

Midko

THE FIREFLY

Stories by G. Renuka

Viyukka series -3





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(Translated from Telugu)

Edited by

P. Aravinda

B. Anuradha

Virasam Books

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Editors' Preface:

Renuka Becoming Midko

Comrade Gumudavelli Renuka (Midko)'s literature is a great contribution to Telugu literature, especially revolutionary literature. It was through Renuka's stories that everyone came to know that "Midko" means "a firefly." Today, these stories are no longer confined to Telugu speaking states but have crossed the linguistic and regional barriers in the country by being translated into multiple Indian languages. They are even crossing national boundaries and gaining a global readership.

However, Renuka—the author of these stories—remained incognito for three decades, hiding behind various pen names, without letting anyone know her true identity as a writer. On March 31, 2025, she was brutally killed by the State.

Renuka ranks among the finest of the writers who explored a wide range of genres with profound depth and intensity. Her stories are filled with emotion, while her essays are rich in analysis. She understood the uniqueness of each literary form and skilfully navigated through them.

Initially, Renuka started writing stories to express herself. She drew her themes from her surroundings, observations, and life experiences. From the beginning, she was driven by the realities of life. But she soon poured all her creativity and intellectual power into the revolution. So, she didn't limit herself to just stories. She wrote stories, poems, book reviews, literary essays, analytical articles, social commentaries, field reports, interviews, biographies, and more. Some of these works are yet

to be collected. So far two volumes of stories and one volume of field reports were brought out in Telugu.

Renuka was born (on October 14, 1970) in Kadavendi, a village in Devaruppala Mandal of Jangaon district, Telangana, a region known for its legacy of struggle. Kadavendi is a historically significant village—it's the birthplace of Doddi Komarayya, the first martyr of the Telangana armed struggle.

Between 1946 and 1951, the people of Telangana rose in armed resistance against the local feudal landlords and oppressive overlords, backed by the Nizam of Hyderabad, Mir Osman Ali Khan. The landlord Visunur Deshmukh Ramachandra Reddy's mother, Janakamma Dorasani, who lived in Kadavendi, was notorious for her cruel treatment of the people—enforcing bonded labour, collecting illegal levies, and imposing all kinds of punishments and fines.

The Andhra Mahasabha was formed in Kadavendi, and under its leadership, the people resisted the tyranny of the landlords and abolished bonded labour. On July 4, 1946, people united against armed goons sent by Ramachandra Reddy, confronting them with sticks, sickles, and tools. Doddi Komarayya became a martyr in the resulting gunfire. His funeral procession was attended by thousands, and a memorial was erected in his honour in the village.

Three decades later, Renuka's childhood was spent near that very memorial. Playing there, she learned of the nature of society. Perhaps she heard the stories of Janakamma Dorasani's atrocities and the heroic resistance of the people from her mother or grandmother.

Renuka's parents—Gumudavelli Somayya and Jayamma—were progressive thinkers. Her father was a teacher, and the family was influenced by revolutionary politics. Her parents did not raise her merely as a girl but treated her as their beloved child, with democratic values. Perhaps it was this nurturing that allowed her to write her early stories from a women's perspective.

As a young adult, she couldn't adjust to a marriage that elders hastily arranged. Unable to bear her husband's harassment,

she broke the marriage within two years. She took life into her own hands, with her family's support. From there, her journey as Midko began.

Believing that "girls need education to stand on their own feet," she completed her B.A. (as an external student). When she got admission for both an M.A. in Telugu and an L.L.B., she chose the latter, even though Tirupati was far away. By then, through friends of her revolutionary brother, she was already involved in revolutionary politics. In Tirupati, comrade Padma, who was working as an organizer in the urban revolutionary movement, sought out Renuka. That connection changed her life. She became a full-time worker in the women's organisation. There, she also found friends with whom she could discuss literature.

Between 1985 and 1990, under the oppressive regime of the Telugu Desam government, numerous fake encounters took place, and attacks and brutal killings by government-sponsored goons on human rights activists led to a complete halt of all artistic, literary, and cultural expression. Eventually, after its electoral defeat, the Congress government that came to power relaxed the repression. Across the state, progressive forces began mobilizing vigorously on many public issues.

This was the early 1990s — a time when the anti-liquor movement was erupting powerfully across undivided Andhra Pradesh. It was also a period when feminist politics had, for over a decade, entered Telugu literature as a strong challenge to patriarchy. Women's organizations were forming across the state and actively fighting on various issues women were facing. Numerous progressive and women-centric magazines were being published. Even mainstream newspapers were compelled to start dedicated women's pages.

Meanwhile, Dalit identity politics was beginning to spread its wings with consciousness and vigour. It was during this time — between 1989 and 1993 — that *Nalupu* (Black), a publication focused on socio-political issues and representing the voice of the people, was active. Renuka sent her first story to *Nalupu*.

However, the magazine was on the verge of shutting down. Only a poem of hers was published in its final issue.

But the correspondence surrounding that story introduced her to Chakravenu, who was working as a sub-editor at *Nalupu*. His letter, praising her story, inspired her to write another one. Eventually, she sent her story to *Aahwanam* magazine. That story, titled '*Bhaavukata*' published in 1994, received wide acclaim. It was Renuka's first published story.

In March 1989, *Mahila Maargam*, a Marxist feminist journal, was launched under the editorship of Aluri Satyavati. In 1992, it shifted to Tirupati under the editorship of Vishnupriya. The magazine ran primarily with the support of grassroots activists. Since Vishnupriya also led a women's group called *Mahila Shakti*, her home naturally became a hub for many activists. Renuka made many friends there. Many discussions were held among the activists to understand the connections between women's issues and broader social problems through a Marxist lens. Renuka actively participated in these discussions.

Mahila Shakti participated in several struggles related to women's issues, including the anti-liquor movement, and Renuka was involved in all of them. Between 2002 and 2004, she served on the editorial board of *Mahila Maargam* and contributed many pieces to it — stories, reflections, reports, poems, essays, book reviews, and editorials.

After working in Tirupati for a decade, Renuka shifted her field of work to Visakhapatnam. There, she worked for some time in a women's organization. In 1997, Renuka married Comrade Mahesh, a revolutionary leader living underground. Just two years later, in December 1999, Comrade Mahesh was martyred. That was an irreparable blow to her. In 2004, as repression intensified, she was compelled to choose an underground life. In 2005, she married Comrade Apparao, who was martyred in a fake encounter in 2010. Despite these personal tragedies, she endured them with resoluteness, recovered with the support of the people, and moved forward with determination.

From the beginning, Renuka had her own voice. She wrote stories under many pen names. Due to her secret life as a revolutionary and the use of multiple pseudonyms, some confusion arose in compiling her works. Now, we have officially published 37 of her authenticated stories in two volumes in Telugu. The first volume includes 18 stories which explore different dimensions of women's issues, highlighting invisible forms of discrimination. They critique the male gaze on women's lives and challenge the fixed stereotypes in understanding women's experiences. These stories open new windows even for women to see their own lives differently. They expose the cultural values and social constraints that condition women's lives.

Reviewing this early phase, from her first story *Bhaavukata*, we can see Renuka's evolution as a writer. Her growth reflects her deep observational power. From the start, she viewed life not just realistically but also critically. She never took things at face value. She didn't accept what was visible as the whole truth — she sought to understand *why* life was the way it was. Especially in examining the values, beliefs, and norms that constrain women's lives, she immersed herself in society, exploring its wide and complex cultural ideologies. She tried to depict reality critically in her writings.

Renuka has portrayed life in Telangana beautifully in many of her stories. The characters in her stories, their personalities, their language, and their culture—she writes about all of these in a very natural manner.

After she began writing about the revolutionary movement in the late 1990s, she penned 19 stories on the subject which appear in the second volume of stories in Telugu. We selected these 19 stories and translated them into English. Three of the 19 were included in *Viyukka - The Morning Star*, the first volume in the English series. The current anthology, *Midko - The Firefly*, contains the remaining 16 stories.

For women to cross the boundaries imposed by society and enter the revolutionary movement was a significant socio-cultural development. It was extraordinary. Even after entering the movement, women continually evolved and played a creatively

powerful role in shaping the movement as a force against patriarchy, the State, and ultimately the system itself. Renuka portrayed this revolutionary transformation through the lens of man – woman relationships.

Women's entry into and participation in the revolutionary movement, and their political growth within it, could happen only because of their strong personalities. The fact that women acquired such firm and resolute identities was made possible by the revolutionary movement. Renuka vividly portrays this developmental process in many of her stories. At the same time, she honestly discusses the obstacles and limitations that still exist within the movement and the efforts women are making to overcome them.

What has the revolutionary movement done for women is not a standalone question. There's also the question of what women—particularly those from Adivasi and working-class backgrounds, long subjected to oppression—have contributed to the movement after joining it. Only when both these questions are considered together can the discussion around “Women and the Revolutionary Movement” be complete. Renuka herself has personally understood this dynamic. That is why, when we read her stories about women in the revolutionary movement, we realize that while they learned much from the movement, they also brought subtle insights and deep perspectives to it.

Renuka's stories always seek out even the slightest signs of regression in individuals or in the movement. She highlights them and encourages reflection on solutions. That is one of the essential qualities a writer must possess. By turning a problem into a story, she intensifies an experience we all share. She pays careful attention to every character she creates. Like an artist, with awareness of the surroundings, background, and culture of each character, she carves them out with intense concentration. Whether a character is progressive or one that enforces State violence, she portrays them honestly. The characters' perspectives and the context from which they operate make us understand why they take certain stances. That is Renuka's hallmark.

When she chooses themes from conflict-ridden regions, she never prematurely labels anyone as good or bad. The benefits, justice, and injustices involved in the conflict—and the characters’ attitudes toward them—shape their nature. The character may belong to Telangana, may be an Adivasi from Dandakaranya, or someone from Odisha or North Andhra. Selecting characters from various regions is another unique feature of Renuka’s stories. However, she doesn’t craft characters according to her whims; instead, she moulds them from their real-life contexts and consciousness. Her skill lies in writing about such serious matters with great ease. Perhaps this was possible only because of the clarity in her thoughts and her perspective on why she writes stories.

She first worked underground in the Bansadhara region of Andhra-Odisha. There, along with organizational work, she also worked in the press division. In 2012, she entered Dandakaranya and worked in various capacities until 2025. Throughout her underground life, she wrote under many pen names. Taking inspiration from her comrade and sister-like companion Com. Midko (who worked under the name Sabitha), she adopted the name Midko and wrote some stories. She also wrote under the names Vije, Ajitha, Asifa, Nirmala, and Zameen.

Just before she entered the Bansadhara region, Comrade Damayanti was martyred there. To include Bansadhara in her identity, she adopted the name B.D. Damayanti and wrote important revolutionary reports. Similarly, when Shwetha, who worked in the press division in Malkangiri, was martyred, she wrote under the name M.G. Shwetha to include Malkangiri in the name. By the time Comrade Renuka was martyred in March 2025, she had taken the name “Chaithe.”

In a 2011 article written under the name Damayanti, she wrote about two revolutionary Adivasi women’s organisation leaders — Kumili and Chaithe. Both of them were brutally tortured, raped, and murdered by state-sponsored goons. Chaithe was the KAMS leader in the Kanker district of Bastar. It was

through the movement that she learned to read, write, and even learned to operate computers. She worked in the press division for nine years (2002–2011). What greater ideal could there be than continuing the legacy of such individuals — especially for those working in the press division! After joining the revolutionary movement, Renuka personally trained many Adivasi young women in computers.

She worked with dedication to the people for three decades. To capture and kill this comrade — helpless and unarmed due to illness — was a heinous act. Revolutionary salutes to Comrade Renuka, who stood by the people till the very end!

The Flow

'What have you decided?' asked Ravi.

'Didn't I tell you? There is no change in my decision,' Sobha said, her eyes fixed on the stream flowing at her feet.

'Won't you change your mind?' he pleaded.

'No,' she replied firmly, without taking her gaze away from the flowing stream.

He looked at her with hurt for a few moments. She was sitting leaning to the left, with her hand pressed against a small rock. Her rifle was right between them, propped up against the rock on the other side.

'She isn't even trying to look at me,' Ravi thought. When he had arrived there, she was already sitting on the rock, her face intent as she looked down at the stream. Even after he'd sat beside her, she hadn't turned around to look at him. After waiting for four to five minutes, he had broken the icy silence.

'How can you say that? You know very well that I cannot live without you,' he tried again.

Sobha turned towards him and looked directly into his eyes, as if assessing his sincerity. 'Stay with the Movement then,' she replied, although almost immediately regretting it. She knew full well that his decision to leave was made.

'After what transpired, and for no fault of mine, how can I stay in the Movement? The Party didn't understand me. But I had thought at least you did.'

‘Leaving the Party is not a solution,’ Sobha pointed out as her last resort. ‘You should stay and fight.’

‘I’ve been doing that already for the last one year,’ Ravi replied tersely, ‘and I can’t do it anymore. I’m tired.’

Sobha took a moment to reply, her head still bent, ‘You have taken your decision and I have taken mine. There is no point in discussing it anymore.’

‘Won’t you even think about the child?’

‘I thought about her seven years ago, there’s nothing new to think about her now.’

‘What is it that makes you so adamant, Vara?’

Her hand instinctively reached out to the rifle as she replied, ‘Don’t call me by that name!’

‘Why? What’s it if I call you Vara now? There was a time when you were quite particular about me calling you by that name!’ He placed his hand on hers, but she immediately snatched it away. Ravi felt as if he had been slapped. Her face became grim too as she turned away and began staring at the stream of water again.

There was a time when her entire world had been filled with him, always longing for his touch and for his presence. But now she could not bear either.

Varalakshmi was the only child of her parents. Govind was her maternal uncle. People had viewed them as a couple since their childhood. Govind joined Intermediate in a college in the town after graduating from high school, while Varalakshmi had to give up her studies after seventh standard as her parents could not afford to educate her further. Even doing seventh standard was exceptional for girls at that time in that place.

But Govind returned to the village without completing his Intermediate. The Movement, which was at its peak then, literally pulled him back. He participated actively in all the struggles in the village, and Varalakshmi’s parents were not happy about it.

‘We’d expected that you would study hard and get a good

job, so that you could look after Varalakshmi well. Why are you roaming around like this?’ asked Varalakshmi’s mother, while her father pointed out, ‘Is it necessary to do a job for a living? Is cultivating our two acres of land not enough?’

There was no response from Govind to either of them. Vexed with his attitude, they began searching for another groom for their daughter, and fixed her marriage to one Narayana, an orphan labourer from the neighbouring village.

Varalakshmi liked Govind, so she was reluctant to marry Narayana. But Govind was fully involved in activism, and he had no time to think about the developments at home. Varalakshmi’s parents pressured her to marry Narayana, saying that he would stay with them and work in their field along with them so that all of them could live together. Varalakshmi had to give in, and Narayana came to live with them. Things didn’t go, however, as Varalakshmi’s parents had hoped. Narayana turned out to be an alcoholic and his habit worsened after the marriage. He didn’t help his in-laws in any work, instead he demanded money from them. If they refused, he swore at them and hit Varalakshmi.

One day as Govind arrived home for a visit, he saw Narayana beating Varalakshmi. She was wailing loudly and her parents were trying to stop Narayana from beating her even more. Govind could not bear it. He pulled Varalakshmi away from Narayana’s clutches, dragged him to the front yard and beat him badly. If it hadn’t been for the neighbours’ intervention, Narayana would have died.

‘Get out of here, otherwise, I will kill you,’ shouted Govind.

No-one supported Narayana, nor did anyone ask Govind to forgive him. On seeing Govind’s anger, none of them had dared say anything to him. Narayana had no option but to leave to save his life. The neighbours then pacified Govind and made him sit on a cot inside the house before they left. The four people remaining in the house saw them go in silence. Nobody cried, nobody consoled anyone and nobody cursed anyone. All of them sat down as if shell shocked.

‘It is natural to have issues between a husband and wife. They fight with each other and reconcile later. But what did you

do?.You hit him and threw him out. How will he come here again?’ demanded Varalakshmi’s mother after a while.

Govind’s anger, which had been abating, now rose up in him again. ‘You want him to come here again? I will kill him if he dares to do so.’

‘Oh, don’t say that. After all he is her husband,’ objected Varalakshmi’s mother.

‘Is that fellow a husband? Anyway, you must be blamed for her fate.’

‘What happened had happened according to her *karma*¹. Now we shouldn’t act in haste,’ Varalakshmi’s father interjected.

‘There is nothing like *karma*. He had been abusing her for a long time. Enough is enough. I won’t allow him to enter the village.’

Alarmed, Varalakshmi’s mother burst out, ‘Then what will happen to her life?’

‘Nothing will happen. I will marry her,’ replied Govind emotionally.

As Varalakshmi snatched a swift look at his face, Govind looked straight into her eyes, ‘Tell me the truth Varalu, you like me don’t you? Did you like Narayana when you married him?’ He was challenging her to speak.

But Varalakshmi said nothing and looked down.

‘Why do you bend your head? You did exactly the same thing when you tied the knot with that fellow. You will never come to your senses,’ Govind exclaimed in disgust and left.

When he came again after a week, Varalakshmi was alone, lying on a cot. Narayana had not come back. She sat up now, as Govind entered the house. Govind sat down beside her.

‘I shouted at you that day unnecessarily, for no fault of yours. I know very well that marriages in our society take place whether or not the girl likes the groom. Your marriage also happened like that,’ he said in a gentle voice. Varalakshmi bowed her head.

After a while, Govind spoke again, ‘That day when I said I would marry you, I was very emotional. I am still bound by my

word, but we'll only marry if you are willing. On the other hand, if you want to live with Narayana, I will go to him and tell him to behave better and bring him here.'

'No *mama!* I don't want to live with him,' pat came Varalakshmi's reply.

'Then, would you like to marry me?'

Varalakshmi did not raise her head.

'Tell me *Varaalu!*' He tried coaxing her to speak up.

'How can I *mama?* I am already a married woman.'

'So what? Your heart is filled with love for me. A good relationship between a husband and wife depends on mutual love, isn't it?' saying thus he put his hand on her shoulder. She put her hand on his firmly, signalling her agreement and feeling that she should never let it go. Soon they were married. Her parents had given their consent, hoping that Govind would give up his activism and stay home after the marriage. But that didn't happen. Rather, the days he did stay at home became fewer and fewer.

Varalakshmi's mother advised her to use her 'wifely enchantments' to stop Govind from going away. But Varalakshmi didn't pay any heed to her mother. Instead, she encouraged him. She believed that whatever he was doing was good and she must cooperate with him. In the little time Govind was at home, he treated her with love, calling her *Vara* affectionately and sharing in her domestic work, despite her protestations. She listened to his gentle voice with immense interest and asked him to call her *Vara* again and again. And she would laugh with joy every time he called her by that name.

There was no comparison between the life with Narayana, who had stayed at home and just abused her, and the life with Govind.

Sometimes Govind brought home a friend, and occasionally even three or four of them. She provided them with hot water to bathe, gave them food and made sure they ate well. They called her '*Akka*' and she called them '*Anna*'.

During these times, as she cooked for them, they would have

long discussions. When she had finished, they would come and eat, saying 'We're giving you a lot of trouble, *Akka*,' and she would reply 'Not at all!'

After dinner, they would continue their discussions while she went off to the kitchen to sleep. As Varalakshmi's mother was against these visits, she didn't help her daughter with either the cooking or attending to the guests in other ways.

The dawn would be breaking by the time Govind would come and lie down beside her, 'Have they left?' Varalakshmi would ask.

'Yes. They have gone. We are giving you much trouble *Vara*,' he would say, with words to that effect.

'No trouble at all. You were talking throughout the night. Better sleep now,' she would reply.

One day, Varalakshmi was struggling with some damp firewood, which was refusing to light up as she blew air through a hollow bamboo tube. Govind, who had just arrived, took the tube from her saying, 'Give it to me, I will blow the air.'

'Oh! You've just come. Sit down for a while. Why bother with this.'

But she knew that there was no use asking him to take rest. She left the tube with him and began chopping the vegetables. He started talking while blowing the air. He talked about a new world, and she listened with awe, asking about matters she didn't understand. Meanwhile, the rice on the stove began to boil with a gentle hissing sound.

'You move *mama*, I need to pour out the starchy water from the rice,' said Varalakshmi.

With the rice done, she placed a vessel on the stove for making the curry and asked Govind as to why 'our people' were not visiting these days. Varalakshmi had started calling his friends 'our people'.

'They aren't coming to this side nowadays,' he explained.

'It seems a long time since I have seen *Peddanna*,' observed Varalakshmi. She has a special regard for him.

'You know, our people appreciate you very much,' responded Govind.

'Me? But, why?' Varalakshmi was genuinely surprised.

'Because, you treat them well. You offer them food with love.'

'Is offering food that great a thing then?' Varalakshmi felt both shy and happy.

'Why not? Sometimes small gestures also help the Revolution in a big way.'

'You mean, I am also helping the Revolution?'

'Yes. In a great way.' Govind looked fondly at Varalakshmi's eyes as they shone at his reply.

A few days later, Varalakshmi's father came home looking tense and angry.

'We'd been telling you to make him stay at home and show some concern about the family and work, but you turned a deaf ear,' he accused Varalakshmi.

'What are you saying *nayana*? You are talking as if he never stepped into the field. He supervised the transplantation and reaping of the harvest. Didn't he?'

'He is becoming more adamant because you are backing him. Do you know what people are saying about Govind? The police are looking for him and if they catch him, it would be like going into *Yama's*² hands.'

'Who said that *nayana*?' Varalakshmi asked, now a little anxious.

'All the people in our village,' snapped her father.

Varalakshmi felt her energy draining away and she quickly sat down on the doorway. Her mother came and sat beside her. She started to speak, 'I had been warning about this for a long time. What he is doing doesn't help us in getting either money or food. Your father and I can work in the field now because we are fit. When we become older, we can't help you anymore.' She continued in a more cajoling tone, 'Now you are pregnant. When the child is born you will have more responsibilities with more

expenses. You must look after yourselves. Convince him somehow or the other. He will listen to you. Will he come home tonight?’

Varalakshmi nodded.

‘If he comes, talk to him tonight itself,’ advised the mother.

Varalakshmi nodded again.

They waited for him until nine at night; after that her parents ate and went to sleep. Varalakshmi continued to wait without eating. She began to think. Why would the police take him away? *Mama* said that ‘our people’ lived in hiding. Police would catch them if they came into the public. But *mama* was not in hiding like them. Why would the police arrest him? She came out of her thoughts as Govind arrived, by then it was ten thirty.

Govind was surprised to see his wife sitting on the doorway and asked, ‘Why are you sitting in the cold? You should be asleep by now.’

‘She hasn’t even eaten. She was waiting for you,’ called out Varalakshmi’s mother, who had woken up.

‘Is it so? I thought of coming early but could not. I ate in the nearby village.’ He led Varalakshmi into the kitchen and helped her with a plate of rice and curry.

‘No, *mama*, I don’t feel like eating.’

‘You must eat. I will feed you,’ Govind put a morsel of rice in her mouth. Varalakshmi’s eyes welled up. She knew all about alcoholic husbands beating up their wives but not about husbands putting morsels lovingly in their wife’s mouth. She ate her fill, even forgetting to offer him some of it.

Govind made the bed for her to sleep. Just then her mother called her on the pretext of asking for water. While taking the water from her daughter, the mother whispered in her ear, reminding about weaning him away from his activities and keeping him home.

When Varalakshmi came to lie down beside him, Govind had already covered himself with a blanket and was yawning. She felt sorry for him and placed her hand on his forehead saying, ‘Go to sleep *mama*, you must be exhausted with visits to so many places.’ She decided to talk to him the next day.

‘You go to sleep too. You shouldn’t be awake this long.’

They had slept for just a couple of hours when there was a loud knocking on the door. Her mother opened the door and was aghast when she saw the police before her.

‘Where is Govind?’ they demanded and began searching for him. They didn’t need much time to find him in the two-room house. On hearing the noise, Govind, who was sleeping in the kitchen with Varalakshmi, got out of their bed. Varalakshmi also woke up and saw the police was dragging her husband away, all the while beating him black and blue. She ran after them, shouting at them not to beat her *mama*. Her parents also pleaded with the police not to harm Govind.

A sub-inspector ordered the policemen to lock the family members inside the house. Then they took Govind away, still beating him relentlessly. It took him a few moments to register what was happening. By that time, he had been brutally beaten.

On hearing the shrieks of the family, the neighbours unlocked the door. The night passed slowly. The family couldn’t stop their tears flowing. Some of the neighbours tried to console them while others commented on the whole affair.

At last, the sun rose. Someone came carrying the news that the police had caught even more people and taken all of them to the panchayat office and were beating them there. All the villagers got up and ran to the panchayat office.

The scene was heart-wrenching. The people being beaten were crying and the people outside were pleading with the police to let them go. But the police would not release the beaten up people, nor would they allow the other people to go inside. In between those on the outside and those detained inside were many armed guards. In the afternoon, the police demanded chicken curry and money from the families of the detainees. They ate and drank to their fullest. Finally, after torturing Govind and the others for the whole day, the police released them like living corpses, warning them that if they were found with the ‘*Annalu*’ one more time, they would be shot. Some people had to pawn their jewellery to get their family members released.

Govind was almost unconscious when Varalakshmi and her parents took him home. They sponged him with hot water and showed him to a doctor. He developed a high fever and moaned all through the night. The three of them sat around his bed, giving him tablets and hot milk. His fever abated on the second day. When he opened his eyes, he saw Varalakshmi leaning on his cot, weeping. He placed his hand on her head and consoled her. It took a week for him to recover, and the family hoped that he would stay home from then on. But Govind's visits home became even more scarce.

'How can you roam around like this, *mama*?' asked Varalakshmi once.

'Do you think I am wrong, Vara?' he asked.

'No *mama*, I don't say you are wrong. But ...' she couldn't say more.

The days passed and Varalakshmi gave birth to a girl child.

Govind was caught by the police two more times. They also filed a case against him. After two months in jail, he came home on bail. One night after settling the baby in the cradle to sleep, Varalakshmi found Govind sitting on the bed, thinking deeply. He had come home that day after a long time.

'What are you thinking *mama*?' she asked.

'Sit down Vara,' there was a different tone in Govind's voice.

He sat uneasily for some time without speaking. Then, preparing himself to say something, his voice heavy now, he said, 'I am speaking with the hope that you will understand me.'

'What is the matter *mama*?' she asked, agitated.

'You know how the police had taken me three times. Don't know what they will do to me next time. That's why I won't come home anymore.'

'You won't come home?' Her voice choking, Varalakshmi couldn't speak more.

'The Party has decided that I should join the squad hereafter.'

'Joining the squad means you are leaving me and the child? You will desert us?' She began weeping.

'I have no intention of deserting you, Vara. But if I am seen in public, the police will hound me. I cannot leave the Party even as I know I am doing injustice to you. I didn't know what it would be like to work with the Party when I married you. Had I known it then I wouldn't have married you.'

She hugged him tight and said, 'Don't say that *mama*. There is no injustice on your part. I have been very happy after our marriage.'

She wanted to tell him more but couldn't find the words. After a few moments, she said, 'So, you won't meet us anymore! How will you forget me, *mama*.'

'How can I forget you Vara! You are always in my mind. I will meet you secretly,' he said, rubbing her back.

'Can we meet like that?'

'Why not?'

'In how many days?'

'Whenever you ask me,' he replied smiling.

'How will I tell my parents about this?'

'Take some time. If you tell them now, they may shout at you,' he suggested. 'Are you angry with me for this?' he then asked.

'No!'

'Take good care of the child. You must give her the love of both mother and father,' his voice too was choking now.

Varalakshmi began to cry again. Govind tried to contain his sorrow and said, 'Please don't cry Vara. Unless you send me off like a brave woman, I won't be able to work there peacefully.'

Four to five hours passed in sharing their sorrow and consoling each other.

It was three in the night when he finally said, 'I will leave now Vara!'

'Why do you want to go at this time of night, can't you go after an hour?' she asked.

'No I can't. I will be able to contact the squad if I go now,' he caressed the child as he spoke and kissed her. Then he looked at

his wife's face one last time and strode off. He was wiping his tears for about ten minutes as he went on his way.

Varalakshmi also began to sob soon after he had left. 'Did he abandon me?' She questioned herself. But she could not think that way. She cursed the police. Why did they manhandle him? Beat him so harshly? What was his fault? Who would he betray? He would not have left me, if not for fear of the police, she thought.

She revealed the news of Govind joining the squad to her parents after four to five days. Her mother broke into a tirade of reproaches against Govind.

'Please stop *amma*. *Mama* is not at fault. It is my destiny, that is all,' Varalakshmi snapped at her mother.

'You were backing him all the while and have caused this calamity,' her mother retorted angrily.

'It is I who is suffering. Please keep your calm,' Varalakshmi answered with sudden newfound dignity.

It had been two years since Govind joined the squad, taking the name of Ravi. In those two years Varalakshmi met him secretly two to three times, taking care not to be found out by anyone. The police questioned her a couple of times about his whereabouts, but she feigned ignorance.

Once when she had gone to meet him, she was delighted to meet *Peddanna*. She was reading the newspaper when *Peddanna* came and sat beside her. He asked her, 'Are you educated, dear?'

Varalakshmi nodded.

'Do you read at home?'

'Now and then.'

After some more pleasantries, he asked her, 'Isn't it difficult for both of you to live apart?'

'Yes, it is,' Varalakshmi replied, smiling shyly.

'You may also face pressure from the police in future,' he said.

'Oh, yes, *Anna*! They have been questioning me.'

'If both of you live in one place it would be easier for you.'

'You are right. But how is it possible?'

'There is a way,' he said, a little smile playing on his lips.

'What is that way?' She asked quickly.

'Well, if you also joined the squad, you could live together.'

'Me! Join the squad?' Varalakshmi was awestruck and couldn't speak another word.

'Yes, you. The Party has been observing you. You have sincerity and admiration for the Party. People like you should be in the squad.'

'Oh, I'm not sure, *Anna*,' Varalakshmi answered hesitantly.

'Think about it slowly and seriously. Take the whole night. I am proposing this on behalf of the Party. We can discuss your doubts and uncertainties tomorrow,' saying thus, *Peddanna* left.

That night, Ravi asked about her response to *Peddanna*.

'What shall I say?' she asked him.

'Why do you ask me? Think about it yourself.'

'What can I do for the squad?'

'You can do anything.'

'I cannot talk about politics like you people.'

'You can learn.'

'But it is not easy for women.'

'Most of the women in the Party are competing with the men now!' Ravi encouraged her.

'Then, what about our little one?'

'Your mother will take care of her. There are other women who've left their children at home and joined the squad.'

'Really?'

'Do I ever lie to you? *Peddanna's* wife is also working with the Party. She left their son at home. But take your time before you come to a decision. There is no hurry.' Ravi yawned and was soon asleep and snoring. But Varalakshmi couldn't sleep. She was awake throughout the night.

The next day *Peddanna* gave her all the details. When she expressed doubts, he cleared them patiently. He gave her a month's time to think it over. Varalakshmi stayed on for two more days and then went home thinking about the proposal from various angles.

'Can I leave the child with my parents? What happens to the child if both of us leave her?' she thought once.

'I can live with *mama* if I join the Party. Maybe it is better than living with anxiety about him day and night,' she thought another time.

It was seven years since she had left her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter with her parents and taken to the forest as Sobha.

In the beginning she used to follow Ravi and looked after his needs too. Then the other members of the squad advised her to let him attend to himself.

'What's wrong with attending to him? What do they know about our relationship and what a meaningful life he has given me? They stick their nose in everything,' thought Varalakshmi. She also wasn't critical of Ravi on anything. When the commander asked her whether there had been any complaints about him, she would reply 'How can there be any complaints about Ravi?' She couldn't tolerate it if anyone criticised him, it made her very angry at them.

In the course of time, however, Varalakshmi developed her individuality and became an Area Committee Member of the squad and Ravi became a member of the District Committee. Due to the differences among his committee members, he felt he didn't fit in there anymore and decided to leave the Party to join the 'mainstream'. He was firm in his decision and hoped that his wife would follow him.

When the Party members were told about his decision to leave, they discussed the situation at length with Sobha. At first, she couldn't accept his decision and wept. She then thought about it deeply and as the Party members hoped, she decided to

stay with the Party and not follow her husband.

Both of them had discussed it twice already – this was the third time.

‘Won’t you think even a little about me?’ asked Ravi.

‘You only told me that thinking about society is better than thinking about individuals.’

‘I told you that then, and I am telling you this now, why can’t you listen to me?’ Ravi’s impatience was beginning to show.

‘Then you were our leader. But now ...’ her voice trailed off as she continued to look down at the stream.

He persisted. ‘But I was your husband then and I am now. Didn’t you like me as your husband or did you like me only as your leader?’

‘I thought I liked you as a husband, but then I realised that wasn’t true. I wouldn’t have liked you if you had been an average husband. You know very well how I left that average of a husband before. If it hadn’t been for the consciousness the Party instilled in you, you wouldn’t have been that good husband who I appreciated. The Party made you a good person, and I began to like the Party more from then on.’

They continued to argue until dusk.

Ravi then tried another angle. ‘Your parents are becoming old. It is difficult for them to take care of our child. You should think about the future of our daughter.’

‘If we want to think about our child and all the children in the society, we must stay in the Party and work for them.’

Sobha’s response made him furious. ‘How can you do good in the society by making your child an orphan? You, who are supposed to live with me for life, are being disloyal to me and to our child too.’

‘I’m being disloyal?’ Sobha was stunned. Her lips pursed into a thin smile as her voice turned sarcastic. ‘What did *you* say when *Peddanna* was killed by the police, and I was weeping? You said we should carry on his legacy, make his dreams come true as his

heirs. I want to continue in the Party and not be disloyal to his martyrdom.'

'Don't talk back to me,' Ravi retorted.

'Why shouldn't I? Your words might have come from your lips, but I took them to heart. I will never forget them!'

He realised there was no use in being angry with her and tried placating her, 'Please Vara, listen to me.'

'I told you not to call me by that name. That Vara who was your own no longer exists. This Sobha belongs to everyone. There is no use in arguing anymore now. It's my sentry time, and I must leave,' she got up as she spoke.

Then placing the rifle on her shoulder, she walked swiftly away from him, under the moonlight across the stream, taking care to avoid the little rocks in her way.

Translation of 'Pravaham'. (First published in Arunatara May-June 2000 under the pen name Nirmala)

Translated by P. Sathyavathi

Notes:

1. *karma* – a concept in Hinduism and describes a system in which beneficial effects are derived from past beneficial actions and harmful effects from past harmful actions, creating a system of actions and reactions throughout a soul's reincarnated lives, forming a cycle of rebirth. The causality is said to apply not only to the material world but also to our thoughts, words, actions, and actions that others do under our instructions.

2. Yama is the Hindu god of death and justice, responsible for the dispensation of law and punishment of sinners in his abode, Naraka. He is the judge of the souls of the dead and, depending on their deeds, assigns them to the realm of the pitris (forefathers), Naraka (hell), or to be reborn on the earth.

Revolutionary Generation

'If you meet Kamli *didi*, give her this honey, Bujji. She drinks water mixed with lemon juice and honey first thing in the morning, right? She is such a thin person!' Sanni placed the honey bottle in the bag lying on the cot as she spoke. Budri nodded her head without looking at her mother. She was sitting near the fire crackling next to the cot in the veranda in front of the house and chatting with her friend Seedho.

Sanni went back into the house muttering, 'Oh, I forgot!' She came out again with some pieces of marinated and dried bitter gourd. 'Give them to Badru *dada*. I heard he has some disease, for which I believe these are good,' she said, adding the leaf-wrapped pieces in the bag. Budri once again just nodded her head.

The two friends had ignored the cot and sat down right next to the fire in order to escape the biting cold of January. It was past 8am in the morning but it was still not warm. Maad is the coldest area of Dandakaranya, and this village is one of the colder ones in Maad. While Budri and Seedho were sitting near the fire in the veranda, another five to six young women and men were also gathered around the fire in the courtyard. There were three militia members in that group. It seemed as though their words and laughter were competing with the warmth emanating with the smoke from the fire. Those words and laughter had brought a glow to the courtyard still enveloped in semi-darkness.

In contrast to that lighthearted scene, the atmosphere around Budri and Seedho was somewhat subdued. Seedho was listening intently to what Budri was saying. In reality, it was rare for Budri to be serious. Short and stout, with an attractive wheaten complexion, Budri was always active, and constantly grinning from ear to ear while also talking nineteen to the dozen. Seedho was two years older than Budri. They were great friends, having worked together in the cultural organisation until three years ago. But they hadn't met since then. Budri had joined the squad while a year later, Seedho had been married and had left the village. While Seedho's in-laws' village was not too far, Budri worked in the Party's press department. So, there wasn't any occasion as such for her to visit all the villages. This was only the second time Budri was visiting her village in three years. She had stayed for two days and was leaving that day. The previous evening, Seedho had come from her in-laws' place. The two friends wanted to spend at least a day together. But Budri had to leave soon for an appointment¹. In the short time that they had together, Budri updated her friend about all the important issues to do with the Movement. After her marriage, Seedho had started working as a regular member of the women's organisation in her in-laws' village. Budri urged her to work with more vigour.

Even though Seedho was listening to her friend, Sanni's actions were attracting her attention. As soon as Sanni brought the bag out and placed it on the cot, Budri picked it up, saying, 'Oh, What all did you pack?' Sanni had packed the different food items in containers made of leaves. She had then stitched more leaves on the top to cover the contents. So, it was not possible to see what had been packed, but you could easily smell the dried fish and dried meat from near the bag. Budri took out a packet, sniffed it and said, 'These are the dried meat pieces.' She then took out all the containers and smelt them, one after the other: 'This one is dried fish', 'These are dried mango pieces', 'Dried *tendu*² fruit pieces', and so on. There were also some tubers at the bottom of the bag. Budri returned the bag to the cot, commented on its heaviness and continued talking to Seedho.

The food in the bag was for Budri's entire squad. Sanni kept

adding other items such as honey, dried bitter gourd pieces and so on, based on her knowledge of the tastes, likes and dislikes, and the diseases that were prevalent among the squad members. 'Maybe nobody packs so many things so lovingly even for their child going to her in-laws' place for the first time,' thought Seedho.

Once Sanni felt she had packed everything, she tied up the bag. But then, she remembered that she had packed food for all the squad but nothing for her daughter.

'Oh, good, I remembered!' she muttered as she went back into the house. Since Budri had already sent a message that she would be coming on exactly those dates, her mother had bought a *lungi*, towel and handkerchief in the market held that week. As Sanni opened the trunk where she had kept them, she also remembered what she had bought for her daughter, the first time she had come home after joining the squad. She smiled sheepishly at those memories.

Budri had long and thick hair from her childhood. So, Sanni had bought a large-toothed comb, two pairs of clips, rubberbands of various colours, aromatic hair oil and a hand mirror. But the moment she saw Budri, she realised that none of the things she'd bought for her would be useful for her daughter. Budri had cut her hair short like a man's. Her mother's heart bled at the sight. She didn't comment on it immediately, but a little while later she couldn't resist saying, 'How did you have the heart to cut your beautiful hair!'

'After realising I don't have any use for it, I wondered how I put up with it for so long!' Budri hadn't exactly said this in such few words. She had clarified more gently, using the word patriarchy two or three times in her explanation. However, Sanni could not be reconciled. She remembered the thick, black and long hair Budri used to have and felt very bad. For nearly half a day, she felt her daughter's face looked bare and bald. But, as the hours wore on, she became accustomed to Budri's new look, and started feeling there was nothing out of the ordinary about it. It was also the first time she had seen her daughter in guerrilla uniform. By the evening, she was telling herself, 'That haircut suits the uniform.' The next day, she was sure her daughter looked really attractive in her new haircut.

After they had had their lunch, she'd laughingly taken out all the things she had bought from the trunk. 'See, I bought all these for you. But, you don't need them now! – Still, you can take this aromatic oil – you oil your hair, right?' she had asked. Budri took the oil indifferently as she replied, 'We don't use aromatic oil, only plain coconut oil.' She then placed the oil bottle back with the other items. She looked at them and put them away as well. Her mother hadn't seen any interest at all in her daughter's face when taking those items into her hand.

'What's new about that?' thought Sanni. Since her childhood, Budri had always been more interested in taking part in the activities of the children's organisation. Later when she became a little older, she would go to the different villages, participating in meetings, programmes and awareness raising. She was never interested in her personal appearance. 'I thought she would change when she came of age but it was never so,' Sanni had reflected.

So this time, Sanni had chosen only those items that for sure would be useful to her daughter. She had bought a dark green *lungi*, a sky-blue towel and a honey-coloured large handkerchief. She took them out and gave them to Budri saying, 'They will not fit in the bag. Add them to your kit.'

Budri's middle sister Maali then summoned them for lunch. She had come from the kitchen hut next to the house. 'Food is ready. Come and eat,' she said. Since Sanni had been busy packing for Budri, Maali had taken over the cooking that day. She was 16 years old and worked in the village militia. As per the cooking duties in the militia, Badru, another member had joined her in the cooking. For a while, everyone had been enjoying the mouth-watering aroma of dried beef being cooked. So, as soon as Maali gave the call for lunch, they came readily with their plates.

Maali and Badru brought the rice and beef pots to the veranda where Budri and Seedho were sitting and put them next to the fire. 'Get your plates too as you also need to leave soon,' said Sanni to Maali and Badru. Budri's youngest sister, 12-year-old Phulo, joined them with her plate. 'Let us eat together,' said Budri, handing a plate to Seedho. As Sanni got ready to serve everyone, Budri's father also came to help. He washed his hands

and feet and started serving the rice while Sanni served the beef curry.

Some of the people returned to sit by the fire in the courtyard, while a few went and sat on the cot where the sun's rays were just beginning to spread. However, Budri, Seedho and Phulo ate near the fire in the veranda itself. After everyone had eaten their fill, Maali and the other two militia members packed up the remaining food in a box and went to wash the cooking utensils in a stream nearby.

Budri and Seedho washed their plates and gave them to Phulo. Then, they came back to the fire to continue their discussion. Budri's parents were also sitting there. The fire had burned low by then but it was still giving off heat. Budri's parents' hearts were heavy as she would be leaving soon and they didn't know when they would see her again. Budri was also feeling the same. All of them were searching for words to say at the parting.

'You should eat well, my daughter,' said Sanni. 'I always eat well, *Amma*,' said Budri. 'When Sunitha *didi* took our class, she told us that some of the women comrades do not eat enough pulses. Some don't even eat the groundnut and jaggery mixture. If they don't eat these, how will they become strong? Because when there is firing with the enemy forces, the lack of strength will become a problem. You must eat everything that is given to you,' said Sanni. She put forward the points she had heard and discussed in the women's organisation activists' meeting that had happened recently. 'You should eat anything that is given. You shouldn't object saying you won't eat this or won't eat that. If you do not eat properly, how will you become strong? If you do not have strength, how will you participate in the war?' Budri's father reiterated her mother's concerns.

Seedho remembered her brother who was studying in boarding school. She thought, 'I don't think even my parents gave so many instructions to him when he was going to live in the hostel!' She got up and walked towards the courtyard to give private time to the three of them.

There was silence for a while. Budri thought that her parents had said whatever they had wanted to say to her and it was her

turn to tell them what was in her mind. Then Sanni cleared her throat as if she wanted to say more. Budri looked at her mother, but Sanni didn't meet her eyes. Instead, she continued to look at the fire. She added a log to it and then, drawing a deep breath, said, 'My dear, don't get married soon. There is no hurry to get married.' As Budri began to smile on hearing this, her father pitched in too, saying 'I agree. There is no hurry to be married. You should grow in the Party and come up in its cadre.'

'Look at Sukumati and Sanbatti. They have become commanders but have not yet married,' said Sanni. Budri burst out laughing, the sound of it making everyone turn around to look at them. 'Hey, why are you laughing like that? Is it because I was nagging you to get married when you were at home?' Sanni's face had dropped and she sounded woebegone. 'I agree I did that then. But, now, I've understood. People don't have to always be the same?' Seeing her mother's crestfallen face, Budri immediately stopped laughing and the others returned to their conversations.

She said, 'Of course, people change! If people don't change, how will our battle go forward? I am so happy to hear what you said! I know you have changed a lot. Sunitha *didi* tells me about you every time we meet. How you have been participating actively in the women's organisation's activities. *Nayana* has always worked in various organisations. So why would I think you will be the same as earlier?' She paused, waiting for her mother's reaction.

'Since we don't have sons, I thought if you marry Munna, the two of you would stay with us. But, you went ahead with what your heart desired. I was sad then – but now I don't feel like that at all,' said Sanni. Budri's father stayed silent. He had never pressured his daughter to get married and had nothing to justify. 'Even though you were sad when I refused to marry then, I am glad that at least now you have understood me,' Budri's words conveyed her appreciation, and she chatted with her parents for some more time before getting up to leave.

'Shall we go comrades?' she said. At that, everyone jumped up and readied themselves for their journey. Maali and two male

militia members also got ready to accompany Budri to her appointment. Budri picked up her kit and slung a bag with a blanket on her left shoulder. She also slung a single-barrel rifle on her right shoulder. Maali hoisted up on to her head the bag her mother had packed for Budri and slung the bag containing her own things on her shoulder. The militia members too picked up their bags containing their belongings. One of them had a *bharmar* and the other had a bow and arrows. Budri's parents and everyone else stood in a line. The four who were leaving bade all of them Lal Salaam and proceeded forward.

They walked rapidly towards the forest. It was getting to be ten in the morning. As they were mostly walking in the shade of the trees, they didn't feel the warmth of the sun. But because walking in that area meant climbing up and down several hills, they had also stopped feeling cold. Budri was in high spirits. She was remembering her parents' last words again and again. She wondered 'What will Kamli *didi* say when she hears this!' To understand why her parents' words had filled her with so much elation, we need to go back to three and a half years ago and see what happened then.

'Your maternal uncle came yesterday,' said Sanni sitting down on the floor next to the cot on which her daughter was sitting after her bath. She handed over a porridge bowl to Budri. It was about 4pm. Budri had returned after a week of participation in a cultural training camp in the next village. The training had been intense, round the clock without any time to rest. She had then walked back all the way to the village and was extremely tired. So, Budri showed no interest in her mother's news. 'He has gone with your father to the *gorga* tree.'

She said, 'Oh, I see', not showing much interest. Sanni had only one elder brother and it was normal for him to visit their village often. While her mother narrated the gossip about her uncle's household, Budri finished eating her porridge and lay back on the cot. Sanni decided to come to the point before her husband and brother returned.

‘Your uncle said it would be good to conduct the marriage this year.’

‘Whose marriage?’ asked Budri, although she knew her mother’s intent.

‘Who else? Don’t talk as though you do not know. Marriage between you and Munna. This was decided long ago,’ snapped Sanni.

‘I told you I don’t wish to get married right now.’

‘How can you say that? It was all arranged long ago.’

‘Arranged? Whom did you ask before arranging? I certainly wasn’t asked!’

‘We drank *kallu*³ as a pact of your marriage when you were an infant. How could we have asked you then, my dear?’ Sanni tried to mollify her.

‘You drank *kallu* to finalise my marriage when I was an infant unaware of this world? Well, now that I am aware, I am refusing the marriage,’ said Budri quickly. Usually she was a serene person who displayed maturity well beyond her years. But, now, because she was very tired, she spoke impatiently.

‘Why can’t you agree? What is wrong with Munna? He is a nice person. Your uncle and aunt also love you,’ said Sanni in a coaxing tone as she sensed her daughter was piqued. Budri sat up and looked straight into her mother’s eyes. She tried to control her impatience and said, ‘He may be nice, but I’m not ready to get married. I told you I am going to join the squad. Yet you keep nagging me about marriage instead.’

Sanni generally was a serene woman and knew that scolding one’s child nowadays only worsened the situation. So she had never scolded or raised a hand on her children. She also felt such admonishing could lead her daughter’s heart to harden – she had always thought of Budri as a kind-hearted person. ‘I gave my word to my brother that I will get you married to his son. Now, if you go and join the squad, how will I face my brother?’ She hoped that this would make Budri have a change of heart instead.

‘I also gave my word in the meeting the other day that I will join the squad. I will enroll in the PLGA week (this takes place

between December 2-8 every year, during which a special recruitment campaign would be taken up), which is in another month. I was going to tell you and *nayana* about it today or tomorrow,' Budri replied softly but resolutely.

Sanni did not speak for some time. It was not new for her daughter to say she would enrol in the squad. But Sanni had never taken it seriously, thinking that when Budri came of age she would accept the situation that she had been betrothed in her infancy and would honour that commitment. As she saw her hopes fading, she also realised she had two problems in front of her. One was her daughter rejecting the marriage arranged for her and the other was her joining the squad. Sanni was not in favour of either. Given her gentle nature, she just sat there now, thinking about both problems.

After sometime, she spoke again, softly, 'You are the eldest of this house. We don't have sons. We hoped you would be our support, just like a son. Every time you said you would join the squad, I have been telling you this. Will you not listen to me, my dear?'

'*Amma*, I have also been telling you since my youth that I will join the squad. If you want support, there are two more sisters after me for that,' said Budri. 'True, we have two more daughters. But, we arranged your marriage with Munna. Since I do not have sons, your uncle agreed to his son staying with us after the marriage. Will anyone send the eldest son of their household like that? Since it was my brother, he agreed out of love for me. Tomorrow, those who marry your sisters may not agree to move into our household, right?'

'*Amma*, for now, both you and *nayana* are able to work hard and support yourselves. When you are unable to do so, then we will see what to do. Why get tense about it now?' said Budri in an attempt to lighten the atmosphere. 'In another two years, Maali will become an adult. We will send her into the squad,' persisted Sanni, looking hopefully at her daughter.

Sanni had deep regard for the Party (the CPI(Maoist) party). She had never objected to her daughter participating in the activities of children's organisations or the cultural troupe. But,

she was unable to approve of her daughter joining the squad. This was not just the reluctance any mother might feel when asked to be separated from her child. Sanni couldn't reconcile herself to the fact that her daughter was refusing to honour the marriage arranged for her a long time ago. But again, it was not just hurt that a long-established tradition was being set aside by her daughter. It was also the pain that her word given to her brother had no weight and would not be fulfilled. 'Will my brother come to my home after this? Can I go to my maternal home ever after this?' were some of the thoughts running through Sanni's mind. She had not felt the lack of sons after her brother had agreed to give his son in marriage to her daughter and send him to be a part of their household.

'When Maali gets older, she will decide for herself whether she will join the squad or not. Why will I not join even if she wants to join?' said Budri.

'I am not saying that you should stop all Party work. I heard that Munna is also working with the organisation. Both of you can continue to work with different organisations after your marriage too. Isn't your father doing so? I also work as much as I can, right? If you feel that at least one person from our family should be in the squad, all I am saying is that let's send your younger sister,' said Sanni. She knew that most families were proud to have at least one member in the squad.

'I've been sure I wanted to join the squad since I was very young. Maali will decide for herself. We aren't the ones who can decide her future. You can explain to *mama*,' said Budri as she got up from the cot and walked away. Sanni could only keep staring at her daughter's retreating back.

Similarly, a month later, when Budri joined the squad, she kept staring after her as she walked away from the house. She was pained more by the fact that she could not honour the pledge to her brother than by the separation from her daughter. However, no one knew that Munna was also not in favour of the marriage. At least Budri had made it clear to her parents that she was not willing to get married. Munna had never even informed his parents.

Just as Budri was recruited into the squad in the PLGA meeting in her village, Munna also was recruited into a squad in the meeting held in his village. Ten days later, Sanni came to know of this. Her lost hopes of honouring her promise were revived. When she met her daughter one year later during a visit to the village with the squad (added for more clarity), she expressed her wishes to her daughter: 'Since Munna is also working in the squad, at least now, you can get married to him, right?'

Budri laughed loudly at this and said, 'You nagged me to get married when I was at home. Will you not leave it even now?'

'Well ... whether you are at home or in the squad, you will eventually get married, is it not?' Sanni asked, 'You refused to get married then because you wanted to join the squad. Since, now, he is also in the squad, what is the objection? Why delay the marriage that was settled long ago?'

Budri reiterated again, 'I don't have any wish to get married now.'

'Alright.' Sanni said. But she then couldn't help adding, 'Tell me when you will get married. We will talk to Munna. We don't know if he will be willing to wait or not ...'

Budri didn't let her mother finish whatever she had meant to say. 'As of now, I have no thought of marriage. When I do decide to get married, I may marry Munna or somebody else. I do not know as of now. So, you needn't talk to him.'

'Why not Munna? What is wrong with him? Does he have a disability? Or is he not of sound mind? He is also in the squad,' persisted Sanni.

'*Amma*, you're insisting that we should get married because you had arranged this marriage in our infancy. But, did you try to find out if either of us is interested in this marriage? You are nagging me that I should go ahead with this marriage, but even Munna does not seem interested in this marriage. I have met him two-three times recently. If he had been interested, he would have told me, right? Or, even if not to me, he would have told the Party,' said Budri.

'Are you saying you won't marry because he may not be

interested? If so, we will talk to him...' Budri interrupted her mother once again, saying 'Even if he is interested, I am not interested. It's wrong to arrange marriages without knowing the opinion of the children. It's ruining the lives of both the people. Munna is a good person. I am not against him. However, if I agree to this marriage, I will be justifying a very bad tradition. Therefore, it is not only now, I will never marry Munna.'

Sanni could only look helplessly at her daughter.

(The inspiration for this story, Comrade Paddam Budri (Anitha) was killed in the raid by the police on the village of Durveda in the Maad region of Dandakaranya on 7 November 2017.)

Translation of 'Viplava Taram'. (First published in Arunataru, September 2018)

Translated by P. Anupama

Notes:

1. Appointment- As the guerrillas work underground and are constantly moving, appointments are fixed for squads or individuals who have been away on errands to reunite with their formation or when a meeting is necessary with another formation(s) in other areas. The appointment is fixed before leaving the squad or before the squad leaves its current location. If an appointment is missed for any reason the squad or individual still will go to the rendezvous point (RV place) fixed for it for that day.

2. *tendu* – leaves of the *tendu* (Indian ebony) tree are used in locally made hand-rolled cigarettes for wrapping the unprocessed tobacco. Its fruits are collected, dried, and stored so they can be eaten throughout the year.

3. In many Adivasi tribes, marriages are arranged during childhood. The parents of a boy (sometimes still an infant) approach the parents of a girl. If they all agree, both parents commit to the marriage by drinking *kallu* (a traditional liquor made from flowers of Mahua or *Madhuca longifolia*) together. After maturity, if a woman wishes to marry, customarily she has to marry only the man whom her

parents had decided for her when she was an infant or a little girl. However, in the transformation brought about by the Party in the movement areas, Adivasi women are asserting their right to choose their marriage partner. Hence a woman may decide not to marry the man chosen by her parents during her childhood/infancy. She may elope with another man, although since the transformation is not complete, her parents often search for her and bring her back. Many young women have continued to assert themselves, and faced parental domestic violence and also violence from the men to whom they had been betrothed. However, where parents have been part of the transformation, they are also coming out of this customary practice.

Revolutionary Journey

After shaking hands with everyone, Satyam hurried towards Anita, who had walked a little distance away from the squad and was putting down her backpack. He said excitedly, 'I have good news for you.' His dark face was glowing with the joy of the news he was about to share.

But Anita was in no mood to notice his eagerness or happiness. For the past ten days, she had been restless, wondering when she'd get to meet Satyam.

'No, I'll be the one to give you good news,' she said, her dark face also showing her joy.

'No, no—I'll tell you first,' he insisted.

'Nope, I'll say it first.'

'I came to you first to say it, didn't I? You didn't come to me, did you?'

'Well, I just got here and haven't even unpacked my backpack yet...'

'I've been eagerly waiting to meet you and tell you the news since the day before!'

'You've been waiting since the day before, but I've been waiting for ten whole days.'

In the bustling atmosphere where many comrades had gathered, laughter was naturally blooming like flowers. There was mixing of words and general hullabaloo due to overlapping

conversations taking place. Some people, however, had unpacked their backpacks and collapsed with fatigue onto the rocks or logs that were around.

Since no one was nearby within earshot, Anita and her partner Satyam slipped into a playful argument.

‘Alright, alright—ladies first, right? You go ahead,’ he said, putting on an expression as though he was being generous in surrendering his turn.

Without wasting even a moment, as if she had no intention of giving up the chance, she said, ‘Lalitha and Shekhar got married... I was the one who conducted the ceremony.’

Satyam’s face suddenly turned ashen. He slowly slumped down onto a rock.

Anita was confused.

‘Hey, what’s with you? This news about their marriage isn’t new to us. That decision was made long ago, wasn’t it?’ she said, trying to understand.

There was no change in him.

‘Hey, what’s wrong with you? Why did you suddenly become like that...?’ She sat down on a stone beside him.

He looked at her with pain.

‘You said you had some good news to share,’ she said, still not fully recovered from her confusion regarding his reaction.

‘It’s nothing.’

‘What do you mean nothing? You insisted so far that you’ll tell me first, and now you’re saying there’s nothing?’

‘Madhu has been released from jail. He’s already come *inside*¹, to our district...’

His gaze was fixed on the ground.

‘Really?! When?’

‘Just a couple of days ago... I was one of those who went to receive him. He’s traveling right now. I rushed here ahead to inform our people. I’ll be leaving again now. He’ll be here by this evening.’

‘Oh my... Lalitha... will she be able to withstand all this?’

Her eyes eagerly searched for Lalitha. She was laughing and chatting with the squad commander Ramesh a short distance away, after having put down her backpack.

Both of them fell silent.

As it was winter, the sun was just now lazily rising in the sky. The forest, shedding its veil of fog, was shimmering brightly.

‘Looks like you just woke up.’

‘Hmmm... After so many days of walking, I guess I was totally worn out. As soon as I bathed and ate, sleep overtook me,’ said Lalitha, adjusting herself slightly as if inviting Suresh into her polythene sheet.

Suresh was the secretary of that district’s party committee. Seeing him arrive, Lalitha’s guard sitting next to her got up and quietly walked away.

‘You don’t seem to have taken any rest at all...’ said Lalitha.

‘I was taking a report from Ramesh,’ he replied, smiling a bit awkwardly.

‘It would’ve been good if you had taken a little rest. It would’ve eased the fatigue of all that walking. You could’ve talked afterward, right?’

‘You’re right, but there were a few urgent matters to discuss...’

‘Okay then,’ she said, preparing herself to listen.

‘As soon as we arrived this morning, I heard the news, Lalitha... I’ve been meaning to tell you ever since... but...’

‘Why are you hesitating, just say it...’ she sensed the uneasiness in his voice and prompted him.

‘Madhu was released the day before yesterday. It seems he’s even come inside...’

For a few seconds, Lalitha couldn’t comprehend what she was hearing. But once it sank in, her face lit up.

‘Is it true? Is what you’re saying really true?’

'Since we were traveling, we didn't know, but apparently this has become sensational news *outside*.'

'Oh wow, really? You're saying he's even come back inside? How did you find out? Did he come safely? Did they even let him come?'

'He came back very safely, it seems. Not just anywhere—he's come to our district. Satyam and the others personally met him and brought him. And not only that, he's coming here this evening.'

'Really?' Her eyes welled up with tears.

Suresh was surprised. He had expected that she would be shocked when he told her this news.

'After we arrived here, we sent back a team again. I thought I'd break it to you slowly... They must be on their way by now.'

'Oh! So you sent the team after we came here? Why didn't you tell me then? I would have gone to receive him too...'

Now he was even more surprised.

Madhu is coming... her Madhu is coming... After so many years, she was going to see Madhu again...

An indescribable feeling began to stir within her.

Contrary to his usual nature, Madhu was walking silently in the formation. Since yesterday, he had been talking continuously with them, so this sudden silence surprised a few comrades. But those who knew that he was going to meet Lalitha soon understood the reason for that silence. That's why they restrained their urge to chat with him or pull him into conversation and simply walked along quietly.

Satyam, walking in the advance team, was also silent. Whenever someone ahead or behind asked him something, he replied absent-mindedly. Even when someone cracked a joke, he responded with a serious look. His thoughts were swarming chaotically, disturbing his mind.

He had told Madhu and a few others, 'Suresh and Lalitha are back from the conference. You'll meet them this evening.'

But he hadn't been able to say anything beyond that.

The light that had sparkled in Madhu's eyes the moment he heard those words kept flashing back in his memory, pulling at his heart.

Would it have been better if he had just told Madhu the full story? But then, he himself had learned about it informally through Anita—not through the district committee. Perhaps they had decided to share it personally with him. Even if he had wanted to share the news, would he have been able to articulate it?

Madhu was walking silently, but his inner world was surging with thoughts. So many thoughts... so many emotions... so many waves of feeling crashing within him—but one thought, one emotion, one feeling was pushing all others aside, overwhelming him completely, drowning out his sorrow and pain, and instead bringing tears of joy to his eyes.

'I'll be meeting her in a little while...' his heart kept repeating this over and over.

This was the culmination of a wait that had lasted many lifetimes!

He wondered how she was doing... how many worrying reports he'd heard about her health!

No matter how much he tried to avoid it, one question kept surfacing again and again in his mind:

'Did she get married?'

Why was he thinking so much about this again? Their relationship had ended three years ago... He had written her a letter, saying that if she wanted to remarry, it was not wrong, and that he wouldn't stop her. He had asked her to consider his letter as a divorce paper. He had hardened his heart... but had he? Had he really hardened his heart? He had told himself he had broken the bond, but had he truly broken it? Was it even possible to sever such a bond! Was their relationship something that could just be cut off like that!

How had she entered his life in the first place?

The first time they met, she was the embodiment of sorrow.

She hadn't yet recovered from the nightmare of watching her partner Vikram—who had shared with her not just love and companionship, but dreams, ideals, and aspirations—drown before her eyes in a lake.

On top of that, she had severe health issues. The mental stress of losing her partner had triggered epileptic fits. Working among the Chenchu Adivasis in Palamuru district, a region infamous for drought, meant even getting coarse grains as food was a big deal—and she would often be coughing up blood.

What had kept her going was an unshakable belief in her cause—nothing else.

What had Sagaranna (Puli Anjanna)³ told him when he had taken up responsibilities in the Palamuru district?

'Lalithakka has been deeply shaken by Vikram's death. Along with the fits, she's suffering from several other health issues. It's fair to say she hasn't received enough support from the party either. We must do everything we can to support her. The people respect her—not just as herself, but also as Vikram's partner. Vikram was a leader who won the love of the entire district. So naturally, the people honour her as his comrade too. If we fail to support her now, it will send a negative message to the public. Moreover, only when women manage to stand strong even after losing their life partners will we be able to claim that women in the party have developed their own identity. Otherwise, it'll look as if women in the movement are also dependent on men just as they are in the outside society. People will start saying that women stay in the party only as long as their husbands are there, and leave it once they're gone. Imagine what kind of message it sends to other women who wish to join the party. It could seriously damage the recruitment of women into the movement. Keep all of this in mind. Give her your full support.'

He had always held a deep respect for her based solely on what he had heard about her. And after meeting her, that respect only grew day by day. He tried his best to offer her all the support he could. He put in sincere effort in helping her solve the problems she was facing.

That's how a good understanding developed between the two of them, mutual trust and affection grew. Perhaps that's why Sagaranna had the idea that the two of them should be united.

When Sagaranna suggested to him that it would be good for him to marry her, he couldn't find any reason to refuse. He agreed wholeheartedly.

'I told our people to talk to Lalithakka too about this matter. I think she'll probably agree as well,' Sagaranna had said that day with so much happiness.

A few days later, as part of his work, he went to Lalitha's squad. Had the party people talked to her? If they had, did she agree or not? He didn't know any of that. So, putting aside all thoughts of that matter, he stayed with them for a few days, completed the meetings and his work, and got ready to leave.

Just as he was about to take his leave, Lalitha came up to him and said quietly, 'Madhu, I want to talk with you for a moment.'

He nodded happily. Walking beside her, step for step, and sat down near the fire, facing her.

That scene remains vividly and freshly etched in his mind even now, as if it had happened just yesterday!

The dawn was just breaking. The birds were waking up, singing songs to awaken the world. It was the tail end of winter. Both of them sat warming their hands by the fire.

A few moments passed heavily. What could it be about? Had our people spoken to her? He wondered in his heart.

'Did our people say anything to you, Madhu?' she asked slowly, without taking her eyes off the fire.

He instantly understood what she wanted to talk about. But almost unthinkingly, he said, 'About what?'

When those words came out of his mouth, she assumed he truly knew nothing.

'Our people talked to me about one matter... that it would be good if I married you... I said I was fine with it...' her voice trailed off, but he clearly heard the unspoken question: 'how about you?'

'Sagaranna talked to me too... I also said I was fine with it...' he replied. Later, how many times had he fondly remembered the glow on her face on hearing his response!

For more than two years after marriage, the two of them had remained very close, with not even the smallest misunderstanding between them.

And then suddenly, like a bolt out of the blue, came his arrest. She was deeply disturbed. During his time in jail, there were many disturbing reports about her health. When he learned that she was facing many problems from some comrades working with her, he felt very pained. She was never a troublesome person. She worked with such sincerity! She was so warm and genuine with the cadre and the people! As much as she was affectionate towards others, she would also fight with equal intensity when necessary. Some people couldn't tolerate that. They couldn't also bear her growing popularity among the cadre and the people.

The outlook toward women among the male cadre in the party has improved significantly now. But the first-generation women comrades faced many hardships. She perhaps topped the list of those who faced such difficulties. Every one of her actions was scrutinized harshly through a patriarchal lens... baseless suspicions and misunderstandings were created. How badly she was crushed! In fact, none of those who troubled her were able to survive in the party for long. Some even surrendered to the enemy. But the pain she went through in those days didn't simply vanish. It deeply impacted her life.

He learned about everything happening through her letters and party communications. Not a day passed without him thinking, 'When will I be released so I can share her pain?' But his release kept getting delayed, day after day.

In reality, she didn't just need his support. The party was already standing by her, condemning and warning those who were troubling her. But her nature was different. She longed for closeness from her fellow comrades. She needed people who could connect with her inner world, who could understand and comfort her.

- She found that kind of comfort in Shekhar. On one hand, his release kept getting postponed, and he himself had almost lost hope of ever getting out. He couldn't even say, 'I'll be released and come to you.' On the other hand, she strongly desired companionship and her growing closeness with Shekhar — all this made her seriously consider Shekhar's marriage proposal.

But the party disapproved. It asked her to think about how deeply it would affect him while he was still in jail, and said it wouldn't leave a good impression among the cadre or the people. The party issued a strong warning to Shekhar as well. Only then did she reject the proposal.

After that, she wrote him a letter. She said she had thought about the marriage, and asked his forgiveness for it. She described in detail the circumstances that had driven her to that point, pouring out all her anguish.

Reading that letter, he was shocked beyond words... To know that his companion — someone who was half his life, the very breath of his being — had thought about marrying someone else while he was still alive... how much heartbreak that caused! And this, despite there being no misunderstandings or conflicts between them... Who else but him knew how deeply she loved and adored him? That someone who loved him so intensely had been pushed to such a state — how pitiful her mental state must have been... how much the loneliness must have tortured her... how much inner turmoil she must have endured!

Thinking about her situation, he was filled with grief. He burned with frustration at being unable to meet her and offer her comfort... Rage rose within him against the iron bars, and the prison walls that held him back!

Whatever be her reasons, he felt relieved that she had come out of that mistaken way of thinking.

He had written her a letter — asking her not to make hasty decisions, and assuring that he understood her situation.

In fact, he did not see the issue as a personal loss or problem. He knew very well how much influence she had over the people

and the cadre as the first-generation woman comrade in the party, and how much admiration she had earned. He had reflected deeply about the fact that if she were to get married while he was still alive, she might be perceived as guilty in the eyes of society.

But the problem resurfaced. He came to know that she was once again thinking about marriage, struggling with it. That made him think more clearly. He put aside his own discomfort with it and tried to see from her perspective. What was wrong in what she was considering? Maybe waiting for him endlessly would seem ideal, but it wasn't mandatory... In a situation where it was unclear when he'd be released or whether he'd ever be released, was it right on his part to expect her to wait for him indefinitely?

Just because they had been married, and lived together for two years — was that reason enough to confine her entire life? When he couldn't even be by her side through her joys and sorrows, what right did he have to dictate her decisions? After all, she wasn't only his life partner — she was a senior comrade in the party, a comrade with character, someone with the strength and experience to think through, capable of judging right and wrong for herself. Who was he to deny her the autonomy to make decisions about her life?

Was what he felt for her truly love or was it control?

He could sense how deeply she yearned for companionship. The lack of a partner was affecting her both physically and mentally. As a result, weren't the capability and potential of a senior comrade going to waste — or at the very least, remaining untapped? As her partner, and as a fellow party worker, wasn't it her political growth that he should be wishing for?

He thought through all of this, from every possible angle.

Then, without further delay, he steeled his heart and wrote her a letter. He wrote that getting married was not wrong, that she had the right to do so, and that in her current mental state, it might even be necessary. He also wrote that she could consider that letter as a document of separation.

He wrote to the party as well — asking them to accept their separation and her proposal for remarriage.

How much he had grieved while writing that letter! Those were not just words — they were the shattered fragments of his own heart!

Madhu's surroundings suddenly grew dim. He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes.

She had replied to his letter thanking him for his 'magnanimity.' She had asked for his forgiveness — again and again.

But after that, nothing more was known.

'Did she get married?' — The question pricked him again.

'If she hadn't been married yet... and if he asked her to reconsider...'

All of a sudden, his thoughts came to a standstill.

Why was he thinking like this? He had believed that it was impossible to be freed from jail. But now that he 'was' free, were new hopes budding about life?

Getting married or not getting married—wasn't that just a technicality? What real difference did it make? Even if they hadn't gotten married, hadn't she already become one with him emotionally?

So what then? She hadn't become close to Shekhar out of hostility or dislike toward Madhu—she had only taken that path out of inevitability.

Even so, what was wrong if he simply requested her to reconsider? He wouldn't be forcing anything on her.

But if he were to request, she wouldn't refuse. She wasn't the kind to be blunt or dismissive. She would say yes. But would that 'yes' come from her heart?

If she felt she was deceiving Shekhar, or troubling him—if she were caught between not being able to say no and unable to truly say yes—wouldn't that cause inner conflict again? Wouldn't she be crushed once more?

In a way, the matter had come to a stop somehow. Shouldn't he just let it remain there? Why was he thinking of these things again now?

But how many times had he remembered her during his arrest, during the brutal tortures at the hands of the enemy? He had thought he would be killed. He had thought he'd never see her again.

And yet, somehow, he had survived. After going to jail, new hopes about life had sprouted. He had dreamed again and again of meeting her someday—of resting his head in her lap and pouring out all the pain in his heart.

Now, after all these years, to return and find that he couldn't share those feelings with her—how unbearable it was!

Before Madhu could come out of his thoughts, they reached the camp.

Lalitha, who was sitting looking at the path, immediately stood up as soon as she heard someone approaching. Her legs trembled... her heart pounded... She didn't even know how she managed to walk.

The moment she saw Madhu coming towards her, she forgot the world. In a stride she reached him, and she was in his arms. She leaned onto his chest and burst into tears.

Hugging her tightly, he too broke down. Both their hearts poured out in a flood of tears.

Watching the two of them, the comrades around wiped their eyes.

Many of the comrades there didn't even know that Lalitha and Shekhar had been married. Some weren't even aware of the proposal between them.

That's why, seeing the two of them reunited after so long, they watched the 'couple' as if they were witnessing something beautiful.

Within a short while the entire camp was buzzing with excitement.

The silence that had nested there until then was shattered, and Madhu turned into a river of words again.

Sitting on the polythene sheet, he was soon surrounded by all the comrades. Everyone was eager to know how he had

escaped—how he had foiled the enemy’s conspiracy to re-arrest him inside the jail premises itself.

Madhu narrated his tale with dramatic expressions and gestures. The others listened with rapt attention, eyes wide open. Every now and then, laughter rang out among them.

Lālitha sat beside him with a bright face, her eyes completely fixed on him. No one knew how much time had passed like that. Darkness had fallen. Slowly, everybody began to gather around the fire.

‘My head hurts a lot. I’ll go lie down for a while,’ said Lalitha, getting up.

Quietly, Suresh sent everyone away from there. ‘I need to talk to you about something...’ he said, trying to gain control over his voice.

‘Go ahead and speak,’ said Madhu with a smile, moving closer to the fire.

‘I don’t know how to tell you this... Just ten days ago, Lalitha and Shekhar got married...’ Suresh couldn’t say anything more.

For a brief moment, the smile on Madhu’s face vanished. ‘What’s so difficult to say in that? I didn’t know that they already got married, but I did know it was going to happen eventually,’ he said softly, still with a faint smile. There was no expression in his words.

Suresh went on explaining what they had thought about the marriage and what advice they had given Lalitha in that regard.

Madhu listened with a slight nod.

Anitha and Satyam, who had moved away from there, now sat by themselves lighting a small campfire.

‘They both looked so nice sitting side by side, didn’t they? But poor things...’ Anitha couldn’t finish her sentence. Satyam remained silent.

‘Madhu still doesn’t know about Lalitha’s marriage, right?’ she said again.

‘How would he know? Maybe now Suresh is telling him...’

Satyam's voice sounded heavy.

'Poor guy, not knowing anything, he's talking so happily and cheerfully, smiling and sharing stories...'

'And Lalitha too is acting like nothing ever happened. But inside, she must be going through so much turmoil...'

'Oh, that inner conflict must be intense. We know what her nature is like... how sensitive she is.'

'By the way, you said she got married ten days ago. Then how come Shekhar hasn't come...'

'Apparently he had urgent work. The marriage was in the evening, and by early morning the next day, he had to leave... Otherwise, the two of them would've faced Madhu together.'

'We didn't even know who was coming to the appointment. Only after we got there did we realize it was him. He hugged all of us and cried, you know. He spoke to us so affectionately. We'd heard about his love and warmth before, but seeing it in person is something else entirely. I thought — maybe it's good that he came before Lalitha got married. I believed that once he returned, there was no way Lalitha would marry someone else... Oh, if only he had been released ten days earlier, or if the wedding had been scheduled ten days later, things might have been different.'

'If Madhu had come earlier, maybe Lalitha would have reconsidered. She loves Madhu dearly, doesn't she? She could never love anyone else that much... But do you think it's right to think like that? After all, even if they weren't married, Lalitha and Shekhar have shared a bond for several years. Now that Madhu has returned, is it right to ignore that bond?'

'It's not as if she thought of marrying someone else because she stopped loving Madhu. She thought about it out of necessity. That situation no longer exists. After all, even after forming a bond with Shekhar, can we really say that she fell out of love with Madhu or forgot him? Don't we know how many times a day she still thinks of Madhu? And how torn she was while deciding to marry again! Even now, she continues to be conflicted. In that state, do you think she could've gone ahead and married someone else once Madhu was free? No, under no circumstance

could she have done that. If she had, she would have suffered even more. So, what's wrong in her giving up the idea of another marriage and deciding to be with Madhu?'

'It's not about right or wrong, but isn't it difficult to erase someone from the heart and replace them with someone else?'

'But she hasn't erased Madhu from her heart, has she? If she had, I wouldn't be saying all this. And she herself wouldn't be in such inner turmoil...'

'If you think like that, then why regret the marriage ever happened at all? So what if it did—just like a marriage proposal can be cancelled, can't a marriage be annulled too?'

'In my view, there's nothing wrong with that either. There's no rule that one must stay bound for life to a decision taken under compulsion. If Lalitha now decides to annul her marriage with Shekhar and live with Madhu—and if Madhu too has no objection—I would completely support that decision.'

'But even if she now decides to reject Shekhar and be with Madhu, can they go back to how things were before? Isn't there a wall between them now?'

'And can she truly be happy with Shekhar now? She'll constantly be crushed by the thought that she wronged Madhu. Instead, it's better to acknowledge what happened as a mistake and free herself from it.'

'But poor Shekhar—won't he be hurt?'

'Someone has to suffer, inevitably. Doesn't Madhu suffer if she marries Shekhar... even Lalitha too?'

'Lalitha has fallen—she is having fits!' someone shouted from a distance. The sudden cry startled almost everyone, and people jumped to their feet.

Suresh was the first to move, followed closely by Madhu, and both hurried toward Lalitha's polythene sheet.

A few comrades had already gathered around her polythene sheet. The sight of Lalitha convulsing violently on it, visible under the campfire light and the torchlights held by a few hands, was terrifying and sent chills down the spine. Some comrades sat

around her, trying in vain to hold down her arms, legs, and waist to stop her from rolling. Others struggled to pry open her clenched fists, rubbing her palms and soles.

Madhu quickly dropped to the ground near her head and pulled her head forcibly into his lap.

‘Lalitha... Lalitha!’ he called out in distress.

Her eyes had rolled back, her teeth clenched tight. There was no response from her. Still, he kept calling her name without pause.

Some other comrades also began calling her, some with suppressed sobs in their voices and some crying outright.

Suresh snapped angrily at those crying, saying, ‘You people get out of here!’ Ramesh, too, went to each one, telling them not to cry.

Lalitha’s convulsions had subsided. But her body was still stiff. Madhu slowly lifted her a bit more and pressed her head tightly against his chest. Stroking her back, he kept calling her. Still, there was no response from her. Again, he cradled her in his lap. Her eyes were still rolled back. He noticed blood trickling from her mouth. Then he saw that there were streaks of blood on his shirt. Alarmed, he moved his hand near her mouth and, calling her loudly, tried to pry open her tightly clenched jaws.

Then he realized — she was biting her tongue.

Gradually, control returned to her body. Her eyes slowly closed. Her clenched mouth relaxed back to normal. Now, she looked as if she were simply exhausted and had fallen asleep.

When Madhu called her again, she slowly opened her eyes. She stared with a wild, vacant look at the comrades gathered around her.

‘Lalitha, what happened?’

‘How are you now?’

‘Do you want to drink some water?’

‘Do you have a headache?’

All the comrades were asking her anxiously. But she stared blankly at them, as if she couldn’t understand a word they were saying.

Everyone was deeply worried. Anitha took both of Lalitha's hands into hers and asked, 'Lalitha, tell me who am I? Do you recognize me? What's my name?'

There was no change in Lalitha.

Bringing his face close to hers, Madhu asked gently, 'Lalitha, do you recognize me?'

She turned her gaze toward Madhu's face and nodded slightly, as if she did.

'Who am I?'

'Madhu,' she said faintly. Because she had bitten her tongue, her speech was unclear.

Noticing that, he said, 'Let me see your tongue,' and he gently held her chin.

She stuck out her tongue. Blood was still oozing from it. Regaining a bit more awareness by then, she slowly sat up and gestured to those sitting nearby to move aside. She then spat onto the ground. Anita immediately turned on a torch—there was blood all over the ground.

Madhu brought some cotton and wiped her tongue. Exhausted, she slumped back onto the polythene sheet. Within moments, she slipped into a deep sleep.

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief. Madhu sat there, stroking her head, a heaviness clouding his thoughts.

'She's asleep now. Everyone, go. It's past nine. Go eat your dinner,' said Suresh, insistently sending everyone away.

'I'll stay here. You both go eat,' said Anita, addressing Suresh and Madhu.

'No, you go eat first, comrade...' said Madhu.

'Yes, Anita, we'll stay here. You go ahead and eat,' added Suresh, leaving her no choice but to get up and go.

After she returned from eating, Suresh got up and said, 'Come on, Madhu, let's eat something too.'

Thinking it wouldn't be good to refuse, Madhu got up as well. After eating a few morsels, he came back and sat silently on the polythene sheet.

‘What if we wake her up and give her some tea or milk...’ he said to Anita in a low voice.

‘But she’s in a deep sleep. Do you think we should wake her?’

‘If she doesn’t eat anything, she’ll get even weaker...’

Just then, Lalitha stirred. They thought that she was regaining consciousness. But suddenly, she began throwing her arms and legs again.

‘Oh no, it looks like she’s having another seizure,’ Anita said anxiously. Madhu responded swiftly. When Anita called out, the comrades gathered there once again.

All through that night, she kept having fits again and again. She drifted in and out of consciousness. The time between seizures kept reducing. Her tongue got severed and Madhu’s shirt became wet with her blood.

By dawn, her condition had worsened. She had completely lost consciousness.

Everyone was in a state of agitation. Many were weeping, thinking that she was going to die. If Suresh and Ramesh had not reprimanded them, they would have cried loudly. Some others went far away from there and were crying loudly.

Madhu’s mental state was indescribable, he sat staring like a madman at her face in his lap. ‘This happened because of my arrival. How much I longed for my release... How many plans I had made to sneak into the forest without the enemy’s notice. How I had shed tears of joy as soon as I set foot in the forest... How happy my comrades and the people of the state would have been upon hearing the news of my release and safe arrival. But, it was because of my release that her life is at risk! Will she live? Would I be able to bear it if something happened to her? If I had thought that it would happen like this, I would have spent the rest of my life behind bars...’

His head was bursting with various thoughts.

Shaking his head vigorously, he thought, ‘What should I do now?’ He forced himself to focus on what needed to be done immediately.

After a while, he put Lalitha's head in Anita's lap and got up from the polythene. Moving from there, he motioned for Suresh to come with him. He put his thoughts in front of him. And soon those thoughts were carried out.

The comrades ran around to get the tasks done. In a few hours, the news came that the car had arrived. Lalitha, who was looking like a living corpse, was put down in a yoke and carried to the car, which was an hour's walk away. Everyone was looking at her as if it was their last look at her and they were touching her body affectionately. Anita and another squad member Naresh were asked to get ready to accompany her. Madhu sat with Anita and explained everything to her in detail. He gave her the addresses of some people who could help her. He also wrote letters to some.

'Send back Naresh two or three days after her treatment has started. Send a letter explaining her situation and we will inform you immediately what to do.' While Madhu was saying all this, she was wondering if Lalitha would actually live until she got to the hospital.

Finally, Madhu said, 'Let's do everything we can, comrade... But if we can't save her, make arrangements for her body to reach her mother's house...' His voice became hoarse. Her eyes welled up with tears.

He handed her a piece of paper with Lalitha's parents' home address and phone number written on it.

It had been four days since Lalitha's treatment began. Hope began to bloom in Anita. The seizures had stopped and Lalitha had regained consciousness. However, because her tongue was severed, she was unable to speak. In fact, she hadn't regained enough strength to talk either. She was always lying down. Perhaps due to the effects of the medication, she spent most of her time asleep. Since the previous day, she had been able to lean on Anita's shoulder and sip a little milk and fruit juice. If Anita supported her by wrapping an arm around her shoulders, Lalitha was able to walk to the bathroom.

After making Lalitha drink some fruit juice and gently laying her down again, adjusting the pillow, Anita leaned over her slowly and said softly, 'Lalitha, our comrades must be worried, wondering how you're doing. You've recovered a little, haven't you? Shall we send Naresh to let them know? They said we should send a word.'

Lalitha nodded her head as if to say, 'Yes, we must definitely send word.'

Without further delay, Anita took a notebook and wrote a letter. After a little while, Lalitha gestured, as if asking for paper and pen to be given to her.

Surprised, Anita handed them over. With Anita's help, Lalitha slowly got up, leaned against a pillow propped up against the wall, placed the notebook in her lap, and began to write a letter.

'Dear Madhu,

Lal Salaam. I'm recovering. There's no need to worry. I feel weak. I'll come once I'm a little better.

Madhu, perhaps our party may not keep you in the state. They might transfer you elsewhere right away. But please, don't leave under any circumstances without meeting me, without talking to me. Please give me at least one chance to talk to you. This is my request. You won't refuse, will you?

With revolutionary greetings,

Yours, Lalitha.'

Somehow managing to finish it, she folded the paper, wrote the name on it, and handed it to Anita.

Seeing the name on the paper, Anita felt surprised. She wondered how Lalitha was able to write in that condition and what exactly she wrote.

The next day, Shekhar came. 'How are you, Lalitha?' he asked, sitting beside her on the bed.

She looked at him angrily, as if some stranger had sat next to her, and moved away from him with irritation. Both Anita and Shekhar were surprised. Shekhar had come fully informed about her health condition, so he assumed that she probably didn't

recognize him. But Anita was puzzled. If Lalitha could write a letter to Madhu, how could she fail to recognize Shekhar?

Understanding her mental condition, Shekhar behaved with patience. He silently endured her rejection while continuing to provide her with whatever care she needed.

Within about ten days, her condition improved significantly. But her speech was still not back to normal. She could talk only with effort.

'You go and meet Madhu,' she said to Shekhar, who was peeling sweet lime for her.

'How can I leave you in this condition and go?'

'Anita is here with me. What else is there for you to do?'

'What's the urgency to meet him right now? First, let your health improve... Once you're better, we'll go together.'

'No. I don't like the idea of us both going to meet him. Once I'm well, I'll go alone... You go first,' she said firmly.

'I'll go once you feel a little better,' he replied with a dejected face.

'I'm already feeling well enough. You must go and meet him soon. You should talk to him...,' she insisted.

Madhu watched Shekhar sitting opposite him and weeping inconsolably, his heart filled with pain and sympathy for him.

'Don't cry... Don't cry,' Madhu said after a while.

'I never imagined you'd be released...'

'How is it that people who are arrested would remain locked up forever?' Madhu said with a smile. But that smile sank heavily into Shekhar's heart.

'I feel terribly guilty. She too is going through a lot of inner conflict...'

'What's the use of feeling guilty now? I just want to state one thing clearly. The way you handled things was not right. She has the right to get married. But she should be free to make that decision on her own. Instead, you put pressure on her. You

proposed marriage to her first. She was confused. She leaned toward you, too. But later, she realized that it was a wrong decision. She rejected your proposal. She even asked you to forget about it. But you went after her again.

Now, if she had been the one to strongly seek companionship first, if she truly desired your presence and support, it would have been different if you agreed... But even then, you should have helped her understand what was right and wrong. The truth is, she was facing all sorts of problems. As a well-wisher, you should have helped her resolve those issues, or at least supported her in facing them courageously. But what did you do? You brought more trouble into her life. You caused her further conflict. You made people speak of her in all sorts of ways. At a time when she was going through a difficult phase, you should have stood by her as a comrade. But instead, you exploited her helplessness for your own interest.'

'I really liked her...'

'Do you think it's right to say you liked a married woman? What kind of attitude should one have toward a comrade who's in prison? One should give them support and show them compassion. We must be careful not to hurt their feelings. But by doing this—didn't you cause pain to a comrade who is already suffering in jail?' There was a slight sharpness in Madhu's voice.

Whether or not he agreed with Madhu's words, Shekhar sat with his head bowed.

Madhu composed himself. In a calm voice, he continued, 'Don't think I'm reacting out of personal emotions. I'm thinking about this from the party's perspective too. Actually, that's what's most important. Even from the party's point of view, this was not right. That's why I heard the party gave you a serious reprimand. But even after that, you didn't show any willingness to reflect on your thoughts or reconsider your mindset. Keep in mind, that's not good. You know very well how much regard I had for you...'

Shekhar couldn't hold back his tears. 'Why wouldn't I know... How could I forget... But I couldn't keep your regard. I distanced myself from you... I made you turn against me...'

‘Even now, I hold no resentment toward you. Just because I opposed you in this matter, doesn’t mean I don’t hold you in regard. What’s done is done. In some situations, there’s no use in thinking much about the past. It’s better to think about what needs to be done now. A significant part of Lalitha’s life was spent in one form of conflict or another. The time she lived happily, without worries, had been very short. I only wish that her life should be joyful at least now. Always keep that in mind...’

The kitchen was bustling with the clamor of evening tea time. Madhu, perched on a stump with a large, mug-like cup in his hand, was the centre of attention in the midst of all that liveliness. A few comrades sat nearby on the stump and some on stones beside the stump, with others standing around. Sitting right next to Madhu was District Committee member Prashanti, silently enjoying the lively atmosphere with a smile.

Madhu was narrating—dramatically and with embellishments—everything Jaya had muttered in her sleepy stupor when woken up for sentry duty after a long, tiring day. Everyone was laughing heartily. Jaya, on the other hand, sat there with a sulky pout, protesting, ‘I didn’t say anything like that!’

It hadn’t even been ten days since Madhu had come to the Nallamala division, yet he already felt like an old comrade to everyone.

‘How can this comrade laugh so freely? How can he act like he has no worries, when he’s carrying such pain in his heart?’ Prashanti wondered.

The whistle blew, cutting through the chatter and signalling the end of break time. Everyone headed off for collective study. Prashanti had letters to write, but her desire to talk to Madhu held her back, and instead of getting up from the stump, she struck up a conversation with him. Madhu, just about to stand, remained seated when she spoke.

After some casual small talk, she asked, ‘So... Lalitha is coming tomorrow, right?’

‘She should be. We’ve heard she’s fully recovered now. So, it’s better that she comes back. Staying outside is risky, after all.’

‘Madhu... can I ask you something? Will you answer honestly? Didn’t it hurt you... what Lalitha did?’

Prashanti had only met Madhu in person after he was released. Lalitha was her good friend. Whether it was from hearing so much about him from Lalitha, or because of Madhu’s nature—or maybe both—Prashanti had, in a short time, become close enough to feel comfortable speaking openly with him.

‘It didn’t just hurt, comrade... it wounded me,’ he replied, gazing into the distance.

‘Weren’t you angry at her?’

‘No... I wasn’t.’

‘Not even once?’

‘Not even once. Poor thing... imagine the turmoil she must have gone through before she made that decision...’

‘Even I feel so pained when I think about it... Lalitha waited so much for you. She used to treasure your letters with such affection. She used to show them to us with such pride and joy... Not just for the sake of the movement, but even for Lalitha’s sake, we all wished you would return soon. But in the end, when you actually came back, she wasn’t in a position to be happy. She had to be admitted to a hospital, stuck between life and death...’

‘I feel the same way. Maybe if I hadn’t returned, she might’ve been happier. She suffered so much in loneliness all these years. Now she’s married, right... Perhaps she could’ve found some happiness. But with my coming back, it was like reopening a healing wound...’

‘Ugh, don’t think like that, Madhu... Should you have stayed rotting in jail just so she could be happy? She would never have wanted that either. Even if she has to struggle for a few days, she’ll recover. Even if she married someone else, your release gave her immense happiness... But even if she’s happy, there are some comrades who aren’t able to let that happiness last. You’re seeing it, right—the endless discussions...’

'After all kinds of discussions had taken place and they reached a conclusion, they got married. But the discussions started again with my arrival. On top of the old debates, new ones were added. More than the pain of losing her, what hurts me more is that of people talking about her in all sorts of ways...'

'Some of our comrades strongly feel that you were wronged. And while it's true that you were wronged, they're holding Lalitha responsible for it. In a sense, their affection for you is turning into resentment towards Lalitha!'

'That's exactly what hurts me. They think they're showing affection or sympathy toward me, but they don't realize how much it pains me when they talk about Lalitha like that... Sometimes I feel—this whole discussion about her marriage is happening only because I'm alive. If I had died, no one would have had any objections to her marriage. Isn't that true?'

Prashanthi said with consternation, 'Ugh, don't say such things, Madhu... Don't take seriously the words of people, who talk from a half-baked awareness, and react like that.'

She wanted to say more, much more—but didn't find the right words.

After a heavy silence hung in the air for a while, Prashanthi finally broke it.

'I'm also very angry with Shekhar. I feel he didn't think seriously at all about the consequences... You're seeing how the cadre is talking about him too, right?'

'Honestly, he's a very good comrade. He loves people with pure intent. Whoever faces any issue, he responds with sympathy and shares in their pain. That's how he showed compassion towards Lalitha too... He wanted to console her, support her, stand by her, and offer his cooperation. He grew close to her in that process. Eventually, it resulted in this... He probably didn't anticipate these developments either.'

'How can you think so nobly about him, Madhu? Do you know how surprised Mamata was when she came here recently? You asked her, didn't you? 'Is Shekhar doing well?' She told me, 'Shekhar is, of course, the in-charge for me, but I know only

unofficially that he and Lalitha got married... But, the moment I arrived, Madhu asked me so affectionately, 'Is Shekhar doing well?' What's more, he said, 'Poor guy, when he came to meet Lalitha, she was there as a patient in the hospital. Shekhar was deeply distressed.' Shekhar did tell me Lalitha wasn't keeping well, but I didn't know it was so serious. And I also didn't know that Shekhar had met with Madhu. I only found out when Madhu told me. There was only sympathy for Lalitha and Shekhar, concern for the suffering they were going through in his words — not even a hint of resentment... In fact, he spoke about all this as though they were matters unrelated to him, as if he himself wasn't affected at all. He said it all so casually... I wondered—how is that even possible?' She recounted all this and was utterly amazed at your reaction.'

'Do you know what Mamata asked me? She said, 'Lalitha is older than you, right? And that too a 'widow'... In those days, marrying someone like her must have taken a lot of courage. How did you go ahead with it?'' Madhu's voice held suppressed laughter.

'Yes, I too think the same. In those days, there must have been some hesitation in marrying someone in that situation, right? Didn't you feel that way?' There was no hiding the curiosity in Prashanti's voice.

'Tch... I never thought like that. I had read that after the revolution succeeded in China, the Party had called on the youth to come forward and marry the life partners of comrades who had died in the war. That really inspired me... I felt getting married that way was truly ideal. That's why I didn't feel any hesitation in marrying Lalitha.'

They were lost in conversation, until it got dark and cold.

'I gave in to weakness in my thinking, but do you know why I ended up thinking that way? One problem after another kept coming... I couldn't bear it. I was afraid I'd go mad... Every moment I longed for you to come, so that I could rest in your arms, and pour all my pain out. But you didn't come. The hope that you would come dried up as the days passed by... You might say, 'did

I have to come? The Party was there, right?’ Yes, it’s true that though some people in the Party deliberately made things hard for me, many comrades—especially the ones in the higher committees—supported me. But even so, I longed for someone I could call my own... At that time I found the comfort I was craving for in Shekhar. Thus, unintentionally an intimacy grew between us. Still, I never imagined it would lead to this situation... but it did.

Honestly, once I realized that the way I was thinking wasn’t right, I spoke to our comrades and withdrew. But Shekhar kept asking repeatedly. I resisted for a few days, but then I couldn’t continue resisting like that. Gradually, I softened. As a senior comrade, I should have firmly opposed him. But... I grew weak.

I’m not talking to you now to justify myself or to explain my side of things... I’ve even lost the right to sit before you and speak like this... Even so, I couldn’t stop myself from talking to you, from telling you everything that happened... That’s why I’m saying all this now... I’ve been writing letters to you constantly... But unless I speak to you directly, I can’t unburden my heart.

It’s enough for me if you understand one thing. Unlike what many people seem to think, I never saw physical needs as primary...

Let people think what they want about my actions... let them interpret them however they will. It’s enough for me if you understand — and if you forgive me. What I did may not be something easily forgivable, yet I’m asking you to forgive me... If you can’t forgive me, it will be hard for me to live...’

It was as if Lalitha was pouring out a sorrow she had carried for lifetimes. Whenever sorrow interrupted her words, she broke down in sobs.

Madhu sat silently, listening, as though he didn’t want to interrupt even a single word she was saying. But whenever she cried, he simply said, ‘Please don’t cry.’ He waited until she was done speaking before he began to speak.

‘I’ve already written everything in my letters to you — my feelings, all of it... Still, since there’s an opportunity now, I’ll say

it once more. The fact that you started thinking about remarriage while I was still alive — at first, it hurt me deeply. But later, when I thought about it more, I realized there was nothing wrong in what you were thinking. Whether I came out in a few years or never came out at all, whether I spent the rest of my life in jail — expecting you to wait for me forever seemed like a feudal mindset more than anything else. That's why I never once saw what you did as wrong. To see it as wrong would mean denying you your autonomy over your own life...'

'Is that true, Madhu? You really don't think I did something wrong? You didn't feel disgusted with me? You weren't angry with me?'

'Feel disgusted with you? Is that how you understood me? Yes, I was angry, but not with you. I was angry with the State — for throwing me in jail and throwing both our lives into disarray... But there is one thing I strongly felt about you. You should have thought clearly and in a balanced manner about yourself — you should have assessed yourself properly and made a firm decision. But you didn't. And because of that, many misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and doubts developed between the cadre and you. If you had been clear about yourself, there wouldn't have been any room for all this...'

'I was very torn. On one hand, the thought that I shouldn't make a decision that would hurt you — that I should wait for you forever, if need be. And on the other hand, the weakness of not being able to commit myself to that thought firmly... I was crushed in between... I wouldn't wish such a painful situation on my enemies...'

'When you realized your weakness, you should have made a decision quickly...'

'How could I decide like that? I'm a human being too, right? If I had any dissatisfaction or dislike towards you, I could have decided quickly... but I loved you more than my own life... That being the case, how could I just decide to reject you...?' Unable to talk any further, Lalitha broke down in sobs.

Madhu too could no longer control himself. He began

sobbing uncontrollably.

The darkening surroundings of Nallamala stood as the sole witness to their sorrow.

It took them both some time to regain composure.

‘I could make a firm decision only after you wrote that letter saying that getting married is not a mistake... Even then, I wasn’t sure it was not wrong, but I made the decision because it became inevitable...’

‘To bring forward certain new proposals requires immense courage. One must confront many clashing thoughts. In fact, even bourgeois law considers a seven-year prison sentence as a valid ground for divorce. We need to think more broadly, think realistically...’ Madhu wasn’t sure whether he was telling her or telling himself.

‘You’re speaking so reasonably on the surface, but I know how much you are suffering inside. Tell me honestly — all these years you were in prison, so you were unavoidably away from me. But now, can you really forget me and live? Can you recover from the wound I’ve inflicted and once again become the old Madhu, fulfilling your responsibilities?’

‘Even if I say I will live like before, as if nothing momentous happened in my life, you won’t believe it, will you? And I don’t even want to lie and make you believe me. It’s hard... but it has to be endured, right? It will take some time for me to recover.’

‘Let me tell you one thing, Madhu... I am not speaking in haste or impulsively. The only reason for our separation was that you were in prison — nothing else. Now that you’ve come back from jail, tell me, Madhu — whatever you ask me to do, I’m ready to do it... Nothing is more important to me than you... You think about the situation and tell me.’ There was a clear sense of finality and resolve in her voice.

But he didn’t consider it even for a fraction of a second. ‘You don’t think about anything anymore. Further thinking won’t help anyone now. You two got married after going through so many struggles. Now think only about strengthening that bond. I do not wish for anything more than your happiness. First, let go

of the guilt in your heart. Unless you release it, you can never be truly happy...'

'What joy is there in this! After causing you so much pain, how can I be happy?'

'If you keep thinking like this, do you even realize what might happen to you? Let me make it very clear — yes, I am in pain, that's true. But you are not the one responsible for my pain. It may seem so on the surface, but you're not the cause. You didn't put me in jail. In a situation where an unavoidable separation has come between us, the decision you made for your life — especially one that you believed would benefit both you and the movement — is not a wrong one. Some may not like it. Some may even be hurt by it... but that doesn't make you responsible. You must stand firm in the decision you made. You've taken the first step in something. For those used to walking a beaten path, it might seem like you've gone astray. Right now, it might appear to go against the interests of the movement. But the step you've taken might prove to be the correct path in the future. Whatever it is, we must treat this as an experiment...'

She wiped her tear-filled eyes — happy that he had understood her so well, and sorrowful that she had to part with someone who could understand her that well — and said, 'No matter how anyone else understands me... the fact that you have understood me will give me the strength to move forward from now on. Still, even though you say I am not responsible for your pain, it's not as if I don't know I bear some responsibility too. I cannot immediately free myself from the thought that I have caused you pain. Maybe when you recover a bit, remarry, and are able to live happily again, perhaps only then will I be free of this pain. Until then, I...' She continued to talk, looking up at the full moon rising to scatter the darkness.

(When asked, 'Were you never angry at Suguna?' Comrade Shakhamoori Apparao replied with heartfelt emotion, 'Never. Poor thing, how much struggle she endured...' Bowing my head humbly to the magnanimity of his heart... – Midko)

Translation of 'Viplava Payanam'. (First published in Arunatara, April 2011)

Translated by Madhu Maalati

Notes:

1. Inside - Inside generally means the forest areas where the revolutionary movement is active.

2. Outside - Outside refers to the towns, cities and any areas outside of a guerrilla zone

3. Puli Anjanna - A martyred comrade who was the secretary of the then CPI M.L. (People's War) Party's Andhra Pradesh state committee. He was killed by the State on 24th October 1993 in a staged encounter.

Gangi

My little one,

How are you, my dear? It has already been a year and a half since I left you. It took me some time to return to my normal self, binding my milk-filled breasts tightly and firmly suppressing my overflowing emotions as I tried to adjust to the demands of this new life in the squad.

In my attempts to get closer to my comrades and the people in the area that I had to work with, I felt as if the 'mother' in me was slowly vanishing. But since the last couple of days, my memories of you have been haunting me, and the 'mother' inside appears to be gradually re-awakening. Working in these parts, I come across so many infants. Whenever I hold them close, cuddle them, kiss them, you come to mind. Out of all of these children, Gangi, Irme's daughter, is different. I've played with her several times in the past year and a half. But the other day, after we finished playing, memories of being with you suddenly flooded my mind. In the night, I woke up with a start and began searching for you next to me in the bed, wanting to tell you why I had to leave.

Soon after I knew you were taking shape inside me, my whole life changed. You were in my dreams – you, who had no existence until then, you began to occupy my entire world – both my real and dream worlds. Before getting married, your *Nanna* and I had taken a vow not to have children. As people wedded to the Revolution, we believed we had no right to bring a new life

into this world. But, then, unexpectedly, your father's vasectomy failed and you slipped your way into my world.

We had many arguments, as your father insisted that abortion was the best way out. But I refused. How can I explain my reasons? As you began breathing inside me, a tenderness filled my world and I became desperate to hold on to that delicate feeling within me. I resisted all efforts to convince me otherwise and conceded to myself that for some time, the 'mother' in me would prevail. I promised your father that this lapse in the 'Revolutionary' me would be temporary.

Soon your *Nanna* too, even if reluctantly at first, became part of this new journey of ours. He also immersed himself in my new dream world and expanded it with new thoughts. So for a brief time, my dream world became our shared dream world. You see, my dearest, it didn't take very long before we became separated. Our obligations to the Movement meant your father and I soon had to leave the town and take the path to the forest. You were fast asleep when I gently detached you from my breast and placed you in my mother's lap.

You hadn't even learnt to crawl by then, you'd just started rolling over. I was not to be a witness to any of your first milestones in this world. I only came to know when I received a letter from your grandparents seven months ago telling me that you had started walking and were also beginning to learn to talk. I yearned to hear you call me '*Amma*' at least once!

Dearest, just like I left my six-month-old baby, Irme left her 2-year-old Gangi with her mother to join our squad. On 2 December, when we celebrated PLGA day in Irme's village, little Gangi saw her mother in full uniform with a gun for the first time. She watched happily as Irme stood on the podium and took her oath. Little did she know that the heavy responsibility her mother was promising to undertake would mean a complete separation from her.

That night as we swiftly moved away from the village, I felt my feet dragging as thoughts of Gangi entered my mind. But then I couldn't help asking myself, was my mind really with 2-year-old

Gangi or was it with you? As my mind wasn't coordinating well with my body, I stumbled and almost fell.

I tried to pull myself together as my thoughts continued to wander. The night would be gone soon, a new morning taking its place. The birds would chirp their welcome, and small fires by the wayside would drive the cold away. Stoves would be filled with firewood too and lit, and vessels placed over them, ready for the porridge to cook. But would Gangi drink the porridge like every morning? Or would she be irritable and cry? Wouldn't she ask for her mother? The day I left the town, you were still sleeping. Maybe you were hungry and scared and cried after waking up. A bottle would have been coaxed into your mouth as you searched for your mother's warm breast. How your tender heart must have hurt and rebelled. Then, when much against your wishes, the hunger in your stomach would've forced you to take the bottle in your mouth, it would have been the first instance in your life of learning to compromise. My dearest daughter, could you forgive me?

As all these thoughts swirled around in my head, I missed my step many times in that night march. I wondered how Irme would be coping given I was feeling this bad. Sometime later, as I twisted and turned in bed, I noticed that Irme too was struggling to sleep. In the morning, I saw that her face was more solemn than usual. I could see how she tried to immerse herself in various tasks, while I myself couldn't get that image of you out of mind when I saw you the last time. I took a pen and paper and started to write this letter hoping it would calm me down. My Commander, Daya, saw me and asked, 'Badri! What are you doing with a pen and paper first thing in the morning?'

'Writing to my daughter,' I replied. 'What!' he exclaimed, 'You are writing to the little baby?' 'Why can't I do that? I might not live until she grows up. She could at least read this letter in my absence,' I said wanly while attempting to smile. He understood the pain behind my effort and said, 'Write your letter.' As he went away he added laughingly, 'Ask her to grow up quickly and join the PLGA.'

Little one! We have the right to sacrifice our life for our ideals and beliefs. But we do not have the right to deprive you of the love and care of parents. My unwillingness to give up my unexpected motherhood brought you into this world. But then things turned out this way. Please forgive me.

I remain,
Your loving mother

December 2005

My dear one,

How are you? You must be 3 years old now. *Nanna* and I were so happy to see your photo that came with your grandparents' letter. *Tatayya* had even made you write my name at the end of the letter. I was also overjoyed at seeing your first letters to me. When I showed your picture and your writing to *Daya*, our Commander, he said, 'She is so cute, like a doll. She has only written your name this time but soon she will be writing a letter.'

Even though we received the letter a year and half after *Tatayya* had sent it, we still rejoiced in your news. The letter filled the gap left in our lives that should have been filled with your childish prattle and the countless other trivia of childhood that both of us miss. I read the letter again and again and shared my happiness with everyone around me. Your *Nanna* though, being reserved, expresses his feelings only when we are alone. *Tatayya* wrote that you are very active, you like to play games and you are good at singing and dancing. You hadn't started school, *Ammamma* had added, but were learning your alphabets at home.

By the way, we had recently set up camp near *Gangi's* village for 15 days. *Gangi's Ammamma* brought her to meet us but then she stayed on with us while *Ammamma* went back. *Gangi* soon became the centre of attention in our camp, like a beautiful doll for us to play with. Usually, it's little children who like to play with dolls, but there was huge competition among us to play with *Gangi* – from a 50-year-old senior to a young 16-year old comrade.

She stole the limelight everywhere, during our early morning military exercises, while we did our collective work in the afternoons, at our cultural events and games in the evenings, and in the kitchen, at any time of the day. It felt like the whole camp was being run around her – it wasn't exactly clear if she was the 'doll' we played with, or whether we were like dolls for her.

As for me, I think in your absence, spending time with Gangi soothed me. Her innocent eyes and smile and childish prattle pulled me constantly to her. I'd begun to feel that any amount of time spent with her is not enough. I've been playing with Gangi in the little time between duties, and occasionally even make time in between! I must have spent more time with her than any of the others. Whenever she plays in my lap, I feel as if my 6-month-old daughter is back with me. Your delicate touch, softer than the petals of a flower, which I can feel through Gangi's touch, fill my heart with warmth.

Gangi's mother, Irme, is an enigmatic person. She rarely expresses her love for her daughter openly. When Gangi stays in the camp, Irme anyway hardly has a chance to do anything for her daughter. There's always competition among us for giving Gangi a bath, feeding her or doing sundry other things with her or for her. There are always eager volunteers ready to take care of the little girl. It's only after Gangi goes to sleep on someone's *jhilli* that Irme brings her daughter to sleep next to herself.

Although Gangi calls Irme '*Amma*', she doesn't seem to differentiate between her mother and other people. Three-year-old children often cling to their mothers, but Gangi was happy to be with all of us, letting anyone bathe her, feed her or play with her. Irme didn't seem to have any special status in Gangi's heart and she didn't look to Irme exclusively to do things for her. Nor did Gangi appear to distinguish between the specific tasks a mother did and the duties Irme undertook as a member of the squad. I wondered how Gangi would understand her mother once she learnt the difference. Little one, right now you too may not be able to differentiate between your *Ammamma* and me, your *Tatayya* and your father. I often wonder if, after you have realised

the difference, will you accept it? We left a void in your life that no-one else can fill. Will you forgive us for that? Will you understand that we suppressed our love for you to embrace and protect a larger love towards all beings on this earth?

Hoping and looking for your understanding and acceptance,
I remain,
Your loving mother

June 2006

My little one,

How are you, dearest? I've been struggling to put pen to paper for the past few days. An inexplicable weariness has been passing through me. When I met Gangi three days ago, my heart didn't overflow with love as it usually does. Instead, it was overcome with sorrow. I wanted to lay my head in her lap and cry. I controlled my emotions with difficulty and finally gathered her close and held her for a long time. Given her tender years, Gangi was neither perturbed by this unusual behaviour on my part nor able to comprehend her enormous loss. Many others in the camp also held her similarly as they wept, hearts all filled with sorrow. 'Oh! You've become a motherless child!' 'They killed your mother. She is no longer there to look after you and care for you.' Every one said the same thing in different ways to indicate to Gangi about the loss of her mother. But the import of all those words didn't strike Gangi's mind.

Irme was killed when the police attacked our squad on 30 May. Gangi had been living with her *Ammamma*, away from her mother for the past two years. The mother whom she had been with only occasionally, and who often disappeared for days, has now vanished completely. Gangi isn't old enough to understand the permanence of her mother's disappearance. When she eventually will comprehend it, I dread to think of the pain that will pierce her heart.

Irme's mother was inconsolable. She wept on seeing us, saying, 'Previously whenever you came, my daughter was also with you. Now I will not see her anymore.' My grief overflowed as I heard her.

Little one, I knew Irme since I joined this squad because her village, being in Malkangiri district, is in our area of operation. She lost her father when she was quite young and was active in the women's organisation in the district. Fearing that her daughter would join their activities, her mother cajoled her into marriage. Irme's first two children both died as infants. Her husband married another woman before Gangi, her third child, was born. While this practice isn't uncommon in Adivasi tribes, Irme's spirit rebelled against it. She came back to live with her mother. According to their custom, when couples separate, the children remain in the custody of the father. But Irme refused to give up Gangi and was able to keep her with the support of the Revolutionary Movement. Thereafter, she took a more active part in Revolutionary programmes. When we came to work in the area, I was given the responsibility of overseeing the work of all the women's organisations in the villages that fell within the domain of our guerrilla squad. I relied mostly on Irme to help fulfil my responsibilities. As I worked with her, I was deeply impressed by her capacity to negotiate with the *panchayat* while arguing on behalf of aggrieved women, her fearless and straightforward attitude while taking on the defence of women subjected to domestic violence and while trying to convince those many women to stand up against abuse. Irme was not literate but this did not affect her ability to do these things. I was her in-charge, but she was my teacher.

After coming into this society, with which I didn't have either a direct or even an indirect relationship, I learnt much from my Commander and the other comrades. I learned through listening to their opinions, hearing their suggestions, heeding their words of advice and through self-criticism and criticism.¹ From Irme, however, I learnt a lot by observing her practice. Before joining the squad, she used to travel from village to village with baby Gangi in her arms, motivating women to rise, awaken and fight for their rights. But the State doesn't tolerate this kind of consciousness raising among women that helps them distinguish between societal rights and wrongs and shows them the need to fight for justice. Soon, attacks on Irme's house began, but this

didn't deter her. Her mother pleaded with her to stop but to no avail. Irme continued her work secretly, in hiding from the police. Finally she decided to take up arms and join the squad.

On hearing this, I had entreated her, 'Gangi is still very young, would you consider postponing this decision to go underground for a year?' Irme's reply was firm, 'Badri! If I am out in the open, an attack on me is certain. If I join you, when the police come with their guns, I will have one in my hand too.' Her mother had protested very strongly. She'd said, 'If you wanted to go underground, why did you choose to keep Gangi with you? You should have left her with her father. Who is going to look after her? Who is going to do all the work?' Irme had laughed as she'd told her mother, 'I came back to have her here, so she could be with you when I'm not there. Don't talk as if you are old and can't look after her. You know in a couple of years Gangi will be helping you.'

Irme received military training after joining the squad. Seeing her dynamism and determination in every aspect of the training, no one could believe she was a mother. One day, before her training finished, there was a police raid on the camp. Comrades Shwetha and Dulal were killed in the ensuing combat. Comrade Anil was wounded and Irme spotted him on the ground as the squad was retreating. She ran back, broke the police encirclement and carried Comrade Anil to safety, which literally was a 'rebirth' for him. In this way, Irme proved her merit even before completing her training and earned her rightful place in the squad.

When she finally joined the squad, Irme took the name Kumari. In the approximately two years she had been with the squad, she'd become my trusted right hand. Prior to joining the squad, she had only worked in women's organisations, but now she participated enthusiastically in military operations. Her courage shone even when she became a martyr. That fatal day, Irme was on kitchen duty and we were conducting political classes for the members of a children's organisation when the police attacked us. As she was in the kitchen, Irme had ample time to get into a position of safety. Instead, she hoisted her gun on her

shoulder and joined the combat. While the fighting was going on, other comrades had time to evacuate the children and the squad's new recruits to safety. But Irme was killed in that combat. It was a huge loss for me. But never can my loss equate that of Gangi's, even though as of now she isn't that affected. A few days after Irme's death, we visited her village and took Gangi and her grandmother along with us to the camp. There I bathed her to wash off the dust on her body, put on a fresh frock that I bought for her the previous day, oiled her hair and combed it neatly and fed her. All throughout this time, Irme's mother didn't stop crying. She kept telling me, 'You are her father and mother now.'

My little one, I felt you should know the reasons why Irme had to go far away from her daughter and why the little Gangi lost her mother.

Your loving mother

28 October 2007

My little one,

You will soon be completing five years. How are you? Sometime back I came to know that your grandparents had moved to Vizag for your studies. Also, that you pester them for information about us and that they've told you that we were in America for work. Occasionally, my friend Uma and her husband talk to you, pretending they are calling from America. I gathered all this from your grandparents' letters. I can see how hard they are working to fill the gap created by our absence, in order to bring you up as normally as possible, putting aside their own sorrow.

The story about your parents working in America might not last long. As you grow older and interact with other children, you will start asking questions. I wonder how you will take the truth. How will you accept the loss of a normal childhood, the absence of parents as you grow up? 'Why don't you come and meet her once? We could carry on with the lie about America a little longer,' my mother had written. Your father and I have to consider this carefully together to see if it will be possible.

For now, I felt so happy when I heard that you are good at sports and other extra-curricular activities. By the way, Gangi has also joined school! There had been a government school in the village for a long time, but only in name. Sometime back, the village decided to take ownership of it and collectively appointed a teacher to manage the school. The other evening, as we entered the village, school was just over and the children were coming out. When we saw Gangi appear with a slate in her hand, the pilot of our squad called out, 'Badri! Your daughter's coming out from school,' and the other members of the squad laughed.

That evening we brought Gangi to the camp. She had tea and biscuits with us. As I wrote the Oriya alphabet on the slate, Gangi recited them and also wrote them down. Other comrades crowded around and there was a general feeling of merriment all around with much laughter. Four days later, I met your *Nanna* and gave him news of Gangi. 'She is going to school and learning her alphabet, she is going to be good in studies.' He'd laughed and said, 'Write to your mother that she no longer needs to lament about you missing your daughter's childhood. Tell her you do have the privilege ...'

Your father's words gave me a new realisation. After Irme's martyrdom, I'd developed an even stronger attachment for Gangi. Our squad visited Irme's village once every two months. A few days before the next visit, I would make elaborate preparations. I would buy soaps, biscuits and oil, and sometimes I would cook a few dishes. On reaching the village, whenever I met Gangi's *Ammamma*, I reminded her about the necessity of giving nutritious food to Gangi. I bought all the required medicines and sometimes even clothes and footwear. Once your *Nanna* commented, 'Maybe you are overdoing things, there are other comrades who also have children. In the village too, there are many more children, this singling out of Gangi may not be appropriate. It may create a negative feeling among the comrades and the people. Do reflect on it.' As he was talking I felt a sense of resentment rising in me, and I immediately retorted, 'No one would be so narrow minded. The child has no parents. Surely no one would grudge a little special attention to such a child?' Your

father replied in an even voice, 'Our efforts should be to awaken consciousness in people to take care of many children like Gangi. You need to think like a Communist Party worker, and not just as a mother.' I turned my head as I replied, 'I agree with everything you said. All our efforts should be to help build a society where all children like Gangi receive support. But until that consciousness is awakened within people, I can't abandon Gangi.'

This conversation remained in my mind, though, and gradually I realised that I wasn't filling the gap of a mother figure in Gangi's life. I was only trying to overcome my own loss in the life I'd chosen, the loss of bringing up my daughter.

I could go on writing like this for some more time but the comrade who has to carry this post is waiting, so I will stop here.

I remain,

Your loving mother

July 2010

My little one,

How are you? Time stops for no one – it's already been two years since I saw you, but I haven't been able to receive any letters from your grandparents. The situation around is not conducive for sending communications.

After abandoning you at the tender age of six months, we met you only after you'd completed six years! You were still too young to understand the need for this separation. So we played 'the America lie' when we were with you, which your grandparents had started. The other day, when I met your *Nanna*, he said, 'Let's bring our daughter here after she turns ten. If she lives with us for some time, she might understand things better.' I couldn't help but agree with this suggestion. I wrote to my parents to keep all my letters to you safe until then. In the midst of the Green Hunt² attacks though, I am not sure when or even if this particular letter will reach you.

You would have grown slightly taller, now that you've completed eight years. Gangi certainly has grown taller – she isn't as rounded like you, but she isn't thin either. She keeps relatively

clean as we take care of her whenever we visit the village. Her *Ammamma*, seeing our efforts, probably keeps her clean the rest of the time. She's keeping healthy and is also quite active. I hope you are eating well, and of course, studying well too. When we had met you that last time, my father told me, 'Badri! Your daughter loves listening to stories just like you.' But you must be beginning to read on your own now. I'm sure *Tatayya* must be buying you those lovely storybooks just like he'd done when I was a child. And I can picture your *Ammamma* gently admonishing you, just as she had done when I was your age, 'Always reading storybooks, when will you read your school textbooks!'

Gangi stopped going to school though after only two and a half years of attending it. She had learnt to read and write and do basic maths, although her spellings needed attention. Then the first attack of Green Hunt happened, and it happened in their village. The police tore down the school building and arrested the teacher. We were almost relieved that he was put in jail, because they could've killed him.

In these Adivasi villages, the Government never fulfilled its responsibility to establish and run the schools properly. When the villagers tried to do it on their own, the State couldn't tolerate their efforts. The school was demolished and destroyed in the Green Hunt attack, with all the 30 children in Gangi's school losing their one chance to access education.

Later, six of the 30 children joined the residential school that was about 10 kilometres away. The parents of the remaining children were not too keen on this arrangement. I tried hard to get Gangi to join the residential school but at first her grandmother strongly protested: 'I cannot live without Gangi.' Although she agreed after some time, it was very reluctantly. When the day of departure came, it was Gangi herself who flatly refused to go. In fact, the six children too were going very unwillingly. They had just about yielded to the entreaties and threats of their parents. But who could scold or even convince Gangi? The other children who were going away were all boys and no one in the village was willing to force a girl to leave home.

I was not sure what to do next. Maybe I could persuade the child to join next year?

With no school to go to, Gangi has begun helping her *Ammamma* in the house and also with the outside work. On my next visit to the village I saw her with a pot of water on her head. I wondered if you were also helping your *Ammamma* in small ways. I remembered how my mother never let me do anything at home when I was in school. If she pampered me so much, I can just imagine what she would be doing for her darling grandchild.

Adivasi society though is different from ours. They love their children like any other parents, but they also teach them to be responsible from a much younger age. The societal development and mode of production in Adivasi societies encourage children to do labour but not in the same way as we understand 'child labour' under capitalism (which tramples all over children's rights to gain profits from their labour). Even if your *Ammamma* doesn't make you do any work, you must learn to appreciate the value of labour. Though it is labour that makes humans distinct from other animals, unless we recognise the value of that labour, we don't respect it. And unless we respect labour, we can't recognise abuse of labour for profits and cannot strive to free others from forced labour.

I remain,
Your loving mother

March 2011

My little one,

How are you? It has been three years since I had any news, and I do not know how you and your grandparents are doing. You must be entering your ninth year and fourth class at school. My heart yearns for news, but all our efforts to get any little information about you have been in vain. I hope and wish your studies are going well.

My efforts in making Gangi continue schooling have failed. I'd forcibly admitted her to the residential school and she ran

back home within a week. She listens meekly when I talk to her about the importance of education but refuses to engage when I request her to go to school. She once said the new school was not like her school in the village and she did not like it. In the current atmosphere of heightened security we are unable to run schools. I did ponder over the possibility of sending Gangi to Dandakaranya, where schools are being run under the auspices of the *Janatana Sarkar*. Even though my squad in-charges consented to the idea, Gangi did not agree to leave her village. Her grandmother was also doubtful of sending the child to such a distant place. Your father then asked me, 'Why are you so insistent about Gangi going to a school?'

'Would we keep quiet if our daughter decides to stop going to school halfway through her education?' I countered. Your *Nanna* said the comparison was not quite correct as the two girls were growing up in very different circumstances. I could not reconcile myself to that. I wondered what Irme would have done if she were alive. Surely she wouldn't have so easily accepted that Gangi did not wish to continue her studies.

Gangi herself appears indifferent to my conundrum. She is smart and could do well if she studied. She simply is not comprehending the importance of education at this point in time. Yet the other day, our squad doctor told me, 'When you spoke to Gangi about the necessity of education, she listened quite obediently. But later she came to me and said, 'You didn't study when you were young, but aren't you doing the work of a doctor now?'' After all this, I've accepted the fact that Gangi's school life is indeed over, and I do not know how to make Gangi understand the value of education.

I remain,
Your loving mother

October 2012

How are you, my little one? There has been no news of you for four years now. Whenever I worry and become depressed, your father says, 'You have to be strong. Your responsibilities have

increased and you need to focus on doing your duty well.' He's never said it aloud but occasionally I can read his thoughts in his eyes, 'You should have listened when I requested you to go for abortion.' But even in the midst of work, sometimes I can't stop worrying about you.

While we know sexual abuse has always been a problem, when I come across news about child abuse, or acid attacks, stalking and harassing of women under the guise of love, and even kidnapping of children or women or abuse in red light areas, I feel a shiver run down my spine. One would have thought that children living under the shelter of their parents are safe from the perverts in society, but we know that isn't always the case. How are you, a little girl, surviving, being protected by only two elders?

Outside the home, certainly substance abuse appears to have increased with the country moving towards more and more marketisation. Not only has anything and everything physical and material been turned into commodities, the market has also transformed our intellectual and thinking faculties into saleable goods. The market's expanding foundation is destroying whatever 'values' we did have, rather than strengthening and growing them. Instead of streets being safe for women, the occasional news I read makes my head reel at the thought of so many evils around us. So many perils to avoid, inside or outside, especially if one is a girl or a woman.

In the name of progress, humankind has achieved a great many successes, and has learnt how to harness the forces of nature. But even with all these developments, human life has not become simpler or made being a girl and woman easier. The 'Internet', a wonderful invention, has also become another medium for harassing girls and women, blackmailing them, spreading obscenities and other ways of abuse. The power of technology has also increased the ways to do harm and wrong things, without moving out of one's four walls. And if that wasn't enough, there are still places in the country where all this technology is used in ways such that a girl child is not even allowed

to be born. So I can't help thinking about how you will navigate all this, how you will survive this world of chaos and destruction.

I don't worry about Gangi in the same way. She is living and growing up in a community that is not only far away from but is also trying to build a new world that is an antidote to the destructive world outside. She's very eager to contribute her bit to the shaping of this new world.

When Gangi was younger, we used to bring her to the camp whenever we were in the vicinity of her village. Now the moment she knows we are nearby, it is she who comes running to us. Sometimes she is accompanied by an elder, and at other times she visits us on her own. She pays no heed to our pleas against coming out alone – in case the police are lurking around. Some comrades tease her, 'Here comes the future brave leader with the sword.' Gangi simply smiles at them in response. She doesn't leave our side as long as we're there and nags us to take her along when we break camp. All our appeals of 'You are too young right now and can join us after coming of age,' fall on deaf ears. We have great difficulty in persuading her to go back to her grandmother.

Gangi is also a good artist like her mother Irme and is already part of the children's cultural wing. She performs with them in the surrounding villages to motivate people to join the effort for building a just society. In all this, Gangi even continues to be diligent in assisting her *Ammamma*. She's been helping in household work from a very young age, and now she's started working alongside her grandmother in the fields and the forest. She's become adept at collecting forest gum, *mahua* flowers³, gathering firewood for the kitchen, and collecting food items such as leafy vegetables, bamboo shoots, ant hills and crabs. The other day, I saw them both ploughing the land together. As Gangi came running when she saw us, I noticed her eyes shining with confidence.

I've got used to buying her something or the other whenever I go to meet her. And she has started to greet us on arrival with various forest fruits, *jamun*, mangoes, wild berries, corn, wild roots, honey etc. She arranges them carefully in a basket before

bringing them over. She holds the basket tight, and refuses to part with it until she spots me and then puts the basket down on my *jhilli*. Other comrades teasingly complain, 'Your daughter is refusing to give us anything!' Then Gangi divides the portions carefully and distributes them to everyone. While whatever we give her has been bought with money, whatever Gangi gives us is collected with love and care through her labour. She would have searched all over the thick forests for the food she brought us. At that young age, she was already conquering the selfish 'I' and broadening her horizons to think beyond her own self. In today's world where everything revolves around the 'I', you'll realise with time what a precious quality Gangi has.

Please be careful my little one and take care at every step. Even as I say it, I imagine you questioning me sternly, 'How can you teach me to mistrust everyone? Is it right for you to instill doubts and fears in me regarding other people while claiming to fight on behalf of and for them?' Yes, certainly my dear one, our struggle is to fight against the present atmosphere of mistrust that's seeping all around us. I want you to believe strongly that a day will come when we need not view other humans with doubt and mistrust.

I remain,
Your loving mother

July 2013

How are you my little one? I received a brief letter, as if written in a hurry, from your *Tatayya*, a month ago. There were no details, except that you had entered Class VII and were studying well. Have you grown taller, maybe a little thinner? More importantly, have they told you about us? If possible, we would like you to spend the summer holidays with us. We hope this will give you some understanding of our situation.

By the way, Gangi spent 15 days with us recently when we camped near her village. We were holding a week's training for the children's cultural teams. Many children from the surrounding villages in this area participate actively in children's organisations.

About 20 children, including Gangi, took part in the training. After the programme was over, Gangi stayed back with us. During that time, I felt a new sense of closeness with her.

Ever since joining the squad, I've spent much of my working time in this area. As I grew from a member of the squad to a member of the Divisional Committee, I came to know many of the elders and children here. It's easy to be affectionate towards children who are sharp and complete their assigned tasks with determination and commitment. We all love these children, of whom many entered my life before Gangi. A few others did so after her. However, for some reason, none of them could replace Gangi in my heart.

During that training camp, I tried consciously not to single out Gangi for any preferential treatment. But interestingly then, it was Gangi who gave expression to our special relationship. It wasn't surprising that she also felt differently towards me as I had never hidden my affection for her. There were a couple of other comrades she was also close to, but I was also sure her heart acknowledged our special bond, even though she never expressed her feelings through words or gestures. She was generally quite reticent, didn't talk much and only replied when spoken to. But whenever she brought something, I was the first one to receive it.

One day as I was reaching the water spring for a bath, I saw Gangi returning with a few others, they had all just finished bathing. As they passed me, Gangi stopped as the others carried on. By the time I put down my kit and got ready for my bath, Gangi had already placed a pot full of water nearby and was carrying another toward me. I protested and tried to take the pot from her but she refused and told me to get on with washing my clothes. She'd filled two more pots with water by the time I had washed my clothes. She was barely 11 years old then. I was deeply touched and then remembered you. I wonder if you had been here with me, would you have helped me similarly? Then I thought of my mother and how, when I was this age, I couldn't recall a single instance of when I'd helped her out in her chores.

On another day, as I wrestled with some accounts, the tea

whistle sounded. I was reluctant to leave work mid-way, and wished someone would bring me a cup. Your *Nanna* sat nearby reading, he'd ignored the whistle as he never drank tea. I was hesitant to ask anyone to bring me a cup as I felt he would criticise me for asking others to do personal work. But soon Gangi came bearing a tea cup. I could not contain my happiness. 'Gangi brought me my tea,' I exclaimed. A comrade passing by commented, 'She refused to have hers first for fear that yours would grow cold.' I signalled to Gangi to sit by me and opened a biscuit packet. She dunked her biscuit in the tea. 'Gangi likes tea,' I said. 'She is just like her mother,' responded your father without lifting his head from the book. 'I'm never drank tea,' I said in surprise. 'I am referring to this mother,' he gestured towards me as he answered. I was deeply touched as he'd never said anything like that until then. I was used to others in the squad referring to us as mother and daughter, but it was the first time your *Nanna* had said it.

Before I close this letter, I must tell you about one more incident. Recently the tailor's team comrades had visited our camp. Some of our comrades had an olive-green uniform stitched for Gangi. She looked cute in the uniform and was proud to walk around in clothes similar to ours. One day, a comrade was going into the village in civilian clothes, he asked the Commander with whom should he leave his gun. The Commander, who'd seen Gangi in the uniform, told the comrade to give it to her as everyone else around seemed busy. It was a small locally made gun. Oh, my dear, you should've seen how Gangi's eyes lit up as she took the gun from the comrade.

My hopes that Gangi would at least complete her primary schooling came to nothing. She was good at singing and dancing like her mother, and so I began to hope that she would become active in the cultural troupe instead. I'd heard that she was staying close to the militia and wanted to join them. Although it wasn't my responsibility, I decided to speak to her about it. I told her she was still young and it would be good to join the cultural wing. She nodded her head but didn't reply. I could sense that she was keen on joining the militia and would not heed my words.

Yet, I loved her so much that when I saw her in the guerrilla uniform with a gun on her shoulder for the first time, I couldn't help sharing my joy with your *Nanna*. 'She was eager to join the squad and you were after her to continue her studies,' he said laughing. 'I was not asking her to study and get a job,' I protested. 'Whether she completed school or not, eventually I would have hoped that she joined the squad.' 'Then what would you hope for our daughter,' he'd asked, trying to read my face. 'She also should become a guerrilla, an urban guerrilla,' I replied without hesitation.

I brought you into this world but never did my duty as a mother. Perhaps, parents like me who've never discharged their duty should not have any expectations, either. But, I couldn't contain that small seed of hope growing within me whenever I envisioned your future. These hopes are not just that of a mother but of a Revolutionary too, and that is why I hope you will respect them.

I remain,
Your loving mother

September 2013

My little one,

I've been wanting to write this letter for three days, but I was unable to put pen to paper. In my mind though, I was conversing with you all along, as though words weren't necessary to convey my feelings. Finally, I forced myself to bring both mind and language together so that I could put down my emotions on paper.

The person who inspired me to write my first letter to you, all those years ago, and who I mentioned without fail in every subsequent letter I wrote to you, whose life was entwined with yours in my mind, is no more. Gangi is no more. And she didn't die a natural death. She was brutally killed, stabbed repeatedly with a bayonet.

On 13 September, police attacked the militia camp at Silakota, after receiving definite information about the

whereabouts of the camp from informers. In the early hours of the morning, they fired repeatedly at the still sleeping comrades. Twelve of our comrades became martyrs. I do not know how little Gangi escaped the firing, but she managed to reach her village. But she was caught by the police a couple of hours later. They tortured her brutally, and then stabbed her repeatedly with bayonets to kill her.

Gangi's death has shaken me. Losing her itself is an inconsolable grief. But, to have lost her in this brutal manner is just too difficult for me to bear.

I do not know if I will be alive by the time you grow up. Why the State wanted to take out its revenge on an 11-year-old child is something your generation must reflect upon. All of you will have to break out of your sheltered lives, the studies that only encourage careerism, market-imposed 'values' and ideas of self-promotion. You will have to be the torchbearers that usher in a new, just world.

I have great hopes and confidence that your generation will not let Gangi's sacrifice go in vain.

I remain as always,

Your loving mother

(This is definitely a story. But Irme (Kumari) and Gangi are real characters, they are not figments of the writer's imagination. Their bravery and sacrifices, and the State's atrocities are also all real.)

Translation of 'Gangi'. (First published in Arunatara, August 2018)

Translated by B. Syamasundari.

Notes:

1. self-criticism/criticism – self-criticism and criticism sessions are held in every meeting of the Party structures, ranging from the smallest unit (cell) to the highest committee (Central Committee). In these sessions, all participating comrades are expected to recognise and admit their mistakes and the alien class trends that are internalised by them and which lead them to commit such mistakes. This is called self-criticism. One round of self-criticism is followed by a criticism of each comrade by the rest of the committee members.

2. Green Hunt – an operation launched by the central paramilitary forces and state police forces to root out the Maoists. This was launched in 2009 with three phases: Clear, Hold and Build.

3. *mahua* – *mahua* is the Adivasi name of *Madhuca longifolia* or Indian Butter Tree which is abundantly found in the areas inhabited by the Adivasi in the central Indian highlands, extending westward into Gujarat and eastward to the Chotanagpur Plateau. The *mahua* tree is not just a tree for Adivasis but emblematic of their very way of life as custodians of their lands and forests, including the judicious non-extractive use of forest produce for sustenance and livelihood. The flowering/shedding season starts about April for about three months, and the flowers and fruit are collected early in the morning when they are freshly fallen – usually the entire family/community is involved in this work during this season.

Marching Forward

Karuna came out of her thoughts when Deputy Commander Ruppi said, 'Karuna, we'll part ways here.' Karuna and the entire squad that had been walking stopped at Ruppi's words.

'Alright then, it's better to part ways here itself,' she said, taking off the polythene sheet she'd been using for cover and folding it as the rain seemed to have stopped. Almost everyone began doing the same.

'It's funny how we're getting showers in April,' remarked Vijay, a member of the squad. In response, Karuna said, 'Unseasonal rains, what can we do?' She handed him the folded polythene sheet and gestured for him to place it in her backpack, turning her back slightly towards him. Vijay tucked it into the kit slung on her back.

Adjusting the rifle on her shoulder, Karuna stepped toward Ruppi.

'There's a ninety percent chance that they'll arrive for the APT (appointment) in the morning. If not, wait until evening to meet them,' she said, repeating what she'd mentioned the night before.

'Alright, I'll do that,' Ruppi said, using her cap to wipe her face.

'Go carefully then, you know the situation,' Karuna said, extending her hand to Ruppi. Both of them shook each other's hands firmly and then bringing their clenched fists to their

foreheads, they wished each other '*Lal Salaam*.' After that, Karuna also said '*Lal salaam*' to Vijay and another squad member Sattibabu. The rest of the squad followed her lead and saluted the departing three.

'Alright, we'll go now. You should also be careful,' Rупpi said, turning onto the path that split off to the right. Vijay walked ahead of her, while Sattibabu followed behind.

'It must be half-past six now, we still have to walk for half an hour. Let's hurry. If we reach quickly, we can have some chai soon,' Karuna tried to tempt the remaining four squad members.

The thought of chai seemed to wipe off most of the exhaustion that had built up since they started walking through the hills at four in the morning, that too under the drizzle covered in polythene and Bangarraju started off enthusiastically.

'Ah, we're completely drained. I thought she might suggest a short rest. This comrade is so thin and short that even a gust of wind could blow her away. But where does she get so much energy from?' Chute thought, looking at Karuna with regard. Her determination and energy seemed to energize him too, and his fatigue had lifted.

'Vanaja, you walk behind Bangarraju. As before, Chanti is in front of me and Chute behind me,' Karuna instructed, reorganizing their formation after the other three parted ways. The five of them started walking along the hillside.

Even in summer, the forested hills remain cool. It was morning, and with clouds and drizzles over the past two days, the weather was even cooler. The forest, decked in spring finery, looked even more beautiful after the recent rains.

Karuna, who usually gazed at the hills and valleys with wonder, felt no delight in the spring beauty of nature that morning.

'What if Madhukar doesn't show up for the APT?' This thought troubled her deeply. She had planned the meeting in the village with the assumption that he would come. 'If he comes, it'll give me courage, hope he comes. If he doesn't come, I'll have to face Toobri alone. Meeting Toobri and talking to her without

Madhukar's help... Oh, I just can't do it.' She had thought so many times already.

'Ugh! What test Gopanna has set for me?' she thought with disgust.

In a crucial moment of struggle, he had failed miserably. Now explaining that failure to the people became a test for her which caused her frustration.

How could he surrender so completely in front of the enemy? She could hardly believe the news. At first, when she heard he'd been arrested, she was deeply shaken. After all, he was her leader— her political guide. For five or six years, he had directly mentored her, taught her so much, instilled self-confidence. A city-born like her had managed to settle down in these hilly jungles with the Adivasi people, among enemy attacks only because of his support. But now... Had he really harbored so much cowardice deep down? Was he this selfish? Was his spirit of sacrifice so lacking? She had never suspected it.

That's why when she heard the news of his surrender she had initially believed it to be a rumor.

She recalled her meeting with Madhukar, a SZC (special zonal committee) member, after hearing the news.

'About Gopanna... that's just a rumor, right?' she asked urgently and anxiously, even before she shook hands with others, before removing her kit or even wiping the sweat from her face after the three-hour walk.

'No, it's true...' he said in a very low voice, with his eyes cast downward.

'What?' She couldn't say anything more after that.

'Come, let's sit on my polythene sheet,' he said. She mustered all her strength and walked behind him.

Almost reflexively, she removed her kit, took off her boots, and flopped down on the polythene, facing Madhukar. She took a handkerchief from her pocket and began wiping her face.

'Here, have some water,' he said, handing her a bottle. She sipped it.

'Want a biscuit?' he asked, taking out a packet from his kit.

'No, I don't want anything. I just can't believe it... So many have endured unspeakable torture, and so many have given their lives. In his case, he was presented in the court, and he had crossed all the fearful scenarios such as torture and death. Then, how could he surrender? Do we have any other source of information besides the newspapers?' she asked with faint hope.

'He wrote a letter himself...'

'What did he write?' she asked, as her hopes began to crumble.

'He said he lacked the mental strength to endure a long jail term.'

'Huh!' she said with disgust.

'Class struggle is very difficult, Karuna. Not everyone has the spirit of sacrifice to withstand that difficulty. Some lose it at some point. Our struggle moves through many twists and turns. Some travel with us for a while and may fall off at a turn. We need to understand these ups and downs correctly. Only if we understand them properly can we explain them to the people. So, you mustn't let this news pull you down. If you are unnerved by it, how will you explain it to the people and to the members of your squad?' he reasoned gently.

'But this will have a great deal of impact on the people...' she said sorrowfully.

'And especially in your area, the impact will be greater...' he said, studying her face.

'Yes,' she replied, more disheartened.

'That's why, in the DVC meeting, we planned to educate the people about this. We wanted to hold meetings in villages where we felt the impact would be strong. How does that sound to you?'

'That would be good. It's necessary too!'

'Your in-charge is away on work, and the other DVC members are unavailable. That's why we thought I should give you the program. Anyway, we can talk about that later. First, tell

me— how's your health? I heard you had a serious fever recently. Are you fully recovered?'

'Oh! I'm alright now,' Karuna replied and started talking about other matters.

Meanwhile, Madhukar's guard, Praveen, brought tea for both of them.

After sipping tea, they resumed their discussion. Karuna spoke about the conditions in her area and recent developments.

Several hours passed quickly in conversation.

'They rang the bell for food— let's eat, and we can talk more afterward. We'll discuss the program tomorrow, but after dinner let's talk about the pending matters about the area and any issues in the squad. Alright?' Madhukar said, taking his plate from the kit.

'Is it eight-thirty already?' Karuna said, pulling out her plate from her kit.

'So, the planning is all done, right? Is there anything else left to discuss?' Madhukar asked.

'Nothing else, but... couldn't you also come with us?'

'I need to meet Sridhar and give him a program too. We also thought I should stay with him for ten days to help him with this program.' 'Then you won't help me?'

'Why would you need help? He just became a commander. He's inexperienced. So, we thought he needed support. You can execute this program successfully on your own...' His words carried faith in her abilities.

'Oh, I don't know what I will do! I feel ashamed to face the people. I wonder how they will take this How should I explain it to them...'

'Why should you be ashamed? Look, Karuna, we sometimes view things too sensitively through our petty bourgeois lens. That makes us politically short-sighted. But people— they often understand such matters very clearly from their life experience. They even help us understand...'

Karuna nodded as if agreeing.

‘Don’t let this get you down. Trust the people, and try to implement the program we planned...’ Madhukar’s words gave her courage.

Having reached the destination, Karuna pushed aside her thoughts.

All of them halted in front of the hut a little upstream of the gently flowing stream. In the rainy season, that stream gurgles with such charm.

Karuna did the roll call and said, ‘Let’s take the covers like this. The sentry should be near that big tree. Ruppi’s group will come by evening. A few more comrades will come with them. Once they arrive, let’s hold a meeting in the village at night. Right now, we’ll have the village committee meeting. Vanaja will go into the village in civilian dress. Choote will take care of the kitchen. Making tea and heating water will be enough,’ she said, explaining the day’s plan and having the loaded guns unloaded. Then she gave the caution to ‘disperse.’

‘Bangarraju, you have to go for sentry duty,’ said Vanaja, handing a watch to him. Bangarraju went off for sentry duty.

The rest unloaded their kits. Choote began searching for stones to set up the stove, while Chanti looked for sticks. Karuna approached Vanaja and said, ‘Just inform Jambri Dada. He’ll pass on the message to the rest of the committee. If possible, bring someone with you and get some *ambali* (gruel) when you come back... Dada’s group will bring the rice.’

‘There are only five or six houses on Jambri Dada’s street, right? Don’t know whether I’ll get gruel or not. Should I go to Katru Dada’s street too...?’

‘No, no—it’s better if the whole village doesn’t yet know we’ve come. Limiting it to Jambri dada’s street and the committee members is enough. There are only five of us, after all. Even a little gruel will do. Just tell Jambri dada to bring rice quickly from only the houses in his street and that of the committee members. Hand your rifle to Chanti and take the pistol he’s carrying...’

'Alright,' said Vanaja, opening her kit and taking out civilian clothes.

Karuna moved from there and absentmindedly began gathering sticks.

The words she said to Vanaja — 'It's better if the entire village doesn't yet know we've arrived' — weighed her down with guilt.

Vanaja might've taken them as the necessary caution under increasing repression. But that wasn't Karuna's real reason.

Toobri lived in Katru Dada's street. If she found out the squad had arrived, she might rush to meet Karuna—that fear made Karuna think, 'I had better meet Toobri only after Madhukar arrives.'

They had successfully conducted the program in every village in accordance with the plan made with Madhukar, and in the process she often thought, 'Madhukar was right, the people understand things so well.'

Individuals might have their own reputation. Sometimes, those reputations may seem to transcend the party. But once someone leaves the movement, people view them as insignificant. Karuna had come to this realization more deeply by reading the people's sentiments.

Even so, she still felt hesitant about facing Toobri.

Why was it that Karuna was finding it so hard to meet Toobri after Gopanna surrendered?

What was the relationship between Toobri and Gopanna?

It was the kind of relationship that should exist between person and person, between people and their leaders!

Uplifting the dignity of that relationship, Toobri had given Gopanna a second birth.

Just as a mother doesn't care even if her womb is torn to bring a child into this world, doesn't consider it a sacrifice, but only her duty—

In the same way, Toobri had truly considered it her duty to give Gopanna a new life.

Once enough sticks were gathered, Karuna placed them near the stove, took soap and a towel from the kit, and walked toward the stream.

The scene Gopanna had described to her about Toobri's sacrifice played before Karuna's eyes.

Those were the early days when Karuna became Deputy Commander. Till then, Gopanna had served as district committee member and was responsible for that very area. But after he became district secretary, his responsibilities increased and so his visits to Karuna's area had reduced.

'You know, the people in the area keep asking about you', Karuna said, as she carried over a plate of *guggillu* (boiled horsegram) and sat beside Gopanna on the tree trunk.

A faint trace of pride flickered in his eyes. As he munched the *guggillu*, a soft laugh escaped him.

'We are tired of repeatedly telling them that your responsibilities have grown, and you have to tour the whole division...' Karuna said as she popped some *guggillu* into her mouth.

'I've worked in that area for many years. When I went there initially, I was just a squad member. Until recently, I was stationed there steadily,' he said. Karuna felt that he was reminiscing about his connection with that area.

'Oh, and that Toobri *akka*! She often asks about you. 'How is he? When will he come? Tell him to visit!' she keeps saying. I feel that she has a special affection for you...'

'True. She does have special affection for me. Do you know why? Because that *akka* gave me a second birth...'

'Really?' Karuna asked, trying to understand. 'Was she one of the women who saved you when you were injured in that encounter?'

'She wasn't one of them—she was the one who played the most important role...'

'I see...' Karuna listened intently. They had only told the regular squad members that some women had saved him after

the encounter, but not the names—for fear the police would harass those women. But now Gopanna was opening up about Toobri because Karuna was no longer an ordinary member.

‘Do you remember I once told you about that encounter?’

‘Of course. Not only that, you wrote about it in *Tûrpukanuma*¹ too. I’ve read that piece multiple times. How could I forget?’

‘But there’s something I didn’t tell you then—something I didn’t write in *Tûrpukanuma* either—a crucial piece of information about that *akka*. At the time, I myself didn’t know that. I only found out recently.’

Her curiosity deepened.

‘After I was wounded in the encounter, this *akka* brought another woman, and together they carried me to a field some distance away. I was bleeding badly. My mouth was dry with thirst.

She went to her house and while she was bringing back clothes, gruel, and water for me, the police caught her. By then, the police had figured out that two of us had escaped with injuries from the encounter. Seeing the blood trail, they were sure we hadn’t gone far, so they began searching aggressively. When they saw the clothes and water in her hands, they knew they were meant for the wounded. They beat her severely to make her talk. But she insisted she knew nothing.

They threatened to rape her if she didn’t talk.

Still, she remained silent.

So five or six policemen brutally raped her...’ His voice choked, unable to continue.

The *guggillu* she took into her hands to eat slipped from her fingers onto the plate. The word ‘Really?’ came out as a choked whisper from her throat.

‘Do you know how amazing that *akka* is? After raping her like that, the police let her go and she returned home. But the police didn’t stop the search. In fact, they informed higher-ups and called for more forces. *Akka* feared that I would be caught if the search continued like that. .

In fact, the police had already searched almost till the edge of the field where I was hiding. Had I been there by dawn, they would have found me.

But that day, as night set in, that *akka*, along with a few other women, brought a çot, water, clothes, and gruel. I was nearly unconscious by the time they arrived.

They cleaned and dressed my wounds, gave me water, and carried me far, far away—beyond where the police could imagine.'

The pride in his voice was unmistakable. It seemed to Karuna it was the pride born of remembering the courage of ordinary people.

Karuna's eyes too sparkled with tears.

Gopanna resumed:

'I didn't know about this matter until recently. At the time, I was recuperating from the injury, and there was a gap in my visits to that area. Even later, she never told me. Her husband knew about it but he never told me either.

Nobody in the village knew of it, maybe she didn't want anyone to know.

Once, I went to that village with the squad—you weren't with us then. While crossing the stream, it started pouring rain. Some comrades hadn't even stepped into it yet. I had already gone halfway across.

So I crossed the stream quickly and went alone to her house, which is near the stream.

By the time I got there, the couple was sitting by the fire. I too sat by it, dripping wet, and started chatting.

Maybe because I was alone, or maybe they just felt the need to tell someone, they slowly shared this story with me...'

'My goodness! That's incredible. Didn't another *akka* give up her life to save another comrade injured in that encounter?' Karuna asked.

'Yes. That village has a strong tradition of sacrifice...'

'We read about such heroic acts in stories. But in real life, so many miraculous things happen right around us, and we barely notice them.'

'True. Ordinary people are making tremendous sacrifices to protect the movement. Those sacrifices deepen our responsibility to the revolution,' he said, his face reddening with emotion.

'Are you both eating or just chatting? We've all finished our tea, and your plates are still full. You seem to be having a long talk,' said Karuna's partner as he approached.

Normally, Karuna would have smiled at him. But this time, she didn't even turn her head to look at him as she was so absorbed in the matter she was hearing.

'Karuna, tea's ready... come quickly...' came Chute's voice, still tinged with childishness, carefully stringing together each syllable. It interrupted Karuna's thoughts.

'I'm coming...' she replied, pulling her feet out of the canal, and slipping them into the washed plastic boots. She wiped her face with a towel, and then slung it over her left shoulder, secured the rifle leaning on a rock to her right shoulder, picked up the soapbox, and climbed up.

She placed the soapbox near her kit, took a glass from the kit, and walked toward the stove. Chute was already standing there drinking tea. Extending her hand out for a glass of tea, she said, 'Where's Chanti?'

'He took his tea and went for the sentry duty,' Chute said, pouring tea into Karuna's glass.

'Oh wow, the color of this tea looks great...' she said, sitting on a nearby stone that wasn't wet.

'What did you expect! It's 'espesal' tea,' Chute said with a proud smile, sitting across from her on another stone.

'It's not 'espesal,' it's 'special!'

'Espesal.'

'Special.'

Both of them laughed heartily for a while.

Tasting the tea, she said, 'It tastes good too.'

‘Color, taste, thickness!’ Chute said, laughing again.

Karuna smiled in return. As she sipped the tea, she listened to Chute’s chatter with affection, her eyes lovingly fixed on his face. She enjoyed listening to him speak — his language, his choice of words, his clarity, his diction — she found them all very pleasing.

After finishing his tea, Chute turned to the side and cleaned his rifle. He took Karuna’s and cleaned that too. Then he stood up and said, ‘I’ll wash my hands and feet and come back.’

Watching him walk away, she thought, ‘He’s so young, yet he shows such political maturity. Otherwise, how could he have come here from Dandakaranya, understanding the movement’s needs here? His native tongue is Koya, but he learned Telugu fluently after coming here. He even knows some Kuvi and Odia.

As Gopanna’s guard, he protected him like the apple of his eye — he risked his life in so many attacks just to protect his leader.

When he heard the news about Gopanna’s surrender, the poor boy was devastated. He remained silent the entire day. But what did he say the next morning? ‘Only cowards and incapable people surrender. Why should we grieve for them?’

His words expressed such confidence in the movement! When someone this young, and assumed to be politically naive, has such unwavering belief in the movement, why did Gopanna lose that confidence?’

Still holding the empty tea glass, Karuna fell into deep thought. Then, remembering the tasks ahead, she stood up.

Though it wasn’t raining, the clouds hadn’t cleared. She took the still-damp polythene sheet from her kit and spread it over a bush, thinking it might dry faster in the wind.

Hearing the signal on her watch, she realised it was eight o’clock. She turned on the radio, sat back on a stone, and listened to the news. Then, from the back pouch, she took a small diary and a pen from her pocket. She wrote the agenda for the committee meeting she planned to conduct that day. She noted down the discussion points for the meeting separately, flipped

through the resolutions of the previous meeting, and reviewed the notes that she had already written in her diary for the committee meeting.

Just then, Vanaja arrived carrying a vessel on her head, followed by Rami, a women's organisation activist, with an *ambali* pot balanced on her head. Rami lowered the pot and shook hands with everyone. Karuna inquired about the woman's well-being and the news from their village.

Then she called Vanaja aside to get the report. Hearing that everything was fine, she said, taking a plate from her kit, 'Alright then, let's have *ambali*. My stomach's rumbling with hunger!'

Chute had already lit the stove and put on it the vessel of water that Vanaja carried, to boil water for drinking. 'I'll serve *ambali* to everyone,' said Rami.

'I'll do it. You drink with all of us,' said Chute. He disliked stepping away from his duties.

'We just drank and came, comrade,' said Rami with a smile, taking the serving container from Chute's hand and starting to serve *ambali*. With nothing else to do, Chute busied himself washing his plate.

Vanaja changed from civilian clothes into her uniform and said, 'I already had *ambali* in the village. I'll go relieve the sentry,' and headed toward the sentry post.

Rami served *ambali* to the three of them. When Karuna asked, 'Did you bring salt?' Rami unwrapped a packet made from a leaf and added some salt from it to Karuna's plate. The others were used to drinking it without salt. With Chanti joining them, the four began drinking *ambali*.

'It's nice and tangy today,' said Chute. Everyone nodded in agreement, except Chanti who asked, 'Chute, does *ambali* taste like this in the DK (Dandakaranya) too?'

All comrades are generally curious about everything related to the DK. As someone who newly joined the squad, Chanti was especially eager to know about DK — if someone talked about it, he got so absorbed in it that he even forgot about food. For him, Chute was like an encyclopaedia of DK. Sitting next to him, Chanti

would fire off question after question.

‘Nope! They don’t make it with ragi flour. They use rice. Sometimes with millets too. They even add green grams or black grams. It tastes great!’ Chute’s face would naturally light up and his eyes would shine whenever he spoke of his homeland.

‘Really? Not with ragi? With rice? Why?’

‘Because ragi doesn’t grow there.’

‘Oh!’

‘In any region, people’s food habits depend on what crops grow there, and what’s available — right, Chanti?’ Karuna explained.

Karuna looked at the time after wrapping up the committee meeting and sending everyone off.

‘It’s four o’clock. Ruppi and the others might take another hour or hour and a half to arrive,’ she thought.

Meanwhile, she decided to go through the newspapers. Settling into the polythene sheet, she picked up the bundle of newspapers brought by the committee members earlier. They were about fifteen days old.

As always, she arranged them in chronological order and began flipping through, checking the headlines first. It was her habit to scan all the headlines first and then read each paper in detail.

Most of the news was about the doctors’ strike and the Road Transport Corporation (RTC) strike. The front pages were filled with photos of protesting doctors and RTC workers, and police attacking the protestors.

‘Everyone thinks doctors lead secure lives. But even they have no choice but to resort to militant struggles. Even they can’t escape blows from police batons? Day by day, people from every section are being drawn into the struggles. They have no choice,’ she thought.

Then she wondered, why are some people giving up the struggle? Are they unable to understand the pulse of the world?

She couldn't help wondering.

After glancing through the headlines, she stuffed the newspapers back into the bag. She didn't have the energy to read further, and with her back starting to ache, she lied down for a bit.

What could Toobri be thinking? Would she be feeling her sacrifice has gone in vain? How should she console her? How can she make her understand that her sacrifice wasn't for a person but for society? That as long as society exists, her sacrifice will remain meaningful, regardless of who comes and goes?

She felt Madhukar could explain that better. After Gopanna told her about Toobri, she met Toobri and came to know the pain she had suffered that day. Ever since then, whenever she met Toobri, she would especially share Gopanna's updates with her. And whenever she met Gopanna, she would tell him about Toobri. In this way, she had become a bridge between the two. And through their connection, she too formed a bond.

But now, how could she face her?

Would Toobri scold her the moment she saw her? Would she sneer, 'How can I trust you anymore?' Would she be seething with anger?

No... she wouldn't scold, nor sneer nor be angry. That would go against her very nature.

Perhaps she would just look at her pityingly, with eyes full of compassion, and silently stroke her head in consolation. How hard would it be to endure such empathy? How could I stop myself from falling at her feet in response to that empathy?

It would be better if she just shouted! It would be easier if she lashed out and even raged in anger — that would be more bearable!

Karuna couldn't bear the storm of emotions rising within her.

Just then, she heard loud, cheerful cries of '*Lal Salaam! Lal Salaam!*' and playful giggles. She jumped up and walked out of the hut. She looked anxiously at the six comrades approaching from a distance.

The moment she saw a lean, tall, upright figure striding briskly, she sighed in relief, 'Ah, he has come.'

Standing at the end of the line, Karuna was the last to shake hands. Madhukar held her hand for a moment longer and, reading her face, asked with a smile, 'Are you well?'

His firm handshake gave her half the strength she needed. 'Yes,' she said softly. Once everyone greeted each other, Karuna turned to Madhukar and said, 'Let's look for the covers first.'

After checking the covers, Madhukar placed his kit on a rock and wiped the sweat from his face with a towel. 'So... what's the news? How did your program go?' he asked, even though he had already read her letter detailing the program that very day.

'It went well,' she said with a smile. 'How was the program in your area?' she asked.

'It went well there too.'

They stood face to face, talking for about five minutes. Even though Karuna was smiling and chatting, he sensed the pain in her eyes. Since he had read the detailed letter she'd written about her inner conflict in facing Toobri that very day, he could easily read the sadness in her eyes.

'The tea is almost ready. If you want to freshen up, go ahead. Then you can have hot tea,' she said.

'Oh yes... what could be better than that... Here, check the post while I go clean up,' he said, pulling out three letters from his pocket and handing them to her.

Taking two steps, he paused and turned back. 'Here, Munni wrote a letter from jail to the district committee. I thought it'd be better if you read it, so I brought it,' he said, placing another letter in her hand before walking away. She looked eagerly at the handwriting on the three letters he gave her first. Seeing none of them written in her partner's scrawling handwriting, she clicked her tongue in mild disappointment.

Settling onto the polythene sheet again, she unfolded Munni's letter to read first.

'Dear Comrades,

Lal Salaam. Wishes for your well-being... We are all doing well here.

We were very saddened to hear that Comrade Dulal and Comrade Shweta became martyrs in the encounter that took place in February.

Please don't be careless. Be cautious.

We were also very saddened to hear that some people surrendered recently. We don't understand why they are surrendering. By doing so, they are betraying the people.

We, on the other hand, are standing strong. Inside the jail, we are all unitedly fighting against the problems here. All of us are eagerly waiting for the day we'll be released and can return to the people.

We face many problems here, but we are not troubled much because of them. What hurts us more is that some comrades are becoming martyrs, and others are surrendering.

If you are all doing well, we too will be fine here despite all the issues. Please convey our Lal Salaam to everyone.

That's all for now.

With revolutionary greetings,

Your Munni.'

Karuna felt as if sixteen-year-old Munni was sitting right in front of her, slowly speaking each word in her half-broken Telugu.

There were language mistakes in what she wrote — but how strong and clear were her feelings!

After a year of harsh prison life, this was a powerful declaration of conviction from Munni, coming straight from the heart of that prison.

In her mind, Karuna saw Gopanna and Munni side by side.

Gopanna, who thought he knew politics well, admitted he wasn't ready for the hardship of prison life. Yet Munni, an illiterate Adivasi girl who was told 'You're not even fourteen — we can't take you into the squad,' stubbornly insisted and joined the squad. After her arrest, she bore both mental and physical torture, and even within the prison walls, she continued to breathe revolution.

Next to the short Munni, the tall Gopanna appeared like a dwarf in Karuna's eyes.

She must meet Toobri soon and tell her about Munni. There could be no better medicine for Toobri's wounded heart than this. She must tell her — there may be some people like Gopanna, but there are many more like Munni too. That girls like Munni are the proud heirs of a courageous legacy that scoffs at cruel torture. That Toobri's sacrifice lends strength and dignity to that legacy.

A new surge of energy coursed through Karuna's small, slender, frail body. Her pale face flushed with emotion.

Madhukar, who was coming toward her, saw the radiance of self-confidence shining in her eyes — and smiled silently to himself, satisfied that his judgment of her had not been wrong.

(This story, based on true incidents, is dedicated to the revolutionary masses who value the Party above life itself, and to the comrades who raise the flags of resistance even behind bars, laughing in the face of cruel torture.)

Translation of 'Nadaka Munduke'. (First published in Arunatara, June 2009)

Translated by P. Aravinda

Notes:

1 *Turpukanuma* – a revolutionary magazine run by the party in the Andhra Odisha border area. The literal meaning of the title is Eastern Ghat.

Awareness

'Chaite, aren't you going to school today or what?' asked Sanni, balancing the water pot on her head and opening the bamboo fence. She glanced at her daughter still lying in bed despite having woken up.

'My stomach hurts, *Amma...*' There was a faint pain in the girl's voice.

'Arrey, how long has your stomach been hurting, *Bujji?*' Setting the pot down on the raised platform at the front of the house, Sanni walked toward the courtyard. Chaite was lying on the cot there.

'Since I woke up, *Amma...*'

'Does it hurt badly, child?' Chaite's mother sat down on the edge of the cot and placed her hand on the girl's stomach.

'Please try to get up and sit — I'll chant a healing mantra,' said Kosal from the neighboring cot, where he sat cross-legged near the hearth with flames flickering.

'Come on, Grandpa! Do you really think mantras help with stomach pain?' Chaite turned away in irritation, curling up her legs.

Kosal felt offended that a girl who isn't even twelve years old dismissed his wise words so easily.

'Not just in this village alone, but in all the surrounding villages — I've healed so many ailments with my mantras. Do you know how many...'

'All that's just blind belief! That's what our teacher told us.'

'Pshh, your teacher said that? What does *she* know...'

'She's groaning with pain, and you're busy showing off your useless mantras?' Sanni snapped, and turned to the seven-year old boy sitting on a small stool near the hearth and said, 'Hey Guddu, run and tell Sukki that your sister's having stomach pain and bring her quickly.'

Guddu sprang up at once, leapt to his feet, and ran toward the entrance. Kosal threw down the cigar he was smoking, got up and rushed to the front courtyard. His anger was growing. He knew if he said another word, his daughter-in-law would lash out, so he swallowed his anger and vented it instead on the chickens, the pigs, and the dogs—yelling at them, chasing them, stomping around the yard. After a while, it occurred to him: Sukki would be arriving any moment, bringing the medicine box and asking him, 'How do you do, Grandpa?' with her usual sarcasm. The thought of Sukki made Kosal's blood boil from his feet to his scalp. So he left the compound and crossed the path out of instinct, ending up on the narrow lane that led to their farmland.

Even though he had intended to avoid Sukki, it felt like she was always shadowing him...

'I am reduced to a state where I am running away from my home to avoid facing a girl who is not even twenty years old. Did I ever imagine it would come to this? What a life did I lead in the past!

As soon as father died, I took over his work as *Vadde* — a folk healer, an exorcist. I dabbled in herbal medicines, chants, rituals, and pujas. I cured diseases and drove away spirits, also dealt with witchcraft and counter-spells. Within a few days, I surpassed my father and became famous in the surrounding ten villages. There were always two or three ailing people or people possessed by spirits, and their caretakers staying in my home. There wasn't a single day when I didn't chant mantras, perform a puja, or sacrifice a hen, goat, pig, or ram.

The grains that the patients brought as fees — rice, millets, horsegram, black-eyed peas — would fill my yard. My landholding

grew as well and all those who accompanied the sick worked in my fields. In this way, for fifteen or sixteen years, no one could match my healing abilities.

I became popular not only as a healer but also as a respected elder. I even used to sit as a judge in local disputes. Then came the party and the *sanghams* (collectives, local organisations). I was thrilled in the beginning — because when the party came, the forest officials (*naakedars*) disappeared without a trace. As long as they were around, there was no end to their troubles. They used to levy fines for tilling even a small piece of land and for collecting even a few sticks for fuel. They imposed taxes for having goats, pigs, or chickens. Half of whatever I earned had to be shared with the forest officials.

But it wasn't just the forest officials who troubled him. After the party came, even the oppression of Mookal stopped in the village. Claiming that his grandfather had once controlled the village, Mookal was acting like the whole place was his estate. He was very jealous of others' prosperity and he was especially so when it came to me. Just looking at me, Mookal would shoot daggers from his eyes. Maybe he saw a rival in me.

Once the party and the *sanghams* arrived, all the land Mookal had earned through cheating people was redistributed to the people. In retaliation, Mookal gave information to the police on the whereabouts of the squad. So, he was eliminated by the squad. Everyone was relieved that his oppression came to an end. I was also happy at first as I hadn't expected that my own turn would come later.

Even though I hadn't been very active in the *sanghams*, the party members had always treated me kindly. But gradually, they began to say things like, 'From now on, you stick to treating with herbal medicines. Don't chant mantras or practice witchcraft and deceive people. Don't spread superstitions.'

Not only that — they began holding meetings to expose the frauds of those who had been deceiving people and making money through spells and rituals. Still, for many days, I faced no real threat. Though people nodded along when the squad told

them all this, they still came back to me in secret and asked for my mantras. That lingering faith of the public in me protected me for another ten years.

Then came the time of the *Janatana Sarkar* — the people's government. They trained barefoot doctors who began to go house to house and offer medical treatment. Yet even then, I faced no immediate threat as the elderly and the naïve still relied on me.

After all, those doctors might cure illnesses, but they wouldn't deal with spirits or witchcraft. Where it all began to unravel was when I declared that someone wouldn't survive — that their time had come — and those same people were cured by the doctors and lived on. That's when the public began to lose faith in me.

Now even my daughter-in-law also chided me saying, 'Don't mislead and kill people with your quack medicine and profit from it. Stop this nonsense and just stay at home.' It was a stern warning.

Where once I had reigned supreme, I am now reduced to a nobody.'

Even after reaching the farm and lying down on the cot in the hut, Kosal's thoughts regarding his past continued.

'Did you see what happened when we messed with nature, Kamulu?' said Kosal, stopping him as he passed in front of his house.

Although Kamulu understood what Kosal was referring to, he just stood there, unsure whether to agree or disagree. Kamulu was a little younger than Kosal.

'That well has been there since ages, our ancestors' time. No matter how harsh the summer, it never dried up. Did we ever see it go dry? Now, they are saying, during the rainy season, muddy water was getting mixed into it and that drinking it causes diseases. That's why the *Janatana Sarkar* decided to fix it. They said they'd cover its inside with cement. And now look what's happened—it's completely dried up! All these years we drank

that water and lived just fine, didn't we? Were there any diseases back then? Now suddenly, are new illnesses coming out of nowhere?'

Kosal's voice rose, partly because his son and daughter-in-law weren't at home to restrain him.

Kamulu, still unsure, nodded in a vague way, showing neither agreement nor disagreement.

'Let's go check the well once,' said Kosal, turning toward the well's direction.

'I was also just on my way there,' said Kamulu, setting off with him.

The two of them reached the well, chatting as they walked.

The *Janatana Sarkar's* chairperson Kanni and the Vikas (development) Committee's president Sannu, along with a few others, had already gathered at the well. Both Kanni and Sannu had worried expressions on their faces. Their plan to build a wall around the once-reliable old well and coat it with cement all the way to the bottom, in an effort to prevent rainwater runoff from mixing into it during the monsoon had now completely backfired, and they were visibly troubled. This was a well, relied upon by the entire village.

'If you smear cement or something else on a God-given well, won't God get angry?' said Kosal, prompting Kanni to shoot him a sharp glance. Normally, Kosal would shrink back at such a look, but today he wasn't willing to give up the opportunity that had come his way.

'You dismiss everything calling them blind beliefs. But, what happened now? A well that never dried up before—how has it dried up now?'

Kanni and Sannu's faces turned red with embarrassment, but they couldn't say anything. By then, a few villagers had already started nodding in agreement with Kosal's words.

Kanni stood silently for a few moments, gazing at the well and thinking of what could have gone wrong. Then she grabbed a crowbar and climbed down into the well, starting to dig in one corner.

She hadn't dug for more than five minutes when—splash!—water suddenly began to gush out.

Sannu shouted with joy, unable to contain his excitement.

Everyone's face lit up with jubilation. Of course, except for Kosal's—his face fell flat.

Even as the well was fast filling up, Kanni climbed up and with a hint of victorious pride, said, 'Looks like the spring was blocked by cement or rocks.'

Sannu replied, 'Yes, it would've been better if we didn't cement it till that lower edge.'

People around started muttering, 'True, true...'

Kosal tried to slip away stealthily.

'Hey, Kosal *pedanayana*! Why are you leaving in such a hurry?' Kanni stepped across his path, forcing him to stop.

'All these years, you made money by nurturing people's blind beliefs. Now that people are coming out of those beliefs, you're fuming as if you've lost everything. Whenever you get a chance, you try to bring those superstitions back to life. You did the same last year too. When we sowed seeds with the help of women in the fields and there was no harvest due to failure of rains, you started spreading rumours. You went around telling everyone, 'Wouldn't God get angry if women sow seeds?'. Still, we didn't go back. Even this year, we made women sow seeds again. And what happened? Good rains came. The whole village got good crops. The plots where women sowed yielded better than ever before. Yet you still haven't learned. You're still trying to drag people back into superstitions of gods and spirits...'

Kanni paused for a moment, as if expecting Kosal to say something.

Kosal's face turned pale and he walked on lowering his head down in humiliation.

'Do you know what we're doing with the harvest grown by women? We plan to sell it and buy medicines for women. Now see—even the old women, who used to come to you out of faith, won't come to you anymore,' said Kanni.

Everyone there burst into laughter at her words.

Burning with fury inside, Kosal walked away stomping his feet.

'How arrogant she's become! Brought up right before my eyes, this girl no longer respects age or seniority,' he fumed inwardly, cursing Kanni.

'Ugh... I always end up losing to her... damn it!' he thought bitterly.

Kanni's father was Kosal's younger cousin — meaning she was technically Kosal's niece. She was around twenty-five or twenty-six. From childhood, she worked with the children's organisation. Ten years ago, she had become an active member in the women's organisation.

As Kosal's opposition to the movement grew, he tried to pull her back.

Even her own parents, who obeyed Kosal in every matter, tried to pull her away from the movement. They even tried to force her into marriage. But with the women's organisation's support, Kanni stood up to both Kosal and her parents and avoided that marriage. To this day, she remains unmarried.

She continued working energetically in the women's organisation and recently became the president of the *Janatana Sarkar* formed across four villages.

'All these days, people more or less listened to what I said. But now, this girl, raised before my eyes, has defeated me,' Kosal kept thinking over and over.

'*Amma* is coming!' — shouted the three children playing in the front yard and ran towards their mother. Chaite, quicker than the rest, reached her mother first and wrapped herself tightly around her legs.

'Arrey, wait — won't you let me come inside at least?' the mother said, even as the other child, Guddu, came rushing and clung to her as well. Smiling, she gently pried the two of them off and, picking up her youngest son who was still toddling over,

stepped over the wicket gate of the courtyard, with the older kids hanging on to her and swinging alongside.

Hearing the ruckus of the children, her husband Ramal came out from inside the house. It was summertime. Dusk was slowly setting in. Kosal had been sitting on a cot in the courtyard.

‘Where are you coming from now, at this hour, after all this bossing around?’ Kosal’s voice was sharp and annoyed.

She paused for a moment in surprise. Then, without a word, she walked straight past the cot he was sitting on.

‘Have you become deaf? Are you not able to hear me?’ His irritation only grew stronger at her silent dismissal.

Without even turning back, she retorted rudely: ‘Did you drink more than your regular dose today?’

‘I’m not drunk. I speak clearly. That Kanni doesn’t have a husband or any binding. And you — you’re the mother of three kids. Yet you leave them on their own and go around the villages in the name of meetings?’

‘I have not abandoned them. Isn’t their father here to look after them? And anyway, have I been away for some days? I left in the morning and am back by the evening.’

‘Oh, so if you go around the villages, should your husband stay at home, cook and raise the kids like a woman?’

‘Feeding children and raising them isn’t just a woman’s work.’

‘Father, stop it! Sanni, you go inside!’ Ramal tried to intervene and bring the situation under control.

Kosal brushed aside his son’s intervention and continued, ‘Aha! So this isn’t woman’s work, it is man’s work? Is it? And all the men in the world are doing this work I guess? Sanni, you’ve been to those *sanghams* long enough. Now the times are not what they used to be. You’re seeing it yourself. Homes are being burnt. Fields are being torched. People are being shot down like birds. Women’s lives are being devastated. So at least now, stop doing *sangham* work...’

With father-in-law’s appeasing tone, Sanni softened a little.

Handing the sleepy child over to her husband, she sat down near the entrance, exhausted.

‘True, *mama* — this government is hell-bent on crushing people. But, are they targeting only those who work in the *sanghams*? They are killing everyone indiscriminately. Is there any guarantee the police won’t come after us if I stop working with the *sangham*?’

‘Attacks are happening only in villages where the *sanghams* are strong. If you stop the *sangham* activity, others will see you and stop theirs too. That’s how the *sangham* gets weakened and the police won’t bother about our village.’

‘Then the old days will return again.’ Though the dim light hid Sanni’s face, her voice betrayed her distress at the thought.

‘If the old days return, let them. We’ll deal with them. Whatever has to happen, will happen.’

‘How casually you say that, *mama*. Do you even understand what it means for the old days to return? Everything that the people fought for all these years and earned, will be lost.’

Unable to say more, Sanni got up and went inside.

It was past midnight, but Sanni couldn’t sleep.

‘If the old days return, let them return...’ — her father-in-law’s words kept echoing in her mind.

She couldn’t believe how casually he had said that. She couldn’t even imagine a time without the party and the *sangham*. Without the party and the *sanghams*, would her life have ever gone the way she wanted?

The days of her early youth came back to her. Back then, the *sanghams* in the villages were just beginning to grow strong. But her parents were not the kind of people who would ever let her near the movement. Her marriage had already been fixed when she was a child—with her maternal uncle’s son. So her parents saw it as their duty to keep her safe and ensure she was sent to that in-laws’ house.

Until she met Ramal at a marketplace, she too believed she

belonged to that family. But after meeting Ramal, marriage to her uncle's son appeared meaningless. She couldn't imagine a life without Ramal. Her closeness with Ramal became known to everyone. Her uncle and his son came to forcibly take her to their house just as they would do to an animal they bought in the market. Her parents were also ready to forcibly send her off with them even if it meant they had to tie her hands and feet. Neighbours, relatives, none of them thought it was unjust.

Even though she cried, struggled, and resisted, they dragged her away without caring—until the squad came. They stood against injustice. They embraced her. They understood her heart and got her married to Ramal. Even Ramal's father didn't approve of their marriage.

He had already arranged another match for Ramal before. Even after their marriage, he tried to get Ramal to marry the girl he had chosen as a second wife. She decided she wouldn't let that happen as long as she had breath in her body. With the support of the *sangham*, she scuttled her father-in-law's plans. More than that, she learned to stand up to him.

That's how she became close to the women's *sangham*. Now, she is the president of the women's *sangham* in her village. Without the party and the *sangham*, her marriage, and her family life wouldn't have been on her terms.

The awareness provided by the Party had filled their lives with happiness. Now, whenever she goes on *sangham* work, Ramal takes care of the house and the children.

Reflecting on the light the Party had shed on the picture of her life, Sanni had forgotten her sleep.

Even Kosal, lying on the cot in the front yard, couldn't sleep.

The words of his daughter-in-law — '*Then, those old days will return again...*' — kept echoing in his ears.

Would it be good if those old days came back? Or would it be bad? If those days returned, would he again work like a traditional healer, preparing potions and casting spells? Would the charms once again hang in his house? Would the sick sit quietly before him, heads bowed with reverence and fear? Would

it mean Sukki would stop coming up to him clutching the medicine box, giggling and asking him, 'How do you do, grandpa?' Would it mean Kanni would stop admonishing him: 'Don't revive those dead superstitions'? Would his daughter-in-law stop speaking rudely to him?

She speaks like that because of the support of the women's *sangham*. Even the twelve year old girl ridicules him that all his treatment is just old superstition. She says that's what their Guruji told them. If the old days were to come back, neither would the school be there nor the Guruji.

Kosal felt euphoric for a few moments thinking that the glory he lost fifteen years ago might return.

'But then again, those old times weren't all that good. If the past returns, would the atrocities of the forest officials begin again?

No, no, it won't be the same — back then people were very submissive. That's why the forest officials' games went unchecked. Now people have changed so much.

Since the Party came, people have started questioning anyone who commits injustice. Even if the Party no longer exists, the people won't allow the games of the forest officials.

And what about people like Mookal? Will they raise their heads again? Who knows how things are in all the other villages, but in our village, Mookal is dead. He would not come back. People say his son is living in some city somewhere. Why would he come back?

Well, people are no longer as naive as they once were.

So, would they still come to him for healing like before? Would they believe in his mantras and rituals? What choice do they have? If there's no Party, who will be there to provide medical help to these people? Even though people have changed a lot, beliefs in mantras and rituals don't fade so easily. Until very recently, despite all the warnings from the squad, there were people who still came stealthily to me.

They say that the *Salwa Judum* is being run only to preserve tribal customs and traditions.

Even mantras and rituals are part of tribal custom, after all.

But even if it's for preserving traditions and customs, should it go to such cruel extremes? The *Salwa Judum* people go around unjustly killing anybody including children and women and old. They assault women, burn down houses and crops. And all this is being done in the name of protecting Adivasi traditions? Who is suffering because of it? It's the Adivasis themselves. Who are they assaulting? Again, the Adivasis. This is not right.'

Kosal kept debating with himself in this manner.

Kosal didn't even notice the person who had come into the front yard saying 'what are you doing, Kosa *bava*?'

Though he was awake, his eyes were closed, as if lost in deep thought. He looked at the visitor trying to figure out who he was, and got up and sat on the cot.

'What's this, *bava*? Don't you recognize me at all?' the man asked, sitting on the opposite cot.

'Oh, you're Kannal from Nimmalagudem, right? It's been a long time since I saw you. What brings you here?' Kosal asked, picking up the small bundle of cigars from under the pillow.

'Why else would I come to you, *bava*? For the past four months, I've had pains in my hands and legs. I tried all the medicines given by various people, but it didn't help much. I came here with the faith that your treatment would make me better,' Kannal said, taking the cigar and matchbox that Kosal handed him.

Kosal was overwhelmed. Words wouldn't come out of his mouth in that joy. With trembling hands, he filled the pipe with tobacco and said, 'I've treated many such diseases. But now, my entire practice is shut down. I don't even prepare the medicines anymore.'

'Don't say that, *bava*. You must prepare the medicine now, at least for my sake. Besides, *bava*, it looks like the time has come for you to resume your old healing practice. The police have set up camp in our village. Now, the *sanghams* are no longer functioning in our village. That's why those *sangham* people are

not giving medicines anymore. Our village and yours are so close, like neighbours. Very soon, your village might be in the same situation.'

'I don't know why the camps are set up, *bava*! They're actually harassing the people so badly.'

'*Ayyô*, why do you say they're harassing everyone? They are focusing on just a few people. See, they are holding meetings and telling people nicely not to have *sanghams*, and that they'll take care of everything for us. What's the problem in listening to them? They harass only those who don't listen.'

'But then, if the government showed concern for people's suffering all these years, why would the people turn to the party? Why would they look to the *sanghams* for solutions? All these years, people only exploited us Adivasis, nobody came to our aid. That's why the people turned toward the party.'

'What you say is true, *bava*, that the government didn't care about us all these years. Even the government agrees with that now. But it's not so easy for them to look after us, is it, *bava*? We live deep in remote forests. No matter which government employee they send, it's tough to even reach here. The government set up schools, sent teachers with salaries to teach our children. But the teachers only took their salaries every month and never came to the school. They set up Anganwadis and appointed nurses too. But those women never showed up. What can the government do about that, *bava*? That's why now they're saying they'll build roads. They're promising to provide us with all the facilities. They say they'll give monthly pensions to the elderly, rice at one rupee per kilo, and even grant us rights over the forest. But the Party people say the roads shouldn't be built. If roads aren't built, how will government officials ever reach our villages? Not just that—it seems they also don't come to our villages out of fear of Naxalites. So, if we say no to all these parties, meetings, *sanghams*, and slogans, the government says it will give us everything. We turned to the Party because we thought our lives would improve, right? But now if the government itself is promising to improve our lives, why do we still need the Party?' Kannal looked intently into Kosal's face to gauge his reaction and paused.

Kosal didn't say anything. But Kannal could see what he wanted to see in Kosal's expression. That assured him.

'Ever since the police camp was set up in our village, all the *sanghams* have disappeared and it is very peaceful now in our village. We're getting pensions every month. They're giving us rice. Doctors are visiting regularly. Even the teachers are coming regularly to the school now. The government says they'll build us houses too...'

'The moment they set up the camp in your village, I thought our village would also go the same way. But even though there's a police camp right next door, the *sanghams* are still active in our village. Kanni is not to be seen in the village, but she's still running the village from the shadows,' Kosal spat with a noise.

'OK, but how many more days can they run like that, *bava*? Just a few more days. But from what you say, it sounds like someone here is running the show under Kanni's instructions. Who do you think it is?' Without looking at Kosal, he tossed away a bit of ash from the smouldering cigar.

'How would I know who's running it? But someone is definitely doing it.'

'Your daughter-in-law works with those women's groups, doesn't she? Then, you should be having that information?'

'My daughter-in-law and I don't get along at all. She can't stand me and doesn't give me any respect.'

'All that arrogance is because of the *sanghams*, of course. Anyway, the *sanghams* are going to be finished. After that, your daughter-in-law will do as you wish. Just wait and watch.'

Noticing the spark in Kosal's eyes, Kannal felt satisfied. He stood up to leave.

'I'll come again, *bava*. You'll have to prepare and give me the medicine.' He walked from the front yard, crossed the wicket gate, and stepped on to the street.

Kosal walked with him up to the wicket gate to see him off.

'It seems, this afternoon that fellow Kannal came to see

you?' Sanni asked her father-in-law as he was wiping his mouth with a towel after dinner on the front porch.

It was a question she had been holding back for a long time, thinking 'Let the old man eat.'

'Yes, he came. Why? Shouldn't he?' he said indifferently, tossing the towel and draping it over his shoulder.

'I am asking why he came.'

'Do I have to report every little detail of what's said inside these walls to you?' Not bothering to answer her, he went and at on his cot in the front yard and pulled out his pouch of tobacco.

'His house is right next to the police camp. The moment he wakes up, he goes around that camp like a dog. We don't want him coming to our village, how dare he come to our house? That's why I'm asking why he came.'

The heat in her words, rising in intensity, started to frighten Kosal. The courage he had gathered from Kannal's visit earlier that day was slipping away.

'He said he wasn't feeling well. He came for the medicine,' he said, lowering his head.

'But you stopped your treatments, didn't you?'

'He said he took various treatments but none helped.. That's why he came to me,' he said, slightly lifting his head. But he still didn't dare to look her in the eye.

Sanni softened a little. She believed that her father-in-law hadn't really done anything wrong.

'Listen carefully to what I say, *mama*. Don't ever let that Kannal fellow come near again. Everyone has their doubts about him.' Though she spoke softly, her words were sharp and firm. Then she went into the house, picked up the plate in which he ate and kept it aside. She took another plate into her hands, washed it, served herself some rice, sat down below, and started eating. The children, having finished eating, were playing in the moonlight. Her husband had told her he wouldn't be back that night, as he was going to a meeting in a nearby village.

'Hey, hey... are they really going to set up a company between our two villages?' Kosal, sitting on a cot opposite Kannal inside the hut in their farm, asked him.

Kosal did not heed to his daughter-in-law's advice not to entertain Kannal. However, he had told Kannal not to come to the house. Still, they kept meeting—near the farm or at the toddy tree, or in the weekly market. Kannal's words lifted Kosal's spirits, making him feel excited. That's why they continued to meet stealthily now and then.

So far, Kannal hadn't gained any real benefit from his connection with Kosal. Yet, out of foresight, he kept the relationship going.

'Yes, *bava*, if the company comes, just imagine how our lives will change.'

'How will they change?'

'Our boys will get jobs. Then they won't roam around talking about militia, *sanghams*, and squads. There will be a direct big road from Raipur. We won't need to walk anymore. Wherever we want to go, there'll be buses. It seems the company will build a big school right beside it. They'll set up a big hospital. Electricity will come to all the villages around us. They'll give electricity to every house. They'll even give colour TVs too,' Kannal said excitedly as Kosal heard him mouth wide open.

'So what kind of company are you talking about?'

'A company that produces iron, *bava*.'

'How do they produce iron?'

'They say our lands are full of iron, *bava*. They'll dig it all up, the company will refine and process it well, and then they'll send the iron to big countries.'

'What? Our lands are full of iron? They'll dig it all up? But if they dig up the lands, will they be of use for agriculture anymore?'

'How can they be used for agriculture, *bava*?'

'What do you mean, no agriculture? Should we then eat mud to survive?' Kosal asked angrily.

Kannal laughed heartily, as if mocking at his idiocy. 'Why do

you still need to do farming? Your son and daughter-in-law will work in the company. They will earn —thousands of rupees on the first of every month. They'll give you money. There'll be big shops right next to the company. Whatever you want, you can buy in those shops. You'll wear nice clothes, eat good food. You will lie comfortably on a cot under a fan, and maybe watch TV. And not just that, *bava*—as our lands have iron ore in them, the company will buy our lands to mine it and pay us lakhs and lakhs of rupees for the land. Suppose you put that money in the bank—you'll get a lot of interest every month. You could then live in great comfort without ever having to work again.'

'What? Will the company buy our lands? But what if we don't want to sell?'

'If you don't sell, they'll seize it,' Kannal was about to say, but restrained himself.

'Who wouldn't sell, *bava*? Anyone with a head on their shoulders would sell. People will compete with one another to sell their lands. Who would refuse lakhs of rupees...?'

'Let's say they give us lakhs. We'll live somehow. But how will our children live without land? How will their children live?'

'Didn't I tell you, *bava*? Your son and daughter-in-law will get jobs in the company. And your grandchildren? They'll go into higher studies and will get high paying jobs. Do you want them also to till the soil to survive like we did? You worked as a *Vadde*. Your grandson might become a great English doctor someday—who knows?' Kannal laughed loudly.

But Kosal couldn't laugh.

'Grandpa, wash your hands and feet and come. Mother's not there, but I'll serve you food,' said Chaité, as soon as Kosal stepped into the courtyard after returning from the field.

Thinking she might have gone back to the *sangham* work, he grumblingly washed his hands and feet, went inside, and sat on the stool his granddaughter had set for him. Chaité washed the plate and served rice and curry.

Starting to eat the rice, he asked, 'Did you all eat? Where are your brothers?'

'We ate, grandpa. They went to play under the tamarind trees. Today's Sunday, right? No school. All the boys are playing there.'

After a moment's pause, as if something struck her, she added, 'I've sent food for my father with Pojjal uncle to the field. Were you there when he came?'

'Ah... ah... he got it... Where did your mother go?'

'It seems they have a meeting today.'

'But she just went to a meeting the other day. What meeting again?'

Though she understood the resentment in his tone, as usual, Chaite didn't pay much attention to it and answered his query.

'There's a rally next Monday in Bijapur, Grandpa. This meeting is to discuss that.'

'A rally? What's that?'

'Don't you know what a rally is, Grandpa! When a meeting is held in our village, a lot of people come carrying flags, singing songs, raising slogans, and march in lines, two by two — that's called a rally,' the girl's eyes sparkled with pride for knowing something her grandfather didn't.

'But, why are they holding the rally over there and not in our village?'

'Don't you know, Grandpa? The government wants to set up a steel factory and dig mines next to our village.'

'Ah... ah... I know.'

'So, they're rallying to stop them from doing that.'

'What's the harm in setting up a company?'

Looking at him as if surprised that he didn't even know that, she said, 'That company is going to seize all our lands.'

'Seize? No, dear. It seems they'll pay lakhs and lakhs to buy our lands. They'll give jobs to your mother and father. They'll build big schools for children like you and your brothers and sisters.'

'Oh Grandpa! Whoever told you all that — it's all lies. It seems that's how they speak in the beginning, saying 'we'll give jobs, we'll give money'. If we believe them and give our land, it seems later they'll chase us out of our own villages!'

Kosal felt delighted seeing his granddaughter's wide eyes and the veins showing at her neck as she spoke so passionately. So, just to spark some more argument, he said:

'Maybe they told you lies, dear. They say the company will give lots of money, buy our lands, offer jobs, and build schools...' he added with a slight smile.

'If all that is true and there are so many benefits, then why are people fighting against such factories and mines across the country? Not just here — it seems people are protesting against these factories in many parts of the country.'

Kosal had no further point left to continue the argument.

'Who told you all this, *Bujji*?'

'Our Guruji told us, Grandpa.'

'Do they tell you such things in school?'

'They do, Grandpa. Guruji told us not to allow the factory and even had us perform plays about it. She also told us that all the students from our school must take part in the rally happening next Monday.'

'If you do a rally, will they stop building the factory?'

'Will they stop with just one rally? We must keep fighting. The elders, the youngsters, and the children—everyone should come together and fight. Not just our village folk. People from all the surrounding villages are also going to join in. Not only that, even people from big towns, educated folks, and many organisation members are saying that this factory must be stopped. That's why all the organisations are coming together and holding a rally in Bijapur.'

Kosal washed his hands in his plate and got up from the stool. He held his animatedly talking granddaughter close and said, 'You've learned so much from school, dear.' He stroked her head affectionately and walked toward the courtyard.

'They're starting the company construction, *bava*,' said Kannal, sitting on a cot opposite to Kosal's in the field.

Not very pleased, Kosal stared at him and replied, 'They're saying they're doing a rally tomorrow to stop the factory, right...'

'Ah, so what will those rallies do to stop the company? Even though people are saying no in many places, they're still starting companies.'

'Then are you saying this company's construction won't stop?'

'Where will it stop, *bava*? They're performing the *bhumi puja* tomorrow. That's why I've come to see you. The company manager told me yesterday, 'We're bringing Brahmin priests from outside, but since this is an Adivasi area, wouldn't it be good if the *bhumi puja* is performed by Adivasis themselves? Can you find someone?' And I said, 'Sir, my *bava* Kosal is a *Vadde* himself.' That's why I came to you,' said Kannal, laughing as if he had accomplished something great.

'Me? I won't... I won't come,' Kosal said stubbornly.

Kannal hadn't expected that Kosal would refuse to come.

'Hey *bava*, are you scared of the people or what?' he asked.

'I'm not afraid of anyone. But I won't come,' replied Kosal.

Actually, the company hadn't originally planned to have an Adivasi perform the ritual as it was an Adivasi area. But now, in order to give an impression that they had the support of the local Adivasi community, they wanted an Adivasi to perform the puja. That's why Kannal was determined to somehow convince Kosal.

'What, *bava*? Do you think they want you to perform this sacred ritual for free? Here—take these thousand rupees,' said Kannal, taking Kosal's hand and placing the money on it.

'Bah! Who needs your thousand rupees?' Kosal flung the money away in disgust.

'Are you angry because I only offered a thousand rupees? Fine. First you come, *bava*. Then ask for however much more you want.'

'Hey! Will you get out of here or not? What do you think I

am? You think I'm going to perform a ritual for the very company that's devouring my lands and my village? You think I'll sell my motherland for some money? You think I've lost all awareness of right and wrong? I used to believe your sweet talk that I would become *Vadde* again and my good days would return. But once my land is gone, once my village is gone, what's left for me to hope for? Get lost, thief! And if you ever dare step foot in our village borders again—beware...' Kosal got up from the cot and marched toward the village.

He returned home, went to the inner yard, and collapsed onto the cot. It was winter, and darkness had already started to spread. Like any other day, there was a camp fire near his cot. Guddu was blowing it to rekindle it. The younger kid was sitting next to the fire, playing with a puppy.

But none of this registered with Kosal's restless mind.

Just then, Sanni and Chaite crossed the fence and entered the courtyard.

'Amma has come!' the children shouted excitedly and ran toward the fence. Hearing the children's noise, Ramal came out of the house. Until that moment, Kosal hadn't even noticed that his daughter-in-law and granddaughter weren't home.

Sanni went inside and Chaite came into the inner yard. The younger son had gone along with his mother, while Guddu came along with his sister, asking her, '*Akka*, what's that in your hands?'

'Wait, I'll show you. Don't pull my hand,' said Chaite, placing what she had in her hands on the cot.

'Here, this is the flag. Tomorrow, Amma will hold this during the rally. This one is called a banner. Father will carry this. These are placards. This one—you need to hold it. This one—I'll hold myself. If both of us hold them, little brother will cry, won't he? That's why—here, this small one, I made it just for him...' said Chaite, showing each one to her younger brother as she explained.

'Then what should I hold during the rally, *Bujji*?' Kosal asked softly. Even though he spoke so softly, his son and daughter-in-law inside the house couldn't help but overhear. In the light of

the lamp, their eyes met, filled with astonishment.

For a few moments, Chaite was stunned into silence by Grandpa's words. Then, her face lit up as she said, 'Are you coming too, Grandpa? To the rally? But you never come, do you?'

'Well, wasn't it you who told me? You said, 'Don't stay neutral. Old people, young folks, kids—everyone should fight against the setting up of the company,'" Kosal replied, chuckling under his breath.

A faint smile bloomed on the lips of Sanni and Ramal.

With eyes reflecting the burning lights of the fire and brimming with emotion, Chaite gazed intently at her grandfather.

(In the Chargaon area of North Bastar-Kanker district, when the Jayaswal Neco company invited the village priest to perform a bhumi puja (groundbreaking ceremony) to begin mining operations, the priest retorted, 'If this land itself is gone, what use is my priesthood? Even if they beat me or throw me in jail, I won't perform the ritual.' This story was inspired by that act of defiance...)

Translation of 'Soyi'. (First Published under the pen name 'Midko' in Arunatara, December 2013)

Translated by N. Venugopal

Notes:

Bujji – a nickname generally given to little children

Bhumi Puja – groundbreaking ceremony before the start of any construction

A Mother and A Father in the Revolution

'How come you are back so early?' Maini's voice betrayed her anxiety as she saw Rukni and Sindayi coming towards her. The sight of them had startled her as she'd looked up from her writing. It seemed hardly any time since she had sent them both to the village on some work.

'It looks like the police are here. We met some comrades from Salepal village on the way and they told us,' replied Rukni as they made their way towards her.

'Where have they come, the police?'

'Supposedly to Bodili village,' said Sindayi.

'Who saw them there?' asked Maini, closing her book.

'We don't know who saw them, but the comrades said that some people from Bodili had told them,' said Rukni.

'There've been lots of rumours these days. I wonder if this is also a rumour?' said Maini as she stashed her book back into her bag. 'Don't know,' Rukni responded as her eyes scanned the countryside.

Maini picked up her bag and rifle and called her guard as she continued to ask Rukni more questions.

That morning around 30 guerrillas had gathered together in the forest near Kadiyametta village for the Area Committee meeting. Kadiyametta is in the Amdai area of East Bastar Division. As the DVCM, Maini was responsible for all the people who had

come there. They were expecting two more AC members that night. If they reached in time, the meeting was to go ahead as planned next morning.

Very soon, four AC members who had received the information from Maini's guard joined her. Rukni sat down on a nearby stone but Sindayi went back to her section. The five AC members conferred amongst themselves and within five minutes they had come to a plan. Kamlu, Sunny, Rukni, Punni and Sainu were tasked with finding out whether the news regarding the police was true. Once the AC members learnt the truth of the information, they could decide whether to have the meeting in the morning or postpone it and prepare themselves for a counter-attack.

By the time the team set out, it was past four in the afternoon. Being the month of October, the monsoon had long gone but winter was yet to set in. Kamlu's team crossed the paddy fields, where the crop had matured and would soon be ready for harvesting. After they had walked for about half an hour, they met three women from Kadiyametta who were going to the forest to collect silkworm cocoons. One of them was Danai, Punni's mother. As soon as the women saw the group, they came forward smiling and exchanging salutes.

'We heard the police are nearby, *Didi*. Do any of you know anything?' asked Kamlu.

'No, we haven't heard anything like that,' said Danai as the other two women shook their heads.

'We believe some people from Salepal met our people and informed them. We are going there to find out whether the news is true,' explained Kamlu. 'In the meantime, it's best that you don't go to the forest right now. Better to go home and be careful.'

Danai, who was seeing her daughter for the first time since she had joined the squad three months ago, wanted to stay for a moment and talk to her. But all the women knew what it meant to be seen by the police, and they immediately turned to go back home, saying, 'You be careful too. Always be on the lookout.'

As the women began to walk back, Danai felt a sense of

unease rising in her and she kept looking back at Punni, who had been leading the formation, until they were no longer visible.

It took the guerrillas 15 minutes to reach the plains, which meant they were nearing Salepal. On one side of the plain were the hills and on the other side were the fields.

'This hill is a good site for an ambush by the police. We need to cross the plain quickly.' The same thought entered the minds of all the guerrillas almost simultaneously, and they all started walking quickly.

Within minutes, however, they were joined by Badru, a villager from Salepal, who had walked down with his son. Rukni and Punni wished them '*Lal Salaam*' as they continued walking. Kamlu stopped to ask Badru, 'We've heard the police have come. Do you have any information *Dada*?'

'Oh, is it so? I don't know. I had dinner and came to the forest. Maybe the village has received some information,' said Badru.

Seeing Kamlu still standing and asking Badru more questions, the others also stopped walking. Suddenly, the air filled with the sound of firing from automatic guns. It came from the direction of the hill. The danger they had anticipated was upon them and that wasn't a convenient location for any of them to counterattack. Rukni and Punni ran towards the fields. Kamlu, Sunny and Sainu ran backwards towards some trees that were also in the same direction. They took cover behind the trees and started counterattacking. Rukni and Punni had not managed to take cover yet, when the police started shelling as well. Punni ran to the right and became separated from Rukni. Badru didn't know what to do. He had his son with him, so he couldn't think of running anywhere far. So, he took his son by his hand, and they both ran as fast as they could together to hide behind a small tree. Badru squatted down, bending his body over his son as a shield to protect him from any harm.

Danai had reached home and was busy starting the fire for cooking when the sound of the exchange of fire made her jump.

She knew that it must be the police firing at her daughter and the others. Her heart stopped. She left her half-done housework and came out to stand in front of her house, her legs trembling. She was at a loss as to what to do. Then she saw Jugai, who had accompanied her to collect the silkworm cocoons, coming towards her. 'Looks like they're firing at Punni and others,' Jugai's voice was full of anxiety as she came closer. Danai could not answer as tears filled her eyes.

'It appears to be very heavy firing. How come these people went in that direction after having heard the police are around?' In response to Jugai's question, Danai collapsed and started wailing.

The news that Punni was part of the team being fired at, spread across the village in no time. As soon as Punni's father, Sukram, who had still been working in the fields, came to know the news, he stopped what he was doing and rushed home. Usually, when the peasants who are out in the fields or the forest first hear the sounds of firing, they don't go back to the village. In fact, men who are in the village will take to the forests to avoid the police. But Sukram made his way home as he was worried about how his wife and children were doing. By the time he reached, the firing had stopped.

Seeing her husband, Danai's wailing grew even louder. Sukram collapsed on the cot. 'I saw her only today after she joined the squad and only so briefly. She was looking so good, holding her gun and in that uniform, but I had hardly any time to feel happy for having seen her,' cried Danai.

'Why do you say that? She might have escaped the firing,' said Sukram.

'Did you not hear the firing? It was heavy, the bullets must've been raining down. Escaping from such a firing isn't an easy matter,' said Danai. By now many others had also gathered there and none of them could disagree with her. Punni was Danai and Sukram's eldest child. She had two younger sisters and two even younger brothers. She had been the right hand for both her parents until she joined the squad.

'Punni was so good and clever at household work as well as farming work. She was such a great help to her parents,' said one woman. 'She was active in collective¹ work too,' said a second woman. 'And she was active in singing and games,' said another woman.

Musalaih, who was like a grandfather to Punni, could no longer keep quiet. He gently chided the women, saying 'That's enough! Nothing will happen to that girl! Have we not seen how many of our people escape such firings? If you all remain here, you will continue to talk in this vein and increase the worry of her parents.' Everyone nodded and got up to return to their homes.

As the night deepened, Danai and Sukram's two small boys fell asleep on one cot each. Their two daughters sat in wait with them, thinking of their elder sister. They had eaten the food brought by the neighbours, but the parents could not touch it.

Suddenly, Danai stood up and said, 'We met only five of them. That means the others must still be around here somewhere. Those who would've escaped from the firing must have come there too. They may be in the den near the mango tree or the den near the rocks. I will go and check it once.'

'How will you know which den they are in? Also, whenever there is firing, they usually change the location of their camp to one further way. Please don't go,' Sukram tried pleading with her.

But Danai refused to listen to her husband. 'I am unable to sit still. I will go and check.'

'You are so stubborn! Where will you go so late in the night? We also don't know if those police bandits have gone away or are still around,' Sukram was becoming angry with her.

'Let them be around. If they kill me, let them kill me,' Danai flung back. She was also angry that her husband was unable to understand her anxiety. Sukram realised that she wouldn't listen to him and said, 'You stay. I will go and check.'

He got up from the cot where he had been sitting. Danai said, 'No. You stay with the boys. I will take the girls and go.'

Sukram sat down again. He kept checking his watch every few minutes. By the time Danai and the girls came back, it was past 11pm. Even though he couldn't discern their expressions clearly in the dim light of the lamp, he understood from their silence that they didn't have any news.

'Did you not meet anyone?' he asked empathetically as he handed Danai a tumbler of water.

'No, we didn't,' she said and sank down onto the cot on which her younger son lay sleeping. The two girls were also tired and they soon slept off on another cot after having some water to drink.

'Listen to me. All of them must have escaped. Just lie down for a while,' said Sukram, trying to comfort his wife.

'Punni was leading them. It was such heavy firing, like rain pouring down! Do you really think she could have escaped?' Danai asked in a dejected tone.

'Remember how Kailash *dada* escaped firings, even those from close quarters?'

'He had faced many firings. Our Punni is new to it.'

It wasn't that Sukram did not know this. But he wasn't able to imagine that his daughter could come to any harm. He was trying to convince himself through arguments such as about Kailash *dada*.

Danai lay down next to her sleeping son. Sukram lay down next to their other son. But neither of them could sleep. They kept wondering if they would ever again see their daughter's smiling face. Would they ever again hear her talking nineteen to the dozen? Many such questions and thoughts kept running through both their minds.

Could we have stopped her from joining the squad? Was it just for fun that we encouraged her to join? Or was it for the money that we let her join?

We had to send her. Because the government has ruined our lives. Because they wouldn't leave us alone. They are building the Bodhghat dam which will submerge all these villages. Where

will we go, leaving these villages and forests? How will we live? What else can we do but fight?

Actually it is not only Bodhghat. They also want to excavate Amdai Hill. The government doesn't care about the people living here. Its only concern is how to increase the profit of the corporations. If it wasn't for this fight, we would have been reduced to penury long ago.

Punni had grown up in the struggles against the Bodhghat dam and the excavation of Amdai Hill. From the time she became aware of all this, she joined the team that went around singing in the villages to conscientise the people. She then decided that she wanted to join the squad. How could we deny her that choice? If we didn't allow her to join the squad, it would've meant that we didn't want to fight. But if we want to live in our own lands, we have no choice but to fight. If we refuse to fight, we will be forced to leave our village, our forest, and our cattle and go somewhere else. But where is that somewhere else? How would we live? How would we bring up our children? What would happen to their futures?

Have we not been seeing so many of our youngsters leave, to go to strange places to look for work? Then, after slaving for long hours day after day, we see them coming back with empty hands. When we hear about the troubles they have to endure, we would not wish such a life even on our enemies. They have to swallow their self-respect and endure both physical and verbal abuse and live on empty stomachs. If they resist such treatment, they may even get killed! Eventually they return, much distressed by their experience. And the women? We can't even begin to narrate the problems they have to face. So, many have just disappeared. It is said they are sold off. If we'd rather not fight, we have to live such lives. If we want to live as human beings we have no option but to fight.

Again the same thoughts went through both their minds: 'We see only these two paths in our lives. Then, how can we not fight?'

When Punni was preparing to join the squad, Danai had asked, 'Why join the squad at such a young age, my dear? Why

don't you wait for another year or two?'

'I look young in your eyes. But, whenever the police come to the village, they enquire about me,' Punni had replied.

'Once she had said that, how could I say anything to stop her? I was so afraid that her future would be ruined, that she would have to go to become a daily labourer to avoid the police. Even though she's only 16 years old, once she joined the squad, everyone in the villages – from youngsters to old men – have been in awe of her. How could I refuse my daughter that life?' thought Danai, as she turned over once again, still unable to sleep.

Sukram was remembering the time when he had met Punni two months after she had joined the squad. What a difference he'd noted in her in those two months! As they sat together on her *jhilli*, she had talked to him about so many matters.

'*Nayana*, the Party has agreed to your request that since you're not feeling too well nowadays, you can't work in any of the committees. But just because you won't be in a committee, please don't go back to those old ways of living, of trying to lose yourself by drinking and all that. Continue to live according to the principles of the Party. You know, you could help the current committee members a lot by sharing your experiences.' To Sukram, his daughter was already talking like a mature adult! As he remembered that time, he wondered if he would ever see her again. The thought brought tears into his eyes, and he suppressed his wish to cry loudly with difficulty.

Their hearts remained heavy throughout that sad night. As soon as it was dawn, Danai got up with a new resolution. She woke up both her daughters and said, 'Let's go pick the silkworm cocoons.'

Both the daughters were bewildered by their mother's instruction. But Sukram understood Danai's logic and said, 'It is not even morning yet. Where will you go so early?'

'How will we know anything if we keep sitting at home? I will go out and see if we can get any news. Look after the boys,' said Danai as she left along with her daughters. They headed straight to the place where the firing had happened the previous

day. By the time they reached, the sun had risen completely. They saw the chaos, the empty shells lying all around, fallen leaves and broken tree branches scattered everywhere, and the bullet marks on the trunks of the trees. They saw blood in one place and signs that a person had been dragged across the ground. Danai's heart sank even more when she saw that. She collapsed there itself as she started wailing loudly. On seeing their mother in that state, both the girls also started crying.

After some time, Danai gathered herself together, stood up slowly and started walking towards Salepal village. Her daughters followed her, and in ten minutes they had reached the village. They learnt in the village that Badru was injured and went to his home. He had a bandage on his arm and was moaning with pain. Danai sank down on the floor beside the bed and spoke to him in a tearful tone, 'How did you get injured? Our daughter was also in the squad. Did anything happen to her?'

'I didn't see the young women properly,' Badru replied slowly, as the pain was making it difficult for him to speak. 'They had met me only briefly, giving the Lal Salaam. Kamlu asked me if I had any information regarding the police. I told him I didn't know anything about it, and immediately after that, the firing started.'

'Did you stay there until the firing was over?' Danai asked then.

'I was right there all the time. Anyway, there was no way to get away. If I'd been alone, I might have run to the village. But I had my son with me, so we both hid behind a small tree and I covered my son with my body. Still I was hit by a bullet, and I didn't think that I would come out of that scene alive. I didn't think my son would have survived either. I really don't know how we escaped death yesterday!' He pulled his son towards himself and demonstrated to Danai how he had protected him.

After a while, he resumed narrating the events, saying, 'As soon as the firing started, and I started running, I saw Kamlu and the two women comrades behind him run towards my right where there were some trees. They took cover there and started firing too. But the two women comrades who'd been walking

ahead of them ran towards the front of me, where there were no trees. One of them was hit by a bullet and fell down. After the firing was done, they tortured her to death. The poor woman screamed a lot.'

Tears had started streaming down Danai's face even before he had completed telling them what he had seen. 'Our daughter was leading the way. Ohh! Looks like it was her they had killed ...'

Badru's wife came and sat beside Danai to console her. But she also started crying. Hearing their cries, the neighbours also came and joined in. After a while, the people's sorrow turned to anger. The women started cursing the police and the government.

Sukram met his grieving wife at the doorstep and said, 'Please don't cry. I understand our daughter escaped the firing and has met the squad.' For a few seconds, Danai was too distraught to understand what her husband was saying. Then she said in an unbelieving tone, 'Are you telling the truth? How do you know?'

'Why would I lie? Just before you arrived, Rainu came with a message from Maini *didi*. She has asked us to meet her. Come, let us go.' Danai was almost ecstatic on hearing this news. She felt happier than even when she had become a mother for the first time. Her tears of grief turned into sobs of sheer happiness.

'Come, drink this water and let us go quickly,' said Sukram comfortingly but also impatient to leave. His tension of the night before had been replaced by the longing to see his daughter as quickly as possible. The entire family set out to see Punni.

In another half an hour, they were with the guerrillas. Seeing them, Punni extended her hand in a Lal Salaam, but her mother just hugged her while still crying. Her father too had tears in his eyes as he caressed her. Maini came then and comforted Danai saying, 'Punni told me that when they were on their way, they met you on the way, *Didi*. I knew that you would be badly distressed. Since we were nearby, and I knew you would like to meet her, I sent the message for you to come here.'

Sukram informed her about how Danai had gone to the two

den locations and asked, 'How are the other comrades?'

'Punni escaped from the firing and met us last night itself,' Maini explained. 'We've also had a message just a while back that Kamlu and the other three have reached the RV place. Punni told us that it is unlikely that Rukni will be able to make it. As of now we haven't yet heard anything.'

Danai wiped her tears on hearing this and said, 'I went to Salepal village to enquire if the people there knew anything about the firing. Badru told me that he had stayed there until all the firing had stopped. He was also injured by a bullet in the arm. He said that they seem to have killed one person and carried the body away. I also saw blood on the ground and tracks of a body being dragged.' All the people along with Maini were deeply saddened to hear this news. The atmosphere became very grave all around, and a couple of comrades started crying.

'Punni, why don't you sit down with your parents and tell them what happened,' said Maini, as she moved away from there to send a message to Rukni's parents. She needed to inform them about what had happened and ask them to go claim her body. She also needed to send a doctor with medicines to treat Badru. She called all the AC members to gather together.

As soon as they had sat down on Punni's *jhilli*, Danai asked her, 'How did you escape such huge firing?'

'We met you on the road, didn't we?' Punni began to explain. 'A little distance from there, as we were just reaching Salepal village, we met Badru *mama*. We wished him and Kamlu *dada* asked him about the police presence. He was just starting to say he didn't know about it when the firing started. It was all so quick that I didn't know what to do, and Rukni and I just began to run in the forward direction. The others ran a little back in another direction, where they were able to find cover and start firing in return. Rukni and I didn't find any cover. And also, it wasn't like the usual firing. They started bursting shells too! Eventually Rukni and I split, she ran in one direction and I in another. After a while, I managed to find a tree to hide behind. Then I looked out and saw Rukni on the ground. I was so frightened. Because I had never seen such firing, I still didn't know what to do but I felt I had to

do something. Slowly I made my way into the paddy fields. The plants were of enough height so that I could bend and walk and remain invisible. It was tough to bend and walk with the gun. So I hid the gun in the field itself and made my way out. But I felt I couldn't go alone all the way to the RV² place. I knew that the den would've been evacuated immediately. Still, I thought I would check and was making my way there when the comrades spotted me and called out to me.'

Sukram's face became very serious on hearing her story. 'You left your gun and came back? Why did you take a gun? Was it just for fun or for fighting? When you see the police, you are supposed to fight.' On hearing Sukram speak a little more sharply than he'd probably intended, Danai interjected quickly in a loving tone, 'Is the gun a toy, my dear, to go around carrying it without using it? You should learn to use it properly, isn't it?' Still, Punni's face fell on hearing both of them. She had not expected such a reaction from her parents.

When she had met Maini the previous night, Punni had felt apprehensive about telling her that she'd hid and then left the gun behind. She had expected to be criticised by one and all. But Maini had spoken gently as she said, 'You are new to firing and you must have been frightened. Also, you are saying the area was not convenient to return the firing. But, in future, don't ever leave your gun behind. Remember you have to be brave in that situation.'

Maini's words and tone had made Punni stop feeling guilty. So now, her first reaction to her parents' criticism was anger, 'Where was the opportunity to return the firing? I told you that there was no cover!'

'If you have no opportunity to return the firing, you have to retreat with your gun. You don't leave the gun behind,' said Sukram.

'I didn't throw it away! I hid it well!' protested Punni.

'You may have hid it properly my dear. But, if the police conduct a thorough search operation, they will find it, right? I wonder if the gun is still there or those criminals have found it?'

said Danai. Her explanation helped Punni understand her mistake and she now felt ashamed of what she had done.

Sukram and Danai started to walk towards Maini, who had finished talking to the AC members. Their serious faces reminded her of her own mistake. From the time she'd heard about the firing, she had been feeling guilty. She braced herself as she expected to hear them say, 'Knowing that police had been seen, how could you send a new recruit to find out about it? Somehow she escaped but she could have died needlessly.'

Maini started to think about how she was going to answer them as they approached her.

'Why did you give Punni a gun? To fight or to lose it? How difficult is it for us to obtain guns? If everyone does what she did, we will be left with no guns,' said Sukram.

'Don't give guns to everyone! Give them only to those who fight well,' said Danai. Maini was astonished at what Punni's parents had said, and it took her a while to understand their reaction to the events. Before she could respond to them, Danai spoke again, interrupting her husband who was about to speak, 'We can talk later if you have something more to say. Just now, let's go quickly and get the gun back. If it is found by any informer, we will lose the gun unnecessarily.'

Danai moved ahead and Sukram followed her. Maini's image of Punni's parents blurred as her eyes filled with tears.

Translation of 'Viplavamlo oka Talli-Tandri'. (First published in Arunatara, February 2019)

Translated by P. Anupama.

Notes:

1. Farming related collective work carried on under the auspices of the *Janatana Sarkar*

2. RV place – rendezvous site, a meeting point agreed in advance

Teachers

‘It looks like our comrades who’d gone to the village have returned.’

As soon as the guerrillas heard these words, some of them started walking towards the camp’s kitchen, with their mugs in their hands. The space they were calling the kitchen is where it will be eventually. As of now, a temporary stove had been set up by placing three stones in a triangle. A fire had been lit by filling this ‘stove’ with firewood the guerrillas had gathered. A few other guerrillas had gone to the village to bring some utensils, rice and vegetables.

The 3rd Platoon of the Company¹ working in that Division Area had walked for four hours before arriving at this place as dusk was settling in. Walking in this area meant climbing up and down many hills, and all the guerrillas were very tired. On hearing that they had run out of sugar and milk powder, everyone felt even more exhausted.

‘Comrades, bring at least some *java* from the village as we can’t make tea,’ Bandu, the Platoon Commander instructed the guerrillas going to the nearby village, ‘it will take us some time to cook food.’

Many had heard his words and they were now eagerly waiting for the team’s return. So when Company Commander Manku saw the team coming back towards them with empty hands, he exclaimed, ‘What! Is nobody there in the village?’

‘Everyone is there’, Chaitu, the team’s leader replied, with dejection written all over his face.

‘So ...?’ Manku’s voice was full of surprise.

‘We don’t know what happened, but nobody would give us anything.’

Manku was even more surprised. Before he could say anything though, one of the team’s members, Tugge, explained what had transpired. ‘When we asked for *java* they said that they didn’t have any. We thought that it may be true. Then we asked for rice, and they again replied in the negative. This made us a little suspicious. Then, when we asked for utensils and again they said no they didn’t have any – we knew for sure that they were deliberately not giving us anything.’

‘Actually, as soon as they saw us, they didn’t behave with us as they usually do. Some turned their faces away, and some got up and went off hurriedly as though they had some urgent work,’ Chaitu added.

‘Were Sonaru *dada* and Mangi *didi* not there?’

‘No. I think they’d been called by our comrades and had gone to meet them,’ Chaitu replied. ‘There was nobody from whom we could even enquire about their whereabouts. When we asked Sonnai *didi*, she walked into her house saying ‘I don’t know.’ When we asked Kamli *didi*, she also said, ‘How should I know?’ and quickly picked up a pot and went off to the stream to fetch water. Then we asked Aithu *dada*, and he too got up from his bed and wandered off, saying, ‘Do they tell me and go?’ It was only when we spoke pleadingly to Sonaru *dada*’s little daughter, that she told us, ‘They’ve gone to a meeting.’’

‘What’s going on here?’ wondered Manku, scratching his head in puzzlement. Within a few minutes everyone else also knew what had happened in the village, although no-one could make sense of it.

This situation increased their weariness. Usually, guerrillas carry one or two utensils, and some rice and lentils along with them. But this time, they hadn’t done so, as they had to carry a lot of weight with them and they were going to return within a

day. Moreover, it was a big village and a strong centre for the movement. So they'd thought that it wouldn't be necessary to carry food and utensils with them.

'Didn't I tell you that the Civic Action Programme² had been conducted in this village? I'm sure it is the impact of that programme,' said one comrade.

'Visits to Narayanpur have increased recently,' observed another comrade. 'We'd thought that there wasn't any network of the enemy here in this village. He's likely spread his tentacles here very clandestinely.' Many more comments were made regarding the situation.

It didn't take much time for Bandu to know the matter when he returned from taking a bath in the nearby stream. He immediately went to the kitchen, where Manku looked at him and said, 'However much we may discuss it here, we will not get any clarity. Therefore it would be better that we all go into the village.' Bandu nodded his head in agreement and blew the whistle for everyone to get ready to go.

When the guerrillas reached the village, they called all the people for a meeting. At the same time, they heard an announcement coming from a radio that appeared to mock them. 'Maoists do not have the support of people,' the voice intoned.

'What happened *dada*? What happened *didi*? Why are you so angry with us?' Manku asked the people who were now sitting in front of him. Although he could see all the people in the bright light of the full moon, and he could feel a tension in the atmosphere, he still couldn't comprehend the expressions on their faces.

'Why should we be angry? Who are we to be angry with you?' Kamli said accusingly.

'If you weren't angry *didi*, why would you turn your face away as soon as you saw us?' Manku's voice was gentle as he tried to diffuse the hostility.

'I was going to attend to some work of mine. Don't I have my personal work to do?'

'We came here after walking for four hours. You didn't give us any *java*, you didn't even give us any utensils or rice ...' Manku stopped mid-sentence because Sonnai had interrupted him. She spoke quickly, her voice trembling, 'Why should we give you anything, as though you are fighting a big battle for us? Why should we part with the food prepared for ourselves?'

Manku was dumbstruck for some time. Then slowly gathering his thoughts, he said, 'Aren't we fighting for you? If we aren't fighting this war for you *didi*, then for whom are we fighting?'

'If you are waging this battle for us, then would you have done what you did on that day?' The anger in Sonnai's voice was now unmistakable.

'Which day? What did we do?'

'Why do you ask us? You weren't there on that day, but all these people, they were there. Ask them,' Sonnai pointed to the Platoon members with a raised chin.

Bandu, who had been standing behind Manku, immediately stepped forward and said, his voice full of astonishment, 'We ...? What did we do?'

'Look at him! He is asking us as though he doesn't remember anything,' said a villager sarcastically. Manku didn't recognise that voice.

'Why would they remember?' Kamli's voice was bitter this time.

This entire exchange greatly piqued the curiosity of all the guerrillas. They started to think about what could have happened.

'Surely, if we don't remember, you can remind us *didi*,' Manku tried to laugh as he spoke, to lighten the atmosphere again, but the tension remained.

'That day ... when the police came,' said Aitu shortly.

'*Dada, didi!* Please tell us in detail. Otherwise, how will we understand?' said Manku.

'On that day, Bandu *dada* and others arrived here early in the morning and set up their camp by the side of the stream. We

were coming back to the village after gathering *mahua* flowers when we saw the police approaching. We turned around and came straight to the camp and informed the *dadas*. You ask them what they did,' said Sonnai, a little defiantly.

Kamli then continued to narrate the incident, 'We suggested to these comrades to lay an ambush near the hillock next to the stream as the police would definitely come from that direction.' She then echoed Sonnai saying, 'But you ask them what they did.'

'The police are attacking our villages and harassing us like anything. They are even killing us. But what do you care?' said another woman, her voice full of emotion.

The matter was now clear to Manku and Bandu. The incident had been reviewed in the recent Company Party committee meeting. When the 3rd Platoon had camped near this village on that occasion, the people had informed them about the arrival of the police. However, the comrades had been carrying some important materials with them, so they first had to hide them before going to lay the ambush. By the time they reached the spot, the police had gone. All the Platoon members had then felt there was nothing that they could do at that time.

We should have informed them about the review – many comrades were having this thought, including Manku. 'Tell them about the review,' he whispered to Bandu. All the questions that had been clogging his mind were cleared.

'What our sisters said just now is true. But on that day, we couldn't go for the ambush immediately. We were carrying some materials that are very important for our war. When you informed us about the police, we had to first hide the materials in the dump properly. As soon as that was done we went to the ambush site. But by that time the police had gone. We informed this matter to our committee on the same day. We thought they'd informed you. *Didi! Dada!* Would we deliberately not take action on the police? What makes you think we wouldn't care if the police harasses you or kills you? Who are we waging this war for? You have put a big blame on us, but what more could we have done in that situation? Think about it ...'

Manku, sensing the reproach in Bandu's voice, quickly interrupted him, '*Didi, dada*, you heard Bandu *dada* talk about what has happened on that day. We should have informed you about it much earlier. That was a mistake on our part.'

At first there was no response from the people. Then Kamli spoke up: 'Sonaru *dada* had informed us earlier about it. But if you had gone to lay an ambush as soon as we'd told you that the police had come, wouldn't we have hidden and safeguarded the materials carefully?' There was a sadness in her voice.

'How many times didn't we hide your materials?' said Sonnai.

Some more men and women raised their voices in support of the villagers who had spoken out.

Manku was at a loss for words. Bandu bowed his head. Then he cleared his throat and said, '*Didi, dada*, that was a big mistake on our side. What you have said is hundred per cent true. We should have done so. It isn't that we don't know that – this war can be taken forward only with the active participation of the people. All the big blows we have struck the enemy and the many victories we have won, have only been possible due to the active participation of the people. But we didn't take the right decision on that day. We didn't think about the role of the people. Please pardon us. We assure you that we won't commit this kind of mistake again.'

As soon as Bandu finished his apology, Manku spoke again, 'We know that it's the people who make history. But we had forgotten that in practice on that day, and you've taught us a good lesson. We are very proud of the high level of your political consciousness. There are many new guerrilla comrades here today, you've raised their confidence in the People's War. Please always point out our mistakes like you have now ...'

Even before Manku could finish speaking, Kamli had got up. 'They've walked from very far,' she said, looking around at everyone gathered there, 'they must be very hungry. Let's go and make some *java* for them first. Come on.'

A few women followed her and within five minutes, the

atmosphere had changed. Jokes and laughter filled the air and the villagers brought some cots into the open, under the moonlight. All the guerrillas who had stood there just moments before as if they were the accused in a trial, now sat down on the cots to drink the cool *java*.

'Take some rest after you've finished your *java*,' said Aitu. 'We'll have food ready in no time. Then you can have your dinner.'

To make full use of the bright moon light, the village girls and boys started singing and dancing. Finishing their *java* as fast as they could, the guerrillas got up and joined the collective dance.

Translation of 'Guruvulu'. (First published in Arunatara in September 2021)

Translated by N. Ravi.

Notes:

1 Company – a unit of the People's Liberation guerrilla Army. The party committee that leads a Company is called the Company Party Committee.

2 Civic Action Programme – a government-sponsored public perception management programme that aims to malign the revolutionaries and turn the Adivasi people away from the movement.

Steel Fortress

Rajavva walked along with a plastic tumbler of water in her right hand, as though she were on her way to the fields to relieve herself. She was around fifty years old with almost half her hair turning grey. She was of dark complexion, with her tall frame matching her body size.

A little distance behind her walked Swamy. He was a thin and short man who appeared to be about thirty years old. He wore a shirt and wrapped a dhoti around his waist. He had no slippers on his feet. A *gongadi*¹ was draped over his head, and on top of it, he balanced a sack. He looked like a farmer. He puffed on a beedi, releasing the smoke into the air.

Just then, two women came walking from the opposite direction, talking among themselves. Rajavva stopped in her tracks. Seeing her stop, Swamy hesitated for a second, unsure whether to stop or not. Within ten steps, he passed by Rajavva. After ten more steps, Swamy came to the intersection of two lanes. He wasn't sure of which one to take. Should he stop? He picked the closest lane, thinking it better to keep walking than hesitate. But he didn't realise it led straight to someone's house. Before he knew it, he was almost at their doorstep.

Sensing a stranger approaching their house, the man from inside called out, 'Who's that coming this way?'

Hearing that, Rajavva shouted loudly, 'Hey! You're going the wrong way!' Without saying another word, she started walking again. Swamy turned back and followed her.

Turning their heads from the lanes they walked through, they could see groups of policemen in all the thoroughfares. They quietly passed through all those lanes. After crossing all of them, they reached fields of maize. Rajavva turned into one of the fields. Swamy followed her.

After walking for three or four minutes through the field, Rajavva stopped. She looked in Swamy's direction, taking a deep breath. Her gaze, glowing with happiness and satisfaction, fell on him. That same expression was reflected on Swamy's face, too.

'Now keep going straight along this path, son.'

Her voice, filled with emotion, touched his heart. He took the sack off his head and handed it to her. Then he removed the blanket and said,

'I won't need this anymore, *Amma*,' and placed it in her hands.

'I'm going now, *Amma*. We'll meet again.'

His voice was choked with gratitude that he couldn't express in words. It showed in his eyes, his face, and every bit of him.

'Go safely, child! And don't forget what I told you.'

'I won't forget, *Amma*. Next time we meet, we'll call your son-in-law, and talk,' he said and walked on, faster now.

Rjavva watched him leaving for a few moments, then emptied the water from the tumbler and turned back. Swamy walked swiftly through the field and came out. He paused for a moment, scanning all around with his eyes. There was no sign of danger within sight. Taking a deep breath, he continued walking again.

The surroundings looked blurry to him, as though dust had clouded his eyes. His ears were ringing. His whole body ached with minor wounds and burning pain. His mouth was bitter, he felt nauseous. Yet he kept walking quickly without paying heed to anything.

Was he alive? Had he really made it out of a perilous situation? He still couldn't believe it.

Once again, he looked around. The village was far behind now. He was closer to the forest. The dry grass and the trees and the familiar surroundings seemed to be reaching out with open arms to embrace him upon his rebirth.

'I am alive. I could make it out.' This time, he believed it for sure. He took a deep breath, this time with joy. He had narrowly escaped from the jaws of death that had stretched towards him at every step. A flicker of pride crossed his mind as he thought of the enemy's defeat.

But the very next moment, a strange delusion overtook him. He paused momentarily and looked around, hoping to find his comrades.

No one! There was no one!!

He came out of that delusion. He was the only one left. He was the only one who survived. An unbearable sorrow engulfed him.

Despite sorrow weighing on him heavily, he continued to walk fast. Yes, he alone remained. He alone survived. He alone managed to escape the trap the enemy had carefully laid.

'Let's all pack up and move out now,' said Swamy, addressing his squad members.

'It's dark, but people are still moving around quite a bit,' said Gopi, carefully peeking through the window. 'Let's pack and be ready. As soon as the crowd thins out a bit more, we will leave,' said Swamy, lowering himself to the floor near his kit. Agreeing with their commander's words, everyone lowered themselves with their kits and got ready. Intending to leave early, all of them had finished dinner by seven.

After getting ready, Swamy went to the window and looked outside.

'Looks like people are still moving around a lot,' he muttered to himself.

He was in a hurry to get out of the house. He had already sent the two militia comrades out to bring the mines that evening.

'They would have brought the mines. We have to fit them tonight. If we delay leaving this shelter, we won't have enough time to install the mines. Tomorrow, we have to engage in the ambush,' he thought.

Three days earlier, the police had carried out an 'encounter' at Bairapur in the Bansuwada area. In response, Swamy's squad decided to carry out an ambush on the roadside two and a half kilometres from Padkal village. That's why the squad came to Padkal.

'Swamy *Anna*, we both will go down to wash our faces,' said Vijaya. 'Alright. Check carefully to see if anyone's around outside. Come back quickly,' Swamy said. With that, Vijaya and Lalitha went out. 'I'll also go downstairs and wash my face,' said Prabhakar. He was the squad's deputy commander. Swamy nodded in agreement, and Prabhakar, too, went out. None of the three carried their guns.

The house in which the squad took shelter had a wide open space as soon as one entered through the street-facing door. There was a two-storeyed terrace house to the left of the open area and a two-roomed outhouse to its right. The two rooms of the outhouse were side by side, with doors opening into the open space. One of the rooms, adjoining the street wall, was used to store rice, pulses, salt, and other items – sort of a store room. The other room was the kitchen.

The ground floor of the terrace house had two spacious rooms, one behind the other. The front room had a door not directly in the middle but slightly to the side—opposite the store room next to the kitchen. The upper floor had two similar rooms, one behind the other. In front of the kitchen was a small well. Stairs near the well led to the upper floor. The stairs led to a sit-out like open space, into which the door of the upstairs front room opened. This door is not located in the centre of the room, but stood directly above the door on the ground floor. Next to the door, facing the open space was a window. There was another window in the room facing the street. There were two connecting doors from the front room to the rear room.

The entire Sirnapalli squad, consisting of six squad members and two militia members that had reached the house at dawn that day, stayed in the front room upstairs since the place was quite spacious. The two militia members had gone out earlier in the evening. The three squad members who had gone downstairs were washing their faces near the well. Just then, the street-facing doors were suddenly flung open, and the police, in alert positions, stormed in.

Noticing the police, Vijaya and Lalitha instinctively ran towards the kitchen. The police chased them and caught them right away. Prabhakar, however, dashed upstairs towards the room, trying to shut the door and bolt it from inside. But that door had no bolt. Even as he rushed in, the police opened fire and came running upstairs. They began firing at the door from the open area in front of the room.

Hearing the gunfire, the three comrades inside—Swamy, Kranti, and Gopi—alertly picked up their guns and moved into prone positions. Cautioning Prabhakar, who was trying to shut and bolt the door, Swamy shouted, 'Bullets will come through the door! Move to the side!' Immediately, Prabhakar stepped aside. Whether the police kicked or pushed the door, it flung open. Bullets started pouring in through the doors and windows. From inside, the guerrillas too began returning fire.

'Throw grenades from the windows!' Swamy told Prabhakar. Prabhakar immediately threw two grenades—one through the window beside the door into the terrace open space and the other through the window facing the street below. But neither of them exploded.

After that, all four of them fired continuously for about fifteen minutes. But the room they were in had no proper cover, and bullets were coming in through both windows and doors. So, the chances of continuing resistance from that room were slim. It didn't seem like a safe spot to hold their ground. Swamy felt the two connecting doors leading to the rear room might serve as better cover. Compared to this room, that one seemed a bit more secure.

Sensing they couldn't delay any longer, Swamy immediately ordered his comrades to retreat into the inner room. He and Prabhakar moved to the left side door and used it as a cover while Gopi and Kranti took positions on the right side door using it as a cover. They continued their resistance from those positions.

The firing started around 7:30 in the evening and continued until at least 9 o'clock. As the guerrillas showed no signs of slowing down in their resistance, the police began trying various tactics. They climbed the staircase beside the first-floor door and went to the second floor.

Some of the farming families that have terraced houses leave a small opening with a width of around one or two feet in the roof. This opening allows them to push the grains dried on the terrace directly into the grain storage room below, saving them the labour of carrying it down in baskets. This terrace had four such openings—two above each room. If the terrace were divided into four equal parts, each would have one of these openings at its centre. The police spotted these openings.

Police dropped four grenades simultaneously through the four openings. The sound of the grenades exploding simultaneously deafened the four guerrillas. Since they were in prone positions, none of them suffered fatal injuries, but they were all wounded. Their faces and arms were bruised. The skin on their bodies was scraped and torn in many places. 'Hear that? They're throwing grenades,' said Kranti, instinctively pressing one ear to the floor while covering the other with his hand. Before they could recover, another round of grenades exploded right next to them with a terrifying noise.

The room had stacks of paddy bags and piles of pots in two corners. 'Everyone, take cover behind the bags. Otherwise, these grenades will finish us,' said Swamy. Immediately, they all crawled and moved behind the stacks of bags for cover. The police didn't stop at the grenades. They also threw smoke bombs and released tear gas through the openings. They even inserted their guns through the openings and began firing bullets in auto mode, sweeping in circles.

At the same time, bullets continued to stream in from the front room windows and doors. The deafening blast of the grenades seemed to be tearing their eardrums apart. Their eyes burned from the smoke, and tears streamed down their faces. Their entire bodies felt like they were on fire. The smoke made them cough and sneeze uncontrollably, suffocating them and leaving them gasping for breath. None of them had the time or opportunity to consider what kind of a critical situation they were in. The room the guerrillas were currently in had only one window, which was directly opposite the door that Swamy and Prabhakar were covering.

Struggling to breathe, some comrades started moving towards the window to get some air.

‘Comrades, don’t go near the window. There’s a chance of incoming fire. It’s okay to breathe less, but if you go near the window, you’ll get killed,’ Swamy warned them. Although the room’s light was still on, the entire area was filled with smoke and had turned hazy. Despite the suffocating smoke, despite the torture wracking their bodies, not a single comrade’s resolve to resist wavered. So, their resistance continued.

The ceiling above the second floor was made of cement, but the roof of the ground floor—meaning the floor of the upper level—was not made of cement. Over wooden beams and rafters, mud was plastered and covered with a cement coating. Due to the constant grenade blasts from the openings above, the cement coating of the floor began to peel off, the wooden planks loosened, and holes appeared in the floor—directly below the openings above, measuring about two to three feet wide.

Because of those holes, the grenades thrown by the police started falling straight into the lower rooms and exploding there. As a result, the guerrillas escaped the suffering caused by the deafening noise of the explosions, the burning of their eyes due to smoke, and the stinging grenade fragments that could have pierced their bodies. In the meanwhile, sounds started coming from the centre of the upper ceiling.

Looking up in that direction, Swamy said, ‘Are they setting up an LMG (Light Machine Gun) on auto fire? Are they drilling

into the ceiling? It looks like they're planning to make a hole. Let's open fire in that direction—come on, quickly!' And then Swamy began firing towards the ceiling. The remaining three also began firing in that direction, forcing the police to call off their attempt.

'Did you see? When we fire, they fall back,' said Prabhakar. Even in the smoky, dim atmosphere, Swamy could see a quiet pride in Prabhakar's eyes. Soon after, the police began digging along the wall on the left side of the room—right next to where Prabhakar was positioned.

'They're digging over here,' Prabhakar said. 'If they dig through that side, we'll have no cover. Let's fire in that direction,' Swamy said, quickly shifting into a better firing position. Prabhakar also changed his firing arc, and both began firing toward the wall. The digging stopped immediately.

It was around half past midnight. The entire village was holding its breath in silence. No one had even a wink of sleep. Since the firing began, all the villagers stayed inside their homes. The police had threatened that anyone who came outside would be shot.

From the moment the firing started, additional forces kept arriving in batches. The police had taken over every alley, lane, rooftop, and terrace surrounding the house where the battle was happening. They set up massive mercury lights in various spots.

The two women guerrillas and the family who had given shelter to the squad were all in police custody. The guerrillas upstairs could clearly hear their cries and screams as they were being tortured by the police.

The situation inside was tense. 'What's going to happen? How will this end? Can we escape? Is that even possible? Are we all going to die here?' Thoughts like these raced through Swamy's mind amid the relentless gunfire. Most likely, his three comrades were having similar thoughts.

Swamy steeled his heart. Whatever has to happen, will happen. But we must fight until the last breath. He firmed his resolve and looked at his comrades. He felt that they, too, shared the same unshakable determination.

The firing and explosions continued without pause. The police didn't rely on ordinary gunfire anymore. They kept the LMGs on auto-fire, and the shooting didn't stop till the magazines ran out. Only while reloading the magazines was there a slight pause in firing.

Despite deploying overwhelming numbers, launching repeated assaults, and expending hundreds of grenades and thousands of bullets, the police still couldn't break the resistance of just four fighters. The police officers felt humiliated as their efforts failed. Now, they scrambled for new tactics.

To the right of the house and in front of the house, there were terraced houses. The police set up LMGs on both terraces. From the front terrace, they began firing through the window of the front room facing the street. From the right side terrace, they started firing through the window in the back room.

By then, comrades were in the prone position, targeting the doors and windows of the front room. Suddenly, bullets from the back window tore through, striking the back of Prabhakar's head.

'Swamy *anna*, I'm dying,' said Prabhakar, his head drooping down. Swamy called out his name and pulled him close. He was stunned at the sight of blood gushing from Prabhakar's head and didn't know what to do. Kranti and Gopi also turned their heads, looking anxiously toward Prabhakar. 'To all of you, *Lal Salaam!* Long live the revolution!' Prabhakar said, his face pressed to the ground. His words were clear even amidst the storm of LMG fire. The three remaining comrades watched helplessly. 'Long live the revolution! Long live the revolution!' Prabhakar kept rasping. To Swamy, it felt as if Prabhakar was desperately shouting those slogans, knowing he may never get another chance. Even in death's iron grip, he was dreaming only of revolution. The three comrades bore witness to his heroism.

Prabhakar was just twenty three, the only son of his parents. At an age meant for fun and play, he chose the path of struggle. While still studying the Intermediate (10+2) course, Prabhakar became a guerrilla. He was always one step ahead when it came

to hard work. There was no trace of fear, worry, or sorrow in his voice even at the cusp of dying so abruptly at such a young age. What defines a full life? Is it living for a hundred years? Does the length of life determine its fullness? Or is it the essence of life? His voice, filled with a certain satisfaction and the spirit of revolution, suggested the latter. After three or four minutes, the slogans stopped. Only a faint moaning could be heard. The three of them knew Prabhakar was slipping closer to death.

Swamy, still in a prone position next to him, couldn't even sit up and take his comrade into his arms during his final moments as the bullets kept flying through the windows. Gopi and Kranti couldn't get up either from their positions to hold their fallen comrade's hand one last time. They couldn't even raise their heads or glance in his direction because of the relentless hail of bullets. That cruel war left no room for even a final goodbye.

After another minute, Prabhakar even stopped moaning. His youthful life had reached its end. And yet, there was no possibility of mourning for him. Swallowing the pain and remembering his duty, Swamy said, 'Prabhakar has become a martyr. Only we are left. It might also be difficult for us to get out of this situation alive. But whatever happens, none of us should lose heart. We must fight till the end. You both cover that door, I'll cover this one. Any policeman who steps inside should not leave alive. There's heavy firing from these windows. I'll go to that corner. You both also stay carefully in your covers.' Even while giving instructions, he crawled cautiously through the rain of bullets, passing Prabhakar's dead body, and reached the corner.

That corner was beside the window, so the police couldn't fire directly into it. Kranti was at another corner. Gopi was crouched between the two, hiding behind sacks of rice close to the wall. That spot also had cover, so he was able to stay there. After a while Swamy said in a low voice, 'The police are firing like crazy. If we fire in reply to their firing, we'll run out of bullets soon. So, we'll stop the firing. Only if we see them trying to enter the rooms, we'll fire on them and not till then.' After that, from about half-past midnight to around 2-3 a.m., there was no firing from the three guerrillas. This made the police wonder if those inside were still alive or already dead.

By half past midnight, the Superintendent of Police (SP) of the district also arrived. He personally gave orders to start the next round of action. Since there was no firing from inside, he instructed the police positioned around the room to advance inside. But no one seemed willing to step in. Around 2 a.m., the cries and wails of Vijaya and Lalitha were heard near the staircase downstairs.

'Anna! Looks like they're bringing the *akkas* inside,' said Kranti.

'Go on then... Go in and check, you bitches!' the police cursed loudly.

'Looks like they won't come to see for themselves, they are pushing the *akkas* instead,' said Gopi.

'Sir, we can't stand, we are feeling too dizzy. We are having blackouts and unable to see anything Sir, we can't climb the stairs, Sir,' Lalitha and Vijaya's tearful voices sounded pitiful to the three of them.

'Anna, they must've beaten the *Akkas* badly, tortured them cruelly,' Kranti's voice was heavy with sorrow.

'When they fall into the hands of the police, won't they do that? Wouldn't they torture them?' Gopi's voice carried the same pain.

Swamy couldn't put his pain into words. He remained silent.

Since Vijaya and Lalitha could not walk, it looked like they were dragged back.

In the meantime, the police began digging from below near the side of Swamy's corner. If they could break through there, they'd be able to fire at the corner where Swamy was positioned. To stop their efforts, the comrades fired in that direction again. The police stopped digging after that. Suddenly, Kranti said, 'Anna, my rifle bolt isn't working, I'm unable to load it.' He was holding a .303 rifle. 'Take Prabhakar's rifle,' said Swamy, and pushed Prabhakar's .303 rifle towards them. After some time, the firing shattered the bulbs in both rooms, and everything plunged into darkness.

Once again, the police attempted to dig through the wall. The guerrillas fired in that direction again, and the police gave up their attempt once more. This time, Swamy's SLR rifle jammed and he felt lost and helpless. Without a gun, how could he fight? Kranti and Gopi both had rifles. Should he ask one of them and take a weapon? But in such an intense battle, having one's own weapon gives one a lot of confidence. How could he take a rifle from them in such a situation? They were capable fighters too... All these thoughts kept running through his mind. He felt utterly helpless as if he'd lost his limbs. Then he suddenly remembered—Vijaya and Lalitha's rifles. Had they taken them down or left them here? He wasn't sure. 'Vijaya akka, Lalitha akka—did they take the rifles downstairs or leave them here?' Swamy asked Kranti and Gopi. 'I don't know, Anna. I didn't see,' both of them replied.

'Let's just check once; it might be useful,' he said, slowly crawling into the front room. Feeling his way through the darkness, he found two guns propped against the wall. One was a 410 Musket, and the other a double-barrel gun, but neither had their ammunition pouches. Since the pouches are always tied to the waist, he assumed they were still with them. Swamy took both guns and returned to his position. Among them, only the 410 was loaded. He took that and went to his position. But what kind of self-confidence can a single bullet give?

Once again, they had to open fire when they felt the police were trying to dig through the wall. That one bullet was used up. Swamy became unarmed again. What could he do? His heart filled with frustration. 'Kranti, give me that defective rifle of yours, let's check what's wrong with it,' he said, and took that gun. No matter how hard he tried, the bolt wouldn't move. Finally, he hit it hard. Somehow, the jammed bolt got fixed and Swamy managed to load the rifle.

After that, there was no firing from inside for almost an hour. Once again, the SP ordered the police to go inside and check, but none of the policemen dared follow the order. Again, the police brought Vijaya and Lalitha along. 'Go on... go up and see...' they cursed them which were clearly audible inside.

'I'm too weak to stay on my feet Sir. I see only dark circles in

front of my eyes Sir ,’ came the tearful, trembling voices of the two women, which deeply pained all three. Once again, the police took them back.

It was nearing dawn—about four in the morning. The SP, in a fit of rage, abused the policemen and shouted at them to go inside and check. Left with no other option, the police began advancing into the room focusing large lights inside. Their figures were clearly visible in the light. Four or five of them entered. As soon as they moved toward the centre of the room, Swamy took aim and fired at the policeman who was ahead of the others.

With just that one shot, the man screamed, ‘Ah!’ and fell to the ground. The police immediately switched off the lights. ‘Mohinuddin! Mohinuddin!’ They called out to the fallen man twice. But there was no response, no movement or sound from the fallen policeman.

Meanwhile, Kranti and Gopi also fired through the door before them.

Unable to remain there any longer, the police carried the body and ran out.

‘Swamy *anna*, looks like one of them died,’ Gopi said with a small sense of satisfaction, feeling it was revenge for Prabhakar’s death.

‘Yes, he’s dead,’ Swamy replied.

‘Did they take the body?’ asked Kranti.

‘I don’t know... suddenly it went dark, so I’m not sure. But it looks like the police did take it,’ Swamy said.

Then, from downstairs, came the sounds of firing and the agonised screams of Vijaya and Lalitha.

‘*Anna*... it’s the *Akkas*...’ Gopi couldn’t complete the sentence.

Realising what had happened below, their hearts were gripped with sorrow. For some time, they were lost in the memories of Vijaya and Lalitha.

Lalitha was born and brought up in this very village Padkal. She came from a poor Dalit family. After her marriage and the

birth of her son, she joined the movement along with her partner. Her comrade and husband, Saleem (Prasad), who was a district committee member, died a heroic death the previous year fighting bravely against the enemy ambush on the Bichkunda squad. Swallowing her grief with a strong heart, she stood even more firmly in the movement.

Vijaya had studied up to fourth class. Even within the squad, she studied with great interest. She liked discussing what she read. She worked hard and was an ideal in all respects.

Lalitha's figure — with a long, dark face and of medium build — and Vijaya's figure — tall, fair-skinned, with a round face — flashed vividly in front of their eyes.

Thus that night of bloodshed, horror, and terror passed, and morning came. But the police firing didn't stop. The guerrillas, however, stayed alert, guns ready, and prepared to shoot when necessary.

Around seven-thirty or eight, the firing and explosions eased up a bit. Those inside had no clue what was going on outside. Suddenly, they heard the sound of walls being dug up from below. 'It looks like they're digging from underneath, maybe to plant bombs to blow up the house,' Swamy thought. Kranti cautiously came out of the cover to see what was happening. Between the two doors, there was a shelf in the wall that was built with just one row of bricks. Because of that when grenades were thrown at night, a palm-sized hole had formed in it. Kranti crawled to the shelf, got up, and peered through the hole.

From that spot, at an angle of forty-five degrees, he could see the doorway of the front room. Looking through that doorway, he could also see part of the terrace and the sunshade built toward the street side. On that sunshade, he could see a policeman sitting with an LMG, his head turned backwards and looking at the street.

Kranti said in a low voice, 'Swamy *anna*, I see a policeman.'

At once, Swamy crawled from beside Prabhakar's dead body towards the shelf. Slowly rising, he peeped out through the hole. He too saw the policeman clearly. Immediately, he moved into a

kneeling position and aimed his already loaded rifle— at the policeman's chest. In the very next moment, the bullet from his gun tore through the policeman's chest. Swamy and Kranti both clearly saw the man screaming and falling backwards into the street with the LMG (light machine gun) in hand. His cap, however, fell down on the terrace.

Soon after, a fresh round of gunfire and explosions erupted from the police side but not a single bullet was fired in return by the guerrillas.

The firing continued for about half an hour and then stopped. Hearing loud voices, all three of them pricked up their ears. 'I am the DIG (Deputy Inspector General) speaking. All of you must surrender. We've planted bombs all around the house. Don't die needlessly. Don't throw your lives away.'

'The DIG himself is here,' said Gopi, glancing at Swamy. Swamy nodded. 'Don't waste your lives. We won't kill you. We won't file any cases against you. We won't do anything. Just surrender. Leave your weapons inside, raise your hands, and come out,' the voice kept repeating.

DIG's efforts were not in vain. Like a traveller who unknowingly walks into a tiger's trap drawn by the lure of gold, Kranti fell for the DIG's ploy. 'Swamy *anna*, I'll go out. I'd rather take my chances outside than die for sure inside. If I get out, maybe I can return to the party later. But staying in here is a sure death,' he said, forcing his words out while his eyes remained fixed on the ground.

Swamy hadn't expected such words.

Still recovering from the shock, he said, 'How can you believe his words? Even the people who gave us food are being harassed and killed. Do you think they'll spare someone like you at a time like this? Why walk straight into the enemy's hands and die a painful death of torture? Let's stay here and fight as long as we can and die like warriors. But don't surrender to the enemy. Didn't we come into the party ready to die? How can we fear death now?'

His words gave Kranti pause.

But the DIG kept shouting, over and over. 'We won't harm you. No cases, no jail. Surrender now or we'll blow up the house in a while. Don't lose your lives for nothing.'

'Swamy *anna*, maybe what he's saying is true. I'll go,' said Kranti.

'He'll say anything. What's there in just saying it? They are mere words. Don't believe him, Kranti.'

'I don't know... I just can't stay here anymore. I'm going,' Kranti said quietly but with firm resolve. Swamy tried once again to convince him.

Kranti walked into the trap like a moth to a flame, blinded by the promise of freedom.

Kranti removed his gun and the pouch of bullets and placed them on the floor.. He didn't look at Gopi, who was right beside him nor did he look at Swamy, who was a little further away. He didn't even glance at the brave soldier Prabhakar's fallen body. With tears in his eyes, head lowered, he slowly walked towards the front room.

From there, he shouted, crying, 'Sir, I'm coming out. Please don't shoot me, Sir.' A few moments of silence followed. 'Are you coming from the ground floor or from upstairs?' came the question. 'Looks like they think we're on both floors,' Gopi commented. Still thinking about Kranti, Swamy let out a soft 'Hmm.' 'I'm coming from upstairs, Sir. Don't shoot, Sir,' Kranti cried again. 'If you've got any weapons or bombs, leave them inside and come out with your hands raised.' 'I'll do just that, sir,' he said and moved towards the door with his hands raised. Just as he was about to step out, a sudden burst of gunfire was released in his direction.

Kranti would have collapsed there if he had taken another step forward. But the police's momentary impatience caused them to fire too early. Because of that slight miscalculation, Kranti dodged death by a hair's breadth and fell back into the rear room. 'You were right, Swamy *anna*... these scoundrels were going to kill me,' he said, in shock.

'You were wrong to believe him, Kranti. Now you

understand, don't you? You were about to die, all thanks to believing the enemy's words. We live or die, while fighting. Come, pick up your rifle. Let's fight until our last breath and take down as many of them as possible,' Swamy said. He felt happy that Kranti had a clear understanding of the reality now.

Kranti returned to the cover.

'We fired at you by mistake. We won't shoot this time. Trust us. Please come out again,' the DIG began once more, speaking honeyed words. About half an hour later, Kranti began to waver again like before. 'Anna, he said they shot by mistake earlier. He might not shoot this time. I'll go,' he said. 'You saw for yourself what he did, didn't you? He won't let you go. He'll kill you. Don't trust him,' Swamy said firmly. 'Even if we stay inside, we're going to die anyway. If I go out, there's a chance I might survive,' Kranti said. 'What are you saying, Anna? You just saw what happened,' Gopi said in amazement. 'He's claiming it's really a mistake,' Kranti mumbled. Frustrated by trying to convince him, Swamy finally said, 'It's your wish, Kranti. What more can we say?'

'Sir, I told you I'll come out. Even when I was coming out with my hands up, they opened fire. You say you won't kill us, but you're firing to kill us, Sir,' Kranti shouted from inside. 'No one should fire. No one should fire. Come out now. No one will shoot. I've given orders, haven't I? No one will fire,' said the DIG. Kranti placed his gun down, stood up, lowered his head, raised his hands, and stepped outside. This time, the police didn't shoot.

After Kranti went into their custody, the police fully understood the situation inside.

'Swamy! Gopi! How long will you two keep fighting? Surrender now. Otherwise, we've planted bombs around the house. We'll blow it up,' shouted not just the DIG but many different police voices.

Hearing the police threats, both Swamy and Gopi were filled with rage. 'You, sons of dogs! Do you think threatening us with bombs will scare us? We're ready to die. There's no bravery in planting bombs. If you've got guts, come inside!' Swamy screamed. 'You, cowards! If you've got courage, come outside!'

The patience and decency the police had been pretending to show until then disappeared and their true nature came out. 'You're nothing but lapdogs guarding the landlords. Who's going to listen to you?' Gopi too shouted.

After a few minutes of back-and-forth shouting and abuse, perhaps the police realised that these two were not going to surrender. They might have thought they could convince them through Kranti. 'Swamy Anna, they've planted bombs all around the house. They're going to blow them up. Don't die unnecessarily like this. They didn't harm me. You both come out too,' Kranti pleaded from outside. 'We're not cowards like you. If we die, we'll die right here. There's no way we'll surrender like you did,' came the strong reply in two voices.

Seeing there's no use, the police fell silent.

A little while later, Swamy heard something at a nearby hole in the roof above and looked up.

Gelatin sticks arranged in the form of marigold flowers were fitted in the hole. 'They're going to blow it up. If they do, the opening will become wider, and there will be no cover above. What should we do?' Swamy thought. 'I'll shoot it myself before they blow it up, so that everything will fall down,' he thought, making a wrong estimation. As the idea came, he stepped out from behind cover, held his gun upward, aimed directly at the 'marigold', and fired. Boom! It exploded with a tremendous noise.

He felt as if something heavy struck him. The gun flew out of his hands. An unbearable heat enveloped him. His eyes went blind with the brightness. Dust and grit covered his face and hands.

For almost five minutes, he stood there motionless, unable to move. When he recovered a little and looked up, he saw that the roof above had been blown away over an expanse of a yard. He immediately rolled aside. Due to the force of the explosion, even the police who were on the roof must have been thrown away, and it must have taken them a while to recover. Otherwise, it would have been Swamy's end if they had looked in through that hole. When Swamy searched for his gun that had fallen from

his hand he saw that its barrel had bent backwards and curled due to the explosion.

Then Swamy picked up the gun that Kranti had left behind when he surrendered.

From that moment, the police attack intensified many times over. Auto-fire rained from all directions. Bombs were being thrown madly from the holes in the roof. They tied big bombs with ropes and dropped them inside through the large hole, causing massive explosions.

Even so, the big gunny sacks in the room continued to shield the two of them. Hit by bullets and bombs, the sacks too were torn and the clay pots broke, causing the grains to scatter all over.

Unable to breathe properly, both of them became restless. Their throats were parched from the smoke. With no other option, they drank their own urine. Five or six hours passed thus.

Around three in the afternoon, a bullet struck Gopi's right elbow and shattered the bone. He started bleeding heavily and was in a lot of pain. More importantly, he was no longer in a position to fire his gun and he sank into despair. 'Swamy Anna, I'm going to die anyway. If not that, we'll be captured by them alive. If that happens, they'll torture us. Why fall into their hands? I want to just shoot myself and die.' Hearing such unexpected words, Swamy quickly turned to look at Gopi. Gopi's face clearly showed the agony he was in. Clenching his teeth, he was obviously trying his best to bear the pain.

Swamy looked at him with sympathy and said, 'Don't think like that, Gopi. We must fight the enemy until our last breath. Look—despite being surrounded by so many enemies and despite such intense firing, we managed to hold them off and killed two of them. Who knows, maybe we still have a chance to kill some more. So, we must try to stay alive.' 'What chances do we have now? I can't even fire my weapon in this condition. I am unable to bear this pain anymore. If I fall into their hands, they'll subject me to brutal torture. You heard how the two *Akkas* screamed in pain, unable to bear their torture. If I am going to die anyway, isn't it better if I die on my own terms?' Gopi said as he tried to

place the gun to his chest with his left hand. His face reflected a grim resolve, indicating the firmness of a final act.

Swamy moved closer, gently pushed the gun aside and said, "Yes, Gopi, if we fall into their hands, they will torture us. But we have to face that, too. Even if they catch us and kill us, we should raise our slogans till the end and die with spirit. A death like that will inspire the people. But dying by our own hands will not. Please, don't do such a thing.' It was extremely hard for Swamy to even speak—amidst the deafening sounds of bullets and explosions, with his body feeling as if on fire and his tongue parched. Still, Swamy tried to persuade his comrade, who had fought heroically and fiercely for nearly twenty hours, not to commit suicide.

Even Swamy had no hope that they would survive by somehow crossing the fine line between life and death. That's why he couldn't even bring himself to say words like 'we might survive.' But he was anxious that Gopi should not waste the final opportunity to inflict loss on the enemy by committing suicide. Yet, Gopi's thoughts seemed firmly fixed on suicide. When he made another attempt, Swamy once again snatched the gun away.

Swamy was in a terrible situation—on the one hand, trying to dissuade Gopi, and on the other, staying on high alert against the enemy. Because now, he was the only one who could still fire back at the enemy. With bullets and bombs raining down uncontrollably, he couldn't keep an eye on Gopi every moment. After a while, Swamy got the feeling that Gopi had given up the thought of suicide because of his words of advice. A short while later, he heard the sound of a bullet being fired, and Swamy turned his gaze away from the door towards where the sound had come. Gopi had committed suicide.

Leaning against the wall where he sat, Gopi had placed the double-barrelled gun to his chest and pulled the trigger with his toe. Not a sound came from his mouth. Blood spurted from his chest and soaked his entire face. Within seconds, his life was gone. His lifeless body remained slumped against the wall in the same position.

Swamy closed his eyes, unable to bear the sight. 'Oh comrade, what have you done?' he thought, his heart heavy with sorrow.

Gopi was a Dalit boy who studied up to Intermediate. His broad face was always lit up with a wide smile. He mingled well with everyone. He didn't get demoralised even when caught in a terrifying and dreadful enemy attack. He fought back bravely. Though his senior Kranti surrendered in the middle of the battle, Gopi didn't waver at all. As long as he could hold a weapon, he kept fighting. 'Freedom is greater than life. I don't care if I lose my life, but I will not become a prisoner to the enemy and lose my freedom,' said Chandrashekhar Azad²—and just like him, Gopi too became a martyr.

Now, only Swamy remained.

Two comrades were captured alive, subjected to severe torture and then killed. Another comrade fought heroically until his last drop of blood and died giving revolutionary slogans till the end. Kranti, shocked by the horror of it all, lost touch with reality and succumbed to delusion. Gopi, who fought heroically till the end, chose to end his life out of despair when he could no longer fight back. Swamy had to bear the pain of losing all his comrades in less than a day —each in a different way within a matter of hours.

All these events were draining every bit of his inner energy, turning his body into a lifeless log of wood. However, one thing keeping his spirit alive was his strong resolve not to let the enemy have an easy victory. In spite of not having food, water, sleep, or even clean air to breathe, this determination alone gave him the strength to carry on.

It was nearing four in the evening. Realising that the guerrillas were hiding in the room at the back, the police began burning its floor i.e. the wooden beams and planks that made up the underside of the floor. Swamy could feel the rising heat and smoke coming up from below.

He couldn't move to the front room, because of the intense firing there. Pondering what to do, he reached the door behind

which Gopi and Kranti had taken cover. Bending down slightly, he peered from the door into the room.

The body of the police man who died from his firing during the night was no longer there. Swamy ascertained they must have taken away the body. Just then, an AK-47 lying over there caught his attention. Its belt was clearly visible. But only half of the gun could be seen. The debris from the bombing and the thick dust had covered the other half of it. 'How can I retrieve it?' he thought, glancing around. His gaze fell upon a bamboo pole tied to the ceiling to hang things in the very room he was in. At once, he grabbed the pole with his hands. He bent slightly, carefully inserted the pole through the door towards the belt of the AK, and then pulled it back. Within a minute, the AK was in his hands. When he checked, the magazine was fully loaded with bullets.. Swamy was unable to stay any longer in the room at the back as the heat had become unbearable and he felt that if he stayed there any longer, he would suffocate and be scorched to death. So he slowly came to the front room and took a position beside the window, using the wall as cover.

The AK in his hands ignited a blaze of thoughts. Alone, he couldn't resist much longer. They might burn down the house, demolish it. He could burn alive or he might get caught or, as happened to Gopi, he might get shot in the hands which would prevent him from being able to retaliate. So, if he ran up to the terrace and fired at the police surrounding the place till the magazine became empty, a few of them might die. Then, even if he dies, he would take some of them with him. His thoughts continued along this line for a while. After some time, a new idea occurred to him — 'Is there not a sliver of chance to escape?'

Instead of going to the rooftop, perhaps if he could somehow reach the street-side entrance, he could run through the street firing at the police stationed in the street. That way, he might eliminate a few policemen and if possible, he may manage to escape. In any case, going out of the house would only offer a chance either to survive or to kill the police. Staying inside would not offer any opportunity at all. Tormented by such conflicting thoughts, he was finally inclined towards escape. His mind then began searching for possibilities towards that.

As darkness began to fall, his eyes, scanning here and there for an escape route, fell on a roll of broad cotton tape hanging from a wooden peg nearby. The moment he saw it, his thoughts for escape started taking shape. He slowly took the roll and returned to the back room. He walked to a hole in the room formed by the grenades thrown earlier.

By then, the fires that the police had started earlier had died down, so the heat wasn't unbearable. He tied the roll of cotton tape to a beam of timber that was visible through that hole. After taking one last look at the bodies of his two fallen comrades, he gripped the cotton tape and slid down through the hole into the room below. As soon as he landed, he pressed himself against the wall and observed his surroundings. By then, it had turned completely dark. This meant it had been more than twenty-four hours since the police attack began.

As he scanned the surroundings, he noticed that the wall on the street-facing side of the room had been blasted by bombs. Where the wall was blasted, there were bricks scattered and strewn on either side of two yards of the wall. There were no police near the shattered wall. When he peeked out cautiously, he could see a group of policemen near the street gate on the left side. There were also groups of policemen on the terrace opposite. However, on the right side, no police were visible.

He gave up the idea of going out through the street gate and decided instead to leap out into the street from the broken remains of the wall itself.

Forgetting hunger, thirst, the burning pain in his body, and all the agony, he gathered whatever strength he had left. He slung the gun over his shoulder, placed one leg on the broken wall, and, with a sudden leap, jumped into the street. Even as he jumped, he turned slightly to the right. Aiming behind him towards the police group near the street gate, he kept firing his gun resting on his shoulder while he sprinted ahead with lightning speed.

Shocked by the sudden turn of events, the policemen stationed on the streets and on the roof tops that were lit up by

mercury lights, stood frozen for a moment. Then they came to their senses and started firing behind him as he ran.

Swamy, too, fired at the police in the street and occasionally at those on the rooftops. Diving through alleys and ducking into corners, he ran until he reached one end of the village. Now, in just a few moments, he would have crossed the village and reached the outskirts.

But the entire village was surrounded by police. At present, a group of police men was stationed just outside the village, directly opposite the street he was running in. Seeing him running in their direction, all the policemen opened fire on him.

As bullets came from straight ahead, he couldn't go any further in that direction. Swiftly, he turned back and, darting through alleys and lanes, he ran until he nearly reached the centre of the village. By then, he had been running for ten to fifteen minutes. Since police were stationed everywhere in groups with lights set up at various spots, he felt it was no longer wise to keep running. Just then, he noticed a cattle shed and went into it. He stood still for a while to get back his breath. Then he saw a haystack in the shed. Immediately, he climbed on top of it, moved some hay aside, got inside, and covered himself again with the hay.

He stayed like that until around half past midnight. The dry hay was producing unbearable heat and his throat was burning. His mouth had gone so parched that even saliva wasn't coming. 'If I don't drink water immediately, I'll die before the police kill me,' he thought. He knew all the doors would be bolted at midnight, so he decided to go to someone's house and try to get some water either from their bathroom or from the pots outside. He got up from the haystack, came out of the shed, and walked towards a house nearby, hoping there might be a bathroom. As he moved about, the dogs near the house started barking loudly. It was a house belonging to a big family of the shepherd's caste. The dogs' barking woke up almost everyone.

'Who is it? Who is it?' they asked as they opened the door and stepped outside.

Swamy immediately approached them and said, 'Please don't make a fuss. I'm Swamy. I escaped from the police firing. I'm very thirsty. Could you please give me some water?' Everyone stared at him under the lamp's light. Though Swamy didn't recognise them, they had seen him several times before during meetings. The matriarch of the house, Rajavva, immediately brought him some water. He drank the water in gulps, filling his stomach. He returned the empty vessel to her, saying, 'I can't leave right now. The village is surrounded by police. So, I'll take off this uniform and gun, wear regular clothes, and stay here in your house. Somehow, you have to shelter me.'

His words caused concern among the family members.

Rajavva's elder son said, 'It's painful to see you like this *Anna*, but by tomorrow, the police might search every house.'

'Oh, my son! Not one or two, but there are hundreds of police men. If they find out you're staying in our house, they won't spare you, us, our house or our children,' Rajavva said, worried.

Swamy realised that sheltering him in any house wasn't a simple matter of courage with police all over the village and due to an atmosphere of battle built up since the previous night.

'Alright, I'll go now. But don't tell anyone I came this way,' he said and walked out. He went a little distance, wondering if he could go out of the village through another street. But even there, lights were glowing, and police were present. He turned back cautiously without being seen by the police. He concluded that it was impossible to escape immediately and returned to the same cattle shed and lay under the haystack again. 'How long can I hide in this haystack? They'll surely figure out I'm still in the village. Tomorrow, they might search every house, every shed, every haystack...' he mused.

Just then, he remembered an incident narrated by Comrade Murali (Koyyuru martyr³). In one village, when the police were hunting down a Sangham leader, the villagers saved him by hiding him in a dung heap. That memory brought to mind the rubbish heap he had seen near the shepherds' house earlier. Rajavva's daughters-in-law rolled beedis. The leftover tobacco leaves and waste were all piled high in the rubbish heap in front of the house.

Before dawn, around four, Swamy quietly exited the haystack and went to the rubbish heap. He cleared away enough rubbish from one side to fit a person and made a sort of trench. Then he lay down flat in it, placed his gun beside him, and began to cover himself with the rubbish—his feet first, then his stomach, chest, and shoulders. Finally, he pulled the rubbish over his face, exposing only one hand to keep it from falling.

He remained like that until about seven in the morning. At around that time, he heard the sounds of someone washing the dishes near the rubbish heap. Wastewater from washing the utensils was being thrown onto the heap. The water splashed and fell right on Swamy's face. He had been lying still without moving for nearly three hours. His back was completely numb and his arms and legs were stiff.

He was finding it increasingly difficult to remain still.

'If I move even a little, the heap will shift. If it moves, the person washing the dishes will notice. If they spot me, who knows what will happen? They were already terrified last night. If they ask me to leave, I'll have nowhere to go. Since it's morning, if I walk through the street, the police will surely see me...' different thoughts surged through his mind. Still, he couldn't stop himself from moving. He shifted slightly to one side. Immediately, he heard Rajavva's loud voice shouting, 'Oh no! There's something in this dung heap!' He also heard the sound of a metal vessel falling. It sounded as if she ran a few steps away, too.

From the house, he could hear people saying, 'What is it? What's going on?' It seemed to him that everyone was coming out of the house.

Afraid that if he kept sitting there longer, the commotion would grow and attract the attention of the people in the street, he quickly got up, brushed off the rubbish stuck to him, and said, '*Amma*, please don't make a fuss. It's me. I came here last night. I wanted to leave, but the whole village was surrounded by police. I couldn't go anywhere, so I hid here.' Everyone from the house who gathered there began to stare at him, lost for words. Even the small children were staring silently.

He continued before they could recover from the shock, 'The police are all over the village, around every corner. Right now, I have no way to escape. Let me hide in your house just for today. I will find some way to leave during the night. Please protect me just for today. We are not living for ourselves. It is for others. Only you can protect us,' Swamy said.

One of Rajavva's sons immediately said, 'Alright, get up and come inside.' But Rajavva said, 'Ayyo if these monsters come to know, they'll kill you. They'll kill us too. Please, son, don't come into the house.' Another of Rajavva's sons said, 'Where will he go now, *Amma*? Let him stay.'

'No, my son... There are small children and toddlers in the house. They will kill everyone...' The fear in a mother's heart that something might happen to her children was clearly evident in her words.

There was some argument between the mother and her sons. In the end, even the sons couldn't convince their mother. Realising their mother would never agree, one of the sons came to Swamy and said, 'You get up from here *Anna*. We'll take you to another house.'

Swamy, afraid that the neighbours might hear everything if the discussion continued longer, quickly got up from the rubbish heap. He went into the house again, asked for water and drank it. 'Even going to another house is difficult now, so I'll hide in the shed. Please don't tell anyone. All the children have seen me anyway. Make sure even they don't say anything,' he said, pointing towards the shed where he had stayed the previous night.

Everyone looked at his blood-soaked clothes and the wounds on his face, body, and hands with sympathy. 'Don't go into the shed *Anna*,' said one of Rajavva's sons. 'The people living in that house over there have gone to town, so the house is locked up. If you climb the wall and go in, you will find a shed beside the house. If you hide in that shed, nobody will suspect anything since the house is locked,' he said, pointing towards the house across the street.

Everyone, including Rajavva, agreed that it would be better if he stayed there. Even Swamy felt it was a good idea. As he nodded in agreement, Rajavva's sons placed two slim wooden planks slanting against the wall of the opposite house. Swamy climbed the wall using the planks and got down into the shed. They had taken care to make sure no one else saw this.

Inside the shed, there was a pile of hay in a corner. Swamy made space for himself within the pile, lay down and covered himself with the hay.

Four or five hours passed very heavily.

Around noon, he heard Rajavva calling out 'son, son' from near the wall. Saying 'yes,' he rose from the hay and came to the wall. But the wall was high, so he couldn't see Rajavva on the other side. Looking around, he spotted a bullock cart's wheel. He rolled it near the wall and leaned it against it. Climbing up, he rested his head over the wall, looked down towards Rajavva's side and gently asked, 'What is it, *Amma*?' 'Why, son, I called you so many times. You didn't respond.' 'Oh, no! Did you call that many times? My hearing's gone dull, *Amma*... I couldn't hear properly.' 'What kind of trouble have you all got into, son? What suffering, son... You're sacrificing your lives for others. But look at how the police have mercilessly killed young women and men still in the prime of their lives. I just saw it with my own eyes, son,' she said with deep sorrow.

'You saw them, *Amma*?' Swamy asked, his voice filled with anxiety. 'I saw them, son. The police said they'd show us the dead bodies if we brought some firewood. I said I would also see and took two bundles of firewood. Oh child, your own people... there were two women and three men, all of them so young.' Before she could finish her words, Swamy interrupted, 'Three? Were there three men?' 'Yes, son, there were. Oh, how much trouble and hardships all of you endured for the sake of people and what did the people do to prevent them from being killed...' Her voice broke as she spoke.

Then, quickly gathering herself, she said, 'Don't come out into the light, son. The whole village is swarming with police. I went up to the fields just to see and there are police there too.'

They are all around the village and it doesn't look like they will leave today. They put up tents and are sitting under them, eating happily. I'll come now and then and tell you what's happening. But you stay safe, child. Who knows when you ate last...? Here, eat this cucumber, child. It will stop your thirst for a while,' she said. She placed the cucumber in his hands, and looking around carefully, she went back into her house.

Getting down from the bullock cart wheel, he walked back towards the hay stacks. He thought, 'So they killed even Kranti... in any case, why wouldn't they kill him? How did Kranti believe them? How did he fall into illusions? He used to be such an idealist! He could endure so much hardship!'

Swamy felt as if Kranti with his tall frame and dark, long face was standing before him.

Prabhakar, Kranti, and Gopi were all of the same age. All of them had studied till tenth or intermediate and all of them were idealistic. Vijaya and Lalitha, too, were equally committed and principled. What a great team! How could it all vanish in just one day?

How did this happen? This question troubled him even during the terrifying carnage of the previous day and it started bothering him again.

As the squad reached the village before dawn two days before, an old man named Pentala Gangireddy came out to attend the call of nature. He had seen them then. He was slightly opposed to the party. As he had seen them from a distance, they assumed he hadn't clearly recognised them as the squad. Prabhakar and Gopi decided to act like the police, so they went and spoke to him in Hindi and returned.

But what if he'd suspected they were indeed from the squad? Could he have passed on the information to the police? Swamy had wondered many times. When they reached the shelter house, the squad had to call out multiple times because the people inside were in deep sleep. Did anyone hear us back then? That thought too occurred to him multiple times. A small mistake somewhere had led to such a huge loss. All his squad

comrades were killed. He alone remained but would he also survive?

Rajavva said there are still hundreds of police all around the village. Would he be able to escape? Would he have the chance to carry forward the ideals of his comrades? Would he get the opportunity to repay the debt of their blood? He sat there holding the cucumber in his hand, lost in thought.

Suddenly, he snapped out of it. 'No, I must stay alert. The police could come at any moment,' he reminded himself.

He opened the magazine of the rifle to check how many bullets were left. Only one was in the magazine, and another was loaded in the chamber.

A wave of helplessness washed over him.

Rajavva's voice rang out again, 'Son, oh son!' He got up on the cart's wheel and peeked at her. 'Here, my son, eat this food,' she said, handing him a bundle of rice. She also gave him a tumbler of drinking water. Receiving them without much interest, he asked, 'Are the police still around, *amma*?' 'Yes, my son. They're burning the dead bodies. Don't stay here tonight. They now know you're still in the village. They're saying they'll search house to house. If they find you, they'll kill you. And they'll kill us too. Leave before it gets dark,' she said.

'You only told me the whole village is swarming with police—how can I leave now, *amma*?'

'Oh, yesterday you escaped the big encirclement and made it through. Is it really difficult for you to escape from here and reach the outskirts? You can definitely make it out of here, in fact you will be caught if you stay here...'

Even at that difficult moment, Swamy found her words amusing. 'How much faith the people have in the bravery of revolutionaries,' he thought.

He said, 'Alright,' took the food and water, and walked back to the haystack. He didn't argue with Rajavva, but he still felt that escaping that night wouldn't be possible. He cannot even fire at the police and escape, because his gun had only two bullets. How many more days will the police stay? Maybe they'll leave

tomorrow. So if he just hid here for tonight, he'd be safe. This wasn't a tiny hamlet — it had over five hundred houses. How many houses and their attached sheds could they possibly search?

Such were his thoughts.

He didn't even think about opening the food bundle. Occasionally, he sipped water from the tumbler to wet his throat. Before nightfall, Rajavva came twice more to pass on information about the police. It was night now. He remained alert, sitting throughout the night.

Dawn broke.

It was about seven in the morning when he heard someone washing the dishes near the front yard of Rajavva's house. 'It must be her. Maybe this is the last chance to speak with her,' he thought, climbing up the cart wheel. Yes, it was Rajavva washing the dishes.

'*Amma!*' he called loudly enough for her to hear.

She turned around in surprise. 'Oh, my child, you didn't leave last night? The police searched every house on that side. Today, they're coming this way. They'll kill you. And they'll kill us, too,' she said as she walked closer. '*Amma*, you are only saying that the whole village is full of police. Tell me, how can I leave?'

'Let's do one thing. You bring me a shirt, a *dhoti*, and a *gongadi*. I'll wear those clothes and go. I can't leave the house in this uniform,' he said, voicing the plan he'd been weighing all night. She accepted his idea and brought him the clothes.

He dressed in a shirt and dhoti, hid his regular clothes and gun among the haystacks, jumped over the wall and entered Rajavva's house. 'If I just wrap a *gongadi* and go, people might suspect. Give me a bag of pesticide, I will pretend that I am going to the fields', he said. 'There's no pesticide bag, my child.'

'Then at least give me some seeds in a bag, so it looks like I'm going to the field,' he said.

Agreeing, she tied up some seeds in a bundle and gave it to him. He took it and, without delay, went to Rajavva's daughters-in-law who were rolling beedis and asked them for a few beedis. He asked for a matchbox, too. Though he didn't have the habit of

smoking, his intention was to disguise himself better by puffing on a beedi, so that the smoke from it would partially cover his face and make it harder to recognise him.

Wrapping himself in the *gongadi*, holding the seeds bag on his head, beedi in mouth, he stepped into the courtyard and took a few steps. 'My son, my son!' she called out again. Turning back, he saw her beckoning him inside. Once he entered, she said, 'Son, we're in trouble. Please help us. When my son-in-law needed money, I took a loan from someone and gave it to him. He promised to repay, but now he's refusing—and worse, he's demanding more. If I don't give it, he's threatening to abandon my daughter. Could you speak to him and settle this?'

The same woman who had asked yesterday, 'Why are you taking all these troubles?' is now asking him to solve her troubles. Swamy forgot about his own situation for a while and got absorbed in hers. 'Alright, *Amma*. Next time I come, we'll call your son-in-law and speak to him. Don't worry,' he said, responding to her just like he always did with anyone's problem.

The next moment, he became aware of his own danger again. 'How am I promising like this? Am I really going to survive? Will I really be able to solve her problem? Where is this confidence coming from? It is this very faith of the people that is guiding the revolutionary movement,' he thought.

He stood up, said, 'I'll be going, *amma*,' and stepped out again. 'My son!' she called again. He took two steps back. 'If you go this way, there'll be paddy fields for a long stretch. Escaping through them will be tough. But if you go that way, you'll enter maize fields. Once inside, you can hide and escape more easily,' she said, pointing out directions with her hands.

Moved by her concern for his safety, he said, 'Alright, *amma*,' and started walking in that direction.

After four or five steps, she called again, 'My son, my son!'

He turned around.

'No, son. You don't know the paths here. How can you go alone? I'll act like I'm going to the fields to answer nature's call. You follow me. Once I get you to the maize fields, you can escape,' she said, hurriedly filling the mug with water and walking ahead.

He looked at her in awe.

Police were stationed in every street and corner, they surrounded the whole village. Yet, she crafted a plan to get him out safely, and she was ready to execute it herself. She knew well what could happen if the plan failed. Having been born and raised on Telangana soil, she had heard countless stories of people tortured, jailed, and even killed just for feeding or giving shelter to the revolutionaries.

The family that gave shelter to the revolutionaries just two days ago were still being tortured by the police.. She had seen their condition with her own eyes. Yet, she bravely took up the responsibility of saving a revolutionary's life. She had become his pilot.

This is why people are considered the steel fortress for the revolution, he thought.

'Now, I have no worries. This steel fortress will definitely protect me,' Swamy thought as he followed her.

(This is based on Comrade Swamy's narration about the 1993 Padkal encounter.)

(Dedicated to all the mothers who protect and shelter the warriors of people's war within their homes, especially to this mother, Rajavva.)

Translation of 'Ukkukota'. (First published in Arunatara, November 2008)

Translated by Vimal

Notes:

1. *gongadi* - a coarse woollen blanket
2. Chandrasekhar Azad - Indian freedom fighter. He died fighting the British soldiers who surrounded him in a park. Before dying, he managed to kill three of the enemy soldiers and he shot himself with the last bullet in his gun so as not to be captured by the British.
3. Koyyuru martyr - Central Committee members of the then CPI M.L. (Peoples War) party - Seelam Naresh (aka Murali), A.Santosh Reddy (aka Mahesh) and Nalla Adi Reddy (aka Shyam) - were caught alive in Bangalore through a covert operation and later killed in a fake encounter in Koyyuru forest on 2nd December 1999.

The Closed Heart

‘Why do you get involved in all these matters? They have even killed Jilla. You just stop all these activities at least now, and let us get on with our lives calmly ...’

Malle had wanted to say this while serving rice to her husband, but eventually managed to say it after he had finished eating and washed his hands.

‘What do you mean, live calmly? If they kill one of ours, we’ll kill ten of theirs,’ said Kannal, flaring up.

‘You always lash out when I speak. You know very well how to shout at me, but for once, just for once, listen to me properly...’ she said angrily, setting the dishes aside.

‘Eh, always the same complaints from you...’ said Kannal, getting up abruptly while wiping his washed hands on the towel over his shoulder and walking toward the front yard.

Malle followed him. She sat down opposite the cot where her husband had settled. Though she had expressed similar concerns before, today she had resolved to speak firmly.

‘But why should you resort to such heinous things? They are killing everyone they catch irrespective of whether it is a woman, a man, old or young. They are even killing little children. They are raping women without any compassion or mercy and no mother or sister is left untouched. We too have daughters and young children. How can you bring yourself to do such vile, sinful things?’

‘What’s sin, what’s virtue? What we’re fighting is a war! Do you even know what *Salwa Judum* is? It’s a war! There’s no place for all these things in a war!’ Usually, he would dismiss his wife’s concerns, but today some strange passion compelled him to justify himself.

‘A war against whom? Against babies? Against old people?’

‘We asked everyone to come and stay in the camps. Some agreed, some didn’t. If people don’t understand nicely, we must act tough.’

‘Who would agree to abandon their birthplaces, the land that fed them, their homes and fields? Is it not grave injustice to kill them if they refuse to come?’

‘That’s not it... They aren’t leaving their villages just because they are attached to them. They’re staying back with the support of the Naxals. That’s why they have to be dealt with...’

‘Even if they stay back with support of the Naxals, so what? Let them stay. Their lives are theirs...’

‘You ignoramus! You don’t understand anything! If they stay back, the Naxals grow stronger with their support. Since you live in a village by the roadside, you haven’t felt the terror of the Naxals. If they were here, would we still have our hundred-acre land? Would you still be living comfortably in such a big house? Would our sons have been with us? They would have distributed our land to the entire village. They’d have bombed our house, and snatched our sons. They’d even recruit them into their militia...’

‘Whatever. So far, they haven’t touched us. Why provoke them?’

‘If we wait till they reach our village, it’ll be too late. We must destroy the Naxals to protect our land, our dominance.’

‘Fine. But why kill innocent people in the name of that? Why make people cry? Don’t make the common folk pay the price. Nobody has ever survived by going against the people. Moreover they are our people...’

‘Oh, what can these wretched people do to us? We have the government and the army behind us.’

'Don't say they can't do anything. They've already attacked the camps...'

'That's only because they have Naxal support. Let's see how long they last. The government is about to send a large force of the army. Then the Naxals and their sympathizers will be wiped out.'

No matter how much he argued, Malle could not accept it.

'Well, let's see then. But until then, don't go running around everywhere,' she warned.

'Ugh! Enough of your whining. If we take active part in *Salwa Judum* now, we can enjoy power later when the Naxals are wiped out. If we remain passive doing nothing, who will value us tomorrow?'

'Maybe so. But by getting involved with *Judum* now, you're putting our family at risk. Look at what happened to Jillal—his wife and kids are left without support now...'

'Don't worry about me. As long as I have this gun, I'm safe.' He grabbed the double-barrel gun leaning against the wall.

'Didn't Jillal have a gun? His field was right across the police station. Even then, the Naxals shot him dead in that field itself and took his gun too...'

'Maybe he got careless...'

Malle was at a loss how to convince him.

'Please, listen. So far, we've lived well. We got our eldest daughter married. Our eldest son is doing farming very well. The younger ones are studying well. If we keep educating them further, they'll get good jobs. We have been living without any care, we don't need to stir up more trouble.'

From noon to evening, they kept arguing. But neither gave in.

'Isn't it enough that you are doing all kinds of vile things? Are you planning to drag our sons into this too? If you think I'll stay quiet while you destroy our boys, you're mistaken!' shouted Malle.

Once, she would tremble at the thought of raising her voice to her husband. But now she stood in the open courtyard, Kannal sat on one cot; their eldest son Mangal and second son Sanjay sat on another.

Malle and Kannal had six children—two daughters and four sons. Except for the eldest daughter and son, the others were studying in a hostel in Bijapur. The eldest daughter and eldest son had Adivasi names. As with the other Adivasi children, the teachers changed the names of the other four younger siblings as soon as they were admitted into the school. So, the second son was renamed Sanjay.

‘Do what you can. You always quarrel about everything. It is not just our boys who are joining! Many youths are joining the SPOs (Special Police Officers). I’ve personally recruited dozens. I will have a loss of face if somebody asks me why I am not recruiting my own children while recruiting others’

‘We have land. While you go around roaming and raiding the villages, our elder son and I are managing the fields. If we perform his marriage this year, we’ll get a daughter-in-law and grandchildren. My burden will lessen and our home will shine with joy. You want to ruin all that by joining him in the *judum* and get him killed? Our second son is studying well without failing in any class and I was hoping that he will get a good job but you are seeing how to get him killed. Can’t you bear the sight of our children leading a peaceful life? You are all killing people while they are leading their peaceful life and now do you want the same fate for my boys?’ Her voice trembled with anger.

‘Why are you shouting like that? Are all those who joined as SPOs getting killed? People die as per their fate, whether they join the SPOs or not. You are a coward. Don’t turn our children into cowards.’ Kannal was unable to bear the fact of his submissive wife talking back at him with such firmness.

Even though their parents were having a serious quarrel regarding their future, both sons sat silently, without saying a word, looking in both directions from time to time.

‘You go ahead and say whatever you want—but I will not

let you drag my sons into this! I begged you to give it up, and now you're talking about involving them too? If you want to go and get yourself killed, go ahead—but leave them out of it!' she said firmly, in an unyielding tone.

'I'll do as I please. You shut up and keep quiet. Who asked for your opinion? They are my sons and I will decide whether I should join them in the SPOs or not' Kannal cut short the discussion, grabbed his towel and put it over his shoulder, slung his gun, and walked into the front yard and out into the street through the street door.

'You claim they're your sons? You may have fathered them, but I raised them!' she yelled after him.

'*Amma*, you know how he is. Once he decides something, he never backs down,' said Sanjay sympathetically.

'He may do what he wants, but he won't let you live your lives either... But, why are you behaving like sheep and doing as per his bidding?' she asked her sons in anguish.

'I don't want to join the SPOs, *Amma*. I'll finish my degree next year. If I take teacher training for another year, then I can and want to become a teacher. I told him that, but he is just not listening to me. He says: 'Join SPOs now, and you'll become a police officer soon.' But I don't want that police life of killing and getting killed. But what can I do? If my studies were completed I would have led my independent life. But he is saying that if I don't join now, he will not finance my studies. If I stop studying now, I won't get any job, nor do I know farming properly,' Sanjay shared his pain with his mother.

Malle's heart ached. All the while she thought her sons had agreed willingly.

'And you? Why did you agree to join the SPOs?' she asked her elder son, 'You know well how to cultivate the land.'

'It seems if youth like me do not become SPOs and resist them, the Naxals will become stronger and confiscate our lands and property. All my friends have joined. They are roaming with motor bikes and guns. They are laughing at me, saying even girls are joining as SPOs and I'm being a coward. So even I wanted to

join for a long time. But I held back because I thought *Nayana* (father) would scold me for not taking care of the farm. Now that he is only insisting, I've agreed.'

Malle's heart ached even more. It seemed like her elder son was going to follow faithfully in his father's footsteps and think highly of doing vile things and killing people with guns. One son agreed willingly, the other reluctantly. How could she protect them? Would the younger kids also grow up and follow this path? Malle was distressed thinking of various things and possibilities.

Kannal walked briskly in the evening light. After wrapping up his heinous 'duties' he headed home from the *Rahat Shivir*, (so-called Rehabilitation Camp run by *Salwa Judum* leaders and armed forces of the government). Earlier he used to stay at the camp till night. But, now as the situation is changing, he preferred going home by evening. If at all it became dark while he was still in the camp, then he stayed back at the camp that day. Police officers and fellow *Judum* leaders had warned him that it was dangerous to stay outside the camp.

Though Kannal himself forced many people to join the camp, he did not like camp life.

Even though there were no restrictions on his freedom there, the camp was filled with muck and crowds of people everywhere. There was constant shouting and noise. That's why he longed to spend at least the nights peacefully in his own home.

Moreover, his house was the largest in the village. It had sentimental value too—his family had lived there for many generations. During his time, he had built a large house with spacious rooms adjoining the old one, surrounded by a high boundary wall. Once the doors were shut, not even an ant could sneak in—that was the kind of confidence he had.

Kannal's house was about half a kilometre to the east of the camp. Between the camp and his house were a few rows of houses, interspersed with fields, open spaces, trees, and marshy areas. In almost all Adivasi villages, houses aren't in a single cluster but spread out in four or five groups. Between each cluster are fields, trees, or wetlands.

In bigger villages, each cluster may have dozens of houses; in smaller ones, only three or four. And even within those clusters, houses aren't uniform—typically one house is noticeably bigger. In Kannal's village too, there were around a hundred houses in the area where the camp was set up. Around twenty houses were located near Kannal's house.

When walking from the camp to his house, Kannal felt that the empty stretch of land at the end of the row of houses between the camp and his house was a perilous place for him. Police and *Salwa Judum* leaders had warned him often about the dangers lurking in that zone. So, he had the bushes cleared on either side of the path for ten to twenty yards, making it clearly visible.

Day and night, SPOs patrolled that path without rest. If any unfamiliar face was spotted, they'd immediately pounce on them. That assurance — of no one being able to sneak up on him — gave him some confidence. Still, holding a loaded gun in hand, he walked briskly and cautiously, scanning his surroundings. On the other hand, he carried SPO forms he had picked up for his sons.

Just then, he noticed two figures running toward him from a distance and was startled.

Before he could recover from the shock, a bullet whizzed past him with a loud bang.

Instinctively, he dashed toward a nearby tree for cover.

Before he could reach the tree, two more bullets zipped past him.

'Damn! Three misses,' muttered Badru, the action team commander.

Kannal returned fire twice from behind the tree and missed. If he has to fire again, he has to reload his double barrel gun. With the aim of firing on Kannal at close quarters before he could reload his gun, Badru started running fast towards Kannal. Badru's associate Vijjal followed suit. Seeing Badru and his associate closing in, Kannal gave up any attempt to reload his gun and chose to run. In this fear and confusion, he had dropped the SPO forms in his hand.

Badru and Vijjal started chasing him.

Badru tried to fire again, but realized that from a running position, it was difficult for him to hit a running man at such a distance. So he decided to get closer before shooting.

The three of them were running, pushing their bodies to the limit.

For Kannal, it was a matter of life and death. If he stopped or even slowed down, death was certain.

For Badru and Vijjal, it was an all-out attempt they've been risking their lives for—if they stopped or slowed down, their mission would fail.

They crossed the fields and entered the residential area. Since it was evening, people were out and about in the streets. Seeing the men running, everyone standing in the streets and doorways froze in place and stared.

As soon as they neared the houses in the lane, Vijjal intentionally fell slightly behind. Badru's focus was entirely on Kannal, while Vijjal kept scanning his surroundings. He carefully observed every person they passed, ensuring that no one would intervene in their operation—that was his responsibility.

As soon as the houses came into view, hope sparked in Kannal's heart. In another minute, he would reach his home. If he could get inside and bolt the doors, no one could touch him—he believed. Even though he was out of breath, he kept running with all his strength.

Badru began to feel despair. If this man reached his house... it meant the mission had failed.

He thought, *'I have to shoot him before he steps inside.'*

Kannal had reached the lane where his house was located. As soon as one stepped into the narrow lane, his house stood directly in front of it and the lane ended at his house.

The moment he entered the lane, Kannal could see the door of his house. *'Thank God, the door is open... My wife is standing at the threshold. If I can just step inside the doorstep and she shuts the door behind me, then I'll be safe... I'll have made it out*

alive...' Even in those tense moments, Kannal's mind was working sharply.

Badru thought, 'Damn, we've reached his house. His wife is already standing ready at the doorstep. As soon as he steps inside, she might close the door immediately... Even if she doesn't, once he crosses that threshold, who knows where he'll vanish—where he'll hide, where he might load his gun and pose a threat to me. And I don't even know who else is in the house... entering it would be dangerous for me. So, this is my last chance—I'll fire from here. If I hit him, I hit him. If not, that's it. It's better if I turn back from here.'

Badru stopped abruptly.

A flood of unspeakable frustration, helplessness, and disappointment overcame him. So many plans, strategies, discussions, and so many recce missions... all for nothing, he thought.

Vijjal stood at the entrance of the lane, determined to prevent anyone from entering.

Kannal had come even closer to his house. In the blink of an eye, he would have crossed the threshold and rushed inside!

But... his wife Malle, saw her husband running towards her in mortal fear, and the - sharp young man chasing him down. It took her only a moment to grasp the situation—and in the very next moment, she made a hard decision.

She quickly ran inside and slammed the door shut.

Kannal, running at full speed, crashed into the door and came to a sudden stop.

The shock his wife gave him would have taken him a lifetime to recover from, if not for the looming shadow of death behind him. But death was right at his heels, so he recovered instantly.

'Hey! Open the door! I'm going to die!' he screamed, tossing the gun in his hand to the ground and pounding on the door with all his strength, shaking it violently as he shouted loud enough to shake the surroundings.

But these weren't the kind of doors you'd typically find on

Adivasi homes—flimsy ones to stop the dogs and pigs from coming inside. These were doors built to protect their property and authority.

If it were any other Adivasi house, a forceful push like Kannal's wouldn't just knock down the doors—walls and roofs would have collapsed too. But these solid doors didn't budge an inch—just like Mallé's heart.

Kannal couldn't escape in any other direction either. On both sides of the house stood high boundary walls with barbed iron fences attached that were meant to protect their farmland.

In that way, three directions were completely blocked off to him.

Helpless, he turned back.

Badru, still reeling from surprise, stretched out his arms.

The pistol in his two palms glinted coldly in the dim light.

His aim was steady now with no room for missing.

His index finger tightened on the trigger.

(Based on true events.)

Translation of 'Moosukunna Hrudayam'. (First published in Arunatara, July–September 2010)

Translated by N.Ravi

Mother's Love

'*Akka*, already the sun is so high in the sky. That's enough picking for today. Let's head home. We have to fetch water and do other stuff, and prepare food,' said Mangli, transferring the plucked *mahua*¹ flowers from her small basket into the larger one.

'Yes, let's go. We're out of water and I am feeling thirsty too. We will feel better after having some *ambali* (a fermented gruel) at home,' said Somvari, as she added the *mahua* flowers from her basket to the larger basket and adjusted it. The baskets, filled with *mahua* flowers that resembled small jasmine buds, were a delightful sight.

'You have a daughter-in-law at home. You can work together and finish things quickly once you're back. But I have to manage everything by myself,' Mangli balanced the large basket on her head as she replied. Then, holding the empty hollowed bottle gourd in one hand, which she had brought with her for carrying water, she began walking briskly.

'Why don't you get Sukku married? Once a daughter-in-law comes, your troubles will ease too,' Somvari suggested, following her.

'I'm always telling him to get married, but does he listen to me?' Mangli replied.

'He seems interested in joining the squad ...' Somvari hinted.

'And if I say yes, he'd leave in no time. But he's my only son.'

If he goes, who will I have left? That's why I keep saying no,' Mangli explained.

'Does he listen to you if you say no?' Somvari asked.

'He won't go against my word. He can't see me suffering,' Mangli said.

'True, Sukku is a thoughtful boy.'

Mangli's face lit up with pride at Somvari's praise of her son. A faint smile appeared on her lips. Slightly short and about 45 years old, years of hard work had given Mangli a sturdy frame. She had a pleasing appearance with a round face and dusky complexion, calm eyes and beautiful teeth. Sukku was her only surviving child out of several. Five years ago, her husband had developed a lump on his leg. Despite selling their goats and pigs to take him to Bijapur for treatment,² it didn't help. After a year of suffering, he passed away. Since then, her world revolved around her son. They worked hard together on their small patch of land and, like others in the Dandakaranya forest, they depended on its resources. They collected *mahua* flowers and seeds, *tendu*³ leaves, gum, resin, honey, and other forest produce to sell at the market. They were satisfied with what they had and their life was simple but peaceful.

Somvari was Mangli's distant cousin and lived next door to her. She had two daughters and five sons. One daughter and one son had joined guerrilla squads, and another daughter and son had got married. The remaining three boys were around ten years old. Her daughter-in-law and younger sons had gone to collect *mahua* flowers from their land, while she had come to the forest with Mangli.

Both women were wearing blouses with *lungis* that they had tied around their waist and fell to just below their knees. Another *lungi* was slung over the chest to cover their bosoms. Now, they used this cloth to wipe their sweat as they continued to walk briskly. It was the month of March, and although the nights were cool, the days were fairly hot. The trees in the forest, having shed their old leaves long before, were just beginning to sprout new leaves. The *mahua* trees stood vibrant and green,

adorned with clusters of flowers. *Tendu* and other trees, too, had turned lush green, creating a picturesque scene.

As they walked briskly, Mangli paused for a moment, pointed to a *mahua* tree nearby, and said, 'There are red ants.' Both women set their baskets down. Somvari bent a branch low with a stick, and Mangli skilfully removed a nest of ants from it. The nest was built with leaves. Somvari spread a cloth on the ground, and Mangli shook the nest over it to let the ants and their eggs fall onto it. Then she laughed as she ran a short distance away. Red ants were crawling all over her body, biting her. She wiped her face, neck and hands with her palms, and crushed the ants crawling on her body. Then, removing her upper piece of cloth, she used it to brush off the ants from her stomach and chest. Ignoring the burning sensation on her body caused by the ant bites, she came back to the cloth where they were collecting the ants. By then, Somvari had also brushed off the ants from her body. She was sorting the white ant eggs and dead ants into two bundles using *mahua* leaves.

'This was a big nest, there are a lot of ants,' thought Mangli, placing one bundle into her *mahua* flower basket and lifting it onto her head again. Somvari followed her.

Once home, Mangli went to the drying yard beside the house and spread the *mahua* flowers evenly on the smooth, flat ground. The yard already had several piles of flowers in various stages of drying – some almost fully dried were in one pile, others needing two to three days were in another pile, and the fresh flowers formed a third pile. A heap of completely dried flowers was piled in one corner of the yard.

Coming out of the drying yard, Mangli unwound the roll of cloth that she put on her head to balance heavy baskets or vessels. She threw it on the bamboo clothesline, and let out a deep sigh. Without wasting a moment, she picked up a broom. Like most houses there, hers was a small two-room mud house. The front room had the firewood stove, where they cooked and ate. The back room was the store room where they stored grains and other essentials. The family slept in a small hut beside the house.

Hurriedly, Mangli cleaned the house, yard and the small hut. She gathered the dishes she had used for cooking the previous night. She then took two water pots, and balanced one pot on her head, arranging the dishes on top of it. She tucked the second pot under her arm and picked up a few more dishes to carry in her hands. Finally, she placed some clothes over her shoulder and came out of the house. About four or five minutes away from her house was a small pool of water in a deep spot of what used to be a stream but had now dried up.

Two or three other women were already there, washing dishes and clothes. As Mangli reached, she greeted them and sat down by the pool of water. She scrubbed her pots and dishes until they gleamed. She then used a small dish to scoop fresh water from a small spring beside the pool into the two pots and a cooking vessel. After that, she submerged herself in the pool for a bath. Using a stone, she scrubbed her arms, legs and body. She then changed into the clothes she had brought and washed the ones she had removed, beating them on a rock before rinsing them thoroughly. Then she wrung them tightly and slung them over her shoulder. She arranged the roll of cloth on her head and balanced one pot on it. She asked one of the other women to help place the second pot and the cooking vessel over it. Carrying the washed dishes in her hands, Mangli made her way back home.

The cool bath had refreshed her, washing away her fatigue. After arranging the pots and dishes, she took down a clay pot of leftover *ambali*, from the storage shelf just under the roof. Pouring some of it into a small steel bowl, she drank her fill.

She thought of her son Sukku. He had taken *ambali* in a hollow gourd. He must have had it by this time, she thought. He had said he'd come by noon; he may be hungry by then, so I'd better cook quickly, she thought to herself.

After washing the *ambali* bowl, Mangli lit the stove and placed a vessel with some water to boil. Without rinsing the pounded rice, she poured it into the boiling water in the vessel on the stove, letting it cook into a porridge. Once the rice had softened, she took the vessel off the stove and poured half of the porridge water into another pot for making curry.

From the bundle of ant eggs she had collected earlier, she pulled out the eggs wrapped in leaves and placed them into the embers of the fire. Once the eggs had roasted, she peeled off the charred leaves, releasing a rich aroma of cooked ant eggs. Mangli added the roasted eggs to the simmering porridge water. Using a bamboo stick, she stirred the mixture thoroughly, ensuring the eggs blended well.

She then took some raw turmeric and ground it on a stone slab, and added salt, four red chillies, and the ground turmeric to the pot. Cutting a small onion, she tossed that in too. Finally, she retrieved the previous day's leftover fermented rice-water from the high storage shelf and poured it into the curry to give it a tangy flavour. The combination of the sour porridge and the roasted ant eggs released an aroma so enticing that it made Mangli's mouth water. 'Sukku loves this dish, he'll eat heartily,' she thought with satisfaction.

She made two bowls with leaves and filled them with rice and set them aside, covering them with leaves. Meanwhile, Sukku arrived.

He had taken a bath at the stream and returned wearing a freshly washed, wet *lungi*. He picked up the dry clothes from the clothesline and wore them and hung his wet ones to dry. Sitting on a coir cot in the hut, he combed his hair while looking into a small handheld mirror.

'I'm starving, Sukku! Come quickly, let's eat,' Mangli called out as she rinsed the plates:

Sukku silently washed his hands and entered the house, and sat down on a low wooden stool. Mangli served him a plate of rice with a bowl of curry. She took her plate and served herself the rice and curry and started eating with satisfaction.

Lost in thought, Sukku ate quietly.

'Did you meet Kamli? How is she?' Mangli asked. Kamli was the commander of the local squad.

'Yes, I met her. She's fine. She asked me to convey her *Lal Salaam* to you,' Sukku replied.

Mangli smiled warmly. 'It's been so long since she came this way.'

'She's been very busy and hasn't had the time to come this way,' Sukku explained.

'I heard she fell very badly ill recently. Is she better now?' Mangli asked.

'She's doing fine now,' Sukku replied.

'I heard there was some firing recently. Did anyone get hurt?'

'Our people are safe. Only a policeman got injured,' Sukku said. After a pause, he hesitantly added, '*Amma*, Kamli *didi* has been asking me to join the squad. I want to join too.'

Mangli froze. 'Oh, my dear boy! You're all I have. If you join the squad, who should I live for?'

'If everyone thought like that, how would the Party⁴ grow? How would our struggle move forward?' Sukku countered.

'Why would everyone think like that? If I had one more child, I wouldn't stop you from going,' Mangli said firmly.

'Why do you speak like that, *Amma*? Aren't there others with just one daughter or one son who are letting them join the Party?'

'They may join, but I can't survive without you, my son.'

'But, *Amma*, I have such a strong desire to work in the squad. Aren't you part of the women's organisation? You always tell everyone to fight for their rights, but you say no when it comes to me?'

'Are you doing nothing now? You're part of the militia, aren't you? Isn't that part of the struggle?'

'Being in the militia isn't enough, *Amma*. How will the revolution move forward if all of us stay in the militia and work from home? This time, Sannu and Pagnu from our militia joined the squad. If everyone else joins and I don't, how disappointing would it be for me?'

'Think about me, my son. Call me selfish if you want, but I can't survive without you.'

As soon as Kamli saw Mangli in the distance, she got up from the polythene sheet on which she had been sitting in the hut and called out '*Lal Salaam, Mangli Naano*⁵!' Kamli was thin, of medium complexion and height, and had short-cropped hair, giving her a somewhat masculine appearance. Those who didn't know her might have mistaken her for a man until she spoke. Born into an Adivasi family on this very land 25 years ago, Kamli had now become the voice and leader of the area's people.

'*Lal Salaam!*' Mangli replied with a shy smile, putting down on the side, the pot of rice she had wrapped carefully and carried all the way. She shook Kamli's extended hand warmly. The two young girls who had accompanied Mangli also set down their *doppas* (bowls made of leaves). They respectfully shook hands with Kamli.

'How are you *Naano*?' the squad members asked.

'I'm doing well. How are you all?' Mangli replied, shaking hands with Suresh and Mangu.

'What are your names?' Kamli asked the two young girls, gently patting their cheeks.

After a few minutes of conversation, Mangli said, 'You all must be hungry. You eat first and then we can talk.'

'Okay. I'm very hungry too. Come on Suresh and Mangu, let's eat,' Kamli said and asked Mangli if they had eaten.

'We ate just before coming here. Sukku said only three people had come, and three portions would be enough, so we brought only three *doppas*,' Mangli explained.

'That's plenty,' Kamli said. She took out a plate from her kit and washed it with water from the pot outside before sitting down near the rice *doppas*. Suresh followed with his plate, while Mangu quipped, 'Why bother with a plate? I'll eat straight from the *doppa*!' He washed his hands and joined them.

'Fine, eat from the *doppa* if you can finish it!' Kamli teased.

'Don't worry; I'll eat whatever is left in your plates too,' Mangu laughed, picking up a *doppa* and sitting on a nearby rock.

Mangli placed the *doppa* she had brought in front of Kamli,

who opened the leaf covering it and smiled. 'Oh! *Gongura* and dry fish! I knew you'd bring this,' she said, chuckling.

Mangli smiled shyly in response.

'How did you know?' Suresh asked.

'I once mentioned it was my favourite. Since then, she never misses making it during the *gongura* season,' Kamli explained, and the group burst into laughter. Mangli joined in, feeling a sense of camaraderie.

Kamli divided the curry into three portions, and gave a portion each to Suresh and Mangu. She served herself about half the rice from the *doppa* and some *gongura* curry and asked the young girls who had accompanied Mangli to eat the remaining rice and curry.

'We just ate and came,' the girls protested.

'No problem. Eat just a little,' Kamli still insisted.

'It's okay, they've just eaten, leave it in the *doppa*. They can have it later,' Mangli interjected. So Kamli covered the *doppa* carefully with a leaf and set it aside.

A short distance away, a militia sentry kept watch, allowing the guerrillas to eat in peace.

After finishing the meal, Kamli and Mangli sat on a polythene sheet in the hut, while Mangu and Suresh sat on a polythene sheet under a tree some distance away and started chatting with the young girls who had accompanied Mangli.

After about 15 minutes of light conversation, Kamli said to Mangli. 'I sent word to you because I have something important to discuss.'

Mangli laughed knowingly. She had a feeling she knew what Kamli wanted to talk about.

'Of course you also know what I want to talk about – it's about Sukku. It seems you're not agreeing to Sukku joining the squad?'

Mangli smiled sheepishly in response. 'You know, Kamli, I have only one son. If he joins the squad, who will look after me? Who will tend to the farming?'

‘Do you think we’ll abandon you? Our village has mass organisations. The Party committee is there. The *Janatana Sarkar* is also in place, and it will be responsible for you. The cooperative committee will till your lands. Even those who are a single child to their parents joined our Party. The Party has always taken care of the parents of such individuals, hasn’t it?’

‘No matter how much others care, it’s not the same as having your own child with you, Kamli.’

‘It’s true that children have a duty to care for their parents. They should. But it’s not right to think that only children should look after their parents. Think about the people who don’t have children. Even those who do have children, often find themselves in situations where their children don’t care for them. In our Adivasi society, this situation may not be as common, but outside, many parents are forced to beg, despite having children. Society should take care of such people. For that to happen, the society we live in now must change. To bring that change, mothers like you need to send their children to the battle. You too need to make sacrifices.’

‘Sukku is already part of the militia, isn’t he, Kamli?’

‘Yes, he is. I’m not denying that. But Sukku is very sharp. If people like him join the Party to work full-time, they can train many more like him.’

‘But I can’t live without him, Kamli ...’ Mangli’s voice quivered, and her eyes filled with tears.

Seeing her pain, Kamli thought about the thousands of parents who gave up their beloved children to the movement and endured the immense suffering of being separated from their dear children.

‘I’ve thought about it too, that Sukku is your only child. But Sukku is very keen to join the squad. He’s been insisting that I convince you and recruit him into the squad. How is it fair to deny Sukku his desire to work for the people? Even if he joins the squad, he’ll visit you occasionally, right?’

‘No, Kamli, think whatever you want to about me. Call me a very self-centred person. But without him, I simply can’t survive.’

Let him continue with the militia and work even more. If you need him, take him for a few days, and then send him back. I'll also work harder in the Sangham, the women's organisation. Don't I know how important the Party is? Without the Party, where would people like us even survive? That's why everyone must contribute to the Party's work. Use him for any amount of work while keeping him home, but don't recruit him into the squad, Kamli.'

As night approached, Mangli slowly came out of the bush where she had been hiding and stood up. She looked around, but could not detect any unusual movement. She quietly moved toward the fallen trunk of a nearby tree, where Somvari sat crouched spiritlessly. Her ten-year-old son was curled up asleep in her lap. Mangli sat down opposite Somvari. They looked into each other's eyes and then quickly turned away. Both carried the weight of a disaster they had never faced before:

'It is getting dark, shall we leave now, *Akka*?' Mangli asked heavily. Her voice, which had been silent all day, sounded strange.

'Do you think those goons might still be around?' Somvari asked.

'They might have left. It seems they're generally carrying out attacks in the morning and returning before nightfall,' Mangli replied, pausing for a moment. 'We'd been hearing that *Salwa Judum*⁶ attacks are happening more frequently now. We were worried that our village might face the same fate. Now it has happened,' Mangli sighed heavily.

'We were thinking that an attack might happen anytime and we must stay prepared to escape the danger and protect the children. But as soon as I heard that they had come, my heart raced, and my legs trembled. Somehow, I managed to drag this boy with me. But I have no idea of what might have happened to my daughter-in-law who had gone to fetch the water, or my elder son who was on sentry duty ... My husband and the younger boys went to graze the cattle and goats. I wonder how they are ...' Somvari, who had been anxious about her husband and children all day, spoke in a trembling voice while wiping her tears.

‘Don’t worry *Akka*, they attacked from the right side of the hill, didn’t they? Your daughter-in-law went for water, and your husband and the boys took the cattle to the left side. They must have escaped safely after hearing the commotion we created. Even the sentry duty was on the other side. So, your elder son should also be fine.’

Mangli’s words gave Somvari a little courage. ‘Maybe she’s right. Perhaps everyone escaped,’ she thought with hope. Then she looked at Mangli and asked, ‘Sukku left yesterday and hasn’t returned yet, has he?’

‘No, he hasn’t. Kamli sent word and he went to meet her,’ said Mangli. She was confident that her son would be safe because he was with the squad.

‘Come *Akka*, we will look around cautiously and then go,’ Mangli said as she got up. Somvari too stood up, waking up her son. The boy, trembling, held his mother’s hand tightly, and stood close to her with his head pressed against her belly.

The three of them began walking silently towards the village, carefully surveying the surroundings, and using the trees, bushes and rocks for cover. Even the boy understood that being quiet was essential to their survival.

As they neared the village, others joined them one by one. They exchanged looks of concern, silently sharing their grief and pain. Everyone walked in silence, their minds heavy with thoughts of what might have happened to their children, their husbands and their loved ones. There was also the dread that everything in their homes might have been burned to ashes.

Even though still at a distance, they could now see the village – the walls of houses looked bare and patches of smoke were billowing upwards from here and there. It was not unexpected, but grief welled up in everyone. The fear that the *Judum* goons might still be around made them suppress their grief.

Meanwhile, waves of collective mourning began to be heard from the village. The restrained grief within the group burst forth, and they quickened their pace, breaking into a run. As they entered the village, the cries of sorrow multiplied manifold.

Gradually, all the villagers who had fled returned to the village. Everyone anxiously searched for their loved ones. When they saw their family members, who had been missing all day, they felt it was like rebirth. The children were drawn into tight embraces. Ultimately, they were all relieved to learn that none of the villagers had fallen into the hands of the *Judum* goons.

The people then turned to look at their homes, several of which were now reduced to ruins. The walls were charred, the clay tiles lay broken, livestock shelters and coops had turned to ashes, and coal lay scattered everywhere. The burnt remains of aluminium vessels, grains and clothes lay in the debris. There were signs of goats and pigs being roasted and eaten.

Forty houses in the village had been completely destroyed by fire. These houses, built with sweat and blood, as well the people's belongings inside them, purchased with painstakingly saved money, had all turned to ashes. Watching the destruction all over the place, everyone felt a deep sense of helplessness. Even extinguishing the still-smouldering remnants was impossible, as no pots, jars or utensils remained. Their carefully built lives lay shattered and scattered.

Some villagers collapsed in tears out of sheer despair, while others, unable to sit idly, wandered aimlessly in agitation. Children, driven by hunger, fear or irritation, cried and clung to their mothers, who didn't know how to comfort them. They just tried to soothe the children with pats and soothing words while breastfeeding the infants.

Darkness fell, heavier than any they had known before. A collective despair engulfed them. Would this darkness ever lift? Would dawn ever break again? The hopelessness of the situation overwhelmed all. The Party had long warned them of the possibility of a *Judum* attack, advising them to safeguard their grains, belongings and money. Many had managed to hide away in the forest, a few supplies, including grains, clothes and utensils.

The cries of the children grew louder by the moment.

Somal, the local *Janatana Sarkar* leader then spoke to everyone: 'There's no point in sitting here and crying. What's

lost won't come back. At least none of our villagers were captured by the *Judum*. We've heard about the horrors happening in nearby villages, haven't we?

... 'Our Party's timely warnings helped us save some resources. In many villages, people were left with just the clothes on their bodies. We are fortunate by comparison. We need to stay strong. Only with courage can we figure out how to fight back against this *Judum*.

'It isn't safe to stay here any longer. Let's go to the forest. We have already prepared some hideouts there, let's go there. But, we won't all be able to stay together now. Let's split into four groups and adjust in different locations as planned.

Let's retrieve the stored grains and utensils, and cook something for the children. They won't be able to withstand their hunger for too long.'

From afar, Mangli spotted Mangal returning with a militia member. Rushing to meet him, she asked anxiously, 'Where is Sukku?'

'The *Judum* goons captured Sukku, *Akka*,' Mangal replied, bursting into tears.

The ground slipped from beneath Mangli's feet, and she collapsed. Some people ran towards her in concern.

'What exactly happened? How was he caught?' asked Somal who had just arrived there.

Wiping his tears, Mangal recounted, 'Yesterday evening, after speaking with Kamli *didi*, we were returning to our village. The *Judum* goons must have been returning after attacking our village. They saw us. We fled into the forest, but Sukku got caught. I managed to escape, wandering in the forest all night and finally finding my way here at dawn.'

Mangal stood there trembling, his eyes red, his hair dishevelled, his face etched with worry, and his clothes crumpled. He looked terrified, like a goat's kid that had managed to elude the hunter.

Mangli began to weep inconsolably. No-one could gather the strength to comfort her, and so they sat around her, crying with her.

'Don't cry so loudly. The sound of your wails will carry far and the *Judum* goons could come here too,' someone cautioned.

Immediately, many people suppressed their sobs, and tried to focus on consoling Mangli.

'Don't cry, Mangli,' Kosi, Mangli's aunt, gently coaxed her. 'Those goons might come here too. There are little children with us. We have already vacated the village. If they come here, where else can we go?'

'My son ... What will they do to my son? How can I sit silently without knowing?' Mangli wailed, not paying heed to anyone.

'Listen to me, aunt. Those who are caught are taken to camps. Sukku will manage to escape somehow. Don't despair; he will find a way,' assured Somal, trying to instill some hope in her.

'Who knows how much they're torturing him? If they find out he's involved with the militia, what may they do to him?' Mangli cried.

'Don't lose heart, aunt. We must stay strong. This government is targeting us with vengeance. No matter what they do, we must endure. We have no other choice,' another villager said.

The afternoon passed with Mangli continuing to cry uncontrollably. Despite their pleas, she didn't even drink water. After telling her repeatedly to do so but to no avail, some people spread themselves out under the trees, lying down to rest, while others left to check on their huts. Somvari, however, stayed by Mangli's side the entire time.

Mangli eventually stopped crying out of exhaustion and slumped to the ground. After some time, though, she sat up again, wiping away her tears. She drank water from the mug Somvari handed her and splashed some on her face. Tying her dishevelled hair back tightly, she said with resolute determination, 'I will go to the Bijapur camp.'

'Are you out of your mind? What will you do at the camp?' asked Somvari, shocked.

'Even if I have to beg at their feet, I will bring back my son,' Mangli declared.

'You think they will release him if you plead? Don't we know what kind of monsters they are?' Somvari tried to reason with her.

'I will try to plead my case however I can,' Mangli insisted.

'What are you thinking about the *Judum* goons? Do you think they have any humanity left? They are even pulling out foetuses from wombs and killing them. Haven't we seen and heard what they're capable of? Let alone your son, if you go there, they'll detain you too, and put you through unimaginable suffering!'

'Let them do anything! What else am I supposed to do? My son ... If he's suffering there, how can I stay here? I can't live without him,' Mangli said, tears streaming down her face.

'Mangli, listen to me. Sometimes, fate is cruel and Sukku ended up in the hands of those beasts. Maybe, with some luck, he'll find a way to escape. But why do you want to jump into the fire? Being mother and son, you will share each other's grief and pain but will you die for each other? Think carefully!' Somvari pleaded, her tone softening.

Mangli sat silent for a moment, her tears flowing unchecked. Then, with renewed determination, she said, '*Akka*, don't try to stop me. I must go. He is my life. Without him, I cannot survive. Perhaps my pleas might soften even their hardened hearts. If not, then I'll meet my fate alongside him.'

Seeing Mangli start to get up, a few people gathered around her. They too tried to dissuade her, but she was unyielding. She prepared to leave.

'Alas, if only someone from the committee were here to advise her. Perhaps she would have listened to them,' a person said softly.

'How will you go alone? I'll also come with you,' said Kosi.

‘Why aunt? I’ll go alone. Why should you suffer as well?’ Mangli replied.

‘No, we can’t let you go alone. Whatever hardships you’re going to endure, I’ll endure them with you,’ Kosi said firmly. As Mangli and Kosi set off, the others stood still and watched with worried expressions, feeling helpless.

The camp was encircled by a fence of barbed wire. Inside the camp, there were small and large tents, a few houses, and a police station. People were sitting in groups inside the tents as well as outside – men, women, elders, and children. They all appeared dejected, as if stripped of everything. Some moved mechanically, seemingly resigned to their fate, performing mundane tasks like fetching water, bathing children or washing clothes.

Amidst them were armed police and SPOs⁷, moving around, supervising, scolding, beating, intimidating, and mocking the camp’s inhabitants. This was Bijapur’s infamous relief camp, located two hours away from Mangli’s village.

Mangli and Kosi had come to Bijapur for the sole purpose of reaching the relief camp. As soon as they entered the town, the SPOs dragged them to the camp.

‘We’ve actually come to stay in the camp,’ they pleaded, but no-one listened. They were taken into a room inside the camp, where the police officers, *Judum* leaders, and some SPOs were sitting on chairs and benches. Some others were standing around nearby.

‘Who are these people?’ asked *Judum* leader Kannal, looking at them as if they were insects.

‘They’re from Kake Korma, *mama*. They said they’ve come to stay in the camp,’ an SPO replied.

‘Ah, people from Kake Korma? That village is full of troublemakers. They wholeheartedly support the Naxalites. That’s why no-one from their village has surrendered. Don’t trust them,’ Kannal declared.

Her heart pounding, Mangli's throat felt dry and her voice trembled as she faced them, 'It's true, sir. We've come here to stay.' Kosi was just as frightened.

'You two came alone? Where are your husbands and children?' another one of the *Judum* leaders asked.

'My husband is dead, sir. I have only one son, and you people already brought him here. She is my aunt; she has no one else,' Mangli replied.

'Oh, so you came here because we captured your son. Otherwise, you wouldn't have bothered coming, would you?' Kannal mocked, laughing cruelly. The others joined in. Even the CRPF⁸ and the Naga policemen, who didn't understand the conversation in the Koya language, laughed along. Mangli lowered her head, unable to meet their eyes.

'You thought you'd sweet-talk us and take your son back, didn't you?' Kannal sneered.

'No, *Anna*. There's nothing left for us in our village. Everything is burnt to the ground. I'll stay here with my son. We'll do some work and live here. We have no reason to return to that place,' Mangli pleaded.

'Your son worked for the militia, didn't he? How can we let him go?' Kannal asked.

'He didn't know what he was doing. He just went along with others. It was a mistake, sir. I apologise on his behalf. Please forgive him and let him go,' Mangli begged, her eyes brimming with tears.

'Let him go? He hasn't even said a single word about the Party. We'll tear him to pieces if needed ...' Kannal threatened.

'Please, sir, he knows nothing about the Party. How can he tell if he doesn't know? Don't torture him. I beg you. I'll fall at your feet,' Mangli cried desperately.

At that moment, a few more SPOs entered the room. One of them was from a nearby village and recognised Mangli.

'This woman works with the women's organisation, sir. Both she and her son fully support the Naxalites,' the man informed Kannal.

'Ah, is that so? She came here to fool us and take her son away. Drag her to the other room, and bring her son here too. We'll deal with them properly,' Kannal commanded.

Mangli was quickly and forcibly dragged to another room.

'Please don't harm her! She doesn't know anything,' Kosi cried as she tried to follow, but the SPOs shoved her away and blocked the door. Shortly after, Sukku was brought into the room.

As soon as Mangli saw Sukku, tears welled up in her already wet eyes. Grief overwhelmed her, and her heart sank even more. His face was swollen, eyes were bloodshot, hair was dishevelled and his shirt was torn.

'Oh, my son! How much they must have tortured him,' Mangli thought, her mother's heart breaking. She longed to hold him close, but her arms were trapped in a vice-like grip by the SPOs.

Seeing his mother, Sukku thought, 'Oh no, how did she get caught?' The thought of the torture he had endured made him shudder. He wondered if his mother had faced the same and wanted to comfort her, but the SPOs holding him wouldn't let him take a single step toward her.

'Please let me hold my son. Let me go to him. I'll bow down to you, I beg you,' Mangli pleaded tearfully.

'Sure, we'll let you hold him, don't worry,' Kannal said with a wicked smile as he walked over to Mangli and pulled off her clothes. His vile intent was clear.

The others laughed cruelly, and the room echoed with their inhuman laughter. Mangli begged, cried and pleaded, but the beasts ignored her and attacked her without mercy.

'Don't do anything to my mother. If you want, kill me, but don't harm my mother!' Sukku cried out loudly, tears streaming down his face as he struggled helplessly. Watching his anguish, the others in the room laughed as though it was a form of entertainment. Unable to bear the sight of his mother in such a state, Sukku wished he could gouge out his own eyes. But since that wasn't possible, he closed them tightly. The agonised cries of his mother rang in his ears like thunderclaps, piercing his heart.

'Hey, open your eyes and see!' some of the SPOs commanded, hitting him. When he refused, the group began hurling insults and beating him mercilessly. Amidst the unbearable violence, Mangli pleaded, 'Oh, please! Spare my son! Don't hurt him!' -

Listening to the cries of the mother and son from inside the room, Kosi, standing outside, too was overcome with anguish. She begged the guards at the gate, 'Please, let me inside! That's my daughter-in-law and my grandson!'

'Hey, old woman, get out of here. Or else, you'll meet the same fate,' snapped one of the SPOs, pushing her roughly. She fell hard, sprawling on the ground.

After a while, everyone left the room. Sukku was also dragged away. Mangli lay unconscious in the middle of the room, no longer crying, spent out from struggling.

Seeing everyone leave, Kosi slowly got up and entered the room. The sight of Mangli lying there in that pitiful state broke her heart. Kosi had heard of the atrocities against women as part of *Salwa Judum*, but witnessing it with her own eyes made her stomach churn and filled her with distress. Unable to bear the sight, she somehow gathered her strength to pick up a piece of cloth lying nearby. She spread it out to cover Mangli. Sitting beside her, with tears streaming down her face, she softly called out, 'Mangli, Mangli.'

Mangli groaned faintly but didn't open her eyes. Kosi wiped her tears, stepped out, and fetched some water from a nearby tent. Returning to Mangli's side, she sprinkled some water on her face and gently wiped it with her saree. Slowly, Mangli opened her eyes, staring blankly into the void, avoiding Kosi's gaze.

'Oh, dear child, what have they done to you ...' Kosi said in a broken voice, pulling Mangli close.

Mangli said nothing. Her eyes, dry from crying so much, stared emptily ahead.

'Drink some water, dear,' Kosi urged, pouring a little into her mouth. Mangli took a small sip and turned her face away. Gently, Kosi helped her sit up and wrapped her in her clothes.

Mangli, drained of energy, slumped back to the ground and again began to cry heartbreakingly, 'What wrong did I do, aunt?'

'Don't say that, dear. Those people aren't humans, they are utter beasts,' Kosi cursed them bitterly.

'Where did they take my son?' Even in her own state of wretchedness, Mangli worried about her son.

'They took him to the police station,' Kosi replied.

'Oh no, I don't think they will let him go. They might kill him,' Mangli sobbed, more in torment about her son's plight than her own suffering.

'Don't think like that, dear. Whatever is meant to happen will happen. What can we do about it?' Kosi tried to comfort her, stroking her head. But Kosi also wanted to leave the place as soon as possible and make their way back, following the same path they had come. But she knew the armed guards wouldn't let them go. She helped Mangli to her feet slowly, supporting her as they walked outside. Leading Mangli to a nearby tree, Kosi said, 'Sit here, dear.'

Mangli sat down mechanically, then slumped to the ground as though even sitting upright required too much energy. The sun was setting in the west. From a distance, some people stared at Mangli, but no-one came near. The women stood far away, sighing deeply with sadness. As darkness fell, some people lit fires and began cooking with large vessels for all the people detained in the camp. Even in this horrific situation, the people forcibly detained in the camp clung to the hope of survival – for themselves and their children. That hope drove them to perform these tasks mechanically. Mothers sat with their frightened children huddled beside them. Play and songs had become distant memories for the little ones.

As night descended, Kosi told Mangli, 'There's a borewell nearby. Come, Mangli, wash yourself. It'll make you feel better,' she urged.

Kosi wrapped an arm around Mangli's shoulder and gently guided her toward the borewell. Mangli walked as if in a daze. Kosi asked for a bucket of hot water from a nearby house and

returned with it. She poured the warm water over Mangli, rinsing off her clothes and wringing them out before wrapping them back around her. Mangli remained motionless, like a lifeless doll.

Kosi tōo, had been pushed and beaten by the SPOs, and her body ached all over. But Mangli's suffering weighed far heavier on her heart. Kosi also washed herself and later took Mangli to a tent near the cooking area. But Mangli was unable to sit by the fire and collapsed on the ground. Moved by compassion, a person spread a mat of palm leaves for her. Mangli lay down on it, utterly drained. Her mind felt numb, her thoughts paralyzed.

'What will they do to my son ...?' Even in that terrible condition, it was the only thought repeatedly haunting her.

After a while, Kosi brought some gruel in a glass and gently said, 'Drink a little, child.'

'No, I don't want it ...'

'If you don't, how will you survive? You haven't had a morsel since morning ...'

'No, I don't want anything,' Mangli said, curling up even tighter.

A few women came closer. Looking at her lying in the light of the fire, they gazed at her sympathetically.

'Drink a little, child. What else can we do? We are living in evil times. Who would have thought our lives would become this miserable ...' an old woman sighed. As they all kept persuading her with their words, she sat up, forced herself to swallow a couple of gulps of the gruel, and lay back down again.

It had been a month since Mangli had walked into the camp. At some point, Kosi had suggested escaping, but Mangli refused. She said they would kill her son if she left. Kosi couldn't bring herself to abandon Mangli and stayed back with her.

'You leave, aunt. Why go through this trouble for me?' Mangli would plead every now and then.

'How can I leave you in this state and just walk away?' Kosi would reply.

The men who had assaulted Mangli roamed around the camp daily, right in front of her eyes. They mocked her, and though her blood boiled with rage, she remained silent, lowering her eyes. She swallowed her humiliation.

Every day, she tried to get close to her son, when they brought him out briefly in the morning for nature's call, but they never let her approach him. If she tried, they would push her away or beat her. Still, she kept trying and faced the blows when they came.

She went to the police station daily, begging, 'Please release my son ... If you release him, we'll stay here; we won't go anywhere.'

Sometimes, in anger, she cursed them. Otherwise she sat silently, not speaking to anyone, staring into space like someone in a state of shock If someone tried speaking to her, she gave short replies. When Kosi brought her food, she ate it unwillingly.

'If it wasn't for Kosi, who would look after me?' she thought, her heart filling with gratitude. Sometimes, her mind became clouded with confusion. She couldn't understand where she was. She wondered why she had left behind her home, yard, granary, woods, and streams for this cramped and filthy place. She had been used to wandering fearlessly through dense forests, amidst wild animals and venomous snakes. Then, why was she now so terrified of these people? She couldn't understand. When she saw the guns in their hands, her heart would boil with anger.

Often, she remembered Kamli and others like her. She had always admired the guns slung across their shoulders.

'This one was captured during a particular ambush,' Kamli had said once, and Mangli had touched the gun with pride. Those guns seemed like they were meant for them.

She regretted not listening to Kamli a year ago and sending her son to join the squad at that time. If she had done so, neither she nor Sukku would be facing such horrors now.

Finally, Mangli's wait ended. Sukku was released. He returned to his mother, weak and lifeless like a corpse. Yet, Mangli was grateful that he was alive. She washed his wounds with her

tears and treated the swellings on his body with hot water fomentation. After all the days of not wanting to eat the food that Kosi used to bring for her, she now went herself to bring food for Sukku. She gently coaxed him to eat, feeding him lovingly.

She remembered Sukku's favourite curry made with ants, which he used to eat with relish. How could she make it here? If they had been in their village, she would have found the ants easily and made the curry.

'What's this, Sukku? You somehow did manage to escape along with your mother, but if they catch you again, they won't let you live. That's why it's better to join the squad,' Kamli said persuasively. 'I'll talk to your mother. If she agrees, fine. If not, you should still join the squad, even if it means going against her wishes.'

The two of them were sitting under a tree on a polythene sheet. It was just beginning to get hotter. 'No, *Akka*. I can't leave my mother to join the squad,' Sukku replied, lowering his head.

'You'd been so keen about joining the squad all these days. What's happened now?' Kamli persisted.

'I realised that my mother cannot live without me. Otherwise, why would she have entered that hellhole for me and gone through all that suffering?' Sukku shuddered at the memory of that time as he spoke.

'That's true, Sukku,' Kamli agreed but then spoke more firmly, 'They released you because they believed you would stay there. If they catch you again, they will put you through worse. We will convince your mother ...'

No matter how much Kamli tried to persuade him, Sukku remained firm in his decision. 'Even if my mother agrees, I won't come, *Akka*. If I come away, who will look after her? The *Salwa Judum* goons caused her so much anguish. Now, she doesn't even have the strength to work like she used to ...'

'If *Judum* continues like this, countless mothers like yours will be sacrificed, Sukku. We need to stop this, and to stop it, there is no other way but to intensify the war. Tell me Sukku,

how can the war intensify if youth like you don't join? Don't you want to teach a lesson to those who are tormenting mothers like yours? Don't you want to defeat *Judum*?'

'I don't just want to teach them a lesson, *Akka*; I want to tear them to pieces, one by one. From now on, take me along on all your attacks. I want to slaughter them the way we dealt with those at Errabore and Ranibodli,' Sukku replied, his words reflecting his fury.

'Our platoons and companies need to grow to carry out such attacks. How will that happen if young men and women like you don't join?' Kamli said simply.

'The thing is, I can't be at a distance from my mother, *Akka*,' Sukku shook his head as he spoke insistently. 'If I stay in the militia, I can fight the war and also stay with her.'

At that moment, they saw Mangli coming from afar. '*Amma* is coming,' Kamli said as she walked towards her. As they neared each other, she saluted Mangli with a *Lal Salaam*, placed a comforting hand around her shoulder and held her close. Tears welled up in Mangli's eyes, and Kamli's heart melted. 'She used to be so spirited, but now she appears so downhearted,' Kamli thought.

'How are you, *Naano*?' Kamli asked in Koya, Mangli's mother tongue.

Mangli simply nodded in response, and walked with Kamli to a nearby spot also covered with a sheet of polythene. 'Come, let's sit,' Kamli said, continuing, 'Have the pains eased a bit? Why did you go there, *Naano*? Don't we know how cruel they are? We came to the village the day you left for Bijapur. If only we had come earlier, we would have stopped you from going ...'

'If I hadn't gone, they might have killed Sukku, Kamli,' Mangli replied.

Kamli couldn't say anything as she silently acknowledged the truth in Mangli's words. After a pause she tried, 'Well, somehow you managed to escape ... They have been committing so many atrocities, *Akka*. Burning down houses, destroying crops, killing cattle, and abducting people. They've been killing whoever

they come across, or subject them to brutal torture and keep them in camps. They've even recruited some of our people as SPOs to use against us. And if they see women, they carry out brutal sexual attacks on them. This pain is not yours alone. This government and the *Judum* goons that have caused us so much suffering will never be forgiven by history. The people and the movement will certainly avenge these atrocities.

'That process has already begun. The *Judum* militia that has been committing all these horrors is being wiped out. Errabore police station has become like Bijapur police station. We raided it and killed 33 of them. Likewise, we attacked Ranibodli police station and killed 55 of them. We lost six of our comrades in those battles. We've been carrying out many ambushes on their forces during the times when they have been carrying out attacks on our villages, or while they were returning after the attacks. We've also killed many *Judum* members. Our resistance has grown stronger, and as a result, the *Judum* will now be in decline. You must have realised by now that their unchecked reign of terror is disappearing.'

Mangli listened attentively, and for the first time in a long while, she felt a small sense of relief from her wounds, and as she started to speak, her voice was filled with determination: 'Kamli, I made a mistake in not sending Sukku to the squad when you asked earlier. Take him now.'

Kamli, who had thought she would struggle to convince her, was momentarily speechless. She realized that Mangli's own life experiences had made her understand the necessity of the struggle. The growing victories in the battlefield also were making the people more favourable to the revolution.

'I told Sukku the same, *Akka*, but he is refusing to leave you in this condition and join the squad,' Kamli said.

'Call him here. I'll speak to him myself,' Mangli said. Kamli readily complied and Sukku walked over and sat down.

'Sukku, I made a big mistake earlier by not sending you into the squad. Now, I'm earnestly telling you to join them, go,' Mangli said.

Sukku was astonished to know of this change in his mother. 'I know, *Amma*, why you're asking me to leave now. You're afraid that I'll be caught by them again, if I stay. But I'll be careful. How can I leave you behind like this?'

'Sukku, I was wrong before. I thought you should stay with me to support me. But this *looti sarkar* has targeted us, my child. Your support alone is not enough to protect me from them,' Mangli said, echoing Kamli's words. 'Our army needs to grow. How will it grow if young people like you don't join? If you join our army, you'll be a support for countless mothers like me. So, as Kamli said, you must join the squad and you must enlist many more like you into the movement.'

'But how will you manage alone, *Amma*?' Sukku asked, worried.

'When our *Janatana Sarkar* worked well, it used to support lone women like me but the *Judum*'s attacks have made it dysfunctional. Once our *Sarkar* stands strong again, there will be no more suffering for people like me. Our struggle will advance, and our *Sarkar* will stand strong only if youth like you join our army, Mangli answered resolutely. 'So don't worry about me. If nobody else should face what I've faced, the *Judum* must end, and this rogue government that supports it must fall.'

The mother's instructions on duty strengthened the son's revolutionary resolve.

(This is an attempt to depict the terrible experiences many women in Bastar underwent to protect their husbands and children from the atrocities of *Salwa Judum*. It is also an attempt to record the sacrifices made by these mothers in sending their children to the People's Army to heal their wounds and fight the atrocities of the *Judum*. This story is written in solidarity with the people of Bastar, whose lives have been devastated by the *Judum*.)

Translation of 'Talli Prema'. (First published in Arunatara November–December 2011)

Translated by N. Ravi

Notes:

1. *Mahua* - is the Adivasi name of *Madhuca longifolia* or Indian Butter Tree which is abundantly found in the areas inhabited by the Adivasi in the central Indian highlands, extending westward into Gujarat and eastward to the Chotanagpur Plateau. The *mahua* tree is not just a tree for Adivasis but emblematic of their very way of life as custodians of their lands and forests, including the judicious non-extractive use of forest produce for sustenance and livelihood. The flowering/shedding season starts about April for about three months, and the flowers and fruit are collected early in the morning when they are freshly fallen – usually the entire family/community is involved in this work during this season.

2. In most Adivasi areas, there are no government primary health care centres close to the habitations. In places where they were set up, they are poorly equipped and staffed. Hence, to avail medical services, people have to travel all the way to the nearest town using any means available, which could include having to cross rivers in boats in some areas.

3. *tendu* – leaves of the *tendu* (Indian ivory) tree are used in locally made hand-rolled cigarettes for wrapping the unprocessed tobacco

4. Party – Communist Party of India (Maoist)

5. *naano* – Koya word for *akka* or elder sister.

6. *Salwa Judum* – a Gondi term which literally means ‘peace march’. In reality, the *Judum* was a vigilante force that was mobilised, armed and deployed as part of the counter-insurgency operations from 2005 to 2011 in Bastar area of Chhattisgarh, India, with the aim of wiping out Naxalite activities in the region.

7. As the *Salwa Judum* began to lose due to the resistance by the people alongside the Maoists, the government illegally contracted many youth and minors who had taken part in the *Judum* as well as ‘surrendered’ or arrested Maoists as ‘Special Police Officers’ or SPOs. These SPOs were used by the state and police forces at the frontline of the violence against the people. In 2011, the Supreme Court banned state support for vigilantism and use of minors, ‘surrendered’ or arrested Maoists as SPOs in its ‘counterinsurgency’ operations. But still the government has continued to use this tactic – the SPOs were rebranded as ‘Armed Auxiliary Forces’ and later as ‘District Reserve Guard’ (DRG). The state continues to fill many of the ranks of the DRG with ‘surrendered’ or arrested Maoists, against the 2011 judgment.

8. The CRPF, Central Reserve Police Force, is one of the organisations of the Central Armed Police Force (CAPF). These militarised police forces are commonly referred to as 'security forces' and are centrally controlled. They resort to violence and sexual violence with full impunity. Between October 2015 and February 2016, police and security forces doing search and combing operations in the Bastar region sexually assaulted more than 50 women, including around 20 gang rapes. Even after the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes and the National Human Rights Commission both confirmed that police and security forces had committed this mass sexual violence, no one has been charged to date.

Snatch the Guns!

'Akka, it seems Padmakka and her companions have arrived,' said Kamala, panting as she came running to give the news. In the light thrown by the streetlight, Ilamma could clearly see the amazement and happiness on Kamala's face.

Ilamma was sitting all alone, unable to sleep, until Kamala ran in to deliver the news. Ilamma immediately understood who she was talking about. Yet, she didn't understand the message.

'Where did they arrive?' she asked.

'What do you mean where? Here! In our town!'

'Don't be silly! Why would they come to our town?'

'I promise Ilakka! My husband told me! He came rushing on the cycle just to inform me of their arrival. He didn't even eat his food and he rushed right back after telling me,' said Kamala, placing her hand on her head as though taking an oath.

'Are you sure?'

'It's up to you whether you want to believe me or not. I'm going to see them,' said Kamala impatiently, moving ahead.

'O... wait, wait! I'll also come with you,' Ilamma said, closing the door of her house to walk along with Kamala. Still not fully convinced, she asked, 'How did they manage to come to the town? Won't the police kill them?'

'Police? What police! It seems they killed most of the police. I was told they tied up the hands and legs of the remaining ones.'

It seems they're taking the guns from the armoury. Come on, let's go. We'll inform our folks on the way,' said Kamala, hurrying to the place where Padmakka and her companions were present.

The people in the neighbourhood, who were getting ready to sleep, immediately got up upon hearing Kamala announce their arrival. Kamala banged on the doors of a few houses where people had already fallen asleep. All of them ran together, with a mix of happiness and amazement, toward the town centre where Padmakka and the others were.

Three or four minutes into their walk, they could already hear a crowd of people cheering. As they moved ahead, the slogans of the gathering became clearer. They could see several people screaming with joy and running towards the centre.

'Ah! Looks like everyone already knows! Let's go faster,' said Iamma as she increased her pace of walking.

'So, do you believe me now? You thought I was lying just minutes ago' said Kamala accusingly.

'Of course I couldn't believe you! Did we ever hear of such a thing happening in our town before? Even now, I find it difficult to believe it.'

In about ten minutes, they reached the town centre. There was a district armoury over there. A huge crowd had gathered in front of it and the place was resounding with the slogans being given by them with raised fists.

'Look... look... there... over the bus... and over the jeep... they are the Naxalites,' Kamala pointed, showing to Iamma.

Most of the people living in Iamma's *basti*² migrated from villages in search of labouring jobs. Some of them had already seen Naxalites in their villages. Kamala, too, knew them very well. But many people in the crowd were seeing them for the first time even though all of them had heard of them. Iamma was also seeing them for the first time though she had heard about them many times from Kamala. Kamala always spoke about Padmakka, although she had never seen or met her. That's why Iamma immediately understood when Kamala mentioned Padmakka's arrival. She had a good impression of the Naxalites from the

stories Kamala told her. Not only her, but everyone living in the *bāsti* had regard for the Naxalites as they fought for the poor.

‘You’re right! They’re really here!’ said Ilamma, mouth agape.

‘Of course I am right and you doubted my words!’ said Kamala with pride in her voice for having conveyed such sensational news to all.

‘I can’t believe my eyes. How did these people come to the town centre? I can’t understand.’

‘If you can’t believe your own eyes, I can’t help it. Look at that thin, short woman—someone in the crowd said she’s Padmakka.’ Kamala had never imagined she would see the heroine of her stories. Seeing her now, she was thrilled to the core.

‘The one holding the mic and speaking... is that the one you mean?’

‘Yes... yes... that is the one! It seems the police get terrified on even hearing that *Akka’s* name,’ Kamala said, repeating the words that she told Ilamma many times before.

‘Is it? Come, let’s go closer to the jeep,’ said Ilamma, pushing through the crowd. Kamala followed.

‘Shielding themselves with these guns, the police and the government have tortured us enough. What are we asking for? Food to eat. Clothes to wear. A house to shelter our heads. But the government only responds with guns and bullets. Just because they have guns in their hands, they oppress us violently. If these atrocities are to end, if we are to get sufficient food, and if we are to even stay alive—we should also carry guns. But, where will we get guns from? We must snatch the guns from the government! That’s why we are taking away the guns in the armoury!’ declared Padmakka in a resonant voice that stirred up the people.

She ended her speech there and got down to meet everyone who had been waiting to talk to them. By then, a few guerrillas had already started shaking hands with the crowd and getting to know them. Padma also started shaking hands with people. In

this raid being carried out by the guerrillas, Padma was responsible for crowd control and coordinating the sentries. As the guerrillas started shaking hands, the people lifted up their hands and started raising slogans with great enthusiasm.

‘Over there... look at those policemen. They tied their hands, and made them lie on the road,’ Kamala said, laughing.

Ilamma’s attention turned to the police. The police looking so helpless and fearful was an unbelievable sight to her.

‘Whoa! Look at the number of guns! The whole lorry is full of them! It seems the jeeps and buses too are loaded with guns,’ Kamala said as she moved toward the jeeps.

Ilamma saw the guns in the rear of the lorry. Not just these guns—she saw guns in the hands of the guerrillas, in the hands of lay people, guns all around. But she was no longer afraid of these guns as she used to be.

She recalled the guns from several years ago—the guns that ruined her life and broke her heart.

She began feeling uncomfortable, distressed, and dizzy.

Meanwhile, Padmakka, who was shaking hands with people, came to the spot where Ilamma was standing. She extended her hand to shake Ilamma’s hand. Ilamma held it with both her hands. She felt that she now had support in life.

‘Snatch the guns, my child, grab all the guns from the hands of the Police! If they are in the hands of the police, they won’t let us live. They will not let us live, child,’ Ilamma’s voice quivered with immense sorrow.

Padmakka, who had been greeting and shaking hands enthusiastically with the joyous crowd, stopped on hearing the grief in Ilamma’s tone. She looked keenly at Ilamma’s face and sensed the turmoil in her.

Padmakka draped her hand affectionately around Ilamma’s shoulder and asked her ‘What happened, *Amma*?’ The age difference between Padma and Ilamma wasn’t more than ten to twelve years. Yet, Ilamma wanted to address her as a child. And so, Padma addressed her as *Amma*.

Ilamma hugged Padma and cried her heart out. All the suppressed sorrow suddenly emerged from the depths of her heart to be shared with this newfound kindred spirit.

Padma held her close and patted on her back in a consoling fashion. She wondered what painful memories stirred in her releasing the flood of tears. Padma had been studying the problems of the people for the past fifteen years. It wasn't difficult for her to recognize people's pain.

'Don't cry. Please tell me what happened,' the same voice that had roared like a lion from the top of the jeep during her speech, now sounded very soothing.

Ilamma held on to Padma and continued crying.

'What to say, Padmakka? These policemen caused her untold grief, ruined her life, and left her all alone with nobody to care for,' said Kamala, wiping the tears that rolled down her face.

'What exactly happened?' Padma asked, trying to understand what had gone wrong in Ilamma's life. The other guerrillas too joined them in the meantime.

Kamala took a deep breath as she felt suffocated by the urge to quickly explain everything that happened. The atrocity that had Ilamma crying relentlessly and Kamala stressed out with anxiety was...

Ilamma, who had just returned home exhausted after a long day's labor at a construction site, was utterly taken aback when her daughter Bharati hugged her and started bawling. She couldn't imagine what made her weep so much.

'What happened, child? Why are you crying so much?' She put her meal box on the ground and held her daughter close.

Bharati continued to cry without saying a word.

'How will I know if you don't tell me what happened?' Ilamma asked.

She cried for a good five minutes, hugging her mother, and then slowly started to talk about what had happened.

'While I was coming back from school, two policemen were

standing in front of a hotel on the road, *Amma*. I was minding my own business and walking past them when one of them said something vulgar and the other started laughing at that. I turned back in anger and asked, 'Don't you have sisters and a mother?' Despite all the anger, that was all I said. In response, he said many more things, most of which I didn't even understand. He also said, 'How come this *Madiga* ² whore has so much arrogance?' Bharati started crying again due to the remembered humiliation.

'Who the hell is that, child? How dare he say that?' Ilamma's heart convulsed with sorrow at her daughter's humiliation at such a young age.

Being born a poor Dalit woman, Ilamma was no stranger to all this.

But what hurt her was that her one and only child, for whom she was working so hard, had to face such slurs without having provoked anyone. Bharati was the only child who had survived among the three children that she gave birth to. Her two other children had died young due to malnourishment and disease. When her husband passed away long ago, she moved to the city with her only child, earned her livelihood through daily wage labor and brought up her daughter lovingly.

'Leave it, my child. Don't bother yourself with what he said. Mad dogs tend to bark. We shouldn't bother ourselves with all that,' Ilamma tried to console her.

'But it's not fair that they humiliated me despite my just minding my own business. It isn't fair at all.' Bharati, who was studying in the tenth grade, had only recently started to understand good and bad, right and wrong. She felt extremely humiliated.

'What can we do, child? The police are extremely arrogant and they know they can get away with anything. Stop crying my child,' Ilamma said as she tucked the hair from Bharati's face.

'Amma, he didn't stop there. He also threatened that he'd see my end.'

'Oh my! Did he say that? May he be struck down' Ilamma said anxiously.

‘But did I say anything to them? I just said one word because they unnecessarily said something to me. And he got so angry at that. Then, how angry should I feel for what he said about me?’ There was rage mixed with self-respect in the girl’s voice.

‘What can we do, child? We have to shut up and put up with anything they say or do. If we speak up, they won’t leave us alone.’ Life had taught Ilamma many lessons over the past forty years.

‘How could I stay quiet after being spoken to like that? I felt like tearing his tongue out,’ — the burning rage in Bharati’s heart was reflected on her face.

‘What can we do, child? This is our fate. Now stop worrying. His words don’t make you a bad or characterless person. You are precious like gold. Whoever says something nasty about you will face a terrible fate. Now, go and wash your face, my dear,’ Ilamma said, beginning her chores in the house.

That night, both mother and daughter ate the food in a very disinterested manner. After that, Ilamma tidied up the house so they could sleep and Bharati began doing her homework. They were both still thinking about the humiliation Bharati had faced.

Meanwhile, there was a loud sound in the doorway. Ilamma turned her head to see who it was. She was dumbfounded to see the police outside the house! Within moments, two of them barged into the house and tried to forcefully drag Bharati out.

Bharati recognized one of them as the policeman who had hurled insults at her. He was the Sub Inspector of the nearest police station.

She tried to free herself from the clutches of the policemen, all the while crying out, ‘*Amma, Amma!*’ Her cries resembled that of a deer in the clutches of a tiger.

The cries moved the deeply shocked Ilamma into action.

‘My child, don’t do anything to my child!’ Ilamma held Bharati, who had successfully freed herself from the grip of the police, in a protective embrace.

She understood that the tiff her daughter had with the police in the evening had a direct relation to this act of violence.

'Leave her,' one of the policemen shouted, pulling Ilamma away from her daughter. The other hurled abuses at Ilamma and hit her on the chest with his rifle butt. If Ilamma's mother, who had died several years ago, had heard those abuses, she would have died again of humiliation.

Ilamma fell backwards due to the impact of the rifle butt, holding her chest in pain. Added to the pain caused by the rifle butt were the terrible abuses the police heaped on her and her late mother.

'Please don't do anything to my mother,' pleaded Bharati as she struggled in vain to free herself from the grip of the police and go to her mother.

Ignoring her own pain, Ilamma sprang up to save her child. She fell at the feet of the same policeman who had struck her with his rifle butt. By then, the two policemen had begun dragging Bharati into the street.

'Please leave my child, sir! Please! I will be your servant—just leave her.' Even rocks would have softened at her repeated, agonized requests—but they fell on deaf ears.

'Damn it, move out of the way,' the policeman shouted, kicking Ilamma aside while hurling abuses at her.

Ilamma fell down again due to the kicks and was in pain on account of both the kicks and insults but none of that stopped her. She got up immediately to save her child.

By then, they dragged Bharati, who was desperately crying out '*Amma! Amma!*', into the street.

Ilamma ran into the street and fell at the police officer's feet, pleading with him to let her daughter go. Her tears fell on the boots of the policemen who shook her off in disgust.

Hearing all the noise and cries for help, the residents of the *basti*—some of whom were asleep, and others getting ready to sleep after a long day's work— came out of their homes to see what's going on but stopped at their doorways on seeing the police.

They couldn't understand why the police came to the house of that mother-daughter duo who never caused any trouble and

why they were being so violent with them.. But none had the courage to go and ask the police what the matter was.

‘You’re just a *Madiga*² slut, why do you have so much arrogance? You speak as if you belong to the respected classes, huh! Now watch how I will strip you of your respect right in the middle of this street,’ the S.I. (sub inspector of police) said, pulling off Bharati’s half saree.

Bharati let out a wail and collapsed on the ground covering her chest with both her hands.

Ilamma ran to her child, kneeled, and held her tightly with both hands.

Two policemen forcefully separated Bharati from her mother and shouted at her to start walking. Bharati couldn’t take a step due to humiliation and fear, so the police started dragging her.

‘Please don’t do anything to her. Punish me for her mistake. Please leave her,’ Ilamma fell at their feet again, to obstruct them from moving.

They kicked Ilamma aside and continued to drag Bharati along the road.

Ilamma noticed that the *basti*’s elder—Veeraiah—was just coming into the *basti*, walking toward his home. She ran to him, fell on his feet and said,

‘Veeranna, please see the atrocities the police are committing on my child. They hurled insults at her while she was coming back from school. She shouldn’t have reacted, but she asked if they don’t have sisters and mothers. That infuriated them, and now they’re at our doorstep, taking away my child. I told them she made a mistake and that I will make her apologize by falling on their feet. Still, they are not showing any mercy. Please speak to them and stop them.’

The *basti* people understood what had happened only when Ilamma explained it to Veeraiah and felt sorry for the mother and daughter. Two or three of them decided to join Veeraiah in questioning this gross injustice.

Veeraiah approached the Sub-Inspector and said, ‘I will make her apologize to you if she has done something wrong Sir, but

what is this? Where are you taking her, Sir?’

‘Oh, so now we are answerable to you?’ Veeraiah’s mild question felt like defiance to the huge egos of the police.

‘Not that you should tell me Sir but it is a girl. How can you humiliate her publicly like this?’

‘You’re quoting rules now? She robbed someone. So we are arresting her. If you continue to talk nonsense, I will shoot you and claim that I shot you because you were obstructing us from doing our duty. I’ll see then which rules will feed your wife and children,’ the Sub Inspector said, holding the pistol against Veeraiah’s throat.

Veeraiah’s wife came running. ‘Please leave him, sir. He won’t speak to you like this again,’ she pleaded with the officers, and dragged her husband away from there.

Kamala, who was watching all this, felt it was most unjust. The thirty five year old Kamala was courageous and passionate about justice, so she couldn’t keep quiet like the others. She stepped forward, and said controlling her anger,

‘How unjust, sir! You are troubling that girl unnecessarily in so many ways’

‘Oh, now you want to speak up as well? Should we strip and parade you as well?’ the SI asked insultingly.

Humiliated, but still angry, Kamala stepped back.

Everyone witnessing the scene was filled with anger, yet utterly helpless. Seeing how the police reacted to those who tried to intervene only deepened their fear. Moreover, all of them had migrated from elsewhere, and lived in constant insecurity. It is an insecurity born of the fear that even a small confrontation, especially with the police, could threaten their very existence.

Ilamma realized that no one would dare to help her now. She looked helplessly at her daughter who, ashamed at her half naked state and shivering with fear, was struggling to free herself from the hands of the police. As she heard Bharati crying ‘*Amma! Amma!*’ in fear, she couldn’t take it any longer. Her anger knew no bounds and she thought she would risk her life to save her child at any cost.

‘You rascal! How could you humiliate a girl like this in public? Weren’t you born to a woman? Don’t you have any shame?’ Ilamma jumped on the police man holding Bharati and used all her strength in an attempt to free her daughter from his grip. She resembled the mother hen that fought back the eagle in order to protect its chicks.

The policeman who didn’t anticipate her attack fell down. He couldn’t withstand the natural instinct of any mother to protect her offspring. He considered her attack an insult and was infuriated.

With demonic anger, he hit her in the chest with his rifle butt.

‘Ah!’ Ilamma cried out and fell to the ground holding her chest with both hands.

Bharati cried out ‘*amma! Amma!*’ and tried to run to her mother but the police forcefully dragged her away.

Some people could no longer stand and watch Ilamma being beaten and her crying daughter being taken away heartlessly. At least ten of them came running. Some ran to help Ilamma, but some of them ran past her to go to the police in order to free Bharati from them.

The police saw the people approaching. They also noticed how angry the crowd was now.

They pointed their guns toward the crowd. ‘We will shoot if anybody steps forward,’ they shouted.

The angry people had to stop—unwillingly – looking at the cruel police and the guns in their hands.

While everyone watched, the police dragged Bharati to the corner of the street and dumped her into the police jeep as though she were a bag.

The *basti* people who congregated around the unconscious Ilamma did what they could to help her recover. Once she regained consciousness, she looked around and asked Kamala, ‘Where is my child?’

In response, all Ilamma saw were tears in Kamala’s eyes.

'They kidnapped my child! Ayyo, where did they take her, what will they do to her?' she started wailing loudly.

Nobody could say a word to console her, everyone stood still in sorrow.

'They took away my child while all these people were watching... how could they? Where did they take her? I should be with my child right now. I will go, I will...' Ilamma tried getting up on her feet, unsuccessfully. She could be seen using all her energy just to stand.

'Where will you go, *akka*? You are not in a position to go anywhere.' Kamala held her.

'Where else? I'll go to the police station,' Ilamma said as she tried to take a few steps forward.

'How will she go alone? Four to five of us should also go with her,' said Kamala, trying to mobilize the people.

They all empathized with her situation, but the memory of the police with those guns... was daunting. The *basti* folks could only think of their families back in their villages, dependent on the meagre earnings they had in this town.

Finally, Kamala alone accompanied Ilamma. Her husband, Mallesham, was not in town at the time. Otherwise, he surely would have joined them.

'*Akka*, drink this tea at least. I don't know what you ate the night before last. All of yesterday, you didn't eat anything, didn't even drink water,' said Kamala cajolingly, holding a teacup in one hand and placing the other on Ilamma's shoulder. Kamala's husband, Mallesham, and a few other women were there along with Kamala in Ilamma's house. That small house was packed with people.

Ilamma was sitting like a rock, staring into space without reacting. She finally broke her silence and said in a wretched voice, 'How can I drink it, Kamala? I don't know where my child is, how she is, and how much those demons are torturing her.'

Kamala placed the teacup on the floor and sat next to

Ilamma, helplessness evident in her voice and actions. 'What can we do, akka? We've been looking for her since the day before yesterday. All the police stations are claiming they didn't arrest her, and they don't know where she is.'

'These rascals dragged the girl away like a lamb to the slaughter while we were all watching. And now they claim they haven't done it. How terrible they are!' said one of the women in the house angrily.

'This is how the criminal actions of the police are... nobody is there to question these bastards. The government is there for the police first, and only then for the people—if at all they stand by the people. Ordinary people like us are just scared of their guns—so who is there to really stop them?' said another woman.

'That night sent chills down my spine. We were all so pained by what the police were doing to our Ilamma and her child. We were so furious that we wanted to break their knees and legs. It was only the fear of their guns that stopped us from doing it,' said another woman in the room.

'But what about now? They just took her away in front of our eyes and are now claiming they don't know where she is. Are we just going to keep quiet?' asked another woman.

Responding to these concerns, Kamala said to Ilamma,

'My husband says we can file a case in court. But today is Sunday, so the courts are closed. He said we can file it tomorrow.'

Kamala, younger than Ilamma, had become her only hope.

Mallesham, who had been sitting quietly till then, suddenly said,

'Kamala, should we inform the newspaper people?'

'That's a good idea. They'll definitely help put pressure on the authorities. We should have informed them yesterday itself. But, all of yesterday, we were running around from one police station to the next,' said Kamala, feeling sorry for not having done so earlier.

Meanwhile, a woman who had been staring out the window turned back and alerted everyone that the police were coming.

Anxiety filled the air. Some of them immediately stood up.

'Are they bringing my child...?' Ilamma's voice was filled with a mixture of sadness and hope. She slowly stood up, taking Kamala's support. The policemen arrived at the doorstep.

'Who is Ilamma here?' asked one policeman.

'Here, she is Ilamma,' Kamala replied.

'My daughter... where is she, sir?' Ilamma begged him for a reply.

'You should come to the police station once,' he said, without bothering to inform her where her daughter was.

'But where is my child, sir?' she began crying again.

'Why don't you come to the police station first? You'll know where she is,' he said without the harshness common to all policemen.

Without further delay, they all went to the police station. Ilamma was very distressed about the condition in which she might find her daughter, but she couldn't fully steel herself. Everybody else was in an equally troubled state of mind.

There was a lot of commotion at the police station when they reached there. Several journalists had exited the Circle Inspector of Police's office, and the station quieted down after some time. They called Ilamma into the C.I.'s office after some time. Kamala, Mallesham, and a few other women went in along with her as a support system.

'Who is Ilamma here, again?' the C.I. asked. Kamala held Ilamma's shoulder to signal that it was her. He asked Ilamma to sit, but she didn't dare to. She silently folded her hands as if in prayer, requesting him to show her daughter.

'Bharati is your daughter, right?'

'Yes, sir,' she nodded. She continued to fold her hands in helplessness.

'We found your daughter stealing chains at the railway station yesterday. We arrested her.'

Everyone was shocked.

‘What are you saying, sir? Didn’t you take my child forcefully from my house the night before last? Why are you maligning her like this?’ Ilamma couldn’t help saying despite her fatigue and fear.

‘We have eyewitnesses to her theft,’ reprimanded the C.I.

Ilamma did not dare to say that there were eyewitnesses to the police forcibly taking her daughter away from her house.

‘We put her in the lockup yesterday evening. This morning, we realised she had hanged herself in the lockup,’ he lied easily, as if he had perfected the art of lying before he was even born.

He didn’t even bother to lie convincingly. But he didn’t need to—because he was supremely confident nobody could ever do anything to him.

For a few moments, nobody understood what was happening. He had delivered several pieces of shocking news in mere seconds. They had all been mentally preparing to see Bharati in a deplorable condition. They knew police stations were no good—everyone returns not in a normal state from there. They feared the worst. But nobody expected that she would be dead.

Once they processed the information, they all started to cry. Ilamma, especially, lost all control and wailed uncontrollably. All of them understood that the police had killed Bharati.

The police entered the C.I.’s room as soon as they heard the cries, intending to stop them and throw them out—as though they already knew this would happen.

‘You cannot cry here. Don’t make noise in the police station,’ they demanded.

‘What we’re making is noise? You people killed our child and you’re asking us to stay quiet??’ Kamala burst out in anger.

‘What can we do if she killed herself?’ said one.

‘Cry, cry as much as you want—but not in the police station,’ continued another, pushing them out.

‘You killed our child here, so we’ll cry here! Why else would we cry in front of you inhumane people? Why are you pushing us out? At least now, show us our child!’ Kamala shouted angrily.

‘We don’t have the body. It’s at the hospital,’ came the reply, in a careless tone.

Without further delay, they all left for the hospital in an auto. Two people held Ilamma—otherwise, she would have collapsed. She had no energy left to cry.

The others continued crying, cursing the police. Upon seeing Bharati’s body, it was obvious to everyone that she had been sexually assaulted and tortured to her death. Ilamma could not bear to see her like that. She collapsed. The others, horrified by what they saw, sobbed. Hospital workers came running, asking them not to cry there in the hospital. Kamala and the others went on crying, cursing the hospital staff and the police for not letting them even cry after killing their child in an unjust and most brutal manner.

Since it was a Sunday, they had to plead with several people to find someone who could conduct the post-mortem. Journalists arrived during the post-mortem as well. One journalist, who looked at the body before the post-mortem, said to the doctor,

‘It looks like they raped her, sir.’

‘How can you say that without the report? We need a report to declare that,’ said the doctor seriously.

The journalist scoffed. ‘Anybody looking at the body can clearly see that. Being a doctor, can’t you declare that without reports?’ the journalist asked.

The doctor hesitated for a moment and then walked away.

‘Poor fellows! They said they’d take away their daughter’s body in the morning itself. But they didn’t know they wouldn’t be allowed to leave without a post-mortem. They gave whatever money they had to the doctors and got the post-mortem done. Post-mortems are meant to uncover the crime to help in getting justice. But most of our post-mortems are used to cover up crimes. In this case too, I’m sure the report will be favorable to the police. The report will never mention rape, you see. I feel bad for them. They’ve been waiting since morning, hoping to bring the police to justice. When they come to know that the post-mortem they got done with a lot of difficulty will only

exonerate the police, I don't know how they'll feel,' she said sadly to another journalist.

Bharati was taken from the mortuary directly to the cemetery. Ilamma returned home alone to a house that now means nothing to her. Overnight, she had lost everything in her life, because of the big egos and impunity of the policemen.

In that crowded town centre, even though Kamala couldn't describe in detail what happened, she managed to convey what had unfolded in Ilamma's life. Listening to this disturbing story, none of them could say a word. They all remained dead-silent, filled with sadness but also burning with anger.

Padma held Ilamma close, calling her '*Amma!*' Ilamma came out of the bitter memories of the past with Padma's call.

Padma called out to Ilamma but couldn't say anything more. But her very call gave confidence to Ilamma, it felt as if Padma said to her '*Amma, we're here for you.*'

'How long has it been since this happened?' Padma asked Kamala.

'Over five years, *Akka,*' Kamala replied.

'Ah, don't you remember seeing this news in the newspaper? We thought even then it couldn't have been a suicide—it must've been a custodial death. But we never imagined rape! The newspapers didn't mention anything remotely about it. See how terrible they were; they should have reported it,' said Madhavi in anger.

'*Amma,* many mothers are suffering due to this exploitative feudal-capitalist system. So many mothers like you have lost their children and loved ones to the whims and fancies of the police state. The lives of Dalits—especially Dalit women—are unbearable due to the actions of the state and patriarchy. We don't have the right to declare our anger and our self-respect. We don't even have the opportunity to express our sufferings and sorrow. That's why today so many people are fighting to bring down this exploitative state. We are taking away these guns for precisely that fight. From now onwards, these guns belong to the people. All these days, this government and the police used

these guns to steal from us, to torture and frighten us, to kill us and subject us to all sorts of suffering. But, the guns are in our hands now and with them we'll protect ourselves from this cruel system and also fight to bring it down,' said Padma ferociously.

'Yes, child. If the guns are in their hands, no one can stop them. Now see how they look—like squashed lice. Child! If those policemen who took away my child from me were here, I would have killed them with my own hands...'

Pausing briefly, 'Are these ones any good anyway? Who knows how many girls and women they may have bothered and harassed?' Ilamma thought to herself. She could only feel fury toward the policemen.

She channeled all that sadness and anger toward the police. She went up to the policemen lying on the floor and began kicking them and spitting upon them. As she continued to beat and kick the life out of them, the crowd cheered. Others ran toward her, trying to assist Ilamma in beating them up. The Naxalites realized this would lead to their death. So they intervened and asked everyone to stop. They only let Ilamma continue—for as long as she could. The crowd, once again, was filled with happiness and amazement.

Kamala watched Ilamma beat the police officers. She felt like this settled the injustice, at least a little. Like strong waves, the memories of her early life kept returning to her.

Twenty years ago Kamala married Mallesham and went to his village which was very active in the Naxalite movement. Her husband, Mallesham, was an active comrade in the local organisation. Kamala also joined him in the organisation until the repression began. Families were broken up and people scattered under the repression. Kamala couldn't withstand the terrifying situation. She wasn't sure when her husband would be home, when he would go out, where he was, how he was She was getting very agitated to stay in the village. Her parents and in-laws persuaded them to migrate to this town where they found a place in the *basti* where Ilamma lived too. They left their roots in the village and struggled to make a living in the town through daily wage labour. They experienced the misery of migrants' lives.

Even though they settled down in the town and had three children their hearts, memories, and relationships remained far away in the villages.

For a long time after they left the village, they were afraid to go back to it even for a short visit out of fear of the authorities. Over time, they started going there once in a while. They had only recently gone to their village for Dussehra and on that trip, Mallesham's relative told Kamala that things had changed in the village: 'The village is not like before and people are not afraid of the police as before. These days they are questioning the authorities. They aren't silent in front of the police anymore. In fact, the police are afraid of people now.'

Those words stayed with Kamala. They ignited hope in her. 'We should have stayed back in the village despite all odds. We didn't have to come to the town. Here, they treat us like animals,' she always thought to herself—especially after Bharati's death. But Kamala's hope was now becoming a reality in this town too!

'These guns belong to the people.'

'These guns are for our self-defense against the state.'

Kamala was reminded of Padmakka's words.

'Even now the police fear coming to the village. If these guns are also in the hands of the people...' thought Kamala to herself, feeling elated. 'Now, the Naxalites have come to the town too. Does that mean the town will also change like our village? I hope so' she wished strongly.

Although the village once lacked unity and feared the state, soon things changed, and the party began to gain ground. So, the village changed. The party must be strengthened in the town too for which everyone should get involved, felt Kamala strongly.

As if to put her thoughts into practice, she thought to herself:

'Oh, who knows when they last had food? We should feed them all. But where is the food now? Our houses are far. Maybe some of us could run, cook something, and get it for them in fifteen minutes,' she thought.

'Padmakka, I don't know when you last had food. Let us get you some,' said Kamala on behalf of everyone. All the women,

who had been watching the police being kicked by Ilamma with satisfaction, turned to the Naxalites upon hearing Kamala's offer. They all said, 'That's true *Akka*, you must have eaten long ago! Wait for a while, we'll get you food!'

Smiling in response to their affection, Padma said, 'No, dears, we don't have time. We have to go now.'

'No way! You can't leave without having food!'

'Your affection has filled our stomach, really. Please don't bother.'

As all the arms were loaded into the buses, the rest of the guerrillas walked toward Padma and the other comrades. They didn't understand why Ilamma was kicking the police and why the crowd was cheering her and why their comrades were watching her with enthusiasm. Zahir, one of the commanders of the raid, asked, 'Who is she? What happened?'

Kumari, an eighteen-year-old guerrilla, who was totally involved in what was happening, came to herself and replied:.

'She is Ilamma. She lives in a nearby *basti*. The police killed her daughter. That's why she is beating the police in anger.'

'Ah,' Zahir replied, appreciating the militancy of the mother and moved towards Padma.

Ilamma, tired from all the beating, stopped. She walked towards Padma, held her hands, and said, 'I am now satisfied. This is justice. I'm satisfied I could do at least this much. From the time the police killed my daughter, my blood boils when I see any policeman. I wanted to beat at least one policeman at least once. But, I never thought I could do it. I am helpless and they have big guns in their hands. So, I never thought I could fulfill my heart's desire but today that came true.' Ilamma's tearful eyes were shining with satisfaction.

Padma teared up and began weeping as Ilamma thanked her. Meanwhile, Zahir introduced himself to Ilamma, held her hands affectionately, and then said, 'Padma, let's go now. We're done here. It's been fifty minutes since the raid started.'

Wiping her tears, Padma said, 'Alright, let's go.'

Seeing her reddened face and teary eyes in the dimly lit streetlight, Zahir said, 'Hey, why are you crying? You should stay strong.'

'No, Zahir! I know that this raid... no, no, not just this raid but any raid is a political victory for our party and it also enthuses people a lot, boosting their morale. But today, I realized that many mothers must be feeling extremely happy during the raid because they got their revenge on this system. If I think about that, I'm unable to control these happy tears,' she said while wiping her tears.

'That's true! People's war is all about realizing the aspirations of all and attaining justice at all levels,' Zahir said. Padma smiled in agreement.

(This story is dedicated to all the brave guerrillas who participated in the Koraput raid and thus inspired this story)

Translation of 'Tupakulu Gunjukondri Bidda'. (First published in Arunatara, June – July 2005)

Translated by Vipanchika S. Bhagyanagar

Notes:

1. *Basti* – an area in a town or city where typically working class and lower middle class people dwell

2. The Madiga is a caste among Dalit community in southern India – Dalit being a term for those placed at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy and once deemed 'untouchable.' Traditionally forced into leatherwork and other menial occupations, the Madiga have faced centuries of exclusion and continue to fight for dignity and social justice.

Unresolved Loss

‘Not a single bird in sight. Who knows what unfulfilled desires that old man still had,’ said Kamamma, looking up into the distant sky.

‘Vijayamma, Sugunamma—both of you go once more to the place where we offered the food and pray again to your father, that you’ll stay united and will take good care of your mother’ said Veeramma.

Vijayamma and Sugunamma went to the place where the food was kept for the birds, bowed down in prayer once again, and returned to sit under the shade of the tree.

‘Hmm... even now the birds didn’t come. I wonder what’s in *mama’s* mind. Are all of us here or is anyone yet to come? Is *mama* perhaps waiting for someone else?’ said Ramulu, glancing around. ‘Looks like everyone has come though. I wonder why the birds didn’t show up.’

‘Did we offer everything the elder liked? He liked whisky the most, right? And, we didn’t bring any whisky!’ said Enkanna.

‘Hey, that’s true! All of us forgot. Enkanna, go quickly on my bike and bring a bottle,’ Ramulu said, pulling out money from his pocket and handing it to Enkanna.

Madhavi watched everything that was happening with indifference. It had been ten days since her grandfather Sattayya passed away. Today was the *dinaalu* (tenth-day ritual). She had come mechanically along with everyone to the stream. There was

a custom originating in the belief that if food items loved by the deceased are offered by relatives and friends, the departed soul would come in the form of a bird to partake of them. But Madhavi had no faith in that belief or ritual.

'It's so hot. No birds would show up in this heat. It's pointless to put in whisky or anything else now,' she thought to herself. She didn't say anything aloud—knowing no one would care even if she did.

Within fifteen minutes, the whisky bottle arrived. Ramulu took the bottle to the offering site, poured it all beside the food, and bowed once more. Everyone else also bowed again. Still, there was no sign of a bird.

'Hmm, no use. Let's not stay any longer. There's still a lot to do at home. And before we know it, it'll be time for lunch. Let's gather all these offerings and immerse them in the well,' said Ramulu.

'Yes, let's do that. How much longer can we sit here? The heat is unbearable. We'll immerse them in Muthyalamma well, right?' said Kamamma.

'Yes, that's nearest to us. Suresh, come and help me collect all of these into a bundle,' said Ramulu, picking up the food items placed for the bird. Suresh also started helping.

Ramulu was Sattayya's younger sister's son. Suresh was Sattayya's younger daughter's son. Sattayya had only two daughters. The elder, Vijayamma, had only one daughter—Madhavi. The younger, Sugamma, had one son and two daughters. Since Sattayya had no sons, his grandson Suresh performed the final rites. Even the tenth day's rituals were being conducted by Suresh.

'Okay now, let's go. Everyone who's supposed to do the rituals, come along. We'll finish the bath at the well and then go to the feast area,' said Narayana, Sattayya's younger brother.

Those who were related to the deceased and had to perform the ritual cleansing moved towards the well while the rest headed back.

'Come on, akka. Let's go. Anyway, we aren't obliged to take

the ritual bath,' Soumya called out to Madhavi.

Madhavi stood up, glanced once toward her grandfather's grave, let out a heavy sigh, and began walking with Soumya.

'Why are you so glum, *akka*? Dying is natural, right? If you think about it, your grandpa lived quite a long life—he must've been about eighty-five when he died. My own grandpa died ten years ago and he was nearly fifteen years younger than your grandpa. I barely remember him,' Soumya chattered on.

'You're studying medicine, right? Death is natural to you,' Madhavi said with a faint smile.

'Oh please, what does my education have to do with this?' laughed Soumya, gently tapping her forehead.

Madhavi and Soumya were second cousins— they were granddaughters of Sattayya and his brother. Soumya was ten years younger than Madhavi. Still, the two were close friends.

They held each other's hands and walked across the stream. Soumya continued to talk excitedly, while Madhavi listened quietly. The rest of the relatives who were heading back also walked in small groups through the stream.

As they neared the edge of the stream—

'Hey, there's grandma sitting under that tamarind tree. Let's go see,' said Madhavi. Both stepped off the main path and started walking towards her.

From the group behind them, Soumya's mother Sujatha's voice called out—

'Hey, Soumya, where are you going?'

'We are going to Grandma'

'Wait a second,' Sujatha said a little anxiously.

Both of them stopped. Within a few steps, the entire group caught up to them and stopped. Vijayamma was also among them.

'Why are you going there? Better go home' Sujatha said.

'We thought we'd just go see her,' said Sowmya.

'You'd better not go there, dear,' said another woman from the group.

- 'Why not?' asked Sowmya, confused. But Madhavi understood.

'Do we have to spell out everything for you now? Just don't go near your grandma right now. Come on, go home,' said another.

'Oh, is that so...' Sowmya responded, seemingly giving up the idea of going there.

'Okay, Sowmya, you go. I'll go to grandma,' said Madhavi, letting go of Sowmya's hand and starting to walk toward her grandmother.

'Why do you want to go either, dear...' Vijayamma thought to herself but couldn't say it aloud.

After hesitating for a few moments, she said, 'What will you do by going there? Look at Samata, she's playing in the heat. Take her home quickly and feed her something. If you wait a little longer, she'll start crying from hunger,' she said to her daughter Madhavi.

Madhavi paused for a moment, looked into her mother's eyes, and gave a small smile. 'I'll take just a few minutes Amma, I'll be back soon,' she said and started walking.

That faint smile twisted Vijayamma's heart and she couldn't say another word.

In Vijayamma's eyes, her daughter's marriage wasn't really a marriage, her domestic life wasn't a normal one nor did the 'widowhood' her daughter had been subjected to truly register as widowhood to her. She never considered her daughter a widow, she still saw her as a young woman who ought to get married. That's why she didn't want her daughter to go to a place that was meant only for widows. Letting her go there, to her, meant not only accepting her as a widow but also allowing others around them to see her as one. She didn't want that to happen.

Even so, she couldn't stop Madhavi.

As Madhavi approached her grandmother, her steps grew heavier.

Her grandmother was sitting in a rickshaw. Madhavi walked up slowly and looked at her face.

Her grandmother's face was smeared with turmeric and a large red bindi adorned her forehead. Her hair was filled with flowers. Normally, such decorations were meant to make women look vibrant and festive. But on her grandmother, they only accentuated the absence of any joy.

Madhavi felt a surge of disgust inside. When will these customs ever change, she thought. The turmeric-smeared face of her grandmother was full of sorrow and her eyes, looking into a distant void, stirred pity in Madhavi's heart.

Madhavi didn't know what to say. Finally, placing a hand on her grandmother's shoulder, she asked gently, 'Grandma, are you getting tired sitting here for so long?'

There was no change in her grandmother's face. She kept staring off into the distance.

Unable to stand there any longer, Madhavi said, 'Okay, I'll go now,' and turned to leave.

'I'll go too. My head is aching in this heat,' said Gauramma, trying to get up.

'Where are you going? She's a woman with hardly any mobility. Only if there are four or five of us, we can give her a bath and manage the rituals together. If you go, how can we manage?' said Mallamma.

'Fine, I'll stay. I only said I'll leave because my head is aching,' Gauramma replied.

The ritual of removing bangles and wiping off the bindi for a widow are carried out by other widows. Yet, no one thought to ask Madhavi to stay. And Madhavi herself didn't feel like staying either.

Evening had set in. Things had quieted down a bit in the house. Most of the relatives had left. The few who remained were chatting. Some were busy arranging for dinner.

'Though he had no sons, the old man's children performed all the rites properly,'—this was the general opinion of nearly everyone.

Sattayya's daughters and sons-in-law were also relieved that they completed the rites successfully and they were going around, sending off some guests and asking others to stay. Now that everyone was praising their efforts, the tension they had been carrying for the past two or three days seemed to lift. They began to breathe easy again.

Since morning, Madhavi had been busy with one task or another, without a moment to spare. Finally, she found some time to herself. She felt like going and sitting with her grandmother for a while.

As she stepped into the room where her grandmother was, she paused for a moment. The present appearance of her grandmother was in complete contrast to the one she had seen that morning by the riverbank. Her grandmother sat on the cot wearing a white saree, silver bangles, bare neck, bare feet, bare forehead without her usual bindi — a vacant expression in her eyes. That same sorrow lingered on her face.

Madhavi quietly went and sat beside her grandmother. For a while, she couldn't think of what to say, so she sat there with her eyes cast down. Her gaze fell upon her grandmother's bare feet. Instantly, Madhavi remembered how her grandmother used to walk. Before the paralysis struck, her toe-rings would make a loud metallic clinking sound as she moved. That unmistakable sound used to signal whether she was in the house or not, and where she was. After paralysis confined her to the bed, that sound had faded away. But the toe-rings remained. If they slipped off, she would ask others to find and put them back. If they seemed loose, she would ask for a string to tie them tighter.

Whenever Madhavi grumbled, 'Why don't you just take them off?' her grandmother, with toothless laughter, would reply, 'Who would remove their toe-rings, dear?'

She also loved bangles dearly. The clinking of glass bangles always accompanied her wherever she went. Even when her hands had become paralysed, she refused to remove them.

'Ugh! Why so many bangles?' Madhavi would complain whenever she had to give her grandmother a bath after her paralysis.

'Ugh, these traditions... People's likes and dislikes don't matter in these traditions. Even if you don't like something, you have to wear it. And even if you do like it, you have to give it up,' Madhavi thought to herself.

She couldn't figure out how to lift her grandmother's spirits. She knew the loss of her grandfather had left a void in her grandmother that would never heal.

She thought back to the relationship that existed between her grandparents. As a child, during school holidays, she and her cousins would spend their days at their grandparents' house. Her grandparents were always affectionate toward all the children, relatives, and neighbors. But, they were constantly bickering with each other. If one said east, the other would say west.

And yet, once her grandmother was struck with paralysis and became bedridden, her grandfather's demeanour changed completely. He took care of her like a mother would take care of a sick child. Even when people advised him to go live with one of his daughters, he refused — wanting not to burden anyone. With just the help of an attendant, he took care of everything for his wife. And whenever her grandmother spoke of him, it was always with warmth.

At eighty-five years of age, her grandfather had been quite healthy. No one ever imagined he would die. In fact, everyone thought her grandmother would pass away first. But suddenly, it was her grandfather who died.

Poor grandmother — what must she be thinking now? Is she worried that from tomorrow, she'll have to live at the mercy of others?

Since grandfather's death, she has remained in this state of quiet sorrow. Even when he died, she hadn't cried. Not a single tear had fallen. She just sat still, steeped in grief.

When their neighbor Muttamma asked, 'Grandma, he served you so much. And now that he's gone, don't you feel like crying?'

Grandmother had simply replied, 'I don't know, tears aren't coming.'

But today, she seemed more sorrowful than usual. Why,

Madhavi wondered. Was it because she had taken off her beloved bangles and toe-rings?

Coming out of her thoughts, Madhavi asked,

‘Grandma, why do you feel so sad? All of us have to die ultimately, don’t we? Grandfather lived for eighty-five long years — how much longer was he going to live?’

‘Yes, true. Your grandfather actually outlived all his siblings. He lived the longest,’ grandmother replied.

‘So you know that people younger than him have died too. You know that, yet if you’re so sad, what does that mean? Today you seem especially down. Why? Is it because they removed your favorite bangles and toe-rings?’

‘No... I don’t feel sad about that,’ grandmother said.

‘Then why are you sad?’

For a moment, her expression turned grave. ‘On the day he died, I didn’t see the spot where they dug his grave. Even today, I didn’t get to see his grave.’

Madhavi was taken aback, and words caught in her throat. Straining her voice, she said, ‘Oh no, grandma! But the rickshaw doesn’t go across the stream through the sand. The graves are all on the far side of the bank. If it were possible, we’d have definitely taken you there, grandma.’

‘The rickshaw doesn’t go, but bullock carts do,’ grandmother said firmly.

‘Oh, grandma, if you had said just once that you wanted to go, we’d have done anything to get you there. If you had just told me at least this morning, we would have made arrangements to take you there, somehow,’ Madhavi said with deep regret.

‘Why wouldn’t I want to see it, child? Do I have to tell you people? Don’t you know?’

It felt like a slap across Madhavi’s face. Doesn’t everyone want to see, to witness such moments? Was it really she who had said those words? How could she?

Just a year ago, she had fought a huge battle — for what? Just to see Prakash one last time.

Madhavi and Prakash were from the same village. They had known each other well since their student days. After completing their studies, they both became teachers in the same school, and their acquaintance blossomed into a deep friendship. Eventually, they became inseparable. That's when they decided to live together for life. But since they belonged to different castes, neither of their families approved. Still, they both decided to get married. In the end, their parents had no choice but to relent.

By the time they got married, Prakash was already involved with the revolutionary movement. After marriage, his involvement only deepened. After their daughter was born, it became impossible for him to continue his activities openly. So they thought of handing over the baby to Madhavi's parents and going full time into the movement.

But Madhavi's parents cried, pleaded, and beat their chests.

'You're all we have. If tomorrow we're bedridden, who will be there for us? If you go, what's to become of our lives?

The baby isn't even a year old. If you both parents go away, who would care for her?

We can't live without you. You kill the child and us too. Then, you do as you wish,' they said.

Their words and tears changed Madhavi's decision.

'I can't leave my baby and my parents behind, Prakash. But you go. Don't stop for me,' Madhavi said through her tears.

'Madhu, we wanted to live together, work together. How can I go, leaving you behind? And how can you stay behind leaving me?'

'I told you even before marriage—I won't be an obstacle in your path. If we are to live together, either I must walk your path, or you must walk mine. When neither is possible, each of us must follow our own way. I'm sincerely telling you to go,' she said, leaning against his chest and sobbing.

'Come on... where will I go, leaving you behind?' Prakash comforted her that day.

But within a few days, he made up his mind to leave Madhavi and go.

When he told Madhavi about his decision, she asked, trying hard to suppress her sorrow, 'So, won't you meet me again?'

'Why wouldn't I? Even if I go underground, we'll still be husband and wife,' he explained.

And so, Prakash left for an incognito life. He would meet her only occasionally, like a falling star.

'It's not possible for us to meet more often, Madhu. Aren't you getting angry that I am taking so long to meet you?' he asked once.

'Pfft! I don't get angry. No matter how late you are, I won't get angry. Don't disrupt your work worrying that I might be upset. No matter how many days pass before we meet, it's enough for me if you haven't forgotten me,' she said.

'Come on! As if I could forget you!'

'I don't know... do you ever think about me?' she asked in a low, sorrowful voice.

He laughed heartily and said, 'So now I understand. It looks like you never think of me.'

'That's not true... there isn't a moment when you're not on my mind.'

'Well, I have my doubts. I never imagined before that it's possible for a husband and wife to forget each other. Since you seem to think it's possible, maybe you don't think of me. That's why you think it is possible to forget the other person,' he teased her.

One day, she said to him, 'Prakash, you're in the movement, and I'm out here. Are you truly satisfied? Don't you wish your wife were working alongside you... If you marry someone who is working along with you in the movement, I won't be hurt.'

No matter how much she tried to sound casual, her voice trembled with sorrow.

After a few silent moments, he asked, 'So are you planning to marry someone else?'

He pretended to be serious.

‘What are you saying? Did I ever say such a thing?’ she snapped, her face red with tears and anger.

‘You say there’s nothing wrong if I marry someone. But if I said the same to you, it angers you. Don’t I have the right to feel hurt too?’

‘That’s not it, Prakash...’ She was about to explain herself, and seeing the despair on her face, he softened.

He began to speak gently. ‘If you could fully join the movement, I would be overjoyed. Even if you don’t, that doesn’t mean I’m disappointed in you because you neither oppose nor dislike the movement. I understand why you can’t join me. That’s why my love for you hasn’t diminished—and it never will,’ he said.

Madhavi had no words. Overwhelmed with emotion, she tried unsuccessfully to hold back her tears of joy.

Seven years passed like that.

That day... was the most tragic day in Madhavi’s life.

Prakash’s friend Sudhakar came from town. He was quite familiar to Madhavi. He worked in a human rights organisation. A woman had come along with him, she too worked with him.

The news they broke caused an outpouring of grief in the house. The neighbors came to find out what happened. Within minutes, the news had spread throughout the village. Prakash’s parents came running, beating their chests. Some people were crying, others were talking.

‘Is it really true, sir? How do you know?’ asked one of Prakash’s friends.

‘There are some people we know in that state. We had our doubts, so we made some calls to find out.’

‘When did it happen?’

‘The day before.’

‘Will they give us the body?’

‘We have to go and ask. We must leave quickly. If we leave now, we can catch the train.’

'Oh, is it? Somebody go and get a jeep quickly!'

Madhavi stood like a stone without paying attention to what anyone was saying, asking, or crying about. Mamatha, who came with Sudhakar, placed her hands gently around Madhavi's shoulders and said, '*Akka*, you have to be strong. The jeep has come. We have to leave quickly.'

Madhavi moved mechanically.

Some people were helping Prakash's parents into the jeep.

'Aunt, uncle, are you going too?' someone asked.

'How can we not go? If we don't go, what will happen to our daughter? Who will be there for her?' cried Vijayamma, and followed Madhavi.

Someone held Madhavi around her shoulders and helped her walk along. Madhavi saw her daughter Samata clinging to her grandfather and crying. She walked towards her daughter, held her by the hand and led her toward the jeep.

'She's just a little girl, why take her with us? Leave her here. Someone will take care of her,' said Vijayamma.

Madhavi acted as if she hadn't heard her mother and continued walking towards the jeep with the child.

Realizing there was no use insisting, Vijayamma tried to separate her granddaughter's hand from her daughter's hand and said, 'Let her go, dear.'

'We'll take her with us. She'll also see her father,' Madhavi said firmly.

'Oh no, child. What will she understand by seeing that? She'll only get scared,' Vijayamma said, her voice choking with sorrow.

'Am I trying to show her a demon or a ghost that she should get scared? I want to show her, her father. If she doesn't see him now, she'll never see him again,' said Madhavi, her voice filled with a mix of anger, anguish, and sorrow.

'That's not it, child... it's just that she's too young,' Vijayamma finally gave up trying to stop her.

The jeep departed. After reaching the town, they got down from the jeep and boarded the train.

Prakash's parents collapsed on to the train seat as if they had fainted. Vijayamma gathered courage and holding her granddaughter's head in her lap, she kept looking at her daughter again and again. She really wanted to pull her daughter into her arms and comfort her. But her daughter sat there without shedding even a single tear. Vijayamma was afraid that if she even touched her, those suppressed tears would burst like a flood. She feared she wouldn't be able to bear it if she saw her daughter cry.

'She hasn't shed even a drop of tear... but who knows how much she is breaking up inside. Curse the God who put my daughter through such hell. Oh God! How could you test my child like this in front of our eyes? How will she endure this sorrow? How will she recover from this blow? Dear Lord, please give my child the courage to bear this pain,' Vijayamma prayed silently in her heart.

Madhavi sat by the window but she hardly registered anything she saw through it. Mamatha sat beside her with her arm around her shoulders by way of support. Seeing Madhavi like this made her heart ache.

The train was speeding past the state borders. Madhavi had traveled on this route many times before. Every time, it had been for Prakash, to meet him. Even now, it was for Prakash. But how different it was then and now!

Earlier, he would meet her a little while after she got off the train. He would greet her with a smile as soon as he saw her. That smile felt like moonlight to her.

'You're doing well, right?' his voice would carry the fragrance of jasmine blossoms.

'Yes,' she would reply. She couldn't say a word beyond that.

'How is Samata doing?' he would ask. She would simply nod to say she's fine.

For all his questions, she would reply with either a single syllable or a single word. After a while, she would wonder at how and why a talkative person like her had become so silent.

But this time, he wouldn't greet her with his usual smile. Nor would his words carry the sweet fragrance of jasmine.

How would he look?

Lifeless... wounded in several places... stiff like a log...

Could she bear to see him like that? Would she be able to withstand seeing him like that?

No! She wasn't thinking of any of this. She wasn't considering whether or not to see him. She wasn't contemplating whether or not she could bear to see his lifeless body. In fact, from the very moment she heard the news that Prakash was no more, time stood still for her and her thoughts froze. She was travelling mechanically.

Prakash loved their village deeply. Every time he met Madhavi, he would speak about it. He would ask repeatedly about every little change that had taken place in the village after he left it.

Once, Madhavi had asked him, 'Do you feel like seeing our village again?'

He gave a faint smile and replied, 'What's the point even if I feel like it? I can't come, can I? May be when I die, only my corpse will come to the village.'

'Ugh! What kind of talk is that?' she scolded, silencing him.

Seeing the tears welling in her eyes, he stroked her head gently and said, 'It's not in our hands. Whatever happens, you must stay strong.'

'No, please don't talk like that ... if anything happens to you, my heart will break and I'll die,' she sobbed.

'Ah, sorry! I made you cry unnecessarily. Nothing will happen to me. Please, don't cry,' he comforted her with gentle words for a long time.

After that, she never again asked him, 'Do you feel like seeing our village?'

But once, he had said, 'I strongly feel like seeing our village. Pch! But it's not possible now. Once the revolution is successful,

I'll come to our village and live there permanently. As before, the two of us will teach the children. Alright?'

He would dream aloud like that, sharing those dreams with her.

But now, none of this came to Madhavi's mind. Her heart had become numb. She didn't know where she was going, or why she was going. She was in a dazed state, unable to comprehend anything. In fact, she didn't even seem to be aware that she was going somewhere.

The next morning, they got off the train and went straight to the Collector's office. Sudhakar, Mamatha, and Madhavi went into the Collector's chamber. Madhavi, who walked with Mamatha's support, was still in a daze. They were shocked to hear the Collector's words.

The encounter took place deep inside the forest. It was very difficult to retrieve the bodies, so they had conducted the post mortem and cremated them right there — that was the gist of what he said.

Madhavi snapped back into awareness hearing those words.

'Is it over? Is everything over? Did these people do everything?' she wailed in agony.

Mamatha held Madhavi tightly by the shoulders and said, 'Akka, please...'

She couldn't say another word due to the weight of grief pressing upon her.

'They took away a full life, took him away from me. They didn't even leave me a possibility to see him for one last time... not even a final glimpse...'

The grief frozen within Madhavi from the day before melted swiftly into an outpouring of tears.

'Calm down, akka. These people are not human, they can't understand our pain,' Mamatha said, wiping away tears streaming down her cheeks.

'No, akka, no. I must see my husband. I have to see him one last time. I must see him.'

'Oh! akka...'

Mamatha was finding it increasingly difficult to manage her own desire to break down into sobs.

Even Sudhakar was moved to tears looking at Madhavi.

Suddenly, Madhavi stopped crying, broke away from Mamatha's arms, looked toward the Collector, and said,

'At least show me what you did to my husband. Show me his grave or his pyre.'

Her grief had turned into fury.

The Collector, not understanding Telugu, looked confused. Mamatha explained in English.

The Collector informed them that four people had died in the encounter and all four had been cremated. So it was difficult to identify which pyre belonged to whom — that was the gist of his reply.

In truth, all four were cremated together in a single pile. Knowing that, the Collector lied.

'Why were they even cremated? According to the law, they should have been buried,' Mamatha asked angrily.

'There must have been some special circumstances,' the Collector replied very coolly.

'You always have 'special circumstances' ready whenever you want to escape the law. We're beginning to suspect... was it even an encounter? Or did you just capture and shoot them?' Sudhakar lashed out.

'The post mortem report will bring out the truth' the Collector said, in a voice completely devoid of urgency.

'What use is a post mortem report? The police dictate it, and they write it just as they are told,' Mamatha replied.

'You took a full life, snuffed it out without mercy. You took him away from us. When we ask to at least show us the body, you made sure even the body is not there. When we ask to at least give us the ashes, you won't even do that. Don't you have the responsibility to remember who you burned and where? Are

they some kind of flies or mosquitoes that you can squash and throw away somewhere and then claim that you don't know where you threw them?

They were people... living human beings. Don't they have children, just like you do? Don't they have parents, just like you?'

Crying, Madhavi screamed at the Collector.

Wiping her tears, she spoke again.

'At least show me the place where my husband was killed. Show me the spot soaked in his blood. At least I will see that place, and the four pyres there! One of those pyres is my husband's, isn't it? At least I'll see that.'

The Collector was in a tight spot because he was merely parroting the narrative woven by the government and the police. The truth was, it wasn't an encounter. They had captured them, tortured them brutally, dragged them into the forest, and shot them to death. As they were afraid the corpses would reveal the truth, they spread the story that the encounter happened somewhere in the interior forest. They didn't even allow journalists to visit the spot. The police themselves took photographs and gave them to the media.

The Collector didn't know what to say. He realized that if he didn't act cleverly, pulling one thread might unravel the whole fabric. He wanted to ensure that didn't happen.

'I'll speak to the SP and try,' he said and called the SP right there in front of them. He wanted it to appear as though he was making every possible effort.

On the phone, after hearing the issue, the SP said it was a deep forest area, and even the police party that had participated in the incident would struggle to identify the exact spot. Moreover, there were many streams along the path that flooded suddenly, making it too risky. He added a few more such excuses and suggested managing the situation with words.

The Collector repeated those same words. He also added, 'If there's even the slightest chance, we would have definitely fulfilled your request.'

'You say it so easily. If someone from your family had died

and their body lay there, would you leave it there? You'd bring it in helicopters. But when it comes to the corpses of our people, you treat them like orphaned corpses... I don't care what you'll do. But unless you show me at least my husband's remains, I won't leave,' Madhavi said, crying but with determination in her voice.

Wiping the tears streaming down her cheeks, Mamatha said, 'Come, *akka*, let's go. These beasts can never understand our pain... let's go.'

'No, *akka*, I will not come! Prakash loved our village dearly. He always wished to come back but he couldn't return to it while alive. If I can't take his body back... at least I should take his bones... I must take his bones back to the village, *akka*. At least his bones should rest in our soil. He was a beloved leader of our village. Let our villagers at least see his remains...'

Mamatha hugged Madhavi and broke into sobs.

'*Akka*, we can't do anything here. Let's go to the court with a demand to at least be given the remains,' Sudhakar persuaded and took her outside.

The next day, the newspapers published a report saying Prakash and others were captured and shot dead.

Since it happened in deep forest, Madhavi and others had somewhat believed it might have been a real encounter. But after seeing the news, they were enraged. They spoke to the media, demanding justice and punishment for the killers. They filed a case in court.

Madhavi gave up her demand to see her husband's remains. She realized that if she insisted, they might show her someone else's bones, but never her husband's.

With a burning heart, Madhavi turned back.

Her grandmother's words stirred up all the past incidents in Madhavi's mind. She tried hard to suppress the grief overpowering her. She struggled with the sobs rising in her throat — neither able to suppress them, nor able to cry out.

'No! No! Please Madhu... don't cry... seeing your pain, Mom and Dad won't be able to bear it... control yourself,' Madhavi kept telling herself.

With great effort, she held back her tears as she always did. She buried the storm raging within.

She forcibly turned her mind toward her grandmother.

It was true — wouldn't grandma want to see grandfather's grave? Theirs was a bond of nearly seventy years, sharing joys and sorrows. For the past ten years, grandfather had been everything to grandma. Wouldn't she then want to see where he became one with the earth?

Why hadn't she thought about this? Not just her — why had no one thought about it? Why had no one cared? Even though grandma's limbs had failed due to paralysis, her mind hadn't faded. Why hadn't anyone considered her feelings?

How come those who wondered why the bird didn't peck the rice and if the old man was still waiting for someone didn't remember grandma?

They thought that the reason the bird didn't peck was because grandfather loved whisky and that wasn't in the offering. Then, why didn't they recall how much love he had for grandma?

They had all thought about how to conduct a grand ceremony in grandfather's name — how many people to invite, how many goats to slaughter, how many varieties of dishes to cook — all to make a display to the world of their love for him and to get kudos from everyone that his ceremony lacked for nothing.

But why hadn't anyone thought to peek into the heart of her grandmother whose life was entirely entwined with his?

This indifference to people's feelings... No, no... we must not become so heartless, Madhavi told herself.

'Grandma, tomorrow morning itself I'll arrange a vehicle and take you to grandfather's grave,' she said, holding her grandmother's hand.

(Dedication: To my grandmother, who couldn't see my grandfather's grave... and to the revolutionary people who are unable to bid a final farewell to their loved ones...)

(Published under the pen name 'Zameen')

Translation of 'Bonda Judanaiti'. (First published in Arunatara, October – November 2002)

Translated by P. Aravinda

Collective Grief

'*Chinnamma*, here, have just this one idli', Aruna said to her aunt pleadingly.

Kamalamma shook her head in a way that showed more inability than refusal.

Aruna put her arms around her aunt's shoulders and said, 'You haven't eaten since this morning, you must eat.'

'No, *bidda*', she said, turning away, hiding the tears that were threatening to flow out of her eyes, and rested her head against the seat.

'Didn't she eat?' asked Venu, walking towards the parked jeep, his eyes on the uneaten Idlis in Aruna's hands.

'No', said Aruna helplessly.

'Well, at least you eat them', said Venu.

'I can't eat, either', replied Aruna.

'*Akka*, you're also behaving like *Peddamma*', scolded Venu. 'You must eat, we need energy for the rest of the day. I've brought you another plate thinking *Peddamma* would eat that, at least eat something.'

Not wanting to be told again, Aruna reluctantly stuffed the idlis into her mouth.

'Should I bring some *chai*, then?' Venu asked.

Aruna nodded her head

'Here, *Peddamma*, have some *chai* at least,' Venu said, handing her a glass of tea.

Kamalamma gulped two sips of *chai* mechanically.

'He loves *chai*' she thought to herself. With that thought, she couldn't drink the tea anymore.

Neither could she throw away the *chai* that her son loved so much. So, she just sat there, cradling the glass in her hands.

'Drink a little more,' Aruna pleaded again, taking the glass to Kamalamma's lips, gesturing to her to take a sip.

'Mm-hmm', Kamalamma said, declining.

Kamalamma's mental state was in disarray since that morning. Her husband, Narsayya had been ill for the last two days. Krishnamurthi, the RMP doctor¹ of their village suspected that it could be a case of Typhoid fever.

'It's already summer. He has become completely weak this summer, *Chinnamma*', said the doctor. 'Let him stay in my house for two days, I will put him on glucose'.

'Alright son, whatever you think best...all I want is for him to get well', she agreed.

Kamalamma, too, spent that night at the doctor's house as Narsayya was treated with restorative fluids.

'It will take a couple of hours for this to be done, you should get some sleep, *Chinnamma*', the doctor insisted. 'I will wake up to check on him', he assured her.

Despite the doctor's reassurance, Kamalamma did not sleep. What if the doctor doesn't wake up? What if Narsayya moves in his sleep? What if he calls out for her? Anxious, she stayed by his bed all night, nodding off a few times only to jolt awake abruptly again.

She went home early the next morning. She finished all the chores swiftly, with the intention to take some food back to her husband.

'This man is not eating anything I make. It has become so bothersome, what should I do', she muttered to herself. Talking to herself, she began sorting things here and there in the kitchen

when her brother-in-law's son, Venu, came running with two of his friends behind him.

'Oh? How come you thought of your *Peddamma* first thing in the morning today, eh?' Kamamma, who didn't observe the way Venu came running, teased him.

'*Peddamma...*' Venu cried out in anguish.

'What is the matter, son? What happened?' Even as she uttered the question, her mind was filled with an unknown fear.

'News in the paper...encounter...*Anna's* name...' gasped Venu, unable to say more.

Kamma grew cold, she couldn't find her voice. Her legs became wobbly, totally lacking strength. Unable to stand anymore, she collapsed on to the floor.

Aruna, daughter of Kamamma's other brother-in-law, who was visiting her parents, caught sight of Venu hastily running towards Kamamma's house. Curious, she came behind him and overheard what he said.

Holding up her aunt from collapsing, Aruna said to Venu in a voice filled with grief,

'What are you saying?'

'It's in the paper, *Akka*. They wrote that it could be *Anna*', he replied wiping his tears.

Aruna wailed. But there was no reaction from Kamamma. Her mind had become numb and the vacant look in her eyes indicated that she was hardly able to make sense of what she heard, where she was and what was happening.

Hearing the sounds of weeping, Kamamma's brother-in-law and sister-in-law and the neighbours, all gathered around her. The wailing grew louder.

Meanwhile, Venu's friend Yadagiri took him a few feet away from the group and said, 'Look, Venu, will you just stand here and weep too or see what needs to be done now?'

Venu looked at Yadagiri, wiping his tears. His eyes seemed to say: 'What is left to be done, now? What shouldn't have happened has already happened.'

As if sensing the unasked question, Yadagiri said, 'Let us go there. To our tragic misfortune, if it is indeed our anna...should we not bring him back?' He couldn't bring himself to say the word, 'corpse' or 'body'.

Murari, another friend of Venu's, nodded in solemn agreement.

On hearing his friends, Venu was reminded of his immediate duty at hand.

'How shall we do this?' he asked, looking to his friends helplessly for advice. The three of them then moved into the living room from the kitchen, discussing.

'How else? We shall book a jeep²! Didn't they write that they might bring him to some hospital, let's go there', said Murari in a determined voice.

Some other men gathered around them. Each of them suggested their idea. They said we could do this or we could do that. Let's do it this way. Maybe, let's do it that way. But we must make haste, they all concurred.

In minutes, the news spread through the entire village. Venu's parents and sisters joined the family, weeping. Their house is a short distance away from Kamamma's. Venu read the news in the morning paper when he was at the village's consecrated stone and from there he ran straight to his uncle's house. So, his parents heard the news a little later.

Krishnamurthy, the doctor, had read the news when he was at the tea joint. Shocked by what he had read, he quickly ran back inside his house and bolted the door shut behind him, fearing that someone might break the news to Narsayya. Narsayya was just recovering and the doctor was afraid that this news might cause his health to deteriorate further, so he wanted to keep the tragedy from his patient as long as he could. He decided to keep administering the fluids until that evening and tell him the news once he was better.

Meanwhile, at the house, Yadagiri arrived in a jeep. Who should go? Everyone was eager to go.

In the chaos, Yadagiri said, deciding, 'What is the point of

us all going, there's nothing for us all to do there. Look Venu, you, me, Murari and Sambayya shall go, that is all. Not even your father or uncle. They are elderly and it is summer, it will be trouble for them. Since Narsayya *Pedananna* is unwell, we'll take Kamalamma *peddamma* with us'.

After more deliberation, everyone consented to this plan.

'Arunakka, will you come too, to accompany *Peddamma*?', Venu asked.

Aruna agreed and handed over her children to her mother's care.

The jeep began to move, leaving a trail of people behind, before catching speed and driving away. They all stopped and watched it disappear into the distance, a vision blurred by their sorrow.

In the jeep, Kamalamma gradually came to and began to regain her sense of reality. The thought that her only son might be dead, brought grief gushing out of her broken heart and she wailed. Aruna and Venu, who sat on either side of her in the jeep, tried to calm her down, but to no avail.

'Calm down, *Peddamma*. The newspaper didn't say conclusively that it was *Anna*. They only suspected it to be him. With some luck, it may not be *Anna* at all', Venu said, trying to convince his aunt of something that he himself was unsure of.

'No? Is it not my son, then? Oh God, please see that it is not my son', she prayed.

She consoled herself thinking, 'It may not be him, after all, they didn't say anything with certainty in the newspaper.' But soon, more thoughts followed, 'but they did write that it could be him, why did his name come up at all if it was not him? This has never happened before. His name never came up in this way. If I believe it is not him and go there to find that it is, will I ever be able to bear it? Is it not better to turn my heart into a stone and be prepared then? Has it really come to this? Is there really no more hope?' Kamalamma began to weep again uncontrollably.

After a while, as though exhausted by her own grief, she turned quiet and numb. Aruna gently laid Kamalamma's head on

her shoulder. The morning passed and it was afternoon when Yadagiri suggested to Venu, 'None of us had any food since this morning. I'm sure we can't bear to eat rice, let us have some *tiffin*³ and tea. We might not be able to eat for a while after..'

They pulled the jeep over at a roadside hotel and ate, almost cursorily, just for the sake of eating something. Kamamma however, refused to eat. After all, what is hunger compared to a mother's pangs of grief?

The jeep hit the road again, speeding.

Earlier, at the house, as Kamamma was being helped into the jeep, an old woman had said, 'why are you taking her along when she is looking like a mad person?'

'It seems the mother has to identify the body, only then will they hand it over,' someone answered in a matter-of-fact manner. These words came back to Kamamma now.

She must see and identify her son. The thought itself rattled her. Many images of 'encountered' corpses on the TV and in the newspapers danced before her eyes. Bullet-ridden bodies, shot in the head, in the eyes, the heart or the stomach, with skin bruised black and blue, as a reminder of police brutality, flies swarming around them...terrifying, chilling, and heart-wrenching sights. How many times did she turn away from them, unable to make herself see? How many times did she shiver in panicked anxiety? Her son ... in the same way, bloodied, bullet-ridden, flies swarming all around him... No, no, no. She shut her eyes tightly, willing the images to go away. For a bit, the horrific thoughts seemed to ebb.

'Kamamma, look at your baby. It's a boy, and that too in your first delivery, you are fortunate, *bidda*', her mother said, laying her newborn next to her. As that first spring of motherly love blossomed in her heart, she forgot the pain and struggle of labour, and looked at her son for the first time adoring, her eyes sparkling with joy.

After bathing the baby and marking his forehead with a black dot to ward off the evil eye, her paternal grandmother laid him on Kamamma's lap. 'He looks just like your husband', she

teased, playfully pinching her cheek. Shyly, the new mother looked contentedly at her beloved son.

In the hospital, at his birth, when the doctor said, 'Your son is well and healthy, plump as a marigold, there's no need for any medicines' she beamed at her child happily.

One day, when her husband said, 'Our son is first in his class at school. If he keeps this up, his headmaster thinks he could become a collector when he grows up!', Kamalamma looked at her son, proudly pleased.

Once, when he received a prize at a school tournament, her neighbour commented a bit jealously, 'Your son is so bright, first in class, first in sports, first in music, first in everything, you have nothing to worry.' That day she looked so gleefully at her wonderful boy.

When he wouldn't heed her caution against playing in the hot sun, she beat him on his back, admonishing him, looking at him angrily.

'Are you your mother's boy, or your father's boy?', she would ask him. He would answer, 'I'm a mother's boy' and hide his head in her belly, cuddling up to her. She would look at him lovingly, stroking his hair.

When her son said, 'I will study well, become a collector and I will drive you and father in a car', she looked at him adoringly.

When he said, '*Amma*, I will also fetch water in a small pail along with you,' she looked at him with love.

'Your son is hurt, a wild thorn has pierced him, he's at the school, crying', when his schoolmates informed her, she ran hastily to him, shuddering as she saw his wound.

When he was studying in high school in the neighboring village, a local boy told her that her son had won the first prize in a singing competition. She waited for him to return, eager to share his joy. When he did return, with his prize hidden under his shirt, he told her with a disappointed expression on his face that he didn't win. She tapped his head with her fist lovingly, and looked at him, delighted.

... 'Amma, I saw some marigolds in the garden on my way from school, and I brought some for you. Here, put them in your hair! Quick!', he said one day, impatient to see his mother wear the flowers he had brought. That day, she cherished her precious boy.

When the whole village had marched into the movement, she looked on as her son marched ahead, leading the people with a red flag in his hands, her heart bursting with pride.

When her son began to sing 'Relare...' at the sacred stone of the village, and the women around her talked among themselves about 'how wonderfully he sings', she revelled in his glory.

As he narrated the *Oggukatha*, playfully inserting his own humour here and there, 'Look at your boy, how he makes up stories', teased an old woman. Kamamma looked at her son, laughing uncontrollably.

Once, as he delicately narrated the story about the four youths who were killed in an encounter, she tearfully looked on.

As her son stood at the village stone and delivered an intense speech, Kamamma saw him ardently.

At night, when they lay down beside each other to sleep, her son would tell her of his dreams of the dawn. She looked into his eyes and saw the embers of revolution, flickering even in the dark of night.

As time passed and repression increased, the whole village stepped back in fear. Her son, however, would only march forward, as she looked on anxiously.

In time, her only child would tell her that the movement was life itself. That he would leave her behind and cross many faraway lands to ignite with his very breath the sparks of revolution. She saw him off, her eyes full of tears and her heart heavy with the despair of parting.

'Be proud of your son, Kamamma. I taught many children, some of them are doing very well for themselves, big jobs and all and some are doing small jobs, some have amassed wealth and property, and only your son is doing this. This is my only satisfaction. He is the only one of my students I'm truly proud

of', as Yadaya Sir said this, her son's image played before her eyes and she looked at it with wonder.

'We grew weary and put down our guns decades ago, Kamala. We couldn't see how our leaders were deceiving us. By the time we realized it, we were too old to pick up our guns again. Anyway, your son is on the right path. It is good that he is now holding the gun that his grandfathers had put down', her uncle said with contentment. She looked at the image of her son as sketched by her uncle, with admiration.

When the son, who lived the revolution as his breath for the past ten years, came to visit and stood smiling before her, calling her, 'Amma', with her heart singing in elation, she saw him to her heart's content with the eyes that had longed for his image, celebrating him.

Now, many days and years later, they tell her cruelly, 'we killed your son, come and see him...'

'Oh dear God! Why did you not snuff out my eyes? Did you bless me with these sinful eyes only so I could see my son like this?' she lamented, all to herself.

'I can't see him ... no, I cannot. My son is the little red-faced baby my mother laid next to me for the first time, he is the lively, fun-loving little boy, he is the very spirit of the marching crowds, my boy is the resounding voice that reached all corners, he made everyone laugh in the meetings with his humour, and he is an inspiring river of songs That's how I shall keep him alive in my memories

Oh, god...I can't see him as a rigid dead body with blood clotted all over and flies swarming all around him. For as long as there is life in my eyes, I cannot see him like that, it is just not possible. Go back, we must go back. I must ask them to turn the jeep around.'

The jeep came to a stop.

'*Chinnamma*, get down', said Aruna in a trembling voice, holding Kamalamma's shoulders with her trembling hands.

Kamalamma opened her eyes to the vision of a hospital.

'No, I will not get down, I will not see my son like that. Let's go. Let's go back. Now!' she cried out waving her palms in front of her face, her tears now a relentless waterfall.

'*Peddamma*, please don't say that. We can only take him back if you identify him', said Venu, his voice thinning with sorrow.

'No! Let them not give him to me. I can't bear it, son...'

'*Amma*', Yadagiri spoke firmly, 'our *anna* is not an orphan, and we are all there for him. People in the village await our return, to see him one last time. You must turn your heart into stone and do this unbearable thing, if only for them.'

As Aruna and Venu helped her out of her seat, Kamalamma got down from the jeep. They held her on either side as she slowly started walking forward, one foot after another. With each step she took, she felt as if she were slipping a thousand feet into a bottomless pit.

'I wish my heart would stop now, I wish my head would burst, I wish my nerves would snap and tear off, then I wouldn't have to see my son like this', she thought.

'You wait here. Venu, let's go talk to someone inside', said Yadagiri as he started to walk towards the hospital entrance.

Meanwhile, the rest of them sat down on a bench under a tree, hearts racing and nerves threatening to snap out of anxiety. Kamalamma rested her head on Aruna's shoulder and shut her eyes, waiting.

A half hour had passed, slow, heavy, burdensome.

When they spotted Venu and Yadagiri returning everyone held their breath, bracing themselves. But Kamalamma's eyes were still closed shut.

As they walked closer, Aruna, Murari and Sambayya sensed the relief in their manner and slowly released their breath. They felt their hearts grow lighter. They looked at them, questioningly.

'All okay' their eyes seemed to say.

Venu held his aunt's shoulders and began shaking her back to reality. '*Peddamma*, it is not him. It is not our *anna*. Our *anna* is well. You don't have to grieve anymore' he said, elation and relief in his voice.

Aruna brought her palms together and prayed her gratitude, 'Oh god, we will return your kindness', she said. She felt as though someone had reached into her heart and taken away all the pain and weight of loss.

'Who is it then?' asked Murari, still rattled, 'Why did they print *Anna's* name, then?'

'You know why? This is all a police act, it is their games and their plots. No men were killed. A woman has been killed', Yadagiri said, his voice blending fury and sorrow.

It took a few more moments for Kamamma to absorb this information. All her grief now broke the floodgates and came rushing out of her core. She began to wail loudly.

Everyone looked at her, a little confused. Hearing her wail, some bystanders began to hurry towards them.

'It is true, *Peddamma!* It is not our *anna*. We made sure. We also checked with the journalists', stressed Venu.

Kamamma wouldn't stop crying. She wailed and wailed. The ocean of grief that she had held still between her chest and her eyes all morning, gave way, heaving out of her all at once.

'*Peddamma*, it is true! Don't you believe it?'

Her wailing eased gradually. Finally, she spoke.

'Which mother's child was she, I wonder? Her mother must still be living in peace, unaware of her daughter's death — believing her child to be safe somewhere far away. Perhaps she has just eaten her fill of *kali* or *ganji*, oblivious to the burning ache of her womb.' She paused to blow her nose, wiping it with the loose end of her saree.

The pause only lasted a brief moment. Her tears flowed again, relentless. 'I grieved that mother's grief today. I experienced the pain in my heart that she should have experienced today. Who knows for certain? If tomorrow, my son is killed, perhaps another mother will mourn him in my place.' There was no end to her sorrow.

'Please stop *Chinnamma*, people have started to gather around us, let us go now.' Aruna tried to lift her up, holding on to her shoulder.

But, she wouldn't get up. She became indifferent to all around her. Not listening to Aruna, she cursed, 'Those who said one has died in place of another, let death fall upon their house. Let them prepare for the funereal departure. How can they kill a woman, and then give out the name of a man? Sinful creatures, what do they know of a mother's pangs?' Her grief now turned to fiery rage.

And then again, as though some new thought struck her mind, she continued, 'To think of the mother who even after two days, knows not how her child, the infant she birthed out of her womb, now lay dead somewhere...Ayyo! How terrible! How terrible! Her daughter would have returned to the dirt here, even before her mother had heard of it. She would have become an unidentified, anonymous corpse, unknown to her own kin. Ayyo, *bidda!* Which mother's daughter are you, child? Today, you made me weep over your death, you showed me the pain of losing a child. My child, I feel as if you too are now a child of mine.'

'Calm down, *Chinnamma*. In another life, and another time, maybe we have known this stranger. That's why we have all wept over her death as though she was our own.'

'Not another life, *bidda*. We are her kin in this very life. My son, this daughter, both walk the same path. That is how we are bound', Kamamma said as she continued to weep. She seemed to represent the eternal sorrow of all mothers.

By this time, a large crowd had gathered around them and started commenting on the situation.

'They say she is in that room, that nameless child.'

'They say she is not even twenty years old.'

'May the curse of death fall upon them! How could they kill such a young girl, so cruelly?'

'Vile creatures, they only live to take lives.'

Most of the people in the crowd were in tears with women wailing openly. Kamamma's grief had now become a collective grief.

Some police personnel tried to disperse the group. They thought resentfully, 'While we are sharing sweets and celebrating

that we killed one of them, how can these people cry and mourn? Why such an outpouring of grief?’

And so, that collective grief itself became an act of great defiance.

(Dedication: To Damayanti, the comrade who was ambushed and killed in a police firing on the Andhra-Orissa border on 30-3-2003, whose martyrdom inspired this story.

To Vijayakka, who gave me a kiss when I wrote ‘Metla Meeda’, and said, ‘I reserve my kiss for another story’, but passed away before she could keep that promise.)

Translation of ‘Ee Sokam Endaridi’. (First published in Arunatara, November 2003)

Translated by Jabili

Notes:

1. An RMP doctor (Registered Medical Practitioner) - is a healthcare provider who offers basic medical treatment, especially in rural areas. They serve as the first point of contact for primary healthcare needs.

2. Jeep - The word jeep is used synonymous to any large 4-wheeler or even a small transport vehicle and should not be confused with the actual Jeep automotive company.

3. Tiffin - The word tiffin, is used in a synonymous way with breakfast, snack or even a small meal eaten at any time of day.

Two Mothers

'Teacher!' someone called.

Rama, who was busy grading exam papers, lifted her gaze to the front door, her eyes, betraying her impatience at this hindrance to her work.

There was a woman standing at the foot of the steps leading to the entrance to the house. Rama had never seen her before.

Gesturing for her to come in, Rama asked, 'Who are you, *amma*? What do you want?' The woman took a timid step forward and said, 'It seems you get the newspaper?'

'Yes, I do. Do you want old papers?' asked Rama, eager to get back to her work. It was not uncommon for people to ask for old newspapers, to cover their children's school books or to sundry savoury snacks during festivals.

'What would I do with old papers, Teacher?', said the woman, pausing, as if she was unsure of how to continue.

Rama looked at her enquiringly, as though asking, 'What then?'

'Was there something in the paper today, teacher?' Rama did not hear the slight trembling in her voice.

'There is always something or the other in the paper, isn't there? What are *you* looking for?' asked Rama, smiling.

At this, the woman slumped down on the step, looking weakened all of a sudden. She sat with her hand resting on the

threshold of the door, and said, '*Amma*, people are talking about the police shooting many Naxalites somewhere. Is that news in today's paper?'

Rama now sensed the anxiety in her voice.

Rama said, 'Yes, it is' and looked at her questioningly.

'Did they print the names?'

'Yes', Rama replied automatically, still with a questioning look on her face.

'Could you tell me the names?' her pleading voice betrayed her anxiety.

'What do you want with those names?' asked Rama, looking at her, and picking up that morning's paper, which she put aside after finishing reading.

That woman hesitated for a few moments and then spoke haltingly.

'My son...my son has joined the naxalites,' she said in a sorrowful voice.

It took Rama a few moments to make sense of this news. She had never heard of such a thing in this village.

Regaining composure, Rama thought to herself, 'I should now read aloud these names, to search for her son's name. I will be the one to give her the news of her son's life and death. I will be the news-bearer of her child's death'. All of a sudden, the newspaper felt too heavy and her hands began to shiver as though unable to bear its weight. The black ink of the newsprint began to blur, letters fusing into one another, becoming indecipherable.

Rama mused, 'I feel so distraught at the possibility of a stranger's death. What must his poor mother be going through?' She closed her eyes for a couple of seconds, composed herself and then looked at the news published on the front page of the newspaper. 'Seven Naxals killed in an encounter', the headline read in large block letters. The article was accompanied by photographs. Skipping over most of the news article, Rama focused on the names. All the seven names were printed and she read them to herself.

Then she suddenly realised that she didn't know what name to look for, and asked 'What is your son's name, *Amma*?' In her distress, Rama couldn't look into the woman's face as she asked.

'Yadayya...Yadagiri', the mother stammered.

Rama looked at the paper again and thought to herself with relief 'No, that name isn't here'. She felt light, as though a weight had been lifted off of her. 'Your son's name is not here. These are others' names, *amma*', she said, glancing at the woman.

In an instant, the agitated look vanished from her face. But, almost immediately creases of worry appeared on her face.

'What if they are others? They are some mother's children. Those mothers must be going through agony, with their hearts breaking over the loss of their children. Isn't love towards one's children the same for everyone, teacher? What if it is not my child?' her voice became slightly hoarse from her sorrow.

Rama looked away, her eyes gathering mist. 'Only a mother can understand another mother's grief', she thought to herself.

As the woman wiped her tears, Rama discreetly dabbed hers. A few minutes of silence passed between them. Dusk began to settle all around, and Rama turned on the lights, in the room and on the porch.

'I asked her to come inside, why is she still sitting on the porch?', wondered Rama. Deciding not to force her, she went to the door herself and squatted down on the floor, resting her back on the door-shutter. As soon as Rama sat down, her guest shuffled a little, feeling uncomfortable. She was making to move or stand when Rama said, 'It's alright, please stay seated'.

She sat back down. Without any more words passing between them, the two women sat facing each other, on either side of the door frame. Rama hadn't yet recovered from the swirl of emotions that had gripped her only minutes ago. As for her guest, she too sat wordlessly, not knowing what small-talk she could make with this educated school-teacher.

Rama broke the silence. 'What is your name, *Amma*?', she enquired.

'Adavi', she said. Adavi, meaning forest.

'Adavi?' asked Rama, puzzled.

'Yes'

'What an unusual name!' she thought. 'Where do you live?' she asked.

When she heard the response, Rama understood why she wouldn't step inside the house even when invited.

'How many children do you have?'

'Just one, just him. Four of them died at birth. He is the fifth, the only one remaining, and he has gone this way', her face clouded again with misery.

Rama looked intently at the woman. She was perhaps in her fifties...clad in a faded, ragged cloth, body worn by a life of toil... her un-oiled hair with some grey in them tousled...she bore all the symbols of widowhood...

'Do you live alone?' asked Rama.

'Yes, who else is there for me, teacher?'

'What do you do?'

'I go as hired labour'

'What kind of labour?'

'Sowing, weeding, reaping, all sorts of farming work.'

After some small talk, Adivamma felt more comfortable. 'Teacher is a nice person', she thought. She had seen Rama a few times before walking confidently through the street, head held high, looking only straight ahead and with a handbag on one shoulder. She had heard some say that the teacher was too arrogant, and she didn't talk to anyone. But today Adivamma realized otherwise. Heartened, she began to quiz Rama about her life as they fell into casual conversation. Rama answered all her questions patiently.

In the midst of their conversation, Rama, careful not to stir more pain, inquired, 'How did you know that the paper carried this news today?'

'There is a boy who studied with my Yadagiri when they were children. He has a transistor and often gives me news about

what's happening in various places. Today, as I was walking back from work, I ran into him carrying a stack of hay into the village. He talked about this and that, and then slowly he broke this news. Whenever I hear such news, I fear for my son's life. And so, the minute I heard it, my heart began to flutter. That boy told me that they will print the names in the newspaper. All these days, there had been nobody in the village who would get the paper. That boy only told me that you get the paper, so I came here...'

Rama was very curious to know more details about Yadagiri as their conversation went on, but she didn't want to upset Adivamma. She decided she could ask later.

More than an hour had passed in their conversation when Adivamma said, standing up, 'I shall leave now, Teacher. I came straight from work. It is late. Not that there is someone waiting for me back home. But regardless of where we go, we must ultimately return to our own nest at the day's end.'

'Alright then, but keep visiting, I live alone too. We can pass the time together', said Rama.

Adivamma was stunned by this invitation. She didn't expect that an educated, fair, beautiful teacher would ask her to drop in occasionally so that they can spend time together!

'Of course, Teacher...' her voice trailed off, as she felt lost for words. She then turned and walked away into the distance as Rama looked on.

That night, in bed, Rama couldn't fall asleep. She realised that she was under the illusion that the old wound had healed but it was still as raw and painful as before. It felt as if the pain that she hid in the inner recesses of her heart was forcibly pulled out and displayed in front of her. Memories from the past swarmed around her like so many bees and started suffocating her.

Memories of events that once lightened her heart, experiences that once gave her happiness now caused only intense pain. Every time she willed them to stop, the images would come back swifter and clearer. Images of Venu.... She had often tried to scatter them away and failed every time. That night,

she failed again and Venu's image settled in front of her eyes. She shut her eyes to avoid seeing his image but then his image emerged behind her eyelids.

She tossed in bed, restless. The agony of the last year seemed to have somehow compounded that day. She got up, switched on the lamp and began to read a book, hoping to control her mind. Her eyes followed the letters in the book but her mind was miles away. In mere minutes, finding it impossible to concentrate, she gave up, closed the book, turned off the light and lay down again.

It seemed futile to push away Venu's image from her eyes. She closed her eyes and began to think about him. It's been a year since she saw him, and yet, it felt like only yesterday when he sat across from her, talking. Even though she hadn't seen him, she still kept thinking of him despite every intention of forgetting him. It wasn't easy for her to forget him, because she loved him a great deal.

'You mean everything to me, you are my whole world', he had said and she took pride in that. She couldn't wait to share her life with him.

Later, he had said, 'The world doesn't begin and end with you and me. It is a wide world, with endless suffering, sorrow and injustice. Come join me so that we can learn about it together.'

By that time, Rama's father had incurred a huge loss in business. She needed to find a job to solve the crises in the family. She decided that's her duty as the eldest daughter, so she couldn't take up his invitation.

'Try to see your problems through the struggles of the world', Venu said. 'I'll bother about the problems of the world once my troubles have come to an end', she replied.

And so, their paths separated. Rama couldn't, wouldn't blame Venu for walking into the world of revolution. She said goodbye to him, in tears. She narrowed down her world for the sake of her family and moved to this village as a teacher half a year ago. She spent lonely and troubled days here. Yet, every month she sent money back home to her parents.

'How much longer can I bear to keep thinking of Venu like this? I must forget him', she resolved. That thought brought a fresh stab of pain to her and tears rolled out of her eyes.

After a long time, still thinking of Venu, she slowly slipped into sleep.

'What are you doing, teacher?' called Adivamma by way of greeting.

Recognizing Adivamma's voice, Rama came out of the kitchen into the front room, and said smiling 'Come *amma*, come inside.'

As Adivamma stood outside hesitating, Rama pressed on, 'Come on, come inside, it's alright'. Adivamma came inside doubtfully but stopped right near the threshold.

'I left the milk boiling on the stove for tea', Rama said, rushing back into the kitchen.

Taking the milk off the stove and starting to make tea, she called out, 'Come here *amma*'.

A surprised Adivamma stayed put, not moving. 'I am telling you, come inside! I don't believe in these customs of segregation', Rama said, irked.

Walking slowly, Adivamma finally stepped into the kitchen. Rama was immersed in making tea. She took it off the stove and poured it into two glasses. Holding one in each hand, she led the way into the other room, saying, 'Come *amma*, let's sit out in the front.'

She spread out a mat and sitting on it, beckoned Adivamma to sit next to her. Adivamma started to sit on the floor next to the mat. Rama said, 'Arre, no, no, sit on the mat, here, with me!'

'It's alright, Teacher, I'm fine here' Adivamma replied, squatting on the floor.

'You just don't listen', Rama sighed, placed the glass of tea in front of her and said 'drink.'

Adivamma looked startled, afraid even. 'Me, teacher?'

'Yes you. It's just tea, not poison.'

'You drink *amma*. Why me?'

'Is it water, that I could drink two glasses at once? It's tea, one glass is plenty. It's ok, take the glass and drink', she said, in a persuasive tone.

Obligated, Adivamma began to drink the tea.

'Have you been to work today?' Rama began the conversation.

'I went Teacher; how can I manage without working? There are no onions or green chillies in the house, even if it's just for me, I must eat, no? So, I went to the shop to buy them. As I was walking past your house, I thought I'd look in on you', she said. Rama noticed the small bundle Adivamma had tied at the loose end of her saree to carry the fares she bought at the shop.

They spoke of this and that before Rama mentioned Yadagiri.

'How long has it been since your son joined the Naxalites?' she asked.

'It has been nearly eight years'

'Why did he join them? What prompted him to join them? Did someone else from this village go too?'

'No, Teacher. No one in this village is aware of these politics.'

'Then what made him go?'

'It's all down to fate', she said, 'his father died of a snake bite when he was a child. He is my only child, so I brought him up so lovingly, so preciously. I sent him to school, thinking his future would be bright. He studied until the fifth grade in this village. He is really clever. '*Amma*, I want to study further', he said. Everyone said that if he studied higher, it would be easier for him to get a job, especially because he belongs to our community. What more do I want than for him to study higher and get a job, I thought. He passed his tenth standard in the neighbouring village, scoring high marks. He said he wanted to go to the city for higher education on a government scholarship and I agreed. I don't know if the government gave him any money. I kept sending him some money from my wages. He is not really a spender, anyway. He studied in the city for four years. What did

he study there? I can't tell. I can't wrap my tongue around it. It's a mouthful. That is where he made these friends, the ones that talked him into all this. All this is their influence.'

'Did you know before he left?'

'Yes, he told me. He would often visit me on festival days in the beginning. And then one year he didn't come home at all. I sent card after card asking him to come. When he finally came, he told me he had stopped going to classes a while before that. 'I will not come back home, ever', he had said. When I asked why, he said many things I couldn't understand. When I said, 'Are you abandoning me, son?', he only said, 'There are many people like you, I must fight for all of them.' I wept and pleaded with him not to leave but he didn't let go of his resolve. I wanted to stop him from going, somehow. That day, I didn't even go to work. He said he was going to the lake for a bath and to wash his clothes. He never came back. He went away from there that day.' Adivamma wiped her tears and stopped speaking, overwhelmed with sorrow.

Rama leaned against the wall and kept looking at Adivamma. That mother's grief was melting her heart.

Adivamma began again, 'He is such a good son, so handsome — everyone in our neighbourhood admired his looks.. Although there was no man to raise him, he grew into a good and decent young man. He never troubled me, except this one time when he caused me so much pain by going away', she said, her voice catching in her throat. She wiped her nose with the loose end of her saree.

Rama didn't know what to say. Unable to console her, Rama swallowed her own tears as Adivamma shed hers.

Adivamma spoke again, 'What is this life Teacher, it has become so terrible! I eat to sate my hunger. I work because there is still strength in my limbs. Only God knows what will become of me in the future.'

Adivamma recovered from her grief after a while and said, 'It is late Teacher, I'll leave now. Get up and turn on the lights'.

Rama snapped out of her thoughts and said '...alright'.

Adivamma couldn't see the expression on Rama's face due

to the gathering darkness in the room.

Adivamma walked out slowly in the direction of her house.

Rama got up and closed the door. She lay down again on the mat without turning on the light.

‘As Adivamma spoke, it was as though I was speaking of my own sorrow to myself.’

‘Am I and Adivamma in a similar state?’

‘Are Venu and Yadagiri in a similar state?’

‘Adivamma’s life without Yadagiri is filled with darkness, so is mine without Venu.’

‘Why do I think like this? How long will I pine for Venu? I must forget him! Perhaps, I can then share my life with another person’, she mused, the thought only causing her to ache more.

‘However painful it is, I must forget Venu,’ she thought firmly.

‘But, what about Adivamma? He’s her only son, how can *she* forget him? She may turn her heart into stone and live out her days, but what happens when she is old? Who will care for her? Isn’t my sorrow lighter than hers? But, Adivamma can share her grief with others and find some solace. What about me? Who can I share my grief with?’

Rama thought of various things in this manner and eventually fell asleep.

As days passed, Rama and Adivamma grew closer to each other. Adivamma had started to visit Rama almost every day. They shared many moments of laughter and joy now. Rama told Adivamma of her day at the school and stories from back home between bits of news from the day’s newspaper. In turn, Adivamma told Rama gossip about neighbours, past history of the village, stories about its people and events from her work. Thus, each of them provided glimpses of their world to the other. Now, Adivamma moved around freely in Rama’s house. Rama was not as pained as before with thoughts of Venu and Adivamma spoke of Yadagiri, without breaking down into tears.

One day, Rama asked, ‘Have you not seen your son for seven

years?’

‘He met me twice. He asked me not to tell anyone, and so I didn’t. But I am telling you now’, Adivamma said in a low voice. The expression in her eyes indicated her complete trust in Rama.

‘When did you meet him?’

‘It was two years ago, he said he would meet me again, I wonder when that will be.’

‘What does he talk about when you meet?’

‘So many things, things I don’t fully understand. He speaks of the dawn of a new world where there is no suffering. He speaks of great things. I know my son will always do the right thing. But the people here, they talk without knowing, they speak out of ignorance.’

‘I wonder why this village has not yet felt the touch of revolution!’

‘My Yadaya said that they will come to every village including ours. I wonder when they’ll come here’, she said, a hopeful longing in her voice.

‘Didn’t the police ever come to interrogate you?’

‘Yes, they did. Twice, asking where my son is. I said I didn’t know. They threatened me and said I must hand him over to them, if he ever came home. That was three years ago, they never came again.’

On that day, Rama sent her students to the playground for sports while she sat in the classroom reading a book.

Meanwhile, the postman came and dropped off a letter along with the usual daily newspaper. Rama had never received any letters from anywhere but home. She put the newspaper on the table with the intention of reading the letter first and looked at the address on the letter before tearing open the envelope. She recognized the handwriting on the envelope and her heart began to race. The hand holding the letter shook and she paused without tearing open the envelope. It was Venu’s handwriting.

She stared at the address written in Venu’s hand. After a

couple of minutes, she realised that she had to read the letter.

'I can't read this here', she thought, 'I'll go home'.

She pushed the paper and the letter into her bag, got up from the chair and walked out of the classroom. Her handbag dangling on her shoulder, she stumbled towards the headmaster's office, wiping sweat off her brow.

'Sir, I have some work at home, I'll leave now,' she spoke urgently.

He readily agreed seeing that Rama had seldom, if ever, asked permission to leave early.

In her haste, she even forgot to thank him. She walked swiftly to her house, as though she was being chased by someone. She *was* being chased, by her own thoughts.

'He wrote a letter after so many days. Does he still remember me? Hasn't he forgotten me?'

'But then, is our relationship such a superficial one that it could be so easily forgotten?'

'I wonder what he has written, how he is. How did he find out my address?'

'Well, it might not be so difficult for him to find out if he wanted to.'

She absently unlocked her door, stepped inside the house and shut it behind her. She sat leaning against the wall and fished the letter out of her bag. She felt very agitated as she tore open the envelope. Venu had written her countless letters in the past but she never felt the apprehension that she felt now.

She opened the envelope, pulled out the folded pages and unfolded them. There were rows and rows of letters spread out all over the papers. The letters she loved, which had once showered her with love. After looking intently for a few moments at those letters written in Venu's familiar handwriting she began to read them. She wiped her eyes multiple times, as they kept filling with fresh tears every few seconds. She read the letter four or five times and sat still holding it in her palms. He had written so much about himself, his life, and about the path he had chosen to walk.

‘Did Venu change?’

‘He did. He matured as a revolutionary. He has more conviction in his ideology now. He has become closer to the people now, truly a part of them.’

‘And yet, Venu did not change. His love for me did not change. He did not forget me. He still extends a friendly hand out for me to hold.’

‘But am I in a position to reach that hand? No. His hand is too far and too high above me to reach’.

Rama closed her hand around the letter but she couldn’t close her heart to Venu.

She would have continued to be lost in her thoughts if not for the knocking on her door. Startled, she went and hastily opened the door, Venu’s letter still in her hand. It didn’t occur to her to wipe her tears or hide the letter before she opened the door.

Outside the door stood Adivamma, smiling as usual.

The moment she saw Rama, her smile turned to concern. ‘What happened *amma*? What is the matter? Why do you look like this?’

‘It’s nothing, just a headache. I came home early from school too.’ Although Rama’s lie didn’t seem believable, Adivamma had no reason to disbelieve her. And so, she took her word for it.

‘Ayyo, should I go to Enkatayya and bring a tablet for you?’

‘No no, I just took one. But, could you make some tea?’

Adivamma agreed and walked into the kitchen.

By the time Adivamma brought two glasses of tea from the kitchen, Rama had changed into fresh clothes, washed her face with cold water in the backyard and had combed her dishevelled hair.

She smiled affectionately at Adivamma as she handed her the tea.

‘Ah, see, now you look nice! How terrible you looked when you opened the door!’

'My headache reduced a bit. Your tea will cure it completely', Rama said, laughing.

'Ah, where will my tea cure it? However much you teach me, can I ever make tea like you?'

'Why not? You make tea better than me!'

Slowly, they fell into conversation and Rama mentioned Yadagiri deliberately.

'Your son is a great person. You should be proud to be his mother', she said.

Adivamma was overjoyed. She spoke for a long time about Yadagiri and Rama encouraged her further. In reminiscing about Yadagiri, Adivamma felt as if she were close to him. Did Rama help Adivamma feel close to Yadagiri or perhaps did she feel closer to Venu?

Was all the praise she showered on Yadagiri, for him? Or, for Venu? Or perhaps, for both?

As Rama couldn't mention Venu in front of Adivamma, she brought up Yadagiri in the conversation. As Adivamma recounted Yadagiri's stories, Rama applied them to Venu.

Both their hearts brimmed with joy.

Rama's heart seemed to have turned numb, without feeling, as though grief had frozen into a hard stone inside her heart. She paced back and forth from room to room.

'How should I face this? How?' she panicked.

'Adivamma will be here soon. What should I tell her? How?', she asked herself, again and again.

She opened the newspaper that was on the mat and read the news, again. She wished desperately that the news was a lie.

But the truth of it struck her again. The name, the surname, the name of the village, age, all of them matched. This was, alas, not a lie. It was true.

'Ayyo, how do I tell Adivamma this news? How do I tell her that her son is no more?'

'Will that mother's heart be able to withstand this news?'

'How will I bear to see her heart break into shards in front of me?'

'It is time, she will be here soon. Even if she is covered in mud and utterly tired after a hard day's work, she will come to me, with shining eyes. What do I tell her? That the light of her eyes has been snuffed out?'

'Ayyo, how should I escape from this situation?'

Rama was panicking, tangled in her thoughts. Every little sound startled her and she kept looking at the door.

Time passed and Adivamma didn't come at the usual time.

'Why did she not come yet?', wondered Rama.

Over the last one year of their acquaintance, Adivamma only rarely missed a visit.

'She must have gotten late, she must have gone to the shop on the way', Rama reasoned.

It was so late that by then, on a regular day, Adivamma would have come and gone back home. But today, she still hadn't come. Rama was puzzled.

She turned on the lights and sat on the threshold, waiting. 'What must have happened? Did someone give her the news? But who could have told her? I don't think anyone else gets the paper in the village. Would she really need a newspaper to tell her of her son's passing? Maybe she heard him cry out to her as he lay dying? Perhaps the blood he shed would wet her lap, and she would know. No, no I am being irrational. Perhaps someone brought a paper from the town and told her. That could be it.'

'I wonder how she is! Maybe, I should go to her house and check on her.'

'But I don't know where she lives.'

'Well, it can't be so hard to find out. But what should I go for? Is it to see her heart-wrenching agony?'

'Teacher...!' she heard the call and came out of her thoughts. She saw Kondamma in front of her. It seemed as if she was on her way to someplace else and stopped to talk to her.

'Adavi has been in bed with a high fever since last night, Teacher.'

'Oh, no!'

'Yes, teacher, she isn't even opening her eyes...'

'Arre! Did you not call the doctor?'

'We went, but he didn't come to see her. He said he would visit later and gave two or three pills but she is no better even after taking those.'

'But why didn't the doctor come?'

'Oh, he will only come once we put money in his hand. Adavi didn't get her wages for the last ten days. I didn't get my wages too for the last one week; else I would have paid the doctor. I asked two or three others and they are in the same situation. I am now on my way to get the wages for our work.'

'Alright, you go.'

Rama got up, locked the door, wore her slippers and walked quickly. In three minutes, she was at the end of the village, and stood there hesitantly unsure of which way to go. There was a group of women there, some standing, some seated. As Rama began to walk in their direction, one of them asked in surprise, 'What is the matter, teacher? Why are you here?' Those who were sitting stood up immediately.

'Where is Adivamma's house, *Amma*?' Rama asked.

'I will show you Adavi's house, come along', said an old woman, leading the way.

Rama followed. Another woman from the group followed Rama.

'Teacher must have come to check on Adavi because she is ill.'

'What a kind heart the teacher has! Adavi has always said that the teacher is a very nice person!'

The women in the group talked among themselves and Rama overheard their words.

They all knew of Rama and Adivamma's friendship.

The old woman led Rama into Adivamma's house, as a small group of women followed behind them. Some of them waited outside while others came in. It was a mud house with only two rooms. The roof was made of palm leaves. In the front room, there was a cot on which Adivamma lay sleeping.

The room was filled with the dull light of a low-voltage bulb. Rama went to the cot and bending down, she touched Adivamma's forehead to check her temperature. It was burning hot and Rama pulled back her hand. Adivamma stirred at Rama's touch but did not open her eyes.

Rama turned around, looked at the women standing there and asked, 'Can someone go and fetch the doctor?'

'He will not come, teacher', one of them said helplessly.

'Tell him I asked him to come, he will come.'

'Yes, that's true. Would he dare not come if we tell him the teacher asked him to come?'

'He will come', they all agreed.

'Let's go', two of the women went to bring the doctor.

In ten minutes, the doctor arrived with a bag of medicines. When they told him that the teacher was at Adivamma's place, he was so confused that he was still a little dazed when he arrived.

'She has been running a fever since last night. The medicines you gave have not helped. Give her something better', said Rama.

The doctor was surprised at Rama's concern over Adivamma's health.

Still confused, he administered an injection and handed her a few more medicines before leaving.

'I will send you your fee tomorrow', said Rama.

The doctor nodded his head in agreement, and left Adivamma's house, his bafflement only growing.

After the doctor left, Rama asked the women if there was water in the house.

'Yes, teacher. I fetched some this morning', said one of the women.

'Ok, that's good. She'll need water to take these medicines after an hour.'

Everyone looked at Rama in surprise. She had been on her feet since she arrived, occasionally touching Adivamma to check her temperature. The act of Rama touching Adivamma was like a precious thing to see, a rare sight. They wished they could ask her to sit. But, where? What if she takes it the wrong way?

'It is quite late and the teacher is still not going home', they thought to themselves.

'Teacher, it is quite late. Please go home', said Kondamma.

'I will stay here tonight', said Rama.

'Ayyo! How can you stay here, teacher?', said another woman.

'Why not?', Rama smiled.

'You go home, teacher, I will look after her', persuaded Kondamma.

'No, I will not leave. We need to give her the medicine once every hour. I will check the time and give it to her.'

They couldn't say anything to that.

'Have you at least eaten dinner?'

'Yes, I have', she lied.

'It's very late. You all go home', said Rama.

Seeing no one move, Rama urged, 'Please go, if you all clear out the space there will be some air in the room.'

They all began to depart slowly, except Kondamma who said, 'I will sleep here'.

'Alright,' said Rama.

'I will go home to tell my family and bring some bedding to sleep on', she said, leaving.

By the time Kondamma arrived, Rama had spread out the torn bamboo mat on the floor next to the bed, and sat on it, her back resting on a leg of the cot.

For half an hour, they spoke of this and that. Rama kept answering Kondamma's questions, although indifferently. Rama didn't feel like talking to anyone.

'I am feeling sleepy teacher, I will lie down', said Kondamma.

'Yes, go to sleep', said Rama.

'If you need something, wake me up, Teacher', said Kondamma.

'Sure.'

In no time, Rama began to hear a low snore from Kondamma. 'They work hard all day and are utterly tired at the end of the day. It must be so hard for them to stay awake at night,' she thought.

The time was ten, when Rama carefully touched Adivamma's body and thought, 'The fever is coming down'.

Adivamma opened her eyes to the touch and looked at Rama, confused. After a while, she said weakly, 'Amma! Is that you?'

'Yes, it is me. I came to see how you were when they told me you were ill. Try to sit up, once. You can take the medicine and then go back to sleep', said Rama. She helped Adivamma sit up by supporting her shoulders with her arms. After taking the medicine, Adivamma lied back on the bed with Rama's help as though she had no energy to sit up even for a moment. She seemed to be trying to say something but failing to muster up strength, she closed her eyes and gradually fell asleep.

Rama stood there looking at Adivamma, watching her sleep. Her eyes teared up and Adivamma's image blurred in front of her.

She wiped her tears and started pacing back and forth in that small room. While doing that, she looked carefully around the room. A photograph hanging on a nail on the wall caught her attention.

She went near the photo and observed it curiously. It was an old photo but she could recognize the young Adivamma. The man next to her, she guessed to be her husband. Her eyes flitted across the photo to the little child on Adivamma's lap.

'This child, could he be Yadagiri. Yes, he must definitely be Yadagiri.'

‘He must be five or six years old in this photo. He looks so innocent ! How restfully, peacefully he sits perched in Adivamma’s lap, in his mother’s lap!’

‘This boy is not alive anymore. Adivamma’s lap is now bare. Not just hers — he has left so many mothers’ laps empty today! So many mothers must be beating their chests, and wailing for their lost sons.’

‘This mother, Adivamma, is sleeping calmly and peacefully now, no fear or worry clouding her yet. This Adivamma’s son too is sleeping peacefully in the bosom of the forest itself.’

She stretched her index finger and gently touched the face of the little boy in the photo. As her tears fell, she stood looking at the photo on the wall.

She would have stood there for an eternity, but she heard a murmur from Adivamma. Hastily drying her tears with the loose end of her saree, she went to the cot where Adivamma lay. Kneeling on the mat at the foot of the bed, she leaned closer to Adivamma.

She heard Adivamma mumble in her sleep. ‘Yadaya...Yadaya’. Her call for her son stirred and moved Rama. She placed one palm on Adivamma’s head and the other on her stomach and said, ‘*Amma!*’

‘My son, have you come, my son?’

‘My son...you remembered me...’ saying this, she clasped Rama’s hand.

As though, afraid of losing him again, she opened her eyes. She looked at Rama, with a fevered, delirious gaze, before closing her eyes again. Worried that Adivamma would wake up if she took her hand back, Rama didn’t move, sitting down beside the cot. Looking at Adivamma’s sorrowful face, she started thinking.

‘This mother, how will she bear the news of her son dying? She has no support, no one. Will she have to live her entire life in loneliness? Who will look after her in sickness? Who will care for her in old age? What will happen to her?’

‘He went away from his mother...but became a son to many

mothers. He left her without any kind of support, but became a support for many others.

'If he became a son for so many mothers... she too must become a mother for many children... All the people for whom he left his mother and gave his life now bear the responsibility to hold this mother as their own.'

'But there is no movement in this village... there is no one to recognize his sacrifice. Then, who will care for her?'

'I do recognize that he laid down his life even for me... Then, why shouldn't I be the one to take care of her?'

Rama's thoughts stilled and she felt unnerved by the idea. Her hand was still held tightly in Adivamma's hand.

She calmed down and thought again.

'Why can't I take care of her? Why can't I be her support for her entire life? Will someone object if she lives with me?'

'Who would object? Why would they?'

'What will my parents say?'

'I can explain to them. If they can't see why I want to do this, then it's up to them to come to terms with it. As long as I keep sending them money every month, they wouldn't object strongly.'

'What would Venu feel about this?'

'He would be happy...even if he's not proud of having loved me, he will not feel let down. He will not be disappointed in me.'

'I do not have the courage to live like Venu or to die like Yadagiri, but I can at least live like this... I will live like this.'

'I will become this mother's child', she resolved.

Just then, Adivamma's clasp on Rama's hand began to loosen. Rama tightened her grip, holding Adivamma's hand firmly.

Translation of 'Iddaru Tallulu'. (First published in Arunatara, Sept-Oct 1998)

Translated by Jabili

I want those Politics

‘What’s the matter, *Peddamma*? It looks like you’ve been away from the village for many days. I came many times thinking you’d be here, but you weren’t. I looked around and went back,’ said Bhikshapati as he removed his sandals and entered the house.

Venkatamma, who had been sitting on the cot expectantly waiting just for him, and anxiously picking at the hair on her scalp, replied, ‘Yes, it’s been several days, son. My elder sister hasn’t been well at all. I went over just to see her. But when I got there, she said, ‘What will you do at home? Stay here for a few days,’ and so I stayed back.’

‘Oh, you were standing all this while! Sit down here, son,’ she said, gesturing to the empty space beside her on the cot.

Bhikshapati hesitated for a moment, glancing uncertainly at the cot as if wondering whether that cot would hold his weight. Sitting on that cot was not new to him, but invariably he had this moment of doubt every time he sat there.

Deciding it was fine, he sat down and asked, ‘When did you come back?’

‘Just yesterday evening, son,’ she said, gathering her hair into a tight knot.

‘I was actually planning to come and meet you as soon as you got back. In the meanwhile, you sent word for me,’ he said, looking enquiringly at her.

‘I have some work with you son,’ Venkatamma said. She paused for a moment, took a deep breath and said, ‘Would you come with me to Sendraiah *Setu’s* shop, son? I’m thinking of selling off this gold chain. I don’t know how much it’ll fetch or what the rate is.’

She wanted Bhikshapati to come with her — not just because he would know everything about it, but because with him beside her, the merchant wouldn’t dare to cheat her. For her, he was a strong support.

‘Why sell the chain now, *Peddamma*? What’s your need all of a sudden?’

‘It’s nothing, son. All the people around are building tombs for their martyred sons and daughters. They’re even showing it on TV, aren’t they? So I thought, I’ll build one for my son too,’ she said, looking vacantly at the photo of her son hanging on the wall.

‘This is exactly why I wanted to come see you, *Peddamma*. All of Komurayya’s friends have been discussing it. We’ve decided to build a memorial. We’re collecting contributions from the villagers too. I wanted to tell you, but you weren’t here. I figured you’d return someday and we could talk then,’ said Bhikshapati, his voice filled with emotion.

‘A memorial, child...?’ she whispered, and couldn’t speak further.

All these days, she had thought that only the family — the blood relatives — would build the memorials of the deceased. But now, when her son’s companions also wanted to build one for him... she was deeply moved by their affection. For a moment, she sat silently, as if weighing the worth of her son’s life — a life that had earned such love and loyalty.

‘Come on, son, let’s go. You must have a lot of work to do,’ Venkatamma said after a while, pressing both her hands on the cot for support while trying to rise from it.

‘What’s this, *Peddamma*? Why do you want to go now? Didn’t I already tell you?’

‘You did, child. All of you decided to take this up because of

your affection for him. Then, shouldn't I too do my bit to take care of my son's memorial?'

'That's not the point, *Peddamma*. Komurayya died for the people. So the people will build his memorial. Why should you sell your gold for it?'

'They may build it, child. But if there's my hard earned contribution too in it, it will give me immense satisfaction. How much will I get by selling this gold? Back then, *your Peddanayana* bought a half-*tola* of it. Now, after accounting for depreciation on it, I'll get some money with which I thought I could build a memorial to the best of my ability. Now that all of you have taken up the task, it can be built well. I thought my son would live a hundred years, but he didn't even live to see thirty. Let us at least build his memorial well—so that it will last for a long time. That's all that I can do. I can't bring him back to life, right?' she said, her voice hoarse with pain. She wiped her eyes.

Tears welled up in Bhikshapati's eyes. He lowered his head and sat silently for a while.

'But *Peddamma*, this is all the gold you have. If you keep it, it's at least something of a support.'

'He was my only support, and he's gone. What support is this now, son?' she said, and with firm resolve, stood up from the cot. Bhikshapati followed her helplessly.

Five minutes later, both were at the moneylender's house. Since it was past ten in the morning, the early rush had subsided, and the shop was nearly empty.

'Are you really planning to sell it, Venkatamma?' the moneylender asked.

'Yes, *Setu!*'

'You've pledged it with me four or five times before, haven't you? But now you say you want to sell it entirely. If you keep it, it could come in handy during hard times. Don't you remember how much it helped you the last time?' he asked, as if urging her to think again.

'I need more money this time, *Setu!*' she said, as if leaving no room for further discussion.

'Then let's go to the goldsmith Brahmachari's house. We have to estimate the depreciation on it and reduce it by that amount. It's good that you brought Bhikshapati along. Bhikshapati knows all the ins and outs,' said the moneylender as he got off the low stool, went inside, and returned wearing his shirt.

The three of them started walking. The streets were not too busy. The two men walked ahead, while Venkatamma, with her head bowed, walked slowly behind them.

She started recollecting the incidents from her past, when she had pawned her jewellery.

When her fifteen-year-old son's leg was pierced by a thorn, it had swollen up badly and became infected. The village doctor said it had turned septic. They had no money at all to go to the town. That wasn't a season of much work either. There was no use asking anyone. Just a few days earlier, she had got a gold chain made and worn it around her neck. She took it off and placed it in her husband's hands. He took it to the moneylender, pawned it, and brought home three hundred rupees. With that money, they took their son to the city and saved his leg.

If she hadn't had that gold then, would her son have lost his leg? Would he have become crippled, walking with a limp, dragging his leg around with the help of a stick? The image of her son crippled appeared vividly before her eyes, and her heart ached. She lovingly touched the gold chain in the knot of her saree that had saved her son from becoming lame. The joy that she had saved her son then from becoming a cripple flickered on her face for a moment. But very soon, dark clouds covered that face.

What was the use of saving her son's leg back then? Today, she couldn't save his life. If her son had become lame, maybe he wouldn't have gotten involved in politics. Maybe he would have stayed in front of her eyes!

This thought had recurred in her mind many times before. 'Whatever has to happen will happen — what power do we have over life?' she thought and sighed as always.

Another occasion when she pawned her jewellery for her

son came back to her memory. Her son had gotten a college seat in the city. He said he needed at least three hundred rupees for the bus fare, college fees, and books. It was the same situation then too. It was just the beginning of the planting season. There was no money at home. The neighbours said, 'Narsayya is dead. You're a widow. How hard will you work to send him on to higher education? Why don't you stop it here?'

Her son had said, '*Amma*, just this once, please help me. Once I get into college, I'll get a scholarship. Then we won't have to spend anything more.'

She couldn't bring herself to deny his intense desire to study. She had hoped that her son wouldn't waste his life doing menial work in the mud like her, but would find a proper job and live with dignity.

Once again, she pawned her jewellery with the moneylender. Her son had joined college and got involved with politics. The son who she had hoped wouldn't work with mud is now part of the soil himself. Had she not sent him to college, would he still have been alive before her eyes toiling hard like her?

She sighed again.

She remembered another occasion when the police conducted a raid on the hostel, and caught some boys. She came to know that her son was among them. She had then wailed uncontrollably.

People came and told her that the police would file a case, that her son would be put in jail. If he were imprisoned, the boy's life would be ruined, they said. They advised her to go immediately and fall at the feet of the *sarpanch* (village head) – only then might he intervene and get the boy released from the police station.

Without a moment's delay, she had run and fallen at the *sarpanch's* feet. He said it would cost at least a thousand rupees. Along with the little savings she had from her daily labour, she also brought some money by pawning her jewellery. Still short, she begged and borrowed from others, literally touching their

feet, to gather the rest. She took it all and handed it over to the *sarpanch*.

Her son returned from the police station, bloodied and bruised. She had protected him and took care of him then. Once his pains had subsided and he had recovered, her son left the house without a word to her. After leaving the house like that, he came back as a corpse. Had she left him in the jail then, perhaps he'd still be alive today, though rotting in the jail.

Another heavy sigh tore out from the mother's heart.

Before her thoughts could settle, they arrived at the house of the goldsmith. The goldsmith weighed the gold chain, deducted the depreciation and assessed its value to be fifteen hundred rupees. The tally he wrote down on paper was verified by Bhikshapati and the moneylender. The moneylender took the money from his pocket and placed it into Venkatamma's hands, claiming the gold for himself.

As Venkataamma handed over the gold into the moneylender's hands, Bhikshapati's eyes welled up with tears. Bhikshapati and Komurayya had been childhood friends. They had studied together from early on. After tenth grade, they had joined the same college. Both were introduced to the revolutionary movement at the same time. While Komurayya had marched ahead in the movement without hesitation, Bhikshapati had stayed back in the village, turning to farming after finishing his grade twelve.

He knew full well the pain Venkatamma had endured at every step for the sake of her son.

'She pawned this gold with the dream of giving her son a better future. Now she's selling it, desperate to keep her dead son's memory alive for the future generations,' he thought, wiping his eyes when no one was looking.

Later, Venkatamma and Bhikshapati left for home. Along the way, neither of them could speak a single word. With hearts weighed down by sorrow, they stepped into the house and sat silently on the cot for a while. Their eyes drifted toward Komurayya's photo reflexively.

After a few moments, Bhikshapathi let out a sigh and said, 'We thought it would be good to build it right in the centre of the village, *Peddamma*. It's almost been a year since he passed away. We felt it would be appropriate to unveil the memorial and hold a meeting on that occasion. Ever since the peace talks¹ began, we had been thinking of erecting Komurayya's memorial but we thought the one-year anniversary would be the right time. That's why we delayed it a bit,' he said slowly, turning his gaze toward Venkatamma.

Taking out the money she had tied into the corner of her sari, Venkatamma placed it into Bhikshapathi's hands and said, 'Start quickly, my boy. Now it's all up to you. I don't know anything about such work, you see.'

He knew she had a great deal of trust in him. Still, when she placed that money — so precious to her — into his hands without a moment's hesitation, he was overcome with emotion.

'We'll begin right away, *Peddamma*. We'll start tomorrow. I'll speak to everyone today itself. If we begin the foundation work tomorrow, within two days we can arrange for stone, bricks, and cement,' he said, rising from the cot.

'Oh, Venkatamma! The police have come, it seems they're demolishing the memorial! They're causing utter confusion,' gasped Lachchimi, catching her breath. She lived in the house next to Venkatamma's.

Venkatamma, already up before dawn and sweeping the front yard, threw down the broom she was holding and asked, 'What are you saying?'

'It's true, *Akka*. I went to the flour mill while it was still dark to get the paddy milled and heard people there talking about this. As soon as I heard that, I rushed to tell you!'

Without another word, Venkatamma dashed off in that direction. Lachchimi was reminded of how Venkatamma had rushed off like this long ago when she'd heard that Komurayya was being beaten by the police near the panchayat office.

By the time Venkatamma reached the site, the memorial

that had been three-fourths completed had been reduced to rubble. Bricks and stones lay scattered everywhere.

'Oh my son! What a terrible thing they've done to you, my child!' she cried, falling on the mound and weeping in heart-wrenching anguish.

For the past ten days, work on the memorial had been going on. Every day, rising before sunrise and finishing her chores in a hurry, Venkatamma too had been going there. To erect a monument on this earth in memory of her son — the one she had carried in her womb for nine months and raised with care — she too had labored alongside everyone else.

Every day, as dusk fell, she would stop her work, get ready to leave for home, and stand for a while, silently gazing at the memorial structure completed so far. As she looked on like that, the image of her son would flicker before her eyes in many forms. Sometimes, she would recall the image of him as an infant, after a bath, with a black dot placed on his cheek to ward off evil — the look of satisfaction on her face as she gazed at him. At other times, she would remember the way she cradled him in her arms when he cried for milk, wiped his tears, and offered her breast, watching him with adoration. She would also recall the image of him as he set off to school with neatly combed hair, and how she looked at him with joy.

Now, when she looked at the heap of stones and bricks, what came to her mind was the image of her son she had seen almost a year ago in the hospital — a lifeless body soaked in blood. She wailed with anguish, pounding her chest, over the heap of rubble just as she cried over his dead body that day.

At that moment, the police who were smashing the bricks to rubble caught her eye. A surge of rage burst forth from within her. She rushed toward them and cried out, her voice mingling with grief and anger, 'Why, sir? Why are you committing this sin? You've killed my son, aren't you satisfied with that? Should I not even be allowed to build a tomb for my son?'

People started gathering there as they came to know what was happening. A slow-burning anger began to simmer among

them. Even though there were peace talks going on, their inherent fear of the police kept their anger subdued. Still, as they suppressed their rage, they began softly rebuking the police one by one.

The police didn't bother to respond. One officer, however, looked indifferently at Venkatamma and said, 'Go on, go ahead and build it! Did we say no? But this is government land. The rules don't allow building here,' and walked away as if there was nothing more to say. The others followed him.

By the time Bhikshapathi came running from the fields after hearing what had happened, the police had already crossed the village boundaries.

'On the one hand, they carry on with the peace talks and on the other hand they do exactly as they wish. Let's get this incident published in the newspapers, *Peddamma*,' said Bhikshapathi, sitting on the cot, his heart aflame with emotion.

'Let it be in the newspapers or not, child... but how will my son's grave remain standing?' Venkatamma wept so much that her voice had become hoarse.

'We'll get it published in the papers and rebuild the memorial... Once it is out in the public as news, maybe the police will not touch it again,' Bhikshapathi said, clinging to a thread of hope.

Shaking her head in disagreement, Venkatamma said, 'Police are cruel people, child. How can we trust them?' That was the opinion she had formed about the police from her life experiences.

After a few moments of silence, she spoke again, breaking the stillness.

'They said not to build the memorial on government land. Fine, let's not. But the land next to our house — that's ours, isn't it? If we build it there... what could they do?'

After looking at her thoughtfully for a few moments, he said, 'I think it'll be just fine, *Peddamma*. Our house too is practically in the middle of the village, isn't it? This is the main

street in the village. If someone wants to go from one end of the village to the other, they have to pass in front of our house. Everyone will see it. It'll be good.'

After a few moments of silence, she let out a deep sigh and spoke again.

'Huh! Back then, my father-in-law bought that land to use as a stable for cattle. After the cattle were gone, many people asked us to sell that land. But since our son was there, we didn't sell. The house is small, and what if tomorrow he gets married and has children? If we kept the land, we thought he could build a house there. And, now that very land is coming to use for his grave,' she said, her gaze filled with resignation.

'What is this, sir? You said we cannot build the memorial on government land. Fine, so I started building it in my own yard. Now, how can you say even that's not allowed?' Venkatamma spoke with vehemence, surprising the Sub-Inspector of Police (S.I.).

'I came here to tell you politely, *amma*. Stop that construction immediately,' the S.I. said, trying hard to suppress his irritation.

The peace talks were over and the political atmosphere was heating up. But the news regarding the memorial being demolished fifteen days ago, received widespread publicity. Members of mass organisations had come to the village. Their statements condemning police brutality had appeared in newspapers and on TV. That's why the S.I. was struggling to hold back his annoyance. This time, he didn't want the police to demolish it. Instead, he wanted to somehow get her to stop the work on the memorial.

'Why should I stop, sir? Everyone erects a grave in memory of the dead. I'm doing this in my son's memory.'

'If your son were like everyone else, sure, you could. But your son was a Naxalite.'

'Naxalite or a thief or whatever else — I don't know, sir. He was my son, born from my womb. I brought him up, not for a

year or two but for twenty years. You killed him and deprived me of him. And now, if I want to see him, where will I find him? That's why I'm building this grave. I'm building it so that I can see him at least in that.'

In the past, she had often been beaten by the police in their hunt for her son. Still, her unshakable resolve to build a grave for him — now bolstered by the support from the rights groups who had recently visited — gave her the courage to speak out.

'Now don't act too smart. Today, you will talk about building a grave. If we give you permission for that, then tomorrow you'll hold a meeting. You'll gather people and curse the government. Don't think you can pull the wool over our eyes. I am telling you politely, you had better listen to me' the S.I. said. Despite all his attempts to control himself, he couldn't help the inherent harshness of a policeman being manifested in his demeanour.

'What is there to listen to, sir? Yes, we'll hold a meeting. When someone in the family dies, don't we conduct funerals and ceremonies for them, sir? Don't we invite relatives and neighbours to those ceremonies, sir? Don't we collectively remember and grieve the ones who've died, sir? The meeting serves the same purpose...'

'Meetings and gatherings are held only when great people die. Do you think your son was someone great? He was a traitor, a pest to this country. His death is something to be happy about, not to grieve or remember. Even your crying or wailing is unnecessary...'

She couldn't bear those words. That's why, cutting him through the middle of his sentence, she said:

'Oh sir, you may be happy with his death. That's why you people killed him. But he was the child born from my womb, sir. What mother would be happy when her son dies? How could you speak like that, sir?'

Not letting her finish, the S.I. barked:

'Instead of feeling happy that such a son died, why do you grieve for him?'

'Which mother would be happy about her son's death, sir?'

Just the other day I saw on TV—a policeman brutally raped and killed a woman. If that policeman dies tomorrow, won't his mother cry, sir? Will she be happy and celebrate that he died?'

That struck a nerve with the S.I.

'With whose support are you talking excessively, woman? Just because people came and spoke the other day, you're acting bold, huh? Looks like you've forgotten all the beatings we gave you. Do you think we'll do nothing just because those people are there to support you? If we thrash you now and break apart your limbs, it will serve you right.'

'Beat me, sir, beat me! Kill me! That's what you people do, right? You already killed my son. Be charitable and kill me too!' she said, bringing her hands together in a furious appeal. There was a stubborn defiance in her.

The S.I. was filled with rage—he wanted to beat her to death right there. But lately, his 'heroics' had been making headlines in the papers, so with great difficulty, he managed to control himself a little.

He realized there was no use arguing with her any longer. By then, people had started to gather one by one. The other policemen stood like statues, silently observing the verbal clash between the S.I. and Venkatamma. Occasionally, they looked at the half-finished memorial pillar beside her.

'For good or bad, ever since Komurayya died, the police stopped coming to our village but now they're back again. Why can't we live in peace, Venkatamma? Why don't you stop the memorial?' said the *Sarpanch*, sitting on a raised platform. Two other 'elders' of the village were sitting beside him.

'How nicely you speak, sir! How can you even say such things to me? Not one of you said it is unjust and wrong when the police made my son, who was supposed to live a hundred years, disappear from this earth. But, today you come and tell me not to even build a grave for him? How can you say that with a straight face?' she shouted, standing in front of them and trembling with emotion.

'That's not the point, Venkatamma. What do you get by building that tomb?'

Before the *Sarpanch* could finish his sentence, she cut in, agitated:

'Sir, don't you all have sons and daughters? Don't you tell others about them?

'My son is studying in a great college in the city. My son has a big job in the city. We're getting offers of lakhs in dowry for my son's marriage. I got my daughter married with grandeur. My daughter has built a big bungalow...' — don't you all talk like this, sir? What do you get by telling others about your sons and daughters? Some sort of satisfaction, right? Similarly, wouldn't I feel like talking about my son?

Just because they killed my son, will memories and recollections of him die too? I'm building this memorial so that I too can say I had a son...

Now, what can I tell others about my son, tell me? Can I say he's studying? Can I say he's working? Can I say he's married? That he has children?

No. The only thing I can say is that he is dead!

But then how should I say he died? Should I say he died of illness? That he died from pain? That he died of old age?

No. What I have to say is — the police shot him!

Then what do I say when someone asks why the police shot him?

Should I say he was a thief, and that's why they shot him? That he was a scoundrel, and that's why they shot him?

I'm building this memorial just so I can tell the world why they shot him...'

She stopped talking as she ran out of breath.

The *sarpanch* and the elders with him were shocked to see her speak with such defiance.

For a few moments, none of them could speak.

They remembered how in the past she fell at their feet, begging them to save her son from the hands of the police.

'She once bowed before us for her son's life. Today, she's openly defying us — for his grave,' they thought.

They also felt she wouldn't listen to anything they said now.

Yet, in front of the police, they couldn't give up their role as elders of the village.

'We feel your pain too, Venkatamma. Even our hearts burn when we think of Komurayya and how unjustly they killed him. They caused you terrible grief, and now they're tormenting you again — that's what pains us.

That's why we're saying this. Everyone in the village already knows how your son died. What's new in it to say now?

Is building a memorial the only way of remembering him? He'll always live in everyone's hearts,'

One elder said, hoping she might listen if spoken to gently and with tact.

'Maybe everyone in this village knows now — but the future generations should also know whose grave this is. That's what I think.

Coming to the police harassment — let them do what they can'

She said firmly, and without another word, she walked away from there briskly.

'They aren't even returning the bodies of the martyrs, *amma*. They aren't letting us perform their final rites, hold memorial meetings for them, or build memorials for them. They aren't even allowing us to say they were killed unjustly. In order to fight for all of this, we—the friends and families of the martyrs—have come together and formed an association. It would be good if you joined us too, *amma*,' said Madhavi as she sat on the mat beside Venkatamma, took her hands into hers, and spoke gently.

Two middle-aged men sat on a cot nearby while Bhikshapati too sat on one side of the mat.

'Your fight to build a memorial for your son is a great one.

Every parent would want to question the unjust death of their children, perform their final rites, hold memorial meetings, and build monuments. But some don't have the courage to face police harassment. We need to support such people. If we do that, they too will definitely come forward,' said one of the men.

She silently thought to herself how much strength she too had derived from their support.

'Do you have to say so much, sir, about all this? It's only to remember our children, after all. I will definitely be a part of the association, just as you've said,' she replied with determined resolve in her voice.

Looking at Venkatamma and Bhikshapati, Madhavi continued, 'The memorial is almost complete now, right? Even the meeting date is approaching. Let's distribute the pamphlets and put up posters on behalf of our association. We'll take care of all that. Bhikshapati — you take care of distributing the pamphlets and pasting posters in the nearby villages with the help of the youth in your village. *Amma*, you must remain strong. The police might come again and harass you. If you need anything, call us immediately. Bhikshapati, I hope you have saved all the numbers we gave you?' She continued discussing a few more things.

'*Vadina*, when that boy was alive, the police came to the house and harassed us constantly. After he died, it had been quiet for a while. Now again, the police have started coming. They've already come four or five times and threatened us. I really don't understand why you're being so stubborn about that boy's tomb,' said Mallayya, the younger brother of Venkatamma's husband.

'If you could understand why a mother fights to protect her child, then you'd understand my stubbornness too, brother...' Her voice held a mix of pain and reproach.

'Not that, *vadina*... we also feel it'll be good to raise a tomb in his name... If his was an ordinary death like anyone else's, the police wouldn't have cared if we built a tomb or anything else. But what can we do—his wasn't that kind of death.'

'It wasn't an ordinary death at all... it was the kind of death that deserves a tomb right in the middle of the village. That's why I'm building it,' she said, a flicker of pride shining in her eyes.

'But even if you build a tomb, it's not like he'll come back to life, will he? Tell me—'

Before he could finish his sentence, she shot back, angrily.

'Ask the police that question. Ask them—'Sir, if building a tomb doesn't bring him back to life, why are you so afraid? Why are you so insistent we shouldn't build it?'" she said, flinging her clenched fist into the air.

He hesitated to say anything more, seeing how strongly she spoke. But then he recalled what the village *sarpanch* had told him. The *sarpanch* had warned him: 'If you don't listen to the police now, trouble will come—first to Venkatamma, then to your family too.'

So he decided to press further.

'It's not that, *vadina* ... The police killed him because he got involved with certain organisations and political parties. Now, why are you getting involved with these organisations again? The police are also furious that you've joined an organisation and have been attending those meetings,' he said in a persuasive tone.

'People like you don't need these organisations but people like me do need them. If we want to remember our martyred children, if we want to tell others about what happened to them, we have no choice but to come together in organisations like this.'

'Just listen to one thing, *vadina*. It seems the police told the *sarpanch* that if you give up all this, the government will take care of you and you don't have to go for daily labour.'

'How exactly will the government take care of me after killing my son, and leaving me with no one to turn to? It'll provide me food without my having to go for daily wage work, is it? That very food is soaked in my son's blood—how do you expect me to eat it?' she said, rising abruptly from the ground. Her voice was choked with rage and sorrow, her eyes sharp and unyielding.

Mallayya had no more courage left to speak, so he hung his head low and sat quietly on the cot.

‘Now, first of all, Comrade Venkatamma—who is not only a member of our association but also the mother of Comrade Komurayya—will speak,’ said Madhavi. ‘Today, all of us have gathered here to inaugurate the memorial pillar of Comrade Komurayya and hold this meeting. But this didn’t happen easily. The government caused a lot of trouble—especially to Comrade Venkatamma. The police harassed her in many ways. She bore labor pains only to give birth to her son, but to see his memorial raised on this land, she endured many more hardships. Still, she faced all those difficulties with courage and has become an inspiration to the families and friends of our martyrs.’

As soon as Madhavi finished speaking, slogans of ‘Long live Comrade Komurayya!’ rang through the air.

The entire street bustled with people. When there was no more space on the ground, people climbed trees and walls to get a view.

Bhikshapati held Venkatamma by the hand and helped her onto the small stage built beside the memorial. Madhavi placed her hand gently on Venkatamma’s shoulder and brought her forward to the microphone. Seeing her, the crowd’s slogans grew louder. She stood on the stage for some moments, with folded hands and tear-filled eyes, silently gazing at the people who were proclaiming through their slogans that her son was not dead.

Then, she began to speak in a low, emotion-filled voice. She had never before stepped onto a stage. She had no idea what a public speech even meant. But the desire to share about her son—her own flesh and blood—made her speak. As she spoke, the entire crowd fell silent.

‘My dear ones, truly, I endured a lot of suffering to raise a grave for my son. When other people built graves for their children and held meetings, I too felt the urge to do it. The police threatened me, saying I shouldn’t do it. They killed my son and told me to remain silent, not to build a grave, and not to hold a

meeting. In his childhood, my son used to write on his slate and then he would wipe it clean. Lines drawn on a slate can be wiped away—but can people be wiped out like that?

Now that he's not alive, am I supposed to believe I no longer have a son? Just because he's no longer visible to the eyes, should I think I never gave birth to him? The police want me to think so and behave so. But can any mother stay silent like that? When they rip apart your womb and tell you not to utter a sound, how can you remain silent? That is no ordinary pain.

Every mother feels like speaking about her children. Even a mother who lost her child in childbirth, if asked how many children she has, will talk not only about the ones who are alive, but also about the ones who died during birth. My son didn't die immediately after birth. He lived on this earth for twenty-eight years. Then, wouldn't I feel like talking about his life, my dear ones?

That's why I built this memorial—to tell the world that my son lived such a life.

The police taunted me saying

'So now you have started needing organisations and you'll get into politics ... You'll continue the fight your son started.'

Until recently, I used to think that organisations, politics, and struggles were big, important things. I believed such things were only for people above my level of life and understanding. I joined this organisation only to commemorate my son. This organisation exists so that mothers like me can commemorate their sons and daughters without fear. That's why I joined it. If politics is all about memorializing our children in this manner, then I want those politics. If remembering them is a struggle, then I will surely carry on that struggle.'

The audience was spellbound and captivated as they heard the grief, anguish, pain, fury, and defiance of countless mothers in her words.

(This story is in response to news that the relatives and friends of martyrs fought passionately to unveil a Martyrs'

Memorial in Subhashnagar, Hyderabad in May 2005.)

Translation of 'Aa rajakiyalu naggavale'. (First published in Poru Mahila, April 2005 – September 2006 and Arunatara, September 2006)

Translated by P. Aravinda

Notes:

1 This refers to the 2004 peace talks between the then CPI (ML) [People's War] and the Government of undivided Andhra Pradesh. During this period, state repression briefly eased — combing operations and extrajudicial killings of activists and civilians were suspended, and people were allowed to organise public meetings for a few months.

Glossary

This list includes the abbreviations related to the Party's functioning as well as several words from different Indian languages that are part of the everyday language of the people in the revolutionary movement. Some words are 'pan-Indian', and used as part of regional languages across India, for example 'Lal Salaam'. Others are more specific to speakers of a particular language, for example '*ingo*' is a Gondi word and largely used only by Gondi-speaking people. Hence we have added information about the language in each entry – Gondi (G); Koya (K); Telugu (T); Hindi (H)

AC - Area Committee

Akka(T) & Didi(H) – elder sister, but this term is also used by people to address female comrades

Ambali(T) - gruel

Amma(T) – mother

Anna(T) & Dada(H) – elder brother, but this term is also used by people to address male comrades

Annalu (T) – plural for brothers, but the term is often used to address male comrades belonging to Maoist Party

APT – appointment

Bava(T) – brother-in-law

Bharmar is a muzzle-loading gun. Adivasis have been using *bharmars* for hunting since almost the time of the British

occupation. They are made locally and also used by the militia.

Bidda(T) - The word '*bidda*', literally 'child' conveys much more than the meaning itself in Telangana. It is a show of love, affection and deep familiarity with a younger person and often packs a feeling of great closeness.

Chinnamma(T) - aunt, typically mother's younger sister

DVC - Divisional Committee

DVCM - Divisional Committee Member

Guggillu(T)- a snack made from various boiled and tempered legumes

Ganji(T) - Ganji is a gruel-like thick white rice water obtained from over-boiling rice in excess water.

gorga – fishtail palm (or *Caryota urens*), a tree from which toddy (fermented palm sap) is collected and drunk (fermentation happens on the tree itself, in to the pot – please note)

jamun(H) – fruit of the tropical *Syzygium cumini* tree, also known as Malabar plum/Java plum/black plum

Janatana Sarkar – people's government

Java(T) – porridge

Jhilli(H) – polythene sheet used by guerrillas to sit and lie down

Kali(T) - Kali is also obtained while cooking rice by draining the excess water from it and then fermenting it overnight – in short, fermented rice water. This was done in olden days when rice was cooked in earthen pots, it is no longer in vogue.

Lal Salaam(H) – Red Salute

Lungi(T) – cloth wrapped around the waist, the two ends of which are knotted together

mama(T) – maternal uncle

nanna, nayana(T) – father; these different forms of 'father' are used in two different dialects of Telugu, and region and caste are also implicated in how a father is addressed.

Oggukatha(T) - Oggukatha is a narrative telling of folklore including songs and skits, usually performed in praise of local deities.

- Oriya – the main official language of the western coastal state of Odisha. Several dialects of Oriya are also found in other regions of India.
- panchayat(H)* – village council as per Panchayat Raj Act 1989
- Peddamma(T)* – mother’s elder sister, also used to refer to elderly women in the village
- Peddanna(T)* – a respectful address for elder brother (see *Dada*), but this term is also used by people to address male leaders in the Movement
- PLGA – People’s Liberation guerrilla Army
- Sangham(T)* – mass organisation, for e.g women’s or workers or students organisation
- Sarpanch(T)* – elected head of a Gram Panchayat, a village level local government
- Setu(T)* – typically a trader and money lender
- Tatayya(T)* – grandfather
- Tola(H)* – *tola* is equal to 11.66 gm; it was used in India to measure precious metals like gold and silver
- Vadde(G)* – akin to a priest in the Adivasi society

Notes on Translators

ANUPAMA. P. is a faculty member of Computer Science in the University of Hyderabad. She is concerned about the direction and models of 'development' currently being followed in the world. She is a fan of Carl Sagan, and very much in love with Earth, our only home in the universe. She believes that Indigenous people in all the countries ought to be our role models for their care of nature.

ARAVINDA. P. studied engineering but has a keen interest in literature, economics and politics. She worked in the software industry for 30 years and left it to pursue her interests in other areas. As part of her current work, she is actively involved in translations of English works into Telugu and vice versa. She is also currently studying various thinkers and scholars to understand the intersection of caste, class and gender in India. She lives in Hyderabad.

JABILI is a poet and architect from Hyderabad. She is currently pursuing a Master's Degree in Design Research in Germany. Her work looks at Architectural Production in the overarching capitalistic system and links aspects of home, care and labour on the architectural site to Social Reproduction Theory under Marxist and Feminist Studies.

MADHU MAALATI is a revolutionary activist and translator. She translates from English to Telugu and vice versa. She translated many articles and stories for revolutionary magazines under different pen names, and translated 'History of Indian Women in Movements' into Telugu.

RAVI. N. is a revolutionary activist. He has been participating in revolutionary, democratic and progressive movements and is engaged in writing political and polemical articles from a Marxist point of view and translating from English to Telugu and vice versa. He has translated '30 years of Dandakaranya Cultural Movement' from Telugu to English (Under the pen name R.V. Sridhar), Gujarat files by Rana Ayub, Varna to Jati by Naveen Babu, and co-translated 'Wretched of the Earth' by Frantz Fanon and Critiquing Brahminism by Ajith (K.Muralidharan) from English to Telugu. He has brought out his collection of articles 'Caste and Revolution' both in Telugu and English.

SATYAVATHI. P. is the author of the award winning story '*glasu pagilindi*', published in 1977. *Illalakagaane*, a volume of short stories, won her the Chaso Award and established her as a leading feminist writer in Telugu. With four Novels, five anthologies of short stories, and a volume of essays to her credit, she runs a regular column on the early women writers in the magazine Bhumika. She has also translated into Telugu, to much acclaim, the works of Ismat Chughtai, A. Revathi's 'The Truth about Me: A Hijra life story', Y.B.Satyanarayana's 'My Father Balaiah', C.K.Janu's 'Mother Earth' and Paula Richman's 'The Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a narrative Tradition in South Asia'. She is the only Telugu writer to win the prestigious Kuvempu national award for literature in 2021. Having retired as an English lecturer, she now lives in Vijayawada.

SYAMASUNDARI. B. has a doctorate in Philosophy from Hyderabad Central University and worked on the current

paradigm of development. Her quest to understand how theory translates into real life, brought her to the handloom sector where there is a coexistence of the traditional and the modern. She started in Dastkar Andhra in 1998 as a Policy Researcher and is currently a Trustee of the organisation. She has an abiding interest in Telugu literature and has worked on translation from Telugu to English and English to Telugu. She is on the advisory board of Southside books, an imprint of Hyderabad Book Trust, publishing in English.

VENUGOPAL. N. is a poet, literary critic, journalist, translator and public speaker. Born and educated in Warangal, he has been associated since his early teens with Srjana, a leading Telugu journal of modern literature. He has been writing and translating for the past four decades. He has published more than thirty books in Telugu and translated as many from English. He currently edits Veekshanam, an alternative monthly journal on political economy and society. His recent publications include Understanding Maoists - Notes of a Participant Observer from Andhra Pradesh; The Making of Varavara Rao - An Intimate Portrait by a Nephew; Varavara Rao - A Life in Poetry (with Meena Kandasamy)

VIMAL is a revolutionary activist. He wrote several articles on social change. He translates from Telugu to English. Translated several articles and short stories. A significant work among his translations is '*Janatana Rajyam*' by Pani. Accused of being a Maoist, he was detained as a political prisoner in multiple states from 2011 to 2019.

VIPANCHIKA S BHAGYANAGAR is a PhD Student in History at Purdue University, West Lafayette. Her areas of interest include Punishment, Prison Studies, Colonialism, Surveillance Technologies, Cartography, Social History and Gender/Caste studies. In 2024, Vipanchika received the Harold D. Woodman Graduate Research Award for investigating the binary of

'ordinary' and 'political' prisoners in colonial Indian archives at the National Archives of India, Delhi. She published book reviews in peer-review journals of Sage and Taylor & Francis and wrote to The Wire, EPW, among others. She translated short stories.



Starting with her first story, Renuka evolved as a writer. Her growth reflects her deep observational power. From the start, she viewed life not just realistically but also critically. In stories with revolution as the backdrop, Renuka vividly portrays how women in the revolutionary movement learned much from it, while they also brought subtle insights and deep perspectives to it. At the same time, she honestly discusses the obstacles and limitations that still exist within the movement and the efforts women are making to overcome them. Renuka pays careful attention to every character she creates. Like an artist, with awareness of the surroundings, background, and culture of each character, she carves them out with intense concentration.



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