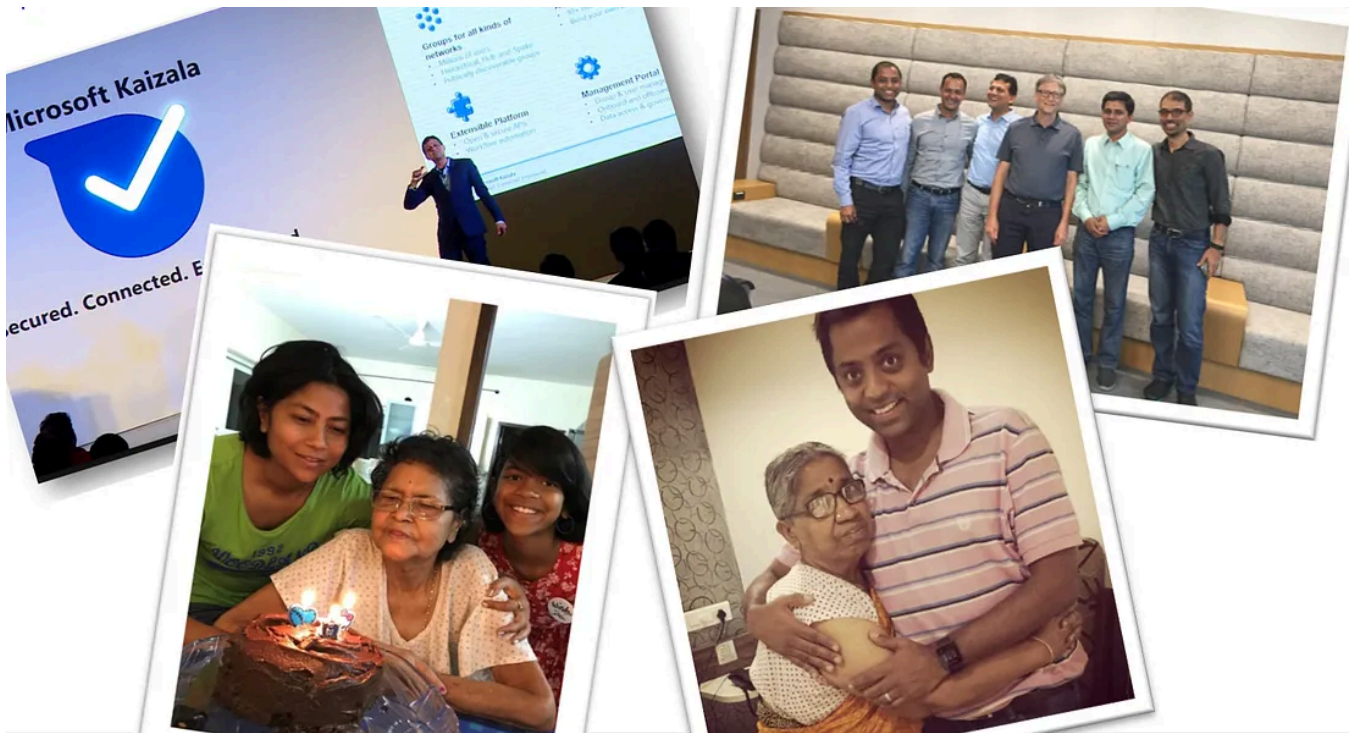


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## 2017 — #Kaizala, BillG & my mothers

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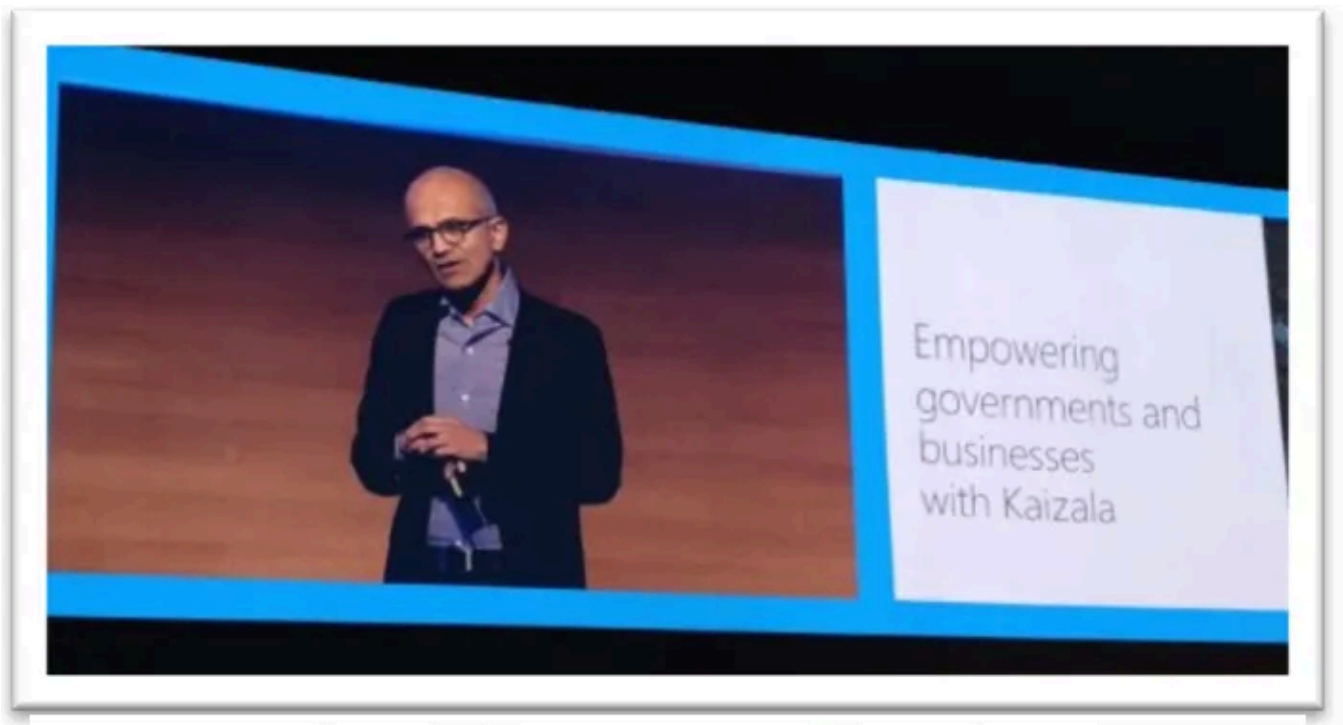
2017. This year. My memory is shattered. A broken jigsaw. And among the fragments that float in my mind are pictures of Kaizala, a photo with my childhood hero, and the physical darkness of bereavement.

### July 27th, 2017 / The Kaizala Launch

We're launching Microsoft Kaizala tomorrow. I'm sitting next to my mother at our aging home in Mumbai. The paint peels off the walls, and the light of an open bulb shines down dimly upon her. She sleeps restlessly, tossing uncomfortably on a bed that is older than I am. It has been a month since her final chemo. She has had a nagging fever for the last few days. I am worried for her.

I have my laptop open, and I work on putting the finishing touches on the presentation for the launch event. I send out an email with a link to the deck to Rajiv, the Corporate Vice President of Office India. It's now 12.07 am. JT, my design counterpart, and I will meet Rajiv at breakfast tomorrow to walk him through the final presentation— that's now today.

I say bye to my father and take the long ride to the hotel. I snooze in the taxi, the night sounds of Mumbai and the warm humid breeze lulling me to sleep. I finally reach the hotel. I fall asleep almost as soon as I lie down on the bed.

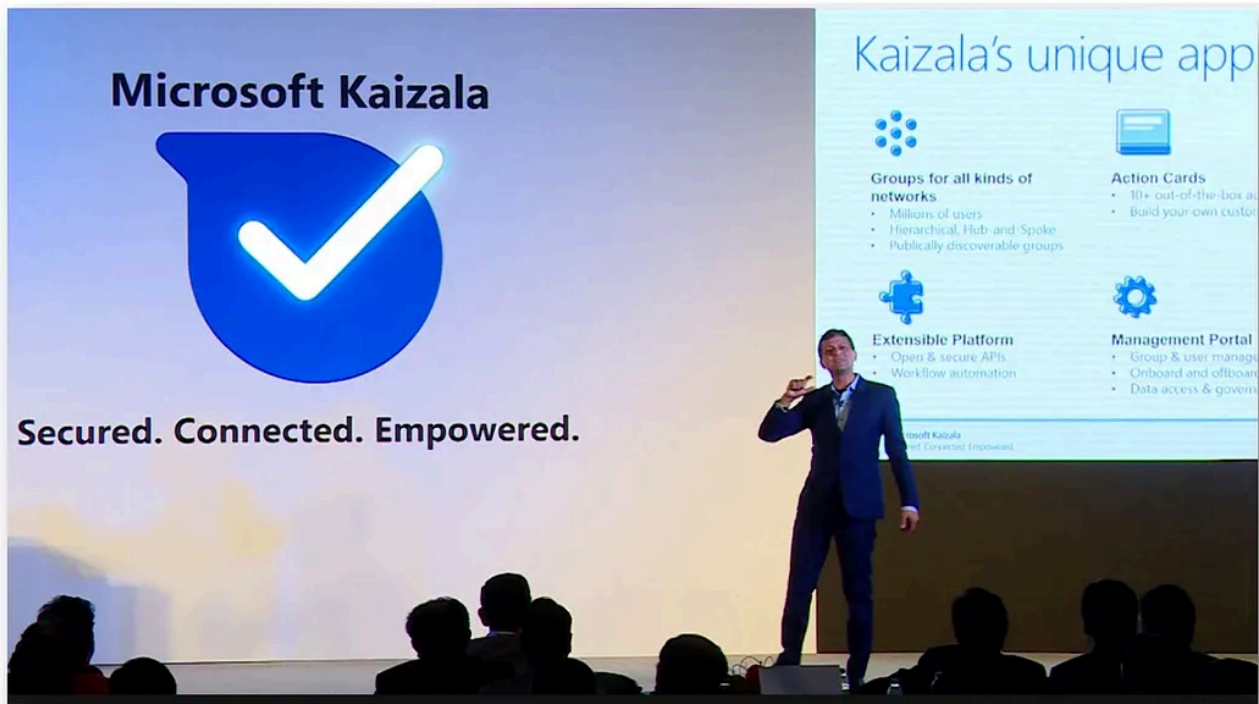


Today, we're officially launching Kaizala. Satya had announced Kaizala earlier in the year at Future Decoded in Mumbai.

Since then, it's been hard work for the entire team. I'm tired, and I'm happy.

Birthing a product is multivariate, non-linear, never predictable and always huge fun. It is a team sport, and everyone adds her or his bit.

And now, a year and half after we started working on the product, we're here, launching Microsoft Kaizala in Mumbai. Now is when the journey really begins...



*Rajiv, at the launch of Microsoft Kaizala, Jul 28th*

Rajiv's talk on Kaizala has gone down splendidly. The audience has been engaged and energized, asking questions, and with some applause on Kaizala's unique features. I am manning a Kaizala booth with my colleagues. Delegates from different companies come to learn about Kaizala, and we answer their questions.

Microsoft Kaizala is real now! What I'd like best is a strong coffee and to bask in the warm after-glow of launch. I'm thinking nice thoughts about myself and my team. My phone rings. It's Prashant, my manager. I had promised to send him a Kaizala product roadmap & plan deck yesterday. I haven't gotten around to working on it yet.

"I'll get it to you by end of day today, I've been working on the launch deck..."

I get schooled by Prashant. He's having none of it and he is letting me know clearly.

"I need it by noon", he says, "You promised to send it to me, and as the product manager you know that it's more important for you to be focused on the road ahead than the launch event. That's already over!"

We sign-off sourly. I go up to my room and work on that deck for Prashant. I'm mad, and I want to play the victim. "I'm tired, I've been working hard", "My mom's not

well”, “We just launched”.

Prashant calls me back. He knows we ended on the wrong foot and wants me to understand his point of view. This is how great coaching looks like. I talk. He listens to me. He parries my yesbuts. He is firm and holds me accountable. We talk about integrity. We talk about honoring one’s word.

I think I understand. I thank Prashant for his coaching and get back to working on the deck. It doesn’t take much time, and I’m done sooner than I thought. I send out an email to him with the deck. I feel light.

There is power in getting things done. There is power in keeping your word.

### **August 12th, 2017 / Flying to Seattle**

I lose yet another game of badminton to Prashant. We’ve kept this ritual of playing badminton on Saturdays through the year, and its helped me lose weight and get fit, though I hardly win any games at all. I say bye to Prashant and head out to my car.

I sit in my car, lost in thought. My mom’s fever hasn’t reduced, she was barely able to talk on the phone this morning. My father is struggling to manage things on his own in Mumbai. I am supposed to fly out to Seattle on Monday evening. We have a meeting with Bill Gates, my childhood hero, on Thursday. I’d love to meet him.

I get out of my car, and call Prashant and ask if he has time to talk. He says yes. We take a walk around his apartment complex. I tell him that my mom isn’t doing well. My mom-in-law, who stays with us, is also not doing too well and is probably in her last few weeks.

“I think I should cancel my trip to Seattle”, I tell Prashant, “I feel responsible for it, and don’t want to miss the opportunity, but I just don’t know what else to do...”

We talk. Prashant listens, and the talking helps me clarify my thoughts. He tells me that if I do choose to make the trip, Microsoft will help in every way to take care of my mom when I am away. And that if I choose not to, that would be perfectly alright too.

I make my choice. I fly to Mumbai the next day, Sunday, August 13th. I call Lolly, one of my closest childhood friends, and he drives me home from the airport. My mom has deteriorated. She is delirious and weak, unable to get up from the bed.

Lolly takes me out to dinner. It's my birthday. The next morning, Lolly, my father and me somehow manage to lift my mother and place her in Lolly's car. We get to the airport. Dad & I smuggle Mamma through the check-in and security, with every staff member and air-hostess worried about her, asking me what was wrong.

Any of them could decide that mom wasn't fit to fly, but I wasn't going to let that happen.

I was going to get Mamma to Hyderabad somehow.

Finally, we're on the flight and I breathe a sigh of relief.

When we land in Hyderabad, Jivan, our magic-weaving Microsoft admin has arranged for a car to take us to the hospital. Jivan helps me hoist mom into the car. At the hospital, he takes care of all the formalities, the insurance and the details.

I will fly to Seattle this evening. Jivan assures me not to worry, and that he will look in on mom and dad while I'm away.

## **August 17th, 2017 / Meeting with BillG**

We're meeting with Bill. The Bill. Bill Gates. I grew up reading about him, talking about him, dreaming about meeting him someday. India has always been mad about him, and most people here know his name.

Later, when I had joined Microsoft, I had heard about the BillG review. It was supposed to be a stressful meeting. An intellect higher than yours would examine your work from all sides and could pounce on a weak defense in your thesis, ideas or implementation at any time and tear it to shreds. This was a person who knew more about your area than yourself. The problems you were proud you had solved now, he had solved them a few decades ago. The geek response, naturally, was "How exciting, I want to be part of that!".





*Meeting BillG, Aug 17th*

And now we're here, outside the conference room where we would meet with Bill. Rajiv would share the Kaizala thesis, and I would demo our product.

All I can say publicly is that it was an exhilarating ninety minutes that flew by in seconds, that I had to strain my brain cells to understand some of it, and that I came out thinking "Wow, he's such a nice guy, what were all those stories about?!".

I go from the Bill meeting to a couple of back-to-back meetings, and then rush to the airport to catch my flight back to India. I land in Hyderabad and head over directly to the hospital.

My mom is doing OK. Over the next few weeks, she improves.



*Side-by side in ER, & I'm not allowed to talk to her!*

In the meanwhile, I come down with strange, high fever, probably due to exhaustion. My wife is diagnosed with dengue at the same time. We check in to the hospital together, keeping our marital vows to stay side-by-side in joy, sickness and grief.

In the hospital, in emergency, we talk from our beds that are next to each other. A nurse approaches. She suspects that I'm trying to chat up the pretty lady in the bed next to mine, and so she draws the curtains between our beds to offer her some privacy. So it goes.

My brother visits from the US. My cousin comes from Bangalore. My sister-in-law and her husband come down from London. Finally, Mamma is discharged. She needs a few days of physiotherapy, and we move her to a rehab center.

I took care of my mom. And, I met with Bill Gates, my childhood hero. Friends, family, colleagues and #Microsoft came together to make this happen.

I feel lucky.

## **September 2nd, 2017 / Ma & Mamma**

Mamma is unable to breathe. A few moments ago, she said “Arun, I will walk again, I want to try”, and now she is gasping for air. There are nurses everywhere, oxygen cylinders, frightened junior doctors scurrying about.

Dad and I are in an ambulance with mom. Mom has collapsed and is on oxygen, hardly breathing. We rush her to emergency. We sign an authorization form to put her on a ventilator. Then, we wait at the hospital. We wait by the minute. We wait hourly. We wait daily. My father barely budes from the spot he’s decided to occupy outside the ICU.

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A couple of days later, we lose Ma, my mother-in-law. She had been living with us, gradually losing her own battle with cancer over the last year. Daily feeds through a tube, a gradual decrease in weight, oxygen at home, and an inability to lie down. She had been fading away. Through it all, she sat in her chair, enduring the pain and the knowledge of her limited time. Somehow, she stayed aware till the end of everything at home, and never failed to ask whether everyone had eaten.





*Ma, on her birthday in May*

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Dad & I got home late that day from the hospital where Mamma was. I was exhausted, I hadn't had much sleep in the last few days. My wife told me that she was worried for Ma. We had a cup of tea in the balcony and held each other and cried a bit. She told me that Ma had been calling for me all day. I wanted to see Ma then, but she was being changed. At about 8:45 pm, we went into her room.

My wife and I held Ma's hands. Her breathing slowed. Then she was gone.

For Mamma, there are moments daily. “She is worse”. “She is better”. “You can see her now, she can open her eyes”. “She isn’t doing too well; her infection counts have increased”. And then, “I think we should let her go”. The medicines that were keeping her B.P. artificially elevated aren’t increased further. Her B.P. falls. Her heart slows. Finally, 11.03 pm, Sept 8th, it’s all over.

This is how years of fighting cancer looks like. Chemo and radiation and more chemo. This is the fluid in the lungs that will wear Ma down. This is an infection that Mamma will never recover from.

The end is but one truth. Then there is the truth of my memory of my mother. Arguing, fighting, disagreeing, uncompromising. There she is now, baiting me with her favorite jibe, “You’re idealistic, learn to be practical otherwise you won’t get ahead in this world”, and I would storm away with “You raised me to be idealistic, what else do you expect?”. I am 42 years old, but she could reduce me to 13 at her own wish.

Unconditional love circumscribed by the limits of her human expression. And now, she is gone.

The world doesn’t compute anymore.

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There are friends coming in daily. Friends from school, from college, from work, from the various places we’ve lived in. They are a strength. There’s family from Bangalore, Coimbatore, Chennai, the USA.

The words of comfort, condolences, the don’t offer any succor and only serve to irritate me. I want to be left alone.

I feel lucid and clear-headed, however there is an indescribable pain, not in my body, a dagger through my psyche. I cry, and I don’t know where the tears are coming from, or the reasons for them.

The last seven years my wife and I cared for Deuta (my father-in-law), for Ma and for Mamma. We fought with cancer in a war of attrition from which we knew that we wouldn’t emerge victor. We became dour and stoic, fighting a losing battle, and at times wondering how the daily hospital visits & seeing all the medicines in our house would affect our child. We sometimes talked about the trips we didn’t take,

the movies we didn't go to and the friends we didn't meet. We talked about growing old. I hated it most of all when we fought each other, the disease and constant care-giving affecting our relationship.



*Kanchuki & I in dressed up for the rituals...*

My father, my family and I go to Bangalore for the various religious rituals, the tenth and thirteenth day ceremonies. I spent the first nine years of my life growing up in Bangalore. My mom reminisced fondly about Bangalore as we moved from city to

city, “the best days of our life, we used to go to Cubbon Park, go for movies every week, and to eat out so often”, she would say. She loved eating out at new places, new types of food, pizzas and pastas and Chinese and Thai. It seemed right to do the rituals in Bangalore, at the place where her oldest sister and favourite niece stayed, where her fondest memories were.

I don't understand the various rituals I am supposed to do daily. “I'm doing this for Mamma, and I'll do it well”, I tell myself as I go through with the various ceremonies.

My father has been lost since Mamma died, in his own world. He talks to my friends, speaking to them about how he feels, telling them that he wants to go back to Mumbai. He stays on with my wife & me in Hyderabad for a couple of months. He and I, we don't talk much, only functional things like bills to pay or chores to do. But I bring him magazines to read, and he makes me coffee. And in a way, that's more than words.

## **December 21st 2017 / The Year Gone By**

It's been a little over 3 months since Mamma died. I got back to work soon after she passed, that's what she would have wanted me to do. And most days, well, they're fine.



*Me, with my mom...*

Then I look in the mirror and I see her in the reflection, there she is in my eyes. Some days, I'm grappling with a problem, and I hear her voice telling me what to do, insistent that I should do it a particular way, berating me for being weak. And of course, whenever we eat out at a new place, I think of her.

The seasons are changing. It's coming up to a new year. And there's still a few days of this year to breathe through...

2017. Kaizala, my childhood hero & my mothers.

Product Management

Leadership

Bill Gates

Caregiving

Bereavement





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