

# Today is Our Chittamma's Birthday!

by her family members — Gumudavelly Somaiah, Jayamma, Prasad and Raju

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Today marks the 55th birthday of our Chittamma, known to the world as Gumudavelly Renuka. As she is no longer with us in person, perhaps it is more fitting to observe it as her birth anniversary from now on. It has been 22 years since she left our home. Every October 14, throughout these years, our mother has cooked payasam for everyone, and the day passes in remembrance — in sorrow, in pride.

We wonder — if she were alive, how would she have celebrated her birthday in Dandakaranya, among her revolutionary comrades? There would be no cakes to cut, no parties — such things do not belong in the life of a revolutionary. Yet, as a writer, a revolutionary, and someone deeply loved by so many, what would our Chittamma truly have done today?

Perhaps she would have risen before dawn, before the darkness faded, and sat for a while on her polythene sheet — the one guerrillas use for everything: to sleep on, to sit and read, to rest their backs, or to talk. It is usually about six feet long and three feet wide.

Sitting there, she would first have remembered her mother and father — thinking, with a mix of sorrow and wonder, “It’s already been 22 years since I last saw them.” She would have sighed, recalling that it had been 11 years since she last wrote them a letter. Her heart might have ached, wondering how they were faring in their old age.

She would have remembered her life-companions, Santosh and Shakhamuri, both martyrs — and reflected on how their brief, tragically ended companionship had filled her with strength and inspiration.

If circumstances permitted, she would have bathed early that morning and chosen the neatest, cleanest clothes from whatever limited wardrobe she carried in her backpack. She would have gone to the kitchen to see what her comrades were preparing for breakfast, and whether there were ingredients for a dish she liked. If there were, she would have joined in — whether or not it was her turn for duty — cooking something to bring joy to her comrades.

Yet she would not have spoken of why the day was special for her. If there were close friends who knew her well, she might have shared a quiet word with them. And if someone noticed her unusually bright expression and silently asked, “What’s the matter?” she might simply have smiled.

Softly, she might have said, ‘Looks like I’ve turned 55 today...’, her trademark smile spreading gently across her face.

Her comrades, too, would have shared her happiness without any fuss — perhaps with a firm handshake or a warm hug. Maybe someone would have quietly placed a new pen or a little diary into her hands, or offered her a piece of biscuit, breaking it with care.

Then she would have turned her thoughts to the day's work — the tasks ahead, the ones she preferred, and perhaps choosing her favorite first. Or she might have sat down to read a beloved book — an anthology of poems, or an old text she had scanned and saved on her laptop.

She might have tried to begin the story or essay she had been struggling to write for long. She would have played her favorite Vimalakka's song, "Adivasi Aatmabandhuvu Edikellene..." at least twice that day.

If she visited a village that day and saw mothers with little children, she would have lifted a baby into her arms, holding it close, kissing it tenderly.

No matter how busy she kept herself, the day would have brought back endless memories of Kadavendi, her native village — of her childhood, her family, her loved ones. Kadavendi, Mothkur, Tirupati, Visakhapatnam, Bansadhara (Odisha), South Bastar, West Bastar, Abujmad... she would have recalled every stop in her 55-year journey.

Even after 21 years in the forest, she might have marveled that she was still alive — though with only modest health. She would have smiled to herself, thinking, "Those who once teased me at home and in the village, calling me delicate and soft-hearted, would be surprised to see how strong I've become."

As a storyteller, writer, and activist, she might have quietly reviewed her own journey — feeling a trace of pride at what she had accomplished and the recognition she had earned. A faint smile would have appeared across her lips, almost without her realizing.

But the next moment — the hardships, losses, challenges faced by the movement, the grief of separation, the tears, the martyrdom of beloved comrades — all would have flashed before her eyes like scenes from a film, and that smile would have faded. Her face would have lost its glow.

After a long, tiring day, when her restless mind and weary body finally sought rest, she would have lain down on her polythene sheet, perhaps thinking once more about how her journey had begun and the turns it had taken.

She would have remembered the first novel she read back in Kadavendi, in sixth grade — Mother. She might have smiled again, recalling how, decades later, she reread it and even wrote a commemorative essay when that world-famous novel turned a hundred years old.

She would have recalled the unexpected response her early stories, like Bhaavukata and Vidurapu Manishi, had received — and the inner struggles she faced as she entered the circle of revolutionary writers. While growing up as a revolutionary, she also nurtured the storyteller within her, sometimes confused, sometimes tenderly persistent in her innocence.

Then she would have remembered Santosh, her first life partner, who read every story she wrote and praised them with genuine warmth — patting her back and saying, "Comrade, you've found

your voice as a storyteller. Proceed.”

She would have smiled, recalling their first handshake in the Nallamala forests, and how, after returning to her room in Tirupati, she went two whole days without bathing — she, who usually bathed twice a day — just to hold on to the sensation of his touch. She even ate her meals carefully, using spoons, not wanting to wash away that feeling.

Remembering those first days of love in the revolution, she might have blushed shyly to herself. She might have remembered their last meeting — on August 2, 1999, at the Kanchipuram bus stand, when Santosh said, “This time, it might take long for us to meet again.”

She could never have imagined that “long” would mean a lifetime. In that silence, her heart would have wept once more. As warm tears slipped down her cheeks, she would have slowly drifted into a restless sleep.