



Critical Essays and Reviews

Nidadavolu Malathi
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Nidadavolu Malathi
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eBook, 2023

Foreword

This is my second e-Book featuring my critical/analytical articles. My first e-Book is Eminent Telugu Scholars and Other Essays, published originally in 2008. It has been revised a couple of times, and the current edition revised in 2022.

This collection contains 24 articles , 21 of them spanning over a period of two decades, and 3 are conference papers submitted in 1982 and 1990s. As such, you may find the collection short on uniformity in content and formatting. For the same reason, all articles do not have footnotes. While putting them together, I thought of adding them, but then, I realized the number of footnotes would be overwhelming. To put it another way, readers would have some general knowledge about our culture, or, will have the knowledge of where to find further information, I assume. I tried to make it readable the best I could. Hopefully, the articles may evince my growth as an essayist, however small it may be.

As for selection, I did not have, actually, a plan. As a regular user of the Memorial Library in Madison, Wisconsin, I picked whatever book I stumbled upon and wrote about it if I liked it. I was familiar with some of the writers from my younger days, and others I just came across while searching for something or other. Thus, in the case of 3 writers, I happened to write two articles on each, not by choice, but by accident. I, personally, like all the writers I have written about.

Some readers thought I was too harsh in my critique of *chivaraku migileedi*. It was not personal. I raised some questions based on Bucchibabu's comments regarding his intent to write the novel, and his comments on another novel, *migilindemiti* by Lata. I have not received any response to my questions to date.

I also would like to mention that I tried my level best to clean up grammar and style. I apologize for any omissions, inadvertent, but not intentional.

For books, I relied on the Internet, specifically, Telugu wikipedia, archive.org, kathanilayam, and on rare occasions, on English encyclopedia. Most of all, Memorial Library, Madison, Wisconsin, was very helpful to me, while I was working in the South Asian Department, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI. I am eternally grateful to all these websites and the University library in Madison.

On a final note, all my e-Books, in Telugu and English, are available, free to download for your reading pleasure. You may find the links on the last page of this anthology. I rely heavily on kathanilayam, archive.org, and wikipedia (Telugu and English) for books and information. This is my way of expressing my gratitude.

My e-Books, however, must not be used for commercial purposes, must not be offered as "free books" on commercial sites.

- Nidadavolu Malathi. October 28, 2023.

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1. Atukuri Molla. *Molla Ramayanam*

Atukuri Molla, author of *Molla Ramayanam*, better known as Kummara (potter) Molla, based on her caste. Molla is the only female poet from ancient times to receive so much attention from English-speaking scholars, besides Muddupalani, author of *Radhikasvantanam*. The precise date of Molla is not known but scholars concluded, with reasonable certainty, that she belonged to the sixteenth century.

From the “avatarika” [preamble] to her *Ramayanam*, we gather Kesaya Setty was her father, considered a boon from the local deity, Srikantha Malleesa in Gopavaram, Nellore District, Andhra Pradesh, India. Kesaya Setty was a great devotee of God Srikantha Malleesa, a notable scholar, and was well-respected in his community.

Ramayanam appears to be the only extant text authored by Molla. There is no tangible evidence pointing to other works, if any, by her. Nevertheless, Molla is acknowledged as a notable poetess by scholars outside Telugu community. My first encounter with an article was from a Bengali scholar, Naboneetha dev Sen, published in *Manushi*. After that, I found another reference to Molla in *Women Writing, 600 B.C. to the Present* by Lalita, K. and Tharu, Susie. Apart from their comments on Molla’s work, one thing that surprised me was their mentioning her poems as slokas for a couple of reasons. First, a sloka is a Sanskrit verse form. Telugu poem is referred to as padyam. Besides, *Molla Ramayanam* contains not only verses but also prose, which is referred to as “gadyam” in Telugu. Molla, specifically, made a point of staying from the highbrow language of Sanskrit scholars and wanting to write only in mellifluous Telugu. Therefore, it would be only appropriate to call her poems as poems or verses but not as slokas. Possibly, the scholars called the poems as slokas in order to status to elevate her status as a scholar, which she never sought in the first place.

There seem to be several versions of *Molla Ramayanam*. Arudra, a well-known scholar and researcher, stated that the text contained 871 poems and prose pieces [“gadyas”] altogether. (*Samagra Andhra Sahityam*, v.2.). In the text I came across, the publishers counted both verse and prose pieces in one sequence and put the total at 880, spread over six sections [“kandas”]. 208 pieces are in prose. Some of them contain only one or two words while others are one-page long.

Before I go further, I must admit that I am no scholar of any consequence, especially, when it comes to poetry. Nevertheless, Molla’s *Ramayanam* is well-known for its ease of diction and native flavor. Keeping that in mind, I read the text, and to my surprise, I found myself taken by its appeal. In this article, I will only point a few aspects that captured my imagination, and will raise a few questions that occurred to me.

First, let me explain the popular name of the poet as Kummara Molla, a reference to her caste. To the best of my knowledge, no other writer, male or female, came to be known by his or her caste or vocation. Molla did not mention her caste in her work, not even when she referred to her father. She described him with so many epithets, but his caste or vocation was not one of them.

Brahmin poets in ancient times stated their caste, gotra and lineage. Molla stated in her preamble to her *Ramayanam*, she was a daughter of Kesaya Setty, who was “devoted to worshiping Guru Linga, and a good friend to all relatives.” There was no reference to his caste or vocation. In all, I would assume the title, Kummara, was attributed to her by editors and publishers of *Molla Ramayanam* after printing came into vogue.

The second question is about her caste. Some scholars determined Molla’s caste based on her name. Andra Seshagiri Rao discussed this aspect extensively in his book, *Andhra Vidushimanulu* (Telugu female scholars). He states Molla is a flower belonging to the family of jasmine flowers, and in those days only prostitutes were named after flowers. Some scholars went further and stated Molla was a concubine of Emperor, Sri Krishnadevaraya. However, Seshagiri Rao and Kanuparti Varalakshamma, a prominent female social reformer, concluded Molla was not a prostitute.

The preamble to *Molla Ramayanam* is a concrete source to establish her times. From the names of the poets she paid tribute to in her preamble, and the poets she did not mention, the time she lived is determined as the end of the 15th century. I do not know if her successors ever mentioned Molla in their works. Andra Seshagiri Rao quoted one instance, but he was also quick to express his doubts that the reference might not be correct.

No question her scholarship is of superior quality, despite her modest claim that she had no other kind of education but for the blessings from the local deity, Srikantha Malleesa. Her scholarship is evident in her command of diction, figures of speech, and quotes from other famous kavyas and prabandhas. In her preamble, she states that she is not knowledgeable in native diction, grammatical forms, poetic peculiarities, phrases, inner meanings, distinctiveness in expression, idiosyncrasies in kavya tradition, and so on, and that she had learned to write poetry through the blessings she had received from the god Malleesa in Gopavaram. The fact that she was able to give us such a long list of the characteristics of scholarly works vouches for her scholarship. The statement that she was no scholar, as I see it, comes from her modesty, a cultural characteristic in our country.

Additionally, she states that, if a work is filled with words that readers cannot understand instantaneously, it would be like a dialogue between a deaf person and a mute person. In other words, poetry should be intelligible to the reader as he reads along without the help of dictionaries, and/or consulting scholars. According to Molla, poetry should be like honey on the tongue—one should feel it as soon as the honey hits the tongue.

Several critics have attested to her claim as valid. Her *Ramayanam* is praised as a work filled with native flavor, ease of diction and appealing to ordinary readers. For instance, she describes the city, Saketapuram, in terms

of what it is and what it is not. I sought the help of Bhairavabhatla Kameswara Rao (<http://telugupadyam.blogspot.com>) to interpret this poem. He points out the poem is filled with double entendres, thereby explaining what the city is and what it is not. (I appreciate his help) Kameswara Rao's explanation is:

The nagas in Saketapuram are magnificent elephants but not mean serpents;

The Haris are the horses which returned from wars victoriously but not a gang of monkeys;

The syandanas are beautiful chariots but not meager fountainheads;

The ganikas in Saketapuram are cultured female entertainers, who could sing beautifully but not wild forest flowers;

The scholars are compassionate intellectuals with a sense of aesthetics but not harsh, cruel demons;

Saketapuram is a city of superior order, which may be described by saying what it is not.

Molla's poetry oozes with the native flavor of the Telugu language. We find metaphors like "Is this a bow or a mountain?" and people "ran into the back alleys" (*sandu gondulu*) profusely through out the text.

One of the poems describing the beauty of the evening shows her keen sense of poetry in every day life. "The soft evening hue commingled with the onset of darkness parallels a view of rubies and blue stones set in the sky."

A statement by a veteran research scholar, Arudra, summarizes Molla's status in the history of Telugu literature. Arudra comments, "while several Ramayanas, written by male writers, are lost in the folds of history, Molla Ramayanam remained popular to this day." (*Samagra Andhra Sahityam*, v.2).

I have no knowledge of poetics and barely enough to appreciate good poetry. However, I would not hesitate to admit that I found this great work fascinating, which is the purpose of the author, as she claimed in the "avatarika." With that in mind, I venture to note a few peculiarities that are fascinating to me.

One such element is the way she repeats a word to drive a point home—a common usage in colloquial speech. In "Aranya kanda" [Canto 2. The Forest section], while Rama was wandering in the forest searching for Sita, he "asks and asks" each animal if it has seen the lady (Sita), "asks and asks" every bird whether it has seen the lady in several ways, ... having failed to find her, he "swelters and swelters" because of the separation from Sita. This kind of repetition is used even more effectively in the "Yuddha kanda" [Cantos 4, 5, and 6. The War section] where warriors fight with each other, repeating the blows, naturally. While the entire Ramayanam is written in six cantos, the war section takes three of them. And Molla shows unusual acumen in describing the war. As Prof. Malayavasini put it, it looks as if Molla has either witnessed a war face-to-face or read extensively about war. These descriptions vouch for Molla's scholarship despite her modest claim that she is not well-read.

Another instance where Molla narrates how Hanuman describes Rama and Lakshmana for Sita in Lanka. Sita suspects Hanuman if he is one more illusion of the demons in Lanka, and asks him to describe her husband and his brother for her. In response, Hanuman describes Rama in a poem that has become common knowledge in Telugu homes. It has been part of the grade school textbooks in Andhra Pradesh for years. Hanuman says,

His complexion is dark as cloud
His eyes are white as lotuses
His neck parallels the conch
His ankles are beautiful
The arms are straight and long*
His voice resonates like a drum
He has lotus lines on his feet*
He has beautiful chest
He knows no treachery but to speak the truth.
Lady! Rama possesses meritorious qualities.
Brother Saumitry possesses all these qualities
And he is of golden complexion.
[* befitting royal persona]

The poet, by thus summing up Lakshmana's qualities in one line, shows her use of words prudently, comments Dr. Malayavasini.

Probably, other poets in her time or immediately after her did not mention her as a poet of excellence. Nevertheless, in the modern period, there is no dearth of scholars, both male and female, to pay tribute to her poetic excellence.

A veteran scholar, Divakarla Venkatavadhani, states, "Although Molla said she is not educated, we find no scholastic flaws in her kavya. Her descriptions are sophisticated and conform to the prabandha style. Especially, in describing Saketapuram, Molla shows extraordinary flair in several ways with her use of double entendres and metaphors. Her style is fascinating to all readers because of the sweet resonating words and her imagination. ... She is also highly skilled in maintaining propriety." (*Andhra vanjmaya charitra*. 59-60).

Regarding poetic propriety, however, Andra Seshagiri Rao differs. He comments that Molla followed the tradition of male poets in not only describing women in her kavya but also referring to female body parts in her metaphors. In a three-page-long comment, he quotes several instances where Molla did not maintain the propriety befitting female writers.

As stated earlier, very little is known about Molla's life. A fictional account of her life story has been written by Inturi Venkateswara Rao, under the title *Kummara Molla*, published in 1969. Based on this novel, another writer Sunkara Satyanarayana wrote a ballad, which became popular and was

sung in Andhra Pradesh, he claims. The story is made into a movie in 1971, under the title *kathanayika Molla* (Molla, the female hero).

Since most of the incidents, both in the novel and the movie are fictional, there is very little I can say about them with reference to Molla Ramayanam, a literary masterpiece in its own status quo.

[End]

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(Published on thulika.net, September 2010.)

2. The Life and Works of Bhandaru Acchamamba

Recently, I found a monumental work, *abalaa saccharitra rathnamala*, [Biographies of Laudable Women], 2 volumes, on archive.org. These volumes are not available on the market.

The first volume included detailed account of Acchamamba's life story which is no less interesting than her monumental work, *abalaa saccharitra ratnamala*, [Biographies of Laudable Women].

Following is a gist of her biography as given by the publishers and her introduction as appeared in the first volume:

Acchamamba was born to Komarraju Venkatappayya and Gangamamba in 1874 in a small village called Nandigama in Krishna district, Andhra Pradesh. She had a younger brother, Komarraju Lakshmana Rao, a prominent scholar, literary historian, social reformer, and more importantly, a significant figure in Acchamamba's education and literary pursuits.

Acchamamba's father strongly believed that the woman's place was at home, and so, refused to send her to school. After his death, her mother moved in with her two children to live with her step-son Sankara Rao. Per custom at the time, Acchamamba was married at the age of six to her maternal uncle and widower, Bhandaru Madhava Rao. At seventeen, she was sent to live with him. Like her father, Madhava Rao was also against education for women. Acchamamba, respected his wishes, observed traditional sati dharma [the tenets prescribed for dutiful wives in sastras] and the purdah system. But, she was also, equally, determined to educate herself. She achieved her goal after bringing her brother to her home for his education. She sat next to her brother while he was studying and learned how to read and write Telugu and Hindi. After Lakshmana Rao left for Nagpur for further studies, she continued to study on her own. She learned on her own the local language, Marathi, in the same way. Additionally, her brother used to visit her whenever he had vacation time, and helped her to improve her language skills in five languages – Telugu, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali and Gujarati. She also learned Sanskrit, minimally though.

About English texts, Acchamamba stated she did not have English language skills, so, she relied heavily on the Marathi translations of major English works like Mill, Spenser and Lubbock. She commended the Marathi scholars' fervor for producing translations of the English originals and wished that our Telugu scholars followed their example and undertook translations from English.

Acchamamba was a meticulous writer. She took great pains not only to find materials for her work but also double checked her sources for authenticity. Sometimes, she had to wait months and even years to find her sources and confirm she got it right. The publishers pointed out she was so diligent, it took her four years to put together the second volume. In 1903,

she set out to visit her friends in Krishna and Godavari areas and then she went to Benares where she met with Sanskrit scholars and studied the Vedas in order to verify her stories of women in Vedic literature. On another occasion, she wanted to quote a sloka from *Rutu samhita* [A long poem about seasons]. She went to great lengths and found a copy of the *Rutu Samhita* in Hyderabad.

She had a clear notion of her project. Her brother helped her to define her goals and create the layout for her project, she added. She described her objectives as follows:

1. Some people allege that “women are weak, dim-witted and lack commonsense. My first objective is to disprove those allegations and prove that women are courageous, remarkably knowledgeable, and highly educated; they love their country, are politically astute, and, several of them, have lived exemplary lives. Not only that. It is also my intent to postulate that women are naturally predisposed to follow the path of virtue and not evil ways.

2. Second, Some people think, if women are educated and allowed freedom, they would take to immoral ways, humiliate their husbands and destroy the pleasure of family life. My aim is to prove with examples that these accusations are meaningless and that the education would actually help them to stay away from evil paths, not turn them into bad people. The country benefits only from the freedom women may obtain through learning, not suffer loss. Education for women is extremely important.

3. My third objective is to write a book that is enlightening and interesting to my sisters in Andhra Pradesh. Everybody knows that real life stories yield better results than fictitious narratives. Therefore, I wish to convey the importance of *pativratyam* [unconditional devotion to husband], love of country, women’s education and other virtues to our Andhra sisters through these biographies.

Acchamamba further elaborated on her methodology. According to her plan, volume 1 covers women in history of India. By history, she meant the period from 1000 A.D. to the present. This part includes women like Padmavathi and Samyukta, and righteous women like Anandibai. While working on this volume, she discovered the dates of some stories of women who lived in the age of Gautama Buddha, a few hundred years back to B.C. Then, she realized that history meant the period as far back as we could unearth the stories with certainty. Volume 2 covers the stories of women in the Vedas (Gargi and Maitreyi), Puranas (Parvati, Sita, Tara, Damayanti, Draupadi and others), and Buddhist women (no examples were given). Volume 3 covers women from other countries like England. This volume has not come to materialize, I believe.

True to her convictions, Acchamamba narrates the stories with equal fervor, whether it is an extraordinary event (e.g. in the case of Vengamamba, regrowing of her hair instantaneously after her head was shaved), or the unusual bravado of women in royal families to save their husbands from rival kings (e.g. Vimala goes to the enemy's palace under the pretense of a man and helps her husband escape from prison) or simply a remarkable tolerance for suffering at the hands of husbands (e.g. Komarraju

Jogamamba). For her, the ancient tenets of pativratyam were as important as the modern notion of education for women. She proves that the two standpoints are not contradictory to each other but complementary.

She states that she researched, to the best of her ability, to find women in each state and found a few women in Kashmir, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bengal, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. If any names were left out, it was not intentional, she added. She asks readers any information they may have, so she could incorporate them in her book.

Acchamamba also states that her main sources were the old “bakharies” [documents?], prevalent stories, history books and several monthly and weekly magazines in Hindi and Marathi.

“When I said history, I thought of the period from 1000 A.D. to the present. As the work progressed, I found stories of Buddhist women existing in 300 to 400 years B. C. Secondly, although I was not knowledgeable in English, I gathered several narratives from the Marathi translations of English works. Marathi scholars are proficient in enriching their language. To me, English writers like Mill, Spencer and Lubbock appear in the Maharashtra language. Telugu people need to follow their example. I was able to write this book without learning English only because of the texts in Marathi, and I commend them for their service.”

Some of these accounts were published in women’s magazines such as *Savitri*, *Hindusundari*, and *Anasuya*, all popular at the time. Acchamamba also mentioned that her first volume was published in *Chintamani*, a women’s magazine run by Kandukuri Veeresalingam.

Acchamamba added that, chronologically speaking, the entries in the second volume should go first but she could not do so. Timely availability of information or lack thereof made her proceed with whatever she had on hand at the time. She hopes her readers would condone this minor inaccuracy in her work.

Acchamamba also wrote two books on knitting, one on crochet and the second on wool-work, one *satakam* (a book of one hundred verses) and a few short stories. Some of her short stories are discovered and published by Sangisetty Srinivas in 2010 under the title, *Bhandaru Acchamamba kathalu*. Possibly, there are more of her works, yet to be discovered and published.

She traveled extensively not only to gather data for her work but also to meet with prominent female scholars and discuss women’s issues. At the end of her introduction, she suggests educated women should get together once a year and work toward educating other women. To that end, she provides a list of contemporary women working as journalists, educationists, and social reformers with the hope that they would at least get to know each other and keep in touch with each other.

As mentioned at the outset, Acchamamba’s personal life is equally fascinating. Her biography, included in the first volume, provides us with some interesting anecdotes.[i] As stated by the biographer, Acchamamba observed purdah in step per husband’s convictions, and did not speak to men unless it was absolutely necessary, and even then, she would say as little as possible, and leave the room quickly.

Following example is given to highlight Acchamamba's strong belief in sati dharma [Prescribed tenets for a dutiful wife]. She, her husband and step daughter, Meenakshamma, visited the author on one occasion. In the evening, they all finished eating supper and sat in the front room, chatting and chewing paan. He [host] rolled the paan leaves with betel nut and handed it to her. Acchamamba took it but did not eat. He asked her why but got no reply. Then, Meenakshamma went to the partially opened door, returned, and told him, "My father has not eaten his paan yet. Until he has eaten his, she would not eat hers."

What is important to note is the manner in which she managed her relationship with her husband while achieving her goals in life. She could change her mind and stance on women's education and her public activities. She educated herself, and pursued her literary and humanitarian activities while living the life of a dutiful wife according prescribed tenets. I believe compromise is a great cultural value for Indian women. Several stories in *abala Saccharitra ratnamala* vouch for this tenet. Acchamamba followed the tenets she preached through these stories.

Another anecdote is about her ability to be calm in the face of pain and suffering. One day in her childhood, she was stung by a scorpion, and as the story goes, she remained calm in spite of the pain. Unlike other children who throw tantrums, she remained calm and quiet until a family member noticed it and treated her! She was also, from her childhood days, kind, generous and adroit. Whenever her parents gave her money, she would give it to the poor, but never spent it on herself. She never thought of her own needs or suffering.

In short, it would appear Bhandaru Acchamamba's life and work epitomizes the Indian womanhood. She cherished traditional values, lived the life of a righteous woman, and succeeded in making a difference in the lives of numerous women remarkably.

Bhandaru Acchamamba died on January 18, 1905, leaving behind her grieving husband, mother, stepdaughter, several friends and ardent supporters.

Relevant articles available on thulika.net:

"Bhandaru Acchamamba: First story writer in Telugu

Stories written by Acchamamba." A Review

"Women's Education" (story) by Acchamamba

"Lakshmi puja day" by Acchamamba

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Acchamamba's photo courtesy of te.wikipedia.org.

[i] From the preface in the second volume, the author of her life history appears to be Gadicherla Harisarvottama Rao. He claimed he was responsible for publication of the two volumes and appended his name to the preface in the second volume.

(Published on thulika.net, April 7, 2013)

3. *Bhandaru Acchamamba Short Stories. A Review*

For a decade or so, Telugu scholars started discussing the works of Bhandaru Acchamamba's works, primarily in an attempt to ascertain that she is the first writer among both males and female writers to write a well-developed Telugu story in the modern sense.

In this article, however, I only intend to review an anthology of Acchamamba's stories, compiled by Sangiseti Srinivas. He collected ten of twelve stories written Acchamamba and published it under the banner Kavile, Telangana research and referral center. The two prefaces written by Srinivas and Dr. Sujatha Reddy to the said book are packed with valuable information.

Basically, reader needs to transpose to Acchamamba's time, that is late nineteenth century, to appreciate her stories. She used effectively the language and the technique prevalent in her day to tell her stories. We can identify the social milieu and the literary experiments of her times in these stories. In that sense, Acchamamba is a pioneer in the history of Telugu short stories.

The themes in these stories include social issues, women's education, good parenting, and economic issues in middle-class families.

Here follows brief summaries of the stories:

1. "Gunavathi yagu stri" [Virtuous woman] is not her original story but a retelling of an episode from a famous epic, *dasakumara charitra*. The message in it is that an adept woman will know how to run the household on a shoestring budget. "There is nothing remarkable in managing the household when the husband is rich. When he is poor, however, it is hard for a woman to run the household with whatever little means they have and make him happy," the narrator comments at the outset.

Saktikumarudu, a young man from a business community, sets out to find a suitable bride for him with a small bag of rice. His plan is to test young girls and find a woman who could cook a sumptuous meal with the rice he brought with him. Eventually, he finds a girl who could cook a meal with his rice and serve it to his satisfaction. He marries her. However, the story does not end there. He keeps testing her by hurting her in numerous ways, even bringing another woman to home. She puts up with his vagaries, passes all the tests and proves herself "Gunavathi", a virtuous woman at the end.

As stated earlier, the thought that one should be able to manage the household in times of economic hardships is a plausible quality in a person in any period. The value of prudence is timeless. The author might have chosen the episode from a Purana because of the strong hold the Puranas had on people in her day. However, the second part in this story is somewhat confusing and untenable in modern times, at least. Her husband continuing to test his wife's capabilities after their marriage is hard to appreciate. There is

no justification for that unless we fall back on Puranas and also, remember that the story is not Acchamamba's original story. Possibly, Acchamamba could not move away completely from that kind of Puranic clutch. Or, we may convince ourselves that that we have come so a long way from that point in time.

2. "Lalithaa, Saradalu" is a children's story. It is based on the basic principle, "Doing 'good' to the person who harms you is the best policy." We have moralistic poems in Telugu which encourage similar notion.

Lalitha is a daughter of Tahsildar, a respectable government official. She constantly bullies other children. Sarada is a poor, well-mannered girl and well-liked all around.

One day, Sarada was in the rose garden, holding a rose and wondering why a beautiful flower like rose should have thorns also. Lalitha came there and, for no obvious reason, raises her hand to hit Sarada, but misses her aim.

Her hand touches a rose and gets pricked by a thorn. Blood oozes from the wound; she starts crying. Sarada, despite Lalitha's evil act, nurses her wound and consoles her. Then on, they become friends. In course of time, both get married and move away. After a few years, both come back to their maternal homes and meet in the same garden where Lalitha had been wounded by a thorn. Sarada asks Lalitha, "Now we both have children. How do you suggest we should raise them to be well-behaved adults?" Lalitha replies, "What can I tell you, who is more mature between you and me? Maybe you are testing me, so I will tell you. I told my children the incident from our childhood and told them to remember that always. I told them a good person always forgives others' mistakes but never bears a grudge against them."

Apparently the moral goes beyond forgiveness and includes a comment on parenting skills as well. The message seems to be children taught early will learn to control the negative feels such as vengeance and anger in their adulthood.

3. "Janakamma" is the only daughter of a poor man Ranga Raju. Despite his pecuniary circumstances, Ranga Raju invites newcomers to town and feeds them as befitting a good host. Janakamma grows to be a young well-mannered girl. Her father is worried he may not find a suitable husband for her. Thanks to Ranga Raju's generosity in the past, she is married to a rich young man, who asks no dowry.

The story is simple and straightforward. The author seems to promote the thought that children raised by well-mannered parents will have good life later in life. Her description of the village in this story is poetic and charming.

4. "Dampatula prathama kalahamu" [A Couple's first fight] depicts woman is not a man's servant. Apparently, it is not new, it has been prevalent for more than a century. The story opens with Lalitha, a young woman, telling her grandmother, "This is not your time. We are not servants to our husbands." She tells her grandma the circumstances under which she returned to grandmother's home. Her reason appears to be trivial.

Her husband Narayana Rao told her that he had bought tickets for a play. Lalitha was upset since he did it without consulting her first, and also she had planned a trip to her grandmother's house, earlier.

The grandmother tells Lalitha a story (actually, her own story). There was a woman who had been quarreling with her husband constantly. The husband got tired of the squabbles and left her for good.

Lalitha is moved by the story and returns to her husband. In the meantime, Narayana Rao also feels remorse for his action, and, unable to enjoy the play, returns home, repentant.

The grandmother's preachings to Lalitha are consistent with the traditional mode of thinking. First, the problem that triggered the disagreement appears to be trivial. Second, the fact that her husband regretted his action appears to be modern. In the final analysis, the resolution carries the message that both husband and wife should accept responsibility for their actions. Acchamamba succeeded in showing the two sides of the issue.

5. "Satpaatradaanam" [Giving to the deserved] also carries a fresh note. A young boy called Kesavudu asks his mother to give money to a poor old beggar on the street. Mother talks to the beggar and learns that he has sons in his village who make little money but refuse to move to a more rewarding place and improve their economic conditions. The old man apparently helps them by giving them the money he has earned as a beggar. Mother says giving money to the old man means supporting the sons who are reluctant to help themselves, and also, it means donating to those who do not deserve it. The narrator's comment, "Some animals keep digging for grass where there is none but they do not go to find new green pastures" reflects the author's strong belief in hard work and self-reliance, which again are considered modern views.

6. In "Strividya" [Education for women] dialogue is used as a narrative technique, which is a major departure from traditional narration. The story takes place on the eve of a husband's departure to jail as a political prisoner. He suggests she should learn how to write in order to communicate with him while he is in prison. Wife is reluctant at first, giving all sorts of excuses; she can ask her younger brother for help, there is no need for her to learn since she is not going to some office, and so on. At the end, however, she is convinced of the importance of education and decides to learn how to read and write. The story includes all the arguments usually people, who believe women do not need education, give. One should read this story at least to understand how the minds of such people work.

7. "Dhanatrayodasi" [Lakshmi Puja day] is a well-written story with all the elements of a good story by current standards. For translation click [here](#).

The story depicts a woman with high self-esteem, who leads her husband to the righteous path, after he has gone amiss. The story made me think of another story, often praised as the first modern story, entitled "diddubatu" by highly acclaimed writer Gurajada Appa Rao.

Appa Rao depicts a man accustomed to visiting brothel houses, and his wife trying to change his ways by pretending to leave him for good. It is

narrated in just one incident, two-pages long, and readers are expected to believe the man has changed his ways as soon as he learns his wife left him. In reality, she did leave him, just hid under the bed and makes their servant to tell her husband that she has left him. In my opinion, visiting brothels is a much bigger problem, and the habit is not that easy to quit. In that sense, I believe, Acchamamba's story is a better story in terms of making a man alter his ways.

In my opinion, the problem of lechery is a major problem, and the story should be of the same proportion to the gravity of the problem. Bigger problems require stronger scenes to establish the extent of its impact and consequences. Smaller issues such as stealing one hundred rupees, even that to help the family, are easily resolved as in the case of "Dhanatrayodasi." In terms of technique, Acchamamba's handling the issue is at a level appropriate for the seriousness of the issue. She succeeded in introducing the issue, their poverty, walking through a few incidents consistent with the gravity of the issue, and walking the readers through to a convincing solution. On the other hand, Appa Rao's story takes a humungous issue—womanizing—and treats flippantly.

8. "Bharyaa bharthala samvaadam" [An argument between a husband and his wife] is the weakest of the ten stories. The story is presented in the form of a dialogue and centers around the issue of women's education. Wife is interested in jewelry, and husband tells her she has jewelry, which are: Modesty, humility, humbleness, good behavior, composure, integrity, kindness and kindness toward others. These qualities are desirable in men too but appear to be more desirable in women. It reminds us of the duties of a wife, as advanced by Veeresalingam.

In this narrative, there is no really story, no development of an issue except a casual dialogue. Acchamamba wrote this story in 1903, one of her last two stories. She had written much better stories earlier. I am not sure why she did not develop this theme earlier. Possibly, it be a commissioned article. *Hindusundari* magazine, in which the story was published, might have requested her to write on this theme because of its topical interest at the time, and she finished the story in haste. I am just guessing, there is no verifiable proof.

9. "Addamunu Satyavathiyunu" [Mirror and Satyavathi] is a story about a little girl, Sathyavathi, barely three-years-old. She looks at her reflection in the mirror, mistakes it to be another girl, and makes faces at her. To her surprise, the girl in the mirror also makes faces, which annoys Satyavathi. She complains to her grandmother, who understands the problem and tells her to smile at the little girl in the mirror. Sathyavathi smiles and finds the reflection also smiling. Later in life, she recalls this incident after she had some experiences, and concludes, "This entire world is like a mirror. If we growl at it, it growls back at us; and, if we look at pleasantly, the reflection also shows a pleasant face." She not only cherishes this lesson but keeps telling others to do the same. Once again, the idea is so close to personality development lessons in modern times.

10. "Beeda kutumbamu" [A Poor Family] is about a poor woman who makes a living by grinding wheat, corn and maize at rich the homes of the

rich. At the outset, the author says this is a true story, told by one of her friends.

A woman, after her husband with little means died, grinds flour on a grinding stone day and night in order to raise her six children. Eventually, the children grow up, get respectable jobs and live happily.

Probably, this story was written to reiterate the values of self-respect and hard work. She also stresses the need to instill these values in children.

Regarding these stories, the first thing that comes to one's mind is the language in them. For current generation readers, reading them could pose a problem. Nevertheless, these stories are valuable. Everyone should read them within the context of the social and literary milieu of Acchamamba's time, the 19th century. In these stories, we find pioneering and progressive views we value immensely today.

Acchamamba depicted women as strong and possessing plausible qualities such as self-respect and unconventional views. Today's views on women's education, gaining knowledge, and personality development are present in Acchamamba's stories written well over a century ago.

Acchamamba was inspired by Veeresalingam's writings but did not hesitate to move away from his views on women's duties. While Veeresalingam professed women's education to make them better wives and better mothers, Acchamamba held it as an important component of their personal development.

Her descriptions are poetic and powerful. For example, her descriptions—the village in the story, “Janakamma”, the deepavali festivities in Mumbai, the wife's thought process and husband's dilemma in the story, “dhanatrayodasi” etc. are depicted with unusual knack. In “Sugunavathi yagu stri”, she compares the face of a woman to a crescent moon, implying it gives the same pleasure as when one watches a crescent moon. In our literature it is common to compare a beautiful face to a full moon, but not a crescent. In that, Acchamamba's metaphor is original.

In her preface to the book, Dr. Sujatha Reddy commented that Acchamamba should be considered a Telangana writer since she was born in the area, lived there for sometime and also used Telengana dialect, partially. To my knowledge, some of the words quoted by Sujatha Reddy are used in other areas as well. Besides, limiting a writer to a particular area is not called for unless the author specifically makes a point of wanting to be named so for his or her own beliefs or as a pride of place. I did not find such a penchant in Acchamamba.

The compiler of this anthology, Sangiseti Srinivas, commented, “We cannot restrict her to any one area.” I believe so, too.

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4. Illindala Saraswathi Devi. *Status of Indian Women, Then and Now*

Illindala Saraswathi Devi (1918-1998), a veteran writer, writes in her short, succinct book, *Bharata naari, naadu nedu* [Women of India, Then and Now], traces the history of women's status in our society and their rights from the Vedic times to the modern times. It records the progress of women's status in India up to 1975 [date of publication]

The author notes the rights for which today's women are fighting were put in place centuries back. She has quoted numerous precepts from the Vedas and other texts by ancient sages in support of her claim. Saraswathi Devi delves deep into the reasons that led to the current state of affairs and lays out the need to change our views regarding the present status of women in India. This book will serve as a valuable resource for those who have no time to read a handful of books on the subject.

She starts with her opinion that every individual deserves respect in the society he/she lives in. The respect, however, depends on his/her place in the society and the role he/she plays.

At the beginning, Nature created man and woman. They were attracted to each other and were instrumental in procreation. That is a truth which needs no proof. The two individuals, a man and a woman, shared household responsibilities and continued to live as a couple. However, in course of time, they became stronger and the questions of superiority and one's importance came into play. The questions remain unanswered to this day.

Bruhadaarakopanishad created the concept "man is superior" and further strengthened it. Since he was superior, he was treated as the primary person in the house. The belief was Prajapati (the Creator) thought loneliness was unbearable for the man, and so, provided him a companion by cutting man's body into two halves. The other half turned out to be a woman, and that gave him immense pleasure. That also caused his fall [patanam]; and from the word *patanam*, the words *pati* and *patni* derived. In the course of time, the word *pati* came to mean husband (the one that bears the burden) and *patni* the wife (the one whose burden the husband bears) and got rooted deep in our language. We can find a similar story in the Bible. The story goes like this: God created man, and the man felt an unbearable pain for company. Then God created a woman from a bone in his side.

These two stories, one from the Bible, and the other from the *Bruhadaarakopanishad*, vary in wording but convey the same message in essence. The question of who is superior between the two is not peculiar to one society or one country. Every country has grappled with this question. Every country has debated it. At the same time, however, women have also commanded respect to a certain degree in every country. Does she have an equal status with men, and if not, should she have an equal status with men? These questions are being debated even now. As a result of persistent discussions and movements, women in some countries have acquired equal status. In a few other countries, laws are created but remained ineffectual in reality. The difference is only in degree.

"Women in the Western countries progressed significantly and acquired equal status with men. Women in India are lagging far behind. Their status in the society is hopelessly poor." This view is prevalent not only among foreigners but also among some people in our country as well.

However, there is a huge difference between the status of women in India and that in the other countries. The perception of women in India is:

*yatranaaryastu pujiyante
ramante tatra devataah
yatraistu taastu na pujiyante
sarvaastatraah phalaah kriyaah*

The sloka reads: Gods are pleased in a place where women are worshiped. All the good deeds go futile where women are not worshiped. This is the ideal for Indians. This view exists in India from prehistoric times.

A French writer, Louis Jacoilliot, stated his view of Indians as follows: "The civilization of India, which has created the highest status for women at home, and in society dates back to prehistoric times. No other religion has given this much respect to women as the Hindu religion in the Vedas. Their civilization and culture are older than the Jewish culture and civilization."

In today's society, the status of men and women are valued, based on their financial status, educational qualifications, and their opportunities in politics. On the other hand, in ancient times, their status was based on their specific duties in religious activities.

Since woman is created for a different purpose than man, her physique is also different. For the same reason, women do not possess the ability to do some acts that a man can do by his physical strength. Her physique stands in her way to do the same. Nevertheless, it is wrong and foolish to consider the woman as inferior to the man just for that reason. Religion and society must lend support to men and women in performing their duties as assigned to them separately. Woman is an equal partner in conceiving, delivering and raising children, and further by cooperating with the man in accomplishing his gruhasta dharma (one's duties as a family man).

Vedic Period

There is an enormous difference between the institutions of the Western countries and India. In those countries, the institution of marriage was created based on materialism, exclusively. In India, the institution of marriage was deep-rooted in Dharma, with Artha and Kama as its branches. According to the Vedas, pleasing God by performing Yajna and other Vedic rites, and thereby seeking heaven, were man's duties. A man or a woman did not have the right to perform Yajna rituals by himself or herself individually. The ancient sages determined that only couples were qualified to perform them. Since the husband was not eligible to perform the ritual by himself without his wife's participation, the importance of the wife and the necessity for marriage acquired a significant place in the Hindu religion. The husband and the wife should respect each other and make the gruhasta asrama purposeful. In Hindu religion, the status of marriage has received the highest status for the same reason. The gruhasta asrama was held as a duty in a man's life, and

the man is expected to serve guests, sages, disciples of Vedic studies, the needy, and the poor with the utmost respect. It was his wife's duty to stand by his side, and support him in performing the Vedic Rites and help him in completing his duties. The Daksha Smruthi holds in high regard the couples who respected each other and performed their duties. The woman who was harmonious, sympathetic, modest, proficient, reclusive, and loving toward her husband was considered not a human but a goddess in every sense of the word. The creators of Smrutis ascertained that the man who had such a wife would enjoy heaven on earth.

Wife was not her husband's slave. The reference to a man as *jayedasta* [man was borne by a woman in the form of progeny] in Rigveda was an assertion of the same view. We can find similar views in Yajurveda also. Because a woman was instrumental in accomplishing the primary goals of Dharma, Artha and Kama, she was held in highest regard. The woman was given extraordinary respect because she performed her duties in consonance with her husband's duties in rendering his duties in all the three Asramas-Dharma, Artha(Material) and Moksha(Salvation).

prajamanu prajayase

tadute marthyamrutam.

(Oh Man, you were born in accordance with the principles of procreation. Therefore, procreation is your ambrosia.)

Women were given unparalleled respect in our society because she offered immense support to her husband and the family in multiple ways. She was created not only for providing physical pleasures to man, but also for his redemption in the form of sons who in turn would be the means for the father to attain salvation. Therefore, the argument that a woman was created only for the man's physical pleasures would go against the grain of the fundamental Vedic principles.

At their marriage, the bride and groom walk seven steps around the sacred fire; and the groom tells the bride, "We became friends by walking the seven steps together. Let us not leave each other ever. Let' us be supportive of each other in performing our duties, be devoted to each other, and live in harmony." Since the bond of marriage continues beyond death, marriage is considered unbreakable. The Vedas imply that neither of them must leave the other. The Vedas praise highly the woman who wins over her husband through love.

There is a difference between the affinity the couples will have for each other, and the other kinds of amity as well. Other kinds of amity may die in course of time but the amity between a husband and his wife does not die because of the Vedic mantras, recited during their wedding ceremony. The Vedic hymns note that not only the amicability between a husband and a wife must exist as long as they are married but it must continue beyond. The marital precept is, "Marriage is permanent and so is the amicability. Those who walk out on their marriage are considered to have essentially violated the Vedic principles.

Although the husband has authority over his wife, he should win her over by being amiable toward her. A woman without love at heart cannot gain the affection of her husband; is it not so?

The couple prays *sammaatariswasam dhata samudeshtri dadhaatanau* (May we two be blessed with harmonious minds by God of Wind, Brahma and Saraswati.).

The status a man accords a woman may sound strange because of his apparent superiority. In the Vedas, man regards woman not only as his equal but also gives himself up to her.

asmin gruha garhapatyaya jaagruhi. (Oh Bride! Be aware and ready to lead this home.). The bride is not a slave to the man. She is the lady that is invited to grace the throne. She is the lady who comes to command the home with universal, maternal love. Her management does not cause distress to the citizens of her kingdom. Under her administration, all the troubles, previously existed, will be absolved. The house becomes a heaven on the earth. In the Vedic times, the heaven that emanated from a man's good deeds was subject to the woman's will. Thus the adage *bhaaryaadheenasthadha swargah* (heaven at wife's will) has come into vogue.

During that period, women played a prominent role in mundane activities. Bruhaspati wrote Artha Sastra in accordance with the prescripts of humans, gandharvas and goddesses, after serving them for some time. During the period of ancient sages, Anasuya and Arundhati were scholars in Artha Sastra; Maitreyi and Gargi were great orators; and, Gargi was an eminent scholar in the Vedic texts. Gargi's work, *Brahmanyam*, shows she participated in the Vedic debates. Similarly, Lopamudra and Viswavara are memorable for their unparalleled Vedic knowledge. Therefore, we cannot say that there were no female poets in the past, although the number was small.

It is a well-known fact that 23 of the 1028 hymns of Rugveda were authored by women. That means women were allowed to study mantras. Therefore, it is not fair to say that women were never allowed to study the Vedas.

During the Vedic period, also known as the Sruti period, women clearly had the right to participate in religious activities. Women wrote Veda Sutras. Men were not allowed to perform the Vedic rituals like Yagna, Yaga, Havana and Krathuvu¹ without women's participation. At some point, salvation by penance became important and women were considered an obstruction to achieve that goal. Later, during the Daiva Smruti period, women were declared ineligible to study the Vedas.

Upanayanam² was a prerequisite to study Vedas; it was performed at the age of seven. It was an important event in the lives of boys and girls. Both Upanayanam and the Vedic Studies played a significant role in arranging marriages.

¹ Various types of Vedic rituals.

² An Initiation rite to study Vedas.

Dharma Sastra treatises, called Smrutis were written by sages in ancient times. During the Smruti period, there was no lack of respect for women. They believed that the lineage would be served better by daughters who had no brothers than the daughters who had brothers. A daughter could continue the lineage in much the same way as a son. For that reason, she was referred to as "putrika", a term specific only to the daughters without brothers. A daughter who had no brothers could save her father from the hell called "puth", from which the term putrika was derived.

Manu Smruti said *aputro nekavidhina sutaam kurveeta putrikaam* (those who had no sons should accept their daughter as son). Giving away a daughter in marriage was valued highest of the sixteen benevolent acts as prescribed in the Vedas. In ancient works, giving away a daughter in marriage facilitated salvation for not only her father but also for her grandfathers as well.

dasyaami Vishnave thubhyam

Brahmaloka jigeeshaya

"I am giving away my daughter to you, an embodiment of Vishnu, with the hope of going to the world of Brahma," says father to the groom at the time of marriage.

tvaddaanaath moksham aapnuyaam, [meaning] "I may obtain redemption through the act of giving you away," says the father to his daughter.

kanyaam imaam pradasyaami

pitruunaam taaranaayavai, [meaning] "I am giving away this young woman for the redemption of my forefathers."

In the Samvartha Purana, the result of giving away a bride is described as follows: He who gives away [in marriage] a beautifully bedecked young woman through the process of the Brahmin wedding ceremony will receive plenty of grace, fame, company of the virtuous, and several material goods. The result will be one hundred times better than the one received by performing Jyotishtoma rite. He who gives away a woman sanctified by Homa mantra and decorated with valuable jewels will go to heaven and be worshiped by gods.

According to the Vedas, a girl can be a great savior of her parents and their ancestors. It also illustrates that the authors of Smruthi held women in high regard.

Daughters have helped their families for several generations. Smruti also states daughter's daughters also contribute to the redemption of their ancestors.

Bodhayana states a man cannot marry a woman on his own accord. Gods bestow a wife on him. A husband should always respect the woman he marries. That pleases Gods.

And Bodhayana continues to specify the harshest punishment for the man who leaves his wife.

Daksha Smruti stated, "Although during the Smruti period a woman was declared ineligible to study the Vedas or to have Upanayanam, she, however, was considered to have performed the rituals that were performed by her husband by virtue of *paanigrahanam*³. She was required inevitably to participate in some rituals. During some of the Srauta ceremonies, a wife was considered to have attempted *sannahanam*⁴. A woman who participates in the ceremony would be considered to have performed the ritual without actually reciting the mantras. However, there was no mention of sharing his sins anywhere in the ancient texts. She could go to heaven, despite her husband's sins.

Women's property

In Manusmriti, brotherhood must apportion one fourth of their property to their sister. They would go to hell if they failed to do so. Yajnavalkya stated clearly that brothers should spend one fourth of their properties on her marriage, if such occasion should arise. Manusmriti stated that the woman was entitled to a portion of her maternal grandmother. Smruti mentioned daughters should share their mother's property after her death. Manusmriti stated that not only daughters but mothers also would have rights to the property in some situations. Manusmriti added the property of a childless son belonged to the mother. Yajnavalkya ruled that after the death of a man, the mother (his wife) had the right to his property along with her sons. There were also other means by which women might inherit property, in addition to the above-mentioned conditions.

According to the creators of Smruti, there were six categories by which a woman would be eligible to receive wealth:

1. The money given to the bride by her parents at the time of marriage, with the sacred fire as their witness.
2. The money given to a daughter at the time of her leaving for her husband's home.
3. The property given by her husband voluntarily.
- 4, 5, and 6. The money given to her by brothers, mother and father on various occasions.

Yajnavalkya confirmed the same view in his tenets. He said brothers, mother, father and brothers-in-law must be respectful toward her and give jewelry etc. to her regularly. Ancient sages also stated that the house in which girls were not adored would be accursed by them, and that the house would be annihilated. The wealth given by brothers and others could be in various forms. There was a custom of groom giving money to the bride and her father. That money belonged to the bride, and must not be used by her parents. Husband must not remarry, if the wife was healthy and had given birth to children. In the event the husband wished to remarry, he should give his first wife a sum equivalent to the money he had spent on the second

³ Custom of bride holding the groom's hand at their wedding.

⁴ Lit. Attempt, breast armor.

marriage. It was the responsibility of the king to protect women's assets. Stealing a woman's money was considered a great sin.

Women and their hereditary rights

The Dharma Sutras were formulated by sage Gautama. Manu Dharma Sutras were written in 2000 B.C. and Yajnavalkya Samhita in 1000 B.C. according to research scholars. There were no standard treatises in regard to traditions and royal inscriptions prior to Manu. There were historical records of kings, but, no records of duties of people.

According to Manu Dharma Sastra, women had no rights. Women should be protected by her father in her childhood, by her husband in adulthood, and by her sons in old age. Manu prescribed *na stri swatantryam arhati*.⁵ Yajnavalkya, however, granted a few rights to women. He specified a few rights for widows both in joint families⁶ and nuclear families. In joint families, he suggested the family must set aside a sum, based on their status, to widows, who had no children. In individual families, a childless widow was entitled to enjoy her husband's wealth only during her lifetime.

In the 11th century, Vijnaneswarudu wrote an interpretation of Hindu Dharma Sastra. It is called Mitakshari. It was to be adopted by the entire country. This allowed women to have several rights and powers. Women were allowed to adopt children. She possessed the right to use her husband's property after his death in times of dire necessity and for the welfare of the family. By this rule, she could also sell a part of the property and spend on her daughters' marriage and court costs. She was also required to settle husband's loans. She even received the right to manage and improve property values.

In Hindu Dharma, women received property in two ways: Through blood relationship and religious rites such as a death ritual. Close relatives would have to perform the death ritual for the dead person. If the dead person had sons, the responsibility would fall, entirely, on the shoulders of the sons. If he had no son, the widow would have to shoulder the responsibility. Thus, *Mitakshari* of Vijnaneswarudu combined the religious duties, blood relationship, and death ritual into one.

Marriage

The ancient sages set a few rules for the system of marriage and for the good of society. According to Dharma Sastra, the couples, who were married according to tradition, must remain bound for the rest of their lives. Kautilya, 4 B.C., provided for the couples to break up under certain conditions. This permission was, however, granted only in the case of marriages performed in accordance with the Gandharva, Asura, and Paisachika traditions. And, it was limited to non-Brahmin castes. According to Dharma Sastra of Kautilya, the woman, left by her husband, was entitled to receive some maintenance allowance known as manovarti. The amount depended on the husband's income. He also laid rules for women to remarry under certain circumstances.

⁵ No woman deserves freedom.

⁶ Extended family.

Kautilya considered a woman's remarriage a *niyogam*⁷. Women belonging to the castes of Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra were permitted to remarry if the husband left for another country, or, she was childless. Also, in such cases as when her husband moved to another country, became a sanyasin, or died, and she had no children, she was permitted to remarry after seven months. She could marry her husband's brother or someone from a proper *gotra*⁸.

Kautilya stated a woman could remarry or remain a widow and lead a chaste life. He set many rigorous rules for men to be able to remarry. The man could remarry only if his wife had no children, or all his children were dead, and that too only after eight years. If his wife had given birth to a dead child, he would have to wait for ten years. If he had no male child, he would have to marry according to the principles detailed above. Any man violating these rules would face punishment.

In short, Kautilya's Dharma Sutra were more favorable to women than men.

It is obvious that Dharma Sutras were not uniform in ancient times also. The Dharma was defined according to the social conditions at the time they were codified. That is why we see variations in different texts by Manu, Parasara and Kautilya.

Equal Rights

Men and women had equal rights to the money because of their marital status. Sage Apasthamba considered it plausible for the husband to earn money and the wife to manage it efficiently. Manu also stated,

arthasya sangra chaivaam

vyaye chaivaam niyojayet

(Women should be designated to protect and spend money wisely.) The woman, also, would have the right to the money after her husband's death, but she would not be obligated to pay off his debts. There were exceptions to this latter rule. She would be responsible to pay off his debts under the following circumstances:

1. The loan he asked her to pay off at the time of his death;
2. The loan she co-signed along with her husband; and,
3. The loans she had obtained on her own.

These three types of loans must be paid by her. In joint families, after a man's death, his brothers should take care of his wife, stated Narada. In short, women appeared to have enjoyed fairly respectable status, regardless of opposition by a few individuals.

⁷ Mandate

⁸ Lineage.

Mother is a Goddess

It is obvious women were respected in various measures. Within a family, women were respected in different ways in different roles. It varied depending on her role, namely, as a mother, wife, daughter, and widow. Women received the highest form of respect as mothers. Manu said,

*iyam lokam matru bhaktya
pitru bhaktya tu madhyamam
guru sushrushaa yatyeva
Brahammalokam samasnute.*

(One may conquer this world through devotion to his mother, the world in general, to his father, and the world of Brahma by serving guru.)

Mother, father and guru are the three important worlds, the three Asramas, and the three Agnis [sacred fires]. Among these three states, mother takes the highest place and thus is held in the highest esteem.

*upadhyayaan dasacharyaa
aacharyaanam satam pitaa
sahasram tu pitruunmaataa
gaurav, enaati rityachyate, stated Manu.*

(Reverencing one guru is considered greater than reverencing ten teachers, a father greater than one hundred gurus, and a mother a thousand times greater than a father.)

In Vasishtha Smruti, it is said that
*yathaa mataram aasritya
sarve jeevanti jantavah.*

(All creatures follow in their mothers' footsteps.)

There is one more precept. If the father falls short of being an ideal father, the sons need not respect him. On the other hand, a mother must be worshiped even when she takes to the evil path. Sons have no right to judge their mother. Vasishtha argues that the mother is never a fallen woman in the eyes of her sons.

Not only a mother but a mother's mother, the wife of a guru, a mother's sisters, a father, a mother-in-law, and her sisters should be respected by men. In fact, not only them, but also his mentors also should be held in high esteem. At one point, he says that all women must be revered. Manu and Yajnavalkya also declared that the wishes of a pregnant woman must be fulfilled, and forgive any mistakes she may have committed. Manu also rules that a man must step aside and give way to women whenever he comes across their path.

Goddess on Earth

There is a baseless perception that women must not be allowed freedom. It is not clear when and where it was stated. It is possible those rules were interpolations by unknown authors. No amount of research may yield a convincing argument for this. Even if we accept it as reliable, it is not proper for us to assume that women were not respected. All Smruti texts declared woman as the most revered person, and to be regarded as a goddess on earth. In the ancient times, freedom was denied only to those who failed to consider the welfare of others.

During that period, women got together and held gatherings for women, exclusively, to discuss worldly matters. They also attended gatherings held by men. They served kings. There is also evidence that they fought in wars and performed rituals that were usually performed by men.

In Vedas, some hymns, which could be defined only by female philosophers, were authored by women. They did not remain just as elite authors, but participated in philosophical debates also. Women were also learners and scholars in various other disciplines such as music, dance, and other professions.

In those days, children belonged to the same caste as mothers.

Conduct for good men

The respect and proper conduct men had shown toward women were clearly evident in the text of Ramayana. That was because of the conduct of the remarkably virtuous man, Lord Rama. His brother, Lakshmana, showed utmost respect and childlike admiration toward Sita in the same text.

naaham jaanami keyuure

naaham jaanami kankene

nuupure tvabhi jaanami

nityam paadaabhivandanaath.

(I do not know her by her [Sita] ornaments on her arms and wrists, but I do know her by her anklets which I had noticed as I saluted her feet every day.). During that period, men treated their mother, guru's wife and older brother's wife, even when she was younger in age, as mothers according to the tradition.

At the time Lord Rama visited Sage Atri, Atri introduced his wife, Anasuya, to Rama as

Anasuyaam, mahabhaagaam

taapasiim, dharmacharineem [Meet Anasuya, a pure soul, ascetic and follower of Dharma].

And added, "She is the mighty woman who produced fruits and abundant water from the River Ganges when some sages were starving due to a horrendous famine for over ten years. She is the gifted woman that

performed intense penance for ten years. She is a great wife that performs numerous rituals everyday; and, the unparalleled mother that watched over the sages and prevented any obstructions they might face. Several years ago, she was able to convert ten nights into one night with her powers in order to accommodate a divine event. You worship that great woman as your mother and obtain her blessings. Let Sita bow to her feet and seek her blessings."

Mother

Undoubtedly, women received the highest honor during the Vedic period and Smruti period. From the times immemorial, Indian women were worshiped as mothers. Swami Vivekananda ascertained in his speeches abroad. He said, "People in the West treat women as equal. We worship them as mothers."

So far we have revisited women's status during ancient times.

During Middle ages

In course of time, the changes that occurred in politics affected our society. The path laid by ancient scholars started deteriorating gradually. The paths laid by India, which earned its reputation as a global peace-maker, are filled with darkness. In the name of religion, the meaning of traditions was gone. Current traditionalists do not have the patience to explain our traditions and prove them with convincing arguments to our youth. It created a huge fissure between traditionalists and modernists. These conditions brought about a huge change in the beliefs of ordinary people.

During Muslim period

Chastity for women was extremely important for Hindus. Hindus suffered immense hardships to protect their women. Under these conditions and the changes that took place in our society, women lost their ability to marry later in life, like the women in the past. Fathers, out of necessity, arranged marriages for girls as young as eight or nine, in the name of saving them from degradation. Widowed women were forced to self-immolate, whether it was because of religious commands or because there was no other protection. Sati became a tradition by itself. It would appear that women were never allowed to step out the front door during the Muslim rule. Apparently, it was quite a challenge for Hindu families to live under those circumstances. Nobody could think of women's welfare then.

After the ascent of British Rule, the changes in the country were different. During British rule, the British were engrossed in plundering the country and transporting our valuable items to their country. They implemented the "divide and rule" policy, but were not concerned about religion. Unlike the Muslims, the British neither barred Indians from practicing their religion nor destroyed temples. They, however, worked toward promoting their language by creating numerous schools and colleges.

Some of the youth who had received English education started scrutinizing our country's conditions seriously. People started thinking about implementing reforms in the society. Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, and Gopalakrishna Gokhale founded Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj undertook several social reforms.

Although it was an ancient tradition, Raja Rammohan Roy thought the tradition of Sati, by which the widow was forced to self-immolate on her husband's funeral pyre, was horrible and decided to eradicate it completely. There was vigorous opposition to his proposal from traditionalists. Very few accepted it; support for it was minimal. Despite the opposition Rammohan Roy faced in his motherland, he was not discouraged. He went to England, discussed it in great detail with the British Government, returned to India and convinced the then Governor General of India, Lord William Bentinck, to declare a law making the practice of Sati illegal in 1829. Rammohan Roy became a personification of Brahma on earth for women, who had the fortune of being alive after their husbands' demises.

Women could live longer after their husband's death; but, living as widows was hard. They were not allowed to remarry due to the social constraints imposed on them. Under the British government, there were no facilities for them to receive education. Other adults at home would not permit it either. How many parents could support widowed daughters? It is normal for the raging hormones to act up in young adults regardless of gender. After parents' deaths, the widows, without any monetary resources, became free laborers under the control of demeaning brothers and brothers-in-law. Life for them was the very personification of silent suffering.

Kandukuri Veeresalingam avowed to change these conditions. He founded homes for widows and created educational opportunities for them. They were taught English and Sanskrit in those schools. He also founded separate schools for them. He wrote textbooks in simple, easily understandable language on various subjects for their use. He wrote numerous stories, plays, and novels illustrating the cruel, heart-breaking traditions and stupid beliefs that were causing enormous harm to the society. He found suitable grooms and arranged marriages for those who wished to remarry. He encouraged young men to marry widows. Veeresalingam rendered invaluable service to widows. He was a great benefactor to countless women whose lives could have otherwise ended like tree stumps.

Another champion of women's cause was Gurujada, a renowned poet and writer, who wrote heartrending plays about bride price, dowry, their disastrous effects on families, and the hardships the families suffered. His musical play, "puthadi bomma. Purnamma" [Purnamma, a doll of gold] is a timeless classic that speaks of his artistry.

The women who were confined to homes knew nothing of the outside world for several centuries. While staying within the confines of their homes, however, they acquired worldly wisdom and imbibed the spirit of Ramayanam, Maha Bharatam, Bhagavatam and History. Although they were not formally educated, they were very knowledgeable in all sastras through oral tradition. Some of them learned Sanskrit and Telugu, and studied the five kavyas under gurus. Sitting in the dark corners of their homes, they wrote poetry and kavyas.

Some women wrote romantic kavyas praising their kings and ascertaining the idea that women were created to entertain men. This was a primary factor in our society which led to the belief that women should be confined to the bedroom and kitchen.

In the fourth quarter of the 19th century, some wealthy families, persuaded by social reformers, sent their daughters to cities for education. They fought against the prevalent question like "Why educate women? Are they going to work or undertake any worthwhile job?" and encouraged their daughters to earn degrees. Some of them became doctors. That was accepted as a progressive step at the time. Women could enter teaching, medical and other professions without putting up a fight. The wealthy laid the path and the middle class families followed. Girls entered schools and colleges in Districts and Taluks. There were no separate schools for girls yet. Coeducation was implemented.

There were, however, questions about the progress in the area of women's education. For instance, how many girls went to school? Up to what level? And, what did they do after receiving their education?

Also, not everybody wanted education for their girls; and, many did not want higher education for their daughters. Many of them thought it was enough if a girl learned the alphabet and could check the laundry list. Some families decided to continue their daughters' education until their marriages were arranged. On the boys' side, young men were either in school or completed their Western education at the time of marriage. Usually they expected their brides to have some education. That resulted in women discontinuing their education after marriage.

Ancient customs and practices were losing their hold gradually. But nobody had a definite clear-cut idea regarding what was their goal and what was the ideal. Nevertheless, the one custom that of marrying girls before puberty continued to prevail. Traditionalists continued to have their daughters married at the age of 8 (the practice probably came into vogue during the Muslim rule). Usually the groom would be 16 at the time of marriage and either was in college or about to enter college. Very often, the groom would be introduced to the girl for the sake of appearances; but, the decisions would be made by the adults. One of the possible consequences was the groom would change his mind after he finishes school, becomes more sophisticated, finds her not up to his expectations and leaves her. Other reasons could be she was not civilized enough, not beautiful enough, and/or, simply he did not like her. Thus, the number of rejected wives increased considerably. Some parents married little girls to older and/or disabled men out of greed. In those circumstances, some girls rebelled while a few took to adverse paths.

Harabilasa Sarda took notice of the despicable consequences of girls' marriages before puberty, and worked toward enacting a law against child marriages. The Sarda Act was enacted in 1929. By then, Sati practice, polygamy, and child marriages had ended.

We would like to see some improvement in the women's conditions.

Independence Movement

About this time, Gandhi started assembling an army to strengthen the National Movement. He looked all over the country for resources. One half of the population was women, who never stepped outside the front door. They were confined to their homes by meaningless customs and senseless

beliefs. Gandhi needed their strength, and the gold they had in their possession. With that in mind, Gandhi used the strength of their language skills to persuade and attract others to his movement. He invited brave women to participate actively in it, sent diligent women door to door, persuaded them to reject foreign goods and embrace home-made products. He engaged a few others to sway other women to burn foreign clothes and picket against liquor stores. The Gandhian movement helped the status of women to move one step up. Gandhi praised them for their work. Our society learned, "Women can accomplish anything with their courage and determination; can confront any and every kind of situation. They are capable of every sacrifice. We have read women took part in wars in the past. Now, we are watching them in action." It was an eye-opener. That our women sustained beating and imprisonment is a case in point.

In Kolkata, the Hindu Muslim riots flared up and resulted in dreadful acts. Gandhi sent Sarojini Naidu, an eloquent speaker with an angelic voice, to act as an intermediary between the two parties. Both the Hindus and the Muslims calmed down, thanks to her captivating voice. This is one more example of women's strength.

Mahatma Gandhi watched his mother and wife closely and learned that our customs and traditions were ingrained in our women. He believed women must be engaged in the fight for our society to progress. Therefore, he employed women to eradicate the untouchability prevalent in our society. He showed the path for women to work toward regaining women's identity which was ignored by women in general and society in particular. Mahatma Gandhi awakened them; he said, "Up until now society believed women should silently bear with men's evil ways and be devoted to their husbands, a tradition known as *pativratyam*. Actually, a wife is the right person to show him the right path when he takes to evil ways, no matter how much she loves and respects him. That is her duty. Doing so does not taint her devotion to her husband."

"The dowry system is ruining families," he said, and that the change should come from women. "Women need not feel desperate and get married by paying huge amounts of money particularly when it is not a suitable match. Goddess Parvati is a role model for girls. She performed severe penance and obtained Lord Siva as husband; she did not buy him with money. Young women may remain unmarried, take to austerity, and dedicate themselves to the service of the country."

Women's conditions improved considerably during Gandhi's lifetime. Separate schools and colleges for women were founded. Women imbibed newly found vitality and social conscientiousness. While their husbands were political prisoners, they managed the household with children and older adults skillfully. They spun thread on spinning wheels, and had their clothes made. That was their primary vocation for a while.

Independent India

As a result of Gandhian movement women obtained voting rights after India had achieved Independence. At the time, women in other countries did not have voting rights. Some women won in elections and became Members

of the Legislative Assembly. Srimati Ammanna Raja was elected as Deputy Speaker. Eventually, women became ministers, prime ministers, planning commission members, governors, ambassadors, and a president of the U.N. General Assembly.

In independent India, according to the laws of the nation, men and women have equal opportunities without discrimination of caste, religion, color, or sub-sects. They received education and job opportunities.

Unmarried women passed the tests such as I.A.S and I.P.S. Later, married women also were allowed to take those tests.

Changes in women's rights to inheritance

Dharma Sastras rules were framed with the progress of society in mind. The progress of a society depends on the boundaries the society sets at a given time. If the rules are not changed according to the changing times and conditions, it would lead to unruliness and rebellion. The customs and traditions of ancient times are bound to change in step with the changing times. The law put in place previously must be changed according to current practices and customs for the sake of the welfare of the society. Changes must be accepted even when those are against the Vedic prescripts. Thus, some social reformers undertook to make changes in the laws in 1937.

Until then, widows had the right to husband's property only in nuclear families. After the laws changed, widows earned the right to the husband's property in both nuclear families and extended families alike. Father must pass his son's property to the widowed daughter-in-law and grandson's property to his widowed wife. This was, however, limited to enjoying the property during their lifetimes only.

Regardless of numerous changes in the law, a daughter had no right to her father's property. It was the responsibility of her father or brothers to make sure that the girl was well-taken care of and her marriage was arranged in due course. If the father died, the remaining property would be divided among the brothers after proper arrangements were made for the daughter's marriage. After the marriage, the daughter would continue to enjoy these rights in her in-law's home. With the seven steps she had taken around the sacred fire along with her husband at the time of marriage, she would become the responsibility of her husband. From that moment on, there would be changes in her rights and status.

In ancient times, the property rights extended to three generations only. Death rituals were performed up to three generations only. Accordingly, the heirs were sons, son's sons and his great-grandsons. If there were no sons, the daughter, daughter's daughter, and great-grand-daughter would inherit the property. If there were no heirs, the dead person's property would go to his mother. After her, his father, and then, his brothers would inherit the property in that order.

Our Dharma Sastras acknowledge eight types of marriages. There is no one sastra or sutra that is applicable to all types of marriages. When a man from a higher caste marries a woman from a lower caste, it is called an *anuloma* (descending order) marriage. Hindu law does not acknowledge it as

legal. The marriage would be recognized only after the couple got married under the Special Marriage Act.

The Hindu law did not provide property rights to women. She could enjoy the property after her husband's death, but would not have the right to donate it or sell it. No matter how rich her father was, she would have no right, not even an iota, to the property. In modern times, the women's situation is devastating due to lack of rights and economic freedom. It falls exclusively to women's lot to face all the hardships and losses that may arise in marriages. Women's lives depend on the kindness of others, both in their maternal homes and at their in-law's homes.

Under these circumstances, the Government of India appointed a Committee to examine widows' rights prescribed in *Mitakshari* in 1937, Hindu Women's Property rights, and daughter's rights in father's property. In June 1941, the Committee reviewed the said laws, and reported that making minor changes in Hindu law was not sufficient, and suggested that the entire Hindu law should be reexamined in its entirety and codified.

Accordingly, the government appointed another committee. In February 1947, this Committee traveled around the country and noted the flaws they had found in the original bill. The Committee submitted a report of their findings and a draft bill suggesting the changes needed to be made in Hindu law to Parliament in August 1948.

The second chapter of Hindu Code bill contained the Committee's suggested reforms regarding marriage. The details included marriage practices, registration, oaths, witness accounts and certification. In the third chapter, divorce, reasons for it, ways of proving them, remarriage, and determining children's status were included. In the fourth chapter, adoption, legally acceptable adoption, qualifications for it, right to deny adoption, and other angles were addressed. Sixth chapter described the property rights in nuclear families and debts. Details regarding women's property was addressed in the seventh chapter; inheritance of women's property in the eighth and ninth were given. The tenth chapter addressed the inheritance of women's property.

After lengthy discussion regarding the Hindu Code, the Select Committee submitted its report. This report provided some important changes in the Hindu Code in step with their progressive views.

According to the new Hindu Code, sons did not have the right to inherit property based on birth. Only the owner of the property would have full rights to his property during his lifetime and nobody else. Property, both real and personal, either inherited, earned by himself, or with other family members jointly, will be distributed according to his Legal Will. Women would have full rights on the property they received. Inheritance rights in the case of men's property were designed differently from those of women's property. It was determined that women should receive one half of the property men received. Both Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assembly denied daughters equal rights with sons.

One truth came to light during the discussions to finalize the bill. The lawyers who drafted this bill were not sufficiently knowledgeable in Sanskrit

to interpret the ancient Dharma Sastras. The Sanskrit scholars who were involved in this process did not have the needed English language skills to explain the Hindu Dharma sastras in English to the lawyers. The net result is it leading to the inequality between men and women in our society.

Well-known Vedic scholar Shakuntala Rao Sastri ascertained in her book, *Women in Dharma Laws*, [Shakuntala Rao Sastri. *Women in Hindu Laws*. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. 1953.] as follows: "Working toward restoring the rights women enjoyed in ancient India back to them is a sign of progress. It would have served the purpose well for them if the original Hindu Dharma Sastra was properly understood and adopted. During the time that Dharma Sastra was configured, no other country in the world had ascribed that level of status to women."

By the beginning of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, a little more progress was made. The number of separate schools and colleges for women increased considerably. Women entered the field of literature and were recognized as writers and poets. Prior to the nineteenth century, some women had received *kanakabhishekam* [a custom of honoring poets and writers by showering them with gold coins.]. In recent times, women writers received Sahitya Akademi awards and won first or second prizes in competitions held by magazines. Some women have written novels and stories for movies; A few are honored with *swarna kankanam* [Golden bracelet]. Several women have entered Medical, Educational and other professional fields, and become invaluable assets to our society. They are shining in politics as well. Some seats are reserved for women in various positions in government.

Ayyadevara Kaleswara Rao created a bill prohibiting dowry, an ill-conceived tradition, that has been ruining families economically. According to the bill, expenses for a marriage must not exceed Rs. 2000.00. If it exceeds the limit, both the giver and the taker will face punishment.

When we review this, one feels like asking, "What else they[women] need? What else they want?"

Does not our society uphold the ancient tenet, *yatra naaryastu poojyante ramante tatra devataah* [Gods revel where women are worshiped.]? Has the world of women progressed to that point? We cannot help but wonder if our country is one step ahead of other countries, when we look at the number of women who have acquired college, post-graduate and doctoral degrees, and are working in high ranking jobs.

However, everybody knows that progress in the cities appears to be only a daze, and is good only for boasting. This is only one fourth or one fifth of one percent. It is only good to show off but, most of the time, it is a star in the sky, unreachable by ordinary people.

In our society even today, people gasp, "Oh, no," the moment they hear the word 'girl'. Parents are having hard time to find suitable grooms for their girls; and the girls are mostly engaged in doing chores at home and going to school only until they get married. Grooms are available only in the black market. Either overtly or covertly, the dowry problem is hurting parents and humiliating girls. Even for the girls, who are educated and holding jobs with

the hope of living on their own, the situation far from satisfactory. There is no value for their education or earning power. Some parents are postponing girls' weddings because of their (parents') dependence on daughters' incomes. Today, it is hard even for the women who have jobs to get married. Parents are not thinking about their girls' happiness. Working wife is rarely respected by her husband. It is also rare for a woman in a lower position to get the same satisfaction as a man in a higher position. Even now, it is difficult for a woman to work without fear amid male co-workers. She earns yet unable to enjoy economic freedom.

On one hand, the movie producers are making hundreds of thousands of rupees by displaying women's physical attributes. On the other hand, women in the lower class are getting crushed by various problems in one form or another. No matter how morally they lead their lives, there is no safety in their married life. They have no right to live a moralistic life, and no pleasure in living with drunken husbands. There are laws allowing working women to receive equal pay but not full pay during maternity leave.

Numerous problems are haunting women in our society. Can education, money, jobs or wisdom protect them from the discrimination prevalent in our society? How far the woman's status in the country has improved because of laws, moralistic words or lectures?

For all these conditions, there is only one important reason. We have to ask -

What do you mean when you say "woman"?

How does society perceive women?

In its mind, "Woman is a weakling, frail, and an object of pleasure for men; she belongs to a separate race, caste, class, or religion."

That is the reason women are unable to win society's empathy in regard to their well being, pleasures and pains, and a better life for themselves. Our society craves to enjoy her because she is weak, believes she should be treated only as an object of pleasure, humiliates her and ridicules her. If it gets a chance, it causes her to fall and even makes money by throwing her as an enticement.

Why?

Because society views her as somebody else [not a person].

Is relationship between a man and a woman like a relationship between a mill-owner and a worker?

Or, is it like the relationship between the ruler and the ruled?

Is that because of the difference between the weak and the powerful?

Or, something like the difference between the learned and the ignorant?

It is totally confusing.

Some claim that there is no redemption for women until patriarchy is gone and matriarchy prevails. Others argue that men and women together make up society, share responsibility in managing the household equally, and that their collaborative effort is the foundation of the home and society. The

respect a woman receives extends to man as well; so also her status, clout, progress, knowledge and acumen. If she is humiliated, it goes to the man and extends to the society they live in. Her insults are insults to him.

The word 'woman' stands for a mother, a wife, and a daughter.

If one does not think on those lines, one cannot understand who a woman is.

Since some women started thinking along those lines, change started taking place. So also revenge and angst. Things like defiance of men, accusations, insulting articles, and words are flying around. Men and women should be living affably, as reflected in the expression, "ksheera neera nyayam" (like milk and water.). Instead, their modes of thinking are moving in opposite directions. Polite language has given place to rudeness. Some women go even further, and ask why women cannot make the same mistakes men make? Why they could not be forgiven in the same manner as men for the same mistakes? Instead of suggesting ways to change men's attitudes, some women are fighting for rights to make the mistakes men make.

This attitude has resulted in mutual insults and ridicule. Before the laws and rights are established fully, there used to be the tradition of "respecting women and worshipping women." Even when there was no right to inheritance, there was a tradition of sending women to their in-law's home with a lot of gifts such as cash, gold, things of value, fruits, and new garments. There was a tradition of respecting her even when she was an enemy's wife. The enmity, even when it was at its worst, was never shown against women but remained between the men. Women were treated as mothers, wives, and daughters, always.

Now, it turned upside down. There is no procreation without a woman. It is the mother who carries the child for nine months, feeds, and raises it. Woman is created to provide for man's happiness in this world as well as the next. Woman is one half of man. It is not possible for each to achieve complete progress without the other. Even if it is accomplished, it will not give the same pleasure as the pleasure of being together. Therefore, it must be achieved together.

The mode of thinking in our society must change. Women are the backbone of our society and life-support. In our society, civility and the view that we receive respect when we respect women must develop naturally. There is no use of passing laws and regulations without people espousing good manners. Scholars, writers, social reformers, and politicians need to realize this truth.

Nowadays, we are hearing serious discussions about a harmony of ideas and patriotism. We are talking about them and encouraging them. The elite assert unanimously that people will be happy and prosperous with that kind of harmony. They hope for it. But, from where should this ideology of harmony arise? Experienced individuals claim that our culture was born and conserved in the homes of ancient sages. So, where is its root? Where is the root collar for this plant?

Need for mutual respect

For harmonious discussion, people should understand each other, be empathetic to each other's pleasure and pain, and be there for each other in times of need. Each should wish the best for the other. This empathy must start with couples. Then, it should extend to the society, and finally, permeate through out the country, like the scent from Jasmine flowers. If a man cannot empathize with his mother, wife and daughter, he cannot do so at other places either. Society cannot fare well without education, and degrees that teach courtesy and generosity. In a society that is not doing well, men and women may fare well, but begetting healthy children will be hard.

The person who thinks everything is fine when he is fine needs to change his attitude and invite women into his world. Then only we will have real progress. If one person fares well, that is not progress. Similarly, when women rebel, fight for their progress through laws, and installing matriarchy, that too is incomplete. The real progress is when both men and women work side by side with congeniality. That is well-rounded progress. And it lays ground for the progress of future generations.

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(Translator's note:

This translation is based on the text available on archive.org. In a few places, the xerox copy is smudged. In such instances, I took the liberty of providing the text as I understood. Any misinterpretation is regretted, and all suggestions are welcome. Thanks to archive.org for making this text available.

(The Telugu original, *Bharata naari - naaduu neduu*, was written by Illindila Saraswati Devi. Seconderabad. Yuva Bharati, 1975.)

(December 24, 2021)

5. Who Opposed Women's Education, And Why?

For more than a century, social reformers and elitists have been calling out that education for women is important. That made me do some serious thinking. So, who said it is not important, and what is their rationale for opposing women's education?

I admit I have not read extensively, nor am I a scholar of any significance. Nevertheless, within the scope of my limited knowledge, I have come to understand that there is really no plausible explanation for anybody to take women's education or lack thereof, as a separate, independent issue. Let me explain why I thought so.

We do not know about prehistoric times, but we do have ample evidence that women in the Vedic period were not denied acquisition of knowledge. Scholars often cite female scholars such as Gargi, Maitreyi, Lopamudra, Viswavara and Apala. They were all said to have participated in literary discussions along with men. Notably, men did not object to women's participation in their discussions. There were even occasions when women challenged men's views. Modern day scholars too cite these names without any reservations.

However, it is not clear whether these women were exceptions, or a general rule. Secondly, who educated them? How did they acquire that level of knowledge? I could not find answers to these questions, but would be happy to learn if anybody shares his or her views.

From the books and articles I have read, one truth is strikingly obvious. Women in royal families and the rich were educated. Most of them read classical literature in Telugu and Sanskrit. Some of them wrote poetry. *Andhra kavayitrulu* [Telugu Poetesses] by Utukuri Lakshmikanthamma records 283 poetesses from the Vedic times to the late 20th C.

Similarly, *Abala Saccharitra Ratnamala* in 2 volumes by Bhandaru Acchamamba features 58 women of excellence in various fields. The wording in the title is a bit amusing. "Abala" literally means weak, yet all the women she portrayed in these two volumes are shown to have impressive fortitude and knowledge. In her foreword to the book, Acchamamba quoted a line from Bhavabhuti's *Uttara ramacharitra*, "Not the gender, masculine or feminine, but ethical values are venerated."

In the other parts of society, the underprivileged, not only women but men also, were not educated. Thus, a better explanation for lack of education for women appears to be not gender but wealth. A second question is, how did those who were knowledgeable receive it? I will come to it in a moment. First, let us see how the movement of women's education began.

In the late 19th C, Kandukuri Veeresalingam started to promote women's education. His reasoning for the need for women's education is however interesting. He said, "Women, if not educated, will waste their time fighting with each other." Let us stop here for a moment, and ask ourselves

how arrived at that conclusion. Are there no men who waste their time with meaningless arguments and verbal exchanges? Some of them are polite and informative, but most of them are not, to be frank.

Kokkonda Venkataratnam Pantulu was a staunch opponent of Veeresalingam regarding women's education. That Veeresalingam and Venkataratnam Pantulu exchanged fierce words in their respective magazines is a well-known fact. So also, Vedam Venkataraya Sastry and Chellapilla Venkata Sastry got into verbal exchange in the late 19th C. Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry referred to the arguments between Ramakrishna Kavulu and Tirupati Venkata Kavulu in his book, *Anubhavaalu Jnapakaalu* [Experiences and Memories.].

Veeresalingam's comment that women should be educated to avoid wasting their time on quarrels does not hold water. In my opinion, he arrived at that conclusion after watching his mother and his aunt (mother's older sister) bicker about his upbringing.

We all agree women must be educated. Then the question is what kind of education and to what end?

The education Veeresalingam designed for women was far from progressive in today's terms. His syllabus was limited to teaching women their duties to serve her husband, support him in his activities, and raise children; pretty much, as the saying in America goes, keep women "barefoot and pregnant". Modern day progressives do not agree with this argument.

Strangely, in his times, Pulugurta Lakshmi Narasamamba supported women's education and even adopted his syllabus, which was to reinforce sati dharma in women.

The second question is to what end. This requires a greater study, as happening now. Before going into the "end" per se, we need to examine the definition of "education". What do we mean when we say somebody is educated or not educated? How did the idea that "somebody is educated if he attended a school or a college" start? It seems to have started with the Western concept of "educated". Veeresalingam, influenced by Western mode of thinking, founded schools for girls in the late 19th century. Originally, there were only co-education schools. He founded separate schools for girls. Right around that time, the British missionaries started schools to promote their religion first, and later, to promote their mode of governing. In other words, education meant a specific building, specific areas of expertise, and an organized group of teachers. Going to school meant to go to a particular place at a scheduled time and receiving knowledge from some individuals called teachers.

By default, that meant knowledge acquired from parents and other individuals (gurus) at home, or by self-study, was not taken into account! Then should we say all the works created by men and women who did not attend so-called "schools" and "colleges" are not parts of our literature?

Bhandaru Acchamamba was not "educated" in that sense, but her humungous work remains a standard work, a classic, to this day. In this context, I cannot help but think how our modern day "educated" are performing.

Women without formal education have produced voluminous literature. In me next article I have given some examples of some writers, who claim to have master's and doctoral degrees.

In some ways, this is personal; nevertheless, the point I am going to make is valid in general as well. In November 2021, an article Dr. Ramesh Prasad Ravella has been published in Misimi monthly [print] magazine. The title is "Nidadavolu Malathi." This is the 14th article under the running title "Expatriate literature." The article barely touched upon the subject in the title, "Nidadavolu Malathi," (which spanned 7 decades, I might add,), and went into a smorgasbord presentation of writers and stories that had nothing to do with either Nidadavolu Malathi or expatriate literature. It was glaringly obvious that the writer had no idea of what is expatriate literature. (For further details, you may read my article on my blog telugu thulika.). The point I am trying to make here is, the term "educated" does not necessarily mean that they have received the ability to study a given topic diligently and critically, and write an article on the subject in question. (For further discussion on the subject, please, read my article, "Irresponsible writings," at the end.) .

This is just one example of what I happened to notice. I think it has become common for writers to write articles without reasonable knowledge of the subject, and for the magazines to publish them with equal indifference or ignorance.

If we compare this literature from the so-called "educated" writers to the women writers in the early 19th and 20th centuries, we can easily notice the difference between the women with real knowledge and commitment, and the current day writers with "education."

In the final analysis, I would agree that getting systematic education in colleges and universities serves a specific purpose of achieving a goal in a given field, but acquiring knowledge outside the educational institutions does not mean lack of education; certainly "uneducated" is not the correct epithet for them. Acquiring knowledge has its benefits and could serve an exemplary purpose. Most women have been knowledgeable in that sense. That women needed to be educated is a convoluted, untenable notion invented by social reformers and promoted by university-educated scholars. Let's get real. At present, more than women's education, a complete overhaul or reform of the current educational institutions is needed.

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6. K.K.Ranganathacharyulu. *Telugu Short Stories, Early Times-1930s*

In the past nine years, well over one hundred Telugu stories have been translated and published on thulika.net, in an attempt to introduce the intellectual richness of Telugu writers to the non-Telugu readers. But for the two stories by Bhandaru Acchamamba, all of them were written in the latter half of the twentieth century. Additionally, a few articles discussing the nature and peculiarities of Telugu story were published. Nevertheless, up until now, the origin and the development of modern Telugu story has not been expounded. The present monograph, *tolinaati Telugu kathanikalu: modatinunchi 1930 varaku. Telugu kathanikala pariseelana* [Telugu short stories from early years to 1930s: A Study] by Prof. K. K. Ranganathacharyulu fulfills that gap.

This 120-page-long monograph records a meticulous study of the origins and the development of Telugu short story in Andhra Pradesh. The author walks us through significant elements of Telugu short story.

Prof. Ranganathacharyulu has taken great pains to study the subject objectively and it is obvious in these 120 pages packed with valuable information. Even the title so carefully crafted vouches for his commitment. It says “from the beginning” but gives no specific date. The reason for doing so becomes obvious in his discussion on identifying a given story as the first modern Telugu story. I will come to this later.

During my last visit to India, Prof. Kethu Viswanatha Reddy gave me this book. I found it not only interesting but valuable for anybody interested in studying Telugu short story as a genre. While I was in Hyderabad, I asked the author for permission to publish an abridged version of this book in English. However, as I started working on it, I found it impossible to shorten the text. Therefore, I decided to quote a few arguments from each chapter in order to give the readers a glimpse into the nature of Telugu story in its early stages. I earnestly hope that those who can read Telugu will read the original in order to benefit fully from this monograph.

The author opens with a brief history of Sanskrit texts. He states that, initially, the short story took brief accounts from longer Sanskrit texts and retold them in the form of kavyas and plays. Eventually, it progressed through various stages such as adaptations, translations, and finally, settled as modern stories, which is narrating current events and occurrences in colloquial language. The book opens with a substantive preface giving the background, and proceeds to describe the evolution of the Telugu short story in magazines, discussion as to which one is the first short story, anthologies, translations, diversity of themes and variations in styles), famous writers of the early times, brief introductions of a few more notable stories and writers, and critiquing the short stories.

The monograph also includes notes, source list, and a 28-page long appendix of the stories examined by the author, with complete bibliographical data for the purpose of this study.

Here is a brief account of Prof. Ranganathacharyulu's study

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Normally, the short story and the narrative techniques in a given culture are as long a history as the language itself. In the past, stories were prevalent in the form of oral literature across the world.

In modern times, the changes in the production, the industries, and the businesses brought about significant changes in the nature of our lives. Now we have greater latitude in human relationships, experiences, and in our mode of thinking. Printing facilities and magazines made it possible to reach a wider range of readership. As a result, the short story attained greater variation in themes, narrative technique and complexity. We refer to the modern story as a fictional story because it is a product created by a writer based on his observations of people and incidents in real life, which happened repeatedly and he found a commonality in his observations.

Like short story in other cultures, Telugu short story also has a long history. According to scholars, short story in India has been in existence since the Vedic times. The *Bruhat katha* by Gunadhya in the Paisachi language is the first notable writing in Indic languages. Along with Ramayana and Maha Bharata, *Bruhat katha* also provided writers with anecdotes for kavyas and plays in Sanskrit.

In Sanskrit literature, some stories are entertaining while others are didactic. Vikaramarka charitra, Salivaahana charitra and similar other works are focused on royal families and are imbued with rasas such as excitement, bravery, and amazement. Stories like *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesa* belong in the category of didactic stories. Usually, they include animals and birds as characters. Most of these kavyas gained circulation in the form of oral literature.

In Andhra Pradesh, there are umpteen stories prevalent only in the oral form. Several scholars such as Gurajada Sriramamurthy, Komanduri Anantacharyulu, Madhira Subbanna Dikshitulu, and Nandivada Chalapati Rao published them in print. Some of the writers, who are known for their scholarship, put them in pedantic style. A few wrote them in a semi-classical style while others wrote in colloquial style. The stories containing romance and ethical values are intended to entertain readers.

In the early years, adaptations from Indian stories into other languages and vice versa were undertaken freely. For instance, *chitra ratnaakaram* by Gurajada Sriramamurthy is based on *Arabian nights*. Taking the incidents or events from the original, he modified the names of the people and places as appropriate for Telugu readers.

Whether modern Telugu story has evolved from the ancient works progressively or as a newly developed form is open to debate. Modern scholars and critics claim that it is not evolved from the ancient works.

The stories mentioned earlier were intended for oral presentation. All the incidents and events centered on a single hero. Authors took the story and positioned it in their own milieu, languages and peculiar styles. On the other hand, modern story is anchored in one theme and structured accordingly. It contains the peculiar characteristics such as opening, organization or scheme, ending, and a distinctive style. Each writer has a style of his own and each story has a form of its own. Also, the importance of the incidents he creates, the characters he depicts, and the dialogues he develops change according to his point of view and his perception of his audience. The structure in modern short story has no room for expansiveness. Variation in themes, realism, depiction of contemporary life, and human psyche are vital. They belong to the written culture in their entirety. Modern short story is an invented story based on realism. The stories adapted from the oral literature do not belong in this fictional category.

In ancient times, the stories were rooted in the tradition of invoking a sense of amazement in the readers as a whole and taking them into an imaginary world or teaching them the righteous path. The modern story, on the other hand, helps the reader to understand one dimension of truth in real life. Whether the topic is taken from history, oral literature, or mythology, if it contains an awareness of modernity in essence and in perception, it becomes a modern story.

Kolluri Dharmarao identified this distinction between the modern story and the ancient story in his article, “kathaa parinaamam” [evolution of story] published in Andhra Bharati in July 1928. He comments that the stories containing ideas of social reform are harmful to the society. Notably, he believes that the British kept retelling the old stories because they could not give up the didactic nature of the old stories and that introducing new stories in our society started only after the desire for social reform caught on. Modern story is defined as a story illustrating today’s realism in today’s language as opposed to retelling the old stories in modern language.

Although the modern story belongs to modern times, the name itself is not modern but taken from old times. Ancient grammarians classified the genre of story into five categories: *Akhyayika*, *katha*, *khanda katha*, *pari katha*, and *kathanika*. Based on the nature of the theme, topic, length, and scheme, each is shown as having a different set of characteristics.

A *kathanika* has been defined as:

bhayaanakam sukhataram garbhe cha karuno rasah
adbhuto[asthe]sukluptarthaa no daatthaa saa kathanikaa.

These characteristics may be redefined in the context of modern short story as follows:

Bhayaanakam in the modern sense is to create curiosity as in “what next”, suspense, and amazement in the opening. *garbhe cha karuno rasah* may be interpreted as including a little sadness, conflict and internal struggle in the scheme of narration. Ending the story with an unexpected twist is *adbhutam* [Amazement]. Presenting it in a language easily comprehensible to the readers is *sukhataram* [uncomplicated], and *sukluptarthaa* [brevity of diction and meaning or unity of theme] is the

same as making the topic brief, and keeping all the elements (the characters, incidents, events, illustration, underlying thought, and conflict) focused on the core theme.

In general, a short story may be defined as one that contains the opening, which can draw the reader in, maintains suspense and curiosity in the reader by describing the internal or external conflict of the characters powerfully, and finishes it with either an unexpected twist or which provokes the reader into thinking. This is only a general statement. Modern story contains more breadth and depth. The critics of the first generation Telugu short story have discussed this subject in great detail.

In modern literature, prose literature has a special place. In the early days, terms such as *vachanam* and *gadyam* were current for some time. In the course of time, *vachana sahityam* became the accepted term. Several terms such as *chinna katha*, *kathika* and *kathaanakam* were in vogue for a while. Other terms found in our magazines are *navalika*, *pitta katha*, *kalpita katha*, and *kalpanaa katha*. Detective fiction was referred to as *nirupaka katha* and the detective as *nirupakudu*. Eventually, *kathaanika* has been accepted and *katha* became a longer form for the same genre.

Akkiraju Umakantam is one of the early critics to discuss short story during this period. With his knowledge of English critics like Hudson, and French and Russian writers, he accepted Telugu short story as a separate genre. He adds Hudson's theory that the short story originated in order to cater to the readers who are hard-pressed for time is not tenable in our case (Andhra Bharati. July 1918). He further comments that, "A short story gives the same, inclusive pleasure and satisfaction as a play or a novel to the reader. ... After reading a story, the reader experiences suggestion (*dhvani*). Suggestion is important in a short story. All the elements in the story are anchored in this suggestion." Umakantam's validation of Telugu short story, in the light of his scholarship in classics and poetics, is notable.

Andra Seshagiri Rao deserves special mention as a critic from the same period. He comments, "Readers now live a fast life in cities and have no time to read huge volumes and lengthy novels. Therefore, their interest turned to the short story which can be finished in a short period of time."

D. A. Narasimham encapsulates the characteristics of a short story. He states books such as biographies, *rajasthana kathavali* and *Arabian Nights*, do not belong in the category since they are not focused on one theme. In his opinion, the important element in a short story is a single topic, which should fill the reader with suspense and imprint itself on the reader's mind deeply. He makes a special distinction between a short story and a novel and suggests six principles that a writer should remember while writing a short story.

1. Short stories may contain a variety of unusual topics the same way as novels.

2. A short story is not a short novel. There is no rule regarding the length for a short story.

3. Characterization through dialogues is more difficult than descriptions. However, the best way is to let the reader understand a character through

dialogues. With that, the reader understands the story's environment by himself.

4. Reading a story puts the reader to work. It makes him think. The reader feels satisfied after reading a novel.

5. The reader after reading a novel, reminisces about it. The short story does not constrain the reader's thoughts. They (the thoughts) leap forward, and are anxious to befriend new thoughts.

6. Unlike the novel writer, a story writer gives just a little to the reader. He gives ten times more work to the reader than what he has given in his narrative.

Kolluri Dharmarao does not approve of short stories offering social reform messages, although he does comment on such short stories favorably. He states, "There is no other gadget that could goad [into thinking] a reader better than a short story." Also, he prefers colloquial language as a better means to serve the intended purpose in a story. Regarding the subjects for a short story, he says, "The purpose of a short story is to narrate a topic taken either from history or a fictional social event and narrate it in a manner that reinforces the traditional Aryan values."

There are definitive proofs to show that Telugu short story has acquired an independent and significant stature even in the early period.

Magazines

There is no need to state specifically that magazines were instrumental in promoting the short stories. Umakantam published his stories in his magazine, *Trilinga* in 1913-1914. Rayasam Venkatasivudu published his stories in *Telugu janaana*. Achanta Venkata Sankhyayana Sarma published his notable stories in *Kalpalata*. Other magazines, which provided platform for short stories during this period, are *Suvarnalekha*, *Sahiti* and *Bharati*. Between 1916 and 1920, after the First World War, printing magazines slowed down due to the high cost of paper and printing materials, commented Andra Seshagiri Rao. His comment underscores the close relationship between magazines and the progress of short stories. *Sujatha* is credited with publishing stories by prominent writers such as Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry, Madapati Hanumantha Rao, Oddiraju Sitaramachandra Rao, and so on. In the same magazine, some of the early stories of Chalam appeared. Some critics wondered if other magazines hesitated to publish Chalam's stories and essays. Soon, the magazines published them.

The first short story in Telugu

For a long time, critics insisted "diddubaatu" by Gurajada Apparao is first modern short story. Vallampati Venkatasubbaiah states that modern short story should be studied with the assumption that "diddubaatu" is the first short story. He posits modern Telugu short story has no infancy and that the short story, "diddubatu" arrived with full stature like a well-developed beautiful young woman. And, he believes that "diddubaatu" contains all the elements of a good story such as brevity, feeling, unity, conflict, and a strong structure. However, recent studies indicate that there are other stories published prior to "diddubaatu," even though they may not contain all the

elements mentioned by Venkatasubbaiah. If we search magazines published in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, it is possible to find several other first short stories.

Whether "diddubatu" is the first story or not makes no difference to Apparao's status. There are stories before his story was published, but there were no models which he could develop on. Notably, in terms of his philosophical perceptions and choice of topics, there are no stories comparable to his stories in the later years either. That is the peculiarity of Gurajada Apparao's stories. Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry comments on Apparao's stories regarding their merits but not on its status as the first story.

Here are some stories published before Apparao's story, and could be claimed as the first story:

"Lalitha" by Achanta Sankyayana Sarma was published in November 1903 in *Kalpalatha* and has been named as the first story by Puripanda Appalaswamy. Setti Iswara Rao states, "The style and the language in "Lalitha" are classical but not modern. Nevertheless, the short story elements such as opening, development, dialogues, the muse [sphurti], and the narrative technique are modern." Several others have quoted Sankyayana Sarma as the first writer. In another story by the same author, *Apoorvopanyasamu*, the author depicts the speeches of social reformers and their associations sarcastically.

From the sources recently made available, Bhandaru Acchamamba's name came to the fore as the first writer. Her story, "strividya," narrated in the form of dialogues, is claimed to be the first story by some writers. It was published in *Hindusundari* monthly. Another story, "[dhanatrayodasi](#)" [The Lakshmi puja Day] also is considered for the same claim. The story was published in November 1902 in *Hindusundari*. Rayasam Venkatasivudu stated that Acchamamba had been publishing short stories since 1898. His article was published in 1902 in his magazine, *Telugu janaana*. According to his article, Acchamamba's stories, "Prema pariksha," was published in July 1898 in *Telugu janaana*, "Eruvula sommu baruvula chetu" in September 1898, and "Lalithaa Saaradalu" in September 1901 in the same magazine. Another of her stories, "Beeda kutumbamu" was published in February 1904 in *Savitri* magazine.

Apart from the language in these stories, "dhanatrayodasi" and "beeda kutumbamu" are noteworthy in terms of structure. The opening scenes in these stories are completely modern. Until we find other evidence to prove otherwise, we need to state that the stories written by Bhandaru Acchamamba are the first stories in Telugu. If we compare her writings to the activities of the social reformers who had undertaken the women's issues, we will find Acchamamba's writings advocate women's individuality.

Prof. Ranganathacharyulu discusses the early stories in other Indian languages and points out the similarities and dissimilarities between those stories and the early Telugu stories. Also people in other fields such as social, political and reform movements and research, have written stories. The list of stories published during this period is indicative of the recognition, the status and the importance of short stories. Akkiraju Umakantam, Andra

Seshagiri Rao, Seshadri Ramana kavulu were all scholars of repute. Sankhyayana Sarma was not only a traditional scholar but also knowledgeable in art, music and dance. He was editor of two magazines *Sujanapramodini* and *Kalpalatha*. Famous short story writers like Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry, Veluri Sivarama Sastry and Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry were well-read not only in Sanskrit and Telugu classics but also in several other Indian and foreign languages. Writers like Panuganti Lakshminarasimha Rao, Adivi Bapiraju, Kavikondala Venkatarao wrote short stories in addition to writing in other genres.

Madapati Hanumantha Rao, Kanuparti Varalakshamma, and Gummididala Durgabayamma [Durgabai Deshmukh], among others, were known for their participation in politics and social reform, and also as writers of short fiction. Famous story writers Chalam and Chinta Dikshitulu were associated with the field of education. Among others who wrote short stories, Gidugu Sitapati stands out as an activist in the colloquial language movement and Giri [Nandagiri Venkatarao] was a judge at the district level. Sri Vasudevarao declared himself as belonging exclusively to Hyderabad, wrote stories, which were modern in all aspects such as language, style, and themes.

During this period, we also see several writers writing under pen names. Komarraju Lakshmana Rao wrote under the pseudonym, Ramanujarao, says Adiraju Veerabhadrarao. Other pseudonyms are Bhasudu, Samgha samskari, rasapipasi, okaru, nenu, oka mitrudu and several others.

Rangacharyulu found approximately two hundred writers in his search. Fifteen of them were women. Stories written by such writers as Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry, Chalam, and Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao were published during this period. During this period, Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry published about forty, the most by any writer at the time. The number of stories by Rayasam Venkatasivudu, Chinta Dikshitulu, and Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao ranged from fifteen to twenty-five. Among the writers who wrote from five to fifteen were Chilakamarti Lakshminarasimham, Kanuparti Varalakshamma, Abburi Ramakrishna Rao, Viswanatha Satyanarayana, Bhamidipati Kameswara Rao and a few others. It is hard to state that all the stories under consideration would meet the criteria of a modern story. For instance, most of the stories written by Abburi Ramakrishna Rao were published in 1923. Among them, "Suryarao cheppina kathalu" [Stories told by Suryarao] are not stories focused on one topic. Most of the writers wrote only two or three stories yet their stories show the characteristics of a modern story at an advanced level. Counting the numbers is meant only to show the extent to which the Telugu story developed in the first two or three decades of the twentieth century. In the magazines meant exclusively for women such as *Telugu janana*, *Anasuya* and *Savitri*, the stories were woven around the characters from mythology and famous historical women. They are not taken into consideration for this study.

Literary organizations and associations also contributed to the popularization of the story extensively in this period. Sahiti samiti, Kavita samiti, Sodarasamiti, Kavikumara samiti, Saraswata samajam and Andhra

geervana sahitya sammelam were prominent literary organizations during this period. Writers suffixed their membership status of these organizations to their names along with their educational qualifications. Some writers developed a separate nomenclature for parts of their stories. One practice was to break the story into short parts and labeled them *rangaalu*, *adhyayaalu*, *prakaranalu*, and *chinukulu*. Giving names to each part was another practice. We can also see inclusion of verses at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of a story, as the author deemed fit. Those who could not do away with tradition followed these methods. Among the places that were featured extensively in these stories are Chennapatnam[Chennai], Calcutta, Bombay, Hyderabad, Poona, Visakhapatnam, Rajahmundry, Bezvada, Nellore, Anakapalli, Bellari and Konaseema. Some of the cities in Burma and Rangoon were also featured in these stories. [Note: The names of some cities have changed since. I believe the author kept the original spellings as appeared in the stories and I followed the same pattern in this article.]

Anthologies

The fact that there were already notable anthologies in this period vouches for the advanced status of short story at the time. Some of them were anthologies of stories by one writer such as Chalam, Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry and Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao. Several anthologies included stories by several writers, edited by one writer.

Translations

Several critics stated that modern story entered the Telugu arena, following the introduction of English literature in our country. During the period under discussion, along with original stories, numerous translations also published. Numerous stories were translated not only from English, French and Russian but also from Bengali, Urdu, Hindi, and Marathi. At one point, *Krishna patrika* published stories under the name of the original author but did not include the translator's name. In the early stages, the information regarding the original story or writer was not given in full. Some mentioned the original title while others mentioned the name of the original author only. Some said it was a translation but provided no other information. Several terms such as *anukaranam*, *etthi raasinadi*, *grahimpa-badinadi* were used to identify a translation. Some called it *anuvadam*. Among the stories in Indian languages, most stories were translated from Bengali and most of them were the stories by Tagore. In the anthology, *trilinga kathalu* by Akkiraju Umakantam, six of them were from Bengali. Umakantam does not mention the name but were Tagore's stories. From 1912 onwards, several stories of Tagore were translated without mentioning his name. Among those who translated Tagore's stories in great numbers, the name of Karumuri Vaikuntarao stood foremost. He and Sobhadevi translated several stories and published a volume under the title, *katha guccham*. Among the stories translated from Marathi, only Sri Vasudeva Rao's name was notable.

Among the translations from foreign languages, Russian stories appeared prominently. Jayanti Brahmanandam (Pseud. oka haindava yuvati) and Kurma Venugopalaswamy in collaboration with Seshubai translated several Russian stories. Ponaka Picchireddy wrote some stories based on a

French writer, Balzac, and called them *anukarana* [a loose adaptation or transcreation].

Multiplicity of themes

Telugu story has gained strength in structure as well as variety in themes even in the first three decades.

In the early stage, the stories mostly featured woman-centered themes and women's reform movement. Among the woman-centered themes, widow-related issues were prominent. Child marriages, the consequences, the problems faced by widows, their status in the family environment, their experiences, and remarriages were themes for many stories. Quoting ancient works such as *smruthi* in order to rationalize widow remarriages and the Sarda Act opposing child marriages were found in the stories written by female writers. Some stories depicted parents as coming forward to arrange marriages for their widowed daughters, or widows getting married under the auspices of Veeresalingam or Brahmo samaj of Calcutta. Another important aspect relating to women was education. Promoting women's education, Bhandaru Acchamamba and Gurajada Apparao wrote stories. Another theme was the identity of prostitutes and their marriages.

Muslim women, women as ideal individuals in a family, women subjected to oppression, suppression, deception, and those who put up with the oppression silently, their tragic lives—all were portrayed in the stories at this time. The names of Muslim women were used as titles for some stories. Bhandaru Acchamamba portrayed women as cherishing self-esteem, having strong will, and also being capable of mending the moral weaknesses in their husbands. This kind of portrayal of women was not evident in the stories that came after Acchamamba. Chalam's stories showed women from a variety of social strata. Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry depicted courageous and worldly-wise women, wiser than their husbands. We see widows dreaming about motherhood and the conflict between motherhood and love in Chalam's stories. There were also stories depicting women as ideal housewives. In some stories we see educated, self-disciplined women carrying themselves on equal status with men liberally. We need to make a special note of women in zamindar families, their poise, determination, ego, and their sense of self-worth as depicted in some of the stories.

Several stories depicted the hardships of individuals from several angles within the family and the marital status of couples. Husbands suspecting wives and wives suspecting husbands were treated rather lightly. Often, the husbands' suspicions of the wives turned out to be unfounded. The problems arising out of marriages with considerable age difference, subsequent suspicions in the man and his mental struggle were the themes in some stories.

Many stories depicted the conflict between generations. In these stories, we see the youth questioning child marriages and exposing the dishonest attitudes of adults, who claimed to be upholding tradition. This appeared to be a struggle between the tradition and the modernity. Several stories depicted modern educated youth as ideal. The bridegrooms insisting on meeting the prospective brides was a new trend in these stories. Another new

trend was young men marrying girls of their choice and without their parents' intervention. Young men, who went abroad for education, returned home with new values, and their altered attitudes—all these figured into the stories. Writers' own values also were worked into the choice of topics.

Stories of unusual love and romance were also numerous in this period. They included both categories—happy endings and tragic endings. Some of them featured platonic love, successful love, and poetic element in the romantic tradition, while a few others dealt with failed love and broken hearts.

Most of the stories illustrating the economic problems and the changes in the economic world were limited to the middle class. Some of the female writers depicted the families which were once rich but ruined, the resulting problems, and now the women handled their situations. So also, the problems relating to jobs, loss of jobs, preference of starting a business and living independently as opposed to working for somebody, the high style of zamindars and the lazy lifestyle of the men in Agraharams [endowments bestowed on worthy Brahmins by royal families] were also depicted in stories.

Many writers included literary discussions in their stories whenever possible. The works of Kalidasa, Shakespeare, and other English novels found their place in these stories. Stories also took a shot at romantic poetry. Women in these stories appeared to be well-read in classics. There were husbands who encouraged their wives to read English literature. Similarly, the language issues were also discussed in the stories.

At some point in this stage, self-delusion seeped into the stories. Especially, we see this aspect in Gurajada, Chalam and Sripada. After Gurajada, no writer dealt with the follies of religious beliefs. There were stories with World War I, national and non-cooperation movements as background.

Very few stories discussed politics. Also, there were no stories depicting farmers, their relationship to the land, and the land ownership issues. The only story found by the author is "chacchinanta kala gante". There were no stories featuring the oppressed and their issues, not as much as expected, at least. In short, the stories published up until 1930, represented only the middle class. At this stage, stories illustrating the delicate angles relating to human nature, their depth, and their inner struggles were next to none.

Variations in structure

The diversity, multiplicity, and the signs of structure which are common in modern stories are prevalent even in the first two or three decades. In this period, the stories have acquired the modern form in language and style. Even when the language was classical, the narrative technique was modern. In the course of time, some of the writers developed their individual styles as a part of their creativity. Chalam, Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry, Veluri Sivarama Sastry, and Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry developed their own styles. Gurajada Apparao's stories illustrated density in expression, depth (*nirbharata*), brevity, and simplicity blended with gravity. We should make a

special note of the writing based on the pronunciation by Gurajada and Chalam.

Another feature peculiar to style of this period was moving away from the straightforward narration and toward complex narrative techniques. We see a wide variety of characters from simple to complex in this period. Also, some stories were told in the first person while others were told in the third person. From the use of first person during this period we can say the Telugu advanced considerably. At the time most of the stories with strong structure were told in the first person. It allowed the reader to get closer to the writer. We see this first person narration in the stories written by Bhandaru Acchamamba and Kanuparti Varalakshamma. At times, we see the writer interfering in the narration to comment on the relationship between two incidents or events; so also to comment on the characters. Some writers like Acchamamba and Sripada used dialogues exclusively to narrate a story.

In terms of the opening, construction, and ending, the stories displayed as much diversity as possible. Also, during this period, we see the titles given to the stories indicative of the nature of the theme and the narrative technique. Some of them were in word like *darjaa*, *bolta*, *veli* while others were two correlated words such as *nenu-jonna rotte*, *aame-eeme*. Some of the titles were complete sentences. For example, *karmamitlaa kaalindi*, *menarikam tappaledu*. Such descriptive and expressive titles indicated how the story proceeded and how it was going to end. They vouched for the writers' talent.

Further elaborating on these insights, Prof. Ranganathacharyulu discussed some stories by following writers individually under the caption "Prominent writers of early times" [*tolinaati pramukha rachayitalu*].

They are: Bhandaru Acchamamba, Achanta Sankhyayana Sarma, Gurajada Apparao, Madapati Hanumantha Rao, Akkiraju Umakantam, Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry, Gudipati Venkata Chalam, Chinta Dikshitulu, Veluri Sivarama Sastry, Rayasam Venkatasivudu, Kanuparti Varalakshamma, Viswanatha Satyanarayana, Adivi Bapiraju, Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao, Mokkapati Narasimha Sastry, Bhamidipati Kameswara Rao, Vempati Nagabhushanam, Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry, Sri Vasudeva Rao, Nandagiri Venkatarao, Oddiraju Sitaramachandra rao, Oddiraju Raghava Rangarao, Siriguri Jayarao, Panuganti Lakshmi Narasimharao, Chilakamarti Lakshminarasimham, and Abburi Ramakrishna Rao.

Critiques

Akkiraju Umakantam enunciated the importance of the genre of prose in literature in no uncertain terms. He stated that the genre of fiction had the same important place as novel and drama in literature. Andra Seshagiri Rao was one of the critics who would study individually one story of one writer and analyze it in depth. In his criticism of a story by Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry, he wrote a comprehensive review of it in which he gave a brief note about the short story as a genre, commended the story and the writer, and the purpose of the anthology in which the said story was included. Then he proceeded to analyze the various elements such as classification of themes,

structure, and the improprieties in a couple of places as well. While paying tribute to the writer as a social reformer and preacher, Subrahmanya Sastry's themes were classified into four classes—widow remarriages, post puberty marriages, promoting the idea that business and farming were better than working for somebody, and family life.

Modern critiquing techniques were present in Seshagiri Rao's analysis. He balanced the positive and negative aspects while analyzing the author's complete understanding of all the elements, his taste in good writing, and his technique. He then summarized the elements of a short story. He ascertained the relationship between an author's personal life and the writer contextually. He pointed out the impropriety of the setting in one story. He believed variation in the settings in general contributed towards authenticity.

In 1928, an article on the specifics of a short story was published in *Bharati*. D. A. Narasimham wrote some articles discussing the structure and the nature of a short story extensively. He stated literature would change along with the environment, time and conditions, and that, among various literatures, which evolved after the introduction of English literature, the *gadya katha* *anakamulu* [prose fiction] gained in popularity. He also admitted that he became knowledgeable after reading short stories published in *Bharati* and *Andhra patrika* magazines. Based on his extensive reading of the contemporary stories, Narasimham postulated six tenets. He believed a short story should be able to penetrate into the reader's mind deeply as a veritable fact. He also believed that a good writer would have the skill to stay behind the characters and make them narrate the story.

Notably, by 1930 Narasimham studied all the elements and explained them with examples supporting his conclusions.

In the reviews of the time, Chalam's stories stood second to Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry's stories. His story, "Sasirekha" (1921) was written in pedantic language yet the theme created a sensation. Thallavajjhala Sivasankara Sastry wrote the preface to the anthology dwelling on its philosophical and rational aspects. Arikapalli Lakshminarasimha Rao and others criticized both Chalam and Sivasankara Sastry for their position in 1926. Kolluri Dharmarao was another critic who rejected the modern progressive views prevalent in the stories and criticized Chalam in strong terms for promoting uninhibited love. He, along with a few other critics, set Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao as a deliverance from the literature created by writers like Chalam. Narasimha Rao's *Kantham kathalu* did not receive the status of serious literature during that period, it would appear.

The monograph includes a list of sources, notes, and a list of the stories with complete bibliographical details the author has reviewed for this study (28 pages). This is a remarkable work.

[End]

The book has been published by Dr. Madabhushi Rangacharya smaraka sangham, Hyderabad. 2008. Available on avkf.org.

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7. Nori Narasimha Sastry, A Reputable Scholar

Nori Narasimha Sastry (1900-1978) began writing poetry as a child. He produced voluminous amount of literature in almost all genres—poetry, plays, short stories, novels, and literary criticism for over six decades. He received the title kavi samrat [Emperor of poets] in 1947. He was an active participant in several literary organizations.

Narasimha Sastry was born to the couple Nori Hanumacchastri and Mahalakshmi on June 2, 1900. He obtained his bachelor's degree in 1919 and B.L. degree in 1925. He was well-versed in Sanskrit, Telugu, English and Kannada languages. He received diksha [a religious ritual to receive Vedic education] from Sri Kalyanananda Bharatiswamy.

“He was a top-ranking literary persona and his work has been is exemplary in all genres of literature,” says his son, Hanumacchastri in the “Preface” to Nori Narasimha Sastri's *sahitya vyasalu* [Literary Essays by Nori Narasimha Sastry]

Sastry was just nineteen by the time he published his first anthology of poems. He wrote excellent poetry but, his novels, especially historical novels such as *Narayana Bhattu*, *Rudramadevi*, and *Malla Reddy*, earned him fame and fortune. His first novel was *vagheera*. He wrote three novels depicting the lives of poets, Srinatha in *Sarvabhaumudu*, Srinatha and Pothana in *kavidwayamu* and Dhurjati in *Dhurjati*. Additionally, he included famous Telugu poets as significant characters in other novels such as *Rudramadevi*, thereby demonstrating his respect for distinguished poets from the past.

Among other works, *Devi Bhagavatham* (3 vols), plays, poetic plays, literary essays, reviews and prefaces stand out as evidence of his remarkable scholarship. One of his achievements was to coin a new phrase “bhava natikalu” [perception-based plays] and add a new angle to plays, wherein perceptions or ideas took precedence action. These plays contained heavy Sanskrit phraseology. He also wrote short plays in poetry and prose, *karpooora dwipa yatra*, a children's novel, and *Sabdavedi*.

The fifth volume of his complete literary works is devoted to his literary essays and is available on the Internet. This one volume contains over 940 pages and reflects his vast knowledge in several genre of not only literature but also other subjects such as music, sculpture, art and religion. For instance, in his article on highly regarded lyricist, “Subrahmanya kavi”, he discusses the qualities of a great lyricist in general, standards set by lyricists in the past centuries, Sarjnadeva, Kshetrayya, and modern lyricists such as Balantrapu Rajanikantha Rao and Rallapalli Ananthakrishna Sarma, and then, offers his opinions on the superior talent of Subrahmanya kavi.

Similarly, sculpting does not mean carving a stone but envisioning the form latent in a stone, and removing the parts of the stone that envelope the figure inside [parasthalaalu]; the process is very close to envisioning the Brahman, says Sastri.

Commenting on the novel *Himabindu* by Bapiraju, Sastry explains the depth with which Bapiraju has enhanced the novel with his knowledge of music and sculpture. So also, when he writes about the beat in modern poetry, Sastry states how Veena Dhanamma, a famous musician, introduced new trends in raaga prastaaram [Elaborating on raga notes in music].

In short, in each article, he points out a new angle regarding a particular writer, poet or the times in which the work has been written.

The range of topics he discussed in these articles is impressive. They include renowned classics in Sanskrit, Indian history, the history of Andhra Pradesh, Telugu intellectuals, literary criticism, prefaces, reviews, literary movements, modern literature, fiction, humor, and devotional literature.

We see his deep regard for our country and our culture in each article. His comments especially about our history are noteworthy.

Narasimha Sastry states we have come to accept the divisions of our history determined by Europeans and from their perspective, distorting our perception of ourselves. He believes strongly that we should study our epics, Maha Bharata and Ramayana from a historical perspective seriously, and study the two perspectives—the Westerners’ and ours—in juxtaposition. Then only we will have a comprehensive and well-balanced perspective of our history. He also explains at length the changes our country has undergone as a result of the onset of Buddhists, Jains, Turkish, Hun and the British in “mana desa charitra” [History of our country]. In another article, “Andhra desa charitra” [History of Andhra Pradesh], he points out how our history has been distorted because we have accepted the English language as our model and rejected our own language, Telugu.

In “charitraka navala” he elaborates on how literature flourished in the historical context. He contends that classics like Maha Bharata and Ramayana were written to provoke people into thinking, action and reexamining our views of our dharma at a time when the morale of the country took a turn for the worse. He highlights the close, inexplicable rapport between history and historical novel. Authors may take real life incidents but it is not necessary to record them precisely the way they happened. A poet has the right to make necessary changes to the story in order to produce a kavya. As an example, Sastry says he changed the six years of Rudramadevi’s rule into six months in his novel by the same name. However, the author also has the responsibility to examine the history under reference carefully, understand it thoroughly and, then only, he can write a successful novel. He says he would research his materials always before writing his novels.

The two articles *swatantra bharatamulo charitra rachana* [Writing about history in the independent India] and *Andhra bhashalo charitraka navala* [Historical novel in Telugu] provide us with excellent background information. They would be particularly helpful for those interested in writing historical novels, in my opinion.

There are three articles listed under “humor writing” —“failing an exam,” “shashtipurti utsavam,” [celebrating 60th birthday], and “mushti kavittvam” [Poetry for favors]. The first one, “failing an exam” [pareeksha

tappadam] is somewhat flat. In the second article, “shashtipurti utsavam,” Sastry delves deep into the origins of the festivity. He says it was not a celebration originally. According to the legend, death appears in the form a human, Ugraratha, and destroys the person who turns sixty and his family on that specific day. And the person, in order to avoid such calamity, performs a ritual pacifying Ugraratha. The article, “mushti kavitvam,” is a satire poking fun at the poets, who write second rate poetry, motivated by politicians, party bosses and, by their own greed for fame and fortune.

Narasimha Sastry strongly believes that poets should possess the same qualities as rishis; that is, being focused on dharma, searching for truth, and staying committed to the art and practicing temperance. Even when they choose lust, anger and spite as their subjects, they still should write with self-control as practiced by rishis in the past. The poets of the past, even when they depended on the kings for their livelihood, wrote freely, unfettered by any obligation to royalty. In modern times, the critics should still take the responsibility of preventing writers from falling prey to these politically motivated “-isms”

In his historical novel, *Rudramadevi*, Narasimha Sastry depicts the political turmoil of the times under Rudramadevi and her successful victory over rebellious Yadava, Chola and Chalukya kings in the south and Maharashtra kings in mid-13th century. Her husband Veerabhadhrudu, a Chalukya king, becomes her enemy because Rudramadevi’s father refused to anoint his son by another queen as emperor and anointed Rudramadevi as empress, instead. Veerabhadhrudu instigates other minor kings to attack Kakateeya kingdom. Rudramadevi finds herself in a difficult predicament between her duty to the empire and saving her marriage. She decides to put her duty to the kingdom ahead of her personal life. Her husband prods the naïve Jains to rebel. Rudramadevi fights and wins the war, pardons the Jains after her victory but punishes Veerabhadhrudu for his transgressions, regardless of the fact he was her husband.

Into this political story, the lifestyles of all strata of society were woven skillfully. Tikkana Somayaji’s character as a detached poet with a flair for politics was depicted beautifully. Similarly, the story of Koppera Jingadu (also known as Rajasimhudu), a Kadava (Kerala) king, who crosses the Godavari river and, while his ships were attacking Andhra warriors, sets up his tent on the shore and arranges a performance of “uurubhangam” [Smashing Duryodhana’s thighs in the Maha Bharata war] attesting to his superior taste in literature.

The author succeeded in giving us a piece of literature with a right mix of history and fiction. The characters in this story come alive and it includes enormous amount of the lifestyle of the queen’s times. Rudramadevi is one of our best novels of all times in modern Telugu literature.

[End]

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8. Nori Narasimha Sastry. History of Telugu Historical Novel

As mentioned in the preceding article, Narasimha Sastry argues that our present mode of studying our history is faulty. He establishes the correlation between our history and the historical novel.

In his essay, “swatantra bharatamulo charitra rachana” (Writing History in Independent India), he shows how our mode of thinking was molded by the methods established by famous western historians such as Gibbon, Carlyle, the lord Prudhoe and Wells. Their works on history were regarded as valuable literature; they have shown us that historians are poets in essence.

We, however, need to remember that the British rulers introduced Macaulay Report in schools only to serve their own purpose, which was to turn our people into tools to prolong their rule in our country.

That led us to rely on the English books to study our history to a point that we would not read our Telugu and Sanskrit texts unless they were given in English. This craze for English extended to all other fields such as religion, society, politics, literature, science and even to geography.

Currently, the history of India is broken into three periods—the Hindu period, the Muslim period and the British period. Narasimha Sastry goes on to elaborate on the problems with this division as follows:

Originally, the Aryans came from outside, assailed the Dravidians and the Dasyus, and promulgated their religion in our country vigorously. Their cultural power, however, waned due to the hot climate in our country. Internal struggles eroded and some of them turned traitors. After the Aryans, the Muslim rulers came in multitudes and took over. They attacked the feeble Hindus. Later, they succumbed to mundane pleasures and lost their power. When the British came, the country was in shambles. They could easily drive away the Muslims and the other white rulers and take over the country. This is the gist of the division of the historical periods.

There is a perception that temperature weakens people. This is not a proven fact though. Possibly others who are accustomed to cold climate may suffer from the heat in our country and vice versa. However, this should not be an argument to enslave ourselves to foreigners. Heat is a geographical issue and irrelevant to one’s strength or weakness. This is a pious land and the place for such sacred activities as bathing three times a day and offering prayers to the Sun god [*sandyavandanam*].

Narasimha Sastry states since the creation of the universe, 195 crore 85 lakh and 550 years have passed. In this long span of the history of mankind, the British ruled our country for 190 years, the Moghuls for 181 years, the Lodis for 75 years, the Sayyads for 37 years, the Tughlaks for 94 years, and the Khiljis for 30 years.

Among the Indians, the Gupta period runs for 500 years and that is considered a golden age. We read that the Satavahanas ruled for 464 years

and no other reign had such a sway for that long. And the Kushans seemed to have ruled for 230 years, the Mauryans for 160 years, and the Nandas for 74 years. Also, the Bimbisara and others ruled for over 200 years.

Thus, it is evident that the current history as we study in our books gives more importance to the time we were under a foreign rule. We should rewrite our history books expanding the times we were free and proud, and delimit the period we were subjected to slavery.

No doubt the British ruled our country for about 200 years. There were some local rulers called Zamindaris but they existed only with the blessings of the British. Muslims stayed mostly in the the north. Attempts of Tughlak and Aurangazeb to take over the southern part of India failed. At the time, the Kakateeya kings in the south were powerful. After that, Vijayanagara kings prevailed in the south for one hundred years more. Thus, the label for these periods should be Kakatiya period, Vijayanagara period and so on. In the 18th century, the Maharashtra rulers were strong all the way from the southern end, the Sethu, to Himachal in the north. Indian culture flourished in the north for sometime, and later the south enjoyed superiority. There were times when the Chola, Chalukya and Pallava kingdoms and Kancheepuram were at the peak. There is no reason to accept the labels given by the foreign rulers who ruled only the northern part of the country.

Other facts to note are: During 550-330 B.C., Persian kings ruled Punjab and Gandharam (current Nepal?). Later Greeks ruled over the same land for 150 years (200-20 B.C.). Kushans prevailed for sometime. There is also a misconception that all Muslims are the same. In reality, some of them were Shiites and others Sunnis. In the north, Persian culture was prominent while the Absenian culture prevailed in the south. The difference between these two is no less than the difference between the Greeks, Pantheons, Sakuns, and Kushans. That being the case, it is unfair to lump them all into one race.

Against this background, Narasimha Sastry suggests labels such as the Turkish threat, the Moghal menace, the Sunny hazard, Shiite turmoil, and the British tempest for the periods our history. Also, there are only two races—Aryans and non-Aryans, and one was productive and the other was destructive just like any other living organism in the world.

It is important to note that the Aryans regard the land as their motherland and fatherland. For them, the land gives them birth, entertains them, and comforts them. It is “karmabhumi” [place of action], “tapabhumi” [place of contemplation], and “punyabhumi” [pious land]. For them, the entire India is one country and the Vedas and the Vedangas are the paradigms to live by. Sanskrit is the language of the polite society. The non-Aryans, on the other hand, are engrossed in self-promotion, their own physical image, and abandonment.

The detailed discussions of dates for a given king are not important. The Puranas recorded the history of the kings who reinstated the Aryan dharma following political and social turmoil. Those should be the paradigms for us but not the texts written by foreigners such as the Greek travelers in Alexander’s time, Megasthenese during Chandragupta’s rule, the Chinese

traveler Huen Tsang, and so on. We should read our history based on the data available in our texts produced by our poets. The texts by foreigners may be used as secondary texts. Historians should sift the falsehood spread by foreign historians.

Let's not forget there were kings during the periods Valmiki and Vyasa maintained their stance as poets in their own status quo.

By the time Vyasa wrote Maha Bharata, 193 crore 83 lakh years had passed. He was fair in depicting the histories of the two dynasties, including the violations of Dharma by the Pandavas. The pundits who question Maha Bharata's integrity need to separate the later interpolations and study the original carefully.

The historians should help us revive the spirit of unity and nationalism. Valmiki and Veda Vyasa should be viewed as the archetypes and the protectors of dharma; they are historians and poets in the true spirit.

Historical novel

The term "historical" implies narration of truth without fluff. On the other hand, a novel requires invention invariably.

A novel may not contain even one page of authentic history in a 304 page book. Yet, it may provide a lot of details about the political atmosphere, social customs, manners, travel amenities, and other facilities of its time without contradicting historical facts.

A novelist takes bits of history, "dry as dust" in Carlyle's words, brings them together, adds more details and grows it into a big tree, sprays heavenly nectar on and brings it to fruition.

Westerners store dead bodies in the graveyards. They save important and unimportant incidents alike. The historians cull through these bits of data and elaborate on the past history. Because of this custom to save all the items, the historians are able to tell the stories of their people—poets, sculptors, lyricists, kings, ministers, their kept women, businessmen, priests, actors and actresses, soldiers, and beautiful women. The books, diaries, magazines, letters, inscriptions, and memorials carved on the graves—all these are available to their writers. However, despite the availability of all that information, the well-established theories are getting thrown out by new revelations. While interpretation of history keeps changing, great novels are being produced in the west.

We do not have the facilities to write historical fiction or biographical fiction the same way the westerners have. Nevertheless, we have produced great novels such as *Bhagavan Parasuramudu* by K. M. Munshi and *Simha Senapathi* by Rahul Sankrutyayan. The first one attempted to recreate the Vedic and the Puranic works from the perspective of national spirit. The second one took the Vedic literature with the Buddhist tradition as a supreme ideal, and attempted to promote the current communist ideology. Both the works are great examples of our historical fiction.

In a country's or even world's history, what happened is important. The dates and the names of individuals are like a body. The incidents are the life force behind these works. Beyond these two elements, there is also the

Atman which is the dominant force in our lives. A historian must not forget the soul. From this perspective, we need to examine whether our historians have understood the supreme truth about our nation as much as the authors of our Puranas.

Numerous plots and subplots embedded in the Ramayana and Maha Bharata appear to have actually happened. They might not have happened in that particular time and in that particular place but they seemed to carry certain authenticity about them. And they contain lessons for us. To collect such stories and record them is the primary responsibility of our historians.

The authors of our Puranas had a great sense of the timelessness of history and the intelligence as to what must be recorded. We fail to appreciate their philosophy only because of our self-indulgence and ignorance.

The Greek historian Herodotus wrote several fantasy stories in the name of history and we regard him as the king of historians. The Chinese travelers wrote history, depicting their own importance, and we have accepted them as standard the same way as the histories written by Christians. The stories in their books are fabricated much the same way as the stories in our Puranas. It is the same with personal letters, diaries and other writings.

The genre of novel may have been born in Italy or France, but there is no clear-cut definition yet. It has been taking various forms in different times and different places, which is its distinctive nature.

A novel could be rendered in the form of a play, story, biography, letters, diaries or a combination of several forms. It can be short, like a little pond, a great sea, or a combination of several features.

We may create suitable platform and call works like *Dasakumara charitra*, *Simhasana dwatrim sati*, *Bhoja charitra*, *pancatantra*, *Hitopadesa*, *neeti chadrika* novels. Our critics called *kalaa purnodayam* a novel, although it is written in the form of poetry.

That being the case, it is a mistake to consider only the form set by westerners as the only standard form for a novel. We may even stay as far away as possible from the western mode of thinking and create much better novels.

Narasimha Sastry also points out that writing a novel is a profession for westerners. And marketing requires novelty, constantly. In his opinion, they are short-lived for that reason. On the other hand, we consider the novel a literary genre, and thus maintain its quality.

Novelists have a wide range of opportunities. A novel is not a short story and, in that, there is no holding back. It is not a miniature painting; it does not have to flow monotonously like in a long story. Unlike a play, the novel does not rely on theaters, the vagaries of actors and actresses, and an insensitive audience.

However, as in a drama, the writer may take the uniqueness of dialogues and incidents—the intrinsic qualities of a play, and incorporate the poetic merit and musical quality in his novel. He may include his entire knowledge in it. A novel has the ability to reflect numerous varieties of

literary genre in numerous ways. Novel is the supreme genre among the entire literary genres so far as we have gotten. The proverb, *naatakantam sahityam* [Writing a play is the final chapter in one's writing exercise.] may be rewritten as *navaalantham sahityam*.

The novel that contains history with the traits noted above may be called a historical novel. When we study a novel from that perspective, we will find no contradiction between the noun "novel" and the adjective "historical". On the other hand, the elite may even find a close affinity between the two terms.

It is common knowledge among intellectuals that it is hard to evaluate contemporary works regardless of our capabilities and impartiality.

Unless we examine them from a distance, we cannot recognize their authentic value; the incidents do not rise to the level appropriate for the plots of kavyas. This is the reason many poets in all countries at all times choose the stories related to their heroes and events from the past. That does not mean writers should not write about contemporary occurrences.

Critics sometimes comment that authors of historical fiction, being unable to face the modern day society and issues, choose incidents or people from the past and write about them. Their ignorance regarding the characteristics of a kavya is evident in the comments mentioned above.

A novel may achieve the status of a kavya even when it does not depict contemporary life. And that is so even when it does not aim to solve the current society's problems. For instance, Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace* based on the invasion of Russia by Napoleon. Like our rishis, Tolstoy did not rely only on the history written by historians but conducted intense search for historical facts and thus was able to produce a unique work. Same thing can be said of *Faust* by Goethe, *Paradise Lost* by Milton, and many other novels.

It is evident that a poet may produce a high quality novel with current affairs as its theme, if he has the ability to look back in to the past. In support of this argument, He quotes an example from his own experience after China attacked India:

He says, "I was furious. I wanted to take over the entire nation of China in retaliation. I was irate that our government pledged to fight for the land up to McMahon line only. What about our Manasa sarovaram, Kailasam, the abode of Lord Siva, and the land that conjoined the sites where the two rivers Brahmaputra and Sindhu originated? I was so angry yet not a single poem came out of my mouth. So many people have written kavyas and sang songs. None of them appealed to me, when I tried to read them as kavyas.

"Secondly, the dragon is China's national symbol. I searched hard for an equivalent term for dragon in Sanskrit. Words like "Sarabham" or "Sarabhasaluvu" could be close enough, but did not sound right. In Rg veda, "ahi" was mentioned. Some scholars used the dragon for Ahi in their translations of the Vedas into English. I remember a verse in the Vedas which described Indra at the time he killed Vritrasura. To my knowledge, nobody else thought of it, but I could not view it as a kavya. My heart has been sullied by my hatred for the Chinese. It would not reach the kavya level unless and until the hatred in my heart was washed up."

If we think on these lines, the scholars who study the philosophy of kavyas may note that, among all the genres of kavyas, the novel and among all the varieties of novels, historical fiction is the highest.

Basically, the Maha Bharatam has been identified as *ithihasa* [history] and Ramayana as a Purana (mythology). From the standpoint of tradition, both the works were written by the writers who lived in those times. Yet they became great works for the following reasons. Valmiki was a tapasvi (Ascetic). He was capable of distancing himself from contemporary life and observing it with uncontaminated eyes. Similarly, Vyasa was a saint who remained detached despite of his relationship with the characters in the story. He stayed in his hermitage quietly, contemplated and reflected on the story at his heart.

Some scholars accept them simply as two authors who collected several episodes told by other individuals and had them recorded by a few or several other individuals. There is no doubt that the incidents in these stories were based on actual occurrences.

As is evident, the social, political, and dharma-related systems, the war strategies, and the philosophical reflections were narrated in these works with a focus on the ultimate truth. No other work wielded that much influence on Indian culture as these works. Despite the fact that these two works were based on the Vedas, they exerted more influence on our culture than the Vedas. Without these two classics, it is hard to imagine how far our culture could have deteriorated. This may be inferred from the history of other countries where there is no such impact.

However, the Ramayana text and most of the Maha Bharata text are rendered in the form of poetry. They were not filled with incomprehensible Sanskrit phraseology but written in a form that is close to modern prose. We can call them historical kavyas or historical novels written in the form of poetry. The difference is only in terminology but not in content.

One of them is a great river flowing with zest like the River Ganges. The second one is the milky ocean encompassing several great rivers. Today's historical novelist is a follower of those great authors, Valmiki and Vyasa.

They are not performers of death rituals who collect pieces of history. They are the visionaries who have attempted to identify the historical truths.

Modern day historians should search their souls and find, to what extent, they have understood these tenets and adapted them.

[End]

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9. G. V. Krishna Rao, A Standard-Bearer in Literature

A Literary organization, Sri Aravinda Sahityaseva samiti, Tenali, honored Dr. G. V. Krishna Rao on March 3, 1979. At the ceremony, several writers and critics praised him for his superior work in Telugu literature and commented that his work sets standard for Telugu literature.

Krishna Rao was born in 1914 in Kuchipudi village, Tenali taluq, Andhra Pradesh, India. In an autobiographical essay, Dr. Krishna Rao stated that originally he was not keen on attending school. His parents had no education but wanted him to receive education. Not much came out of it though. Either he absconded the school, or when went to class, he could not stay focused. Later, his aunt took him to her village and put him through the school in her village.

He was not much of a learner in the traditional methods. He said when he tried to write the word, chepa [fish], it looked like chaapa [mat]. Nevertheless, he wrote a parody and showed it to his friend. That friend showed it to their teacher. The teacher chided him, kindly though, “You can’t memorize one verse, and you’re writing poetry?” The teacher, nevertheless, complimented him on the poem. He said, “It is not right to start writing poetry without studying poetics first and thoroughly. It just creates chaos.” Krishna Rao was in the eighth grade at the time. He began studying classics and ancient grammatical works on his own, and found studying had some negative consequences. For instance, he came to believe that writing meant only writing poetry and that scholarship meant writing complex phrases. In his later years, he understood that prose was more important and put it on a higher pedestal.

In his final year of high school, his teacher, Sastry, corrected his essay and told him, “Writing long, meandering phrases is not good. Beatific meaning is important. Unless there is efficacy, one should not use a word that is not comprehensible instantaneously. A document must always be lucid like a peeled banana, ready to eat. That is the greatest writing.”

Krishna Rao was well-versed in grammatical texts ever since he was a child. At the age of 17, he wrote his first novel, and wrote a satakam (a book of 100 verses) at 20. He also wrote a storybook for children and tried to have it prescribed as a textbook in schools, did not succeed though. During the same period, he was upset with one of his teachers and wrote a poem on the blackboard. As a result, he was transferred to another school. There he met Tummala Venkatramayya, and both became friends for life. Venkatramayya recounted a couple of interesting incidents from that period. One of them was when Krishna Rao’s name in school records was Gavini Venkatakrishnayya. Krishna Rao researched the origins of his surname and found out that there was a word Gavaka meaning an entrance to Durgamapuram. In course of time the word underwent several variations such as gavanu and gavani. He preferred the name gavanu. Currently, however his surname appears in his books as Gavini.

Second was when he filled the answer papers with his comments about the grammatical errors in the question paper instead of writing answers to the questions. [there was no mention of what happened next]. In his school days, parents used to request him to write poems blessing their sons and daughters at their weddings.

Krishna Rao performed *ashtavadhaanam* and *sataavadhaanam* – a peculiar kind of poetic application where a poet crafts poems extempore, one line at a time in response to eight or one hundred individuals, called *prucchakas* [interrogators] in one sitting. At the end, the poet repeats the completed poems in the same order given to him on the stage. This skill is prevalent only in Telugu and Sanskrit languages, to the best of my knowledge. Krishna Rao took it as a challenge and practiced them in woods, pretending the trees to be his interrogators, and playing both the interrogators and the respondent. He did not give much weight to these early writings, though. He commented, “It took a long time for me to get rid of the habit which I had gotten used to from this trellis-like poetry.”

While he was studying for his bachelor’s degree, he met Gopichand, a prominent leftist writer of his times, from whom he acquired a taste in the Western literature and literary styles. Krishna Rao studied M.N. Roy’s works and Marxism, which changed his entire perspective. He understood that the use of colloquial language was important for his work. In those days, he also used to meet with traditional writers as well as modern writers like Chakrapani and Kutumba Rao. They all met regularly in a medical store and discussed the characteristics of criticism and short stories.

After obtaining his bachelor’s degree, he tried to get a job but without success. During this period, it became hard for him even to get food to eat, which reminded him of an episode describing the anger and frustration of the sage Vyasa in *kasikhandam*. Inspired by the episode, Krishna Rao wrote a play called *bhiksha paatra* [A bowl for begging]. He says, “It is my first writing that emanated from a bowl filled with experiences.” He sent it to several magazines but was rejected by them. However, the play received critical acclaim later and was performed at several places numerous times. In this context, the comment made by Kurma Venugopalaswamy, registrar of Andhra University in the fifties and an avid supporter of Telugu stage, is worth mentioning. He commented that he had read the play several times and had it performed in the experimental theater of Andhra University, Waltair, Andhra Pradesh. It was translated into several Indian languages also.

After failing to obtain a job, Krishna Rao went to Benares to study for his master’s degree in English literature. He took a tutoring job to pay his college fee. At the same time he pursued his other interests as well. He studied eminent literary works in Telugu, Sanskrit and English. That part of his studies resulted in a classical work, *kavya jagatthu* [World of literature]. About this book, Krishna Rao says, “I explained the metamorphoses of the theme in a *kavya* from the perspective of Marxism, quoting various notable Indian and Western works, from Bharata to Pandita rayalu, and from Plato to Marx.” Further, he added, “I reviewed modern literary movements and their characteristics, and also the social conditions and the leaders of those movements from where from those characteristics originated.”

Another milestone in Krishna Rao's life was attending the political conference organized by Radical Democratic Party following the end of World War II. At the conference, M. N. Roy criticized, vehemently, the existing political parties and proposed a new humanistic approach that was non-divisive and democratic in principle. That speech stunned Krishna Rao and paved the path for his future literary pursuits. That was the start of his studies in philosophy. Later, Krishna Rao worked on *Kalapoorodayam* for his Ph.D. and received his doctorate.

From his writings, Krishna Rao's life appears to be one long stretch of endless inquiry, an insatiable thirst for knowledge—from the meaning of a given word to the meaning of life. He stated that the theme in his novel, *keelu bommalu* [Puppets] reflects this enquiring mind: What does freedom mean? How do humans lose it? What is the best path to regain it? To what extent, economic and political matters influence human lives? What is the duty of individuals?—inciting this pursuit of knowledge is the goal of *keelu bommalu*,” he stated in the preface to the book. Once a reader wrote to Krishna Rao suggesting the novel should have ended with a happy note. Krishna Rao replied, “Had I given it a happy ending, I would not have gotten even this note from you.” Apparently, the author was happy his novel provoked the reader to think.

While he was working at a degree college, he studied keenly the grammatical works of Acharya Nagarjuna, *vigrahavarthini*, *Ratnavali* and several others and translated them into Telugu poetical works. Unfortunately, his translations were stolen. He said he was able to translate again only one book *vigrahavarthini* and published it with extensive preface. He also translated Plato's *Republic*.

In 1962, he lost his job. Then he started writing another novel, *papi kondalu*, but left it unfinished as he got a job in a radio station. While working at the radio station, he wrote some poetry, translated *pratima natakam* by Bhasa, and published an anthology of his short stories, *udabinduvulu*. The author called it an anthology of short stories. However, the copy I came across included poetry, plays, and two essays. His last novel *papi kondalu* was never completed. Krishna Rao died in 1978.

Krishna Rao is one of those rare scholars who examined the Indian traditional values and ancient works as well as Western philosophies thoroughly, developed his perspective on life and the world, and presented his own philosophy. His works such as *jegantalu*, and *kavya jagatthu* vouch for his status as a literary persona. He was persistent in his *jignasa* [pursuit of knowledge] even from his childhood days.

His opinion regarding the western influence on our (Telugu people's) mode of thinking speaks of his keen sense of awareness what is wrong with our society at present. He says, “We have acquired modern, scientific and technical knowledge. Rationalism has taken place in our lives. Industries have been set up and wealth has prospered. The appetite to go for it [wealth] one way or another also has increased. We've gotten used to materialistic culture and started pursuing physical pleasures. In the process, we have become increasingly slaves of material possessions and thought. Ethical values are waning; generosity and appreciation of fine arts are

disappearing. We must not ignore the economic values, which we have learned from western civilization. But are the economic values the same as all values? Unfortunately, we see them only gracing our lives today. What is happening to our society? Are we forgetting gradually the culture that has put dharma on a high pedestal and helped us to visualize the Truth, Beatitude and beauty? Are we forgetting ourselves?” he questions.

Until recently, I have not heard of any of his works but for the novel *keelu bommalu*. After receiving the novel from his daughter, Dr. Umadevi, I searched on the Internet, and found several other works. Here are some his works I have found:

1. *Sahiti chaitraratham*. This is a commemorative volume, put together in honor of Krishna Rao, his service to Telugu literature, and his distinctive personality. The volume includes articles by several prominent writers, critics, and admirers of Telugu literature. It also contains three essays by Dr. Krishna Rao.

In his article on the duty of a writer, he comments, “Our writers, being unable to see the world perceptible by the five senses, are commemorating the world of the past. Even those who could see the modern world are unable to comprehend it. Even if they comprehended it, they are only playing a game like ring-around circus, but unable to resonate with it. A writer may become a poet only when he watches today’s world, understand it, ache for it, and then forward his views to the world. If he fails to do so, he becomes simply a seeker of laurels.

2. *Jegantalu* is a Telugu rendering of Plato’s philosophy. He called it a translation. From what I understood, which, I must admit is very little, the book is a result of his study of several books by Plato. At the end, a list of 18 books by Plato and critical works by other writers is given as his sources.

In his essay, “Kavya jagatthu,” the author discusses the essence of kavya from the perspective of Marxism. The book includes extensive discussion of various poetic works in Sanskrit, Telugu and English and the author’s perspective on the themes under discussion. There is a glossary at the end.

3. *Udabinduvulu* is an anthology of his poems, stories and plays, including the play, “bhiksha patra” mentioned earlier.

I was searching for the novel, *keelu bommalu* for a long time. Several novels published in the forties and fifties were focused on the struggles of the Independence movement and the social conditions following the declaration of Independence. Among the very few novels that dealt with the human conditions and psychological analysis, *chivaraku migiledi* [What remains at the end] by Buchibabu, is well-known. I believe, Krishna Rao’s novel *keelu bommalu* [Puppets] belongs in that category.

I liked *keelu bommalu* better than *chivaraku migiledi* in spite of its high acclaim in literary circles. In terms of themes, in the latter novel, the story revolves around one man and his thoughts about himself and the women around him. The entire story is presented only from the protagonist’s perspective. The other characters have no identity except what the protagonist says about them. On the other hand, in *keelu bommalu*, the

author presents a balanced view of all characters. Each character speaks its mind, thereby, giving the reader a chance to discern his own opinion of those characters. Secondly, in *chivaraku migiledi*, the story revolves round the man-woman relationship. In *keelu bommalu*, the story is anchored in the dharma of individuals. Thus, the topic is broader.

The title of the book, *keelubommalu*, is significant. In general, the term puppets implies a common notion that we all are puppets in the hands of some unknown force; there is a player who pulls the strings and make us perform. Krishna Rao, however, moves away from that perception, and establishes, unequivocally, and illustrate, “A human being must think for himself from the perspective of humanism, and choose his own path of dharma.” In this novel we see how a man thinks when he is faced with a conflict and how he resolves. Apparently, most of the time, he forgets his dharma and resorts to a temporary comfort zone. That is his fall. That is the message in this novel. Here is a synopsis of the novel.

The protagonist, Pullayya, cosigns a loan for Chandrasekharam without telling his wife. When the time for repayment is up, Chandrasekharam has no money to settle the debt. Legally and morally, it is Pullayya’s obligation to settle it, but he cannot do it. He is worried his wife would come to know of it if he repays the loan, and he is not prepared for the consequences. That is the crux of the issue in the novel. People in the village start talking about it and expressing opinions on either side. Pullayya’s daughter wants to know the truth. She asks him and he, by keeping his mouth shut, leads her to believe that he did not cosign the loan and that Chandrasekharam was spreading the rumors. Not only he misleads his daughter and wife, but in course of time, he convinces himself that he did nothing wrong. Pullayya did not lie out of ignorance, but with the full knowledge of the actual event. He consciously chose to ignore the truth and let the villagers divide into factions, and emotions flare up resulting in clashes on the streets, arson and murders. Even when the village is being destroyed systematically, Pullayya remains convinced that he did nothing wrong. He even accepts a few honors for his generosity. The message is that individuals need to reflect and decide what Dharma is for them by themselves. It is not something that somebody would provide for them. In that sense, there is no puppeteer. Each person is his own puppeteer. The author has shown extraordinary skill in depicting this angle in the story.

There is another angle to the story, particularly in relation to the modern mode of thinking—that the value Pullayya puts on his wife’s status in the family. Back in the fifties, making money was husband’s duty and running the household was wife’s duty. That was Dharma for them. That being the case, he should have told her about his cosigning the loan, but he did it without her knowledge. At the time of signing the papers, he, probably, hoped it would never come to his obligation to pay. Then, modern day question is: Why he could tell her later when it was time for him to pay off the debt? That is the peculiarity in our culture. The incident highlights the manner in which a husband and his wife respect each other in our culture. Author never vocalizes this aspect; perhaps at the time it was not even a question.

A prominent critic, R.S. Sudarsanam commented, “Krishna Rao gives high importance to an individual and his conscience regarding performing one’s duty. There is a considerable relevance of Freud’s unconsciousness theory in both the incidents—first, Pullayya forgetting his duty and, second, Dr. Vasudeva Sastry’s failure to perform his duty [Pretending not to know he had sex with his friend’s wife].” He adds that Pullayya ignored his duty due to his cowardice and selfishness whereas Vasudeva Sastry took responsibility for the mistake and was prepared to correct it socially. I am not convinced of this argument.

First, let me explain the situation. Vasudeva Sastry invited a local teacher Satyanarayana, his wife Padma and their little child into house after their house had been burnt by one of the factions. While staying in his house, Padma goes to Vasudeva Sastry while he was half asleep and has sex with him. Vasudeva Sastry believes it was only a dream and continues to believe so until Padma tells him that she was pregnant with his child. Vasudeva Sastry suggests they elope. Padma refuses to elope with him. Sastry screams that she was a typical Hindu woman; apparently, he was expressing his “righteous” anger.

To me, the entire incident is a bit dramatic. That Vasudeva Sastry, a doctor by profession and rational thinker, would not know whether he really had sex is strange. Secondly, Vasudeva Sastry not believing that he had sex with Padma, and then, suggesting elopement without a consideration for Padma’s husband and their child. Is that really a socially responsible and rational suggestion?

Sudarsanam suggests that the author made Vasudeva Sastry his mouthpiece in order to express his own opinions. I think Vasudeva Sastry is just one more character in the story. Author has never made any statements to believe otherwise.

In his preface to this novel, author states, “I did not write this novel aiming at any one individual, parties, or upcoming elections. Only artistic appreciation is the main basis for this writing. Only when the reader is willing to forget the party politics and read it, then only he can achieve the right kind of appreciation.”

Krishna Rao is a seeker of Truth and philosophical commentator. He is one of the very few who continued to pursue his literary activities, reflecting on one’s dharma, and total commitment.

[End]

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10. Magical Realism in the Stories of Munipalle Raju

I have known Sri Munipalle Raju for over 60 years. I have come to know of his experiments with magical realism only in April 2014 when I started working on a translation of his anthology, *astitvanadam aavali teeraana* (Beyond the Shores of the River Existentialism.).

In his preface to the anthology, Sri Raju stated that the western literary historians claim the term "Magical Realism" was coined by Latin American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, but the same amazing mayavada rasa manifested in the Indian folklore and Puranas like Ramayana, Maha Bharata and Bhagavad Gita; and, that Vyasa Maharshi was the first poet to captivate it in a manner nobody else could. He, also, stated that he undertook his story-writing process, keeping in mind the works of guru Vyasa, the creator of Magical Realism, and within the purview of the complex problems in our daily existence.

For the purpose of this article, we should keep in mind his premise regarding the themes in these stories, as described by him. According to Sri Raju, in the Indian metaphysical world, the fundamental questions of human race fall into three categories of agony: Those caused by mind (adhyatmikam), those caused by physical ailments (adhibhautikam), and, those caused by providence (adhidaivikam). "This complex set of questions is pestering the human race in every epoch [Yuga] each time the wicked diabolical forces create the deadly fire and destroy the quietude of people's lives. If we consider the time from then to now when someone assembles his creative energies and destroys these lawless rogues as a transition period, in that twilight, these questions are the same as the doubts that cause the individuals to ache.

"... The social consciousness, and the consciousness of self are two flanks of modern man's consciousness. They travel in the inner celestial chariot in his prolonged and distraught dream life at night. This magical realism is an attempt to articulate those mysterious vibrations. This genre has the power to transcend time and space. ... The magical realism, the marvellous reality, is the instrument that extricates the supra-mundane truths beneath the truths that are visible to the naked eye. Its natural form becomes visible only in the style of word-constructs of Mayavada and Chayavada schools. This does not follow the empty slogans of literary trends." ("Preface." *Astitvanadam Aavali Teeraana*).

Against this background, I attempted to shed some light on the concept of magical realism in Sri Raju's stories.

Both in print and on the Internet, a vast amount of discussions of the term "Magical realism" is available. However, for the purpose of this article, somewhat simplistically, I would like to define magical realism as an element that is faithful to everyday events in our lives with a touch of magic

or mystery. It has been achieved in these stories through the setting and expression.

The term "magic" brings to our minds an assumption that it goes beyond what is visible to the naked eye and what we believe to be normal—the mysteries in our everyday lives. In our Puranas, a man born from an earthen pot (kumbhasambhavudu), a dog that followed Dharmaraja to heaven, a monkey that could grow to gigantic proportions at will and crossing the ocean in one hop - all these constitute magic and necessitate the readers to stretch their imagination in order to visualize the event. In our daily lives, we hear or tell stories, the authenticity of which we do not question or doubt. We tell children the story of a hare that challenges a tortoise to a race or a lion that insists a baby goat should pay for his father's sins. No child asks in what language they - the hare, the tortoise, the lion and the baby goat - spoke, or how they communicated with each other. In fact, in today's ever popular Science fiction and mysteries, this magic is present. Nevertheless, the core theme is, most of the time if not always, virtue conquering vice. And let us not forget that the "virtue" and "vice" in these stories are consistent with human values. The point is, in each case a group of animate objects is created to drive a point home. We, the listeners, accept them with "willing suspension of disbelief," and proceed to grasp the underlying message. That is magical realism. An aura of magic or mystery is created in a given story in order to transport the reader into a new milieu. Within the context, the story is told to reaffirm a truth, the author's point of view.

The dog in "Satrayagam in Naimisa Forest" (Naimisaranyamlo Satrayagam) plays a significant role in the life of the protagonist. The bird in the "Goddess of Good Fortune" (Adrushta devatha) plays the role of a friend and an intermediary. The big tree in "In the Shadows of Maha Bodhi Tree" (Maha Bodhi Chayalo) speaks not only words of wisdom, but also offers comfort to the protagonist. The parallel between this tree and the Peepal tree under which Gautama Buddha received enlightenment is unmistakable. There is however one difference between the two. The tree in this story goes beyond imparting spiritual knowledge. It provokes him to ask questions, mundane, and act according to the responses he had received. In fact, he is also aware that nobody believes him if he says the tree spoke to him. It is real for the protagonist and the magic for the rest of us.

Of all the stories of Munipalle Raju, the story that received the highest accolades is "The Red Dot to Honor a Hero" (Veera kumkuma), in which the bull, Pullanna, plays the hero by defending his owner, Pratapa Reddy against two butchers. We all are aware only too well the relationship and their mutual appreciation between farmers and their animals. Pratapa Reddy inherited Pullanna from his grandmother; it was born in their home and was treated as their eldest son. That being the case, it is no surprise that when Reddy's life was in peril, the bull went to his rescue and crushed the enemy. The fascinating part is at the end, when Pullanna hauled Reddy's body with his horns on to his back and brought him home. The author said that he heard the story while he was traveling in Rayalaseema in the early 50s. In this story, the magic is not unimaginable, but it is out of the ordinary and must be construed as an instance of magical realism!

The role of the dog in "Satrayagam In the Naimisa Forest" is interesting in its own way. At the beginning the protagonist, Chakri, saw him at the railway station, fed him, kept with him briefly and later, as he embarked the train to Naimisa forest, tried to get rid of him. We should remember Chakri went to Naimisa forest in an attempt to renounce his worldly attachments and seek liberation. We watch his struggle to leave the old baggage without success. It is obvious when he narrated his past to Prof Baruva in a language that was clearly one of anger rather than of renunciation. He was still upset about the way the woman (Kamala) had treated him and let him down; he blamed her for all his miseries. Normally, the first step for a person seeking the life of renunciation is to forgive all those who wronged him. Chakri achieved it only after watching the deaths of Kamala and the dog. At one point, he even wondered if the dog was symbolic of his attachments. Thus the dog's demise seems to complete the process. The magical element is evident in two instances - the reappearance of Kamala and the dog in Badarikavanam twelve years after he had taken the vow of renunciation and become a *sansyasi*.

We may have to assume that the spatial relevance of the dog in Badarikavanam contributes to the idea of magical realism. Chakri (later Goswami Avadhuta) left it behind at the railway station on his way to the Naimisa forest. The same dog appeared at the foot of the Himalayas in Badarikavanam and played the role of an envoy from Kamala. How he could overcome the distance is left to the readers' imagination. Similarly, Kamala's appearance seems to be a little more than a simple coincidence.

The tree in the story "In the Shadows of Maha Bodhi tree" (Maha Bodhi Chayalo) is, unlike in the case of Gautama Buddha, more than something that imparts knowledge. To him [we know him only as Chinnayya], the tree stands for all the six kinds of gurus mentioned in the same story—*preraka*, *suchaka*, *vachaka*, *darsaka*, *sikshaka* and *bodhaka*. Additionally, it is also his confidante. He finds immense solace under the shade of the tree. It consoles him, asks potent questions, and provides sensible answers. In some ways, it is like his conscience and the better part of his judgment. The part in which he has heard the tree communicate with him is similar to the experiences of the sages who live in the woods. People receive ideas or thoughts when they move away, far from the madding crowds, and listen to "the still small voice within." The point is, we all rely on an animate or inanimate object for inspiration or answers to the confounding questions we come across in our everyday lives.

Silence is a unique concept in Indian culture. In the west, silence carries a negative connotation; silence is weakness. Smart people speak, and only the weak remain silent. In our culture, on the other hand, silence is a poignant spiritual experience. A term for sage in Sanskrit is *muni*, which is a derivative of *maunam* (silence). The author refers to this concept of silence in "Satrayagam in Naimisa Forest" in two instances: First, when a sage on the banks of River Gomati put stones in his mouth to help him maintain his silence; and secondly, when he quoted a sloka from Dakshinamurthy stotram, which says that guru Dakshinamurthy remains silent and the disciple's doubts are dispelled (*gurostu maunam vyakhyanam, sishyastu cchinna samsayaah*).

In other words, Lord Dakshinamurthy provides answers by remaining silent and let the disciples figure it out by themselves.

Raju attempts to depict that silence is not just an abstract idea but a powerful spiritual experience in the story, "Silence is not a Word" (*nissabdam oka padam kaadu*). For me, however, the magical realism in this story is equally pervasive and evasive as the idea of silence itself.

The protagonist Rao barely speaks, and when he speaks, it is only to himself, in a sort of monologue. His wife complains, "We never know what is on his mind; he never tells us what's bothering him. ... He worries only about *his people* (italics mine); not a whit about what happens here at home." His son is supportive of his father, "Everybody has a soft spot for their own people. What's wrong with that?" In itself, the term "his own people" is not explained; no characters are introduced directly. In one instance, the daughter-in-law offers an explanation to her mother-in-law's (Rao's wife) question as follows: "She suggested that he (Rao) should perform his father's annual death ceremony not at home but in a choultry, and after that, he (Rao) stopped talking." From this line it would appear there is no love lost between Rao's wife and his father, and possibly, his mother and siblings, if any; she could be referring to them when she said "his own people." So much information is left unsaid. It seems as if not only Rao, but the narrator, also, courted silence. Life is elusive; human nature is elusive; we never know what another person has on his mind at any given moment. The silence of the protagonist and the narrator force readers to draw their own conclusions. The author might be implying that the "unknown" is the magic and that is the reality. I am not sure, though.

In the "Goddess of Good Fortune" [*adrushta devatha*], there is a fascinating episode in which the protagonist, Murali, listens, enraptured, to the music from his mother's flute. At the end of the song, the wad of butter in the little cup placed in front of the god disappears. Murali believes that baby Krishna himself came and ate it. The description of this event is fascinating.

As she began with the praise of Sabda Brahma [Creator of Sound] softly and continued to sing the Radhesyam bhajans and ashtapadis of Jayadeva invoking exquisite postures by a danseuse, he listened to the music, enraptured. In that moment, there were only two listeners—the baby Krishna and Murali. Mother swayed to the music with absolute devotion. The wad of butter in the silver cup, like a kiss of the moonlight, vanished leaving the imprints of the baby Krishna's fingertips at the bottom of the silver cup. "Ammaa! Ammaa! The wad of butter?"

"Yes Babu, Krishna heard our prayers."

It is a magical moment when baby Krishna responded to the mesmerizing music from the magic wand called flute, played by his mother. The experience of the child Murali as totally immersed and lost in the magic of the music is fascinating. Is it possible that little Murali identified himself with baby Krishna, unconsciously of course, and ate the butter? Such an interpretation is sustainable but takes the charm out of the story. The episode

is probably intended to create that mystical aura around his mother for whom he has enormous respect, and later allows him to communicate with the bird.

Murali needed to create a halo around his mother as a *matrumurthy* [mother incarnate]; she was an outstanding musician, who had devoted her life to music but the world called her "kept woman," being unaware that his father had married her while she was on her deathbed. He lived all his life with the resulting inferiority complex, incapable of speaking up at any cost, and incapable of acting on his own. He needed the bird for a friend.

Yet another example is the ending in the story "On the shores Beyond the River of Existentialism" (*astitvanadam avaliteerana*). It is an interesting story. It illustrates the life of a man known as Bairagi at first, and later, as Raghu, seeking a life of renunciation. He ends up in a hospital where his friend Satchindanandam treats him. The narrator's play upon the name—sat, chit, ananda—is probably intended to be a prognosis of the protagonist's predicament. He was searching for that ultimate Ananda and he attained it while on the stretcher. Dr Lavanya removed the sheet on the stretcher to check upon the patient and found nothing, no Raghu, no patient. Presumably the gross body dissolved into the ether. It may remind the reader of a magic show where a person disappears from a box or a cubicle.

Earlier in the story, Bairagi sets out to free himself from worldly entanglements and obtain the ultimate absolution. For all appearances, he had left everything back, and moved on with only a shirt on his back and a small handbag. That he was inclined to relinquish everything he had is evident from the incident when he gave away his blanket to a half-naked woman with her baby he saw on the choultry steps. While pulling out the blanket, three rupees fell out of the bag. Somebody alerted him, and Bairagi dismissed it as his last possession he was willing to let go, and went away. Later, however, he woke up and realized that his bag and the camera in it were gone. My question here is, would a person, who had relinquished everything, carry a camera on his way to absolution? Probably, we will have to take it as an element of magical realism. For want of better explanation, we may say that as long as one has the appetite to cling to something, it does not matter what the thing is.

In addition to the events that seem to spark an aura of magic, there is another contributory factor in the stories—that is the author's experiments in the narrative technique, his use of peculiar figures of speech, metaphors and phrases, out of the ordinary at times.

Modern day short-story gurus instruct new, amateur writers to write in a simple, straight-forward language, practically, at the level of a 5th grader. Sri Raju goes against this trend, particularly, in the magical realism stories. He draws heavily on his knowledge of Indian culture, Telugu and Sanskrit languages to create a specific mood in the reader's mind. No doubt he trusts the readers' intelligence, instinct and imagination. His use of unusual phrases is a stretch, at times, nevertheless, it serves the intended purpose. For instance, here are a few constructs: "Are some mysterious everlasting parents worried about the welfare of their heir on the planet below while they are in yogic sleep on the banks of a wholesome pond in the world above?" ("Amidst the Monologues of Another World"); "Dewy melodies amid flames

of musical notes" ["On the Shores Beyond the River of Existentialism"]; and, "Friendship with my classmates that has just started sprouting like the first response at dawn" ["In the Shades of Maha Bodhi tree"]. These constructs make readers stop and try to comprehend the meaning. Let me also add that the above translations are mine. Readers need to go to the Telugu originals to appreciate them fully.

We see this kind of expansiveness mostly in the stories intended to create the milieu of the moment. This usage naturally puts readers' imagination to test. But then, there is no magic that does not call for readers to stretch one's imagination.

The stories that are anchored in magical realism reflect Sri Raju's in-depth knowledge of Indian culture and his command of diction. As I tried to establish, it certainly helps to create the needed characteristic in those stories.

(The stories under reference in this article are available in translation in the book, *Beyond the Shores of the River Existentialism* by Munipalle Raju, published by Sahitya Academi, Delhi, India. 2023)

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11. Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma. “Nonduality”

Life is a necessary ingredient for a story; meaning, a writer must possess a sense of discernment about life. We will know an author’s potential when we pose the question, “Did he write the story with a thorough understanding of life or not?” That is the easiest way to decide whether a story is functional or not.

A second question a prospective writer must ask is, “What is the writer’s role in writing a story?” After reading a story, we must be able to establish whether the writer took a stance on behalf of the subject and was pleading its case, or, hiding in the background while letting the story move on like God. Then we will know whether the author stayed outside the story or submerged himself in it. In some cases, it would appear as if the author put the story in a stroller like a baby, took it for a walk, and brought it back carefully. Some stories appear to have progressed on their own.

Another important question is, whether the story has captured the reader’s attention at the outset or remains boring. A reader must have a good feeling after he finishes reading the story. If a story cannot capture the reader’s attention at the outset, there is no question of good feeling. Without proper diction, style and narrative technique, the story fails, even when it has dealt with a great theme.

We need to figure out for whom the author is writing. Is it for himself or for the public? Could he resonate the world through his writing, or, is he just using the medium to rub his personal woes on the world? Readers resent the writer who writes to show off how difficult it is for him to write a story, and how smart he is.

A good story must be able to send the reader into a rapture. He must experience the bliss. A story must have a purpose and a goal. After reading the story, the reader must be provoked into reflecting on things such as how things should be; should it be like this or that?

A good story develops only when the imagination and the reality go together hand-in-hand, like a cart drawn by two horses. Writing a story based on the superficial behavior of the characters is the old method. A story cannot be called “modern,” unless it also has some psychological insights and portrayal of the human psyche. There is one more characteristic without which a good story cannot stand on its own; that is the native spirit. If a reader cannot feel it is a Telugu story, and that only a Telugu person can write like this, then the ego of the entire race gets hurt.

However, it is delusional to expect a story to contain all these qualities. If one of the characteristics is predominantly present in it, the other characteristics fall into place equitably.

Fiction-writing is like a great alchemy. A kind of chemical reaction takes place when one writes a story, and again, when it is read. Some

commentators have stated a story must have nothing but the story. However, if we examine carefully, we will notice that some other characteristics of other genre do seep into the story. Some stories run like the strands of a top-rated lyric. In some stories, dramatization shows remarkably. A potent story erases all the demarcations and stands out alone, on its own, and with its own peculiarities. A human being bound by the limitations, morals and tenets created by himself also breaks them occasionally. So also a story surpasses its own code.

Writing a story is, in a way, a social responsibility. We take the raw material along with the inspiration from society and then return the same back to the society as a finished product through a literary genre. That means the author has paid his debt to the society through his writings.

In Recently times, a group of new writers started using the story as a powerful weapon to confront and fight back the injustices and atrocities in our society. Ravi Sastry said youth must seize swords; if not, sword-like pens. Literature has the power of not only desiring a change but also bringing about a change. Why not? A piece of paper, with an imprint of the government, has the power to rule the world; that being the case, why the writers cannot take sword-like pens and use the power to fight the government and create a new system. Today's young writers recognized that the story has a responsibility of not just entertaining the readers, but several other duties also.

This anthology [unfortunately, never materialized] under the editorship of Nidadavolu Malathi garu contains eleven stories. All the important elements discussed above can be found in the stories in this anthology. Even as all the children of the same mother are not equally fortunate at all levels, all the stories in any anthology do not evince the same level of competency. Angara Venkata Krishna Rao garu depicted the naked exploitation in great graphic detail in his story “chettu kinda” [Under the Tree]. After reading this story and realizing that the person who bought the house was forced to sell it, we undergo a host of emotions—fear, pity, resentment, and anger—all at the same time. We feel selling his house must be humiliating to him.

The story, “muudu kotulu” [Three Monkeys], reviewed from the perspective of the Freudian theory of dreams, comes out as a writing which uses psychoanalysis as a shield which tears apart human behavior and human relationships. There is enough satire in the story that could provoke a reader to go out and slap every human being on both the cheeks. In this anthology, this one story that stands out independently, like a flagpole. This is a good story, inspired by the movie, “Liberation of L.T. Jones.”

In the story, “Madhura Minakshi,” R. S. Sudarsanam garu states, through the central character, “At the sight of Goddess Minakshi, some unique feeling filled [my] heart as if time froze; as if I drowned into the depths of the ocean of time; as if I went back to a point in history.” He, the protagonist, met Minakshi, a philosophy lecturer, at the Minakshi temple in Madurai. Why the two statures cannot be one and the same? Dissociation means having no preference; that is, maintaining an equitable view. Change is one characteristic of creation. Advaitam preaches that we must supersede this change and experience unity. The protagonist in this story went to visit

the Goddess Minakshi in the temple and met with another Minakshi in person. This Minakshi in person handed him the message—to experience unification of his feelings. She died the same night in a fire accident. In her death, she illustrated the variance between the permanent and transient. But the author states that the humans can attain unity of the permanent and the transient only through what is transient in this world. There is a danger of this story being ridiculed. Some readers might feel that sermonizing after meeting a woman in a temple and enjoying the pleasure of her company is ridiculous.

In Rajaram's story, "Anamakudu," [Nameless person], the expectations of the readers and the characters in the story are befuddled by an unexpected turn of events. The surprising end, first brings up a laugh, and then pity, in the readers.

The story, "manchu debba" [frostbite] is a sad story of a childhood friend who sang the beautiful song dheerasameere [An ashtapadi of Jayadeva] at a school function, and later, wilted away by a frostbite. One would like to ask why women like Vakula should die? Why not elope with somebody? This story showcases how badly we are treating women and their abilities; and, how we are wasting them away. We need a change that stops murdering women like Vakula. After reading Malathi's story, my afterthoughts are that our society is rotten and our institutions of family and marriage are screaming for repair.

Among the other stories, "akali"[hunger] by Kolakaluri Enoch stands out as one of the best stories. This one line is sufficient to demonstrate the author's skill: "Money is like a flag that illustrates the superiority of the 'haves' and the inferiority of the 'have-nots.'" The author displays a razor-sharp vengeance in this story. This is a "small" hunger story. In the entire anthology the three stories that have maintained a uniform style are "chettu kinda" [Under the Tree], "muudu kothulu" [Three Monkeys] and "akali"[Hunger]. The other stories seem to show that the individual voices and the styles of the authors are not yet developed.

Pulikanti Krishna Reddy's story, "guudu kosam guvvalu" [Birds for their Nest] depicts the conflicts in the lives of Gurappa thatha who predicts future with the help of a parrot, the parrot, Ramudu, his cage, and the son-in-law, Rangadu. Krishna Reddy garu deserves compliments on his effort in weaving the meticulous details, the local dialect, and his style which is filled with native flavor in his story.

Malathi garu called this anthology *nithya jivithamlo vyasa ghattaalu*. I must admit that, at first, *vyasa ghaTTam* sounded silly to me, like *snanaghaTTam*. Later, I found out that 'hard-to-comprehend' places in a book or a story are referred to as *vyasa ghattaalu*. Hard-to-comprehend items cause pain. Pain is a synonym for poetry. All activities—from giving birth to writing a piece—are painful. I believe that writing a story causes only pain, not pleasure. Therefore, I think there is a justification in giving this anthology a name that translates to "stories and sufferings."

There is one more thing I would like to add. Usually we say, "Thus ended the story." But, to speak the truth, no story really ends. Even when we

think that the story is finished, it still leaves a lot more for us to think about. Just like life, stories are incomplete. Life and fiction are equally unfinished. Each person has a story and it has no ending. Whether one writes or not, stories keep springing up. The unwritten stories are unborn children.

No matter who writes in which language and in what country, all stories contain an element of universality. Each story reminds us that there are no boundaries for literature. I can ascertain without hesitation and full conviction, people who say, “What can literature do? Who wants fiction and such nonsense?” are fools, no doubt.

Puranam Subrahmya Sarma.

Vijayawada –10

June 25, 1973.

[End]

(Translated by © Nidadavolu Malathi, and published on thulika.net, September 2003).

12. Balivada Kantha Rao, An Astute Fiction Writer

Balivada Kantha Rao, is a conscientious writer and a reputable writer from Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India. He was born in Madapam in Srikakulam district, Andhra Pradesh on July 3, 1927. He was eight when the family moved to Visakhapatnam for his education.

While he was in the eighth grade, Kantha Rao acted as the editor of a hand-written school magazine called *vidyarthi*. He said two persons by the same name, Suryanarayana—his father and his teacher—had been his inspiration, and contributed to shaping his interests in becoming a writer.

At 17, he started working as a clerk in the Indian navy and soon became a civilian officer. While working in the Navy, he had the opportunity to travel and get acquainted not only with different parts of the country but also with different cultures, especially tribal communities. The knowledge he had acquired through these experiences enriched his fiction greatly.

First, let me apologize for this rather brief article. I am aware there is a lot more to write about him, but could not for lack of resources. I hope this will persuade you to find other sources and read more about Kantha Rao.

Probably, Kantha Rao could have achieved greater recognition had he courted some ideology. In fact, that is where his strength lay. He did not commit himself to any one specific ideology nor limit his creativity to promote that one ideology. Instead, he took pains to scrutinize life from a wide variety of perspectives, studied them methodically, including tribal communities, and presented them in his stories. His canvas is not just Andhra Pradesh but the entire country.

Kantha Rao's first novel, *Sarada*, was published in 1947. Regarding its publication, the author says it was rejected by one magazine, and then he submitted it to another magazine, *Chitragupta*. When asked whether the rejection ever curbed his enthusiasm, Kantha Rao commented that the rejections actually made him even more determined to pursue his literary career (Yohan babu. "Interview").

As it turned out, his determination and self-confidence were well rewarded. In his foreword to his anthology of short stories Kantha Rao says how the publishing went in the early days: He sent a story to *Bharati*, a highly regarded literary magazine and they published it not in *Bharati* but in another magazine, under the same umbrella organization, *Andhra Patrika*, a popular weekly magazine. Later, he sent another story to the same weekly magazine, *Andhra Patrika*, and the editors published it in the monthly magazine, *Bharati*!

In his early novels such as *godameeda bomma* [Picture on the Wall] (1953), and *dagaa padina tammudu* [A Betrayed Little Brother] (1957), he dealt with familial themes covering shorter periods. For instance, *dagaa padina tammudu* is a story supposed to have happened in just one decade. In

his later novels, however, he took several generations to illustrate his views on a wide variety of subjects. He says *Vamsadhara* [The River Vamsadhara located in the author's village] is a case in point; it extends over a span of three generations. He believes that, in order to illustrate the metamorphoses of a social change meaningfully, it is necessary to extend over a period of three generations.

At the time of writing this novel, Kantha Rao was living in Delhi. The platform for this novel is his village and covers the events for a period of about fifty years, starting from 1918. Since he left his village in 1936, he decided to go back to his village and gather the necessary information for it. Several individuals—his friends and his father's friends—gave him valuable information which helped him in developing his characters truthfully, and also obtaining some of the colloquialisms and nuances, which he incorporated in his story.

Asked by Dr. Yohan Babu for his reason to change the ending in the novel, *Vamsadhara*, in his latter edition, Kantha Rao said his friends pointed out the discrepancies between his rendering and the actual events. "I believe that a writer must not be influenced by his own preferences and depict events contrary to the truth; and should not have rushed to the conclusions so quickly." It took nine years for him to get it in the form of a book and he was pleased with the final product, he added. He was hoping that the views expressed in it would provoke the future readers into thinking.

The novel discusses several aspects—political ideologies, religious beliefs, social customs, and the lifestyles of various tribes—in an unusual detail. The novel could be labeled "the Story of modern day India", considering its range and depth, commented Dr. Yohan babu.

Delhi majileelu [Tours of Delhi] is another major work of Kantha Rao. He says, "It is a well-researched product. After finishing this humungous novel, I felt like I received a doctoral degree. It took six years to finish it. Even the format is different in that it includes stories within stories and contains extensive discussions on all walks of our lives—political, social, economic and cultural—from Dharmaraja's Indraprasthapuram to today's New Delhi. I am very pleased with it, although it has not caught the public attention yet. Sales are still low. Maybe, it gets noticed after it is translated into Hindi some day."

Here are some of the opinions Kantha Rao expressed in his interview by Yohan Babu:

On current writers, he says good writers may become ordinary writers, if labeled as great writers. If writers focus only on fame and money, quality of good writing goes down. There are several writers today who have overcome these limitations and are writing well. They are the ones who can prolong this thread of literature and take it forward."

His reason to continue writing short stories, and not novels, was writing a novel was harder and after writing, there was no guarantee that it would be published, he said.

On writers who influenced his style: There are not many he could quote. Bengali writer, Sarathchandra Chatterjee's influence is evident in his novel,

Annapurna. After that, he developed rather an ill-conceived notion that, “If I read great fiction written in other languages, I would be influenced by them and my stories would reflect that influence. However, now I feel I missed out on something—I don’t know what makes a novel great.”

In response to a question whether his education in psychology helped him to delineate his characters, Kantha Rao said he never made a conscious effort to apply his theories to characters since he never studied them from that perspective. After he has created the characters, he felt they might have been recast into those theories.

Three novels *janmabhumi* [The Motherland], *punyabhumi* [The Pious land] and *karmabhumi* [The Land of Action] reflect his political views. As a government employee, he was not in a position to depict prevalent political conditions in his novels, and for that reason, he created an imaginary country, he said.

He considers tradition to be a “withered branch and change does not happen if one hangs on to the dried up branches. No society can progress without change,” which explains his creation of some characters to be anti-traditional.

Kantha Rao believes in checking the minutest details and being truthful to his characters. In his foreword to his anthology of short stories, *Balivada Kantha Rao kathalu*, he states that all his stories were based on his observation of real life events and all characters on the people he had come across in real life. The story, “manishi, pasuvu” [Man and the beast] is one such story. It was based on a person whom he had met while he was working in Mumbai. He created strong female characters in his novels for the same reason. He had seen in his village such exemplary women who believed in upright living, and depicted them in his stories.

To give an example of his writing, let me discuss the story *manishi, pasuvu* [Man and the beast]. It revolves round a class IV employee in the office of the protagonist, Sayeba. The man, Patil, never gets to work on time and is drunk most of the time. He spends not only his money on liquor, but also harasses his wife for money. He never bothers to find how she was managing to bring the money. Sayeba tries to change Patil’s behavior by giving him money at first, and later by lecturing him. Patil justifies his drinking by ranting about the prevalent injustices in the society. Sayeba seems to understand Patil’s logic and continues to give him money.

Eventually, Patil shows some change which does not last long though. One day, he overhears two policemen talking about his wife sleeping with other men. Thinking they were rumors, he attacks the policemen for speaking ill of his wife. The policemen throw him in jail. Patil calls Sayeba to bail him out. Later he learns she was prostituting herself to support his drinking habit and murders her. He goes to Sayeba’s home and tells him that Sayeba was the only person who treated him like a person.

For me the story is intriguing. It raises several questions. If the author intended to maintain that Patil became a habitual drunk because of the injustices in the society, his attitude towards his wife makes no sense. And to kill her because she was earning money through prostitution further

complicates the issue and presents him in a dubious light. After much debate, I have come to believe that the author attempted to illustrate the complexity of human nature. Ever so often, human behavior is inexplicable. It never fits into a theory like a hand in a glove. If we are willing to make that concession, we will find some comfort in the thought that the protagonist was able to see some change in Patil.

I liked the story, “korikala satyam” [Truth about desires] for a couple of reasons. It is human nature to wish to improve one’s life and work for it. Call it progress, call it better life—we all want something more. However, if the wishing and working for better life changes into a craving for popularity, it could become disastrous. Click [here](#) for a translation of this story.

naalugu manchaalu [four beds] is one of his short novels. It depicts the lives of four persons lying in four beds in a hospital. Actually, it is a story of three individuals drawn together by a fourth person, Sundaram, who connects them to the outside world and also takes care of their businesses and his own in the outside world. Sundaram could accomplish it by being in and out of the hospital because of his health problems. It is an interesting concept—how seemingly unrelated people could become entangled in a web of relationships. It is done well.

Kantha Rao quotes three incidents that helped him develop his technique.

In his childhood days, Golla Ramaswamy, a bard in his village, used to narrate a wide variety of stories to the audience under a tree. “I learned from him how to make a story interesting to read.”

In his adult years he saw a fight among children which led adults to squabble. Among them, one woman’s brother was standing, away from them, and watching the squabble. Kantha Rao asked him why he did not interfere and stop the squabble. The brother replied that he needed to obtain an unbiased opinion and that would be possible only when he stood at a distance and watched them. “From that incident I have learned that a writer must be unbiased.”

On another occasion, he saw a brief memo about a junior officer’s work. The note said, “Several senior officers have learned about solving disputes between the administration and the labor force from him (the junior officer).” The junior officer was promoted superseding the other senior officers. “From that, I have learned that we get results only when we tell a story straight and succinctly,” said Kantha Rao.

Kantha Rao passed away on May 6, 2000.

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Some of the stories by Balivada Kantha Rao are translated into English by Sijata Patnaik, in an anthology, *The Secret of Contentment and Other Telugu Short Stories*. 2002.

(Published on Thulika.net, August 11, 2013)

13. Dwivedula Visalakshi, A Storyteller With a Flair

In the nineteen sixties, women writers dominated the field of fiction in Andhra Pradesh. Visalakshi is one of those writers, who captured large readership because of their ability to tell stories with charismatic elegance.

Historically, as a part of the social reform movement and the country's reorganization programs, women were encouraged to learn to read and write. And the women made the best of it by addressing contemporary social issues in their stories. The impact of western civilization on our values, women's education, newly developed problems facing the educated women, their transformed status within the families and society, and the newly arisen challenges in arranged marriages figured into the literature created by the women writers at the time. Weekly and monthly magazines proliferated and the editors encouraged women writers with great enthusiasm. In that environment, a few women made their mark in literature, rightfully so, I might add. Dwivedula Visalakshi is one of them.

Normally, there are two ways for writers to express their views in their writings. Some writers present the issues as manifested in real life. Their goal is to highlight the inherent problems in society, which everybody knows but ignores knowingly or unknowingly. They attempt to highlight the issues in order to create an awareness in the public. There are other writers, who identify the problem and position it in the environment of a hopeful future. They may not offer solutions yet present a positive vision, nonetheless. Visalakshi belongs in the latter category. Her stories and novels leave the reader with a satisfaction that he has understood something about our society or human nature.

Dwivedula Visalakshi started writing short stories probably in the late forties. Her first novel, *vaikuntapaali*, won first prize in an annual competition held by a prominent weekly magazine, *Andhra Prabha*. It was serialized in the same magazine in 1963 and published as a book in 1965.

The core theme in the novel is adoption. In general, the word adoption carries a vague sense of suspicion. If the child is raised by a family without going through the ritual of adoption, it may cause problems. Additionally, if the mother gives birth to another child after the first child is brought home, matters precipitate. The novel illustrates the ensuing problems when a child is not legally adopted and the manner in which some people rationalize their actions.

In her second novel, *maarina viluvalu* [Transformed values], Visalakshi delineates the status of educated women in our society in the face of changing values both at home and in society.

Janaki is the eldest of five children—three boys and two girls. The novel opens with the second daughter, Santha, announcing she passed the Intermediate exam. Mother is not happy however; she is sad since her third son, Sambu, failed the same exam. In her opinion, education for women is not important. Ironically, there is one educated woman in the family, Janaki,

and they are enjoying the benefits from her education. Yet, mother does not see it that way. In our society, while the social reformers, both male and female, scream for education for women, there are also some who remain deep rooted in traditional value, no need of education for women.

A second angle to this theme is the use of women's property called *stridhanam* by her family. In the past, living on a woman's earnings was considered despicable. In modern times however, this opinion has changed significantly. Now, women do go out, get a job and earn money. However, son continues to command higher status regardless of woman's earning power. All these variations in the relationship of woman and wealth are built into this novel, providing the readers with a piece of history in the making.

In the next chapter, the pivotal incident, which led Janaki to take up a job, is explained. Previously, her marriage had been arranged and broken in the middle of the ceremony due to her father's failure to come up with more money to give to the groom. Since it happened after the tali was tied, she was technically a "married woman." Later at night, Janaki went to the railway station to persuade the groom to return to the wedding ceremony, but to no avail. The marriage ended. Eventually, she obtained a job in an orphanage and started supporting the family both economically and emotionally.

The eldest son, Surya Rao, is a coward who constantly worries about public opinion. He does not have the guts to encourage his brother, Prakasam, in his business venture, fearing it might hurt their social status. He cannot accept that his youngest brother, Sambu, is not up to the demands of education. He does not know how to handle the situation. He will not allow his sister, Santha, back into the home, because she had run away, found she had been deceived and returned home. For him, that was not acceptable.

Janaki is the female hero in the novel. takes on the responsibilities, which should have been Surya Rao's. She understands Prakasam's abilities to go into business, Sambu's inadequacies to grow as an individual, and Santha's daring spirit.

At the end, the man, who had left Janaki on the wedding day, returns, asks her to go back to him and take care of him and the children of his second wife, now deceased. Janaki tells him that taking care of the children at the orphanage is more satisfying to her than going back to him.

A striking element in this novel is the author's portrayal of women as strong characters. They are confident and determined to achieve their goals. In contrast, men are portrayed as weak and ineffectual. Prakasam, the second brother, is portrayed as successful but not without plenty of support from Janaki, and his sister-in-law, Kanakam.

Second daughter Santha may have made a wrong choice in life yet she is shown as having the courage to pursue what she thought was right for her. In that, she is not the typical naive young girl, commonly known in our society.

There are two incidents in this novel that need scrutiny. In the first chapter, Janaki goes to the railway station alone in the middle of the night. Recently, a young woman asked me, "Would such an act on the part of a woman not be considered inappropriate in the sixties?" From what I know,

the readers of the sixties did not raise this question. Secondly, to answer this question, we need to consider the social conditions of the times.

As I mentioned at the outset, the society was swarmed with social reformers and political activists who encouraged women not only to learn to read and write but also to participate in the movement. In fact, the active participation by women in all the social and political movements had started long before we have achieved independence. Thus, while majority of the women were still rooted in tradition, there were also women, who showed independent spirit. And several writers of the sixties depicted such women in their fiction.

Janaki's independent spirit and progressive views have been established with the incident at the railway station. Possibly, the elite created strong-willed female characters in fiction by way of providing comfort to the feeble women in our society, even to prod them into action.

The second incident in this story is the husband's reappearance. Janaki refuses to go back to him, which again is in step with her character. In those times, this also could be viewed as improbable yet the readers did not raise this question in the sixties.

Last August, I met with the author. She told me of another incident, which possibly happened much later. Visalakshi said that a prominent movie director, C. S. Rao, approached her for permission to make the novel into a movie. He was interested in making the movie but he wanted to change the ending. His suggestion was to make Janaki ask for her husband's forgiveness and go back to him.

Visalakshi refused to make the change and the director dropped the movie idea. Here I see the traditional mode of thinking in the director and the author's progressive views in her refusal to change the ending. Strangely, the director had no objection to Janaki going to the railway station alone in the middle of the night.

In the novel, *grahanam vidichindi* [The Eclipse Ended], written in 1967, the author addresses two issues—firstly, a young woman, Bharati's psychological trauma after her husband's sudden and untimely death, and secondly, the ensuing complications brought by the money she had acquired after his death. All her family members, on her side and the husband's side, offer to help her and protect her money through investments in the products of their choice. Bharati starts suspecting their ulterior motives. While struggling with her emotions, she gets involved with her husband's best friend and, in course of time, finds that he is also interested in putting her money to work according to his own preferences. Disgusted, she decides to go to Rishikesh, where she finds Babaji consoling at first, and later as a man with suggestions to invest her money. Once again, she feels betrayed and packs to leave. Babaji gives her a note on the eve of her departure, which explains the real problem in her mode of thinking. While living in the constant fear of being cheated by everybody, she is doing the same, which is clinging to her money. She realizes that she should consider the alternate possibility—that all the people around her might be genuinely interested in

her welfare as well as her money; genuine affection and their interest in her money need not be mutually exclusive.

In her preface to this novel, author made it clear that the argument for widow remarriage in this novel should not be construed as an argument that all widows must remarry necessarily. In her opinion, one may remarry if that contributes toward one's personal growth and only if that is her choice. In other words, it should be the choice of an individual, and not a rule to be honored by all widows invariably.

In Visalakshi's short stories, we find an unusual flair in her choice of themes and her narrative technique. She chooses the language and the milieu appropriate for her narration.

Two stories, "ittadi binde" [brass pot] and "teerani korika" [unfulfilled wish] illustrate two different angles in the psychology of the rich. In the first story, a wealthy woman goes shopping in her car, just to kill time, and buys a six thousand rupee necklace. On her way home, the car breaks down and she decides to take the bus "for fun." In the bus, fellow travelers are fascinated by a brass pot, a working class woman bought for thirty rupees. The rich woman is surprised by their fascination of the pot. Eventually, she learns that the young woman is her servant's wife. Almost impulsively, she invites the couple to live in her outhouse. The story revolves around various emotions the rich woman goes through while watching the couple express their love for each other. The crux of the problem is her inability to sustain her generosity. It is an interesting twist.

In the second story, "teerani korika" [unfulfilled desire], we find a different angle, once again, in the generosity of the rich. The protagonist, Rangaraya Bahaddur is a wealthy zamindar, whose generosity knows no bounds. He never says no to anyone who comes to him with an appeal. A new gentleman, by the name Potti Pantulu, arrives in town. Potti Pantulu needs help but does not go to the zamindar. Zamindar waits for him to come to himself, since he [the zamindar] does not extend his help unless the person comes to him. People around him notice that the zamindar is troubled about something but do not know what it is. While zamindar is waiting for Potti Pantulu to appear at his door, Pantulu wins a huge sum in a lottery. Thus the zamindar's wish has never been fulfilled.

In both the stories, the author did a good job in depicting the psyche of the haves. In both the cases, the issues appear to be small for most of us yet of consequence to those who would have to face them.

Normally, a lazy person, who squanders away his life, does not admit he is squandering away his life. In the story, *kadalika* [shaken], narrated in the first person, the protagonist has no problem admitting that he is wasting his life like a branded bull. In Andhra Pradesh, a branded bull carries a ritualistic significance. In some families, as a part of death ritual, a bull is branded and let go on the streets to roam freely. Traditionally, people are not supposed to stop the bull in any manner for any reason.

The young man is aware of the resemblance between his conduct and that of the branded bull on the street yet has no will to change his ways. He whiles away his time at the bus stops watching beautiful girls getting in and

out of buses. One day, he sees an old man in stinky, tattered clothes getting off the bus. Being old and clumsy, the man reels off the step and falls on the ground. Another bus hurries through the street, running over the old man. The young man notices a medicine bottle and a prescription slip on the ground. He debates for a while in his mind and decides to go out of his way and pick up the two items. He learns from the prescription slip that a girl named Malli is waiting in some hospital for that medicine. He goes to the hospital only to find that Malli is a little girl and she died the night before because the medicine was not delivered to her in time. The doctor tells the young man that nobody was there to claim the body; and so, it will be thrown into the municipal cart. The young man, despite his carefree lifestyle, is moved (the change) for some unknown reason. He takes the girl's body to the outskirts of the town, buries it and returns home.

At home, his older brother yells at him for returning home late and slaps him. For the first time in his life, his older brother punished him. He notices the change in his brother's demeanor and is surprised. Both his brother and sister-in-law never punished him, not even so much as raise their voices as long as he acted like a wild, branded bull. Now, for the first time in his life, he acted like a human being, did a good deed and in return, is slapped. The older brother did not know of the young man's humanitarian act yet instinctively, he acted as if he had recognized the human element in him at that point in his life.

Annayya lifted his hand and slapped me a few times. "I am being so patient but there is no use; your behavior is getting worse each day. Tell me, where you've been? What did you do with the money Vadina gave you for books?"

Annayya pulled all the strength in his body and beat me.

I did not reply. I was surprised. I stood there watching him.

This is the first time Annayya has ever laid a hand on me. He did not have the heart to lift a finger as long as I sported the signs of a branded bull. Probably, he was scared that I might squash him with my horns and make a mush of him. Now, the branded bull within me has moved away and I am showing the signs of a human being, he has gotten the strength and the interest to punish me.

Had he punished me like this before, I would have thrown my head indifferently and walked away. But, his chiding today got the better of me completely. With that whack, my stupor has gone completely. They would not believe me even if I tell them what happened. Annayya knows me only too well to believe my words; I would not stand a chance!

"I lost the money. I was searching for it all this while," I said.

Annayya knew that I was lying but he did not have the strength to beat me anymore. I knew I lied to them. There was no point in telling the truth. The old man's soul would know that it was a lie. Malli, who was lying alone in the tamarind grove, knew it was a lie. But, they are not in a position to show up here and say that it was a lie.

This is what I liked about the story. The author's keen insights into human nature. Self-analysis in a self-centered person is not an everyday event. However, it is not completely unlikely. That is what stories do—touch upon the innermost corners in human psyche that is ignored in everyday lives.

For the first time, he realizes that, as long as he acted like an unfettered bull, his brother and sister-in-law treated him just the way they would a branded bull, that is feeding him and letting him roam on the streets. But, after he imbibes a bit of human quality—kindness, they view him as a human being. Implicit are two perceptions: First, one may sense the change in another person intuitively. Second is the human value, which is to acknowledge that there are consequences for one's actions. If a person is considered a human being, the other values such as discipline follow. Discipline means reward for good deeds and punishment for bad behavior. In this instance, the young man came home late and for that reason must be punished. He has done a good deed but the brother is not aware of it. Maybe the young man will be rewarded after the elder brother learns of it.

On a slightly different note, I must say I ran into some glitches while translating this story. It is filled with long, meandering sentences, and, at times, too much information is packed into just a few lines. There are inconsistencies in a couple of places. For instance, the narrator says the stores were closed because it was Sunday. If it was Sunday, why did the young man go to the bus stop to watch the college girls get off the bus. Are not the colleges closed on Sundays?

“The first sale” is a short short story (3 pages) woven around a single incident. In the wee small hours of dawn, a graveyard watchman is losing hope because he has not had even one sale in the entire night. Unless he receives one dead body and collects the fee, he will not be able to buy medicine for his sick child. In the last minute, he sees a man approaching him with a bundle in his hand. Much to his dismay, it is his child, for whom he was hoping to buy medicine. It is time for the next guard. The next guard comes, looks at the dead body and is elated that he has a sale even before he started his shift!

I believe this is one of the few stories where burial ground is used powerfully as a background. The story should remind the native speakers of the story of king Harischandra, who was forced to insist on payment of the fee for burying his own son. The guard in this story is aptly named, Veeri gadu, which reminds us of Veerabahu in the story of Harischandra.

Like wealth, death has several angles and the author succeeded in highlighting those angles which are usually not noticed or noticed but ignored. Visalakshi possesses a remarkable skill in crafting her stories. Her narrative oozes the native flavor. She has traveled to Malasia, America, Britain, and Switzerland. She has working knowledge of Hindi and English.

To her credit, she has 13 novels, 4 anthologies of short stories, and an anthology of essays, *Malasia: then and now*. Some of her novels have been translated into Kannada. She reviewed about 200 books, under the pseudonym, Sumana. Her works were subjects for several Ph.D.s and M.Phil. degrees.

Visalakshi received the prestigious Gruhalakshmi Swarnakankanam award in 1966, Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi award in 1982, and honorary D. Litt. from Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University in 1998, among other awards.

I met her in August, 2009. She agreed to meet with me, but no interviews, she said. She further explained her reasons for not giving interviews. “Nowadays, I can’t recall many details. And it would not be right on my part to give wrong information. Therefore, I decided not to give interviews.”

I asked for her permission to translate one of her stories. She said, “I can say I have no objection. However, it is not appropriate for me to do so, since I have donated all my books with full rights to Visakhapatnam public library. You should contact Bhamidipati Ramagopalam and Varahala Chetty, members of the board of trustees of the public library, and obtain their permission. I am sure they will have no objection, but you should contact them.”

Accordingly, I met with Bhamidipati Ramagopalam and Varahala Chetty on the following day. Both of them assured me it was not a problem. Mr. Varahala Chetty wrote on a piece of paper, “With the kind permission of the copyright holders, Visakhapatnam public library,” and gave it to me.

Eventually, I translated the story “kadalika” and mailed a copy to the author as a matter of courtesy. She wrote back to me that the story in question was not her choice for translation and that I must not publish it. Probably it was one of those instances of her memory lapse. I decided to honor her request, although I had the permission from the copyright holders, and shelved my translation. This is one of the stumbling blocks for translators, I think.

Regardless of this incident, I respect Visalakshi for her contribution to Telugu literature.

[End]

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14. Dwivedula Visalakshi. *Vaikuntapaali* [Snakes and ladders]

In the history of Telugu fiction, the two decades 1950s and 1960s have been significant. Writers have produced notable fiction from the perspective of themes, technique and in recording the social history of the times effectively. Immediately after the declaration of independence, the country set out to educate the public, and the Telugu newspapers and magazines played a huge role in this effort. Women writers dominated the field of fiction at this time. Several women writers of this era are warmly remembered by readers even to this day.

Dwivedula Visalakshi (1929-2014) wrote her first novel *vaikunthapali* in 1963. The novel won an award in a competition held by a popular weekly magazine, *Andhrajyothi*. The title *vaikunthapali* refers to a board game, similar to Snakes and Ladders. Literally, the term "*vaikunthapali*" means the heavenly abode or steps leading to the ultimate destination. Philosophically speaking, winning in the game meant reaching the ultimate destination after fighting the innumerable odds in life. We roll the dice (seashells are used in Andhra Pradesh) and move on to the next square, up the ladder or down the spine of a snake. Snakes and ladders are symbolic of the events in our everyday lives. The western board game Snakes and Ladders is a variant of the same game.

The core theme in *vakunthapali* is adoption. It opens with Avadhani, an elementary school teacher, bringing home a two-year old boy. His wife, Parvatamma, was surprised and also taken to the boy instantly. She asked him, "He is so cute! Whose boy is he?"

"Ours, of course. Why else would he be here?" Avadhani said and explained how he happened to bring the boy home.

Parvatamma was elated. The couple had no children of their own, and that had been a sore spot for her for a very long time. Avadhani went to consult Sastry, a local astrologer and friend, to find an auspicious day for performing the ritual of adoption. Much to their disappointment, Sastry told him to wait until the boy turned three; second year was not auspicious.

In a series of flashbacks, several events, which led Avadhani to bring the baby home follow.

Avadhani had been to another village as a polling officer and run into a young woman, Rajeswari, his former student. She had invited him to their home. Avadhani learned of their disheartening situation.

Rajeswari's mother Mahalakshamma had been sick for some time. Rajeswari had an older, sister, Saraswati, and three younger siblings, Ramu, Subhadra and Vasu. Their father took to drinking and had been spending

away any money he could lay hands on, and a few things he could find to pawn away.

Somebody brought a wedding proposal for Saraswati from a prestigious family. Saraswati's parents could not turn it down, considering their circumstances. The marriage was performed in style in step with the groom's status. Saraswati moved to her in-law's home.

Avadhani was transferred to another village. Parvatamma fell ill. Avadhani left her at their village, and went to work in the other village. He was commuting to home on weekends.

One day, he pulled out an old coat to wear to a wedding and discovered a letter his wife had given him long time ago, and he had forgotten to read. It was the same letter Saraswati had written to Rajeswari. It said, that Saraswati's life had miserable at her in-law's place. Her father-in-law had used up most of the family fortune on his extravagant habits and died. Her mother-in-law had been keen on keeping up the same extravagant lifestyle, despite lack of resources. Saraswati's husband had been squirming under the pressures from his mother. He had learned that his wife was pregnant, got scared and fled, leaving Saraswati and her unborn child to their fate. Saraswati had died after giving birth to a baby boy. After her death, Rajeswari brought the baby home to raise him herself. By this time, Rajeswari's father had run away from home, never to return.

Rajeswari went to another town for teacher training. There, she met a young man, Syamala Rao, who expressed his feelings for her. She also had feelings for him, which she kept to herself. Syamala Rao got a scholarship for higher studies in America and left.

Rajeswari was diagnosed with tuberculosis. She wrote to Avadhani, begging him to visit her. Avadhani went to the sanatorium, where he met with Syamala Rao, who had returned from America and landed a job in Calcutta. Rajeswari begged Avadhani to raise her sister's baby. Avadhani promised her that he would take the baby.

Rajeswari died. Syamala Rao told Avadhani that he would perform the death rituals for Rajeswari in Benares. He felt that he had earned that right, although they had never been married, but that kind of bond existed between them.

After a few days, Avadhani went to Rajeswari's place and brought the baby home.

Avadhani received a letter from Subhadra. After Rajeswari's death, Syamala Rao was sending them money, specifically for her education. Mother died. Ramu, like Rajeswari was taking care of the family, but he also died. Vasu married a girl from a rich family and moved out. Subhadra had no one to turn to but Syamala Rao for help. Eventually they got married.

The little boy turned three and Avadhani went to Sastry once again to set a date for adoption. He learned from Sastry's wife that his wife Parvatamma was pregnant. Sastry had misgivings, and advised Avadhani to

examine carefully the logistics of adoption at this point. Avadhani returned home, and asked Parvatamma whether she would feel the same way about the first child after she had one of her own. She dismissed his fears and assured him that she would never discriminate, never choose one over the other. The couple had a son. They performed the naming ceremony. The first boy was named Ranganatha Rao (Ranganatham) and the new baby Gopala Rao (Gopi).

Avadhani took Ranganatham to admit him in school. The headmaster insisted on giving Ranganatha Rao a surname. Avadhani was in a dilemma. He could not give his own surname to the boy, since the adoption had never taken place, and he could not give the birth-father's surname; he had never known their surname. It was decided to note down a single letter 'A' as Ranganatha Rao's surname, rather arbitrarily

Santha was Avadhani's first cousin (their mothers were sisters). Avadhani has always been treating her as his own sister. Santha, her husband Satyanarayana and daughter Sudha came from Delhi for a brief visit. Santha proposed to take Ranganatham to Delhi with them. Avadhani and Parvatamma had reservations but let Ranganatham go, hoping that it might give him a better future.

In Delhi, Ranganatham was admitted in school. Santha kept assigning chores to him, which interfered with his schoolwork. He received an undue punishment from Satyanarayana, who was unaware of his wife's part in it. Ranganatham took all the beating without speaking a word.

Ignoring Avadhani's specific instructions, Santha talked about Ranganatham's past inadvertently; and Ranganatham was devastated as he heard it from his cousin. He confronted Santha but failed to get a direct answer, much to his dismay. He was heartbroken and fell ill.

Avadhani and Parvatamma heard of Ranganatham's illness. They went to Delhi and found that Ranganatham has been seriously ill for sometime now. Parvatamma insisted and they moved into another apartment in town. They stayed there until Ranganatham was strong enough to travel and then they all left for their village. That was a blow to Santha who has become fond of the boy and has been hoping to marry Sudha to him and make him an illarikapu alludu[1] (live-in son-in-law).

At home, Ranganatham asked his mother about his birth-parents once again. His mother explained to him that he would always be their son, regardless to whom he was born. In the final year of his high school, Ranganatham had to deal with the issue of surname once again. The school clerk refused to accept a single letter 'A' as a surname. Ranganatham was mortified.

Ranganatham finished high school. Parvatamma fell ill. Santha and Satyanarayana came for a visit. Santha invited Ranganatham to Delhi, promising to send him for higher studies. Parvatamma and Avadhani were torn between keeping their son at home and letting him take Santha's offer, which included a bright future. Ranganatham told Santha that he could never live with himself, if he left his adoptive parents behind, trading them for his

own future. Ranganatham completed teacher training and settled down as a teacher. He promised Gopi to finance his engineering education.

Parvatamma tried to arrange marriages for her two sons. But Gopi told her that he had decided to marry a rich girl, whose father promised him a bright career.

Ranganatham agreed initially to marry a girl of his mother's choice but things changed quickly. His colleague, Janaki sent him a telegram, saying her mother was seriously ill. He went there only to find that it was a ploy to get him to her place. He returned home and told Parvatamma of his decision to marry Janaki. He assured her that she (Parvatamma) would be pleased with Janaki. Parvatamma died before the weddings had taken place.

Gopi invited Avadhani to live with him and his wife's family. His wife's family took care of Avadhani very well. Nevertheless, their life in the city was too mechanical for him to stomach.

He went to Ranganatham's house, where, once again, he was met with extraordinary kindness, which once again was too much for him. He went on a pilgrimage. Ranganatham and Janaki had a baby girl. He wrote to Avadhani that Parvatamma had returned to their home as a little baby girl. Avadhani returned and broke into tears as he held the little baby in his arms.

The central theme is adoption. On a secondary level, the interpersonal relationships reveal the social phenomena of the times. The interaction between husband and wife, and brothers and sisters, even when they were not born to the same mother or in the same family, have been presented truthfully in this novel. That is one of the strong points of the author, Visalakshi, I might add.

Let's first review the main characters in the story. The main characters in the story, besides the protagonist, are Avadhani and Parvatamma are the childless couple, who had taken in Ranganatha Rao for adoption, and Santha, who was interested in taking Ranganatha Rao under her wing. Avadhani was depicted as an intelligent school teacher, who constantly weighs the pros and cons of each issue, and the propriety of his actions, but rarely consults his wife. In the first scene, he walks in with a two-year-old baby in his arms, and tells his wife that the child was theirs to keep. There is a line in the narrative stating that he explained how he had come to bring the baby home. There is no indication of any prior discussions with his wife, although the subject was on his mind for quite some time. The couple told themselves that "although we did not go through the ritual of adoption, he is and will always be our son; we have accepted him as our son in our hearts," and swore that they would never show favoritism toward one over the other. In their minds, there has been no discrimination. However, the question of surname for Ranganatham has surfaced twice and both times Avadhani failed the boy.

A note on surnames is in order here. In Telugu families, surname connotes a lot more than just an identification mark. Very often, families are referred to by their surnames; and sons, daughters, and even daughters-in-law by their surnames.

That being the case, Avadhani's logic sounds hollow in the face of the young man's heartache, caused by the lack of a legitimate surname. The headmaster refused to admit Ranganatha Rao in school without a surname. If you don't consider him as your adoptive son, tell me his father's surname, he said. Avadhani said he knew only Ranganatham's father's name is Sivakamayya; Rajeswari told him only that much, not any more. He added he thought the boy would find out himself, if he were interested in his roots in course of time. "I can't go about it now; I have neither the strength nor the motivation to do so," he told headmaster.

Avadhani returned home and told his wife about the incident at school.

Somehow, the process was about to be wrapped up but, the same question surfaced once again. All the children will have an initial (representing their surname). ... If Ranganatham's name carried no initial letter, it could cause problems later, if not right away. ... Thus, Avadhani agreed to prefix an initial 'A' in front of Ranganatha Rao's name, and was glad, it was solved, for the time being.

To me, the reason for ignoring a very important aspect of one's life like surname by an apparently intelligent man like Avadhani illustrates the manner in which even the most important events in one's life were passed up in those days. This action on Avadhani's part had left a permanent mark on Ranganatham's mind and on his life.

Avadhani does not consult Parvatamma even in matters of consequence. So, what kind of relationship they are supposed to have between themselves. After Parvatamma's death, Avadhani reminisces the past and the times they had had while playing the game, vaikunthapali. Parvatamma had won, almost always. On one occasion, she had lost and broken into tears. Avadhani tried to console her that it was only a game. Parvatamma had turned the conversation into a discussion on husband-wife relationship. In the game, "You left me and reached the ultimate destination. Are you going to do the same in life too? ... The thought that you would move on leaving me behind is scary," she said.

"Well, you've been moving forward all these days, haven't you?" he retorted.

"That's different, you are a man," she said, and continued to explain the difference built into the psyches of man and woman. A woman is compared to a vine wound around a tree trunk. When that support is removed, the vine collapses to the ground. So also a woman; her entire life is wound around man's life. Physically, she might be a separate entity but mentally she is united with her man into one piece. For man, that is not the case. He allots one part of his life for her, he loves her and adores her in that position. But he also has the remaining part of his life, separate from her. A man is complete only when he has these portions united. He might grieve his wife's death but he also has the facility to manage his grief, with the help of the other part in his life.

Avadhani looks back now and ponders, "Parvati, I could not refute your argument on that day, but you are wrong. Today, I know so from my

experience. Here is my rebuttal. I am unable to keep my feet on the ground; I am on the run endlessly. ...

A woman may not be the only thing in a man's life. But she holds the rudder that can make his life run smoothly. ... A man without his wife is like a hand with his thumb cut off. A man receives all his passion for life and happiness from a woman in his attempts to shape his life. Without that source of passion, man is left with nothing but darkness and sorrow. A woman may display her sorrow in front of others and humble herself in the process. A man does not even have that provision, unfortunately. He has to suppress his grief within himself and burn inside."

Avadhani understood the gravity of the problem, only after he had come to experience it. This entire mode of thinking points to the nature of things prevalent at the time.

Despite her views on the status of woman, Parvatamma was depicted as a strong character in her own way; she would put up a fight only when it matters. One good example is when they went to Delhi to see Ranganatham. She noticed that Ranganatham's illness was more serious than they had been led to believe. So, she decided to move Ranganatham to another apartment in the same neighborhood, take care of him, and bring him back to their home, after he recovered. Avadhani

tries to point out that it could hurt the feelings of Santha and Satyanarayana, but to no avail. She was determined to take care of her son herself and she did it. On the other hand, she would let go in regard to the two sons' marriages, despite her attempts to fix them up with brides of her choice. Both the sons disappointed her, but she would not fight them because she was keenly aware of changing times.

Santha is a naive, middle-aged woman, who means well but acts without much forethought. When she saw Ranganatham for the first time, her thoughts were to marry him to her daughter and keep both of them at her house. After arriving in Delhi, she started assigning him chores, hurting his education in the process. She did not realize her mistake until he had taken the punishment from his uncle for missing school, without pointing a finger at her. Ranganatham missed the school bus because she had sent him to bring banana leaves from the store. She knew it was her fault, but did not have the courage to admit it. Her logic was, "How can I make bobbatlu[2] without banana leaves to press on?" Her second mistake was to talk about Ranganatham's birth parents, ignoring Avadhani's instructions. Her redemption lay in changing her attitude toward Ranganatham, but, it came too late. Both the mistakes played a major role in shaping Ranganatham's character and life.

Ranganatha Rao, the protagonist, was portrayed as an archetypal hero. Symbolically, he was the pawn who moved up the ladder or down the spine of a snake at the whims of other players. As a hapless child, whose mother died and father absconded, he still had a ray of hope in his aunt Rajeswari. And she had set up a place for him in Avadhani's home, prior to her death. Thus, each step of the way, his life was balanced with ups and downs. His character was delineated with flair. From the moment he had learned that he was going to have a baby brother to the moment he had to make a decision

about his marriage, it had been one tough ride for him. Yet, he handled it like a man, even when he was a little boy! Probably, that was the problem in a way. There are occasions, like when his uncle beat him up for missing school, when the reader wonders why he did not speak up.

His silence at Santha's house could have come from the fact that he never felt at home there. Although, it is not unusual in our families to assign small chores to children, the fact that Sudha has never been asked to do any chores makes Ranganatham's situation look worse. There was a time when he did tell his aunt that it was getting late for school but Santha dismissed it as a trivial matter. That was a crucial turning point in his life. After that, he kept his lips tight forever. Sudha developed friendship with him but that was not enough for his little life.

Into this gamut of characters, the theme of adoption was worked in. While there were some serious implications and repercussions in regard to the ritual of adoption, the ritual itself had become immaterial for the couple, and supposedly for the son. In Avadhani's mind, legal issues could arise only if there was a property to allocate, and he had no property. The only issue would be taking care of the parents in their old age, and both the sons were more than willing to do so. That was not an issue at all. The incomplete adoption process came to the fore twice in the story. Both the times, it happened in a school environment. Avadhani, a school teacher, did not foresee it, and did not find a plausible solution for Ranganatha Rao. Once again, it reflects the attitude of the adults during that period. The age-old belief that things have a way of taking care of themselves - the karma theory of sorts - kicked in.

A second occasion was when Santha invited Ranganatham to live with them, and Avadhani's justification to allow him to go with them. It points, rather indirectly, to the same argument that Ranganatham's life and his future must be evaluated in the light of his adoption. Avadhani felt that he had made a promise to Rajeswari he would give Ranganatham a better life, and therefore, he must, of necessity, set aside his own preference to keep him with himself and his wife. It is obvious that his thoughts would not be on the same lines if Ranganatham were his own son, Gopi. In fact, even Santha might not have thought on the same lines if it were Avadhani's own son. Additionally, the above incident in juxtaposition with Gopi's decision at a later date, to move in with his in-laws in pursuit of his career sheds a new hue on an old custom.

In all, they all seemed to have acted in a rather slapdash fashion, despite all that intelligent and highly cogent arguments Avadhani, Santha and even Satyanarayana had. Some heavy duty discussions did take place between Avadhani and Parvatamma, and again between Santha and Satyanarayana regarding how Ranganatham should be raised but, in reality, none of them had taken away or even tried to alleviate the pain they had caused him in the process.

The novel depicts the massive social change that had been taking place during that period. One such instance has been the interpersonal relationship between generations - the freedom parents allowed to their children. In the past, children followed fathers in their choice of a vocation automatically. A

doctor's son was a doctor and a lawyer's son was a lawyer (pretty much like caste-oriented vocations). But in the post-independent Andhra, sons and daughters have started showing signs of independent thinking[3] and parents allowed it, while struggling to let go of the old habits. Ranganatham became a teacher, not because his father was one, nor at his father's suggestion, but due to other prevailing circumstances. Gopi, on the other hand, wanted to become an engineer and Ranganatham was willing to foot the bill. Avadhani and Parvatamma let the children make their own decisions, even when it went against their grain.

A second area was the husband-wife relationship. In this novel, we see both the angles - the past and the present. Avadhani brought the little boy with not so much as mentioning it to Parvatamma in advance. But Parvatamma played a major role in bringing Ranganatham away from Santha's home, botching her plans.

As for the structure of the novel, we must, first, look into the process of serialization. In the fifties and sixties, novels were written for publishing them in installments in magazines. That meant creating segments to fit 3 or 4 pages at a time, and including a cliff-hanger line to sustain the readers' curiosity. In creating these artificial breaks, however, the story suffered from lack of cohesiveness at times. For instance, the time frame of the letters when they were actually received and how much time had passed between the reading and writing were not very clear. It is even more confusing when one reads the novel in a book form. Sometimes, one incident switches to the next without even an extra space between the two.

Most of Visalakshi's novels and stories are pivoted around the middle class - their economic problems, women's education and, more importantly, familial relationships. Like most of the women writers of the 1950s and the 60s, she wrote about the life she was familiar with. One of her strong points is the struggle of finding a happy medium between traditional values and progressive views. Her characters are deep-rooted in tradition yet open to experimentation in modern ways to improve their lives. This is particularly true of women characters.

[End]

[1] A son-in-law was invited to live with the parents-in-law. It is not a flattering status, although it happens sometimes because of his economic conditions.

[2] Flat bread with sweet filling.

[3] The story, "God's Work," also illustrates similar theme.

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15. Sivaraju Subbalakshmi, A Renowned Writer and Artist

Sivaraju Subbalakshmi (1925-2021) was married at the age of twelve to another famous Telugu writer, Buchibabu [pseud.] (1916-1967), who was twenty-on at the time. She hails from Rajahmundry, a town known for its rich literary heritage. She is the second of three daughters and three brothers to her parents. She adopted her brother's son, also named after her husband Venkata Subba Rao.

"I am eighty-four," She said. (she just turned 85 last September). After Bucchibabu obtained his Bachelor's degree, the couple moved to Madras. They started their life together when Buchibabu moved to Madras to do obtain his Master's degree. In Madras, the couple made friends with several esteemed writers, which contributed immensely to literary pursuits. Subbalakshmi fondly remembers the good times she had with her husband until his untimely demise in 1967.

In 2006, I talked with her over the phone for the first time. She was in Bangalore and I was in Hyderabad. In September 2009, however I happened to go to Bangalore and so took the opportunity to meet her.

She has a pleasant personality. She welcomed us with a big smile, made tea for us, and showed us her room and her paintings. She says Bapu, a highly acclaimed artist of our times, is her nephew (Bucchibabu's brother's son) and has taught him how to draw.

Subbalakshmi started writing short stories in the mid-fifties. She quoted a famous writer, Jalsutram Rukmininatha Sastry as saying, "I like your stories better than that novel [of her husband]." I asked her what that novel was and she replied with a hearty laugh, "By then, *chivaraku migiledi* (by Buchibabu) was already published." Another famous poet and university professor, Pingali Lakshmikantam paid her a charming tribute in his "asirvachanam" [Blessings] ("Preface" to one of Subbalakshmi's anthologies). He commented that Subbalakshmi's stories came from the heart and she wrote from a perspective that only women could understand and portray. Regarding her style, Lakshmikantam stated, "Nowadays, the stories, which are published, are hard to distinguish between the stories written by male and female writers. The specialty in Subbalakshmi's stories is that, the feeling we would feel that only women can write like this. A man, however talented he is, can describe the woman's nature only the perception he can see through his masculine eyes. It is no surprise that when a woman describes the nature of another woman, the description will be far from exaggeration and closer to truth. We can say the objective of these stories is to hold mirror to the human nature filled with jealousies, intolerance and narrow selfishness, and make our world a better place." He finished his "Blessings" hoping that she would write better stories than her husband.

Subbalakshmi credits her inspiration and success to her husband. She says in her preface to her anthology, *Sivaraju Subbalakshmi Kathalu*,

addressing her husband, “You wrote a story and I wrote one. You painted and I painted.” It would appear they had an ideal marriage.

Subbalakshmi has published four volumes of short stories and three novels. One of the three novels, *neelam getu ayyagaru* [The owner of a house with blue gate] has received critical acclaim. It illustrates a wealthy family who live in a big mansion with blue gate; it is narrated from the perspective of a maid in the mansion, Ponni.

The author did a marvelous job in capturing the perceptions of an illiterate, working woman. The character comes alive in her novel.

In our conversations, Subbalakshmi mentioned that she stopped including descriptions in her stories and novels just to avoid the possible criticism that she was imitating her husband. I was not aware of the change in her style at the time.

Nonetheless, she did not stay away from descriptions completely in her stories. For instance, the novel, opens as follows:

Clusters of white roses present themselves through the blue gate and make the passersby stop for a moment, at least. Far off, Ponnamma lives in a hut on the open fields, and goes around looking for work, along with her daughters. She says one half of the houses on the street belongs to her.

At the very beginning, she establishes the specialty of the white rose. Ponnamma possesses a unique character. She is a little lamp that stays in the heart of the owner of the house with the blue gate forever. She is a maid with a courage to claim one half of the houses on the street as hers.

Narrator says Ponni “never tells truth” and continues to narrate the previous incidents that landed her in the present position.

As Ponni was about to open the gate to enter, the owner’s dog jumps on her, tears her sari and rips the skin from her bones. At the same time a car pulls in. A fair-skinned, heavy-set man in white clothes gets out of the car and offers her some money. Ponni refuses to take it. The man, out of generosity, tells the driver to take her to the doctor, adding, “If she dies, the sin gets to us.”

Eventually, she gets a job as a maid in the mansion. When the owner decides to spend some time in the Nilgiri hills for health reasons, he and his wife invite Ponni to go with them as a domestic help. She becomes a confidante for the entire family—the owner, his wife, their son and his wife. She listens to all their stories. They all show concern for her well being. When the owner attempts to make an inappropriate move on her, she cleverly escapes, saying, “You are like the Lord Rama [man of honor]”.

The owner in his final days reflects on his life; he cannot but think of Ponni as his mentor. He was convinced that he had seen several servants but there was no one like Ponni.

This novel, *neelam gatu ayyagaru*, is well-received by her readers. Subbalakshmi, however, considers another novel of hers, *teerpu* [Judgment] as her best work. It was serialized in a monthly magazine, *taruna*.

Subbalakshmi has firm convictions regarding the woman's position at home and in society. According to her, kitchen is the most important part of a house, and woman has a responsibility to take care of the home; she should never leave home, since there is no place for a woman where she can be safe.

She said at present [in 2009] she would write stories when she finds something interesting in the news, but does not send them to any magazine for publication. She was also writing her autobiography at the time. "This is not just a dull account, like 'we lived here or there,' but my experiences and memories," she said. She showed me 12 handwritten pages, she had written so far.

I asked her if she would fair copy them.

"No, I just write as it comes. Too lazy to rewrite," she laughed. Suddenly I felt nostalgic. Back in the fifties and sixties, that was the way we all had written stories. At the time, there were no computers, no editing, and no cut-and-paste facilities.

Subbalakshmi had an amazing memory. At the age of 84, she remembered in great detail all the themes and the incidents that had inspired her to write her stories.

In response to the question why one writes stories, she says, reminiscing her past, "For those who can be happy with what they have, the desire to have this or that is low. Yet, their hearts pine for something special to be recognized about them ... that her husband should recognize her identity." She recalls fondly the times when she and her husband would be sitting on the shores of the River Godavari, and he would ask about her opinion on the endings of his stories, and the satisfaction she felt because he respected her opinions—that, evidently, left an imprint on her mind forever,

The preface to her book reads beautifully. As spoke, she lost herself in the good memories. I felt the preface in itself is a piece of captivating creative piece.

Most of her stories are anchored around the lives of middle-class women, their struggles, fears, frustrations and their inability to extricate themselves from the tough situations they are stuck, and in the end settle for a compromise.

She pointed a few stories as her favorite stories. However, the one story that captured my attention is *aadavaalla pettelo prayaanam* [Traveling in a ladies' compartment]. This story seemed to have highlighted her personality as I found during our conversation in September 2009. As I stated earlier, she was full of zest. That is evident in this story. Therefore, I translated it and published on my site, thulika.net. Click here for [link](#).

[End]

(Published on thulika.net, June 2010.)

16. Bucchibabu. *Chivaraku Migiledi* [What is Left at the End]

Bucchibabu (Sivaraju Venkata Subba Rao) is a highly respected writer from the forties through sixties, in Andhra Pradesh, India.

Bucchibabu was born in Eluru, Andhra Pradesh, received his master's degree in English literature, and worked as lecturer in English in Anantapur and Vizag. Later he joined the All India Radio, Madras. He married Sivaraju Subbalakshmi, a renowned writer. At the time he was 19 and she was 12 years-old.

Bucchibabu is one of the top-ranking fiction writers, playwright and essayist in the history of Telugu literature. He is especially known for his style, which is two-fold--psychoanalytical approach and his poetic expression. He is the first author to introduce the psychoanalytical technique in Telugu fiction.

In his preface to his most famous novel, *chivaraku migiledi* [What is left at the End], author says that although he started to write it in 1943, its publication began only in 1946. It was published in *Navodaya* monthly in installments' for a period of 16 months. The novel has received praise from prominent writers like Achanta Saradadevi and Pilaka Ganapathi Sastry. In 1952, a publishing company Desi kavita mandali published it in book form. Later in 1970, EMESCO published it in two volumes.

In recent times, the composition and habits of readership and the methodology of critics have changed considerably. In the light of these changes, I would like to attempt to revisit this famous novel. Also, since I have introduced a few eminent writers on this site, and Bucchibabu belongs in that category, it is only appropriate I discuss his most famous novel, *chivaraku migiledi*.

Like several other writers of his time, Bucchibabu was acquainted with the romantic genre of the nineteenth century Britain, and the romantic element is built prominently into his narratives.

The novel, *chivaraku migiledi*, [What is left at the End] has received a permanent place in history of Telugu fiction as the first psychoanalytical novel. The author has stated some of his motivation to write this novel as follows:

1. Every writer gets complete satisfaction only after sharing his inner feelings with the public; only then, it [the work] ascertains its value and attains the status of social conscious work.

2. In writing this novel, he hopes that it helps the reader to obtain a perspective on life.

3. The protagonist's mother's tarnished character followed him as a shadow through out his life and polluted it. In confronting his mother's violation, he gains some values and this novel reflects some affinity with those values.

4. He also wonders whether readers could find if they could experience the writer's ability to depict his passion for knowledge with complete honesty.

5. Bertrand Russell's article, A Freeman's Worship, has transformed him [Bucchibabu] and his perception of life completely. The readers however must beware that he was not mindful of either Russell or the article in question at the time of writing this novel.

The EMESCO publishers stated in their introduction to the novel this novel illustrates in detail how children would lose the opportunity to grow and be ruined by the sins committed by their parents.

I have read this novel in my younger days, but I do not remember what was my impression at the time. Now, after reading it for a second time, I believe the technique of psychoanalysis and the poetic quality in the descriptions are the elements that brought enormous fame to this work. And, the author's postulations on life, as the author pointed out in his preface, also calls for further discussion.

Basically, the story revolves round the protagonist's psychoanalysis of other characters in the story. Dayanidhi, the protagonist, is presented as suffering from his mother's moral transgression. The transgression, however, is found to be only a rumor, but not true.

In his college days, Dayanidhi meets several women from his village and reflects on their personalities. He suffers because he heard rumors about his mother's character. He obtains his degree in medicine, moves to another city, Anantapur, to practice medicine. He strikes rich in Anantapur, not because of his professional excellence but by stumbling on a valuable diamond. However, he is not happy in Anantapur either. He feels regional prejudices and local politics put him at a disadvantage. At the end, he concludes he is with nothing in life, but memories.

Into this framework, other characters and events are woven. To me, Dayanidhi comes out as a self-ordained philosopher and the novel a record of his reflections. He goes on psychoanalyzing every one he comes across in his life from the start to finish. The characters came under his scrutiny are his mother, and the young women, Komali, Amrutham, Suseela, Indira, Nagamani, and Katyayini.

Dayanidhi admires his mother immensely. He even got her statue installed in his town. At the same time, however, he also blames her for all his problems in life. Dayanidhi does not know what actually happened, and so, neither the readers would know what happened. All that the readers could gather is only they are rumors as stated by Dayanidhi. The author states in his preface that the events that led to her immoral behavior were considered irrelevant and were left out. Readers may accept this explanation, yet they also may question why Dayanidhi, a rationalist, qualified psychoanalyst, and thinker, makes no effort, shows not even an interest in digging deeper and finding the truth. There is no desire on his part to understand her perspective, and no attempt to improve his life by using the new knowledge he could have acquired by such probing. It is hard to believe that a seeker of truth would jump to a conclusion regarding his mother's behavior based only on

the rumors he had heard. Dayanidhi seems to be anxious only to justify his own behavior: He lied because another woman made him do so, his life turned into hell because his mother behaved badly, and so on. Through out the novel, we see only his belief that he is not responsible for his life; it is always somebody else's fault.

Dayanidhi's relationship with other young women is also a bit confusing. He gets close to Amrutham because she resembles his mother in some ways. She invites him to visit her, and he goes to meet her. After having sex with her, he thinks his perception of the resemblance between his mother and Amrutham was correct. Actually, Amrutham came to him on her own. Both of them surrendered to a momentary excitement and had their wish fulfilled. It is not Amrutham's fault exclusively. Nevertheless, in Dayanidhi's mind, Amrutham crossed the line and committed the same sin his mother had committed. She became pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl. Strangely, it does not occur to him that his daughter may suffer the same fate as he and for the same reason, that is a mother's sin. Additionally, he goes crazy wondering whether the baby is his or not. He goes back to Amrutham's house, but does not have the courage to ask her. At this point, I would question his integrity.

Komali is another woman that was fascinating to him. In his opinion, Komali is not a woman but a part of nature, like the green grass and the sky. She invites him to meet her at the village well. She tells him she would light a lamp to let him know of her presence. Dayanidhi goes to the well and returns home. Nothing happened; he did not lay a finger on her. In his mind, Komali is like a flower; the petals may fall on touch; he cannot taint her piety. He puts a little money under the pillow and walks away. The truth is, he wants her, but does not love her. The desire is physical as opposed to the love which is anchored at the heart. In desire, there is selfishness; in love, there is sacrifice. Komali loves him but he only desires her--these are some of the thoughts he entertains. In essence, that is his belief, the outcome of his psychoanalysis.

After finishing novel, I found it hard to believe that Komali is that naive. Her approach appears to be more pragmatic than emotional. She shows worldly wisdom in assessing her situation and following the path that works best for her.

In his psychoanalysis, Dayanidhi often includes the women's physical attributes, which makes one wonder whether his passion for knowledge and understanding of them is pedantic or them as women. If the author's aim is to inform the readers only Dayanidhi's character through his physical descriptions of women and his opinions but not about the intrinsic values the characters cherish, I must admit the author succeeded.

Suseela is his uncle's daughter, a cross-cousin thus an eligible bride for him, considering how the relationships in Andhra Pradesh play out. Her father, however, refuses to the marriage proposal because of the rumors about his mother. Dayanidhi's father arranges his marriage with another woman, Indira. Indira's father performs the wedding but refuses to send her to live with Dayanidhi. When Dayanidhi visits her, she begs him to take her with him, but he remains passive. Once again, his behavior is far from that of

an educated, intelligent individual who would like to make a good life for his wife and himself.

He strongly believes all the women around him are aching for his company and fighting to get his attention, endlessly; but he makes no attempt to put his beliefs to the test and verify if there is a truth in his beliefs. According to his assessment, Komali is a part of nature, Suseela is a part of urban life, Amrutham is a down-to-earth woman, a kitchen cow, just like his mother; they are all hunting him and robbing him of his peace of mind. Actually, it is in the nature itself--women hunt men and take pleasure in the process.

Suseela and Amrutham get married, eventually, and start their lives with their husbands. Komali realizes that she cannot find happiness with Dayanidhi, goes with a zamindar, who ill-treats her. She leaves him and returns to Dayanidhi. Dayanidhi believes she came back to him because of her selfless devotion to him. To me, it seems, she understood Dayanidhi was incapable of violence, and for that reason, she would be safe with him. Whether she is naive or pretending to be naive in order to make her life comfortable for herself is a moot point. It is a bit surprising that Dayanidhi did not notice it.

Bucchibabu is known for his romantic style. That comes out strongly in the reflections of Dayanidhi on the women he came across in his life.

His description of Komali is:

Komali is a kind of person that should bask amid blades of grass, tend to them, caress them, and befriend the earth and the sky. That is her true place. Green grass is her natal home and the sky her in-law's. As she sits under the yew tree, the tree should shower her with the water they absorbed in the rainy season. The wind should thrust a shameless silly flower in her hair forcibly. Blades of grass, which tie up the red flowers together, glimmer in the sun because of the wind in harmony like a green silk sari, which is laid in the sun to dry; it dries up and wraps around Komali. She is the godliness which knows no confusing and desirable sadism and which has no hunger or thirst; she is the experience that knows no boundaries."

In his description of Amrutham again, we see the unusual metaphors, he is so famous for:

Amrutham is a woman that must be living amid stone relics. In a place like Hampi. Amid all the stones, broken sculptures, lonely stone pillars, she could be like a princess whose heart turned to stone for love, and the relics lay around as if a sigh or footsteps might shake them. Amrutham should be sitting amid the relics and smiling sadly. When she cries her heart out and reminisces the glory of past experiences, her tears roll down her breast drop by drop and turn into today's river and flow. Her sorrow turns into a river and drowns the body - that's wrong! She should not cry but laugh with a touch of sadness. On that day, her beauty completes its journey and turns her into stone. Amrutham, like tears spilled in one's sleep, turns into water when one moves any one of those relics with a sigh.

The descriptions highlight Bucchibabu's use of metaphors, which at times are confusing. He suggested it himself that readers should not think of

religion and blind faith while reading this novel. However, life is a conglomeration of pleasure and pain, good and bad, hardships, tears, and other mundane issues. If we read this novel from that perspective, Komali, Suseela and Amrutham are the only characters that are closer to the people we come across in real life. They seem to understand life in all its complexity, reorganize their lives to the extent possible, given their situations, and live the best they know how.

The entire novel is a record of Dayanidhi's psychoanalysis. It continues as a philosophical catechism, more like a compilation of quotations from previous philosophers or a list of adages. There is less action on the part of the protagonist and more cogitation and postulation. Author mentions in his foreword that it is a weakness or a characteristic present in every human being. I doubt that thought.

Life is a journey from birth to death. This novel ends with Dayanidhi's conclusion that life has no meaning, and that nothing is left at the end but memories. I am not sure what kind of memories he is referring to.

One of the virtues of this novel is Bucchibabu's style as mentioned earlier. Here we see a shade of romantic poetry which gained prominence in the forties in Andhra Pradesh. At times, even the story seems to "leave the ground and scuffle in thin air," as the saying goes

An important angle in this novel is the immoral behavior of his mother, or, rather, the rumors about it, and his strong conviction that his life was ruined because of those rumors. Secondly, his belief that mutual hatred between different societies, Sarkar districts and Rayalaseema, influences the individuals in question. Bucchibabu says society and those antagonistic powers render a person unable to receive love. As an extension of these opinions, we also find a suggestion that love is supra-mundane and loftier than everything else.

At this point, it is appropriate for me to mention another novel by another prominent writer, Lata. Two decades after the publication of *chivaraku migiledi*, Lata published her novel *migilindemiti*? [What is left?].

Bucchibabu wrote a letter to Lata commenting on her novel. Some of the opinions he expressed in his letter are worth noting. He said:

1. I finished reading the book, skipping some parts. I felt excitement, surprise and some sensuous [sic] feeling.

2. In the novel, the parts I found objectionable are: Vidya, a prostitute, commented that her mother was purer than a respectable family woman. I think this statement is unnecessary. Her [mother's] chastity was irrelevant to the story; Vidya was born to that kind of a mother, yet cherished a plausible moral perspective. In that sense, chastity strikes a "falsetto note".

He continues, "If somebody else narrated the impropriety Vidya thought of committing with Raja in the hospital, it would have been less sharp and more polite. I am also one of those who believe that a bit of impropriety and offensiveness in life and literature are necessary. However, it is going to take a very long time before our society gets to that level." (Anjaneya Sarma. *sahitilata*. p. 86.). In fact, the incident between Raja and Vidya (having

inappropriate sex) is no different from what Dayanidhi and Amrutham did in Bucchibabu's novel. In both instances, they got carried away and engaged in inappropriate sex without thinking. In both instances, the issue is the same, that of having inappropriate sex. Both the writers used the same language. That being the case, why did Bucchibabu make a point of commenting on it?

Possibly, Bucchibabu changed his opinion since there is a twenty-year lapse between the dates of publication of the two novels. Or, he (Bucchibabu) could argue the character of Dayanidhi is significantly different from that of Vidya. I think this is one of the instances where the argument that critics are biased towards male writers gains support.

Bucchibabu has discussed about love in Lata's novel at length also but I could not follow his argument. Therefore, I will stay away from that subject. There is one point however that is a bit strange to me. He suggested that if the novel was written in second person instead of first person, it would have received a kind of dignity and harmony. I am not sure if it is possible to write a novel in second person,

Chivaraku migileedi is narrated in third person. However since it is a narrative of the protagonist's psychology, it reads like a first person narration. I agree that there are advantages in writing a narrative in the first person. However, when we study the two novels in juxtaposition, I see no justification for this kind of grammar applications.

In short, there is no correlation between what Bucchibabu achieved as a writer and the opinions he expressed as a knowledgeable reader.

Bucchibabu says the purpose of literature is to provoke readers into thinking. After I finished reading the novel, *chivaraku migileedi*, I had to think hard about the message in the novel.

In the past, Telugu writers created characters that were supposed to be models for the next generation readers. In modern times, the protagonists are created based on common man and on democratic principles. I have no problem with that. However, I am not sure I would suggest this protagonist is the model for general populace. I could be wrong but the first thoughts that came to my mind are: Is he saying that the mode of thinking in men is this narrow? Among men, there may be some who think like Dayanidhi. If one sits around and continues to analyze life in this fashion, can a person accomplish anything in life? Or, is that what Bucchibabu wants us to understand, that we need action-oriented individuals.

Among his essays, there is one essay, "nannu marchina pustakam" [the book that has changed me] that became a tremendous success. In the essay, he explains how Bertrand Russell's article, "A Free Man's Worship," changed his perspective on life. He read this article while he was in college and was grappling with fundamental issues like what is the meaning of life and what is the relationship between man and god. In his essay, he explains how he has moved away from the preconceived religious notions such as "I am a sinner, I sinned and therefore I will go to hell," and learned to appreciate the beauty of life. Despite his claim that this novel has nothing to do with Russell's article, some of the words spoken by Dayanidhi seem to be

very close to Russell's philosophy. This shows only the extent of the influence of Russell's writings on Bucchibabu.

Although my critique is somewhat harsh, that by no means undercuts Bucchibabu's place in Telugu literature. This is just an attempt to present one more perspective, a different approach, and raise a few more questions, partly because I am not knowledgeable in psychoanalysis.

He has written several short stories, novels, radio plays and critical essays. His paintings also are well received. Among his other works that received critical acclaim are *nirantara trayam* (Endless triad), *atma vanchana* (Self-delusion, a play), *nannu gurinchi katha rayavuu?* (Won't you write a story about me?). He has won Sahitya akademi award for his critical study on Shakespeare.

As stated at the outset, this novel has a permanent place in the history of Telugu fiction as an experimental work. In my opinion, the purpose of an experiment is to find a specified result. After that, we do not repeat the same experiment. This novel caught my attention as an experiment. Usually, I will read a novel again if it fascinates me. I am afraid I will not read this for a second time. In fairness to the author and readers, I must admit there are plenty of Telugu readers who swear by this book.

(End)

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17. Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao. “Kantham and I”

Humor does not lend itself to crosscultural translation easily. However, I decided to give some excerpts from the story, “Kantham and I.”

Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao developed a unique style in portraying the minor squabbles between a husband and his wife in a charming manner. Readers enjoy the dialogues thoroughly, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing annoying, but just enjoyable. Most of this series about a teacher and his wife, narrated in first person. The excerpts are indented.

The story opens with a monologue of Kantham’s husband, Venkata Rao, expressing his annoyance with his wife, Kantham. He was upset since Kantham laughed at him the night before, and, for that reason, decided not to eat at home; he believed that would be a good way of punishing her.

“You can give me a thousand reasons why I should eat at home, but I will not eat at home today. Forget the food, I will not even drink a glass of water here. You are way out of line. How long do you think I can put up with your misconduct? I am in no mood to eat at home today. I swear I will go to the hotel.”

“Please, forgive me. What I did say, anyways?”

“I don’t even want to hear the word, “forgive.” I can take any number of insults in the privacy of our home but not in front of my friends?” I said.

The humiliation I suffered last night is fresh on my mind. Seething at my heart, I went to the hotel. I have taken all the insults she poured on me until now, but how long can I put up with her misconduct? Can you say I’m being irrational?

You might say “Why bicker with Kantham, just forget it.” How can I? Not just not showing me the respect I deserve as her husband, she is also calling me by name, Venkata Rao in a low voice.

How stupid is that? She thought I could not hear her. I was willing to let go of it but then she burst into a big laugh, looking at my turban.

That is the real issue. She called him by name and laughed at his unsuccessful attempt to wear a turban properly. His refusal to eat at home sets the stage, and the description of his struggle to wrap the turban around his head is hilarious.

I never made the mistake of wearing a turban during my student days. I started it the custom, out of necessity, after I entered the teaching profession. It never turns out right for me. Sometimes it looks like a turban sitting on the top of a pestle, or turns into the headgear of a Tamilian. I take a lot of trouble and try to wrap it around my head, but it assumes the form of a snake charmer’s turban. In Greek mythology, there was a cowherd, who could predict future. There was, however, a caveat. If anybody tries to capture him, he would transform into a petrifying figure and scares them away. But, if that person remains calm, and fearless, the cowherd returns to his normal figure and predicts the future for that person. I suspect that my turban is a reincarnation of that cowherd. It keeps taking any and every form except its natural form as a school teacher’s turban.

There I was struggling to wrap it around my head correctly, and she, instead of helping me, was standing by the door and laughing at me. You tell me how should I feel?

We can see why it was amusing to Kantham. One person's misery is funny for another person. That is human nature. It is amusing how the author ties in a cowherd from Greek mythology to his own turban problem. His reference to a Tamilian's headgear seems a little far-fetched. There is, however, one difference. The author used a different word, *talagudda*, a piece of cloth worn on one's head as opposed to *talapaga*, a stylish turban, a sign of one's sophistication. Possibly, it was a reference to the Tamilian, a server, who was introduced later in the story.

The story was written in the pre-Independence era. In those days teachers were required to wear a turban, even when they wear a three-piece suit. Apparently, that was not a viable experience for all teachers.

The next episode is a comment on women's lack of interest in acquiring knowledge and keeping abreast of current events. One day, the husband rushes home with the latest issue of a highly respected literary magazine, *parishat patrika*, zealously.

I was hoping Kantham would read the magazine and become knowledgeable in current matters. I said, "Here is *parishat patrika*. Read it. It has plenty of information." She took it, and, as soon as I turned my back, used it to cover the soup dish. I came back, noticed it and was sad. That cracked her up again. What can I say?

Historically, it was the time when the women's education movement reached its peak, and in several families, men encouraged women to learn to read and write. Possibly men felt that women had not been responsive to the movement with the same zeal as men.

Another story, "strividya" [women's education] by Bhandaru Acchamamba written in 1887 also addresses the same issue in a serious note, though. Maybe, at the time, women were pragmatic in their approach and were prone to acquire the necessary skills only when there was a good reason for doing so. It is also possible that, from the perspective of women, the current education system is not addressing the women's issues in a meaningful way, and thus, fails to capture women's attention.

Despite Kantham's apparent lack of interest in the day's events, Venkata Rao starts to read the journal aloud. Kantham stops him, saying the text was not in Telugu. She said, "Wait, that's not Telugu; it sounds more like a Tamil women's song. I know a few Telugu women's songs. You don't have to read them to me."

Venkata Rao tries his level best to explain that it was not a Tamil song, but Kantham was not convinced. He had no choice but to laugh along with her. Venkata Rao comes to the conclusion he had been ridiculed one too many times, and that he could not take it anymore. He was itching to prove that he was right for once, at least, and wanted to watch her lose for a change. He abides his time.

One day Venkata Rao was seriously engrossed in a matter relating to the exams at school. Kantham came in.

“Emandi!” [She called his attention]

“Hum.”

“Hear me? I’ve a question.”

“Huh, now? What?”

“Why don’t you listen to me?”

“I’m busy. What’s it anyways?”

“Just tell me what do you want me to do?”

“About what? Don’t you see I’m very busy?”

“You yell at me like that, what can I do? All I want to know is whether I should make okra curry or soup? Or, just make soup, and forget the okra. Or, forget both, and make lentil chutney with cumin?”

I was upset with her at that moment. I moved the books to the side and thought for a second. I was not sure what to say. “If you skip the okra soup, what’s the curry going to be?” I asked her.

“If I don’t make okra soup, you will have okra curry,” Kantham said.

Oh, god. What a mess. I chased her away, saying, “That’s all very confusing to me. Take it to your brother, have it converted into a ‘simple equation’, and bring it back to me.” I was elated I won the first round.

He basks in his success, but that turns out to be a short one. He faced with another loss the same evening.

Kantham coughs. He gives her a piece of an herbal root and tells her to keep it in her mouth. Here is a rough translation of the dialogue between husband and wife:

“Here, tuck it inside your cheek. It cures your cough,” he said.

“I don’t want it.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like the taste of it.”

“What taste? It’s a medication. Just take it.”

“I’m telling you, I don’t want it.”

“No, I won’t let you not have it. If you don’t take it, how do you think you can get rid of your cough? You and I both will be sleepless all night.”

“I won’t.”

“Don’t you give me the lip. Take it,” I shouted.

“Do I have to?”

“Yes, you have to. Or else, I will be very angry. Doesn’t a man have that much right over his woman?” I said harshly.

That got to her, it seems. She was afraid that I would be upset. She took the root.

This sounds harsh. Would a man, who is so stuck in his role as a “man”, verbalize the sentiment in so many words? I think the author was being sarcastic, and he aimed it at men who are “full of themselves”.

Secondly, the author says Venkata Rao was elated because he made his wife do what he wanted her to do; he recalled his grandfather's words, that a man should keep his wife in line one way or another. He was, however, confused when he saw Kantham smile. "Why she is smiling?"

Here is why. He goes to her bedside and looks at her with scrutiny. Kantham lay on her bed with the root holding next to her cheek.

"How could you be so stupid?" I asked.

"You said 'tuck it next to your cheek'."

He did not say whether it should be tucked in from inside or outside! Just a play upon words. She is not stupid, just playing him. He is humiliated once again. And then, comes the final blow when one of his friends comes to visit him. The couple invite him to stay for dinner. At the dinner, Venkata Rao tries to impress his friend by making excuses for not serving a huge banquet.

The ship did not arrive at the port; there were no fresh potatoes in the market. All the other vegetables were rotten. There was a snake gourd in the kitchen, but it is quite sometime since it is picked. I am sure it has gone bad. I am afraid you may get sick, if we served it to you. You may think that this rice and chutney we served to you is a meal for a recuperating patient, but trust me, we are doing you a favor and protecting your health. ... The chutney is made with Gongura from Guntur, the place known for its Gongura fields in the entire world. ..."

Kantham was in the kitchen. She sneaked in as if she had nothing better to do, and said, "When did we get Gongura from Guntur?"

My friend was suspicious about my ramblings, and now he was convinced that I was bluffing. He burst into a big laugh.

Venkata Rao tries to bluff his way out one more time. "Did your sister not bring it from Guntur?". And Kantham says, "Yes, I forgot", but her tone sounds more like a "No." That sends them into a sidesplitting laugh. Venkata Rao has no other way out and so joins them. That is when he decided not to eat at home. He goes to a hotel run by a Tamilian. The author once again makes fun of the Telugu language spoken by Tamilians. Most of the words are Telugu words with different meanings. Probably, a rough translation reads like this.

"Is food served here?"

"Yes, [we] drop it."

"All right, drop it then."

"Buy a ticket first."

I bought the ticket and sat down in front of a leaf plate.

"Should I drop a morsel?" he said.

I was ticked off. What does he mean by 'drop a morsel'? Am I an invalid or what? Is he going to give me a measly morsel like I can't digest a full meal? As I was racking my brains for answers, he came in and dropped two morsels of rice on my plate, literally. The first serving was barely enough to eat with the chutney. I shouted again, "Rice." He held two morsels close to my face, and asked, "May I toss all this on your plate?"

“Yes, toss the entire lump and bring three more servings. You are killing me,” I said.

After that, he brought the ghee. It is true, he has a ghee dish in his hand, that is all I can vouch for. Beyond that, God only knows whether there is ghee in the dish or not. Probably it is easy to discover what is at the bottom of the Bay of Bengal, but no one can tell what is at the bottom of that dish. ... Into the dish, he dipped a ladle with a long handle and pulled out with extraordinary skill, lifted it nearly a mile long over my head, and tilted it. For a second, I was under the delusion that something would drop into my plate, like the Ganges from the top of the Himalaya mountain. That did not happen.

The server goes through similar gestures while serving the other items. Venkata Rao returns home, with a half-empty stomach. He tells himself it served him right.

At home, he finds Kantham lying on the floor in the kitchen with her head on a sitting plank. She sees him and gets up. Venkata Rao could see remorse all over her face.

“Did you eat?” he asks.

“No. How can I, without you?” Kantham says.

“What does it matter if I am not home. You could eat as usual?”

“My heart will not allow me to.”

“All right. Eat now.”

“I won’t unless you eat too.”

“Maybe I ate at the hotel. What is it to you?”

“Then I will wait until the meals at night.”

That is enough to let me know how strong her love for me is. At the hotel, I had only half a meal. So, I told her to serve for me too. I persuaded her to sit down with me and serve for both us. We both enjoyed a hearty meal together.

The author makes his point with the last line. Couples agree, disagree, fight and make up. Nevertheless, there is an interesting twist at the end in regard to the husband’s attitude. He acts like he was doing her a favor; he could not admit that he did not have enough to eat at the hotel, and that he was still hungry!

One question I have is: Did Kantham guess as to what could have happened at the hotel and decide to play along – a pragmatic approach to marital bliss? In the final analysis, the entire story appears to be about taking a jab at the attitudes of men and women in the nineteen forties decade.

I had to quote their conversations at length, but I am not sure the translations so good as in Telugu. I hope readers will get an idea of the Telugu humor.

[End]

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18. Telugu Humor

Sometimes I try to impress my daughter, an American-born and raised, with our Telugu humor. I tell her a joke and she just giggles. I am not sure whether she got it or not. So, I ask her again, "Are you laughing because you found it funny or because I thought it was funny?" She narrows her eyes, looks at me, and says, "Both."

Humor in Telugu homes is distinctly different from the western humor. In recent times, we seem to have lost a bit of our funny bone due to modern sensibilities of being polite. While in the west, people continue it on the stage and screen like in the stand up comedy and sitcoms, it is all pervasive in Telugu homes, it used to be so, at least, in the past. I chose three writers I grew up with to make my case. I introduced one writer, Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao, in the previous article. The other who made big waves are Bhanumati Ramakrishna and Mullapudi Venkataramana.

Bhanumati, apart from her unparalleled stature in the movie industry, made her mark as a humor writer. To my knowledge, she is the first female writer to mix humor with everyday events at home. She has written a few stories of serious nature also, but it is her mother-in-law character that became the hallmark of her writings. Her mother-in-law character is unique and hilarious. It may sound illogical but humor fiction is rarely taken seriously. More often than not, the message is lost between the laughs. Bhanumati's stories are one such example. The celebrated author did more than just create a unique character. Her mother-in-law stories reflect her belief in tradition and family values equally. Her stories are brimming with her belief in god, astrology, and family values.

Bhanumati draws her humor primarily from situations at home and the human idiosyncrasies; and, she never misses a chance to take a jab at our customs and beliefs. That is not, however, to be interpreted as disrespect toward tradition. Bhanumati's talent in creating humorous situations speaks of her keen eye for the incongruities in human behavior. One good example is in her Attagaru, avakaaya (Attagaru and pickles). In general, Attagaru does not let anyone see her food plate; she sits on the floor with her back to the rest of the world and facing the wall. "The only way one could know what she was eating was to jump out of the wall in front of her, like Lord Narasimha," the author comments. For those who are not familiar with the reference, Lord Narasimha was one of the ten incarnations; he jumped out of a pillar to prove his existence to a non-believer, a demon king Hiranyaksha. The comparison is a stretch, but the point is the overextended shield her mother-in-law would create for her food in the name of *madi*--a custom in Brahmin families.

And then, the narrator goes on to describe how the family members will know of what she's eating; that is when she moves the pickles jar. As she puts it: "The smells of her pickles extended beyond the kitchen walls and into the living room. One day, my husband sat down to eat along with Attagaru. She moved the pickles jar, the smell from the pickles jar exploded and filled the entire house."

Her husband blames it on his wife and her incompetence as a housewife.

“Huh! What's that smell? Are the oranges gone bad? Maybe not, uh, what a stench! May be the maid did not clean the area after washing the dishes,” he started yelling. Then he turned to me and said with a grimace, “Didn't you notice that? What do you do all day sitting at home? Can't you take care of the cleanliness, at least?” I was nearly dead by the time I had finished explaining to him that he was wrong in his assumption about the smell. (Bhanumati kathanikalu).

Taken out of context, some women would be ruffled by his husband's comment. In Bhanumati's story, the narrator is having the last laugh; readers may even see a wink and a nod from her husband. Let's not forget that he was ridiculing his mother's pickles.

The incongruities in our actions and the eccentricities in human nature are great stuff to create humor. And, our beliefs and gods are no exception for a good laugh as you'll see in some of the irreverent comments in her stories. A few common phrases such as *apachaaram* [sacrilege] are used sometimes seriously and, at other times, flippantly to make fun of those who use them seriously. Bhanumati makes the best use of this practice. For instance, "touching lightly on one's own cheeks" is a way of expressing regrets (*lempalu vesukonu*, *lempalesukonu*) . In other words, even gods and the sanctity surrounding gods are no exception in the realm of humor. Attagaru refers to Lord Venkateswara as Venkanna (a nickname) and compares him to a neighbor in his physical appearance and make up.

Bhanumati uses laughter itself as core theme in two stories, which are serious in nature. In two stories, “jeevitamlo agaathaalu” [deep dark holes in life] and “telivitetala viluvalu” [value of intelligence], the protagonists, Rambabu and Rao, laugh incessantly, much to the dismay of the narrator.

In the first story, “jeevitamlo agaathaalu,” the reader comes to know at the end that Rambabu was laughing to hide his pain. His wife was a hysteria patient and he could do nothing about it. In the second story, Rao laughs non-stop, but in this story, he really has no reason to laugh; just a habit. Additionally, the narrator's husband and Rao call each other "fool" and neither is offended by this name calling. The story ends with the narrator commenting, "I stood there watching those two fools."

Bhanumati's respect for tradition is evident in her use of the proper names. In our homes, people are often referred to by relational terminology--somebody's son, somebody's daughter-in-law, and somebody's daughter-in-law's daughter-in-law; and this is true even when two persons are cousins, two or three times removed.

In our culture, laughing at oneself is also normal, and Bhanumati does not mind laughing at herself. In her story, “pedda aakaaraalu, chinna vikaaraalu” [hefty personalities and small eccentricities], she gives a hilarious description of her fear of lizards. The narrative goes like this:

Usually, those who are not scared of lizards make fun of those who are scared of them. You know the popular proverb, “Cat is having the time of his life while the rat is running for his life!”

I am one of those rats. ... Lizard is my enemy for life. I will not walk into a room if there is a lizard on the wall. If I have to, I will tell one of the servants to remove it, and then, I enter the room slowly watching every nook and corner to make sure that it is gone. Under unavoidable circumstances, I will enter the room cautiously, as if I was walking into a lion's cage, tiptoeing around, and watching its every move. We two move around like two planets in opposite directions. No matter how far I am from it, my eyes spot its presence instantaneously. Then my body moves like a robot in the opposite direction.

On a final note, Bhanumati has captured a huge readership with her easygoing style and by teaching us to laugh without reservations.

Humor has its time and place. What's funny for us Telugu people may not be funny for people in other cultures. Remember the popular saying in America? If someone slips and falls, it is funny, but when you slip and fall, it is a tragedy. That is not the case in Telugu homes, at least, not in the fifties and sixties. Later, however, the Telugu people also have acquired the modern form of sophistication.

In the 1950s and 60s, the three stalwarts in Telugu humor writing, namely, Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao, Mullapudi Venkataramana and Bhanumati Ramakrishna were the writers I grew up with. Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao was already an established writer by then and Mullapudi Venkataramana was making his name in the early fifties. Chronologically, Bhanumati Ramakrishna was a contemporary of Venkataramana but, started writing fiction a little later.

All the three writers have showcased the laughter in Telugu homes as never before.

Bhanumati mentioned that she was inspired by Narasimha Rao's *Kantham kathalu* (Stories of Kantham), published in 1944. She also mentioned that Mullapudi Venkataramana encouraged her. Interestingly, Mullapudi Venkataramana dedicated his anthology of short stories, *Radha and Gopalam* (1965), to Bhanumati. Bhanumati published her anthology, *Attagari Kathalu*, in 1966.

Regarding the themes, I am not sure if Narasimha Rao had written about topics other than the familial relationships. Bhanumati wrote a few stories depicting tragic situations in life. Mullapudi Venkataramana has written about almost every aspect - politics, society, entertainment (movies), children, and also critiques.

I chose to discuss the three stories based on family values and domestic bliss as depicted by the three writers.

Like any other custom or tradition, humor in a given culture develops from its own environment. In that, demographics do play a huge role. When several members of a family - aged parents, sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren - are thrown in together under one roof, a good sense of humor becomes a major part of the skills for coexistence, peaceful or not. In Telugu homes, we tease each other, poke fun at each other, and call each other names; and at the end of the day, all's well; no offense intended, none taken.

Secondly, with the progress of civilization, the code of conduct has put a rigid barrier between people and clouded our sense of humor to a certain degree, I think. But if one wants to have good hearty laugh, one must be prepared to laugh and be laughed at with equal ease. That's a prerequisite to foster one's sense of humor. These stories illustrate this point.

In "Nenu, Kantham" (Kantham and I), the couple appear to be mature, although the husband does act immature at times. Most of the humor in this story is anchored in the husband's desperate attempt to punish his wife by eating out.

In "[Radha's Debt](#)," the couple, Radha and Gopalam, are newlyweds, and between the two, Radha is the level-headed; Gopalam acts like a juvenile, "act" is the keyword though. Gopalam's insistence that Radha owed him for the expenses he had incurred to get attention prior to marriage is humorous in itself.

In "Attaa-Kodaleeyam," (A story of a Mother-in-law and her Daughter-in-law), the story is woven with Attagaru (mother-in-law) as the main character and Kodalu (daughter-in-law) as her sidekick, if you will. Attagaru is a charming, naive, traditional woman who constantly creates difficult situations for herself, and leaves it to Kodalu, to resolve. Kodalu is respectful toward her Mother-in-law and raises to the occasion dutifully. The charming part is she does not step in until and unless her service as a mediator or arbitrator is needed. She appears to be enjoying a private joke of her own in the process. She never talks back, never offers to take matters into her own hand unless and until it becomes absolutely necessary.

Mullapudi Venkataramana created remarkable great stories with humorous instances using debt as the core theme in several stories, including a series, *runaananda lahari*, in which his play upon words is hilarious. In the story, "Radha's Debt," Gopalam surprises his wife by asking her to pay back a "loan". In reality, it was not a loan; he was asking her repay the money he had spent in order to get her attention before they were married. Since it was not a loan, she, first, expresses surprise and then she turned around and proves he owed her, too. The theme is frivolous on the surface. To me, the story reflects the amicable relationship between the two of them.

While in "Kantham and I," the narrator was depicted as being an egotist, conscious of his status as a husband, in "Radha and Gopalam," the husband and his wife behave like friends, teasing each other for the fun of it.

The incongruities in our actions and the eccentricities in human nature are great stuff to create humor. And, our beliefs and gods are no exception for a good laugh as you stated earlier in some of the irreverent comments made in Bhanumati's story.

Humor in the Kantham's story comes from everyday events and the interaction between a husband and his wife. They do care about each other, yet the husband could not take the apparent disrespect from his wife. Possibly, Narasimha Rao, the author, was showing how little things can escalate to serious issues, if one does not have a sense of humor.

Bhanumati also, like Narasimha Rao, creates hilarious scenes from everyday life; but, unlike Narasimha Rao, she narrates them while remaining

complacent. Secondly, unlike the narrator in Kantham stories, the narrator in Attagaru stories stays in control. We do not see her laughing but on rare occasions, the "I" of these stories seem to enjoy a private joke of her own while playing the innocent bystander.

A brief note on the names is in order here. Proper names are often abbreviated. More importantly, the relational terminology is used in place of proper names, which could be confusing for non-native speakers, or when the same term is used with reference to more than one person.

For instance, in Attaa-Kodaleeyam there were three daughters-in-law and a son (the original Attagaru's son and the husband of the narrator who is also Kodalu). Mother refers to him as *abbayi* (by attagaru), meaning son, and the narrator refers to him as *maavaaru* (meaning 'my husband' but his real name was never given in the story. In fact, in this particular story, all the characters were referred to only in relation to each other, even when they were cousins two or three times removed. This usage of relational terminology in the case of distant relatives could be a way of bringing them together and of reinforcing family values. For the purpose of clarification in this discussion, I decided to leave Attagaru as is, she being the protagonist. The story is narrated in first person by Kodalu (daughter-in-law) and, I used Kodalu as a proper name for her. Her co-daughter-in-law (todikodalu) and her daughter-in-law (kodalu of todikodalu) also appear in this story. In fact, Bhanumati makes fun of this relational terminology in another story, "vavi varasalu".

Another angle to the proper names, as a form of address, is "calling each other names". Bhanumati takes it to a new level in her story, "telivitetala viluva" [Value of Intelligence]. The title seem to be a little off base. The core theme is the form of address as used by two friends, (narrator's husband and his friend, Rao) to address each other as 'fool' and laugh at each other. Rao's son-in-law gets involved in a scooter accident and Rao tells the narrator about the accident, laughing boisterously, and again when the narrator and her husband go to the hospital to visit the son-in-law, the two friends talk about the accident, laughing and calling each other, "fool". The narrator stands there, "watching the two fools", as puts it.

In "Radha-Gopalam," the author gives the characters usual proper names. Additionally, he uses a few perfectly legitimate proper names like Ramanatham or Gurunatham as punch lines.

Second person singular pronoun has two forms in Telugu, *meeru* and *nuvvu*. Within a family, seniors who are respected (father, grandfather, for instance) are addressed as 'meeru'. This is not a hard and fast rule though. Kodalu always addresses Attagaru as 'meeru' and Attagaru addresses Kodalu as 'nuvvu'. Wife addresses husband as 'meeru' and husband addresses wife as 'nuvvu'. This protocol is maintained in the stories of the fifties and sixties. The peculiar part however is, a kodalu (the co-daughter-in-law in Attaa - Kodaleeyam) or a wife (in Radha - Gopalam) may address the other person as 'meeru' and still engage in a lively bickering and pour insults on each other, and thus adding one more shade of humor to it.

Regarding technique, the three stories present ordinary events in a lighter vein. In Kantham story, the narrative is tight. It opens with a scene illustrating a husband's frustration about his wife's behavior. He refuses to eat at home to punish her; and it turns out to be a punishment for him. He acts like he has the upper hand. It is not easy to create humor in such a negative atmosphere. The story is told in a straight forward manner, no unexpected twists and no incident of any shock value. Narasimha Rao succeeds in delivering a funny story, that is the strength of an established humor writer.

In the Mother-in-law story, there is more than one plot. The story opens with a proposed pilgrimage to Tirupati by car, and as usual, the two main characters--mother-in-law and daughter-in-law--are thrown in together to the exclusion of the son/husband. The second plot includes a second daughter-in-law (todikodalalu. Two wives of two brothers are todikodalllu). I think Bhanumati did this on purpose.

A little explanation is necessary here. In general, the relationship between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law is depicted as confrontational. But, in all her stories under the running title, "Attagari kathalu" [Stories of Attagaru], the relationship, is congenial. They never fight. She may have created this second daughter-in-law to reflect another side, a more common notion of it, a kind of love-hate relationship. And then, there is one more subplot, the arranged marriage. Typically, it was arranged by the mother-in-law and the second daughter-in-law between their heated arguments and boisterous laughter. The narrator however does not lose touch with reality. The reality is "The two women are going to meet like two rival planets on a combat zone in the month of magham" (11th month in lunar calendar). In a way, the three plots make the story less tight, compared to the Kantham story, but entertaining all the same.

The story is, as indicated by the title, about a relationship between Atta and Kodalalu. The incidents follow in a lighter vein. The story of Radha and Gopalam takes this idea of a theme narrated in a lighter vein further. In fact, it is a story about sweet nothings. The underlying message is the secret of marital bliss. As long as a couple can laugh together and at each other without malice, there is no cause for complaint in a marriage. All's well that ends well. Most of the humor in this story, unlike the other two, comes from its language and the adolescent behavior of the couple.

[End]

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19. The Image of Telugu Women Writers

(Paper presented at the 12th the annual conference on South Asia on November 4, 1985, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI)

In the past 3 decades fiction has become predominantly a prominent form of communication. In writing such fiction, women literally stole the show. As a result, a peculiar image of women, contradictory to the popular notion of women in general and writers in particular, emerged. The sensation they have created through their writings and their personalities was very close to the status of movie stars.

From my study of various sources such as magazines and interviews, I could discern three distinct areas that contributed to one fairly comprehensive image of the female writers in Andhra Pradesh.

To begin with, there is a general impression, in an abstract sense, of writers in cartoons, quips and jokes.

For instance, here is a joke from a popular magazine:

“The older sister writes a novel, and younger sister write a short story, naturally.”

Another joke:

“Why the producers choose women’s novels to make movies?”

“Maybe they think women’s novels are dainty.”

Many cartoons carry a comment that women writers are too naive, ignorant, egotistical, hopelessly lacking in the knowledge of writing techniques and domineering.

Here are some cartoons reflecting such attitudes:

Publisher: Madam, for some reason, your novel did not sell well this time.

Female writer: Of course, it wouldn’t. I told you to print my name on each page; you didn’t listen.

(Note. Although it was meant to be a joke on women writers’ ego, I found writer’s on each page in the novels of male writers. It seems the joke is on the cartoonist and the magazine editors.)

Another cartoon implies either women do not read literature or steal freely the works of other male writers.

Here it is:

Man: What did you write, madam?

Writer: *Ramayana kalpavruksham*.

Man: Do you know who is Viswanatha Satyanarayana?

Writer: That does not surprise me. They asked me the same question when I said I wrote *veyi padagalu*.

Viswanatha Satyanarayana was a well-known writer and the books mentioned above were his works. There is hardly a Telugu reader who would not know this fact.

Some cartoons depict women writers as overzealous with their newly acquired skill.

One such cartoon shows a floor design in the front yard of a home with an affidavit next to it saying, “This design is my own; not a copy or adaptation of anybody else’s.”

A slightly different, but common views are obvious in the following cartoons.

A maternity ward nurse tells a father to be: Your wife has delivered two women writers.

A concerned mother to a teacher: My daughter need not pass exams, and seek jobs. Just teach her the alphabet. She will make a living by writing novels.

Some cartoons indicated that men were behind women’s success. For instance, one male editor tells another, “So long as we (men) are editors, women writers flourish. If women become editors, they will not let other women to become famous. Women are jealous, you know.”

In Andhra Pradesh, it is common for male writers to use female pseudonyms to get published. The following cartoon stresses two points; 1. Female names sell; and, 2. Women cannot write without the help of men.

I have to refer to the scandals surrounding one famous writer, Lata. Lata wrote a short novel called *gali padagalu, neeti budagalu* [[Kites and Water Bubbles](#).] depicting the horrendous lives of prostitutes in gory detail, for the first time in the history of Telugu fiction. Unlike other writers who either extolled the virtues of prostitutes’ lives or depicted them as home-wreckers, Lata depicted the horrific realities of their lives. For that, she had to face a great deal of adverse criticism and derogatory comments on her private life. In a way, this kind of criticism and unsupported scandals about women writers are not uncommon in our literature.

Coming back to men writing for women, here is a joke:

A friend to another, “Instead of whining the magazines are pouring praise on your wife, why don’t you stop sending your novels in her name?”

The editors of weekly and monthly magazines and publishers of novels belong in a different category. The opinions they express are also noteworthy. Mostly, they work, strictly, with writers on a business basis.

I have interviewed editors of two highly popular weekly magazines, *Andhra Jyothi* and *Andhra Prabha* with a weekly circulation of 100,000 and 80,000, respectively. Both of them said, in sheer numbers men outnumber women but, women writers contribute heavily to increasing the readership.

in 1976, when Andhra Pradesh Academy announced awards, excluding an award for fiction, Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma, editor of *Andhra Jyothi* weekly, published a letter condemning the decision. In his letter, he listed a

few novels by women writers as worthy of the said award, considering the awards that had been given in the previous years. The letter, however, triggered a different kind of response from readers. Heated discussion followed for the next three months from readers, some supporting women writers and others deriding them. What is interesting is, two stalwarts in the field of criticism, Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao and Mahidhara Rammohana Rao took a stand and argued objectively. Kutumba Rao argued writing should not be judged on the basis of author's gender. Rammohana Rao stated critics should give credit to the women writers for what they had achieved so far. Some readers commented women write nothing but trash containing cheap sentiments and sweet dreams.

When I mention women writers and magazine editors in the same breath, there is one name that pops up invariably; that is, Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma, editor of *Andhra Jyothi* weekly. Previously, he had written articles ridiculing the fiction by women writers. At the same time, he also was seeking contributions from them. He also was instrumental in publishing a host of cartoons ridiculing women's writing, as I mentioned earlier. Some of them appeared to be commissioned works. For instance, the daily newspaper by the same name, *Andhra Jyothi*, published the following cartoon next to a feature article on Herold Robbins.

The title of the feature reads, "The books that sold 5 million copies." Under the title, a woman's face appears with a statement, "At the rate of one thousand copies per novel, how many novels should I write to sell five million copies?"

Another development in this rash of cartoons was to create a cartoon with characters from the serial novel that was running. A highly controversial novel, *Janaki Vimukti*, by a female writer drew that kind of attention. It was serialized in the magazine, *Andhra Jyothi*. The novel became famous for its theme--male domination, submissive nature of women, Marxist ideology, etc. I was told, Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma discontinued its publication, claiming readers were getting bored by the lengthy discourses on Marxism. While the serial was being published, however, it included cartoons, based on the storyline and using the same characters.

For example, a girl says, "So, what happened to the marriage proposal you mentioned yesterday?"

The other girl replies, "Well, everything was fine until my father learned that the boy's name was Venkata Rao. Now he is very worried."

The husband's name in *Janaki vimukti* was Venkata Rao. He was depicted as being chauvinistic and pig-headed. Some readers interpreted it as a sign of the writer's Marxist ideology bordering on fanaticism. Even a new proverb was coined, which stated, "Like going on a honeymoon with Ranganayakamma's [author of *Janaki vimukti*] novel."

Here is another cartoon on the novel, even more harsh.

"True, Auntie Vimala, hostility does exist between me and my husband. However, it must reach a climax before I can determine whether it is sympathetic or antagonistic. In recent days, I am beginning to perceive it as a

conflict between two individuals in a class struggle rather than individuals at war owing to personal differences.”

This kind of strained rhetoric sounds hollow in Telugu homes and amounts to parody.

The same editor, Mr. Sarma, brought out a special issue of *Andhra Jyothi* in January 1975 in celebration of Sankranti festivities, with photos of all the female contributors in the issue and called it “bommala koluvu”. The term, “bommala koluvu,” refers to another festival during Dasara celebration, where dolls are arranged in a charming display. Apparently, some women took it as offensive.

During my interviews with publishers, the stats I received were staggering. I was told female writers were paid incredibly higher than male writers. They were also in a position to bargain and set their own terms. At least one publisher said dealing with women was so exasperating, he decided to publish the fiction by male writers only, even when it meant less money.

Here is an ad by a publisher for the fiscal year 1981-82. It recorded 120 novels by women and 20 by men. The same publisher released 4 novels in October ‘82. Three of them were by women and the fourth by a male writer under a female pseudonym. Another announcement by another publisher said orders were placed for 17000 copies before the book hit the market. A sale of one thousand copies in the first few months was normal for titles by female writers. Another magazine announced the publication of a serial novel in the author’s own handwriting and an autograph on the cover.

All these incidents highlight one simple fact. Women were not naive or ignorant. Despite the cartoons and jokes, they held their ground, were very businesslike, and were fully in charge of their goods.

We find a more tangible and concrete perception of them in their own words.

During the one month between December 1982-83, I interviewed 15 female writers in Andhra Pradesh and Madras. In 6 homes, husbands were present at the interviews. In one home, the husband did all the talking. This struck me as odd since I had the impression from her writings she was an individual in her own right. Later I came to know her son had died recently and she had not yet recovered from the loss. At another writer’s place, the husband not only stayed away from us but also prepared coffee and snacks for us. In two other cases, the husbands wrote the letters, I am supposed to have received from the writers themselves. In all, it looked like all those husbands were supportive their wives in their writing activities.

I also looked up the autobiographical details of the writers published in the special issue of *Andhra Jyothi*, I mentioned earlier. Some of the statements they made are interesting.

One writer said she wrote because it gave her pleasure to her husband. Two of them said the magazine editors were encouraging. Another said she had received just enough schooling to read novels. She added, she had produced 3 children, 6 novels and 80 short stories to her credit. One writer told me specifically that I should make a note that she had left her husband

and moved in with a man 9 years younger than her. Another writer, sounding humorous, said her husband kindly gives him a little money and tells her, "You may spend it as you please. Don't hesitate." And she uses it to buy paper and write stories.

In this paper, the points I tried to make are: at first, the public was not directly in contact with the female writers, and was somewhat indifferent in regard to their status as writers. In course of time, people began to recognize their superiority as writers of fiction. The cartoons and jokes by male editors and cartoonists seemed to reflect only their own insecurities rather than women writers' status in the field of fiction or society, for that matter. **I did not come across a single woman writer who said she stopped writing because of those cartoons and jokes.**

Secondly, the editors and publishers who were in touch with the female writers in a businesslike fashion had to accept the demands of the writers. It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into the details or reasons for the business dealings but I would assume the readership had something to say about it.

Third, all these writers were quite comfortable at home as well. They made their presence felt with enormous success both at home and in society, in a nutshell.

In all, I got the impression, these women were not deterred by silly cartoons and jokes, had not opposition at home; and, they all felt free to write whatever they pleased.

(Unpublished)

20. Recapturing Traditions in Telugu Fiction

Let me start with a few details about our traditions. I was twelve or thirteen at the time. A young man used to come to our house for meals once a week. I do not know where he is now or what he is doing. Nevertheless, I have this one vivid image of him in my mind—he would come early morning, stand by the pillar on the front porch and remind my mother of his *vaaram* [our commitment, a custom, of giving him food once a week] at our home on that day. That was a common practice in those days. That is what captured my curiosity when a popular writer, D. Kameswari, sent me her story, “*vaaraala abbaayi*” for translation.

There are a few angles to this story, “*vaaraala abbaayi*.” First the title. The Telugu original was published under the title, “weekly boy”. I am not sure whether Kameswari was aware of my apathy for using English words in Telugu stories or changed her mind about the title after the story had been published. She crossed out the Telugu title on the tear sheet and wrote *vaaraala abbaayi*. The point is, if she had not written the Telugu phrase, I would never have guessed what it was about. This of course is an issue for translators, which I addressed in another article. I have been seeing comments even from Telugu people questioning the authenticity of a dialogue or a character in modern day stories. “That is not the way things are” is a comment by several readers, possibly because the current generation is out of touch with our past, maybe, not every young person but most of them, especially those who are educated in English medium schools. I have received emails from several young men and women saying they did not know this or that until they had read about it in a given story in translation. For those who are unaware of this tradition of *vaaraalu*, Kameswari’s story is an education. That brings us to my second point. If the same story were written in the sixties, the author would not have described the tradition in such minute details as she did in this story, published in 2002.

The author presented a plausible outcome emanating from this practice—a poor boy receiving education and becoming a successful judge because seven generous women had agreed to feed him seven days of the week, one woman a day on a regular basis. Another famous writer, Munipalle Raju, wrote a story (his first story, I understand) by the same name, *vaaraala pillaadu*, in which he depicted the negative effects arising from an indifferent and/or humiliating attitude of the hostesses. The protagonist in Kameswari’s story also had experienced this kind of apathy from some of the women. Venkataramana, the protagonist, says, “Your mother was an incarnation of the goddess Annapurna; not all mothers are like that.” On the other hand, Raju narrates a series of incidents in which the host families humiliated the young boy and drove him to a life of degradation and finally to his death by execution.

The gist of it is: Narayana was a little boy, about ten, when his paternal grandmother died. Nobody in the family explained to him where his grandmother was or why.

Narasimham was a *vaaraala abbaayi* in Narayana's house. Narayana, having no one else to talk to, approached Narasimham and asked him about the dead. For the first time, he learned that the dead people would never return; their bodies would be burned to ashes. The burning would happen in the graveyard. Narayana asked Narasimham to take him to the graveyard. Narayana, surprised by Narasimham's knowledge, changed his attitude toward this *vaaraala abbaayi*; swore that he would never tease him again, would not doodle in his notebooks, nor hide them.

Narayana wanted to learn more about Narasimham's way of life. Narasimham narrated his experiences—cruel and humiliating as they were; he did not get food always as he was supposed to. Some women would forget their commitment, were resentful toward him as if it was his fault, and almost everybody treated him like an insect. "The windows in his [Narayana's] little heart opened fully for the young boy, a student in a local Sanskrit school, who came timidly to their house once a week, ate and went away." During the same period, Narayana learned a few more things about this *vaaraalu* tradition. He asked Narasimham naively where he would eat on the other six days.

"A different house each day."

"What if they don't give you food?"

Vaaraala abbaayi hesitated for a second and said, "Starve."

For Narayana, the information was fascinating; he saw the tradition as a way of life, independent living at that. Soon after that, his father was blamed for bad accounting at work, for no fault of his, and committed suicide. His mother sought her brother's help for Narayana's education. The brother sent him to the city and set him up as a *vaaraala abbaayi*. He was faced with the same experiences as Narasimham first hand and they were not pleasant. Ironically, at one point, he met Narasimham, but this time the tables were turned. Narasimham was in the 'host' position; he barely recognized Narayana.

Narayana turned a petty crook first, and then a thief, and eventually a gang leader. He committed murder and was sentenced to death by hanging. On his way to the execution, he told his mother that he had implored the court to turn all his property and belongings over to her, and asked her to support a *vaaraala abbaayi*.

A famous critic, K.V. Ramana Reddy, commented in his preface to the anthology of Raju's stories that it is a powerful narration of the heartrending lives of delinquent children. I think it is as much about the tragedy of a poor child as the manifestation of the inhuman attitude of some people in the name of tradition. I am not sure if this *vaaraalu* tradition is to be blamed exclusively for a young man's downfall. Usually, several factors come together and undermine one's self-confidence and lead to his delinquency and destruction.

It has become quite common in India to blame religion for all the evils in our society. By putting these two stories of two poor boys in pursuit of education in juxtaposition, we may obtain a perspective that is more balanced. I believe that any system is put in place with the best of intentions. Most of the problems arise from its misuse or misinterpretation by a few individuals, who, in course of time gather vulnerable followers. In one story, a woman with good intentions helped a young man to improve his lot while, in the other story, several individuals forced a young man to evil ways through their inhuman behavior. We need both stories to understand how a system works or fails.

After several years, I came across an autobiography of Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry, *anubhavaalu, jnaapakaalu* [Experiences and Memories], in which he describes his experience as a “vaaaraala abbaayi” in minute detail. That narrative clearly shows how the measure of commitment and discipline on the part of both the parties were in those days. It was almost ritualistic. The narration was quite an education for me. It is not just about food or education for that matter. It contributes to the student’s personality development immensely.

We see similar perception in the story, “Chicken Burglars.” The author describes the lives of two women—a mother and her daughter—and their animal, poultry farm. Within their means, they were living a happy, carefree life. A small group of crooked boys wanted the daughter's attention, but failed. Then, they decided to hurt her with a devious plot, an act of cowardice. They would snicker and gloat over their own transgression but, in their heart of hearts, they knew it might not last long.

In the story, “[Why would I lose it, Daddy?](#)” we see a child’s agonizing longing to go to school and his father’s helplessness in sending him to school. The story is considered one of the best stories by Chaganti Somayajulu. It reveals his ability to illustrate a potent issue through the narration of a few everyday events and make them a powerful medium to make a point. The author seem to draw a parallel between the father’s unsuccessful attempts to quit smoking and the child’s longing to go to school. The story opens with the father sending the boy to fetch cigarettes for him and closes with asking the child if he still had the money or lost it. “Why would I lose it, Daddy?” the child asks. Is he asking why father would think that the son could lose the money? Or, is it a mild reminder to the father, “I am acting responsibly with the money you’ve given me; what about your responsibility of giving education to your child”? Our age-old tradition dictates that father has a duty to educate the child and the child has a duty to take care of the father in his old age. It is a lifestyle of “give and take” in the larger scheme of things.

[End]

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21. Native Element in Telugu Stories

We read the stories from other countries—Russian, Chinese, Japanese, African—and learn about their culture. Some stories tell us we are not different. Their customs, habits, perceptions, social consciousness, family values, and ethics appear to be so close to ours. They cry in the same manner as we do and be happy the same way we do, aspire for a better life in much the same way as we do. Then there are other stories that distinguish us from them. Partly because each culture evolves in its own environment. Russian winter is unimaginable in Andhra Pradesh. The effects of the vast expanse of land in America is inconceivable in our country. Their interpersonal relationships are defined by their environment. Our summer is inconceivable for them. Possibly the extended family, so common in South Asian countries is incomprehensible to Westerners. The stories from other cultures are fascinating for this reason—they tell us how people live under varying and/or similar circumstances.

The stories of writers like Chekhov, Maupassant, and Mark Twain appeal to us because they all are deeply rooted in their soil; they do not embrace the lifestyles of other cultures or create a pseudo foreign atmosphere in their stories. This should tell us something, meaning we the readers suspend our disbelief willingly as Coleridge put it and acquiesce ourselves to the other environment and explore the other culture. That is and must be one of the primary principles for translation into another language, especially for international audience. For that reason, when we select a story for translation, we need to keep the target audience in mind constantly. Sometime back, a reader raised the question—how would the translator know who reads the translation. Of course, once a translation is published the translator has no control over the readership. However, he or she can still keep a certain target readers in mind and select a story that hopefully captures the attention of that audience. Others may read and even enjoy the story but it would be in their best interest not to dwell on the original, especially if the reader is a native speaker (Telugu reader, in this case.). Native speakers need to realize that no native flavor carries into the translation one hundred percent. When we read a translation from another language, more likely we do not know how the story had carried its native flavor in the original. We only see whether the translated version appealed to us or not.

When I select stories for translation, I attempt to find stories that illustrate the Telugu homes, Telugu environment, our family values, interpersonal relationships as reflected in our relational terminology, our customs, beliefs, the games our children play and the food our mothers cook. It is important they include as many minute details as possible. For the same reason, I stay away from stories filled with descriptions of modern homes with imported goods and ideas. I want stories that provide our age-old values, beliefs, customs, lifestyles, and perceptions we have cherished. One great example would be arranged marriages in our families. Unfortunately, very often our stories cater to the stereotypical, preconceived notions of the

westerners but no effort is being made to explain the complexities inherent in the system such as the underlying philosophy of the extended families and the support they would extend to the couple's lives.

Second, I would look for a style peculiar to the writer. It is common knowledge every writer has or develops his own technique in telling a story. No two persons talk alike and no two writers tell the same story using exactly the same vocabulary. There is no verbatim report even when a story is retold by the same writer. That also explains why we have so many stories on any given topic. Each writer presents a new perspective and adds to the commonality of global understanding. Similarly, no two readers appreciate the same story and perceive the same message from a given story precisely in the same manner.

Against this background, I have attempted to present my rationale for selecting stories for translation for foreign readers, who are not familiar with our culture and traditions. Basically, I find three angles to this thought: 1. the stories that depict our religious, philosophical beliefs and customs; 2. stories that describe various activities in our daily lives; and, 3. reflect unique perspectives and lifestyles in our society.

Let's review a few Telugu stories in translation. In the story, ["The Soul Wills It"](#) by Viswanatha Satyanarayana, man-woman relationship is explored within the context of Hindu beliefs. The story presents, in a larger context, man and woman not as two entities but one. Thus the pain suffered by the woman is experienced by man. Similarly, the woman carries the man's wish not as a duty but as a replication of man's pain. In terms of technique, the author used several forms. It started out with a description of the location and the main characters. In some parts it was presented in the form of direct report, and, in one instance, a dialogue as in a play was also introduced. Is this acceptable in modern storytelling technique? I am not sure. As I said at the outset, the author has the freedom to present his story in a manner that is befitting to his mode of thinking.

["The Drama of Life,"](#) by Madhurantakam Rajaram depicts the absurdity in a presentation of Bharata yajnam, a narrative of Mahabharata in harikatha style and the monetary reward the narrator receives at the end. The underlying philosophy of celebrating Bharata yajnam is to point out the appalling effects of gambling on a family. The storyteller learns much to his dismay that his payment has come from the income at the gambling stalls set up for the enjoyment of the audience. The storyline in itself is not something we can be proud of yet the umpteen details woven into the rendering are enlightening.

In the story, [He is I](#), (Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry), the author depicts prostitutes as connoisseurs of fine arts and conjugal bliss. At one period, in our culture, they are supposed to initiate young men into the life of marital bliss. Into this complex issue, the author weaves a mystical perception "He is I", the message being God resides in our bodies and respecting our bodies implies respecting God. As I mentioned earlier, the philosophical connotation leaves plenty to the readers' imagination.

Another angle in this story is the use of pronouns peculiar to Telugu language, *thanu* or *thaanu* which is a gender-free reflexive, roughly meaning oneself. In a complete sentence, the verb suffix corresponds to the person's gender though. The story *He is I* opens with one person, *taanu*, as the narrator. The pronoun, a reflexive, indefinite, third person, singular, and non-gender specific, is peculiar to Telugu language. After Swamiji is introduced, most of the story is narrated by Swamiji using the first person singular, *nenu*[I]. Towards the end, Swamiji says, "We [*memu*] were waiting for the other train to arrive." Telugu has two forms of third person plural, *manam* [all-inclusive] and *memu* [we, excluding listener]. Significantly, in the story, the second term, *memu* is used. Thus, implicitly, the pronoun "we" includes the listener, the young man [*taanu*], and, puts the reader/audience in the shoes of a listener. Confusing as it is for foreigners, it is also quite illuminating. That is one of the reasons, I chose this story despite the difficulty in translating it.

Relational terminology is another aspect that pervade our stories. Just recently I read that Native Americans use relational terms for people not related by blood in much the same way we Telugu people do. In our culture, the terms are indicative of not only the relationship between two individuals but also how each perceives the other. The discussion of relational terminology is beyond the scope of this paper but the point I am trying to make is our stories provide an additional layer to understand the conversations between two persons.

The "[Wedding Garments](#)," by Ravuru Satyanarayana Rao is a heartwarming story, perfect for holiday season. The *madhuparkaaalu* are a set of garments offered by the bride's parents to the groom along with a drink made of honey and milk as he arrives for the ceremony. Puttanna, the protagonist, is a weaver by profession. He customarily makes the garments and presents free of charge to the family who performs a wedding in the village. The story illustrates the spirit with which Puttanna cherishes his family tradition. He refuses to make an exception even when chips are down and he is struggling. He would rather sell his cow, which he needs not only for his own subsistence but other families to whom he supplies milk. The story walks us through not only his struggles but the remarkable sense of dharma the groom avows. This is a moving story highlighting the human values that go beyond the call of one's duty.

Currently in our society, caste is dismissed as reprehensible. There is however another angle to this caste or community spirit, which is welcome because it aims at the common good. Puttanna belongs to weavers community. For him it is a custom to weave *madhuparkaaalu* (new set of clothes for the bride and groom) in any family in his village free of cost. The reader also learns what life was like for weavers community in those days. It tells us of a lifestyle that is fast disappearing.

Another story that gives elaborate description of a wedding ceremony in Telugu homes is two pawns lost by Poosapati Krishnamraju. This story oozes authentic Telugu flavor and provides a peek into the process of wedding ceremony in our families as it unfolds.

The story "[Cottage Goddess](#)" by Kanuparti Varalakshamma, published in *Andhra Patrika Ugadi* issue, 1924, depicts the ruination of cottage industries and the struggles of families caught up in the aftermath of the great Depression following the World War I. The author gives us the harsh realities of the early forties in middle class families and the woman's struggle to raise her two little children. The amount of details in the struggles of the protagonist's (Ramalakshmi's) is quite an education. Sad as it may sound, that has been the reality in India. The small farmer, the small business, the mom-and-pop store round the corner took a downward turn and never recovered as India kept moving towards modernization. Once again, the details of everyday life during the period in question are well-recorded in these stories.

The story, "[Headmaster](#)," by Palagummi Padmaraju, depicts the extraordinary, lifelong influence of a mentor on a student. In our tradition, the teacher has the same place as mother and father in the life of an individual. The lessons children receive from their teachers go beyond textbooks.

The story, "[Three million rupees bet](#)", by Arudra, depicts a game children played before modernization took over and, in the process, also the creative ways of them spending their time. The story introduces a game that is not prevalent anymore, even in India. In these days of plastic toys and computer games money can buy, it is hard to imagine that children had just as much fun with the side panels of discarded cigarette boxes. The game, effectively, illustrates not only children's psyche but also how they imbibe the complex monetary values early in life.

Some feminist critics perceived the story, "[The Escaped Parrot](#)" by Achanta Saradadevi, as a feminist story, since the female protagonist feels suffocated in their home. I, however, think that the story goes beyond a woman's feeling of confinement. It illustrates the lack of communication between a husband and his wife, powerfully. What Kamakshamma missed in her life is not the freedom but the amicability with her husband. In the absence of such amicability with her husband, she befriends a parrot, short-lived nevertheless. Thus, in her life, the true tragedy is not the house becoming a cage, but her husband ignoring her existence. The one-word conversations between him and her, the husband constantly trying to convince her that life away from the city is peaceful are authentic. That was the state of affairs in most of the Telugu homes in the fifties.

The story, "[Lord Siva Commands](#)" by Nidadavolu Malathi, depicts the newly acquired concept of "privacy" in Indian homes, and also, the interpersonal relationships between the two unrelated individuals belonging to two different generations. An elderly woman, whom the young woman came to know in her childhood and respected as her mentor, comes to visit her in America. The story features several layers. For instance, the two women from two generations developed a close friendship; but, the young woman's attitude has changed after coming to America, which caused her to feel discomfort with the older woman's probing questions on one hand, and the heartening memories from her past, on the other. At the end she comes to

understand where the older woman came from, and how natural it was for her to speak the way she did.

I included this story in this article because of the comments I received from current generation readers. The story is a comment on the issue of privacy. In the past, in our country, the concept of privacy is not understood as the way in the west. However, the perception among the current generation is changing fast. Most of the current generation Telugu youth thought the elderly woman was “intrusive” and “insensitive,” to put it mildly. At the end, the young woman writes a letter to herself. For many readers, it was confusing. The point I tried to make was, the young woman, in an attempt to understand the psyche of the older woman, strains her own imagination and creates a letter that the older woman would have written, if only she knew how to write. The letter explains why the older woman acted the way she did. Basically, that was the attitude of her generation, particularly the did not have much to talk about, and second, that was their way of showing concern for the well-being of the young woman. I was hoping readers would delve deeper into this kind of psyche.

That humor is hard to translate is common knowledge. Nevertheless, it is important we expose the foreign readers to this side of our culture. One of the ways I found useful is to introduce a story through a review. I translated “janatha express” by Mullapudi Venkataramana as [”Middle-class Complex.”](#) This story was relatively easy to translate since there was a good storyline. On the other hand, another story, “Radha’s debt”, (Radhamma bakee) by the same author, was hard to translate since it was just a lot of witticisms and not much to tell as a story. For that reason, I have presented it in the form a review. The entire story is provided with explanations why a particular line is considered humorous by us. It allows us to explain the parts, which we consider humorous, but may not be perceived as humorous by foreign readers.

Each story is situated in a different time and at a different place. Usually, readers from other cultures read these stories in order to identify those differences. And, that is also the criterion for our translators in their selection of stories for translation.

I must admit that all the stories on this site may not meet these criteria. Nevertheless, ideally though, that is what I aim to accomplish, which is to introduce our culture in its multifarious perceptions and our values to non-native speakers.

[End]

(This article is a revised version of the original, “How to Read a Telugu Story,” published on thulika.net, January 2005.)

(November 13, 2013)

22. Urban Characters in Telugu Fiction of the 60s and 70s

Traditionally, the city has been treated in Telugu literature as a place of wealth and freedom, and a place for people to aspire to. Traditional writers have, always, portrayed the city in all its glory, even correlated it to the royalty of the country. There is, however, a major departure from this attitude in Telugu writers of the sixties and seventies. Western education, modern technology, and Marxist ideology inspired the writers to recognize various lifestyles available to individuals in our society. Most Telugu writers of these two decades felt a strong urge to probe into different lifestyles which developed as a result of the modern urban situation.

It is not the sketchy and idealistic image of the city, but a host of other aspects that developed around the city appealed most to the writers. It is not the wealth but the inevitable alienation that accompanied wealth, not the freedom but the suffering of other losses in achieving the freedom that appear in bold relief in Telugu fiction of the sixties and seventies. Modern technology, with all its progress, is also causal in bringing about disruption through commercialization in an individual's life.

For the purpose of this paper, I will consider three lifestyles discernible in Telugu fiction corresponding to the three economic strata of society: namely, the rich, the middle-class and the poor. This classification, according to economics, plays a more crucial role in the cities than in the villages. In fact, it has even superseded religion and caste to a remarkable degree. These latter two important aspects of Indian society are more conspicuous by their absence in novels and short stories in which they do not form the central theme.

In general, the rich are portrayed as reflecting a pseudo-western culture which is developed out of misinterpretation of a foreign culture and through the operation of ill-informed sources. The middle-class people are lured to the cities by western education and employment opportunities, but are not ready for the changes in their traditional values. The poor unskilled laborers see promise of respectability and social mobility in cities.

I must add that, within these three categories, the lifestyles of women reveal the constraint put on them by both men and money. Their lifestyles also differ from both their female counterparts in villages and male counterparts in the cities.

With this introduction, let us examine each group in detail in order to derive Telugu writers' perceptions of city life in the sixties and seventies.

Rich men

One new trend one notices in Telugu fiction beginning with the sixties is the lack of empathy for rich people. Telugu writers in these two decades seem to be particularly averse to the lifestyles of the rich, and have depicted the wealthy as possessing neither the strength of character, nor other plausible innate qualities.

The city of Hyderabad being the capital of the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh has been developing into a big center of modern technologies since the formation of the state in 1956. This city was also the seat of Muslim rules of the recent past whose tradition was epicurean in nature. In Telugu fiction we see a combination of these two aspects—the effects of modern technology and love of sensuous pleasures—giving rise to a new way of life very much foreign to Indians that can only be called pseudo-western.

A popular Telugu writer, Panyala Ranganatha Rao in his novel *Gadval Cira* [Gadval Sari] describes the life of a wealthy man, Somasundaram who becomes the chief of his company by means of living a western-style “social life.”

Among the company bosses there exists a lot of “social life.” Every employee should go to every party accompanied necessarily by his wife. Once in a while each should call on others for a “social visit.” Without any reason one should invite all others for a “cocktail party.” The future of some employees and the survival of some companies depend on this “social life.” That’s not all. Every member should enroll himself in some gymkhana or cosmopolitan club. Foundations for promotions and foreign tours are laid in these parties. Women recommend each other’s husband.

In this narrative, Ranganatha Rao seems to feel that among the rich, traditional human values disappear in the face of overpowering material and economic success. Individuals become caricatures. Another popular writer, Madhurantakam Rajaram criticizes these parties even more strongly in his short novel, *Maricika* [Mirage].

Behind that dinner environment, it looked as if a race had started. Each of them was lost in his attempt to attract everybody’s attention, some through dress, some through talk and some through action. The real problem arose there. If all of them were speakers, who would be listeners? If all of them were actors, who was the audience?

Both Ranganatha Rao and Rajaram observe in their novels that the social life of the rich in the cities is success-oriented as opposed to the life imbued with community spirit in villages.

In Telugu novels dealing with the lifestyle of the wealthy, we find two varieties of characters that usually are the models for the rich of India. The first variety is comprised of those Indians who had been to a foreign country or lived abroad for sometime. Devadas in *Gadval cira* is one such character. He has lived all his life in the United and returned to India to marry an Indian girl at the insistence of his father. He is blatantly ignorant of both cultures. At his own wedding reception, he drinks excessively, insults guests and drags his wife upstairs while the reception is still going on. In the room upstairs he tells his wife to undress because he wants to see a “beautiful nude figure.” And then he forces her to drink and dance. He tells her, “It’s fun when a wife undresses herself. In America every wife takes off her clothes in front of her husband even before he asks her to.” The writer’s spite for persons like Devadas is clearly shown in the final statement of the narrator about this scene: “Devadas raped his wife like a common criminal would

rape a stranger.” The entire novel is replete with the ill-conceived perception of American culture among Indians.

The other variety of characters that supposedly represent foreign culture is the foreigners themselves. In *Gadval Cira*, Williams and Rita are a British couple working in a British firm in India. While Williams is hardly mentioned, Rita is given a stereotypical female role in the novel. She asks Somasundaram for sexual favors while Williams is away and Somasundaram cooperates. Later when Williams writes a strong and favorable report about Somasundaram, the latter could easily understand that it was a reward for “cooperating” with Rita. These two characters, Devadas and Rita, stand for the gross misrepresentation that the Indian fanatics of western culture want us to believe to be true.

Very rarely do the wealthy look back to Indian culture. When they do so, they are withdrawn from the “social life” of the modern world. For instance, in *Gadval Cira*, Somasundaram admits to Saradhi, a young man from a middle-class family in search of a job, in the privacy of his (Somasundaram) home: “However civilized we may think we are, however much we acquire foreign habits due to the pressures of circumstances, we honestly cannot repudiate our customs and conventions so easily! It is in our blood.” (p.88)

With this argument Somasundaram willfully ruins Saradhi’s chance to get a job in his firm. He wants Saradhi to stay at his home for literary discussions; Saradhi represents tradition. In Telugu fiction, we do not find compatibility between traditions and technology.

Women in wealthy families

Wealthy women in Telugu fiction, unlike any other class, are presented as having a lifestyle of their own. They enjoy greater freedom than women in other classes. While the wealthy women in villages continue to be homemakers, their urban counterparts go out to reach society.

It is important to mention that there are at least two perspectives. First that of the women writers in Andhra Pradesh, and the other, that of the male writers who delineate the female characters in wealthy families. The female writers tend to draw heavily on the sex roles the women in the high class are required to play in their husbands’ lives. Lata, a female writer of many controversial novels, has extensively dealt with this aspect in her novels. She was most vocal in her description of Hyderabad and the position of women in that city. The following passage illustrates some general impressions on the city of Hyderabad shared by many writers: “For many people, Hyderabad is heaven on earth. It is the place for care-free life, pleasures, and the unfettered life of art lovers. In that city, woman, too, is one of many pleasures. Women are being used endlessly for the pleasures of men since the beginning of creation, yet those who suffer from this meaningless intoxication see no light.

Earlier, in Hyderabad women were available for money only in ‘Mehboob ki mendi’ [prostitutes quarters]. After the city became the capital of Andhra Pradesh and the law against prostitution had been installed, women became available everywhere—in hotels, in cars, and near

Charminar, and in every form, on the pretext of employment; women are made to please men.”

It is evident that the freedom that women could exercise in the cities was taken advantage of to serve the purpose of the male-dominated society. In this novel *Maha nagaramlo Stri*, Lata writes about three women with mediocre talents who successfully make their way into the movie world by using sex. All of them were seduced early in life. It is important to note that Lata has been particularly concerned about the causes or factors that lay behind the behavior of these women.

By contrast, the male writers reveal a different aspect when they write about the high class women. They write with levity, even with a touch of sarcasm. The women characters created by male writers engage themselves in activities like club memberships, picnics, and celebrations of national holidays—January 26 (Republic Day), and August 15 (Independence Day), etc. Or, get busy with the latest gads. Telugu male writers seem to feel that these activities not only fail to serve any meaningful ends but sometimes turn even disastrous. Binadevi has delineated a typical character, Vijaya in her *Punyabhumi, Kallu teru*, (Oh Pious Land, Open Your Eyes!). The following quotations illustrate the author’s viewpoint: “A quarter of a century ago, Vijaya studied up to tenth grade. She has only one wish in life that she should become a very prominent figure in that city. She started a ladies club with all the officers’ wives in the city. She started another organization for women with all the middle class housewives and she was its president. They celebrated important festivals and gave away prizes. Reports about the functions were sent to the All India Radio women’s programs for broadcasting.

“All the members are middle-aged. None, including Vijaya is under thirty-five. All of them have cooks, governesses and servants. So none of them need to pour a cup of coffee for their husbands or feed their infants. On holidays they play cards with their husbands with high stakes.

“She recently started writing articles like ‘My husband and Little Irritations’, ‘Children and Discipline,’ etc. Magazines published them!

She strongly believed that the children are the main hindrance in the progress of mothers.”

In the end, she becomes pregnant and to cover that shame she commits suicide. Here one can perceive that, while the female writers treat these characters sympathetically and attempt to explain such behavior, the male writers touch upon the realities only superficially.

The rich, both men and women, with their penchant for foreign culture and foreign goods reveal very little of their own values in life. The society they have created for themselves does not reflect a happy blend of the best of the cultures, east and west, but a sad and miserable imitation and apparently a failure.

Middle-class men

The middle-class life as depicted in Telugu fiction in the sixties and seventies reflects the hardcore, day-to-day realities much more vividly than the life of the rich class. Here we find elaborate descriptions, rich with valuable details and true-to-life characters.

Ironically, Telugu writers show awareness that for the rich the city holds everything they wish for but it is not so for the middle-class people. For them, it is just another arena for their struggle for existence. For instance, Saradhi in *Gadval Cira*, a middle class young man, who goes to Hyderabad in search of a job, stumbles into a high class family. He fails to get the job because of his traditional values in life. Prakasam in *Maricika* is an idealist who is educated but remains in the village. He modernizes his home with a good library, newspapers, etc., and his farm with modern amenities such as a bored well. But his cousin, Sobhadevi, from the city, fails to see his point.

“Why do you need all these books if not to show off that you are an educated man?” Sobhadevi asked.

“I don’t blame you for thinking that these books are for show. In fact, the idea that the entire human life is only for show is getting deep-rooted. Education is not for enlightenment through the training of the intellect. Wealth is not, like the pious glow of Ganga, for washing poverty. Everything is just for the pride of possession. Sobha! If you remove the pride and show from the kind of life you value as supreme, is there anything left? I think there will be nothing left.”

For both Saradhi and Prakasam, the city, implicitly, means a departure from tradition and thus is unacceptable.

A well-known writer, Natarajan, who worked as a waiter in a small coffee shop, had written several excellent novels. He, under the female pseudonym, “Sarada”, had thrown some remarkable insights into the lifestyle of middle class people, particularly, in Vijayawada, the second largest city in Andhra Pradesh. His famous novels, *manci, chedu* [The Good and the Bad], deals with various aspects of middle class life in cities. Most of the problems the middle class face are related to money. Insecurities on jobs are a major concern for them, their jobs being their only source of income. So they have to work hard to secure a job and stay in it. Sarada presents this anxiety powerfully in the following passage: “Bhaskara Rao is a junior clerk who marries the daughter of a senior clerk. At his nuptial ceremony, instead of asking for an expensive gift like a wristwatch or a radio per custom, he asks for ‘confirmation of his job at the shop’.”

The bridegroom’s request and the father-in-law’s reaction to the request confirm people’s anxiety for security in their jobs: “What a genuine wish, he (the father-in-law) thought. He recalled the times when he was the newlywed and how worried he was about the uncertainty of his job. The senior clerk understood very well the anxiety and the concern of the junior clerk.”

Their houses, their daily lives and their efforts to keep up appearances present a grim picture: “There are four families in that one house. But each lives a secluded life; not that they do it on purpose. They cannot afford the

time for chit chat. May be once in a while the women get together and chat. Besides, there is always a shortage for something or other like sugar, salt, coffee and at least for that reason they have to approach the neighbors. They develop a bond of friendship and affinity among themselves.

“In front of these houses, one or other creditor will be shouting at a high pitch everyday.

“Their earnings would not exceed one hundred rupees a month. They have very large families. Children will be screaming and crying all around.

“The men would go to work, washing and ironing the one or two shirts they had with hot water pans, and go out with a look of respectability.”

In the face of these harsh realities, they develop a wry humor and their own ways of entertainment.

“Their dwellings are old and in need of repairs and maintenance, badly.

“Why didn’t you ask the landlord to whitewash the walls?

“Of course I did. He said he had gotten it done not too long ago, just during the last pushkaram [Tidal wave that repeats every twelve years], so no hurry.

“The landlord is waiting for the building to fall apart by itself so that he can save on demolition charges.”

They cannot afford to pay for the movies, the theater, and concerts; so, they content themselves with the playing cards, which do not cost them money.

Telugu writers in the sixties and seventies stated that daily life and entertainment in the villages do not put so much pressure on individuals as the city life does.

Middle-class Women

Women in cities coming from middle-class families face all these tensions the middle-class men face plus the additional burden of having to be a progressive woman. In Telugu fiction after the fifties, the women are usually portrayed as educated and conscious of their position in society. Strangely, the middle class men want these women to act as happy homemakers on the one hand and go out to earn, on the other. Both male and female writers have produced voluminous literature on the problems facing the educated, middle-class, working women. In playing this dual role, women suffer a great deal.

In *marina kaalam-marani manushulu* [The Changed Times-Unchanged People] by Vacaspati, the main character, Rukmini is an educated woman who shoulders the family responsibility because her father, being a gambler, does not care for the family. This is a fairly new trend and can happen only in cities. After seeing her brothers and sisters settled in life, she marries, late in life, a widower, and less educated than herself. Since the attitudes of people deep down remain conventional, her family disapproves of her marriage. Society does not condone it either. They face baseless scandals and humiliation. The husband, who is not bad by nature, leaves her for lack of moral courage on his part. Rukmini commits suicide.

This story gives us an example of the problems middle-class working women face in the cities. Like the insecurities on jobs for middle-class men, the public scandal plays a considerable role in the case of women.

The theme of scandal has an interesting approach in Telugu novels. Persecuting women through public scandals is a universal phenomenon, and it happens both in villages and in cities. Strangely, however, the urban situation helps the male victims but not the female victims. For instance, Rukmini in *maarina kaalam-maarani manushulu* is driven by a scandal to such an extreme measure as suicide, a male character, Bhaskara Rao, in *manci-chedu* is hardly affected by a similar scandal about himself and his stepmother.

His father-in-law, Sundaram, suggests: “This is not a village for a scandal to persist for years. If you move from one part of the city to another, it won’t bother you anymore. In the city, an incident that can create havoc on one day becomes an ordinary incident on the second day, and is totally forgotten on the third day. The time and opportunity available to people in villages to discuss such matters at length are rarely available in cities.”

These two perspectives obviously imply that in the case of women, the old moral standards continue to apply, irrespective of the locality.

The situation is somewhat similar when caste is the central theme in the novels and short stories. While here, too, the victimization of women continues, the urban environment makes it a little different. The marriage between Aruna, a Brahmin woman, and Bhaskar, a Harijan man, is the central theme in the novel, *balipeetham* [Sacrificial Stone] by Ranganayakamma, a militant female writer. In view of the importance of this novel in the history of modern Telugu fiction, let me provide a few main events in the story. The circumstances that led to the inter-caste marriage in the novel are: (a) Aruna is a child widow and yearns to die as a “sumangali,” meaning to die while the husband is alive; (b) Aruna is sick, and doctors predicted a short life span for her; (c) Bhaskar is an active member of a humane organization and decided to marry a destitute or a lady in distress; and finally, (d) their urban situation makes it possible.

Aruna’s uncle Sastry and aunt Jagadamba vehemently oppose this marriage as can be expected. They are also Aruna’s in-laws by virtue of their son’s marriage with Aruna at a very young age. The boy died soon after the marriage. Interestingly, Aruna and Bhaskar were not ostracized, which would have been the case, had they lived in a village. Their life in the city saved them from being ostracized. For the same reason, Sastry and Jagadamba maintain familial ties with Aruna but Bhaskar is treated as an outcaste. The older couple welcomes their granddaughter, Jyothi without any qualms into their house and despite her lineage on her father’s lineage. They are also willing to allow Bhaskar’s nephew, Gopi, into their home, but assign menial jobs to the boy, reflecting their awareness of his low class status. In other words, Aruna, Sastry, and Jagadamba are willing to ignore the caste barriers only to the extent that it suits their convenience and the city provides them with opportunity to do so.

Aruna sets similar dual standards for herself in her daily life. On the one hand, she puts up fights for equal rights as an earning member of the family, and, on the other, she attempts to play the role of the traditional housewife, calling herself, padadasi [wife whose place is at the feet of her husband]. Thus because of the superimposition of modernity on tradition, the middle class educated women in the cities face both family problems and job-related problems. Part of the reason is their own awareness of their difficult situation, which does not seem to hold any creditworthy solutions.

Working-class Men

The poor and the middle-class experience shows the same strain in some matters, like housing and day-to-day necessities. Yet the poor in the cities project a lifestyle of their own. New kinds of occupations like rickshaw-pulling, work in factories and hotels, jobs in government and quasi-government establishments (peons and office boys) have created a new lifestyle unknown in villages.

In short stories and novels in the sixties and seventies, the Telugu writers depicted the lower-class people as moving from villages to cities with new hopes. The attraction of unskilled laborers to the cities can be explained on the one hand, as matters like the movies, movie stars, high officials, and all that glitters; on the other hand, it is the removal of social seclusion of the lower caste. Although the lower caste people are not totally integrated into the urban society, they are permitted to move within the society with some reservations. Their gain fits, at least, their own concept of respectability. It is evident in their material possessions.

The proletariat class is aware of their position in society, and they try hard to relate themselves to the higher social stratum by imitating their language, wearing cleaner clothes, and possessing sophisticated items like wristwatches and transistors.

In the story, "chiruchakram" [The Small Wheel] by Malathi Nidadavolu, the main character, Venkanna, moves to the city because he considers a peon's position in a school more respectable than farming on his land in his village. On his job in the school, he goes far beyond his job obligations to please his superiors. In the end, he gets fined not for his fault, but for the mistake of his boss. Later in the night, he describes with great thrill the day's happenings at school to his wife, except the fine, which he purposely omits. In reality, he is intent on ignoring the raw deal society has dealt him. The universal problem of the disadvantaged taking the blame for everything that went wrong continues in spite of all the progress and civilization the city claims to have achieved. This is a valuable perspective that many Marxist writers of Telugu fiction have been projecting since the sixties.

Working-class women

The women characters of the proletariat in Telugu fiction are alert, racy, and sensitive. Racakonda Viswanatha Sastry and Binadevi, both veteran Marxist writers, have created many impressive female characters in this class. For them, the low-class people are underprivileged but not unintelligent. For example, Muthyalamma in "maya" [Illusion], by Racakonda Viswanatha

Sastry baffles a professional lawyer with her knowledge of the operation of the judicial system: "The truth of the courts is different. For them, it is enough if the testimony holds. These witnesses go on the witness-stand one by one, and corroborate their testimonies, decided in advance. What are the questions you would ask? They are always the same; questions like, "At what time you left the police station? How many of you went there? Did you go in civilian clothes? Or, did you wear uniforms?" etc. Right? These questions are like readymade dough for the police. The magistrate would say, "Well, the testimony sounds about right. There are no discrepancies. Even if there are any, they are only minor. So you pay the fine. Or else, go to jail," Two times ... two hundred rupees ... blood money, Sir, I paid."

Muthyalamma, who was booked on false charges only because she had failed to pay the monthly bribe to the police. She was acquitted, at the end, not because of her rhetoric or the expert cross-examination by the prosecution, but by paying the same bribe she could not pay earlier.

Her opinion on the present day world is equally perceptive and strong: "There is nothing else but money and business in this world. Animals—dumb chattel—have morals but not we. I am an illiterate. And I don't have any morals. You are an educated man and you don't have them either. The whole world is prostituting itself for money. I sell rum for money. You sell your education for money. They police sell justice for money. In the elections, you, I and he, all of us are sold in exchange for votes ... There is nothing but sale, sale, and more sales. I am not educated but this is the truth I have come to realize. If that is not the truth, you tell me what is."

The female working class characters are thus invariably shown as the victims of failure of social institutions in reality.

Other reflections on City

Some Telugu writers wrote about the city life without referring to any specific class or group. The picture is usually not flattering. They appear to nurture a general skepticism towards everything that is new or non-traditional.

For instance, Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao, known for his critical appreciation of Marxism, disapproves every aspect of the city life in his story "Patnavasam" [City Life]. Some of his impressions of the city life, as revealed, in the story are: "The vegetables are not fresh; the food is not nutritious; the city people resent longevity of life; they present uncertainties in life as pleasant surprises; and, they interpret the disobedience of children as an expression of individuality."

"How is life in the city?" the villagers asked him. "Our people are finding ways to commit suicide," he replied.

Kutumba Rao observes the city life does not in reality symbolize progress, but only provides us with a way of interpreting things to suit our fancies. Angara Venkata Krishna Rao presents a similar view from a different angle in a short story, "Nagarikata" [Civilization]. In this story, first he describes the savage killing of a pig by a group of brawny men using clubs and ropes. Later, when he sees a well-dressed couple walk out of a store in a city with a beautiful and colorful box labeled 'Bacon' in English,

he wonders: A beautiful and colorful box is a symbol of civilization. But what about the cries of the pig it contained? If dress is a mark of civilization, what about the people in those clothes?

In other words, the city has been teaching us to refuse to notice the offensive and ugly facts of life, and learn to accept everything that is presented in a neat and pleasing-to-the-eye package.

Conclusion

Starting with the sixties, the Telugu fiction writers have become increasingly concerned with the psychology or social behavior of individuals. In each class or group, people have a definite way of conducting themselves in relation to others. An important factor to remember, however, is that there is a tangible shift in the emphasis regarding values in life. The much-wished-for economic progress has led individuals to become self-centered. Technological progress has enabled people only to accumulate material possessions. Education has been viewed as another means of moving into a higher economic group. Conventional and familial relationships have suffered severance. Now relationships are formed based on social status or residential contiguity.

Telugu writers of the past two decades (the 50s and 60s) have perceived social institutions as definite failures. All the illusions about them as instrumental in improving the lot of unfortunate people do not seem to stand the test when their actual work is critically probed.

Against this urban background, the lot of women is even less reassuring. Whatever their economic position, their social acceptance by men as equals is doubtful. The freedom women can enjoy in the city is only skin deep. Their capability to act intelligently and achieve success is counteracted by the contrivances of the male-dominated society. The city, with all its material and technological progress, has become seriously detrimental to the development of individuals as full-fledged and civilized human beings.

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23. Author as Narrator: Crossing The Gender Barrier

In October 2002, I interviewed one of our renowned female writers, Turaga Janakirani. During the interview, Janakirani made an interesting comment: “Men cannot write like women.” I understood her statement as saying men cannot write fiction with a female protagonist as narrator.

I must admit I was haunted by the question ever since—whether a writer can successfully create a narrator of the opposite gender. In this age of gender barrier and numerous controversies, may be, I’m adding one more facet to the fray. By default, authors are skilled in creating a wide variety of characters and, implicitly, understand human psyche. If this premise is accepted, then the authors must be capable of creating protagonists of opposite gender.

There are two stories published on thulika.net previously: “Wilted Lotus” [kamalina kamalam], written by M. Ramakoti, a renowned male writer. The story is narrated by a female, uneducated but intelligent. It is presented as a heart to heart conversation between two female friends, and portrays a potent issue of naiveté and betrayal of an illiterate but intelligent wife and an educated but hypocritical husband. In my opinion, the author has succeeded in creating the nuance with flair. Then the next question is why did the author choose to create a female narrator? What did he accomplish, additionally, by doing so?

In the second story, "[kaasiratnam vine](#)", the story opens with a young, educated male narrating it in the first person. The core story however was narrated by an old man, tatha, and his language conforms to the storytelling technique of oral tradition (The Telugu original shows this aspect better than the translation). I do not remember why I chose to make the narrator a male. Possibly, it was a comment on the worldly wisdom, or rather lack of it, of the educated males in the 1960s era. It is not unusual for authors to choose a narrator to distance themselves from the narrator in order to express a point of view that is different from their own; and, choosing a narrator from the opposite gender could distance them further.

Another story is *hunda* [My Sister: A Classy Lady,] by a female writer, Chaganti Tulasi, and with a male character as the narrator. Unlike in "kaasiratnam", in this story, the narrator’s humility and his admiration for the moral courage of his sister are predominant factors. Once again, the question is: What is the author’s message? Is it possible that only a female writer could perceive the finer qualities of smartness and sacrifice of women? By using a male narrator, did the author achieve additional depth or breadth?

At this writing, two more stories came to my mind. They are not so much about creating a narrator from the opposite gender but creating powerful characters of the opposite gender. Raavi Sastry wrote a story, “Man, Woman” [mogavaadu-aadamanishi], a story of a young man coming of age. The young man goes to the city in search of a job. While he waits at a bus stop, a young woman asks him to drop a letter in the nearby mailbox. He,

quite taken by her beauty and her English, jumps to her rescue and obliges her gleefully. She shows him her appreciation by kissing him, which throws him off on. In the evening, when his uncle called him “kurraadaa!” [You, boy], he retorts, “Don’t call me kurraadaa!”. This story, in juxtaposition with another story, “tanuu – neerajaa,” written by a female writer, Malati Chendur, may offer another angle to our discussion. The story, He[tanu] and Neeraja, [tanu – neeraja] was narrated by a male character, “tanu” in the story.

Here is a brief note on the term, *tanu*. The term tanu is a pronoun, third person, singular, used with reference to both male and female individuals, and is unique to Telugu language. In grammar, the term acts like a third person, singular, with a verb ending conformed to the speaker’s gender, male or female. In fiction, it is implied that the story is being narrated from the perspective of that person, male or female. Recently, I discussed this term with Saradapurna, editor of brAhmi, and her article, raagicembu [Copper pot] in September 2003 issue. The two-page narrative is the narrator’s lyrical response to a copper pot as a metaphor for friendship and a reflection on her life on a foreign soil. Saradapurna mentioned that she switched from “I” to “tanu” towards the end by way of distancing herself—creating a new “I” on a new ground. That is one example of how the term behaves in our language.

In the story, “tanu – Neerajaa,” the narrator is a self-absorbed male, who wanted to marry Neeraja but his pride gets in his way to ask her to marry him; Neeraja understands his position and decides to marry another man, Raghu. In a note to tanu, she explains to him she has decided to marry Raghu since Raghu needs her; he is like a “baby sheep lost in the dark.” Only after losing her, tanu realizes what a grave mistake he had made. The story is significant for two reasons. The story is narrated from the standpoint of the narrator, a male, tanu. Secondly, by giving him no name and by referring to him only as tanu, the male protagonist is reduced to a nonentity. This is obvious from the female protagonist’s choice of another man, Raghu, as her husband.

Are female authors creating less-than-heroic-characters when they portray characters of the opposite gender? If so, why? Male writers, Ramakoti and Ravi Sastry, on the other hand, created strong female characters. I do not mean this is my final word on the subject; I am only throwing a few questions to think about.

We can stretch the point and examine the stories written by couples under female pseudonyms [e.g. Beenadevi and Vasundhara] and raise similar question: Is there a specific element that could be identified as her contribution and/or his contribution? The stories, “A Piece of Ribbon,” [Beenadevi] and “Diary,” [Vasundhara] are cases in point.

In the final analysis, I believe, this question of gender, probably, makes a good topic for discussion, but for the majority of the readers, remains unimportant.

[End]

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24. Irresponsible Writing

As I mentioned in the preceding chapter, formal education does not have much to do with creativity. With sheer persistence and hard work, people may receive master's degrees and doctoral degrees. Often, the doctoral dissertations imply reading by the research scholar numerous books, gathering information either on the Internet or by contacting knowledgeable individuals in a given field, and record all the data in a coherent form in their dissertations. They are also expected to present their own conclusions, hopefully, new thoughts on the subject. Some of the dissertations may contain valuable information, I admit. However, creativity is not the same. At the risk of repetition, I would say, there were numerous writers who had no formal education, yet produced immensely valuable literature.

On the other hand, in recent times, the literary trends seem to imply that, if you can read you can write. I am sure there is some truth to it. That is especially true if an article is informative, and not original or creative. But, when someone thinks, they can pass as great writers by gathering information on the Internet and concocting an article, without doing their research and putting together a responsible article.

The Internet has provided us with an enormous amount of information at our fingertips. Frankly, just by spending fifteen minutes on the Internet, one can easily write a reasonably good article. That is one of the blessings of the Internet.

One of the pitfalls is misinformation. All that appears on the Internet is not necessarily reliable. Writers need to be wary of the possible errors on even reputable sites. Before, I put forth my arguments further, I would like readers to remember that I am not blaming the administrators of the sites I am about to mention. In fact, I have nothing but an enormous respect for all the administrators of those sites. I am a regular visitor of those sites. I use the information from those sites. So, I do not mean by any stretch I am trying to find fault with them. But, like any source of information, there are always some glitches.

On sites like Wikipedia, anybody can make corrections. The sites certainly have policies to make sure that the data is verified before posting it. The administrators keep an eye on the new posts or corrections by users to avoid any misuse or abuse of the facility. Yet, mistakes do happen. Sometimes, an overzealous reader may add what he/she knows, unaware he/she is adding an incorrect piece of information. I have one example that drives my point home. Somebody added some information on Sarayu Rao's page, not knowing he/she mistook her for another actress by the same name. When I corrected it, that person corrected my correction and put back his/her data again. I had to go 3 rounds before I could let him/her understand that I was Sarayu Rao's mother, and I knew better. There were other instances when I made corrections, as I knew for certain.

In Kathanilayam, the places of birth for me and Mandarapu Lalitha and Padma, were noted as Adilabad. I know for a fact, that is not correct. Once again, I am not saying, the administrators are irresponsible. Not at all. All I am saying is mistakes can happen, especially, in humungous sites like Kathanilayam and Wikipedia. Individuals using those sources need to double-check the data, they are going to use. That is the responsibility of the writers.

Writers, as individuals, have the same responsibility. They should make sure they have the right knowledge to write about before posting it on their own site or

submit to a web magazine. One of my experience with a writer's article is a case in point. I will try to be as objective as possible and state my questions.

Dr. Ramesh Prasad Ravella wrote an article carrying the heading, “Nidadavolu Malathi.” [my photo included]. There was also a running title, “Diaspora Literature,” meaning there were several articles under that running title.

In this article, just 4 pages were about Nidadavolu Malathi's translations; and, the rest of the article discussed several translators and original writers like Chekhov, Maupassant, O'Henry and so on. That being the case, how can the author justify using the name of one writer and displaying her photo prominently in the heading? Also, how did the other Telugu writers take it?

The running title also leaves much to be desired. Some of the examples he included are not diaspora literature, not by a long shot. For instance, he writes about a story, “arikaalla kinda mantalu” [burning under one's feet], written by a renowned writer, Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry in 1945. The story illustrates the horrendous conditions under which young widows were forced to live. The story also addresses the widow remarriage movement, started by Veeresalingam. Obviously, the story has no relevance to diaspora literature in an conceivable sense. In all possibility, the author of the article, Ravella Ramesh Prasad, took it as a diaspora literature only because it was translated by a Telugu translator, Ranga Rao, who happened to be living In Delhi, away from his hometown.

In order to obtain a better answer to my question, I posted my questions in a literary group on Whatsapp. One member of the group dismissed it in one word, “hasty.” I expected a discussion of "what is a diaspora story?" and "whether the story mentioned above qualifies to be labeled, “diaspora.” Or, how the title justifies the content in the article as a whole. That is a scholarly discussion. Providing excuses for unjustifiable writing is not scholarly, in my opinion.

I contacted the editors of the magazine, Misimi, and asked what was their justification to print the article. I did not receive any response.

I would also like to point out that several readers gave a “like” to the article on Facebook.

My point is, writers, publishers, and readers, even scholars, are encouraging such irresponsible writings nowadays. Nobody takes the time to study their subject, think about it, and comment cogently. I say this with sadness, since most of them are highly educated.

I do not mean all articles are this ridiculous. Probably, not half of them are as bad. But the fact remains there are enough irresponsible writers, enough to worry about. I say “worry” because, some of these irresponsible writers even make changes on reputable sites like Telugu Wikipedia as mentioned above.

All these mistakes, misinformation will be part of Telugu literature in the history of Telugu literature and get carried over to future generations. That is unconscionable.

October 28, 2023.

About Nidadavolu Malathi

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<http://tethulika.wordpress.com>. Author's original writings in Telugu.

Copies in e-book format are available, free, on her blog, telugu thulika, website, thulika.net, and

https://archive.org/details/@malathi_nidadavolu.

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