



The Way I See It

My Telugu Stories in English

Nidadavolu Malathi

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The Way I See It

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Foreword

After having a few anthologies published (in print and in e-Book format), I decided to compile one anthology devoted to my stories and my translations. In the line of e-Books of my stories, this is the third. As you may be aware, I have two e-Books to my credit, namely, 1. *All I Wanted to was to Read*, and 2. *My Little Friend*.

Some of my stories have been included in the anthologies published by Jaico, Sahitya Akademi, and Lekhini (Hyderabad). This anthology is limited to my translations of my stories and 3 stories by other writers.

The three stories by other writers are, "The Pundit" by Sthanapathi Rukiminamma, "Yearning," by Kalipatnam Rama Rao, and "Uhagaanam Number 9" by Latha. One my reasons for including them in this anthology is, I do not foresee bringing out another anthology of my translations.

"The Pundit" features a peculiar angle to the story. Some people may question the existence of demons. But, the point Rukminamma drives home is the importance of sharing one's knowledge. In a larger context, people who do not disseminate their knowledge are accursed. I liked this story for the writer's flair to tell a story. Rukminamma is certainly talented, I would say.

I included the story, "Yearning", for a different reason. Translating it was a challenge for me. As mentioned earlier, I have no intention of bringing out another anthology, and this story, definitely, deserves to be preserved in a better place than a blog or a website. For those interested in my experiences of translating this story, [click here](#).

As a personal choice, I included one articles from *Uhaagaanam* by Latha. Her articles under the running title, *Uhaaganam*, are brilliant pieces, and many of my generation and the next generation cherish them fondly. I thought I would include to highlight how she brings together the past and the present using a unique mix of humor and ridicule.

I also included three of my stories, previously published in my e-Books. As I was going through the two publications, I noticed some of the translations are more than a decade old. I, in recent years, have learned a lot about grammar, especially, the use of tense in fiction. So, I decided to review my old translations and edit to the best of ability, I mean, at the current level of my ability. All the stories are narrated in the past tense except "Mother Figure."

After editing these three stories, I was wondering if I should review my other translations, too. I am not sure, but may consider it, if readers' response to this edition is considerable. For the present, I started with these three stories, because the Telugu originals of these stories have captured readers' attention greatly.

I added a brief note at the end of each story about the core theme or what inspired me to write/translate it.

On a different note, while people extol the virtues of digitizing, there are also some drawbacks, not mentioned overtly. Links are one of them. Whatever the reasons are, the fact remains the links break. I do not know how the links on my page "naa saahityam PDF lo" [My works in PDF format] were broken. I did not know about the broken links until Kalpana drew my attention to them two months back.

For me, a temporary solution appeared to be to upload all my e-books on to archive.org. Hopefully, they will remain there for a longer period than on my blog.

You may check my page at https://archive.org/details/@malathi_nidadavolu

Consider it as one more resource for my literary works, in case the links on my blog or website do not respond.

Finally, the title, *The Way I See It* refers to my perceptions of the society we live in and the world as I see it. The word, "It", can be the world, the society I live in, or the people I have come to know; sometimes, it is just peripheral.

I tried to portray my perceptions in my stories. Things may not always be the same as they appear to be. Also, not everyone sees things the same way as the others. That is what makes the stories special. Each story tells a story not like the way you see it, but the way the writer sees it.

Thanks for your interest. Your comments are welcome, as always.

- Nidadavolu Malathi

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The Letter Lasts Forever

The Telugu word for letter [alphabet] is akshamam. The literal meaning is “that which stays forever”.

Due to frequent transfers in my father’s job, I could not finish high school the first time. I passed the mid-year exam and waited the next six months to attend college the following year. During that interim period, I had gotten used to shadowing my Mother and learned plenty in the process—more than any education I had received in my school.

Among the lessons I had learned, the most important ones came from Sandraalu, the vegetable vendor, who used to come to our door every day with a basket filled with vegetables picked fresh from her garden in the backyard. She would bring glistening eggplants, tender okra, and the squash which she would not let me touch. She would say that Brahmin women would not buy them if they see nail marks on it.

Sandraalu had a way with words. She was great in telling about the events in her life like an accomplished narrator. Her stories are imprinted on my mind forever, more than any stories I have ever heard anywhere else.

Sandraalu would start with a trite phrase like “nothing stays forever” and then go into a sweeping narration of how she had trusted a Christian father, converted to Christianity, realized that the change had not been for the better, returned home, got an earful from her Mother-in-law, hopped on a bus and ended in a neighboring village, Simhachalam. In Simhachalam, she had met with Jigini Saibu who was running a small tea stall at the bus stop on the outskirts of the village. He listened to Sandraalu’s story and invited her into his home.

He said, “You cook for me and I will provide a roof over your head.”

I do not know how many times I have heard this story. Each time it sounded afresh for me. I had never been tired of her stories.

One day, I asked her, “How come you are selling vegetable and not fish?” That is because she had told me earlier that she was a fisherwoman by birth.

As usual, she went into a spirited narration, swaying like a vine on a windy day. That is how I had learned about her stormy life.

On another day, she said, “That is the thing ma’am. Wretched times, wretched thoughts—follow on the heels of each other. My man and I had a great life, like royalty, from the sales of the fish my man had caught. I brought four kids into this world. Then, that white man came to our village and talked his head off; chewed us up. He said, ‘These high and mighty folks are not treating you well. Are you not people like them? Prick them and they also bleed just like you do, right? Not milk or honey? They don’t let you enter their homes, why? I’m telling you. You come with us. We will give you food, clothes, and let you sit with us in our living rooms.’ He mouthed big talk and I got carried away. At first, my husband was okay with it but

then changed his mind. He said he would not go. My Mother-in-law said, ‘You can go but cannot take the kids.’ I went all right ... but what did I gain? Nothing. I ended up doing the same thing at his house as had been doing before. One rock is as good as another to knock off one’s teeth.”

I understood Sandraalu’s words, partly though. The rest was Greek to me. All the same, I was fascinated by her eloquence. I wanted to ask her, “Tell me, what school you had been to? I want to go to the same school.”

She continued, “Listen to me, I am telling you. You were born to that nice lady, right? She is goddess Lakshmi herself. Can you switch her for another woman? No. Nobody can replace your Mother. You can not. That is the way with religion too. You were born into one religion, you grew up with it, and you stay with it. What is the point of running after things? Nothing. We should learn to find happiness in what we have. That is the real wisdom. You are going to college and getting big education. After that, you’ll go away on an airplane to another country, looking for morsel of food.”

I was amused but the words that I “would go away looking for a morsel of food” pricked at my heart.

“How do you know?” I asked her.

“I know all these things, little ma’am. After I am done with this basket, I wait at the bus stop round the corner. There, people talk all these things. It is like All India Radio, you know,” she said with a piquant smile.

Sandraalu was the Mother of four kids. One day I asked her why she did not sent them to school.

“What do we need all that schooling for, madam? Labor is our life. If we don’t put in our day’s work, we can not eat. Unless we eat, we can not work. I earn four rupees a day and the kids bring a rupee each; then we have eight rupees in all. That gets us through the day. For us, the kids are the assets, madam,” she said.

I shut up. I did not have the heart to tell her that education is important and that a person without education is nothing. She is telling me survival comes first. You can accomplish anything only after finding food to live.

Sandraalu had come to her senses. She understood that switching religion did not bring her prosperity. She returned to her husband and the family but it was too late. Her husband had already found another woman and settled down.

Sandraalu, in despair, jumped on the first bus and arrived in Simhachalam town. She ran into Jigini Sayibu, a tea-stall owner, running his stall next to the bus stand. He suggested, “You cook food for me, I provide a roof over your head.” Sandraalu said fine.

Sandraalu could not sit in the hut all day doing nothing. She was not that kind of woman. She decided to plant a vegetable garden and start her own business. Everyday, early in the morning she would pick fresh vegetables and go door to door in the neighboring city and earn a little money of her own.

One day, I asked her, “You say life goes on, and nothing stays forever. You believe that, why aren’t you staying home? Why bother to grow vegetables, take the bus to the city ... all that hassle? What is the point?”

I asked because she had said her earlier that Jigini sayibu had asked her the same question. It seems he said to her, “My income from the tea-stall is plenty for both of us. Why sell vegetables?”

In response to my question, she said, “Madam, we are human, right? What did the God Almighty say? He said, ‘you do your duty and I will do mine.’ What does that mean? As a human being, you have a dharma. You do what you need to do. Don’t ask what is this or that. No point in hair-splitting legalities.” She went on for the next fifteen minutes lecturing on the legalities in real life situations. Something in her manner rendered me speechless.

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Nearly one half of a century passed by yet the words of Sandraalu stayed on my mind as if they were etched in stone, as if I heard them just yesterday or the day before.

I live in America now. I sat in my office and was watching through the window the discolored sky like washed out dhoti, the Maple trees in skeletal state, more like the sages smeared with ashes, standing on one leg and meditating—the entire atmosphere seemed to hold mirror to time, something like a work in progress.

My brain became numb for no reason. At this time I should be on my couch, curled up and sipping hot coffee or much spicy pakora, and dissolve into the far-off space.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, Sandraalu came to mind.

Thirty years have passed by since I arrived in America. In the past twenty years, I had been through seven computers in a crazy attempt to keep up with the fast changing technology; I had been through all the stuff from 5¼ floppy disks to the ini cds, which would fit snugly in my palm; switched from desktop to laptop, not to the blackberry though. Not yet anyways. I feel like a beat up ferryboat caught in violent floods, I was stuck on idea of using the “new and improved” versions that mushroom the market endlessly. I have to follow them like the groom who repeats the marital vows mindlessly after the priest in the traditional wedding ceremony.

I have changed the Telugu fonts five times to date. I have to follow the dictates of technology for the fear of facing the music of disrepair. All my writings would be lost to the posterity and that scares me. I can not let that happen.

In truth, all this philosophical self-examination originated from the aggravation caused by my boss. Here is what had happened a year ago.

A Telugu-educated American professor decided to start a company for digitizing the books in Indian languages. He offered to digitalize the books published in Indian languages, reformat them attractively, and save them for future generations for a fee. He suggested that he would take care of the marketing, if I agree to do the work as stated above. I know mine is not a marketing brain. Therefore, I accepted his proposition.

I was not sure why Telugu people could not have this work done at home. After all, most of the software engineers are from Andhra Pradesh. Although I agreed to his proposal tentatively, I was not sure that we would get any business for the same reason, that most of the software engineers are in India and thus it would make sense for them to undertake the project themselves. I was wrong. I do not know how but my boss succeeded in receiving business. To my great surprise, there are people in Andhra Pradesh willing to shell down good money and get the work done in America. Is it the concept of outsourcing that got to them, I do not know. Do they want to be part of this overwhelming globalization? Do they believe the language acquires a new hue in the hands of white folks?

I do not know. It is beyond my wildest imagination but it has happened. We are getting projects for digitization.

Working on the actual project is a different story. I was shocked by the language in the book I was expected to digitize. To illustrate this part in English is a task in itself. The vocabulary, the grammar and the sentence construction are horrible. I am lost; no way I can describe the spelling in English for your comprehension. I can not imagine any Telugu man or woman speaking like that, much less writing. From what planet this man or woman has come?

I explained the problems with the text to my boss. “Can we send the book back and ask them to revise and send the correct version?” I asked him politely.

My boss stared at me; he was polite. He leaned forward, leaned on my desk, and said softly, “Our job is digitizing whatever we have received. It is not our place to correct their language and grammar.”

I know I am not supposed to correct them but there are places where any person with any respect for language cannot tolerate. And also places where I would have to make judgment call, which possibly is not fair, given the circumstances.

My boss looked at me as if he was pondering over and then said, “All right. I will contact them. In the meantime, you continue your work the best you can.”

“All right,” I nodded. Maybe I offended him by pointing out the mistakes. Maybe he was offended because I was the one that found them.

He added, “Our job is to digitalize whatever we are given, not correcting them.”

My spirits start drooping. Reaching out for a panacea, I start surfing Telugu web sites.

The computer era is permanent, is here to stay. I make no mistake in that regard, no illusions. However, there is a lot that is not permanent within the field of computers.

Suddenly a huge wave of depression surged in my heart. Half of the Telugu bloggers are software engineers. They are busy creating new programs and creating new programs to improve the hardware.

I am also part of that consumerism that is eating us away—constantly upgrading and updating the software and the hardware in my computer. I have run through the storage gadgets from 5½ floppies to palm-sized mini CDs and backup drives. I have upgraded my computer one after another from 80 processors to Pentium IV. The

Telugu fonts I had started went out of date long time ago. The time I had spent digitizing my stories had been wasted for all practical purposes. How many times can I key in my stories? Even PDF files I had created at the time, some of them at least, are not readable on some of the computers anymore.

Samdralu's words are ringing in my ears like the bells in the Rama temple. "Nothing stays forever," she said with conviction. After all these years, it seemed to make sense for me, finally.

I opened the book I was supposed to digitalize and started typing away vigorously.

(End)

(Author's note: The word, "aksharam" literally means "that which is indestructible." Regarding the title, I need to explain my understanding (actually, misunderstanding of the line), was the letter (a character) is indestructible. Now, at the time of this writing, I searched on the Internet, and have found the words are epithets referring to Lord Vishnu from *Narayana suktam*. Since all my knowledge of Telugu literature has been whatever I could discern from the stories I read in my younger days, this kind of mistakes happened in my stories. My apologies for misinterpreting the line (or words, I should.)

In my story, I tried to illustrate how digitizing does not always mean preserving forever. My own experiences, as I moved from 5 1/4 floppy discs to USB drive (Even these are changing fast) in this area prompted me write about it.

(The Telugu original, "aksharam paramam padam," has been published on *eemaata.com*, and later on *tetulika.wordpress.com*. The translation has been published on *thulika.net*, December 2008.)

Dear Almighty!

Highly regarded, most revered, Almighty and Omniscient Devudu garu,

I, one of the tiny specks in your vast universe of zillions of creatures, am presenting this letter with utmost respect and humility for your kindest consideration, and may I add, appropriate action. It is my pious hope that you would take a minute from your very busy schedule, and take my appeal seriously.

I do believe that I have a right to make this appeal since I am one of the zillions and zillions of creatures you have created and you are responsible for. By the same logic, you are also responsible for my birth and death. Ever since I was a child, my parents and grandparents taught me to trust you and seek answers from you.

That you are responsible for my birth and death has been established. My birth is a thing of past. It has happened, it is over and we can't do anything about it. My grandma said even God cannot change the past. Thus we can work only on the present and future. So, we will leave it at that. As for death, my friends do not appreciate my referring to it so early in this appeal. So, it is deferred for now.

Now let us talk about the time in between, that is my birth and death. Just like you, I have got this avatar and I think I have executed my assignment superbly. Well, I can be modest and say, "to the best of my ability," but I do not see any need for that. After all you are omniscient, and being so, you know what I am capable of doing and not doing.

Probably, this is right time to say something about my language skills. I know this is not written in a highly sophisticated lingo. However you need to understand that I can work only with the matter you have put in my head. My limitations come with the territory. As and when you choose to put better quality matter in it, I promise to compose a better version. So, for now, this is the only version I can provide. (Once again I can be cute and say "deal with it" but probably not a good idea. So, I leave it as an aside).

As for my questions, for starters:

You have given me jobs not commensurate with my qualifications,

Relocated me to places I did not care for,

Delivered goods I did not want at my door.

And when I ask for something I would like to have, you suggest I do penance for one hundred years standing on one leg!

How that is fair?

What did I do to deserve this?

My next question is about avatars. You told Arjuna that you would take an avatar as and when Dharma is violated. So, where are you? Don't you see the world is

in a turmoil, and people are suffering horrendously. Most of the population is bewildered for want of direction and the other few are busy making it worse. What are you waiting for? Do you think it is not the right time yet? Well, I beg to differ. When a loser acts like a winner and even gather support for his crazy idea, I think this is the time for intervention, I mean your next avatar. If you are really committed to protecting the innocent and punishing the wicked, this IS the time in my humble opinion. You see I am still being humble.

Now I will come to my avatar. I will have to refer to your teachings once again. You have stated that detachment means accepting all criticism, positive and negative, equally, including neglect. Frankly, I don't have any control over those who criticize. Therefore, you have to intervene and tell them to give me criticism, positive and negative, in equal proportions. Then I will have a chance to accept all of them.

As I said earlier, you delivered me in this avatar, ill-equipped I might add. Regardless I have completed my assignment. It is time for I assume another avatar. It need not be on this earth specifically. As you may be aware, I am very adaptive and can fit into any place or position.

Respectfully Yours,

A Tiny Speck in Your Universe.

P.S.: I will tell your Mother if I don't get a reply by return post. My apologies in advance. - Tiny speck.

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(A brief note: The sketch is written, partly, in jest. I am also befuddled by what is happening currently in this world, in this country. The atrocities in today's world provoked me into thinking the atrocities being committed as God's failures.

The Telugu original, "devudugariki naa vijnapana," on Telugu thulika, August 12, 2021. [Click here.](#)

What is Dharma?

A ten-year-old boy went to a Guru and asked him to teach him about Dharma.

The Guru agreed and gave him a lengthy lesson on Dharma for over 4 hours. "Go home and think about it," Guru said at the end.

"I will, Guruji. At what time should I come tomorrow?" the boy asked.

"No need to come back," Guru said.

"No, Guruji. I have to come back. My Mother said she would not give me food unless I get this lesson from you."

"Alright. Come tomorrow morning at ten."

After the boy left, Guru's wife asked, "He did not seem to have gotten the point. What is the point of telling him to come again?"

"He will get it," Guru replied.

The wife insisted he would not. "He is willing to come back only because his Mother would not feed him unless he takes the lessons," she said.

"Have you heard of the proverb *bhukti kudirite gaani nishta kudaradu*"? It means one can't focus on acquiring knowledge unless one is sure of getting food. He has understood the path to obtain food. His hunger for knowledge comes next."

[End]

Author's note: I posted the Telugu version of this story in a group on Whatsapp. At the time of writing this story, I was thinking of the proverb quoted in the story, which basically refers to a practical approach.

However, there was a comment by an eminent Sanskrit scholar, Brahmasri Rani Sadasivamurthy garu, which was interesting.

With his permission, I included his comment here.

The story depicts the well-known Sanskrit maxim *Dharmo rakshati rakshitah* Dharma protects those who protect it..

The Guru understood his wife's view. Yet, he performed his duty as a guru, which is to appreciate the young boy's wish to learn, and taught him. That is "protecting Dharma."

(The Telugu original, "bhukti kudirite gaani nishta kudaradu" on Telugu thulika, October 20, 2022)

Mother Figure

Sarada is waiting for the elevator.

The man next to her pressed the button for a third time, staring at the number on the wall, 3. Looks like somebody stopped it on the third floor. A young man in plaid shirt comes running and presses the button, that is already bright. Sarada has been watching him for a week now. His office is only two flights up. He can take the stairs as easily but he wouldn't. He just stands there as long as he has to, fidgety and annoyed.

He presses the button again.

Sarada is amused.

"All this technology is supposed to save time," he says.

"That is the message, I guess, like in the story of the hare and the tortoise," Sarada says with a twinkle in her eye.

There, Julie appears at the other end of the corridor, walking hastily towards them, and waves, as if asking to stop the elevator.

Sarada looks up at the row of numbers, number 3 still.

"Perhaps I should take the stairs," the young man in plaid shirt says, addressing no one in particular.

Julie is getting closer.

The thought of taking stairs flashes across Sarada's mind for a split second. She looks up; number 3 dimmed, finally. She grits her teeth, feels cheated. It's not fair. Two, one. Elevator has arrived, doors open.

Julie has not caught up, not close enough yet. She yells, "Hey, wait, stop."

Sarada quickly says, "hi" and walks into the elevator.

The young man in the plaid shirt pushes close button.

Julie, gasping for breath, sticks her foot between the doors and slides into the elevator. "Ha, I made it," she says, with a satisfactory smile.

"Yes," Sarada nods vaguely.

"How're you?"

"Okay. How're you?"

"Fine, just fine."

"Anything new?" Sarada asks sounding casual, as if it was expected of her.

"Yes," Julie responds with a glee.

THAT is a surprise. She has never finished a sentence with a single, insipid, 'Yes.'

Ninth floor. Both of them step out on to the corridor and walk to our desks, without another word. They hardly settle down in their seats, Julie's cell rings.

Sarada has been watching her for six months now. Almost everyday, the phone rings a dozen times. Always, it is about an hour-long chat. If not phone, somebody comes to her desk and chats with her for 30 to 40 minutes. Midst all of this, Julie finds time to shoot a volley of questions at her.

"Indira Gandhi is acting like a dictator. What do you think of that?"

"I heard of the huge population in your country. What do you people manage?"

"Isn't poverty in India appalling?"

Finally, one fine day, Sarada gives it to her. "Look, first of all, I don't have the stomach for politics. Secondly, I do have enough things to keep myself busy and not worry about fixing the world. So, don't ask me these questions."

Julie is silent for few seconds, and then pulls out a cigarette, "Mind?"

Yes, I do mind, she told herself but gives her 'go ahead' nod, reluctantly. Julie knows that too.

"Seen the news today? A woman stabbed her hubby with a kitchen knife. It says he beat her up constantly as if it is his birthright. Do men in India beat their wives? And the women take it without protest?"

These questions, doubts, preconceived notions about her Motherland drives her crazy.

Heinous position of women in my society ...

Appalling poverty ...

Bride-burning ...

Arranged marriages ...

Numerous Babas and umpteen gods ...

Endless questions, on and on.

"Have we gotten the mail yet?" the usual question to change the subject.

"Not yet. Me too, waiting for the mail, I mean," the same response, as always.

"Let me check. Excuse me," Sarada gets up from her seat, just finding an excuse to leave the desk. She knows the mailman brings mail to her desk in a few minutes.

"Why? Something special?" Julie asks.

Before she could come up with an answer, Julie's cell started ringtones. That ties her up for another 30 to 40 minutes. What a relief! Sarada dismisses the idea of going for the mail and opens the files on her desk.

It is hard to focus on work, she frowns. However much she has tried, she could not focus on work because she is so annoyed by Julie's demeanor. Your country, your government, Indira Gandhi, women's plight, homeless children, hungry population ... Ugh, rubbish.

Why does she have to worry about these matters?

Doesn't she have any thing else in her life to worry about?

Is she or is she not happy? No peace of mind, not even for a day? Why not find some gratifying avocation? Why can't she get busy with her work? Why did she take this job in the first place?

Julie hangs up and looks out the window. "Isn't it gorgeous?" she mumbles as if she is talking to herself.

"Yes," Sarada says, knowing full-well her colleague isn't really looking for a response. In the country where she comes from, it is more often than not, they feel scorched by the unbearable heat.

"It must be very hot there? I wonder how you people could take all that heat," Julie says again.

Mail has arrived. Sarada thanks her stars and starts opening them—a couple of catalogs, a promo notification from an insurance company, explaining what could happen if she died without insurance, another explaining an easy plan to make millions without spending a dime, ... She throws them into the wastepaper basket and turns to work on hand.

She couldn't help looking at Julie. Julie is staring at the letter in her hand, looking tense.

Sarada goes to Peter's office to discuss an important matter. When she returned to her seat, she finds Julie still in the same posture, staring at the same letter.

"Where did you go?" She asked her, weakly.

Sarada is in no mood to chat. She makes a faint gesture towards Peter's office and buries herself in the files.

"In there for quite a while. What's the problem?"

Sarada knows what she meant. A few others also have made similar insinuations. She also knows Peter does not have a special interest in her. It is not hard to guess why. She works like a donkey for one and a half person's work and gets paid three quarters of wages. But Julie does not believe that. "You know Peter has left his wife," she says with a wry smile.

Sarada hates the insinuations.

"Look, I don't care a damn about his personal life. As far as I am concerned, people in this office are no different from this pile of files," she says, holding a bunch of files and waving them at her.

Julie's face turns pales. Perhaps, it was too harsh, maybe. Maybe, she could've tried to be a little polite, for the sake of appearances, at least.

Julie pulls out a cigarette from the packet, looks at it as if she is having second thoughts.

Sarada turns to her files again. She had a long discussion with Peter, but it didn't help. It is frustrating.

Julie noticed it. "What is it about?" she says, pointing to the files.

Sarada makes some uncanny noise and shakes her head, "Nothing."

Julie looks at her cigarette and puts it back into the box.

Sarada is taken aback. She's never seen Julie return a cigarette to the packet. It is like Lord Rama's arrow; once set in the bow, it must be shot.

She asks gently, "What's the matter?"

Julie keeps staring at the paper in front of her. Something must be seriously wrong; must be very painful.

Suddenly, Julie jumps to her feet, and walks to Sarada's desk. "See this," she hands a newspaper clipping to her.

It is an obituary notification, announcing a woman named Harriet A. Christensen in a city called Peoria has died of heart attack. Age 50. Funeral service to be held next Sunday.

Sarada is confused. Julie has told her previously that her Mother's name was Barbara. So, what is the connection? How does this fit into Julie's life?

"A close relative?"

Julie does not respond right away. Takes a few minutes and then says slowly, hardly audible, "She was the woman who'd given birth to me."

Sarada is stunned, feels like a huge boulder hit her in the head.

Time seems to be moving slowly, very slowly, at a snail's pace.

Julie continues in a very low voice, "She was my Mother. It took me 16 years to learn this truth. I was eleven when I first came to know that Sorensons are my adoptive parents. Ever since I've learned my status, I've been going crazy to find my birth Mother. I can't even count how many people I've contacted—doctors, nurses, resident doctors, student nurses, schools, newspapers, county clerks, and even people in the neighborhoods I thought she might be living ... I've even visited a couple of morgues. Just for this purpose, I've joined three organizations in three states."

She stops for a minute, and sighs. For some reason, it doesn't feel like it is a sigh of relief. "Yesterday, finally, I received this letter notifying me that she is in Peoria. I spent all night thinking about her, about her looks, what she might be thinking, wondering if she was looking for me, thinking of visiting her ..."

She smiles a faint smile and takes the newspaper clipping from Sarada's hand. "Isn't it funny that I saw her, or at least would like to think so, I've seen her when I was born. For the second time, I would see her when she's gone. Ironical, isn't it," she weeps silently.

Sarada feels a knot in her stomach. Almost involuntarily, she gets up, puts her arm around her shoulder, and says, “Come on, let’s have some coffee.”

Julie looks up into her face. Tears in her eyes are glistening.

As they continue to walk in the corridor, riding in the elevator, sitting down in the cafeteria, Julie keeps narrating her story, intermittently, her struggles with the one question: Why. Why did her Mother had given her away, why didn’t she contact the daughter she had given away? And, she talks about the things she had said to other people in her desperation, the troubles she had to go through, the insults that had been poured on her, ...

Sarada sits there listening to her, without saying one word. All of a sudden, she sees that Julie is like an open book. Everything about her—her words and her actions—become so clear! So natural!

Julie stops for a few minutes. Sarada is still in a state of shock. She couldn’t find a word to say to her.

Then, as if in a reverie, she speaks, “I think marriages in your country are much less complicated. The adults will take care of everything. There won’t be any children, who knew nothing about their fathers.”

Sarada is cut to the quick. She has understood what she is saying. Julie asks her again, “Are you going to have an arranged marriage?”

That does it. Sarada jumps to her feet, “Oh, God, I almost forgot, there is a file I should have finished yesterday. I’ve to go. Talk to you later. Excuse me. Take care,” She rushes to her seat, leaving a couple of dollars on the table for coffee.

The earth seems to whirl around me.

Marriages in my country are less complicated.

The adults will take care of everything.

Everything much much better there.

Children, who knew nothing about their fathers.

Oh, God! Oh, God, help me,

she wails silently at her heart.

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“I asked Peter for permission to go home. I won’t be in for a couple of days. Going to attend the funeral service.”

“I am sorry about your Mother.”

“Thank you,” she says, heading towards the door.

Sarada nodded in acknowledgement.

Julie left.

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This is mind-boggling for Sarada. A turmoil in her head. Julie's words are ringing in her head like church bells. She staring at the file in front of her. Everything is fuzzy. Looks at the watch; one more hour to go. Julie has just left. She can't ask for permission to leave at the same time. No, Peter wouldn't appreciate that.

Adults ... arranged marriage ... father unknown ... I am going crazy.

She picks up the phone and dials uncle Chinnappa's number.

"Hello," aunt Kamakshi from the other side. Usually, she doesn't pick up the phone.

"Hello, Auntie," Sarada says, a bit hesitant.

"Sarada!"

"Yes, Auntie, it's me, Sarada! How're you?"

"Good. You? How're you?"

It took a minute to reply. "Yes, I am fine. Just ... feeling bored. Thought I'd talk to you."

"That's fine. Glad you called."

"Me too."

"Good. What else? Haven't heard from you for ages."

"Nothing much, really, nothing in particular. Felt like talking to you today, catching up, you know. Can you come over ... just for chat ..." Sarada says, fumbling for words.

"Of course. Sure, I'll be there. Tell me what is good time for you."

"Today? Later in the evening, I can pick you up, after work. I'll be done in about half hour. I'll drive straight to your place, pick you up and we can go somewhere. Don't worry, I'll drive you back to your home again." Sarada hangs up with a sigh of relief. Feels like she has won half the battle.

"Alright," Kamakshi says and hangs up. That is very much in step with her character. Each word sounds like she has carefully thought it out and weighed in each letter. No questions, she just listens.

"Will you call your uncle and tell him that I am going to your place?"

"Sure, I will."

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Sarada shows at Uncle's door at 5:15 sharp. Aunt Kamakshi is waiting at the door. She wore a light pink cotton sari and same color blouse. Sarada gets out of the car, walks around and opens the door on the passenger side. Kamakshi settles in her seat with a gentle smile. It is almost like she has understood the gravity of Sarada's situation. It is a short ride along the lake. Cool breeze gently is blowing into their faces. Sarada slows down and says, "Let's sit here. It is so pleasant and comforting."

They get out of the car and walk closer to water. Sand under their feet is tickling. Small waves are rolling leisurely at a calculated pace. A couple of ducks are gliding on the waves.

Sarada is struggling to find the right words.

Kamakshi is enjoying the beautiful scenery, as if there is not a care in the world. Perhaps, that is her way of giving the time Sarada might need.

A few minutes pass by.

“Have you heard from home?” Kamakshi asks.

Sarada is relieved. That’s what she likes about auntie. She knows what to say when

“Yes. I received a letter last week.”

Once again, silence prevails for a few minutes.

Sarada, looking into the horizon, speaks in a low voice, “I know my brother and sister-in-law are taking a very good care of my child. I am fully aware of it. No doubt. My baby is being raised with the best care any child could hope for. ...” Sarada stops for a second, takes a deep breath and continues, “However, it is actually my responsibility, my duty. It is my job to raise my child. I have to do it. She should not be deprived of both the parents. I want to tell her that I care about her, I want her to be with me.”

Ha! Such a relief after speaking those few words; it is like a big burden lifted off her chest. She already feels elated as if she has the child in her arms, held tight to her bosom.

“That’s good. Good decision,” says Kamakshi.

Kamakshi looks at Sarada. Her face is so serene. Little smiles spread on their faces like the little ripples on the lake.

The very next thought that comes to Sarada is: Tomorrow I am going to tell Julie ...

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The Telugu original, “Amma tapana”, has been published in *Andhra Jyothi* weekly, November 12, 1982.

[Click here for the original Telugu story, "amma tapana."](#) [a mother's anguish]

Translated by author in the late 90’s and included in an anthology.)

(Author's note: After I arrived in America, I was taken by the cultural differences and similarities in the two countries. To me, it became a habit to note how two cultures dealt with a similar issue.

This story is about an unwed mother. While in India, adoption of the child of an unwed mother is usually resolved in a covert fashion, in America, there is a system put in place to deal with the issue. By portraying one mother and one adopted daughter, I tried to illustrate not only two sides of the issue, but also the process in two cultures.)

Lord Siva Commands!

It was Tuesday. Sumana set flowers, camphor, and lamp wicks for puja. She did not believe in the daily worship but her husband, Siva Rao, performed every day. She made the necessary arrangements. That day also she began setting the stage, but mind was a thousand miles away.

Two days back, kathala Atthayya garu (Storyteller Auntie) called from Milwaukee and let her know that she had arrived in Milwaukee. A month ago, she had arrived in New York and called Sumana from there to tell her she would like to see her. Ever since she heard from Atthayya garu, Sumana could hardly contain herself. She told Siva Rao. He said, "Let will see." A trip to New York would take planning. Now Atthayya garu was in Milwaukee, only a couple of hours drive. Sumana asked Siva Rao and he said sure.

On Friday, he said, "We can go to Milwaukee tomorrow."

Sumana looked at him with disbelief. Her big eyes became bigger; really?

"Yes," he said.

The Lord Siva has issued His command! [Refers to a Telugu proverb which says not even an ant will sting unless the Lord Siva commands it, Sivudaaajna ayitee kaani cheemaina kuttadu.], the phrase resounded in her head.

Sumana was nine-years old when she chanced to meet a lady in the neighborhood and befriend her. She used to call her kathala Atthayya garu [storyteller auntie] fondly.

After nearly thirty years, she heard from the same kathala Atthayya garu again. She was ecstatic.

This is how it happened: Atthayya garu came to California for a visit with her son, Rambabu. One day, while she was turning pages of a local Telugu magazine, to her great surprise saw Sumana's name. She brought it to her son's notice right away. "Ohhhhhhh, this little girl I know her. So she lives here now? She is like a daughter to me, don't you remember? She used to come to our house everyday ... I knew her since she was this little," and she held her hand as if she was marking the girl's height in the air. Rambabu got on his laptop at once, conducted a people's search, found Sumana's phone number, and dialed the number.

Sumana picked up the phone and said hello.

"Wait, I'll get your friend," he dropped the handset on the table and went away. Sumana was confused. Who this friend could be? Before she came to any conclusion, she heard hello from the other end. The voice sounded a bit mature, to be a friend of her age.

Sumana said hello back and asked apprehensively, “Who’s this, madam?”
“Me, dear, your story-teller Atthayya from Mangalagiri, remember? You used to come to our house every day in the evening after school.”

“Wow, kathala Atthayya garu! Oh, no, how could I forget you? When did you come? Where are you?” Sumana was startled and choked; she could hardly contain herself for all the joy the tidings over the phone had brought. She could barely keep her feet on the ground.

“Yes, ammayi! Rambabu is in California now, you know. He bought a house. I came for gruhapravesam[Ceremony marking family’s move into a new home.],” she said, feeling elated that the little girl had not forgotten her.

“Wow, listening to your voice again, is so nice, feels like I am in your kitchen again!” said Sumana.

“Where do you live? Are you close by?”

“No, Atthayya garu, California is far away for us. If you come to Chicago, let me know. We will come to see to you.”

“Chicago? I don’t know about that. I will go to Madison. Is that close?”
“Ah, yes, it is close, very close, Atthayya garu. When will you be in Madison?” Sumana was thrilled by the prospect.

“I don’t know yet, Ammayi. My father’s brother’s granddaughter lives there. She has asked me a few times to visit her. Her husband has some job in some company. She stays home with her two kids. I am not sure yet, thinking about it though. The travel here is such a hassle, you know.”

“Please, do come. I would like to see you also. We will come to Milwaukee and bring you to our house. You have to see our house. Travel is hassle, I understand. It is not that easy in this country despite all the flights,” said Sumana, feeling choked

“Who’s she?” asked Pandu. He understood mom was talking to somebody she liked very much.

“Attayya garu,” she said and explained to him how she had met her and become fond of her. She went on talking about Atthayya garu, unaware the boy had stopped listening.

Atthayya garu called Sumana after she had arrived in Milwaukee. Her uncle’s granddaughter, Ratnamala also was very amiable; she invited Sumana to her place. Ever since Sumana had received the news, she had been trying to persuade her husband Siva Rao to take her to Milwaukee to visit her favorite Atthayya garu from her childhood days. Unfortunately, Siva Rao had not been able to do so; something or other was coming in the way. The fact was he would not miss a puja or a religious ceremony in any Telugu home within one hundred miles radius under any circumstance. At the beginning Sumana did not want to go with him to those festivities, but he prevailed upon her, eventually. He told her, “If you do not believe in God, that is fine. Just come for a sumptuous meal called prasadam.[Food or fruits offered to God and eaten by devotees as a sign of receiving His blessings.]” That worked for her. Their six-year-old son Pandu would jump on any occasion that got him out of the house. After that, it had become a tradition in their family. However, the current situation put Sumana in a different mood.

Sumana was losing hope; kathala Atthayya garu would leave Milwaukee and go back to California the following Sunday. After that, she would not get another chance to see her again.

“Let’s go to Milwaukee coming Saturday,” Siva Rao.

Sumana’s heart shot to her throat. Thoughts about the storyteller auntie rose in her head like a swarm of bumble bees. Sumana was floating on the clouds after Siva Rao announced that they would be going to Milwaukee on Saturday. She could not sleep all night. She could recall her visits to Atthayya garu’s home, the mind-boggling aroma from the spices Atthayya garu used in her cooking. Finally in the wee small hours her eyelids drooped heavily.

The car stopped in front of Ratnamala’s home. She invited them in gleefully. Sumana’s eyes were hovering around in the room for the person she had been looking forward to see. She sat on the edge of the sofa. Her heart was pounding like the little engine.

“Attayya garu will be here in a minute,” said Ratnamala; a little smile spread on her lips, understandingly.

Pandu was restless. Siva Rao was trying to keep Pandu occupied.

“What would you like to have? Coke, coffee, tea?” asked Ratnamala.

Pandu said coke. Siva Rao said no thanks. Sumana shook her head, nothing for me.

She wanted to see only Atthayya garu. That was all she wanted. She kept looking around and toward the staircase. When will this wait end?

Attayya garu appeared on the staircase, at last. She was small of stature yet had a commanding personality, like the statue of goddess Rajarajeswari devi in a temple. The signs of age were visible yet nothing changed. She was fair complexioned, always displaying an amicable smile on her red lips, eyes radiated affection; hair turned gray giving the whole face a new glow. Back then, her hair was shiny black. She would apply coconut oil and comb it neatly, put it in a bun, and tuck a bunch of jasmine flowers in it. Then, she would make one more bunch of jasmines and keep it on the little table by the door for Sumana.

Sumana sat there glued to the chair and watching Atthayya garu as she walked down the stairs. Atthayya garu walked up to her, took her chin in the palm, and said in a touching voice, “Let me see your face. I am getting old, can’t see clearly. So, how’re you doing? Is this your kid? Very cute, looks just like you.”

She went on and on asking question after question nonstop. Sumana’s eyes turned moist for all the kindness Atthayya garu was showering. Yes, that’s my boy, he is my husband ... she was answering in the same order. She wanted to ask as many questions, wanted to tell so many things, not a single word would come out of her mouth.

Atthayya garu sat next to her, put her hand gently on Sumana’s head, and said, “It’s so long since I’ve seen you ... You’ve grown up so much, I never thought I could see you again, not even in a dream ... As the Lord Siva wills it, I believe.”

“True, Atthayya garu, I also wanted to see you, always thinking about you, but never thought it would happen.” “Yes. As they say, even an ant would not sting unless He commands it.”

“It will sting if you stick your finger into its anthill,” Pandu said, referring to the story he had heard so many times.

Atthayya garu laughed heartily, “Aha, did your mom tell you that? Even then the ant would sting only Lord Siva orders him to sting.”

“How would we know the ant has His command?” he asked.

Atthayya garu pinched his cheek playfully and said, “You’re also into stories like mom? You’ll know it when it stings you.”

“It won’t sting if it did not have His command?”

“No, it won’t.”

Ratnamala smiled and said, “Let’s eat. It is getting late.” She went into the kitchen.

Pandu sat there with a pout. He was bored. Ratnamala noticed it and said, “I wish my kids were home. They would have great time. Unfortunately, they went to a birthday party; my first son’s friend’s birthday. I told them to stay home but they wouldn’t listen.” She turned on the cartoon channel and handed the remote to Siva Rao and went into the kitchen.

“Can I help?” Sumana followed her.

“It’s almost done, not much really. Just ready in five minutes. You two chat. I’m sure you’ve a lot to talk about,” she said.

At the table, Atthayya garu sat next to Sumana, gently playing with the curls on her forehead and talking, “You had a dark, thick mop of hair; I used to struggle to braid it. Did your husband tell you to cut it?”

“Oh no. He did not say anything. I did it myself. Just a matter of convenience; easy to take care, you know.”

“Is he making good money? Our people come here for the money only, leaving behind families and properties; isn’t it true? Are you saving? We never know when goddess Lakshmi comes and goes. Why aren’t you working? Did your husband object? So, how come you have only one child? He is making good money, you have everything, you should have bellyful of kids. One eye is not an eye and one child is not a child, my Mother-in-law used to say. I also have only one child, Rambabu, you know.”

Sumana was flabbergasted. She never imagined this side of Atthayya garu—endless flow of inquiries about her personal life. She did not know how to answer them. She felt like a little chicken caught in the hands of a naughty boy. Her heart shrunk; she threw a desperate look at Ratnamala, with “save me” look. Ratnamala was busy with something on hand and with her head down. Or, she could be enjoying the scene. Probably, she had been in that situation earlier.

Sumana gathered all the strength she had and made a desperate attempt to stop Atthayya garu as she said, “Oh, no, no, he did not say anything, nothing at all. In fact, he never interferes in my decisions. I just do whatever I please, that’s it. He is not like that at all.”

“How come you are not working? I’ve heard here you have all kinds of facilities to take care of children.”

“I thought I’d rather take care of children myself than hand them over to others. Children are more important to me.” It hurt her to think Atthayya garu felt she did something wrong.

Ratnamala wanted to say something in defense of moms taking care of children. “That’s what I said, too,” she said, setting the table. “Will you tell them the food is ready,” she said to Sumana, putting an end to the chat temporarily.

Sumana thanked her stars and her hostess, jumped to her feet, and dashed to the living room. She came back and sat next to Pandu on the pretext she needed to feed him. However, she could not escape from the torrent of questions from Atthayya garu completely.

Atthayya garu sat across from her and continued her inquiries: Is the young man [her husband] treating you well? Is he doing well in his job? You own the house? On the way home, Siva Rao turned to Sumana and asked, “Happy?”

Sumana could not come up with a good answer for his question.

Sumana put down the pen and started folding the paper in her hand. Siva Rao returned from office. He saw the paper and asked, “Letter? From whom?” Sumana handed over the letter to him without saying a word.

Siva Rao took it and stared at her. From Atthayya garu? Sure looks like it! He was confused.

Sumana shook her head, read it.

Siva Rao sat down and started reading the letter.

“chiranjeevi saubhagyavathi Sumanaki,[In our culture, the form of address at the beginning of letter reflects relationships between the two as well as blessings or regards as the case maybe. The address here indicates the old lady started the letter with her blessings to the young woman.]

Your Atthayya garu blesses you and writes as follows. I am doing well here and hope you all are doing well.

I was very happy you came from so far away just to see me. I never thought I would see you again in this lifetime, my little girl! You remembered me and came to see me. It made me so happy. May God bless you! You’ve always been a good girl, even when you were a little kid. Remember, you used to come running to our home after school every day. I waited for you everyday eagerly and your uncle teased me, your pet child has not come yet? At the time you were six-years old. you’ve grown into beautiful young woman right in front of my eyes and finished high school. I, however, see you only as that six-year old child. That’s why I was so excited yesterday. I was so excited, wanted to ask you so many questions, wanted to know everything about you ... I could barely contain myself, my dear. How’re you? What are you doing? How is your marriage? Is he taking good care of you?

Probably, it was annoying. But, what can I say? What can I do? You know I am not educated like you. You tell me, how would I know the manners of your generation? I have no idea what movies you watch and what politics you talk about. That's all Sanskrit to me. I live in my small world, talk only about the few things I know, and only in a way I know how. That's all. Anyway, while we are on the subject, I am asking again. Is your husband treating you kindly? He is not into drinking and flirting, right? Okay, never mind. I've seen him. He looked pretty decent to me, I'm sure he is a perfect gentleman and is very fond of you.

Do you remember? One time your uncle went out of town and he wrote a letter to me from there. I didn't know how to read and asked you to read it to me. I asked you all right but did not let you read it to the end. I snatched it away from your hands midway. I was not sure what he might say and what questions you might ask. Now, you've all grown up, maybe, you'll understand what it could be about. I know your husband too is romantic!

At that time, anyway, I was angry with your uncle for writing the letter, knowing full well I did not know how to read. I yelled at him and he yelled back at me, saying I should have learned how to read and write. After your family had moved away, I started to learn how to write, with the hope I could write to you, but it did not go far.

Do you remember? You made a small mat in your crafts class and gave it to me. You told me I could sit on it at the puja time. I still have it. I would not sit on it though for fear it might wear off and get ruined. I know what I should do now. After I return home, I will sit on that mat and perform Satyanarayana puja in your name, seeking the Lord's blessings for you, your husband and the child. I would wish a long happy marital bliss and family life for you all.

As for me, the fact that you've come to see me is enough. I never thought I would see you again. And, probably, I will not see you again. My part in this world theater is nearing the end. I am only waiting for the Lord Siva's command. As soon as he says go, I will go. Please, do not be mad at this foolish Athayya garu.

With kindest blessings,

Yours,

Athayya

Siva Rao turned the paper back and forth, looked around for the envelope, and looked in to Sumana's face. He moved close to her, and asked caringly, "I am a little confused. You wrote this? Why?"

"I was feeling guilty about the way I treated her. I should have known better, should have thought of where she was coming from. She was asking questions not because she was inquisitive, but because that was all she knew, her world was small; that was all she could talk about. It was not her fault. I should have just answered her questions and made her happy. To make myself understand that, I wrote this letter. This is the letter she could have written, if she knew how to write."

"This is nice. It reflects her mode of thinking and her situation fully, as if you were holding a mirror to her heart. The wording is hers. I am glad you thought of it."

Sumana could not, however, feel reassured. "I wish I was nice to her," she spoke softly, as if she was talking to herself.

"Stop, you should not feel guilty like this. Recognizing something about a person and admitting it is just as important. Do you know how many people cannot or will not even see that?" And then, he said, in an effort to lighten the air, "You made me a drunk and a flirt in your letter," bringing his face close to hers.

Sumana bit her tongue, squinted and smiled, leaning on his chest.
The phone rang.

“Pch, bummer,” he said, went and picked up the phone. He listened and said, “Oh, no! I am so sorry. Yes. I will tell her. You take care,” hung up and looked at Sumana.

Her face fell. She was staring at the paper in her hand. She kept circling the phrase “the Lord Siva Commands” mechanically.
Siva Rao walked up to her, sat next to her, and said, “Attayya garu suffered a heart attack last night. They are conducting tests, no need to worry, he said. She may not need surgery.”

Sumana said not a word. She could barely see the words Lord Siva Commands through a film of tears gathered in her eyes. Suddenly, she grabbed her husband’s hand and said in a husky voice, “Let us perform Satyanarayana puja.”

Siva Rao was startled. This was the first time he heard it from her. He managed to hide his surprise and said, “Of course, we will perform the puja. I think Purnami [Full moon] falls on next Saturday, good day for the puja.”
[End]

Author’s note:

This story significant on several levels. First and foremost, In my childhood (10-14 years of age), I visited regularly a charming old lady in our neighborhood and listened to the stories, she narrated to me.

In the protagonist's memory, I created this story to drive an important point home. In our culture, the concept of privacy has been introduced, maybe, to the past 2 generations. Accordingly, readers’ comments focused on the importance of privacy. On the other hand, I believe, when the characters are set in the past, the story should be analyzed from that standpoint. That is explained in the letter Sumana wrote, imagining that is what Atthayya would have written, if she knew how to write. On second thoughts, Atthayya might not have that level of sophistication to explain what was going through her head at the time.

This story addresses several layers – two women from two generations developing closeness, the changed attitude of the young woman after coming to America, her discomfort with the older woman’s inquisitive questions, and finally, understanding where the older woman had come from, and how natural it was for her to ask those questions.

In Telugu, I have written two versions. This is a translation of the later version.

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The links for Telugu versions on Telugu thulika:

"Sivudaajna" (ver 1) [Click here](#)

"Sivudaajna" (ver. 2), [Click here](#)

Published in 2008.

Empty Head

The tiny ripples keep moving even as they are soothing to the eyes, cool, calm, jaunty, and in unique patterns. A baby fish shot up as if from nowhere into the air, up some six inches and dived back into the water. At the spot where it fell, waves spread out in circles as if marking its space. I kept staring, my glued to the spot – will it jump up from the same spot again? Or, will it shoot for another spot? How high this time? For the moment, the fish got all my attention, one hundred percent!

I heard a bit of a rustle on my left and turned in the that direction. Ten yards away from me, a ten-year-old boy, settling down on the shore with his his fishing gear, totally preoccupied with his work on hand. He carefully opened the bait box, picked a worm which appears to have the most prospects of enticing a fish, stuck it on to the hook, surveyed the body of water for a good spot to throw the fish line. He moves the pole as, probably that's the next step. I have no idea how fish are caught. Can he really identify a spot for catching fish or is he just going through the process as he was trained to do? How will he know the fish took his bait? What will he do to get the fish's attention? I was mulling over these questions.

I was also admiring his steady gaze. He certainly is very patient, which we don't see in children of his age nowadays in. Will he catch at least one fish today? I wish he will, for my sake, if not his! I am getting involved in the process of catching fish; that is how I am feeling at least. I am not sure whether I am worried about the boy or the fish.

"Enough of that, let's go," said my Head.

"What is the rush? Like some earthshaking agenda is waiting for us," I said.

"How long are you going to watch him? I am bored, I want to go."

"Wait a few more minutes. I want to see who wins—the fish escapes or the boy catches."

"The boy is stupid and so are the fish. If he wants fish, he can go to the market and buy some. If the fish wants food, they have plenty of weeds and germs in the water, ready to eat. Why go for a bait on the pole? And of course, your brain is the worst, for sitting here and watching them."

"Right, you are the only one with brains, nobody else in this world is smart enough for you," I snarled.

"There is no life if you sit in one place like this, no change, no action. I hate being stuck in one place, without movement, annoying, very annoying. Frankly, whether that boy catches fish or not is a very minute matter in this vast universe," my Head kept hollering.

I hate this Head of mine. It has no patience, no balance at all. Hum, not a penny in income, not a moment of peace. Forget the income, why not enjoy the peace at least? ... Monkeys in the forest are better than this Head, chi, chhi

“Ha ha, okay, why don’t get a monkey’s head and stick it in on your shoulders?”
“Ha ha ha, why get another? I already have one, don’t I, I mean the way he hop around? ... Never mind. Tell me where do you want to go?”
“Let’s go home, we can watch TV.”

“What is there to watch at this time of day?”

“Plenty. Didn’t the TV provider say we are getting 250 channels?”

“He did but what he did not tell is, out of the 250 channels he had promised, half of them are the same, like Channel 40 and 240. Then take away the channels which air paid programming, which if you ask me is a double wham for us.”

“What do you mean?”

“First, we pay the provider, which means we are subsidizing the commercial, since whoever is doing the commercial pays the provided and he also has to collect from us, the consumers. Again, when we buy the product, we are paying the business again, that is actually three times.”

“Are you going to get to the point in this decade?”

“The point is there are less than one dozen channels that make any sense at all and that we may watch. Oh, I must warn you of reruns and the commercials within the shows running for 4 or 5 minutes at a stretch, hopeless, if you ask me. They’re filling our heads with trash,” I yelled back at Head.

“It is not trash, that is information we need to know. That’s education.”

You see, this is the reason I am annoyed with this Head. It not only knows everything, but also insists that it all-round knowledgeable. This Head has answers for everything.

“Let’s wait for couple more minutes, just two more minutes. Maybe, he will catch a huge fish in the next 30 seconds.”

Head is annoyed now. “I can’t sit in one place like a stupid stone. If you don’t move right now, I will leave,” Head said.

“Go, go away,” I said. But I had no choice but to follow its orders. Returned home and turned on the Tennis channel.

“I wonder what is happening at the Democratic convention,” Head said, as if thinking aloud.

I flipped the channel. Some famous democrat is telling the participants what a great country this is, what a great leaders we are ... uh, like they don’t know!

“Wonder what is on channel 9.”

Flip.

“Commercial? Let’s check the tennis score.”

Flip.

Serena is breezing through. ...

“I am not huge fan of Fox news but let’s see what they’ve got to say.”

Flip.

We have to protect our Catholic values. Abortion is sin. We must not let these liberals take over. This President does not believe in conservative values. ...”

“Naaaaa, let’s go back to tennis.”

Flip.

6-3, 6-6 ... Wow, both the players are killing! What an amazing game ...

“This is not going to end soon. Let’s see what the Mayor says on Channel 103.”

Psh. I am choking for all the vagaries of this Head. I turned off the TV and picked up a book I couldn’t remember where I left last time. Never mind. This is not a novel, don’t have to worry about where I left. The book is Patanjali’s Yoga sutras with Sanskrit text and English commentary. That is not easy reading.

Started reading Sanskrit text, which I must admit is a struggle. I studied Sanskrit at college that puts the date back to the fifties era. Then the English commentary, which I can’t say I am not comfortable but I understand the religious texts in Telugu better since I grew up with that vocabulary. Anyway, I started reading the English commentary and tried to translate it into Telugu in my mind.

pramāṇa – correct perception; viparyaya – incorrect perception; vikalpa – imagination; nidrā – sleep; smṛtayah – memories.

They are correct perception, incorrect perception, imagination, sleep and memory.

By the time I figured out the Telugu version of this one line, I finished two glasses of water. It didn’t go well to say the least. I checked on the Internet if I could find a Telugu version but no luck. Most of them are in English. The ones I found or rather thought I was getting a Telugu version, are hopelessly messed up. On one site, the fonts are not recognized by my browser. I am also a bit uncomfortable with commentaries by western scholars. Not that I have something against them, but instinctively I prefer commentary by an Indian. I was flabbergasted by my discovery. Don’t Telugu people read these ancient texts in Telugu anymore?

“Glad I didn’t say anything. Enough of that heavy stuff, I can’t take it,” Head started whining again.

I couldn’t control myself anymore. “You are wimp. You can’t stay on any one topic, not even for 15 minutes, no concentration, no interest, nothing. I am beginning to wonder about your integrity too. Oh, God, help me, I don’t want this head,” I yearned in exasperation.

“Uhh, same here. I am not crazy about you either. I’m leaving,” Head said, snapped off my shoulders, and scurried away.

Ahh, what a relief, feeling 14 pounds lighter! In case you’re wondering, my daughter told me average head weighs 14 pounds and I know I am average, my head is average.

Chief Editor of a prominent newspaper phoned his senior reporter.

The senior reporter was napping after a sumptuous South Indian style meal his wife served him. She woke him and told him about the phone call. It is a work day, and it is lunch time. He has right to be home! Trying to hide his drowsy voice, he coughed as if something stuck in his throat, and said, "Hello, Sir," with his eyes half closed, posing a yoga posture.

Chief Editor said, "Somebody noticed a head near Peerlagutta on the outskirts of our town. Go, find out about it, write a report and send it to me ASAP. Get a good photograph of the head also."

"Yes sir," the senior reporter said, dropped the handset on the floor and dozed off. After an hour or so, he woke, walked to his desk, crafted a story in five minutes. He called the staff photographer and told him to go to Peerlagutta and take a picture of the "latest local wonder", the head. Photographer said "Yessaar," dutifully, pulled out an old photograph of a dead person he had taken several decades ago, separated the head, worked on it a bit using his latest technical skills and emailed it to the senior reporter.

Three other local papers also borrowed the news and the photograph from the senior reporter and published on the front page. The headline on the front page read, "Incredible! On the outskirts of Acchayyapalem village, a speaking, moving head appears!" The news spread quickly past the bounds of the village, the city, the state and the country to the entire world.

The entire world came to know that, "in India, a living, speaking Head, knowledgeable in Hinduism, has incarnated. Several pundits dusted their chronicles and concluded that it is the Head of a highly revered Siddha, who had performed austere penance at the foot of the Himalaya Mountains some 300 years ago."

The news caught on like the landing on moon or birth of the royal heir to British throne. This being the age of globalization, major countries vied with each other for the possession of that unique head.

The British Prime Minister sent a memo to the Indian Prime Minister stating, "The Oriental Library in Britain is the oldest and most famous library. Our library is the most appropriate place for that living, breathing head. Deliver it to us post-haste."

The German Chancellor sent a letter to the Prime Minister of India, stating, "We have a history with India. But for the German scholars, who had identified numerous important Sanskrit works, translated them into English and brought to light, nobody would have heard about the greatness of India. Not even your own scholars had no idea until we had brought them to light. Therefore, it is only natural that the Head should stay with us. Send it to us immediately."

"America is the number one country in the world. You will never find another businessman that could put the right price on your asset. I am sending a specially equipped jet with six highly qualified physicians specialized in this kind organs, will arrive in Andhra Pradesh within twenty-four hours. You make arrangements to deliver the Head to them without much ado. You have our assurance that we will take the best care of that head, take every precautionary measure to protect it from bacteria, and preserve it for posterity," telegraphed a multi-billionaire to Andhra Pradesh government. He also made it clear that his request was not to be taken lightly, well not in so many words, but you will know if you see his language.

In America, the election mania has taken over like a massive tornado. Each party has been scrambling for the best candidate to become the next president. A dozen wannabe candidates have started pulling down each other's reputation and whatever goodwill he or she may have.

"What does it matter whom we pick. All we need is a man who puts his signature where we tell him to put," said the party president.

"That's why I brought this head," said the multi-billionaire, pointing to the Head in a bullet-proof, antibacterial bubble, he had brought with him.

All the committee members looked at the head and jeered, "What the hell is that?" They all hissed in unison, "Are you out of your mind?"

"No, you don't understand. Test it? Ask anything you consider important."

"Okay, Mr. Head, what is your opinion on the economic policies of America?"

"Whatever you decide, I guess."

"Do you consider current American policy towards Israel beneficial to our party?"

"I go along with your suggestion."

"We object to moving American jobs to India. What do you say?"

"I agree."

"Do you think we should embrace the yoga practice of Indians?"

"I wouldn't call it Indian yoga. We can develop our own system and call it yoga."

"Do you agree we have adopted the best policy in matters of women's health? Women must consult and obtain our permission for any medical care she will be needing, no exceptions."

"Brilliant."

"Women's earnings should never exceed 50% of men's."

"Of course. You see they are wo-men, a wo-man needs one more syllable wo to make her a complete person. It is only appropriate she gets only one half of what a man makes."

The committee members looked at each other and nodded. This You seem to be the perfect Head to be president. They have understood that they can put whatever they want in that head, it serves their purpose perfectly.

"Now, just one more question."

"What?"

"This is just a head. Where is the hand to sign."

"Oh, that's not a problem. This head is from India, you see. This is computer era and, this is from Andhra Pradesh, the home of programmers!. It will write its own program and create its own signature."

Done!

I stare at the empty space in front of my window, my heart is weeping softly. I am worried, wondering how my Head is managing on a foreign soil, poor thing! Had I inculcated some plausible values in that head of mine while I was little, maybe, it would not have gotten into this mess. What a misery!

[End]

(The Telugu original, "khali burra", has been published on my blog on September 7, 2012, and later in *Andhra Jyothi* "Sunday edition, November 11, 2012.)

Author's note: A satire on boredom and the creativity of the news media.

Language is Power

Uma was reading a Telugu weekly e-zine on the Internet. The phone rang.

“Hi.” It was Shamiana, the resident manager, at the other end.

Uma’s heart sank.

“Yes?” she said weakly.

“Yesterday I saw your son outside.”

Uma took a second to reply, “I was here in my bedroom. I can see him from here.”

“He said he didn’t know where you were.”

Uma gasped and replied, “You come here. I will prove it to you that I can see him from here,” she said, fumbling for words. She was very frustrated with Shamiana.

“I am just telling you what I saw. I don’t want you to get into trouble, you know,” Shamiana said and hung up.

Uma was a young woman from Andhra Pradesh, India. She was small of stature, of fair complexion, and looked five years younger than her age, with her big beautiful eyes and meek demeanor. Her husband, Vijay, and Ramu, five-year old son, came to America six months ago. Vijay was a software consultant in Milwaukee. They rented a two-bedroom apartment in a complex on the outskirts. It was a huge complex of eight buildings, housing nearly 64 apartments on a comfortably enclosed land. Although there was no playground as such, children played in the open area between buildings.

Vijay’s boss assured him that it was a friendly neighborhood. The neighborhood might be friendly but Uma saw nothing friendly about the resident manager, Shamiana. She has been calling Uma fairly frequently and telling her that her son was spotted here or there, wandering alone, and that it was against law to leave children alone without parental supervision. Uma could not understand all that legal mumbo jumbo. She was upset since she could not convince Shamiana that she was taking care of her son like any good mother.

Uma was in her mid-twenties. She was married soon after she had graduated from high school and moved in with her in-laws. She was a typical young Telugu woman, meek and polite, trained to listen, and be courteous. But Shamiana was getting on her nerves ever since she has moved into this complex. Being in a different country with a totally a different set of cultural values, which appeared to be topsy-turvy for all she could see, was no walk in the park for her. She could never figure out what is right and what is wrong, what is acceptable and what is not acceptable on this side of the globe. She spent hours glued to the T.V. but nothing was clear to her.

Uma was still pondering over Shamiana's comment when Ramu came in. She asked him if anybody had talked to him. He nodded vaguely. He did not understand her question and couldn't care less. He turned on the TV.

Generally speaking, it was not uncommon for other mothers in the neighborhood to stop by and say a word or two while he was in the yard by the building, playing with other kids. He was a chubby five-year old, with big dark eyes, got them from his mother I suppose, and a baby face. He was a charmer for the mothers in the area because of his looks as well as his upbringing. So they would stop, and even give him a chocolate or something occasionally. That was not unusual for a kid who has been raised amid a large family and in a very close-knit community back home. So, when his mother asked him if he had talked to anybody, the answer was yes. Lot of people talked to him, what is the big deal, as far as he was concerned.

Uma could not wheedle out any more information from him.

It was cloudy. Vijay was not home yet. Uma was trying to focus on the book she was reading but could not. She has a splitting headache. She went to the fridge to make herself coffee but no milk. She told her husband in the morning that they were out of milk, and he said he would pick up some on his way home later in the evening. But it would be quite late by the time he returned home. He never came home before nine-thirty. Uma decided to run to the store round the corner and get some milk. A little fresh air might do some good for her headache too.

Ramu was playing in the front yard with other kids. Uma called out for him, "Come on, let's go to the store."

"No, I don't want to go to the store, I like playing here," Ramu replied.

"Come, Ramu. Just, for a few minutes. We'll be back in no time, and you can play all you want."

"No, you go. I will stay here. And bring me chocolate," he said.

Uma told herself that it should be okay, the boy is having a good time, it is daytime, so many children are playing, and she will be back in a snap, she won't be long ... She left in big strides, hoping to return in no time.

She came home in about twenty minutes, poured some milk and water in a cup and put it in the microwave. The phone rang. It was the resident manager.

"I saw your son. He was alone in the yard."

Uma was exasperated. "He was playing with other children. I was watching him," she said feebly.

"Katarina said she saw you walking home with a carton of milk. How could you be watching him?"

Uma was stunned. "Who is Katarina?"

"She lives across from you, the tall blonde. She said she saw you leaving the child and going to the store."

Uma turned chagrin. Who's this Katarina, and what business she has to tell on me?

"My son was not alone. He was playing with other children."

"That's not the point. You were not there." Shamiana insisted.

Uma tried to explain, "My friend Meena was home. Ramu was playing with her son."

"Did you tell Meena to watch your son?"

"No. I don't have to. She knows."

"That's what I am talking about. You did not really leave your son in her care," Shamiana repeated her objection.

"You don't understand. In our culture, we all take care of all our children. Children play outside all the time," Uma tried to explain the best she could.

"Look Uma, you are not in your country. Things are different here."

"Alright. I will take care of my son," Uma said and hung up. She was frustrated. Her headache was getting worse. She did not know how to explain to Shamiana that she has been a good mother to her son.

Uma was waiting for the bus. She dropped Ramu at the kindergarten, and was on her way to the library. Staying home behind the closed doors was still new to her; the airtight apartment and loneliness were driving her crazy. Therefore, she got into the habit of going to the library and reading current magazines.

"Hi." Uma turned around and saw Paula. Paula's husband and Vijay were coworkers at the same company. Uma and Paula had met once at a company picnic long time ago. It took a minute for Uma to place her.

"Hello," Uma responded, mechanically.

"How're you?" Paula asked, sounding friendly.

"Fine," Uma replied.

A few minutes passed by. Paula was watching the expression on Uma's face. Last time she saw her, it was serene and pleasant. It looked like something was seriously wrong.

"Are you okay?" Paula asked again, with a touch of concern.

The question opened flood gates. Uma was dying to hear a friendly voice. She said quickly, "No, I am not okay. I am very angry."

Paula suppressed a smile, and asked calmly, "Why? What happened?"

"I don't understand this resident manager. She calls me hundred times a day and says I saw your son here, I saw your son there, ... like that. Why? I don't understand. What is it to her? He is my son, and I know how to take care of him. I am taking care of him," Uma said.

“What happened?”

“Last week, I went to the store. He was playing with other children. It is only fifteen minutes, you know. He likes to play. We are big family, three brothers and three sisters. My big brother lives in Hyderabad. But my sister lives in our town only, on the same street. We all live in one house. All the children play together. He has lots of brothers and sisters. I think you call them cousins but for us, they are all brothers and sisters. You see what I mean. He is feeling lonely here. And also, we never close the doors, not like here. All the children, even our neighbors’ children run in and out of all houses all the time. Everybody cares about everybody’s children. No rules like here.”

Paula was listening to Uma with curiosity. She has been to India and seen the lifestyle there. She was fully aware that different cultures have different mores and different ways of dealing with their issues.

“The resident manager says she saw Ramu alone when I went to the store. That is not true. He was not alone, he was playing with other children. Did she ask the other mothers? I do not know. She calls me and says Ramu was wandering alone. He was not wandering. He was playing with other children. She says she asked the boy where I was. And he said he did not know. I think she is lying. I told my son I was going to the store. He knows I went to the store. And she says Katarina also said Ramu was alone.”

“Who’s Katarina?”

“Somebody in the next building. She has no children, but baby-sits two children. They are also same age as Ramu.”

Paula wondered if Katarina was looking for one more boy to baby-sit.

“I told the manager. Ramu went there to play with the children in her house. The manager said that last Saturday she came to my house, and Ramu was alone. She asked where is your mom, and he said I don’t know. Actually, I was doing laundry. Washer and dryer are in the basement of another building, you know. What can I do? I don’t have washer and dryer in our building. I am taking care of my son very well. I can prove it.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to her. That is harassment,” Paula said.

“What?” The word ‘harassment’ sounded harsh. “It is not harassment,” she said, and added, “I was so angry. Why is she talking like that?”

“She has no business to come to your house, question your kid and jump to conclusions,” Paula said, trying to reassure Uma.

Uma stared at Paula for a second. Before she could reply, their bus arrived. Both got into the bus. Paula sat next to Uma. Somehow she felt that Uma could use a friend at the moment.

“Actually, we were not home last Saturday. We all went to the county fair, and came home late. Nobody was home last Saturday. You see, she was lying. I don’t understand why.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“No. I was so angry. I don’t want to speak her,” Uma said, sullenly.

“I think you should tell her to back off.”

“What?”

“Tell her to stop harassing you.”

The bus slowed down. “This is my stop. You take care,” Paula tapped gently on Uma’s arm and got off.

Uma nodded grimly.

*

Uma was sipping coffee when the phone rang. She picked it up, “Hello.” It was her friend and neighbor, Meena.

“Shamiana called me earlier.”

“What did she say?”

“She is asking me where you’d gone today? And asked me to tell her whenever I happen to see Ramu alone in the yard.”

“What did you tell her?”

“Well, you know. I told her I can’t do that. She must be crazy to think that I’d squeal on you. But I’m telling you, I don’t know why but she is on your case; whatever her problem is. You must stand up to her. I’d give her a piece of my mind if I were you.”

“Okay, Meena. Thanks. I think I should talk to her.” They chatted about other things for a while and hung up.

Uma sat there brooding over the series of events that have been happening. She was very frustrated, felt cornered. She could not figure out why the manager was ‘on her case’ but she has understood that she was being pushed around, that’s for sure. She was acting like a big bully. Uma wanted to talk to Vijay but he would not be home for another two hours. She could not hold herself anymore.

She left Ramu with her friend Meena and went straight to the resident manager. Shamiana was going over some forms on her desk. She saw Uma and greeted with a big smile, “Hi.”

“I want to talk to you,” Uma said, straight to the point.

“I am busy. Can we talk tomorrow?” Shamiana twittered, between munching potato chips.

“I want to talk to you now.”

“What about?”

“Why are you on my case?”

Shamiana stared at her, “What? What are you talking about?”

“Leave me alone. Stop asking my son. If you have questions, ask me. I don’t want you to talk to my son,” Uma said as if she’d memorized the lines.

Shamiana was surprised a little. She had never seen this side of Uma. But she was not used to give in that easily either. She said, “Look, I am sorry you’re hurt. I didn’t mean to hurt you. I am just concerned for you.”

“You don’t concern for me. My son is my business. If you have questions, you ask me, not my son.”

“I am telling you, I don’t want you to get into trouble. You don’t understand how things are here. I am only trying to help you.”

“I don’t want your help. Last week I was doing laundry in the next building. Do you want me to come and report to you every time I step outside? Don’t ask my son. He does not know English very well, to explain all these things. Besides, he is only five-years old. How can he answer your cunning questions?”

Shamiana was shocked. “What did you say?”

Oops, did I say something wrong, Uma wondered, but she was determined to win. “I am saying my son is very young. He cannot explain many things in English. Stop harassing us.”

“Oh, no, no. It is not harassment. I am only trying to help.”

Uma noticed a change in her tone. “I feel like you are harassing us.”

“It is like Good Samaritan Law, you know. I was just trying to help.”

Uma was not sure what that law was but she was hell-bent on proving herself to this woman. “Okay, if you want to complain to the police, do so. In fact, come on, let’s go. I will go with you now. And we can settle it once for all.”

“It’s okay, okay, slow down. I see you’re upset. Nobody is saying anything about police. Okay? Forget I’ve ever said anything,” Shamiana said, in a desperate attempt to calm down Uma.

For Uma it has become clear, she has won this round. “Don’t talk to my son. That is harassment,” she repeated one more time and left.

She came home, but she was still burning inside. She picked up the phone and dialed Katarina’s number, and told her also to back off or she would have to talk to the landlord about harassment in the complex.

Next morning, Vijay, on his way to work, opened the door and found a note stuck on it. It was from Shamiana.

“What’s this?” he asked Uma, handing her the note.

Uma read it aloud. Shamiana apologized for the ‘misunderstanding’ and assured her that it would not happen again; she was only trying to help, since Uma was new in this country. She was trying to educate her in matters of local procedure.

“What’s that all about?” Vijay asked her. He was so wrapped up in his work, he did not realize how hard it was for Uma to deal with the resident manager.

Uma told him the entire story and her confrontation with the resident manager the night before.

“What is Good Samaritan Law?” Vijay asked her.

“I will tell you in a minute,” Uma replied with a smile, and turned on the computer. Knowledge is power, she seemed to have understood it for the first time.

[End]

(The Telugu original, "paluku vajrapu tunaka," [Word is an offcut of a diamond], has been published on Telugu thulika, .February 11, 2008. Translation unpublished.)

As most of you may have noticed, the language we learn in India is not enough to understand the nuances in America, or any other country for that matter.

Apart from the dictionary meanings, there are always subtle distinctions and shades that we miss when we are in another culture. That is one angle.

Another angle is. a non-American needs to prove herself to her superiors. The one way to do it is by being aggressive with another foreigner, especially, who is still new in America. That stops only when the other foreigner, Uma, learns to speak their language.

Top Pocket

“I want a new skirt and top,” Parimala said.

“Just last week we got new clothes made for you saying you’re going to a new school. You want new clothes again,” Mother said.

“Okay, I don’t need the skirt, just a new top. Without a new top, I am not going to go to school,” said Parimala.

“That’s cute. Princess wants new dress each day?” Mother said, smiling.

“I don’t want one a day. I want a different dress only on the day I have the English language class,” said Parimala seriously.

“What happened in the English language class?” Akka (older sister) asked. She had realized long time back that this kind of desires originate only in the school.

Parimala remained silent.

“Okay, we’ll see. We’re having Bobby’s birthday next month. I will have new clothes made for both of you at the time.”

“No, I want it now,” Parimala insisted.

“Nice, very nice, like the deer up and running in a second. Don’t you know you don’t get everything and anything as you please right away? What’s the urgency anyways?” Mother said, annoyed.

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The day before ...

School was in session. Parimala set foot in the tenth class room, wearing new skirt and top and holding the books and the geometry box tightly to her chest. All new faces; her heart was beating like a little engine ... chuk, chuk ... New school, new faces, new class, new teacher, new books, new skirt and new top—everything new, new, new ... Just last week, Mother took her to the store, had her pick her favorite cloth with flower prints for the skirt and mango shoot tinted cloth for the top. She got the outfit made by Ameer Saheb who was sitting on the porch with his sewing machine. Everything fell in place perfectly.

Yet, the new class was new class. Parimala, with her face lowered and sidelong glances, as if she was going to rob a bank, walked into the classroom and looked around. Teacher had not come in yet. All the boys were sitting on the right side in two rows and girls on the left side. Usually, smart and well-behaved students would sit in the front rows. Those who had not studied, had not done homework, and those who would engage in drawing funny pictures sit in the back rows.

Parimala stood at the door and watched them. All the children were talking, giggling noisily and making faces.

Her eyes completed one round and stopped on the two girls in the second row. She was not sure why but felt like there was something special about them. Between

the two, the one on the far end noticed Parimala and smiled. Then she whispered something in the ear of the girl next to her. The second girl turned around, looked at her and also smiled. Parimala waited for what like ages and slowly walked toward the two girls. The two girls moved invitingly and made room for Parimala on the bench. The girl who moved and made room for her asked, "What is your name?"

She was fair-skinned, oval-faced and somewhat skinny. She looked so delicate, probably slightest touch could make her blood clot or she might faint, thought Parimala. She said her name was Ramani. The second girl's skin was wheat-colored; her eyes seemed to be saying "I saw you somewhere; there was a naughty smile on her lips, looking was it was the place of origination for the naughty smile. Her name was Visala, she said.

"Parimala," she said in a voice barely audible.

"Shh," somebody from behind alerted them to be quiet.

Parimala stopped talking with Ramani, turned around, looked at the teacher who was just walking into the class; she was flabbergasted, her jaw dropped, and her heart was beating twice as fast. The teacher was the owner from whom her parents were renting the apartment.

It was just two weeks since they had moved in. Ever since they had moved, the landlord had been giving them plenty in the form of what they could do and what they could not or should not do in that apartment.

The teacher went to his desk, turned and looked at the faces in the class and said, "Hum, so, we have a new girl in the class," he said, watching Parimala with a piercing look.

He opened the attendance register and started calling out the names. "Present, sir," each student was responding dutifully.

"Prameela," teacher called.

"It is Parimala, sir, not Prameela," she said furtively.

"PARIMALA," he said gritting his teeth, as if he was ready to devour her.

Somebody in the back row snickered.

"Silence!" the teacher shouted.

It was English language class. They were going to study a short story about the Pandava princes learning how to shoot the bow from their teacher Dronacharya. Dronacharya asks each of the princes what they saw on the tree. Only Arjuna says he did not see the tree nor branches; not even the bird but only the eye of the bird. It is a story about focus.

Parimala buried her head in the book. A girl from behind nudged her with her pencil, causing her to jerk. Parimala was startled and the geometry box in her lap fell on the floor with a bang. The items in the box—a ruler, a compass, a pencil, an eraser and a quarter of a rupee—all scattered all around. She was frightened; she bent down quickly and started picking the pieces, barely looking at the teacher for fear he might yell at her again.

The children in the class were making funny noises in a low pitch.

"Silence," the teacher shouted again and told Parimala, "Come here."

She put the items back in the box, put the box on the bench and went to him.

“Why did you bring that spice rack to my class?” he raised his voice, short of slapping her.

Parimala had no answer.

“Do you need that trash box in the English language class?”

“No, sir. It is not needed in the English language class, sir.”

“From now on, never bring it to my class again. Understand? This goes for everybody. Nobody is allowed to bring the geometry box to my class,” he issued a memorandum to the entire class.

Twenty pairs of eyes turned toward Parimala. They all said, “All this, because of you!”

The class was over for the day. The two girls, who had made room for her earlier, were walking home. They lived in the same neighborhood. Parimala’s home was also in the same direction. She was walking a few steps behind them.

“Teacher seems to be mad at you for whatever reason,” Ramani commented.

“What did I do? Why would he be mad at me?” Parimala was confused.

“Who knows? You are renting the apartment from him, aren’t you? Probably, something has to do with that.”

Parimala could not understand the logic but decided then and there not to bring the geometry box to the language class again. But then, where could she put her pencil, eraser and the quarter of a rupee she was bringing for milk? She could not hold everything in her palm all the time.

The following day, Mother who had compared her to the deer up and running changed her mind by next morning. “Might as well get it now. One errand done is one less thing to worry about,” she thought. Besides, the tailor takes his own sweet time to make the outfit.

That afternoon, Mother took Bobby and Parimala to the store. Picking the right cloth for Bobby’s shirt and pants was over in a snap but picking the right cloth for Parimala’s outfit was another story. By the time she picked the cloth she liked, the sun was down. Mother paid for the items and went to the tailor sitting on the porch.

Ameer sahib took measurements.

“Add a pocket to my top,” Parimala said.

Ameer sahib was confused. He looked at Mother.

She was also surprised. “What? Pocket for the top? What do you mean?” Mother asked.

“Well, Bobby is getting a pocket for his shirt, isn’t he? Why can’t I have one?”

“Well, he is magavadu[i].”

“So? He is magavadu and I am adavadu. I want the pocket.”

“What is adavadu?” Mother said, laughing.

“Pocket would not look good on a girl’s top, madam,” Ameer sahib said.

“It would look good for me,” Parimala insisted.

“All right. Let us do it. Put a small square on her top as well,” Mother said. It was getting late; she was worried about her husband’s supper. He needed to eat on time, always.

It was decided to put a pocket on the top and the next question was where—on the chest like boy’s shirt? Or, on the side, like grandfather’s kameez?

“I don’t know all that. All I know is I want a pocket on my top, which can hold my pencil and eraser and stuff.”

“If it is for holding the pencil and the eraser, the pocket on the chest may not be a good idea. They may fall out of the pocket when you jump and skip,” Ameer sahib explained the logistics of it.

“All right. Put it on the side,” Parimala agreed.

It was half past six by the time the issue had been resolved successfully. “Come on, let’s go,” Mother pushed them into a rickshaw and got home anxiously.

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The following day, it was Telugu grammar class. Parimala was so afraid of her English teacher but that was not the case with her Telugu teacher. His explanations of Telugu poems fascinate her, always. She understood every bit of grammar he taught.

That day, he was explaining the story of the great grammarian, Panini. The poem said Panini was very handsome—his face was like full moon, peaceful and bright, he was tall and well-built, he would serve the teacher without stopping and without complaint; however, he could never recite a single poem in his life.

Parimala liked that story very much. She was taken by the cute twist in the last line—a wonderful man with no brains! More than that, the phrases describing Panini ended in third person singular suffix "vadu." That word brought another question to her mind—the one that Mother had asked the day before.

After the class ended and all the students left, she approached the teacher. Ramani and Visala were waiting behind her.

“Sir! I have a question,” she said.

“Yes, dear! What is it?” he said with a smile. The teacher was very fond of her; he was impressed with her smartness.

“The pronominal ending vadu—I am confused. Vadu is singular and varu is plural, right?”

“Yes, dear.”

“magavadu is singular and magavaru is plural.”

“That is correct.”

“Can’t we follow the same logic and say, work backwards and say adavaru is plural and adavadu is singular?”

Teacher laughed but Parimala did not. She was confused, seriously. She wanted to know the answer.

Teacher looked at her and said gently, “Grammar does not explain why things cannot be in a certain way, dear. It explains only how the prevalent words have changed in course of time. That is all. Let’s say you would start using adavadu and several others pick up and continue to use it on a regular basis. Then it becomes the norm. Probably, you should do so after you’ve become a notable writer.” He said partly in jest and partly in seriousness.

“I am going to start it even now,” she said. She felt free to speak her mind in his presence always.

“I don’t think so. You’d better wait until you’ve earned the reputation as a great writer. Then, they’d call it arshaprayogam (a construction similar to poetic justice). If you do it now, they’d just question your language skills. How did this idea start anyways?”

Ramani, who was standing next to her, pulled Parimala’s side pocket and said, “Here, because of this pocket.”

“What? ... No, it’s okay. I never saw a pocket on a top. That’s why said ...” he said, staring into her face, and trying to cover his surprise.

“Well, that is our Parimala!” Visala said.

000

Parimala kept mulling over it all night. She could not understand the logic behind the pocket being gender-related. One possibility could be—long time ago, when Mother, her Mother and grandMother had not gone out at all, probably there had been no need to walk around with pencils and erasers and there had been no need for pockets either. Now, for her, there was a need for her to carry the pencil and the eraser and therefore the pocket was also needed. Ever so often she had lost one or the other always and kept buying new things again and again. Akkayya offered to make a little bag for her but Parimala did not think it was a good idea. She still would have to remember to carry it all the time. A pocket on the other hand would take care of it by itself. She would not have to worry about it constantly. Then, she could use her brain for other purposes! That is how she convinced herself.

000

That was fifteen years back.

Parimala came from America and went to visit Ramani. Ramani was elated to see her. She jumped to her feet and hugged Parimala with all her heart. “Wow, after soooooo long. I never thought I could see you again.... How’re you? Tell me everything... Sometimes Visala and I see your stories in some magazine and talk about you.”

Parimala was thrilled to hear that her friends had read her stories and thought about her.

Ramani said, “Come on, let’s visit Visala. She lives in Hyderabad. Now she came here yesterday to see her older sister. Let’s go.”

All the three sat down in Visala’s home and kept chatting about their school days, the short teacher, the math teacher and so many other things.

“Remember, you were the only one in those days to come to class with a pocket top. We used to admire your guts and laugh,” Ramani said.

Parimala laughed, "Why didn't you all have tops made with pockets?"

"How? I had no choice but use up all the clothes my older sister had outgrown and handed me down," Visala sighed, recalling the life of her childhood days.

"I ran out of luck in that area as well. My sibling happened to be a boy. I wish they had let me wear his clothes. Then I would have gotten pockets automatically. It didn't occur to me, to be frank," Ramani lamented.

"Where is our teacher?" Parimala asked.

"He is staying home, after retirement."

"Let's go, see him," Parimala said, recalling those times with her teacher.

"Let's go, quick then. He will be home now. If we don't go now, we may miss him. He will go to the park," Visala said.

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Teacher was sitting in an easy chair on the porch and reading bhagavatam. Next to him, his wife Kamamma was sitting on the floor and cutting beans.

As he heard the gate squeak, he looked up and asked, "Who's that?" adjusting his glasses.

Kamamma recognized them and said, "the girls, Ramani and Parimala," and turned to them and invited them kindly, "Come in. How're you?"

"Who? Pocket Parimala?" teacher said teasingly.

Parimala smiled shyly. She was thinking "why on earth it came to me in those days."

Kamamma went in and returned with buttermilk in three glasses and gave it to them.

"You don't have to," they protested mildly and took the glasses.

"So, you are in America now. Our granddaughter came to visit us last month. All those pants, shirts, and all that... Probably, you're also the same. Lots of pockets, head to foot," the teacher said, commenting cheerily.

"Lots of pockets and lots of money in those pockets ... is that right?" Kamamma said, smiling.

Parimala looked away as she mumbled, "No, not so in my case."

Kamamma said it for fun but, after watching Parimala's face, wished she had not said it.

Parimala however collected herself quickly and laughed, "Now no pocket but this bag only," she said, holding out her handbag. Then she took a pen from the bag and gave it to him, "I brought this little gift for you."

He took it cheerfully and said, "bless you."

Ramani said, "Wherever she is and however many pockets she may have, our Parimala is always the same old Parimala, sir. As always, her pockets are full of papers and pencils, nothing else."

Teacher said, “I heard you’ve been writing stories. You possess the gift of Goddess Saraswati’s blessings. I knew even then that you would become a great writer. I am really happy for you.”

“No great writer, sir. Just scribbling a few lines whenever I feel like and whatever comes to my mind,” Parimala said modestly and feeling shy for the compliment.

“That’s what I am saying too—safekeeping. Pocket to hold the pencil, and the pencil to hold the heart.”

Suddenly, silence fell. For some reason, nobody found words to say. Silence dropped a heavy curtain on their hearts.

“It’s getting dark. We’d better go,” they said, getting up to leave.

“Wait,” Kamamma went in and returned with paan leaves, fruits and kumkum. She put kumkum on their foreheads and gave them the paan leaves and fruits.

Parimala bent and touched their feet, seeking their blessings. She had forgotten these traditions, almost. Today, suddenly, she felt like following that tradition. Tears gathered in her eyes.

They said goodbye one more time and walked toward the gate. At the gate, Parimala stopped and looked sideways at her teacher, and saw him dabbing his eyes with the towel on his shoulder. She heaved a small sigh and hastened to join her two friends.

On her way home, she kept chanting as if it was a mantra—pocket to hold the pencil, and the pencil to hold the heart.

(End)

[i] A play upon the Telugu word "magavadu," meaning a boy. The suffix "vadu" is a male suffix. "Adavadu" is a made up word, built on magavadu, not in everyday usage.

About the story: The story illustrates a growth of writer from childhood days to a grown woman as a writer. In her childhood, she needed a pocket on her blouse to avoid the ire of her English teacher. Casually, she refers to herself as "adavadu", but getting a pocket on her blouse was not enough. Her curiosity takes to question the word mogavadu. Eventually, she becomes a writer. Her Telugu teacher's comment, "Pocket for safekeeping the pencil, and the pencil for safekeeping the heart" explains the mindset of a writer.

Shortchanging Feminism

“You held me tight in your strong arms.”

Sita was in the living room holding the 8-page letter Gayatri had written to Sita’s husband, Sitapati. The letter left a bad taste in her mouth. Her face turned pale. Sitapati was acting strange for a few days now. Sita noticed that much. All of a sudden, for no obvious reason, he became an ideal husband. He started doing chores, rearranging the furniture, washing dishes, folding clothes and was eager to take children for a ride. The children were not little anymore, though. They were grown up. They said, “Thanks, dad!” and took off on their bikes.

Sita threw down the letter in despair. No need to read this trash to the end, she told herself. Her eyes scanned the room and came back to the same pages again.

“That one-day... after 23 years...”

“You said you’d take me to...”

“Your secret letter...”

“The thing you’ve forgotten in our bathroom...”

Sita was burning inside. She wanted to stomp on those papers, but she could not. After all, the paper is Goddess Saraswati! Was he going to all this trouble just to cover up his affair with Gayatri? At first, she was surprised at her husband’s sudden interest in the household chores. But then, she convinced herself that he changed much the same way she had. Now she was beginning to see the clear light of the day. Sitapati had gone to India as a visiting professor and returned home, after six months, as a whole new Sitapati! He was not the same person she had spent the last 17 years with.

One day he made coffee by the time she woke up. “What is this? It almost looks like you have learned quite a few things back home. What did you do there, teach or learn?” she said teasingly.

“Well, we all learn at some point, don’t we?” he replied facetiously.

Sita’s eyes fell on the letter again. “The thing you’ve forgotten in our bathroom.” What could that be? What is it that a man would take off, leave in the bathroom and forget it? It’s got to be his wristwatch or lungi. Of course, nobody walks around without the lungi on. That thing must be his wristwatch. She remembered Sitapati telling her his watch was broken in India.

She bent down and picked up the papers. What should she do now? Hand them casually over to him and say, "Here, these are yours?" Or, hide them? Burn them? Even as she continued to brood, she tore them up, unwittingly. "The world is not going to fall apart if he doesn't see this one letter," she told herself.

"You have been cooking for 17 years without a break. I will cook today. Tell me. What would you like?" Sitapati said, as he walked in boisterously only to find Sita was not in the room. He was a little puzzled. Rani and Bobby were not home. He found Sita in the bedroom.

"Lying down at this hour? Are you okay?" he approached her and felt her forehead to see if she was running fever.

She pushed away his hand. "Who is Gayatri?"

"Just a friend from childhood days." He sounded casual.

"Friendly enough to hug and kiss?"

"What kiss? What are you talking about?"

The argument went on for about one half hour. Then, Sita gave up. Not because she believed him, but she was no match for him in debates. Sitapati, however, was content. In his mind, he did not do anything wrong. Gayatri had poured her heart out on that day. He felt bad for her, and so, he put his arm around her shoulder just to comfort her. What else could he do? That was the way he had always been, ever since he was a kid. Any time somebody was hurt his heart cried for that person. That was one thing he could never understand—what is wrong if one person embraces another? It certainly did not mean that he had broken his vows to his wife any more than it broke Gayatri's vows to her husband. Certainly, there is no reason for raising hullabaloo about it.

Sita thought there would be no more secrets after her confrontation. She was wrong. That night she heard him talking on the phone with somebody in India. She expected him to tell her about it the next day. It did not happen. Once again, she was confused. Why would one make a phone call from half way across the world in the middle of the night if it was not an emergency? She decided to let go of it.

The following day, Sitapati brought mail from the mailbox, slipped one letter into his pocket, and handed the rest of the mail to Sita. "Here, check them, I can wait," he said with a touch of sarcasm. Sita felt firecrackers explode in her head. There is a Telugu proverb, a woman, good at flirting, is good at lying, too. She wondered why this proverb was stated with reference to women only. On that day, Sitapati vacuumed the rooms with renewed vigor. He bought presents for the children on some lame excuse. He even took Sita to a movie. Sita also was acting as if nothing happened. The pain in the pit of her stomach lingered on.

The following day Sitapati left for a conference in Philadelphia. That afternoon a telegram came in the mail. "The boy got admission in the college here," it said. That was from the same Gayatri. Life was getting hard for her. Somebody's boy was admitted in some college. Does that call for a telegram? Or, is it possible that the boy is not "somebody's boy"? Sita felt sick in her stomach again. Her husband, apparently, was hiding something from her. What was it? And why? At this point, she was certain of only one thing—she could not rest until she knew the whole truth. Maybe that was

needed to understand him, maybe for her own satisfaction. She had to know the whole truth and nothing but truth. There was no point in asking him, either. In the past 15 days he never gave her any straight answers. He was beating around the bush smoothly, kindly, arrogantly, snootily, angrily... He was shutting her up every which way but would not come clean.

A few months back, Sita told her husband, "Listen. I don't trust your words and I don't want to discuss this matter with others, either. That is why I am asking you straight."

Sitapati did his usual routine. "I hate lying," he said. "It hurts to think that you don't believe me," he said. "What about my reputation," he said. "Hell with it," Sita told herself.

Something occurred to Sita. She got up with a jolt, went into the basement and looked around. It did not take even 5 minutes. There were letters, pictures of two women, and a phone number scribbled on a piece of paper. Sita threw herself down in a chair with the letters in her hand. The letters were written by not one woman, not two, but three women.

"My husband is not in town. I am holding a new sari and thinking..."

"I wish I could come there and be with you..."

"Next time you come, you must stay only with me..."

"Loneliness, depression..."

"Forget your analytical skills. You're the king of experience, for sure."

"I want to put my arms around your neck."

"I want to nibble your earlobes."

Sita threw down the letters furiously. Then she picked them up again and looked at the dates. Some of them were received here, in the States, and some while he was in India. Thoughts started hovering in her head like bumblebees. A small smile came on to her lips. So many women in America said to her that "Indian women are oppressed." These letters vouch for the complete freedom Indian women have achieved. The question is what they are doing with that freedom? These photos and letters did not look like they were just about friendship. It did not look like a matter of simple crying and comforting. "King of experience," it says. What experience? Did the experience precede or follow his critique? Did she offer experience in exchange for his critique? Or, is it the other way round? Not bad. Not bad at all. Next time he goes to India, he might as well announce, "Consult Sitapati for experiential critique!"

She looked at the photos again. One of them seemed to be very young. That could be Sobha. Had he married a few years earlier, he could have a daughter of that age. Sita felt sick. She was disgusted. God, tell me what to do? I want to do something desperate. But what? Take the car out and hit a tree? Kill somebody—him, the children, those women, whom? Whom could I kill? How about confront those women? But, what can I ask? What is there to ask? I should be asking my husband only. What can I say to him? What is this with these married women? Why fool around with others? What kind of pleasure he gets in playing a second husband? Sita felt there were really no questions she could ask.

Sita closed her eyes for a second. What was the crux of her problem? She was not able to see it herself. Like Major Barbara says in Shaw's play, she thought she stood on a rock eternal; and without a word of warning, it reeled and crumbled under her feet. She hoped Sitapati would cherish some values although he did not believe in our culture or religion. She expected him to show some decency at the very least. Probably that is what is bothering her most. She could see he is lying to her, but could not figure out why. What did he hope to accomplish by that? She heard garage door open.

Sitapati walked into the room.

"I saw the letters," Sita said.

"What letters?"

"The letters from your female friends."

"Not again. I told you that there is nothing going on. Didn't I?"

"The letters are saying a different story."

Back to square one.

"They are after me. I am not after them," he said. "Nothing happened," he added. "Nothing that you should worry about." Then he continued to explain. "Something terrible happened to Gayatri and that led to depression. I am trying to help her restore her self-esteem." And he also said that Sobha was a writer, and that was how the women writers write. Then, he asked in all earnestness, "What can I do if they write like that?" He assured her that he would tell them to stop writing to him.

Sita did not believe a word he said, but kept quiet.

"Stop all those stupid thoughts. Let's go out," Sitapati suggested.

"I am not going anywhere. The children will be back any minute," Sita said, crossly.

"It's okay. They are not babies. They can take care of themselves."

Sita went into the next room without saying a word.

Sitapati was in the basement studying. Sita was in the bedroom. She thought her skull would crack open with frustration. Why did my life turn like this? I've been adjusting to his needs the best I could. In this god-forsaken country, whom else could I turn to but him? And what is my life like here? My day is nothing but making coffee, fixing breakfast, packing lunch, driving children to school, again bringing them home, shopping, cleaning, washing dishes, washing clothes, snow blowing in winter, mowing the lawn in summer, raking leaves in fall...No. These chores do not tire me out, but they sure do take the entire day. Amid all this, if I find a free minute, I would rather sit down doing nothing than get myself busy with something, don't even feel like write a letter. In this amazing land of affluence, with all the gadgets, if I want a cup of coffee, I have to make it myself or forget it. Hell. There are times when I skipped having a cup of coffee simply because it entails washing three dishes. And then the food. I have to have Indian curries, at least, once in two days. For the

children all the three meals are American style. And then Sitapati. Of course, he does not spell it out, but he does have his preferences.

Amid all this, Sita could neither account for her time nor could she say she had plenty of free time. It was a catch 22 for her. Sitapati did not follow any traditions, except the one that included entertaining guests non-stop. His complaint was Sita was not living up to his idea of a traditional wife. Is that the reason he is running after other women? Sita felt totally debilitated. A weak smile hovered on her lips. God knows whether Sitapati reinstated self-esteem in Gayatri or not, but, right now, her own self-esteem hit the bottom. She felt like crying but could not. She wanted to talk to somebody. But with whom? Up until now, she listened to others, but never took her problems to them. She started remembering all those friends, one by one. No. There is no use. It is not going to happen. It is not like back home. Here you cannot go to somebody's home anytime, as you please. "We have plans," they would say. "We didn't expect you," they would say. "Please call me, next time," they would say.

How about a movie, Sita wondered. Her body refused to move. She turned the T.V. on. Some soap. A wife sees a photo of another woman in her husband's pocket. Sita laughed. No matter where she turns, the story is the same. She was about to turn it off, and then again, changed her mind. She wanted to see what would happen in the story. She knew life is not like movies but then there is some consolation. The TV wife started drinking to forget her problems. What if I start drinking? Well, the problem is you need to drink until you forget everything. Then you would not know whether you found a solution or not. It could scare the children, too. She recalled the proverb, "try to make a master, end up with a monkey."

Sita was losing her mind. She wanted to do something drastic, but was not sure what it was. She picked up the phone and called her friend, Kamakshi.

"Hello!"

"It's me."

"Oh, Sita! How are you? What is new?"

"Nothing. What are making for lunch?"

She heard a small laugh. "Stuffed eggplant. Want to come?"

"Are you kidding? You had better be careful. I might show up."

"I am not kidding. Come on."

"Okay. Be there in ten minutes," Sita said and hung up.

"I can't live in that house anymore."

Kamakshi stared at her and said softly, "Want some coffee?"

Sita nodded as started telling her story.

"Did you ask him?"

"I did. I also told him that I wanted to keep it between him and me, and not take it to others. He babbled some nonsense, as usual. You know his rhetorical skills. It

sounds okay for the moment. And then, a letter or a note appears making it only too obvious that they have him wrapped around their little fingers.”

Kamakshi did not know what to say. As far as she could tell, both the husband and wife were reasonable people, both knew right from wrong.

“The more I think about it, the clearer it is getting. It is not just that one question—whether he slept with one woman or not. In the past ten years, he has always been so wrapped up in the lives of others—their problems, their worries, their tears, their health, their children’s education, their marriages, on and on. That is his life. And now it has gotten down to hugs, kisses and lies. If he does not care about our traditional values, why should I? His ‘saving women program’ has reached the peak.” Sita stopped.

“Like Veeresalingam?” Kamakshi said partly in jest, also, trying to clear the air.

“Yeah,” Sita replied, and then, with a weak smile, added, “No. Actually there is a difference. Veeresalingam tried to save 'vidhavalu' [widows] by arranging remarriage for them. Here, this man is messing around with housewives, making their husbands 'vedhavalu' [Idiots]¹.”

Kamakshi smiled. Sita stayed there a little longer, and left. Kamakshi said a few more comforting words and told her not to act in haste.

Sita felt a little lighter after talking to Kamakshi, but the pain did not go away. Her heart was numb. There were occasions when she argued with others about the situation of women in India. Not only with other Americans, but with Sitapati as well. She argued that in Andhra Pradesh men always supported women.

Sitapati did not agree with her.

“Veeresalingam arranged marriages only for young widows for fear that they would seduce men. Even women’s education he promoted was about making women dutiful housewives.” His arguments about Chalam were also on the same lines. He said Chalam advocated sexual freedom for women only to ingratiate men. What an irony? Now one woman complained her husband ill-treated her, and another woman claimed her husband allowed her total freedom—and both ended up in his bed! Wow! Sita felt was if she was hitting her head against a brick wall.

That night, after one more round of wrestling, each of them said ‘go to hell,’ and then they split. He went into the basement and she went into the bedroom. Sita wanted to believe her husband’s words. He never acted like a total jerk in the past 17 years. Besides, if he really wanted to fool around, aren’t there opportunities here? Why did he wait this long? Why so far away? What kind of secrecy is this? Such a joke! What should she think? Is he too smart or too stupid? Or, did he think she was stupid?

One week went by. Sita went into the basement for some book. A letter slipped out of the book and fell on the floor. The letter was addressed to Gayatri. Sita was taken aback. For a third time, the same situation! She recalled a couple of lines Rani

¹ A pun on the word vidhava. Actually, there is a slight difference in the pronunciation of the first syllable.

had written when she was 9-years-old: “Believe me they say, trust me they say, and when I trust them, everything goes wrong.” A smart observation for a nine-year old! What is this? At a time she was trying to convince herself, she found four more letters—two of them from the two women, and the other two from Sitapati to them. Sita felt dizzy. She threw herself in the chair. Even the dumbest of the dumb would know when they see these letters that Sitapati was bluffing all along.

“I want to hug you.”

“I want to kiss you.”

“I want to go to Khajuraho with you.”

“I am surprised that you know so much about birthmarks.”

“Now the room is vacant. This time there won’t be any problem. Kids no problem.”

“Bring me size 34 bra. Bring me gold. Bring me nylon saris. Bring me camera.”

Sita stopped for a minute as if to make sense of all this. And then, she continued to read again. The letter that shot through her heart was the one written by Sitapati to Sobha. "You have a right to hug me. You have a right to kiss me. You have a right to go to Khajuraho with me."

A huge fit of anger choked her. She came upstairs, holding the letters in her hand. She sat down slowly in the couch. The snow outside was bright white like a heap of salt. Sitapati's words in the letter, "You have a right to hug me and kiss me." hit her the most. Sita asked herself, “So, what rights I have? Snow blowing, lawn mowing, washing clothes and dishes? Is that it?” She recalled her words to Sitapati during one of their arguments, “If you think I will stay here for the sake of your reputation while you mess around with others, you are wrong. Don’t count on it.”

It is clear now. She decided that she could not stay in that house anymore, not a minute longer. She decided to leave. She felt the burden off her chest. For the first time in several days, she felt hungry. She got up and started cooking. "You are the only one who understood me. This time I may not stay long." - The lines from the letters were pestering her like hungry dogs. Suddenly, she remembered the letters she wrote to her husband in the first few weeks of her marriage. She knew where they were kept. She quickly went there and pulled them out. She started reading them.

“Here also the sky is blue and the weather is cool.” “With the new status I attained after walking the seven steps with you...” “When I asked you ‘what do you want’ and you responded ‘you just come’...” “Each person has so many layers of personalities. If you had seen me in my office...” “Waiting for the day when I can walk with a friend in the woods and whisper solitude is sweet...”

She felt totally exhausted. For the first time, tears sprang to her eyes. Sita did not get the life companion she was looking for. And he? Only he should know. She kept racking her brains. What happened in 17 years? Why? He did not hit her. He did not use obnoxious language. On the other hand, he told her, repeatedly, that she could do whatever she wanted. But, by the time she understood that, she also realized that his job and avocations stood in her way to do whatever she wanted to do. Six years passed by. In the freedom Sitapati allowed her, there were a lot of built in responsibilities—money management, part-time job, children’s needs, guests’ needs,

household chores. ... He kept telling her “You do such a great job,” and left everything to her. And he got used to spending time with his friends.

Sita tried to understand him from what could be his perspective. He said, "I leave home at 7:00 in the morning and return at 6:00 in the evening. During that period, I struggle to keep the job, work for promotions, try to prove my value, try to please everybody, it is pretty much like prostituting myself. After a long day, is it wrong if I want my wife to welcome me with a smiling face? Is it wrong if I ask about the children? If I have to observe formalities with my wife also, why marry at all? In America wives buy shirts for their husbands. You would not buy clothes for me. I love beauty in nature. Even from childhood days."

Sita took a deep breath. That was his argument. Maybe there was some truth to it. But she was annoyed that he did not take into account all the chores she was doing. He complained that she was not acting like an American wife. But he did not do half the things the American husbands do. In fact, look what he is doing—fooling around with 2 or 3 women? Even that shows that his dream girl is a composite picture, a collage of several women. During one of their arguments, some three years back, Sita said, “If that is your idea of a wife, you might as well look elsewhere.”

He said, “If you think I would go to another woman, you don’t know anything about me.”

That was three years back. Now...?

That’s life, I guess. Days and months go by without we ever noticing it. People change unannounced. Their thoughts and opinions change, unconsciously.

Ding, ding, ding... Fire alarm went off. Sita rushed into the kitchen. The curry was burnt and turned into charcoal; heavy smoke set off the fire alarm. She turned off the stove and went into the bedroom. She stooped to pull out the suitcase from under the bed. The tali in her neck from under her sari folds jingled, like cowbells. Yes, like cowbells, they made noise. Sitapati has changed. His values have changed. Today he is giving a new definition to the word, "marriage." Sita removed the tali from her neck and threw it in the suitcase. She heard garage door open.

Sitapati walked in. He did not find Sita in the living room. Went in to the bedroom looking for her. “What now?” he said, looking at her and the suitcase.

“I am moving out,” Sita said, packing her suitcase, and without looking up.

Sitapati laughed. “What happened now?” He moved closer and patted on her hair.

She pushed away his hand. “Don’t touch me, never again,” she said, and added, “I have warned you. I am not going to live with you, as if I am one of your sluts.”

“What?” Sitapati said, surprised.

Sita continued, as if she was narrating somebody else’s story, “I never called anybody a slut. Today the word came out very naturally .”

“Wow! Have you become a militant feminist?” He laughed a crude laugh.

“No. I did not become anything. I am and have always been the same. Great pundits like you read volumes of literature, deliver soapbox lectures, and produce

more literature. And then, there are women like Sobha and Gayatri that keep blabbering about sympathy and empathy like the wrestlers in a pool of mire. They need to be saved, and you are there to save them. You all need each other. I am one of the million, very ordinary, Sitas who do not belong in either category. I spend my days, weeks and months like a bullock-cart on a country road, enjoying the peace and quiet, while you rush to save the world with your pedantic brain and heated debates. But then, I am not any less of a person just because you do not think so. Did you not hear the proverb—the turtle slithers making its way while the deer hops to its destination. That is their nature. Each person has her own way of life,” Sita said sounding unemotional.

Then she added, looking straight into his face, “Irony, isn't it? You go around lecturing about female voices, hear female voices across five continents, but not the voice that is right in front of you, and under your roof?”

[End]

(The Telugu original, "nijaaniki feminijaaniki madhya," has been published in *Andhra prabha weekly* September 1987, and included an anthology titled, nijaaniki feminijaaniki madhya, published by BSR Publications, Vizianagaram. Later, the story has appeared in anthologies and on websites, I was told.

My translation, "Shortchanging Feminism" has been posted on thulika.net. December 2002.)

The story illustrates two points: 1. The cultural conflict foreigners face soon after their arrival in America. On one hand, they would want to keep their Indian values; and on the other hand, the intense need into assimilate in the local culture. Men cannot leave behind their beliefs and customs, but also want to adapt to the local culture. Women struggle with the lack of domestic help and family ties.

2. In the name of feminism, both men and women violate established family and societal values, and use it as a self-serving ruse for their own gratification. I disagree with the critics who label it as a feminist story. The story, actually, exposes the hypocrisy of both men and women, who embrace the label to achieve their own goals.)

The Verve of a Tender Shoot

The gusty winds may knock down the gigantic trees, but the tender shoots negotiate the winds, abide their time, and rise to new heights, with renewed vigor.

“Mommy...” Kinjalka came running from school.

“Ah! Don’t jump on my like that,” Sarada said. Kinjalka’s face fell.

Sarada noticed her mistake. “Come here,” she said, pulling her close.

That was all the little Kinjalka wanted. She had no idea of the havoc at mommy’s heart.

Sarada could not explain it to her, either. Poor thing. A simple “Come here” was enough to please her!

Kinjalka showed the picture she painted at school.

“See. This is for you,” she said.

“Beautiful. I like it very much. I’ll put it on the refrigerator,” Sarada said.

Kinjalka’s face blossomed like an early morning rose.

Murari walked in. “Here, a telegram from your mother,” he said, throwing the piece of paper in her lap.

“Telegram?” That was a surprise to her too!

“Yeah! She is coming at the end of this month.”

Sarada was silent..

“Send her a reply telegram; tell her this is not a good time,” he said, sounding casual.

“Ha?!” Sarada was almost shocked.

“I mean...” He did not finish the sentence.

“It is over ten years now. Not a weekend passes by without setting one more plate at the table. They all are your friends. Now, for once, one person, my mother, wants to come to see me, and, you want me to tell her that this is not a good time?”

“You know what I mean. Do you, honestly, believe that she can have a good time under the circumstances?”

Sarada turned to Kinjalka and said, “Grandma is coming to see you. Would you like that, don't you?”

“Really! When?” Kinjalka was elated at the idea grandma was coming to visit her. She did not spend a lot of time with grandma, but remembered her very well, because of all the gifts that kept coming from her. Grandma sent silk outfits and jewelry through friends, traveling back and forth.

“Will you let her know, or, should I?” Murari pressed for an answer, ignoring the child's excitement.

“I won't,” Sarada replied, watching Kinjalka as the little girl played with her saree end. The atmosphere in the room was getting tense; and that showed in the little face.

Sarada showed him Kinjalka's drawing, “See this. She created it at school today.”

“Wow! Beautiful. You will be a great artist one day. You know, my cousin on my father's side, a distant cousin, is an artist. It is in your genes,” he said zealously.

“I will make one for you tomorrow, Daddy,” Kinjalka said, expressing her sense of fairness. She did not want Daddy to feel left out.

“I'll put it on the fridge. We all can enjoy it,” Sarada repeated her offer.

“Come. Let's go shopping.”

“What for? Why now?”

“Your birthday is coming soon. Isn't it?”

“Not yet, you silly,” Kinjalka said, with a naughty smile.

“I know that, you silly! Just, in case I am not in town at the time,” he replied.

Sarada sighed, and went into the kitchen.

Mother arrived as planned. Sarada went to the airport, and brought her home.

Kinjalka jumped at her like a leopard, even at the door, “Ammammaa..”.

Mother's face lit up like a hundred-watt bulb. She would not mind traveling ten thousand miles for that moment!

She stroked the little girl's cheeks gently, and said, “You are so thin. Your mom is not feeding you?”

Kinjalka laughed, “Ha, ha. Didn't I say so?”

“Look. I don't understand all this wishy-washy language. You must talk to me in Telugu,” said mother.

“Okay,” Kinjalka said with a shrug.

Sarada explained it, smiling. “In India, people say, constantly, ‘you’re so thin,’ as a matter of concern, you know! She thinks it’s funny,” and added, “Come on. Freshen up. I will show you bathroom.”

While mother was freshening up, Sarada made coffee. After taking a sip, mother opened her suitcase and started pulling out the gifts—a silk saree for Sarada, a pair of dhoti for Murari, a silk skirt, and jewelry for Kinjalka.

Kinjalka could hardly contain her joy, for all the gifts she was getting.

Sarada’s heart sank.

Murari left the room, sulking.

“You shouldn’t have gotten all these things. There is no need...” Sarada mumbled, trying to hide her heartache.

Mother kept quiet.

XXX

Mother kept herself busy with Kinjalka. She taught her songs, played Indian games with her. Helped her to get ready for school, and put her to bed at night.

There was one song, Kinjalka liked very much, and learned to sing, quickly.

chitti chilkamma, amma kottindaa? (Little birdie, Did your mom spank you?)

thota kellaavaa? pandu thechaavaa? (Did you go to the garden and bring a fruit?)

gutlo pettaavaa? Gutukku mingaavaa? (Did you put it in the cupboard? Ate it up in a snap?.)

Kinjalka kept singing the song, ‘chitti chilkamma, kinjalkamma’. It was fun, to build her name into the song. Mother tried to correct it, but Kinjalka did not listen.

“My mommy will never spank me,” she said firmly, as if in response to the line in the song.

Mother tried to explain to her, that it was not about her mom; that was the way the song was.

Sarada laughed. “You can’t argue with her,” she said.

The phone rang. Sarada picked it up, “hello!”.

Revati was at the other end. She called to invite the family for dinner on Saturday. “I heard, your mother came from India. How was the flight? How is she? Please, bring her along,” Revati said.

In the evening, Sarada told Murari about the dinner invitation.

“I am busy. You go,” he said.

“Come on, Daddy. It will be fun. You like Vishnu uncle too!” Kinjalka wanted him to go with them.

“Not now. I have work. Maybe, next time,” he replied.

“You tell him,” Kinjalka did let go. She wanted her mom to try.

“Maybe, you can make time, for this once. All the other children come with both their parents,” Sarada tried to be as clear as possible.

“I am telling you, next time, I promise,” he was just as stubborn.

Sarada got up to do the laundry, and asked mother to get her clothes also to wash.

While sorting the clothes, she felt something in Kinjalka’s pocket. It was a pack of cigarettes.

“It’s not mine,” Kinjalka said.

“How did it get into your pocket?”

Kinjalka closed her lips tight.

“Come on. You have to tell me. How did it get into your pocket, if not yours?” Sarada asked tauntingly.

“I am telling you. They are not mine.”

“What happened?” Murari walked in.

He heard the story and hit the roof. Hell let loose.

He stomped all over the living room. He hollered at Sarada: what was doing? How could she let the child get into bad habits? Is it not her job to take care of her? Today cigarettes, tomorrow stealing cars? How could she not see it?

Sarada was aghast, took a few minutes, and snapped, “That’s cute. If she shows talent, it’s because of Dad’s genes; but, if she errs, that’s mom’s fault. Is that what you are saying?”

“Stop, Daddy! It is not mommy’s fault,” Kinjalka said. She panicked.

“Never mind whose fault it is. How did the pack get into your pocket?” he insisted.

After a few minutes of wrangling, Kinjalka, finally, let the cat out of the bag--a boy from the fifth grade asked her to keep the pack for him; he was afraid that his mother would kill him, if she found out.

“There is a smart idea! What are you thinking? Your Mom would give you a big hug, and pat you on your back?” Mother cut in.

“My mommy won’t spank me,” Kinjalka said, pouting.

Sarada was losing heart. “Please, mother! Let me handle this,” she said, meekly.

“A fine way to raise a kid,” Mother mumbled, seized the child by the arm, and whisked her away into the next room. Instinctively, she knew that this argument between the husband and the wife was not going to end any time soon.

At night, Sarada lay down next to the child in her bed and tried to talk to her. In this country, people would say, “Talk, talk, talk.” But, she never understood how to do that. She did not grow up “talking” to the parents. They talked and she listened. She did not find anything wrong with that. Actually, she became a good listener, in the process! Now, it is time for her to talk; but, the child is growing up in a different culture with a different set of values. Sarada could not figure out a viable solution between these two streams!

“Are you angry with me?” she asked, after what seemed to be an eternity.

“No,” Kinjalka replied.

“Do you want to talk?”

“No.”

“Do you want to talk to someone else?” Sarada asked, holding her breath.

“Can I?” Kinjalka almost jumped at the prospect.

Sarada’s heart felt a thump at heart.

“With whom? Amy?”

“No.”

“Why not? You’ve been friends with her all your life.”

“Her mom says you will leave us.”

Oh God! The words were lashed out across her face like a whip. She held the child tight to her bosom.

For the first time, a huge fit of sorrow leapt to her throat, like a massive tidal wave. All this time, she was thinking of only the other children who might be giving Kinjalka a hard time. She never thought other mothers could be just as cruel! All along, she had been looking at the problem as her own. People kept asking her about how she (Sarada) was doing, but nobody seemed to think how her child was doing or the inner workings of a little mind. Of course, they would ask, “How is she?” or “How is she taking it?” But, who knows what really is going on in her little mind?

“Sorry, Mommy” Kinjalka said.

“It’s okay, dear. You don’t have to be sorry. You did nothing wrong,” Sarada said, and stayed with her until she fell asleep.

Next morning, she woke up early to make coffee. Mother walked in, and asked, “Did she sleep well? Is she okay?”

Sarada was confused. “What are you talking about?”

They both understood quickly Kinjalka was neither with Sarada nor with her mother. They realized, Kinjalka woke up in the middle of the night, told Mother she would sleep in her mom’s bed. But, she did not go to Mom. She was nowhere in the house.

Murari heard the noise and woke up.

All the three searched all the rooms, under the beds, in the closets, in the garage, and called the neighbors, hoping and praying, that the child went to the neighbor's home.

The phone rang, as they were about to call the police.

Janet called to ask if they wanted her to keep Kinjalka for the day also.

Janet was a long-time friend of theirs. She knew Kinjalka from the day she was born. She lived in a nearby apartment, about a five-minute walk, if one took the short-cut, and a ten-minute drive on the road by car.

Sarada, Murari and Mother felt relieved for a couple of minutes. Sarada talked, simultaneously, to Murari and mother on this side, and to Janet, on the other side, over the phone. She asked Janet if the child was okay, and told her she would go rightaway to pick up the child.

Sarada went to Janet's home and learned what actually happened. It was mind-boggling. That night Kinjalka, after telling her grandma that she was going to sleep in her mom's bed, grabbed a shirt, slipped into it, opened the door, and went straight to Janet's apartment, and knocked on the door. She told Janet that there was some family emergency at home; grandma had to be taken to the hospital, and so, they dropped her off at Janet's door. Nobody ever thought that Kinjalka could fabricate a story like that, not until now.

Murari was furious, like any father would, under the circumstances. How could a six-year old child leave home in the middle of the night and walk to a neighbor five minutes away? What was she thinking? He decided the little girl was past "talking" stage; he must take some drastic measure to make her understand; yesterday it was cigarettes and today running away?... Where will she stop?... How could a mother not know when the child is not home?

"You two squabble as you please and as long as you please. I will take her back to India," Mother said in a definitive tone.

"I am not going anywhere," Kinjalka said, crossly.

"Pull her out of that school. Let's send her to a private school or to a boarding school," Murari said, making the decision on the spot.

"I am not going anywhere," Kinjalka said firmly.

"First, tell me why did you run away in the middle of the night? Do you know how dangerous it is?" he asked her straight.

"I did not run away."

"What would you call it, leaving home in the middle of the night, like that, without telling us?"

"I went to see Janet. Janet is nice. She understands."

"Look! You had better get this straight right here and right now. You are not going to do any such thing again. Understood?"

“I don’t have to listen to you.”

“Oh, yes, you will. You must listen to mom and dad. Got it?” Murari screamed.

He was losing patience.

“I hate you.”

“Shut up. Learn to listen.”

“Why?”

“ Because I am your dad!”

“I don’t care. Did I ask you to be my dad?”

Mom and dad were stunned and looked at each other. Where is she getting these ideas from?

Sarada picked up Kinju abruptly and took her to the next room.

Mother went into the kitchen. Murari disappeared into his office.

Sarada kept thinking all day. “Choices” is a huge buzzword in this country. The grown-ups “choose” to marry whomsoever, and whenever they please; “choose” to have a child when they think they are ready; they even get to “choose” the gender; and “choose” to get a divorce as and whenever they want. Where is the choice for the child? Does anybody think what the child may actually “choose” to have or not to have?

Who decides what a child wishes to have or not to have?

The adults and the courts decide, pretty much like kicking a ball on the soccer field, and the child falls wherever she is destined to! Sarada could not help wondering how many children would “choose” to be born into this world--a world overflowing with violence, hatred, greed, and selfishness!

On the following Saturday, Sarada and Kinjalka asked Murari one more time to go with them to Revati's house. He gave the same reply, he had work to do. The others left leaving him behind.

At Revati’s home, it was an interesting mix. There were about 30 adults and six children. They all were speaking in about half a dozen Indian languages, between English phrases and sentences. The atmosphere was funny for Mother. She had some knowledge of English, but, this hybrid language was hard to follow. She sat in a corner, feeling lost.

At the other end of the room, Revati’s father-in-law, Krishnaya was sitting, looking as much amused or lost, or both! After his wife passed away a year ago, his son, Vishnu, and daughter-in-law, Revati, persuaded him to move to the States and spend his golden years with them.

Krishnaya and Mother struck a conversation.

“How are you managing in this god-forsaken country? It is about a week since I arrived here. I feel like the chataka bird hanging upside down in the sky. What is it

our people see here that is such a big draw?” Mother expressed her confusion, sounding a little despondent as well.

Krishnaya smiled complacently. “It is all in our minds. Once we set our mind to it and create an environment for ourselves, these outward trappings do not touch us,” he said, philosophically.

“Probably, you are right.”

“Could you, please, come this way,” he said, as he walked toward the fourth bedroom.

Mother and Sarada followed him.

It was a small room; could be a walk-in closet. It was sparkling clean, and filled with floor decorations. The traditional designs on the floor; the red and yellow dots on edge of a make-shift platform, the green mango leaves hanging overhead—all comprised of plastic and oil paints, yet, for some reason, did not look odd. Against the east-side wall, there was a wood frame, built like a little temple. In the center, the Goddess Syamaladevi was set in a silk saree, decorated with opulent jewelry and looking gorgeous.

Krishnaya lit an incense stick and went into a reverie.

In an uplifting voice, he started singing the famous verse, *Syamalaa dandakam*, in praise of the Goddess Syamaladevi...

Maanikyaveenaam upalaalayanteem madaalasaam...

The music was from out of this world. Krishnaya was miles away.²

Maatangee, madasaaleenee, maahendraditya...

Sarada was lost in the reverberating sounds. She was feeling goose bumps all over.

Saagaraabdha sangeetha sambhramaalola..

She did not realize when Kinjalka came in. The little girl sat next to her, cozily curled up. She was staring at the entire setup with amazement.

The noises in the next room subsided.

Krishnaya finished the song softly, like a plane landing, and prayed for a few more minutes. After that, he gave them raisins as prasadam³

Kinjalka held out both her palms respectfully, and looked at her Mom. Sarada nodded with a little smile. The child lifted her palms closer to her eyes per custom, and ate it.

Krishnaya stroked on her cheek gently, and said, “You are beautiful, like the gorgeous Syamaladevi.”

“I know,” Kinjalka replied, narrowing her eyes playfully.

² I split the lines in order to bring a sense of steady rise spiritual experience in the mindset of listeners as Krishnaya sang. Progressively, along with each line, the listeners feel elevated.

³ Food offered to God first and later distributed to devotees as a sign of blessings from God.

Sarada laughed. "You have to excuse us. We are a little short on humility," she sounded apologetic.

Krishnaya did not laugh. "No! No need for apologies. That is self-esteem, we all have to have it. That is important," he said solemnly

After a while, they got up to leave.

"Can I get a ride?" Raghava asked Sarada. His room was not too far from their home, he said.

"Sure," Sarada said and walked toward their car. Raghava sat in the backseat, next to Kinjalka.

In the car, Raghava said, "I can't understand our people. Our Indians are so brilliant, yet, they act like total morons. Here, in the West, scientists are laying ladders to the sky. We, Indians, are still digging deeper and deeper into the nether lands, like ostriches. In stead of looking up, we are wallowing in the rut of outmoded traditions; we, continue to believe the boulders and tree trunks save us from our miseries. While the West is producing great scientists, we are looking to the stones for rational solutions. Look at Krishnaya. He is an intelligent man, I am sure. Why can't he use his faculties for some logical thinking?"

"We all follow our hearts," Mother said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Yes, madam, I agree. At the same time, what is wrong in developing a concrete mode of thinking. He has a stunning voice. I'll give that to him. He will be a smash hit if he holds a concert. But invoking a goddess? Ludicrous, if you ask me! The man is deluded."

"No, he is not," Kinjalka said.

Raghava was taken aback. He could not believe what he just heard.

Sarada looked at both of them in the rear view mirror, and turned to Mother.

Mother was looking straight ahead, showed no emotion.

"I saw her, too. She is beautiful," Kinjalka said again.

Raghava did not continue his speech anymore. Sarada dropped him at his place and reached home by about 9:30.

Murari and a couple of his friends were playing cards in the living room.

"You said you had work to do," Kinjalka asked.

"I did. I just finished it. They came a few minutes back. How come you are home early?"

"Mother is not used to staying up late," Sarada said and went in quickly. She was in no mood to offer explanations to anybody.

She changed into a nightie and was on her way to the kitchen to get a glass of water. She stopped at guest bedroom door, as he heard Mother's voice. Mother was talking to Kinjalka.

“Come with me to India, dear! You can play with grandpa, your uncles, aunts, and your cousins. They all can teach you songs, games, and all that, you know,” Mother said to Kinjalka.

“No, Ammamma! I can’t. I have to be here. Mommy and Daddy need me. Don’t you worry. That little girl [Syamaladevi at Krishnayya's house] will take care of us,” Kinjalka said.

Sarada forgot about the water and returned her room. She kept thinking, for a long time, about the words Kinju had said to her Mother.

The song Krishnaya sang was an elaborate description of an adult woman in the prime of her life. Kinjalka called her the “little girl”. That is strange!

But the words that kept coming back to her all night, were “Mommy and daddy need me!”

[End]

(The Telugu original, "chivurukomma cheva" has been published on e-Patrika, a web magazine, in 2002, and later, in *Telugu nadi*, a print magazine based in Chicago. The translation, "The Verve of a Tender Shoot" has been published on thulika.net, March 2002.)

Author's note: Children are a lot smarter than the adults give them credit for. They understand human nature instinctively and act as they deem fit. Adults need to pay closer attention to a child's acts and try to make sense of them.

**My translations of stories by other
writers**

A Pundit

By Sthanapathi Rukminamma

The place was Kasi [Varanasi]; and, it was midnight, the moon was waning. The streets were desolate. There was no light, but for the glimmer from the stars. Oil lamps at a distance were dying down. We might as well say there were no lamps.

The street did not look like it was ever swept. The owls were screeching. Imaginary forms clung to the walls and emitting gritty noises. There were some big trees on the street. Foxes were howling sporadically. It was a windy day. The sea waves were roaring once in a while. Tall buildings stood on either side of the street. There were no people but some noises and a few sighs were audible from nowhere. The smoke from the burning bodies was hitting the nose hard.

A man was ambling on one such street. He was hungry. Would anyone be kind to him? No, not even Goddess Annapurna [i] to give him food. Not a soul. The cobwebs that filled the streets smudged his body, too. He kept crisscrossing and wobbly along street, end to end. In between, he was stammering hungry, hungry in a weak voice. He could not walk anymore; he fell to the ground, pulled himself up, and continued to walk slowly. He was tired, stopped, and leaned against the wall. His voice was getting weaker, hardly close to any identifiable note. Was there anyone who could take him in and give him food? No, none. It was getting hard to breathe. Suddenly he heard *saamagaanam* (Vedic chants) and metaphysical discussion from somewhere. He was weak, but reached the place, struggling.

A pundit was on the porch. He asked, “Who are you? Where from? What do you want?”

No answer.

The pundit took him into the house and gave him food.

The man felt better. He said, “My name is Sarvamangaludu. We are three brothers; I am the youngest. My two brothers are eminent scholars in Vedic and literary studies. They were married and their wives moved in with us. I was one

month old when my parents died. My brothers became my parents. I grew up with no fear, never knew what the word fear meant. I turned sixteen without knowing the alphabet, not even how it looked like; I was, literally, a *niraksharakukshi* [ii]. People called me a vagrant. Possessed no skills, none whatsoever. I did nothing at home but eat. My sisters-in-law put me down constantly. Not a moment passed by without their insults. I ignored them and lived like they meant nothing to me. One day, my older Vadina (sister-in-law) said harsh words, after giving me the gruel and rice. She said, 'How could a stupid with no reading skills have three meals a day?' My second Vadina echoed her comment.

I heard the words; the wad in my mouth fell on to my plate. My plate filled with tears; I said not a word. My brothers heard them, but said not one word. I left without another bite. I swore in my heart I would not return home until I became a notable pundit.

I decided to study in Kasi. I knew the proverb, *going to Kasi is like going to the graveyard*. I have been reckless all my life. Why worry now, I told myself.

I have walked all the way and arrived here I am now. I don't know how I got here. I have not had a bite for two days. My name Sarvamangaludu," he explained his situation fully and without reservations.

Pundit listened to his story and was pleased. "I will teach you the entire knowledge, if you stay with me. You must my instructions faithfully and never step out past the front door. Can you do that?"

Sarvamangaludu fell on Pundit's feet and cried, "I will stay with you surely. Please, make me a notable scholar."

The Pundit assured to help him.

"What is your name, Sir," Sarvamangaludu asked.

Pundit checked the almanac and said. "My name is Ghanapathi[iii]. Tomorrow is a propitious day to begin your learning."

Ghanaapaathi's study hall was located in a corner at the back of the big garden, next to the home. It was always very quiet in that hall. Sarvamangaludu continued his study with unflinching devotion in the study hall. Nobody was allowed to go in except the guru and the disciple. He never left the room except for a couple of minutes to eat. During breaks, he worked in the yard along with the guru.

He completed studying the kavyas and plays. He became partly knowledgeable.

He noticed something strange about the guru during that period. The guru was invisible at time, but he could hear the lesson. He could also sense an unusual aroma before the guru reappeared. Some times, the guru turned into a tree amid the other trees. During those episodes, Sarvamangaludu wondered if he was dreaming. He saw the guru slept on the bed in one moment and disappeared in the next. And the bed did not rest on the floor. He never saw the guru eat. Sometimes, the guru went into a corner in the garden and made horrifying noises which scared the disciple. Also, he would grow up to the sky and return to normal stature. One time Sarvamangaludu tried to push the bed down to the floor. As soon as he put his hand on the bed, the guru was on the bed asleep. After that, Sarvamangaludu never tried it again.

After watching these episodes for a while, Sarvamangaludu asked him, “Why do you behave like that?”

“That is the power of Yoga sastra! You will understand in course of time,” Ghanapathi said gently.

Sarvamangaludu said, “I am having bad dreams. Things like—I went to strange and unusual places with you; you called and talked to several people, ugly and beautiful; we watched plays and ran around on the mountain tops; you picked me up and when I ran away in fear and fell, you picked me up, and so on. It is happening every day as I fell asleep. All this is mind boggling. What is that?”

“That’s due to excessive acidity. You will not get those dreams anymore,” the guru said.

Sarvamangaludu thought one must never question the faculty of great souls and the power of God; he kept silent.

2

One day short of twelve years. Sarvamangaludu had completed to learn the four Vedas, six branches of Vedas, sixty-four arts, and several other sciences and arts branches of knowledge. He had the entire knowledge on the tip of his tongue. He became a scholar, mastered the detailed mysteries of all the arts; he surpassed his guru. There was no question in his mind; he missed not a single of branch of knowledge.

After so many years, he became curious about the city one day. He forgot that it was one day short of the twelve years he had avowed. He sneaked through the backdoor of the garden and reached the Dasaswamedhaghattacham[v] site. In one corner, several scholars were having a discussion on the puranas. In another corner, people were being entertained. Sarvamangaludu kept walking, watching each of them, and reached the area where learned scholars were having heated dialogue on sastras. He scrutinized them carefully and understood the topic. He participated in the discussion. The members of the group were surprised by the debating skills of Sarvamangaludu, who had just joined them.

From the moment Sarvamangaludu entered the discussion, Duntī Sastri was watching him closely. Sarvamangaludu was talking as if he was the very incarnation of Sanskrit erudition. He refuted other scholars’ arguments in one minute. The pundits were silent. He established his arguments successfully and asked them to invalidate it, if they could. None of them responded. All the scholars praised his erudition and honored him.

The president asked him, “Where did you receive your education, young man?”

Sarvamangaludu replied politely that he had received his education from Ghanaapaathi in the same town.

The president sat with a strange look his face and without a word.

Sarvamangaludu could not understand his reaction.

Suddenly there was huge commotion. Members started screaming, “Aaaa aaa aaa Ghanaapaathi—that *brahmarakshasi* (Brahmin demon)—you studied with him? How strange!”

As soon as the words hit his ears, Sarvamangaludu got scared. He shut his ears. “What? It is Brahmin demon? My guru?” he said and collapsed.

They all carried in their arms the president who fainted and went away. There was not a soul in the place. At the mere mention of the Ghanaapaathi, the place that was bubbling with countless individuals was deserted completely in a split second. Sarvamangaludu lay there unconscious on the boulder where he had collapsed.

Stars were showing up in the sky, one by one. The evening-prayer bells in the Visveswara temple were ringing.

Dunthi Sastri, who had been watching Sarvamangaludu from the moment he had set foot in the meeting place, returned to the scene. It was dark all over as if it had received a coat of tar. Dunthi Sastry approached Sarvamangaludu. He brought the Ganga waters in a dish, sprinkled on his face, wiped it gently and helped him sit up. Sarvamangaludu came to, barely. He swallowed two bowls of water fast; he felt better. “What is all that? Why did they run away?” he asked.

“They were scared in case Ghanaapaathi might show up for your sake. So they ran away,” he said. “Everybody is afraid of Ghanaapaathi; nobody can measure up to him. I too ran a little distance, then picked up courage and came back to see how you were.”

“So, how did my guru become a demon? Is he dead? If you know, please tell me the truth,” he begged.

“Ghanaapaathi may come back, if we stay here. He has the habit of sitting in the gatherings in disguise. Let’s go to Visweswara temple.”

They went to the temple and sat in a private place. Dunthi Sastry said, “Ghanaapaathi died twenty-five years back, he is dead hundred percent. We all—his wife, children, friends, relatives, poets in town and other scholars—have seen it closely. Ghanaapaathi died no question; he was like a nail in the beam. Per the Advaita custom, he was put on the stretcher and taken to *Manikarninka ghattam* for cremation. The guard at the graveyard made a note of his death. I was one of the pal-bearers. He was cremated. The body turned into ashes and was submerged in the Ganges River. The family performed the death rituals and charitable offerings for twelve days per custom. The wife Purnamma’s head was shaved too.

“On the thirteenth day, somebody knocked on Ghanaapaathi’s door. Purnamma opened and saw her husband Ghanaapaathi appeared just the way he had been when he was alive—swinging ear-ornaments, Kashmir shawl, palm-size red dot on the forehead, wide red eyes, pleated dhoti. She looked at him to her fill. She shrieked and called her sons. The sons came, stood away from them and watched their father.

“Ghanaapaathi came in and closed the door behind him. ‘You don’t have to worry about yourselves. You carry on as usual. I will stay in the garden,’ he said and went into the garden. He had no mundane desires, nor that attitude. For annual ceremonies, their relatives would come and at that time he would not be seen.

“Yes!” Sarvamangaludu said.

“Ghanaapaathi never told said he had been to that house. He would go around town after everybody had gone to bed. He never hurt anybody. Nevertheless, everybody was afraid even at the mention of his name. Right now I am afraid too.

“After he had entered the house, the word that *Ghanaapaathi* became a ghost spread in the entire town within two or three days. The houses and buildings on that street were evacuated. Nobody ever said that he had talked with his family members except for the few words on the day he had returned the first time. He would play with grandchildren and great grandchildren whenever they went into the garden. Ever since he had come back, nobody ever complained of illness, not even a headache. All of them enjoyed good health to the full. It was the same with their wealth. His sons had children yet stayed in the same house. Their wealth remained the same. Sons were working. They could leave the doors wide open at night yet nothing was lost ever, not even a straw. Others in town would not visit them. They did not even walk on that street in the daytime.”

Throughout the narration, Sarvamangaludu listened with unflinching attention. They were not aware of the time passed. They heard the noise as the temple doors closed and walked outside.

Sarvamangaludu started remembering the things the guru had done one by one. His fears started getting to him. He debated whether he should go home or not. If he did not go, the guru might come after him and harm him. At the same time, he could not muster the courage to go home. He could not decide. His heart spun like the elephant fruit in a bamboo platter. There was nobody to give him advice. He was walking one foot forward and one foot backward. He would walk two feet forward and four feet backward. The guru could find me even if I hide, he told himself. He also thought, "I defied the desire to hold onto life and got this far, why fear now? If the guru comes and tries to kill me, I will beg him to let me live. Then the question of what if the guru refuses to listen? There is nothing wrong in offering this body, construed of the five elements, as a reward to the guru who had bestowed me with knowledge." He felt elated at the thought that there was nothing more desirable than offering his body, if the guru so wished. Yet the hold of the desire to live on him was tightening; he could not break clear of it. He reached home, struggling with the thought each step of the way.

He pushed the back door. It was locked from inside. He went to the front door, and went straight into the garden, without saying anything to anybody. He saw the guru sitting in front of the lamp. The guru looked gentler than before. In between he was also looking dreadful.

Sarvamangaludu collapsed to the ground as the guru opened his eyes and looked at him.

“Dear young man, where did you go? It is late and dark. Why are you scared?” Ghanaapaathi asked.

Sarvamangaludu started crying on hearing those words.

Ghanaapaathi said, “I will not reprimand you. I know where you went and what you did. You don’t to say anything. I did not say anything, why are you scared? You are not in any danger. Do not cry, do not be afraid. The twelve-year session comes to an end tonight. I was hoping to endow you with a mysterious mantra. With that, you not only would know the happenings in the past, the present and the future but also many good deeds could be accomplished. But now, even if I give it to you, there is not going to be any use.

“I got this life because I had not taught others the knowledge I had possessed. Now I got my redemption by sharing my knowledge with you in this manner.” So saying, the guru turned into huge flames and disappeared.

Sarvamangaludu screamed and dashed into the house, crying.

(End)

(Note: The story illustrates the importance of the gift or sharing knowledge with others. Readers interested in the review of the entire collection of the author’s stories in Telugu, may click [here](#) for the link to the anthology.

Translated by Nidadavolu Malathi and published on thulika.net)

[i] The presiding Goddess in Kasi, known as goddess of nourishment, a giver of grains.

[ii] Phrase refers to an illiterate. Lit. possesses not even one letter in the stomach..

[iii] Literally, a pundit of superior knowledge.

[iv] Lunar calendar.

[v] An embankment of the River Ganges in Kasi (Varanasi) where Brahma performed Aswamedham. (Offering ten horses in a Vedic ritual.)

The Yearning

By Kalipatnam Rama Rao

That was the month the Sun enters the house of Sagittarius. It was early morning of the day before Bhogi. Nevertheless no house in the village received a coating of whitewash, except those of the rich. Between the village and Malapeta the green fields used to look to be in full bloom. Now there was only a parched Pumpkin patch.

In Malapeta, Pydayya sat in the front yard in a two-foot patch of sunshine. His older brother Narayudu's children were sitting next to him. Narayudu washed his face and turned to the Sun God to offer his daily prayers. Facing them, Yerremma stood, not too far from them.

"So, is that it?" Yerremma asked Pydayya, looking straight into his face. He was her son-in-law.

Yerremma was about forty years old. Crushed by hard times, she was looking like well over fifty.

"Is that what you think too? If so, I will leave right now," she added.

She tried to speak as softly as she could. Pydayya had never heard her speak in such a restrained voice!

Pydayya was barely twenty-five. After moving to the city, he had grown a bit taller and was looking robust. He wore a sleeveless t-shirt and striped silk shorts. The naked children around him looked like baby crows with bald heads and white streaks on their dark faces even the Mother crow would not coddle. "Nevertheless they are looking like round sweet balls, must be gobbling alright," Yerremma thought.

"So, should I leave?", she asked again raising her voice.

Bangari could not hold any longer. She was patting mud on the patio wall while listening to Yerremma's words. She went ballistic. "Why keep asking, 'shall I leave, shall I leave?' Who asked you to come here in the first place? Did we send a special invitation? Why did you come running to us? Who invited you, me, my son, who asked you to come here? Don't you remember? You've said you will not set foot in my front door, unless and until my son and I go to your place and beg you on our knees, didn't you? How could you show up here now? You came here, we did not go to your place. You have no shame to come here. Never mind. You've come and said whatever you wanted to say. Now you are done talking, you had better leave. Now, just go, go back to your hut," Bangari said and returned to her work.

Pydayya was happy that Bangari stopped there.

Yerremma for whatever reason listened to all that bantering without speaking a word.

After a while, Bangari scoffed, "She is your kid, your blood. That is why she went with you. I am her Mother-in-law yet she ignored me, my words, and went with you. You may say he is your son-in-law but you know he is my son first, and then only your son-in-law. He is my son as much as she is your daughter. Anyway, take him with you, if you can. I am not going to stop you."

It sounded like a matter of bondage for Yerremma. She took it as such and decided to step up. "You want to split husband and wife?" she asked.

"I don't have to do anything, you've done it long time ago."

"If that was my intent, I would not have shown up at your door at all," Yerremma said, shaking her fist in the air.

Bangari saw that and washed her hands in a fit of rage.

Oh, God, these two women are going to go at each other again, Pydayya thought. Narayudu intervened and bawled at his Mother, "You, stop it." Then turned to Yerremma and pleaded with her, "Please, Yerremma, I am begging you, go home for now. We are not ignoring your words. We are saying he will go with you if he wants to. After all, he is not a kid you know. We can't force him either to stay here or go with you. He is a grown man. He will do what he wants to do. Let's not pull the rope until it snaps. Listen to me, go home for now."

Narayudu literally held her chin and begged her. Yerremma had never lost in this miserable way, never in her entire life. She swiftly turned around and walked away furiously. She went a few steps, turned around and shouted, "Hey, hey, Iyyaparaala!⁴, Listen, I'm telling you today, you are separating your son and daughter-in-law. For that, you will rot in hell not only after your death now but for the next several lives. In the next life, you'll vegetate in bed forever. I am telling you today, as the Sun is my witness. You keep that in mind." She walked away in big strides to her home, just a few blocks away.

"Go away, truth-teller! Be gone. If your curses and mine have the power the entire world would have been burned down long ago," Bangari broke into a big laugh and then turned to her work.

Sankranti is six months away from Aviti, it is said.

"I will bring my daughter home every six months. You may be her Mother-in-law but you have no right to stop me," Yerremma argued.

Aviti is a chariot festival, an annual celebration observed in the Ganjam district, previously part of the State of Orissa. These two families were living in an area that was part of the previous Ganjam district. Just like the people there, the customs and traditions of both Orissa and Andhra got mixed up.

Bangari said, "Take her as many times as you want, either before or after the festival, keep her for a couple of days and send her back. After all, we all are in the same village."

⁴ A Relational term. Mothers of a couple, address each other *Iyyaparaala*. By using the term, Yerremma appears to draw Bangari's attention to their relationship.

"Whatever you are thinking? Bringing a daughter home every six months is traditional, especially during Sankranti and Aviti festivities. You can't say it is different simply because we are in the same village. Tradition is tradition, whether we are in this village or the next village; rules are the same everywhere and always," Bangari argued.

"If you are so particular about festivities, take her the day before the holiday, keep her as long as you want, a month or two, I won't say no," Yerremma protested.

"Who are you to tell me when I can or can't take my daughter to my home? Maybe before, maybe after, it is and should be my decision. I am the one bringing her home, you know. You have no right to dictate one way or the other," retorted Bangari.

Those gathered there also dismissed Yerremma's claim. As long as she was willing to send her daughter-in-law home, what difference did it make, before or after the festival, how did it matter, they said.

Bangari could not explain her real reason. She could not explain to them that one of her daughters-in-law had gone to her natal home for the delivery and another had died. If she let go of Sanni, she would have to manage the household all alone, all by herself. She was too old for that.

Yerremma's counter-argument was, she sent her daughter to have a life with Bangari's son and not as a servant.

Pydayya's move to the city for a job gave further support to her argument. If he stayed at home, Bangari could argue that he could not live without her, and she could do nothing about it. But that was not the case.

Bangari came to take her daughter home a month ahead of festivities. Yerremma raised hell.

"I won't send her," said one woman. "Come on, let's go," the other woman seized the girl's arm and dragged her toward the door. "I'll see how you can take her," one woman said. "I'll see how you can stop me," the other woman said. The entire village gathered to watch them.

Poor thing, Sanni was embarrassed. She endured their push and pull for a few minutes and then broke into sobs. The two women stepped back. A few minutes later, the two brawlers went at each other again - grabbed each other by the hairs, scratched, and stoned each other. Only after the villagers interfered and separated them apart they stopped the squabble.

Yerremma, being the outsider, sustained more wounds. Sanni saw her Mother bleeding. She could not take it anymore. She followed her home.

"If you leave now, I will not let you set foot in this house again," Bangari barked.

In the evening three girls were picking grass on the banks of river Tummalcheruvu. One of them just started wearing half sari. She came for picking grass for the first time. Quietness spread like the Great Sea. They were feeling suffocated.

Neeli stopped digging and asked, “Oley⁵, Sanni, do you think it reaches the village if I shout from here?”

“Don't you worry, nobody is going to snatch and run away,” Ankemma snickered.

“Who is going to snatch me? Nobody cares about me. If at all, they will pick you up and run away, or, your friend here. You two are in the prime of life. It can happen only to girls like you.”

Sanni broke into a big laugh.

“You, naughty girl!” Ankemma said with a touch of disdain.

“Don't I know why you two come to this god-forsaken corner while there is so much greenery all around the village,” Neeli said in retort.

And then added, bringing her face closer to theirs, “Kotthapeta is not too from here, isn't it? Your man will come to see you later in the day. That's the real reason.”

Sanni and Ankemma burst out into a big, side-splitting laughter. After a few minutes, Neeli asked, “Come on, Sanni, tell me the truth. If I shout from here, can they hear it in the village?”

“Shout and see.”

“What if nobody can hear it?”

“I'm telling you, just shout and see.”

Neeli stood up and looked toward the village. There was no sign of a human as far as she could see.

“I should call whom?”

“Call Dali.”

Neeli pretended not to hear it. Dali was Neeli's husband, he was from the same village. She was nine at the time she was married.

Neeli pulled herself up and shouted, “Hey Pydayyaa mama!”

Ankemma giggled. Sanni smiled and said, “Not good enough. Shout louder.”

Neeli again mustered all the strength in her body and shouted louder, “Ooooooooooh, Pydayya mamaaaaaaaa!”

“Ooh”, Sanni chirped like a bird in the mango grove.

“Aha! No need to laugh at me. He is coming for real,” Neeli bluffed. Then she crashed onto the ground.

“Oh my God! He is here, He is coming, for real.”

No, Neeli was not kidding.

“For sure?” Ankemma asked.

⁵ An informal form of addressing a woman.

"I swear. Come here and see for yourself. I saw him climb up the banks past the Tummala grove. At first, I thought it may be somebody else. But then, I clearly noticed his striped shirt and lungi I'd seen before. That certainly is him," Neeli said.

Ankemma stood up slowly and sat down right away. She saw Pydayya.

"True," she said to Sanni.

Sanni did not move, showed no signs of emotion.

"So, what? Let him come," she said, sounding casual.

Regardless, her heart started beating faster.

In the next minute, the other two girls became serious.

"You stay here. We'll see you later," Ankemma said, picking up her basket to leave. Neeli kept pulling the grass.

"No, Don't go." Sanni's voice sounded harsh. Ankemma was ticked off.

"That's cute. Have you lost your mind? Your Mother and his Mother are fighting, fine. Don't you let it get under your skin, He did nothing wrong," she reprimanded her gently and went to the Palm Grove along with Neeli.

As Sanni continued to pluck the grass she noticed two dark feet in front of her. Her heart jumped to her throat. She was trying desperately to keep her shaky hands under control. Finally, she asked, "Found time at last?"

"When one is far away, it is hard to find the time. Fine. What about them, who don't talk to the person right in front of them? What is that?" Pydayya asked, sitting on the grass, making sure clothes did not get dirty.

Sanni lifted her eyes and lowered them again, without stopping her work.

"Can't open that mouth," Pydayya asked.

Still Sanni said nothing.

Pydayya was wearing a colored silk shirt and freshly washed white lungi.

Sanni was wearing a colored sari, it was faded and looking dirty although Sanni had washed it earlier on that day. She wore a rubber bangle on her right hand and wool thread on her left hand. If she stayed in her Mother-in-law's place, she would not have been in that condition.

"I've come from so far away, can't you say something, not even one word? What have you got to lose?" Pydayya said.

Sanni had no good sari to wear and no valuable jewelry yet she was beautiful. She always took good care of her body. She took care of her looks even when she was busy or not well.

Pydayya was watching her keenly and imagining how her honey-colored figure would look in the yellow sari with red border and green silk bangles he had brought for her under that evening sunlight.

“How long you are going to stay?” Sanni asked, shaking off the dirt on the roots of the grass she had collected so far.

“I will stay for four day if you are nice to me, counting today that is. Otherwise, I’ll be gone by tomorrow.”

Pydayya expected the word “nice” to hit her hard. But there were no complaints from Sanni.

“What actually happened?” Pydayya asked.

“What can I say?” replied Sanni. She lifted her face slightly, there was a little warmth in her voice.

“Didn’t you receive my letters?”

She did not reply.

“Everybody tells me how the squabble took place but nobody tells me how it started,” he said teasingly.

Sanni was about to tell everything but changed her mind and returned to digging.

“I don’t know either how it started. Even if I knew, it is not appropriate for me to tell you.”

“How telling the way it is would be improper?”

“The Mother who has given birth to me on one hand and on the other the Mother-in-law who is supposed to take care of me. I’ll be in trouble whichever side I appeared to have taken.”

Pydayya had no answer. After a while, he said, “Alright. If you want to act like you’ve nothing to do with it, I have nothing to say either.”

“We can’t dismiss it as ‘whatever happened has happened and so be it.’ They’ve gotten into argument today again. I am in a fix, it is like a well in front and a ditch behind.⁶ Tell me what I am supposed to do now at least,” Pydayya said.

For some reason, he thought she would say something but she did not. He was annoyed. “If you don’t tell me this either, I would have to assume that you are angry with me and my Mother.”

Water welled up in Sanni’s eyes. She stopped digging, filled the basket with the grass she had dug so far, and replied in a hoarse voice, “You do whatever you want. I am only a woman after all. In matters such as this, I must not tell you what to do. Even if I had said something, you must not listen.” She picked up the basket and stood.

Pydayya was hurt by her words and even more by her walking away in that manner. Ever since he had set foot in the village, his Mother, brother and even his wife got into fights, and now, she was telling him, ‘you do as you please.’ He felt he

was being punished for a crime he did not commit. Even a passerby would show some sympathy in times like this. His own relatives were showing no concern! He suddenly stood up and said, "Alright, I will leave tomorrow morning. If I set foot on this soil again that would be my ashes only," and went away.

Sanni stood there with tearful eyes.

Pydayya walked away in big strides, his legs floating. Earlier, his heart was beating the same way as he approached Sanni. On his way here, he thought about what he would ask her. And what did he do?

What he did was wrong. He turned around quickly and came back to Sanni. As he did so, he noticed that Ankemma and Neeli were watching them both from behind Palm Grove.

"Can you come to Tavitappa's home later in the evening?" he begged. He was about to break into tears. His voice sounded desperate. Sanni noticed it. After that she found it hard to say no but she had to.

"You come to my place," she said, lowering her head and looking away.

Pydayya could not take it anymore. He left without looking back. He was coming home once every three months and stayed for three days. Both of them lived like that, he in the city and she in the village, for the past three years.

The other two home girls came back to Sanni. She wiped her tears and stayed there for a long time.

Lights were lit by the time Sanni returned home. Yerremma saw that the basket was only half full and growled, "Is this all you could bring, after spending the entire day on the field?"

Sanni was going in to put away the sickle under the eaves. Yerremma's question annoyed her. She was shaking as she spoke, "I did not come here to be your slave, not to cook and feed you and kids. I came here because you asked me to. Tell me if that bothers you, I'll leave right now." That is what she wanted to say but could not.

Instead, their next-door neighbor Narasamma took it upon herself to say so. "You, old brat, shut up. Her husband is in town and you want her do chores for you? I haven't seen anyone like you. You shoot off your mouth and think that it saves you? You don't care how much she is hurting or what she is longing for? You are angry because she has brought a few strands of grass short today?" she yelled at Yerremma.

Narasamma was a few years older than Yerremma, whichever way you looked at it. She was the only one Yerremma would not talk back to.

Yerremma changed the tune and played stupid. She said, "What did I say? All I asked was why smaller bundle? I was worried if she was not well or something. My bad luck, my words didn't come out right. That's all there is to it, I said nothing wrong," and went in.

After she left, Narasamma turned to Sanni and asked softly, "I've heard that your husband went in your direction. Did you see him?"

It is not unusual for the word to reach the entire village before the man has made it to his home. Therefore, Sanni was not surprised.

"I'll come to your home a little later," she replied and went into the house. However, she did not go to see Narasamma, not a little later, not even after much much later. Narasamma decided to go to Sanni herself.

Sanni did not enter the kitchen the whole day. It was late evening, she spread a small jute mat in her room and lay down. Her Mother went to get groceries.

The present Malapeta was on the North side of the village that was developed in course of time. A new street was formed by combining two streets, each with three rows of houses. Yerremma's house was on the new street. Between the new street and Malapeta, there was a tobacco farm. Between that and the village, there were vegetable fields and tender sprouts in preparation for replanting.

Yerremma set up a make-shift stove under the eaves facing the street and started cooking. A small wall stood between the stove and the street. The room Sanni was sleeping in had a door toward the street but not to the back. At night Sanni and her six younger sisters would sleep in the same room. Yerremma would make room for herself in the kitchen to sleep. The veranda had just enough room for a cot for an asthma patient. Yerremma's husband would sleep there wheezing all night. His only past-time was to lay in the cot and listen to Yerremma cursing him.

Yerremma cooked and fed the kids. Sanni said she was not hungry. Yerremma put away the pots in the slings hanging from the roof, closed the door, and went away.

After she left, Narasamma came. She held Sanni's shoulder, helped her to get up and said, "Listen to me, let's go to my place."

Her father and her sister, who had not fallen asleep yet were watching them with curiosity. Sanni understood that there was no use protesting anymore. As they proceeded, Yerremma came out and saw them.

At Narasamma's house there were two young kids but no male member. The kids were sleeping.

Narasamma cleaned the ashes in the coal stove, set the pot on the stove, brought the lamp from outside, and sat next to Sanni. She said, "I am like your Mother. Listen to me carefully. Families break up or make up on occasions like this. I suggest you follow his suggestion. Trust me, take his advice."

Sanni felt like her life had become a tabloid story, she was heartbroken. She covered her face with her sari end and cried. Yerremma heard her cries from next door but could not pull herself to go into the house.

"Stop it, whatever happened that you should start crying?" Narasamma said, a bit annoyed.

"My life has gone to dogs. Fine, see how low he's gone. He asked me to go to the hut every scoundrel visits."

"That's right. That's why I am telling you to take care of yourself. He is stupid. If you neglect him, no doubt another girl grabs him and runs away. That's why I'm saying, you need to heed to his words."

Those words caused Sanni further grief. "Why can't he come to my place?" she said, overwhelmed by grief. She was aware however that her expectation was meaningless.

"How can he? Even on the wedding night, he did not want to go to your place. It is worse than a pigsty. Tell me, is there anything that can make one want to stay there?" Narasamma said.

It sounded harsh but there was truth in her words. The kids would not be able to sleep in the front yard, with only worn-out sari pieces for sheets to cover in the chilling cold weather. They would have to cuddle next their older sister or Mother and sleep in the same room. That was the reason, although he had spent all day at her house, he had to take her to his home at night.

"I cannot say you sleep at my place. That won't do. Your Atta holds a grudge against me for something I had said sometime back. It sure is bound to get us into trouble."

Sanni could not see a way out. She hid her head in her knees and was silent. A little later Narasamma said, "That's why I am telling you to forget these stupid ideas. Just do what he says. I've got hot water ready for you. Wait for a second, I'll fix your hair. I have sent my little boy to watch when Pydayya arrives and let's know. You get ready before he reaches home. Take the boy with you to be safe. On your way back, bring your husband along with you."

It sounded reasonable at first. Then it occurred to her that this news would not be a secret for long. She was devastated. She broke into big sobs, muttering, "No, no, I can't go, I can't," and shaking her head vigorously.

Narasamma tried to explain to her in so many ways but Sanni remained stubborn. Narasamma was exhausted and yelled at her, "would you rather kill your marriage?"

Sanni kept staring at the floor. Narasamma said, "Tell me what are you thinking exactly. You think he will come to you today or tomorrow, or maybe the day after. Well, listen to what your Atta has to say," and then shouted out, "Oley Yerremma, come here for a second."

Yerremma came in. "Sit down," Narasamma yelled. Yerremma sat down. Narasamma said, "Tell her what the Dokkolla woman had said to you."

"You tell her," Yerremma said, looking away.

"She said that your Atta had laid down two conditions to let you back into her home. First, you must promise that you'll never raise the question of visiting your natal home for the next three years, not until she feels like it and say 'you may go'. Second, your Mother should go to her and admit that she (your Mother) was wrong. Unless those two conditions are met, she would not share the same roof with you as long as she lived. You know full well how stubborn she is. Your husband and his brothers will never cross her. Now, tell me whether you will listen to him and save your marriage or give in and let your Atta have her way."

"I may take his advice but where is the guarantee Atta will have a change of heart?" Sanni said. She was irritated.

“Who can tell what is going to turn out how? When the man and wife join hands nobody, not Atta not the Goddess over her head,⁷ can split them apart. Otherwise you have got nothing. Any bitch can break you up.”

“If that is what you think will happen, I have had it. I will not go to him at all. As far as I am concerned his people are as important to him as my Mother and siblings are to me. I am not going to use my body as bait to get him.”

Hardly Sanni finished her sentence, Yerremma stood up ready to leave. On her way out she kept muttering, “haven't I said so? She, her Atta, her husband, and all of them are the same. I am the only one, the outsider. They all blame me as if my girl has joined me and pouring her earnings into my lap. All I've got is the blame. Ask her. Ask her if she has ever given me or my kids one paisa, just one paisa. There is the mirror and there is the face. Ask her straight. She keeps feeding that worthless idiot like a pig. I've told her time and again that it is the same for you whether he lived or died. But she won't listen. She keeps feeding him bottle after bottle. I would ask her why? She says the gusty winds cause him to shiver miserably and she could not watch it. Well, as they say, if he dies today tomorrow is another day. How is he helping anybody by staying alive? It is a hassle for him and a hassle for the family. She stood by such a worthless idiot and got it to this point.

“I did not want to go there to bring her home. I've told her that her Atta is stubborn. I told her since there is no produce this year no work either, and no point in bringing her home. But she insisted that I go there and bring her home. So, I went to fetch her. And, see what happened. I have got broken bones and was confined to bed for four days.

“Yes, she is here. What good has come of it? She has got nothing, not even enough to buy a rag of a sari for the festival. That's what she has accomplished. You are suggesting I should fall on her feet for this girl's sake. Her marriage goes to dogs and people will spit in my face, you say. This is my karma, that's all I can say,” Yerremma left, mumbling and smacking her forehead.

Among the rich, there are rich, very rich, and super-rich. Among the poor, there are poor, very poor, and dirt poor. Yerremma was very poor.

Yerremma owned a hut. She possessed a few clay pots fairly in good condition, some aluminum and bell metal dishes. Also, one cracked aluminum pot, a badly dented vessel that was no good for pawning, and two dinner plates. Thus she was very poor, she must not be categorized as dirt poor.

Compared to her, Bangari was just poor. In her house, there were not only aluminum dishes but also three bell metal dishes good for pawning, two brass platters, brought by her daughters-in-law, and a small brass pot. She also had four water tumblers. She possessed a few other assets as well.

She also owned a house featuring a raised front porch and a door to the backyard. On one side, there was a small porch just enough to hold a cot and a small backyard. After Sanni had joined them as a daughter-in-law, the backyard was fenced in. Above all, she had a small strip of wasteland, which was like a pregnant buffalo that keeps gobbling fodder endlessly but never produces milk. Therefore, many people referred to them as 'haves.'

⁷ A phrase, tallo jejamma ayinaa ..., meaning no one, not even the ruling god over her head can disrupt.

Immediately after Bangari had been married into this family, her Mother-in-law had divided the property. Bangari and her husband received a farm that yielded four or five bags of paddy and a peanut farm that yielded four bags of peanuts if they worked right. They barely had anything to eat. In their lives having a piece of cloth was considered a luxury. They learned to manage barely.

The family grew bigger in course of time. Then came the War. Although the land continued to yield now and then, costs went up, commodities disappeared, and newly the black market came into play. The costs of commodities shot up sky high as they reached the village. Out of necessity, people took loans, failed to pay back, and were forced to sell their lands.

Thus, under the rule of the previous government farmlands of several farmers were wiped out. They had been told that under the new government things would be different. Some said the new government was going to be like the rule of Lord Rama. A few others believed it would be the Mala rule, that they would determine the administrative policies.

“Jobs for Mala folks, houses for Mala folks, and all the wasteland for Mala folks,” the landlords said. Some of them even said that the rules of the new government were laid out by a Mala gentleman.

It was nice to hear them but in action it was different. Wherever the Malas turned the Kapu men confronted them with sticks. The Mala folks in the end received some barren land, quite rocky and in a far off location. It was a horrendous task to break the rocks and cultivate the land.

Bangari's husband had to implore the Village Accountant desperately, offer gifts, and perform numerous odd jobs around Munsif's house for umpteen months. He was nearly worn out by the time he obtained a small strip, located in the middle of a dried-up river. He died in the same year. Folks said the land was accursed. Bangari ignored those comments and kept the land.

The children were still young. Only Narayudu grew up and taller. Bangari assumed the responsibility as the head of the household with Narayudu by her side. From what she had seen so far she understood a few things about life. She told herself, "It never gets better for the poor. If they try to get something they don't have, they will lose everything including the things they have had. The poor may starve days on end yet they do not die. That being the case, why lose the things they have had on hand?" She decided that she would not try to get something she did not have previously and would not let go of the things she had on hand, even if her life depended on it. She put it into action to the letter, never budged an inch. Under her management, they did not lose a blade of grass.

The other Mala folks, who did not have that kind of fortitude and, who believed that the Mala rule would happen, sold pots and pans, sweated blood, and turned the wasteland into a viable farm. As they say, the fresh water washes away the existing water too. The expenses wiped out the profits. They were left with nothing but their houses and their bodies.

The rich would not buy the houses in Malapeta. The poor could not afford to buy a house. It was the same with the bodies. Sacred texts and jurisprudence would allow renting out the bodies occasionally and for a brief period, but not to sell them with full

rights. Thus most of them ended up becoming dirt poor. Or else, they would have been very poor.

Bangari was doing fine until all the four sons had grown up and two daughters-in-law joined the family. They saved a little cash and a few seeds in season and invested them in the land. After the season ended, they managed the best they could without taking out loans. They ate whatever they had and even when they had nothing they managed.

In course of time, Bangari's third son Pydayya grew up. Usually, young men in the early stages of youth entertain a love for life and develop belief in their vigor and brains. Additionally, Pydayya was married. He started complaining that their Mother had no mettle, and people without mettle remain stuck in the same place like floor mats.

"You do as you please but no loans, I will not let you borrow. Put up fences, gather dry cow-dung chips, move dirt from the pond, pour sand, add fertilizer, dig ditches and grow greenery, anything and everything you can and want you may do. I am not going to stand in your way. You work hard, I like it too, but no loans," Bangari told them a few times.

Pydayya was ticked off. He declared that he decided to move to the city at the first sign of an opportunity. "Ah, go, I don't care," said Bangari. Pydayya wasted no time. He left for the city.

Pydayya struggled for about six months in the city and by the end of the year, he made it fairly well. It was not clear what happened but he found no work. In the past two years, he had been struggling with no income in sight.

Back in the village, Bangari's oldest daughter-in-law died in the same year Pydayya left for the city. For the next three years, the yield on the land was far from satisfactory. The yield kept diminishing, first one quarter, next one half, and at the end the entire yield. The entire village was thrown into spasms of fear and uncertainty. It was like the floods after heavy rains. Tiny grass blades were drowned at first and the huge trees and weaker trees were knocked out next. The villagers were suffocating. Bangari lost her mind.

Dogs fight for the morsels of food off the dirty plates in the garbage. Those who eat on those plates might not understand why those dogs fight. Only those who had starved for a year can comprehend the underlying philosophy.

Before the Aviti festival, people could find work like digging and sowing peanut seeds for a month. After Aviti there would be no work until after three or four weeks. There would be plenty of work, like reaping the harvest one month before Sankranti. It, however, would depend on rains-no life without rains.

That was the reason Yerremma wanted to take her daughter home before the festival. That was the reason Bangari wanted to let her go after the festival.

In Yerremma's household, there were only two female laborers, including Sanni. In Bangari's home, there were four male laborers and two female laborers, not counting Sanni. Yet Bangari would not let go of Sanni.

On the following day, Pydayya took bath per tradition, ate bitter-sweet chutney and set out to go to Peddamma's house.

"Why now? Why not go later in the afternoon?" asked Narayudu. Pydayya promised to return home in time for the festive meal. Narayudu agreed.

The night before Pydayya could not sleep and the next morning he was feeling down. He had to talk to someone to find a solution to his problem. Peddamma's village was one and a half miles away from his village. His close friend Kannayya was there in Peddamma's home.

The eldest daughter of Peddamma had died fifteen years ago. Kannayya was her only son. After her death, he moved to his uncle's home. Pydayya and Kannayya had been friends since childhood. Pydayya thought he would feel better if he spoke with Kannayya.

At Peddamma's home, everybody was thrilled to see Pydayya; it was like seeing God. They set a seat made of palm-tree strands for him and gathered around him. Kannayya was not home. Somebody went to fetch him.

An aged, withered old woman was lying in the cot on the porch. She looked like a bag of skin and bones and barely covered with a few rags. She was woken by the noise. "Who is there? Who is that?" she squealed weakly.

Peddamma went close to her, held three fingers in front of her face, and shouted, "My sister's son, the third boy, the third."

Pydayya also went to her and said, "It's me, me, your great-grandson, Kannayya's friend."

The old woman got it finally. "Ah," she said with a glimmer in her eyes.

"The bitch got it," they all laughed.

Whether she understood or not, the entire neighborhood got the message. Those who had known him for a long time came to greet him. Peddamma welcomed them all and showed them places to sit.

After the usual chitchat for a while, they started inquiring about the city.

"How are things there?"

"What can I say? Same as here," Pydayya replied, clearing his throat.

"No, not that. What about rationing? We heard a lot about rationing of the items like rice and such, can you get them easily?"

"Yes, we can get them you know in the black market. You can get them if you can pay twice the price."

"Like here," said one old woman.

"Work?"

"That too is the same as here; some find it, some don't."

Then, they all asked him about life in the city. It was a very big city, ten miles away from his village. It was like three adjoining villages put together into one in size, their village could not compare even to one neighborhood in the city. It was surrounded by mountains on three sides and the sea on the fourth side.

They all listened to Pydayya's presentation of the city with great enthusiasm.

One young woman said, "Yes, you would have to see it at night if you really want to see it, I was told. It would be like all the stars fell into the valley in the dark, I believe. It would cost them millions of rupees you know. My uncle told me." She kept watching Pydayya and the others as she spoke.

Pydayya looked at her and guessed she might be about 25. She could be mistaken for Sanni's sister if one saw her suddenly. She was standing in front of him, leaning against the palm tree trunk pillar.

"Our Bariki⁸ Ramayya's Kodalu⁹," Peddamma said.

Pydayya realized that he was staring at her and that it was not appropriate. He turned away.

"Anyway, what do you do there?"

"I work as a day laborer."

"What does that mean?"

Pydayya explained: In the city, there was a marketplace called Pedda Bazaar. Millions and billions of rupees changed hands by wholesale dealers every day. The businesses included clothes, sugar, grains, tamarind, and many other items. His employer was handling onions and vegetables. Since Pydayya was good at math, he was assigned bookkeeping and the supplies of commodities to small stores. Occasionally, he also moved bags when necessary.

"How much you make per day?"

For several reasons, Pydayya did not give a straight answer. "it depends on seasons and luck. If the transportation is good and supplies are running smoothly, one can make as much as ten rupees. Or else, two or three, sometimes not even that."

The others did not stop there. "Make 70, 80 rupees a month?"

"In season."

"What about out of season?"

"One way or the other, no less than fifty."

That is good, they all looked at each other and shook heads in assent. Pydayya, pretending to be casual, looked at Kodalu and noticed that her eyes were fixed on him.

"By the way, what do you do for meals?" Peddamma asked.

⁸ Bariki - Village watchman.

⁹ Kodalu - Daughter-in-law.

“There is a group of eight workers. A woman from their caste cooks for them. Each of them gives two rupees in the morning. She serves cold rice in the morning and usual meals at noon and night.”

“Is she the same woman from way back?” Kodalalu asked.

Pydayya could not figure out whom she was referring to. He thought she might be talking just to get his attention. The others knew it was normal for her.

“You knew?” Peddamma asked her.

“Is she not the same woman? She was married to the village watchman Appayya of Kotturu. After she had run away with a snake-catcher or tanner, he got married again,” said Kodalalu.

She was blabbering like an old hag, thought Peddamma, it was annoyed to her.

“That was so long ago,” she sneered at her.

“Long ago? Hardly ten years back, maybe fifteen,” Kodalalu said, watching Pydayya, “Didn’t my uncle come to visit you? He said he had seen her and greeted her but she turned away.”

Pydayya kept staring at her pretending not to understand what she was saying. Well-formed figure, Sanni may look like her at that age, he thought.

"Never mind who she is. Forget what your uncle has said. He can't recognize today someone he had seen yesterday. You think he has recognized somebody he had seen ten years ago!" Peddamma said.

Pydayya was confused still. Peddamma explained to him, unraveling like a ball of wool. “Remember last year watchman Ramayya came looking for you? The dark, tall deaf man. He told us that he had eaten at your place. This girl is his daughter-in-law. She has been repeating his words ever since.”

Pydayya finally understood. He recalled the incident.

A year ago one day he had received the goods and was on his way home late in the evening.

“You have got a guest,” said one of his coworkers. Pydayya looked at that person but could not recall who he was.

“Who are you looking for, sir?” Pydayya asked politely.

The stranger did not tell directly who he was. He first established for himself Pydayya was the person he was looking for, and then said he was a relative of Peddamma. On his way back from another town, he stopped to see Pydayya since Peddamma had asked him to.

Based on his own relationship with Peddamma, Pydayya extended hospitality to his guest. He took him to the restaurant, both ate there and then went to a movie.

Ramayya was tall like a pole, dark and skinny, and leaned forward. He wore a white shirt and a dhoti on his head as turban. Below the waist, he was wearing only

loin-cloth. Being a watchman, he would never leave without a cane. Standing next to Ramayya, Pydayya looked like a dwarf.

The movie was an old movie but the theater was a dazzling new theater. It took some time for Ramayya to get used to the dazzle. After that, he was so overwhelmed, there was no telling how much.

The old man could not follow the storyline. He kept asking questions. He was partially deaf. Pydayya could not raise his voice because of the others around him, and if he lowered his voice the old man could not understand. After the interval, the old man felt sleepy, Pydayya felt relieved. But, as soon as they left the theatre, the old man resumed asking questions again.

“Why the theatre is so glamorous? Don’t they have theaters where you can sit on the floor comfortably? Have you heard of touring cinemas?”

The conversation went on like that for a while. Then he started asking about the city: Why places are so far apart in the same city? Why didn’t you bring your family? Men without family don’t behave well, don’t they say?

And more questions about men and women passing by, the stores remained open after midnight, moving buses and rickshaws - endless questions.

Pydayya did not have a room of his own. He slept on the porch in the marketplace. For some reason, there were no lights there. As Ramayya walked past the gate, a bandicoot ran across his path. After that, he was terrified each time he stepped on a rotten eggplant or decomposed cucumber.

Pydayya pulled the old jute mats and rags from the eaves, dusted them off, and spread them on the floor.

The old man did not go to sleep. He kept asking, “Why it is so dark on the porch when the entire city is bright with lights? Why did you not wash this patio?” He could not sleep for a long time, worried about getting bitten by bedbugs, rats, and bandicoots.

Pydayya thought this experience would make him leave. But he did not leave. He wanted to see the city. Pydayya had no other choice. He sent word to his manager that he was taking the day off, told the woman to cook for one more person, and set out to show the city to Ramayya. He showed the huge buildings, skyscrapers, hospitals, and offices, explained about them as much as he could. By one o’clock, Ramayya was hungry and tired. "Let's go home," he said.

“I don’t have a home,” Pydayya replied.

“Where do you keep your stuff like bags, clothes, and all?”

“Right there in a corner in the marketplace,” Pydayya said.

"What about food?"

He explained about his food arrangements. Behind the market, there was a block of slums like any other slums in any other city. This one, however, being in the middle of the city, was small. Since it was small, the houses in it were also small. People huddled in those houses, built one on the top of another on the marshland on either side of a gutter. On either side of that locality, the streets were full of multi-story

buildings, a stunning movie theatre, and a few restaurants that depended on the theatre for business. On the fourth side, the Grand Trunk Road with endless traffic ran.

As he walked in, his first question was, "You live here?"

The hutments, which they called homes, were built of clay-wall surrounds. The roofs were made up of garbage like old rotten palm leaves, rusty copperplate mats from the times immemorial, and jute mat pieces. Rusty copper plates served as doors.

Ramayya was shocked to learn that a room barely enough to hold a cot was rented for ten rupees. He could not creep in through the small hole, which served as door. He sat outside, managed to eat the gruel served to him, and washed his feet rubbing hard. He said, "One might as well starve to death, if you ask me. That's what I think."

Pydayya did not realize the kind of dump he was living in until Ramayya pointed it out. One-fifth of the city's population was living in those huts. He felt good, it felt okay for him as long as he had some cash. But whenever he was short for cash, Ramayya's words came to mind.

Pydayya was startled by Kodalu's voice. Kodalu was telling Peddamma, "Not that, I am not talking about castes. Who cares about castes nowadays. I just asked if that woman was the same woman as we had known."

"Who knows what you are saying or why. Never mind your words. Your father-in-law also ate the food she served. If his caste is tainted, so is my son's. If his caste is not tainted, my son's caste is not tainted either."

They all laughed. Nobody said a word for a few minutes.

Suddenly, one of the women shouted, "Why ask me? I did not go there, nor seen it. Ask your uncle yourself."

A 15-year-old girl, sitting by the door, was embarrassed for being caught thus and pouted. She shoved the older woman from behind.

Pydayya understood that she was Kannayya's wife, based on the relational term she used.

"What? What?" those around him also wanted to know. The older woman explained. Further Peddamma added, "Yes, son, tell them. She is dying to know. A few days back, her husband made a big fuss about joining you in the city. He said he was tired of working here as a farmhand. He calmed down a bit only after Ramayya returned and described the city life. Now she started it again. Maybe she would just go away someday. Tell her what she wants to know."

One of her aunts said, "Just because she asked about the wages, it doesn't mean she is moving to the city."

"Do you really think she will leave your grandson and go away?" one old woman asked.

"Who knows? It is not unusual nowadays. There is a group of folks for whom the city is heaven. You know they have a guru too," Peddamma said, pointing to Kodalu. The young woman would not take it. She retorted, "What is wrong if I go?"

Peddamma did not reply. Kodalu got bolder. "What do we have got to lose? Isn't it better to go to the city rather than wriggle here with empty stomachs," she turned to the others around and asked. Nobody replied.

Peddamma said, "Go, girl, go. Who is stopping you? Please, go there, and wallow in the mire filled with flies, pigs, and bandicoots. Nobody is going to stop you."

"Yes it is wrong to go there and wallow in the swamp leaving behind all this great life we are living, all these mansions, costly beds, and all," she said mockingly.

"Nothing there, nothing here, we might as well die here," another old woman commented.

"Here we have a morsel to eat at least. What do you have there?" added another young woman.

The rest of the women joined the fray. Pydayya understood from their ranting that the reason for this bickering lay not in the current situation but in a feud that had been brewing for quite some time.

"Yes, yes, we are not eating here," Peddamma prolonged the conversation.

Kodalu was annoyed. She countered, "We are eating true, it is so obvious. Let us see what your son has done. He has been a farmhand under Venkatrayudu for over eight years. The first four years it went well, they paid him alright. After that, they kept feeding excuses: 'Tomorrow,' 'In a couple of days,' 'Just wait, wait until the new moon,' 'After full-moon,' so on and on. It was a fierce struggle to get paid even once in the first six months. Then they said they would pay after bringing the produce home. Then they said the produce was ruined. Produce was not ruined, nothing happened, they were doing fine. We kept begging and begging, and even told them we were starving. Finally, they yielded, gave us three months' worth of grain. The remaining wages only after the next yield, they said. They have not given us anything in the past two years, I swear. Nobody dares ask them for fear of getting beat up.

"I asked your son, 'Why work for the wages you may never see?' I told him to quit but your son says, 'If I quit now, I may lose everything. If I stay, maybe one day the produce comes home, and maybe they will disburse our share to us.' I will say we may earn a couple of rupees in the city but he won't see it that way."

"Jobs are not free for grabs in the city either," Peddamma said.

"Neither here nor there. That's what I am saying. What do we have here except toiling and moiling? We are starving but not seeing one paisa in return. There, we may live in a pigsty, fight flies and bandicoots, but we'll have some gruel at the end of the day. Why not move to the city? Why toil on the farms and fields for nothing? And why be kicked and pounced upon, be called pinchers and stealers by these worthless folks?" Kodalu stopped.

"So it is all about you only?" Peddamma asked.

Kodalu retorted, "What do you mean all about me? Did I say you should not go?"

"Do you think the city is teeming with jobs? Who knows how many others had gone there in the past and could not find work? Sometime back, Kopparam Pothayya

and his brothers had sold their property, moved to the city, and returned within six months. His wife left him for somebody else while they were there," Peddamma snickered.

"Why talk about those that had come back? Why not talk about those who remained there and are doing fine?"

"They too will be back tomorrow, if not today."

"Fine. Probably we will also return some day. For now, let's live like this."

"Is that all you can say? Don't you think about others?"

Kodalu was lost for words for a few minutes. Then she came back with renewed vigor, "Alright, I don't think about others. You think and tell me what you will suggest."

What could Peddamma say? She sought God's help. Kannayya appeared at the door.

Kannayya, without saying one word, wrapped his upper garment around his head, went to Pydayya, and started yelling, "You scoundrel, get up, up." He kept hitting him on his forehead and chest with his fist.

Pydayya could not take it; he left his seat. Kannayya sat on it and continued his attack, "Son of a bitch, don't you know you should come to me and not the other way round? Come, come here, sit at my feet." Pydayya did not sit at his feet. Then Kannayya lunged at him, both went into a big fight like two ferocious bulls while others watched. They went on fighting until Peddamma came with a stick and threatened to thrash them.

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Pydayya did not keep his word to his brother. He had said he would return home for supper but he did not. Peddamma did not let him go until he had eaten at her place. Instead of going home he went to the pond and sat on the banks. The midday heat was turning into a soft warm glow. The cool breeze was getting breezier. There was no sign of Sanni. He looked around. Somebody was walking by the Palm Grove at a distance. Pydayya told himself that he would wait until that person went past the Palm grove and then leave.

Pydayya was waiting for Sanni but his mind was not on Sanni. Ramayya's Kodalu had taken over his heart and soul. She was like a well-ripened fruit or a fully blossomed flower. His heart was craving for her but he was scared also. At Peddamma's house, he had noticed that her eyes were devouring him. She took his side while arguing with Peddamma. Her eyes, the moisture in her eyes, the glimmer in that moisture and its reflection in her face, amity in her voice, and her indignation - they all were haunting him.

He recalled his conversation with Kannayya about Kodalu earlier that afternoon. They left Peddamma's house and arrived at the village limits. Pydayya asked Kannayya about Kodalu. Kannayya said, "She may appear like that but she is not worldly-wise, very naive I should say. She is not that kind of a person, as far as I know."

Pydayya thought so too but did not want to believe.

Then Kannayya related to him of an incident that had occurred sometime back. According to him, Kannayya visited Kodalu's place and as he was about to leave, she said, "Leaving already?"

"Why? Are you cooking for me?" Kannayya asked.

"Why should I? Aren't there women in your home? Or, they don't know how to cook?" she said.

Kodalu had been thinking about moving to the city for a while. Her husband had the muscle but not the guts. Therefore she started working on Kannayya. He stalled her for a few days. The more he avoided the more persistent she was. The pressure was building up by the day. Finally, he decided to find out her real intentions. He tried to get close to her a couple of times but she dodged him cleverly. And then he got hold of her while she alone.

"Where would you go now?" Kannayya asked her.

"I am not going anywhere but I will tell you one thing. One must not steal as long as one can get by. It is the same with couples. When one has a spouse, one must not resort to evil ways. Tell me if you don't have a wife at home. I will even go along if she is ill. But I am not going to break up families for no reason. All men are alike and so also all women," she said.

Kannayya said he had left with his head down.

The story got to Pydayya. He thought Sanni was no contest to that woman, and himself no contest to Kannayya.

Pydayya was feeling tired. He looked around again. A woman carrying a basket was climbing up the ridge. Probably fifty-years-old. The sun was down. Pydayya gave up on Sanni and got up to leave. "Just one more minute," his heart was pulling him back.

He thought of something that had happened a few days before Sanni had moved in with his family. Pydayya was wandering in a neighbor's Palm Grove looking for palm fruits. The Sun was prickly hot. He saw a girl alone amid hillocks.

There was no other human being in sight under the scorching Sun. But for the gusty winds blowing through the trees, there was no other noise, not even birds chirping.

The cool breeze from the sea was caressing but he was feeling burning hot. Occasionally dry winds blew and that made him even more frustrated. With pounding heart and longing eyes, he looked around like a thief. He picked up the courage and went into the crags of the small mounds. Madiga¹⁰ Appayya's daughter was there snuck in a corner. She bit one of the mangoes she had stolen from a nearby Mango Grove. She pushed one side of her upper garment and tucked the other mangoes in her sari folds at the waist. She was startled by Pydayya and quickly tried to hide her mangoes with her torn sari end.

¹⁰ Tanner caste

For the crime he had committed on that day he could not stare into her eyes again for a very long time. Now he was thinking it was not his fault. Hunger is the Mother of all evils.

Pydayya was in the same mood today as he had been on that day. His mind was scattered; he could not decide as to what he should do.

Sanni will not come, he told himself and stood up to leave. As he stood, he felt a flood of something at heart, he was not sure whether it was sorrow or frustration. Whatever it was, there was no way out. He dusted off his clothes, turned westward, and thought it was a few hours for the sun to go down. He walked halfway along the banks and arrived at the temple of the local goddess. Something reminded him of Gangamma. He felt relieved for some uncanny reason and proceeded to cross the pond. Halfway past the pond, there was Chennangi grove and Gangamma's hut ahead of the grove.

He walked a few more steps past halfway. Right there was the hut of Dayyala Gangamma.

"You here? Are you lost?" Gangamma greeted him with a question, "Lost maybe but the same old path," Pydayya replied.

Gangamma cleaned the front yard, set up three stones for a make-shift stove. She was cooking gruel.

Pydayya sat on a boulder across from her. His face looked like a partially burned charcoal with bright sun rays shining on his dark face.

"Why that face?" Gangamma asked him, watching the fire in the stove.

"I have been roaming around since morning, totally beat up. I was hoping I will get some cold water," Pydayya replied.

Gangamma read hunger in his face like a doctor would the illness in a patient's face. She was going to refer to the winter weather, instead, she asked, "Where did you go?" as she proceeded to fetch firewood.

Pydayya told her the places he had been to.

The old man inside heard voices and asked in a streaky voice, "Who's that? Narayudu?"

Gangamma's first husband had left her after four or five years of marriage and eloped with another woman. Gangamma remained without a man for about ten years. Her present husband invited her into his life after his first wife had died. After she had moved in with him, he fell ill with some unmanageable disease and lost both his legs. Gangamma nevertheless held on to him faithfully more than his life.

"No, not Narayudu, it is his younger brother Pydayya," she spoke loudly so it could be heard inside.

Pydayya went into the room and said, "I have no cheroot but how about a beedi, old man?"

There was nothing in that room but a water jug and a cot. There was no room for anything else, he thought. He did not notice the dustpan under the cot and the two clay pots in the sling hanging from the beam.

"Whatever it is, I will take it," the old man said in a raspy voice. For Pydayya it was hard to watch the old man's pale face and the drawn-in eyes, which looked like cotton balls. He looked away, lit up one beedi, handed it to the old man, put another by his side, and went back to the front yard.

Gangamma stirred the gruel well and put the ladle down.

She waited for Pydayya to say something. He was quiet. She started asking about his life in the city. Then she brought up the question of the squabble between the two women and asked if there was truth in what she had heard.

Pydayya gave her short answers but did not get into any real conversation.

After a while, she asked, "Why are you here?"

"I told you I was thirsty," he looked up, pointing to his throat.

"If you are thirsty you should go to a liquor store. What do I have to give?" she said in a steady voice.

"Whatever you have," he said.

"All I have is this gruel. I can starve the old man and give it to you," she said, smiling. She checked the rice if it was cooked well and took it inside. In a few minutes, she returned, put out the fire, and removed the ashes.

Pydayya started to speak in a trembling voice, "I am starving for a woman for the past six months. My Mother and Mother-in-law are bickering and causing a rift between me and my wife. Last night I asked Sanni to come to Tavitappa's house. Even she does not understand my suffering. I am telling you, I have thought of picking up a knife, stab them both and kill myself but I don't have the guts. I would not be in this miserable position if I had the guts."

Pydayya went on to relate the history behind the current situation. He said, "At a time when things were tough at home, somebody from my brother's wife's side suggested to him to go to the city. His wife begged him to take up on the offer. My brother refused. Then I took that advice and went to the city. God only knows how much I have suffered, am still suffering for that decision. Leaving my wife behind, went there and have been toiling and moiling day and night. I've been sending home some money, five or ten, whatever I could. But my folks don't understand, they can't see that I come home once in six months after slaving away in the city."

Pydayya stopped and sat there looking down. He wondered if he was telling her what he had wanted to tell Kannayya earlier that afternoon.

"I could have conducted myself anyway I pleased in the city if I wanted to. I watch the hardships my coworkers are going through. I can easily do everything they do, but not when it comes to women. If I go for a woman in the neighborhood, It ruins the family. If I go after a young girl, her innocence would pester me for the rest of my life. There are streetwalkers but I am sure that sends me reeling to some hospital. That means no work and lost wages. That's what I am saying, only I know and God knows my pain."

Darkness was creeping in. He sat there for a while scribbling on the ground with a twig.

"Even now I would not have asked you. The thoughts I had last night are killing me, I am scared that I might do something horrible in that frenzy. Now, I leave it to you, whatever it is, I will take it as your pleasure and my luck."

He sounded the same now as six years back. Six years back he had come on a sunny afternoon just like today. She could not recall whether Pydayya had been married by then or not, but for sure Sanni had not come to their home yet. Gangamma agreed to his request on the condition he would not ask for such a favor again. He has not grown since, she thought.

"You've heard what the old man said earlier. He mistook you for your older brother. Now I am your brother's wife. He will be here soon," she said.

Pydayya was stunned by her account, sat there like a stone carving. Gangamma was sorry for him and asked, "Can you handle country liquor?" She sounded like a Mother at that moment.

Pydayya had drinks on few occasions, but he did not answer her question. She understood, went in, and returned with a bottle.

"This is two rounds for your brother. You talk one half and leave the other half for him," she said, putting the bottle and snacks by his side. Then she went to feed the old man. She ate some, washed the dishes, and returned to Pydayya.

Pydayya warmed up and started talking. Within 30 to 45 minutes, he was flying high.

The bottle was half empty. Gangamma told him to stop.

"You've said you are my sister-in-law and I accepted it. You can't have it your way in everything. That is not going to happen," he said.

Gangamma heard him and decided she had better let him drink. She knew about drunks full well. Pydayya passed the limit, but did not lose his wits though.

"My brother thought about the children at home and decided not to remarry. He did the right thing, I thought. But then I also wondered how he was managing. Now I know this is how he has been managing.

"I think this is good too. He is happy there and you are happy here. What else is there for the moiling folks like us? We can never, not even in thousand years, fill our stomachs. Consummation is the best of all pleasures. For the moment, this is a pleasure, but there is a fee for this. And then some damage too. For that pleasure, no fee, no damage. That is the happiness God has provided for the poor. For me, even that has become out of reach. Look what I've longed for and what I've got. Lovely."

Pydayya went on prattling about his life. Even in that state of drunkenness, he did not blame any one individual nor God. After a while, he calmed down. Before Gangamma could bring some straw to make a bed for him, he threw up and screamed. Gangamma tried to hold him, but he pushed her away and fell down, fell in his own vomit.

“Hey, hey, Bangari, come here, you bitch,” Yerremma shouted a Sugreeva shout.¹¹

Friends and relatives gathered at Yerremma’s house to celebrate the Sankranti festival. The Sun was down by the time they arrived. They all sat down to eat.

“Can’t you hear, Iyaparaala, come here,” Yerremma shouted from outside. It was heard inside. Narayudu was about to get up, Bangari stopped him. “You must not get up from the festival dinner. You have fasted all day and you must have the prasadam. It would be an affront to our ancestors to get up without eating prasadam. I’ll take care of her,” said Bangari.

“Listen, don’t be hasty. Tell her to wait, I’ll be there in a minute. I’ll talk to her,” Narayudu said.

Yerremma, with sandalwood paste smeared on her throat and red Hibiscus flower in her hairdo, stood in the front yard like a belligerent warrior. As soon as Bangari appeared at the door, Yerremma howled, “You, where did you send your son last night?”

“Where did I send?” asked Bangari.

“Did you not send him anywhere?”

“You tell me.”

“You tell me.”

“You started it.”

“Alright, I will tell you. Will you take a smack from me with my sandal.”

“If it is my fault, I will for sure.”

“Maybe it is your fault, maybe it is your son’s fault, the fact remains he has transgressed the rule.”

“If something wrong has happened, I will take the blame for it.”

“Where did your son go last night? Did they, the two men, not bring your son home last night on their shoulders?”

“What son from what town? What two men?”

“Your two sons Narayudu and Kotayya brought your third son home,” said Yerremma.

“Yes, they brought him home.”

“Where from?” Yerremma asked.

Bangari did not reply.

“Why did they have to carry him?”

Bangari did not reply to that either.

"Why? Doesn't your son have legs to walk? He left early in the morning and did not return home until late at night. What was he doing all day? Your oldest son went in search of him and returned at what time? To where did your two sons rush kicking and screaming? And then, brought him home in the middle of the night secretly, why secretly? Where is the need for secrecy if it is only him getting drunk and losing control? Your first son is a drunk, your second son is a drunk but this one never drinks. Why did he drink now? Where did he drink? I understand if he had a drink in a toddy store or in a country liquor store. But why at some bitch's house? Why go to her for a swig, for anything for that matter? Is he related to her? How is he related? Are they of the same age? He should be home at that time but he went to her house, why? Is that his idea or some bitch taught him?"

She stopped to take a breath. In the meantime, a huge crowd started gathering in the yard.

"Are you done or is there something more?" Bangari asked calmly.

"Why? Isn't that enough?" Yerremma said.

"Yes, I am saying that is enough."

"Alright, tell me why he went there."

"I did not send him there. Ask him. "

"Well, I will ask him. Tell him to come out. "

"He is eating."

"I will wait until he is finished eating."

"Why? Can't you come in?"

"I will not step inside until your son comes to my place."

"Well then stay here," Bangari said and went in.

"Hey, don't the special occasions mean anything to you?" the crowd taunted Yerremma. She attacked them too.

"She did not come here for nothing, she came here to wrangle," Bangari said as she walked in and saw Pydayya washing his hand. She did not ask why. Narayudu said, "He is leaving."

"What happened now?"

"He says he cannot take this bickering anymore."

"What is this nonsense? It is like taking out the ire of Atta on the cattle.¹² Alright, go away if that is what you want," Bangari said.

"That is enough. He is worn out as it is. On top of it, you two- you here and Yerremma there - are acting the same," Narayudu said.

¹² Telugu proverb, *Atta meeda kopam dutta meeda chupinattu.H*

By then, Kotayya was done eating. He belched loudly and went into the front yard.

Yerremma looked at him as if wondering “why he?” and asked, “Your little brother has not done eating yet?”

She thought Kotayya was going somewhere. He walked straight to Yerremma and said, “You get up.”

“Why?”

“Get up from here, I said,” he yelled at her. Not only Yerremma but all the others also were startled.

“Oh, you scoundrel!” said Yerremma.

Kotayya jumped on her, hit her with his fist several times and kicked her. “Now, get up,” he said again.

Yerremma got up crying out loud, “Oh my God, oh my God.”

“Go, be gone,” he said, pointing to the street towards her home.

She started out in that direction shaking calling on her parents. She went a few yards, turned around, and cursed Kotayya for his behavior.

By now the other villagers joined the neighborhood crowd and kept watching them.

Kotayya took two steps toward her and said, “Should I come and get you again? Go, just get lost.”

Yerremma took four steps backwards, did not stop cursing him though.

She included even his Mother, wife, and brothers too in her barrage of curses.

Kotayya went it. Inside, Pydayya was getting ready to leave.

“What? Are you leaving?” Kotayya yelled.

Pydayya was quiet.

“If you want to go, go to your wife. Or, bring her here. Don't go somewhere else like a cry baby,” he said, dusting off the patio floor with his upper garment and settling down.

Kotayya's face turned red like a beetroot. Narayudu was anxious to pacify Kotayya desperately but was worried about how he might react also.

“Tell me if you can't go. I'll go and get her,” Kotayya jumped to his feet as he spoke.

“Wait, assailing them is not going to help,” Narayudu followed him, pleading. Kotayya ignored his pleas and left.

Yerremma's two daughters seized her on either side and dragged her toward their home. She was stepping back and forth, growling, shaking off her daughters, and throwing her arms into the air, while continued to spew profanities.

Kotayya walked in big strides toward her house.

"Come in," Sanni squealed standing in the doorway. Probably Yerremma noticed it, she gave in to her daughters. Nevertheless, she resumed her angry outbursts as soon as she reached home.

"Why? What is he thinking? She is not beautiful enough for him? Not young enough? Is there a caste issue? Short of his moral standards? Why? Why? What is the reason for him to go to another woman?" Yerremma kept asking and waving her fist in the air.

She had a point for being angry and frustrated. But her outburst meant nothing to Kotayya. He was focused on Sanni bringing home. It frightened Sanni. She quickly went in and was about to close the door. The door did not close.

"Out, get going," Kotayya howled.

Sanni came out, trembling.

"Come on, move," he said harshly.

Sanni came out, shivering.

Sanni's father saw that and said to Kotayya, "Orey Kotayya, calm down, calm down." It was hard for him to speak because of wheezing.

"You keep quiet, Mava! You don't know," Kotayya said. It sounded more like a warning.

Yerremma was crying. Neighbors heard her cries and came out of their homes. Sanni's kid sisters hugged her and cried.

Kotayya seized her by the shoulder, dragged her out and pushed her crudely.

The entire neighborhood heard Yerremma's cries and came out of their homes and were watching the commotion.

Kotayya pushed her once again. Sanni started running toward her Mother-in-law's house.

Yerremma saw the crowd and started crying louder, "Oh my God, oh my God, what can I do? They are attacking us." She ran and stood in Sanni's path, telling her not to go.

Kotayya stood between the two and pulled them apart. He threw his turban around Sanni's waist to avoid holding her physically, and dragged her toward his house.

Yerremma fell to the ground, got up, attacked Kotayya, beat him, and scratched him while bad-mouthing him. The folks from both the villagers tried to pull them apart. Kotayya pushed away those who stood in his way.

Kotayya saw his Mother coming toward them. He let go of Sanni, pushed her towards Bangari, and went away shaking off his turban.

Sanni saw Bangari, collapsed to the ground, and broke into big sobs. Bangari took her into her arms, "Don't worry, don't you be afraid, my girl, don't you worry," and walked her toward her home.

Yerremma fell to the ground and cried. After Kotayya, Sanni and Bangari left, the folks who gathered around started arguing, taking sides.

“Well, she went to their place first and now he came to her place,” said one person.

“Is it the same? A woman going to their place to pick up a squabble is not the same as a man coming here and attacking her,” one old woman said.

“He may be her brother-in-law but to drag her by the shoulder and take her home is inexcusable. I’ve never seen such an atrocity,” a young woman commented.

“It is okay if it was her husband. But for a brother-in-law to put a hand on her and drag her is wrong, totally wrong,” one old man said.

“This has happened only because she is a woman and her husband is disabled. Had she had a son, heads would be flying by now,” a hot-blooded youth commented.

It was during that period, Asirnayudu, the village-head, decided to talk with Bariki¹³ Papayya. He was looking for a ram to sacrifice at the upcoming Kanumu¹⁴ festival. Asirnayudu noticed the commotion from a distance, went closer and asked the people close by what was the matter.

None of them could explain to him clearly. Then he called Bariki Papayya. Papayya explained to him the entire episode briefly.

“So, the man who dragged her and escorted her to his home is not her husband?” Asirnayudu asked angrily.

“No Babu, he is not. He is her husband’s second older brother, Kotayya,” Papayya replied.

“Bring that scoundrel here right now,” Asirnayudu said.

Bariki did not move.

“If he refuses, pick him up, seize him by the hair and drag him to me,” Asirnayudu shouted louder.

“Yes, sir,” Papayya said, still did not move.

Asirnayudu became suspicious. “Why? Does he drink?” he sneered.

“After he calms down, after an hour or so, they all will come to you, Babu. If we get involved now, we will not have enough time to go to Venkayyapalem and bring the ram. Shouldn’t we take care of that first,” Papayya replied cleverly.

It made sense to Asirnayudu. “Bastards, whatever got into their heads, they are acting like scoundrels. Somebody has to teach them a lesson,” he left, mumbling. Bariki Papayya followed him.

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¹³ Bariki - Village watchman.

¹⁴ Sankranti is a 3-day festival in Andhra Pradesh. On the third day, the animal sacrifice occurs.

"We are eating whatever we have and living our lives quietly. Why work as farmhands for some landlord?" Narayudu's younger brothers would say. Nobody understands how this story would have turned if they had not had those rules and if Papayya had not intervened.

Papayya was right. The village regained peace after an hour or so.

Yerremma, leaning on two men's shoulders, went to Asirnayudu's house. Some of her neighbors followed her for support. A group of drunks from the same area put up a drums and bells show and went around asking for donations.

Sanni was sitting on the back porch. She cried until she was tired of it. Bangari tried to persuade her to freshen up and wear a new sari. Narayudu heard that Asirnayudu was angry and sent Kotayya away to his in-law's place. Kotayya hardly crossed the outskirts, Bariki Papayya appeared at their door with the message that they should appear before Asirnayudu.

Following Bariki Papayya's advice, Narayudu told Pydayya to stay home and went alone to meet with Asirnayudu. As they reached Asirnayudu's home, Papayya told Narayudu to wait outside until after he was done talking with Asirnayudu.

Sun was down. The backyard was noisy with the animals returned home from grazing. Yerremma and her supporters were sitting in a corner on the veranda. Village entertainers heard about Asirnayudu's visit and came per custom. The entire village was looking forward to the entertainment enthusiastically.

Bariki came back and repeated what he had told him earlier. After the drummers had left, Bariki Papayya addressed Asirnayudu, "Babu, Babu." Asirnayudu turned toward him. Bariki said, "Narayudu is here, Babu. His second brother, Yerremma's son-in-law that is, had gone somewhere. His Mother promised to send him to us as soon as he returned. The other brother had gone to his in-law's place, tomorrow is Kanumu, you know." He sounded casual.

"They whisked him away. Did I not say so? They whisked him away," Narasamma said, crying.

"You shut up. They should be crying, if anybody. You keep quiet," Papayya yelled at her.

"Of course you are upset with me. You all are the same party," Narasamma replied. Asirnayudu ignored her.

Narayudu came rushing and said to Asirnayudu, "Babu, Babu, I am begging you." He was very polite but that did not stop Asirnayudu from screaming at all of them. "You, scoundrel, what's gotten into your heads, you scumbags, what were you thinking? You broke into her house for what? Because she is a helpless woman? How dare you barge into her house and beat her? What do you think this is-a village or jungle?

"No, Babu, I was not there," Narayudu was about to say.

"Shut up, bastard, how dare you speak again. Did I not see the wounds? Do think there are no witnesses?" Asirnayudu stood up.

Narayudu did not know what to say. Papayya said, "You be quiet. Babu had seen everything on his way to Venkayapalem."

Narayudu took the hint and kept quiet.

Asirnayudu continued, "I had seen everything. That bastard dragged her down the street like a beast. If I had a stick, I would have broken his bones and sent him to the hospital for six months. Let him show up, I will take care of him like he never forgets, scoundrel." He stopped and returned to his chair.

Narayudu waited until he calmed down and then said, "Yes, Babu, it was wrong. If she had not provoked him, it would not have come to this. After fasting all day, we sat down to eat and she showed up like a bumblebee. My Mother saw her and turned away, she did not say a word. My younger brother, you know young blood, could not control himself. This is not a one time thing, she has been plaguing us for over a month. She comes in storming, and I tell her to stop but she would not listen." He presented his counter-argument.

Yerremma was about to say something, Asirnayudu told her to be quiet and turned to Narayudu, "If she came to your house, you should have come to me. You should not have gone to her house."

"Yes, Babu, yes. That was wrong," Narayudu said. One should not punish a person after he admits his guilt, that is the rule. Therefore, Asirnayudu slowed down.

Then followed a torrent of comments from those present there - Asirnayudu's wife, their neighbor Subbamma, Setty who had supplied sugar to Asirnayudu, the local barber who came to give a massage to Asirnayudu. They all agreed that nobody should resort to violence, no crime should be tolerated. Not one person said violence was acceptable. If there was a disagreement, they should not settle it by going at each other but go to the proper authorities and seek resolution. Everybody suffers from anger and frustration no surprise there. Decent people contain them.

Narayudu listened to all those comments, readily agreed with all of them, "Yes, ma'am," "Yes, babu," "I agree, totally agree."

After that, Asirnayudu settled down. "Where is the girl now?" he asked Narayudu.

"She is with us, Babu," he replied respectfully.

"You take her back and hand her over to her Mother. You bring your younger brother here tomorrow. Yerremma will bring her daughter. I will find out what exactly happened, all the details, and let you know my decision," Asirnayudu said.

Narayudu said, "yes, Babu," and heaved a sigh of relief.

Yerremma's supporters looked at each other, their faces fell.

"You left out the one person critical to all this, Babu," Narasamma said timidly as Asirnayudu got up to leave.

"Yes, I forgot. Bring your Mother too," he said to Narayudu. With that, the party's faces brightened.

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The rich festival falls on a new moon day, they say. But this festival was not a rich festival and so it had the misfortune of falling on a full moon day, it was said.

Bangari's house was crowded with folks anxious to hear what Asirnayudu had said. Pydayya was sitting on a cot in the front yard.

Soon enough, people started coming out one by one. Sanni was one of the last five or six persons. Under the white moonlight, her yellow sari looked white and the red marigolds in her dark hair looked dark. She walked past Pydayya with Narayudu behind her.

A little away, Yerremma's supporters stood like shadows. Narayudu took her precisely to the same point Kotayya had dragged her and handed her over to Yerremma.

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Asirnayudu was basically a small person. If he was weighed, his bones might not add up to one KG. Hard to imagine where God hid that power in him but Asirnayudu was a tiger whether he opened his mouth or threw his palm like a lion's paw. People feared him and worshipped him.

The day his wife had set foot in their house with amazing qualities like those of Goddess Lakshmi, the family had begun flourishing in leaps and bounds. On the same day, Asirnayudu brought together all the fields under one head and set out to cultivate them. He performed his two daughters' weddings. The girls were gems and the grooms were majestic. Three of his sons landed big jobs in big cities. The fourth son was very smart and appeared to be heading to a foreign country in course of time.

"That's what I'd call luck, Bava! Without leaving your chair, you have managed to get the boys educated at the expense of the government. With the high dowries the sons brought, you have performed the weddings of both your daughters. In the town, you've got clout and assets, which you can enjoy as long as you live. That is what I would call 'things falling in place,'" commented a local MLA.

The MLA was afraid that Asirnayudu might run against him in the next election. That however was uncalled for.

Asirnayudu hated politics. He often said that politics existed only to destroy the young and the old alike. He had been Gandhi's follower sometime back and wearing khadi garments too. However, all that ended after Gandhi died.

Now, his village was his kingdom and his current politics were confined to the villagers' welfare. His goal was to make sure that the villagers adhered to the path of Dharma and lived amicably. He would say, "Life is ephemeral, it is here today and gone tomorrow; only dharma stays forever. The world would turn upside down if dharma is not adhered to."

Folks would listen to him and shake their heads in assent. In practice, however, they forget.

Asirnayudu would tolerate anything except stealing and misconduct.

"Bastards, if you have nothing to eat, go begging door to door. It is better to die than steal. By stealing you lose your souls in both the worlds - heaven and earth. Why can't you understand that?" he would ask.

There is a pride in stealing and maybe hard work too. Therefore that is tolerable. Stealing from the fields is different. Hard work and karma depend on one's faith and

trust in others. No matter how many farmhands a farmer has, it is not possible to watch the fields round the clock. Asirnayudu would not tolerate stealing from farmers. He would stop at nothing until the justice was served.

“Bastard, what are you thinking? It is you Mother’s property? Or your father’s? Did you work on that field?” So saying, he would beat him up black and blue and throw him out.

However, stealing had been happening. Asirnayudu let go some without much fuss and others with mild curses, yelled at some offenders, mildly cursed a few others, and occasionally he took some to task. One way or the other, he got it under control. It was the same with misconduct. He made it his mission to keep them all under control.

Because he hated violence so much, Kotayya’s action the day before infuriated him. That was the reason he told them to come to him for settling the matter. He did not care about the festivities.

Asirnayudu said he would settle the matter the next morning but he did not attend to it in the morning, not even in the afternoon. It was getting late. Papayya said to him, "Babu, these folks have not eaten all morning, are worried you might call them any minute. If it is not settled by evening, Pydayya cannot be present. He needs to be in the city by tomorrow."

“Okay, ask them to come at noon after they are done eating.”

Papayya went to the parties well before mealtime, gathered them and brought them to Asirnayudu’s house.

They all waited and waited, and were nearly exhausted by the time Asirnayudu came out. He asked Papayya, “Are they all here?” and went in again.

He had coffee, came out, and sat in his chair. Across from him, a little to a side, Narayudu and his Mother sat. Next to his Mother, Pydayya squatted, he was dressed up like a city man. Two women were standing behind them.

Yerremma sat in a corner with bandages on her body and around her head. Her two daughters sat next to her. Behind her, her neighbor Narasamma and a few other men and women were standing.

“Who are they?” asked Asirnayudu.

“Witnesses, Babu, witnesses,” Narasamma said.

“She has no mouth? You, Yerremma, what are they for?” he said, nodding toward them.

“They have beat me up yesterday, Babu. Look at these bandages. They have broken every bone in my body.”

“Serves you right, bitch! They should have shut up your mouth. That scoundrel broke only your bones, he should have taken a blunt knife and cut off his tongue. That’s what I would have done,” he said.

The women on Narayudu’s side turned aside and giggled.

“Babu, if you go easy on them, they are going to go even wilder,” a man in Yerremma’s group said from behind.

“You all scoundrels, you are the problem. You all gather around them and cause trouble. Or else, why would you bring witnesses and evidence for the problem I had resolved yesterday?” Asirnayudu yelled at him. That shut them all up.

Yerremma wanted to confront him, "What resolution? All that cursing of yours got nowhere, and so are my wounds," but decided not to. As the way things were, he was already spitting fire, and if she spoke, he might go into another fit of rage.

He was quiet for a few minutes and then said softly, "I have been watching you all for years. You always keep bickering with each other for something or other, why? Why do you have got to gain? What is wrong with you? Do you have properties to fight for? Land to infringe upon? Water resources to fight for? Roads? What is it you have got that justifies these quarrels, tell me."

He stopped, looked around until they all bent their heads down, and then continued his preliminary statement. "God has given you all the muscle. That's what you all have got. If all the adults go out and bring home some dough, you have enough to eat for a week or ten days. That being the case, why can't you all stand by each other be happy? Is there pleasure in these squabbles? Don't you have brains? Or, some worms have gotten into your heads and eating them away?"

What could they say? What could they say that would make sense to him?

"Therefore, take my word, stop bickering, learn to put a stop to these squabbles," Asirnayudu said. Then he asked them what was the main reason for their quarrel.

Yerremma and those who accompanied her could not explain the issue clearly. They kept repeating who said what, to whom, by whom, when, and after that, who did what, why they did so, but none of them could explain in a way Asirnayudu could understand.

Then Narayudu summarized the arguments of both sides the best he could and without prejudice.

Asirnayudu listened to some of it and ignored the rest. It was pretty much the same as Papayya had told him on their way to Venkayyapalem earlier.

"So, that is the problem?" he asked.

"There is one more thing," Narasamma said, "I heard some rumor, Babu, I have not heard it myself though. It seems Bangari said, 'What an arrogance! What does she have that she could be so arrogant? It seems she said she would arrange her son's marriage with another girl within a year, or else, her name is not Bangari.' Then Yerremma started asking questions. I don't know what she had found out, but that's the reason she went after Bangari yesterday. They beat her up and sent her home."

Bangari was about to say something. Asirnayudu stopped her and asked Narasamma, "Is your name Narasamma?"

"... .."

"Are you Yerremma's lawyer or witness?"

"... .."

"I am asking you if she has asked you to speak on her behalf."

"Babu, babu," Yerremma said, "I asked her to speak on my behalf. Polite words do not come out of my mouth. Besides, I am not feeling well either."

"Are you sick?" he dissed her and turned to Sanni, "Who is her daughter, you?"

Sanni said yes.

"What is your name?"

Sanni replied.

"Your surname?"

Sanni mentioned her in-law's surname.

"Yerremma! What is your surname?"

"Don't you know?" Yerremma asked.

"You say it, bitch."

Yerremma answered at once.

"That's right. She might be your girl way back then but not now. If she wants to and her husband wants to, she will come to you. If not, she will not. If her husband and her Mother-in-law please, they will send her to you. By law, you have no right to insist that you can take your daughter anytime as you please. Now, you shut up and sit down," Asirnayudu said.

Yerremma had no tears in her eyes to shed. She kept staring at him with her dry eyes.

"If you really want, beg them to let you take your daughter home. Or, ask your daughter if she is willing to walk away from her marriage."

The last sentence hit Narayudu hard.

"Babu, that is not right. We have a saying, 'How can the man who tied the knot has more rights than the woman who has given birth to her?' The truth is she has her rights and we have ours. When it comes to a girl, both parties have rights. We are not going to deny that," Narayudu said, sounding kind.

He continued, "Maybe she was upset and so raised a hell. Here is what probably Yerremma thinks: She (Bangari) has four sons and two daughters-in-law. What's wrong if she lets me have one girl. But Babu, you know the bigger the tree the gustier the winds."¹⁵

"During my father's time, you have granted us a strip of land for farming. It was about one cent of land located in the middle of a dried-up pond. For us, it was a royal elephant or a barren cow. It gobbles up everything we have and produces nothing. I told my Mother and younger brothers to stop working on it but they would not listen. My Mother was also worried that if we take out a loan, we would lose the land just like all the others. That is why my second brother went to the city to make money.

¹⁵ Enta chettuki anta gali - a proverb. In this context, however, the narrator implies Narayudu's family could not afford more, being a small tree so to speak.

"All we see is only his hardships there but no dough. We are constantly worried that he might get hurt there. We continue to worry about him, despite our problems here. We can't ask him to set up his family in the city since there is not enough money. He cannot run a household in the city and be left with enough to send to us. Also, my sister-in-law is not worldly-wise, she is very naive.

"I have thought about our situation thoroughly and told them, 'These are not the times to take a chance, let's be content with the measly food we have and stay here, let's not run.' My kid brother was upset. He said, 'Do we have acres and acres of land to cultivate? Are we producing barrels and barrels of grain? It is getting hard even to find day labor. In hard times, you say it is enough if we have a strip of land to work on and a sip of gruel, at least some of us live if not all.' But they don't understand, heavy storms and gusty winds together will put an end to the story.¹⁶

"Anyway, by mid-year they have understood the truth in my words. They tell themselves to wait and see one more year, holding on to their hopes. It is two years now. He brings some clothes but has saved nothing. In fact, things are the same here too, getting harder to live. My Mother can't watch these Motherless kids cry. I try to tell her that there are kids that are in a worse position than ours. That is how this fire started, it has arisen from that pain in the pit of the stomach."

Asirnayudu thought there might be some truth in his words, if not entirely. Narayudu stopped for a few seconds and then continued, "I am not going to say my Mother is right because she is my Mother, and I am not going to blame Yerremma because she is an outsider. I have told my Mother that Sanni loves her Mother even as we love our Mother. My Mother does not accept that the grand-kids are as much her grand-kids as Yerremma's. It is the same with Yerremma too. She thinks Pydayya is her son-in-law but does not think that he is my Mother's son too. She has been hoping secretly for a very long time that Sanni and Pydayya would move to the city." Narayudu stopped.

"Oh, my God, oh my God," Yerremma was about to say something.

Narayudu stopped her and said, "Okay, if you don't think so, let's us say I am thinking like that, or maybe, these folks think so too. Anybody can entertain such a thought. That is why I am saying. I thought about it a lot. Once they leave they leave for good, no coming back. Think about Yerremma. She is alone and her husband is disabled. She has no relatives, close or distant. Her husband has a brother somewhere in the West but she cannot count on him. In other words, she has no other support but this or another son-in-law. Our situation is totally different. In her case, Pydayya is the only one she can turn to if she needs help, not until another daughter gets married at least. What else is there for folks like us but fellow folks? No land, no chattel, we have nothing. We have to take care of each other. But they don't get it, Babu."

They all understood what he was saying but some of them were not willing to accept it. Not one of them could see the difference between Asirnayudu's judgment and Narayudu's explanation. It was not clear whether Asirnayudu got his point.

Asirnayudu turned to Yerremma and asked, "Oley, you stupid bitch, did you hear what he has said?"

"Nice," she said.

¹⁶ *Gali vana voste kathe ledu* - a proverb.

“Shut up, slut,” Asirnayudu sneered. After he was done scolding her, the others did not have the guts to open their mouths. They did not notice when the sun was down and the lights were turned on.

“Why the light on the street-side is not turned on?” asked Asirnayudu. Somebody turned on the lights in the veranda but left out the one facing the street since there was enough moonlight. The light was turned on right away. It startled everyone except Pydayya.

Asirnayudu looked at the gathering and said, "How long you are going to sit around like this? Ask if you have questions."

"What can we say? You shout at us even before we open our mouths," Yerremma said.

Asirnayudu noticed the change in her voice and kept quiet. After a few minutes, Papayya came forward, "Oley, Yerremma, get up," he said, poking her with his stick.

“You stop, scoundrel! Don’t you show off,” she snarled at him.

“Whip the bitch,” Asirnayudu howled.

Yerremma stood up, whining.

"Go, go, be nice to your son-in-law, speak with him and bring him home," he said to her. Then he turned to Bangari and asked her, "What did you say your name is? Bangari?"

Bangari said yes.

“For this once, go easy on whatever wrong she has done. Don’t you two get into fights and create problems for your kids. Remember one more thing. You are a scrap better than she is. Her suffering brings no good to you or your children.”

Bangari wanted to ask, “What about my suffering and my kids’ suffering? That brings no good to whom?” Asirnayudu was gone by then.

Everything was back to normal after that incident. The husband and wife, who should have gotten together the night before, finally got together that night.

That night at 9:00, Pydayya sat down to eat in front of the plate like a beast at the water tub after beaten badly.

Sanni sat by his side and was serving the food. Yerremma was in the front yard with her grand-kids. From there she shouted to Sanni, “Give him the pulusu Nayaralu had given us earlier.” Nayaralu had given them not only pulusu but also cooked rice and a few curries.

After the matter was settled and they were on their way home, Papayya went to Yerremma and said, “Forget the squabble. Nayaralu wants to give you some food from the feast. Go to her.”

Yerremma went to the front door and saw not Nayaralu but Asirnayudu. He said, "You are such an idiot. Listen to me carefully and try to understand why I am saying this. You have no money and no people to help you in times of need. They are doing

better. Be nice to them. You can't fight with them and win. That is the reason I suggested an amicable solution. I will tell you one more thing. He seems to be a good boy. Win him over and help them to set up a family in the city. Your daughter will have a good life. Maybe, you may even get a crumb in the process. If everything goes well, you may even be able to send one or two of your other kids to the city. Unlike here, they will have work year-round. With enough support, older women also can find work. Narayudu likes everybody to stay here but I don't think that helps. Nobody would have enough to eat here. Empty stomachs do cause problems for sure." Thus he gave her the lesson one more time about the need to be amicable, called his wife, and told her to give Yerremma rice, curries, and other dishes.

Pydayya went to his home first and then went to Yerremma's house. By then Yerremma had fed the little kids. She saw Pydayya and told Sanni to set the plate for him.

Sanni set the plate and served pulusu. He bit a piece of curry and kept mingling rice and pulusu. He was jolted by Yerremma's words. He put food in his mouth but could not get it down.

"Not hungry?" Sanni asked.

"Not hungry? Of course I am hungry," he said.

"Then, why are you not eating?"

Pydayya could not lift his face or food to his mouth.

Sanni waited for a couple of minutes and asked, "How much did you pay for this sari?"

Pydayya took a bite and said, "I can't get it down."

Sanni felt bad for him. "Never mind, leave it," she said and went in.

Pydayya was in a dilemma. He would be hungry if he does not eat, and if eats it, he cannot stomach the handout from the haves.

He looked around and thought, "if it comes to that, what is there that is not a handout here?"

Sanni returned with an empty bowl and put it in front of him. Pydayya washed his hand in the bowl quickly.

(The Telugu original, "aarti" has been published in *Andhra Jyothi weekly*, May, June 1969. Available on *kathanilayam* site, here. Translated by Nidadavolu Malathi, and published on *thulika.net*, July 7, 2021)

About the store: Apart from the village politics, the author portrays brilliantly the economic acumen of the farming women. Their education arises not formal education in schools but through their experience and worldly wisdom.

Musings, Number 9

By Tenneti Hemalatha (Lata)

udvaahe niyatih nayatyati balaa

venaam samaam prakphalaih

An ancient astrologer, Varahamihara, believed that the fate would make a man tie the three knots around the bride's neck only at the appropriate moment. We often hear people say, "He survived because of the strength of the three knots he'd tied."

Priests always try to make the groom tie the three knots at the most propitious moment. Astrology assures us if a wedding was performed in that specific moment, the couple would prosper with wealth, marital bliss, and worthy progeny. Yet fate makes the man tie the knots only at a moment according to his [fate's] calculations—this is the fact we all are aware of.

Sometime back, there was a wedding at one of our relative's place. The propitious moment was set for six in the morning but it was deferred to nine o'clock due to a minor disagreement between the two parties. The guests snickered behind their back. On the nuptial day—traditionally, the sixteenth day from the date of wedding, the groom fell ill with high temperature. People whispered that it was because of the bad thing that happened at the wedding, the argument and the delay in tying the knot.

Another astrologer came, did some calculations on his fingers, and said, "This marriage took place in a divine moment. The boy will live long."

The boy's party said, "What do you mean divine moment. We all fought like hell and performed the wedding at nine instead of six as previously determined."

The astrologer recited the verse of Varahamihira quoted above, and said, "If the wedding were performed at six o'clock as planned, Agni, the lord of fire, would have gutted you and your property by now. But destiny had something different in mind. It caused you to get into a squabble and perform the wedding at the accurate moment." I was surprised.

I am not sure to what extent astrology is reliable. But I am sure destiny is very powerful. Especially in matters of marriage, destiny acts strange and illogical ways. It was destiny that made Ahalya contemplate on Mahendra who was on his way to go around the world, and marry sage Gautama at the same time. It was not Ahalya's mistake but the destiny's which made her do so. Same way, Abala, Ambika, and Ambalika, whose marriages were planned with others, but were married to Chitrangada and Vichitravirya at the same auspicious moment. Their misfortune did not end there. They were widowed. At the end however, they bore children by Vyasa, as the proverb goes, *chandrenaika putrah*.

In one auspicious moment, a young girl with a B.A. degree was married in a modern wedding ceremony to a boy who was in America, at the time. In the same moment a widower-lawyer in his fifties married a young girl to meet his own needs. He wanted somebody to cook and take care of him. We all noticed the difference between the two marriages and chuckled. I went again to the same town after three years. The boy who went to America died. The girl contracted smallpox and lost her vision. She was sitting there at the front door holding a walking stick. She heard my footsteps and asked who it was. I told her. She recognized my voice and broke into big sobs. She could have managed to live with her degree if god had not taken away her sight too.

And the lawyer fathered three children, colored his moustache and was goofing around like he had no care in the world. What else can I call this if not destiny? What did the young girl do to be accursed like that? What kind of punishment is that?

I heard Muslims perform nikha on a new moon day on a Tuesday. Those are bad days for us. That tells us that there is no such thing as an auspicious moment and only fate rules. Two marriages were performed at the same auspicious moment: One bride became a widow and the other was living happily. I can't think of what to say. Our people call it *kuja dosham*¹⁷. I don't know how much of that is true.

Bhaskaracharya is a highly respected mathematician. He realized that his only daughter, Leelavati, would be widowed. He grappled with all the sastras and set an auspicious moment for her wedding. There were no clocks in those days. Therefore he made a water clock. Everything was set to go. The water clock stopped working. The auspicious moment passed. What happened was, earlier Leelavati, being the child she was and curious about its mechanism, peeked into the water clock and one of her earrings slipped, fell into the device and clogged the water flow. She was married and widowed and eventually became a world-famous mathematician. Her treatise, *Leelavati ganitam* became one of the standard texts. In other words, we can never fathom the idiotic games the destiny plays upon us. Destiny also, like ego-centric human beings, insists on having his way as he pleased.

Everybody, from Varahamihira to Appalamma who pounds rice, is aware of this reality. Nevertheless we all allow ourselves to be duped constantly. Possibly, almost everybody had experienced the blessings of their Mothers as she massaged oil on their heads for the third time at bath and utter, "May your Mother's womb be blessed, your Mother-in-law's womb be blessed ... blessed be your womb; you be the Mother of sons in an auspicious moment, flourish with lot of jewelry, rice without stones, and you may live with all the ornaments and gloriously." This is a blessing. That's how my Mother gave her blessings to me. Even these blessings of my Mother could waive the destiny. Well-calculated moments could not change my fate.

[End]

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

Author's note: Lata has an unusual skill in presenting the obvious and the uncanny in a fascinating language. She quotes from ancient works and applies to modern mode of thinking to drive home a powerful point of view. She is known to be a traditionalist, not does not hesitate to question some of the views presented in the ancient works.

¹⁷ Kuja is Mars in the Zodaic configuration, and one borne when kuja is in a particular house is said to bring bad luck.

About Nidadavolu Malathi

Malathi hails from Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India. She has been writing short fiction since 1954, moved to America in 1973. After moving to America, she became interested in the similarities and differences in the two cultures, Indian and American.

Telugu Thulika is her blog featuring original Telugu stories, analytical/informative articles and other writings by Nidadavolu Malathi.

thuika.net is a website, founded by Nidadavolu Malathi, features, in English, translations of Telugu stories and informative/analytical articles on various topics in Telugu literature by Nidadavolu Malathi and other writers/translators.

"Nidadavolu Malathi" on wikipedia in English [here](#).

"Nidadavolu Malathi" on tewiki in Telugu [here](#).

Nidadavolu Malathi's page on [archive.org](#), [here](#).

[END]