Three Generations



MODEPALLI SRILATHA KOTAPATI

English Translation
D.RANGA RAO



Srilatha dedicating THREE GENERATIONS, the English translation of her Telugu novel Moodu Tharalu to Sri Nara Chandra Babu Naidu. Sri Modepalli Kondaiah, her husband is also in the picture.

Felicitation

I have known Sri Kotapati Murahari Rao garu, the father of Smt. Srilatha. Srilatha is considered heir to Dr. Vasireddy Sita Devi in literary circles. Smt. Srilatha grew up as a writer hailing from a joint family. The joint family system is the very basis and foundation for the cultural heritage of India. There is every need to write a novel on this theme for the benefit of the present generation. I heartily congratulate Srilatha for having written this novel. I am glad Sri Ranga Rao has translated the novel into English ably.

I wish that she would take up themes like this and continue writing.

I express my thanks to her specially for dedicating such a good novel to me.

Nara Chandra Babu Naidu

Srilatha's Introduction

I wrote the novel Moodu Tharalu in Telugu. Thousand copies of the novel were sold out. The novel helped me get a good name. I dedicated this novel to Andhra Pearl-Buck, Dr. Vasireddy Sita Devi. She called this novel as another "Matti Manishi". I decided to bring this novel out in English and Sri D. Ranga Rao translated the novel into English.

I decided to dedicate the English version of my Telugu novel to Sri Nara Chandra Babu Naidu garu.

I feel that the English version of my novel will gain in importance for my having dedicated it to a person who himself grew up in a joint family background and attained International Status.

I extend my deep sense of gratitude to Sri Nara Chandra Babu Naidu garu for having accepted the dedication gracefully.

3 GENERATIONS

(The Telugu novel **'Moodu Tharaalu'** *in English)*

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Novel by MODEPALLI SRILATHA KOTAPATI

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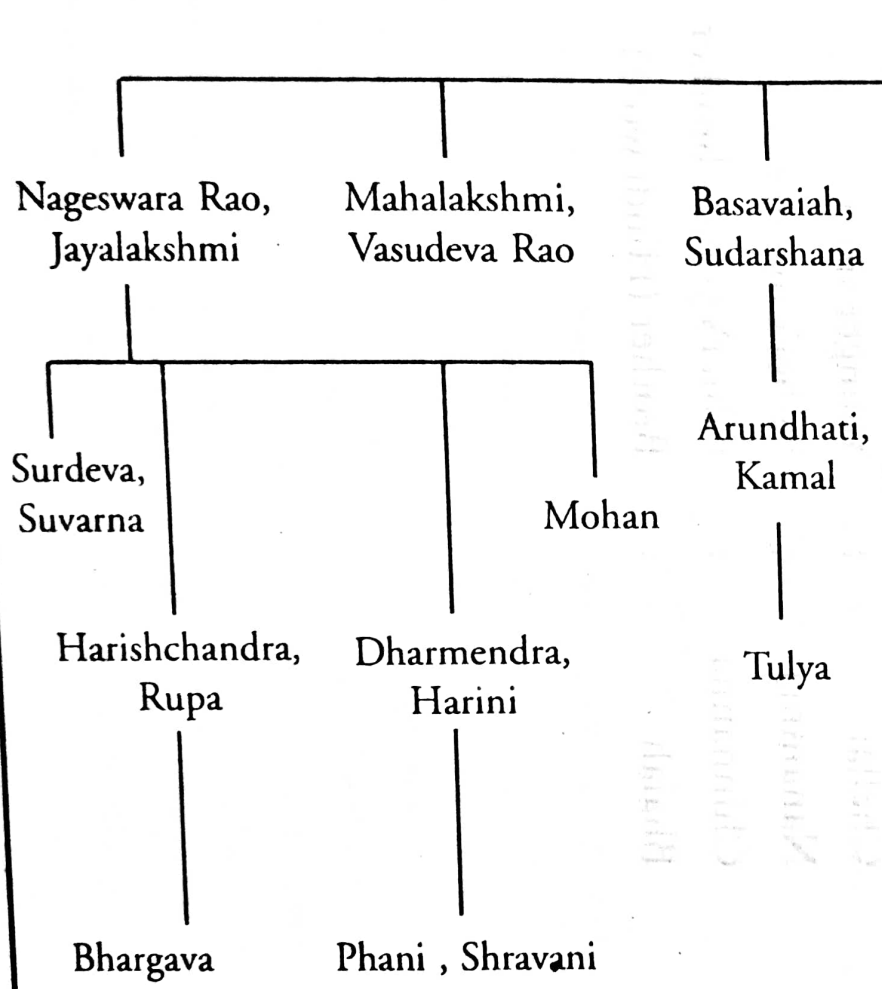
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FAMILY TREE

RAGHAVAIAH - CHANDRAMMA



OTHER CHARACTERS :

Bala Kotaiah	- Raghavaiah's younger brother.
Manykyamma	- Raghavaiah's sister.
Sundara Rao	- Subbarayadu's son (cousin of Nageswara Rao).
Swarajyamma & Subbulu	- sisters.
Anil	- Marwadi neighbour of Narahari.
Rajaram & Kamala	- House owners of Narahari
Eshwar	- Marketing Manager.
Srinivas	- Accountant.
Balaraj	- Office boy.
Pasha	- Helper

Telugu relationship names used in the novel :

Predananna	:	Father's elder brother
Peddamma	:	Mother's elder sister
Annaiah	:	Elder brother
Chellai	:	Younger sister
Nanamma	:	Father's mother
Chinnanna	:	Fahter's youger brother
Bhaiah	:	Brother (Hindi word)

JUST A WORD

The ingrained love man has for family genealogy and the generations that follow in a family is the foundation for this novel. My father's elder brother used to tell us how his grandfather was and what his great grandfather did and I used to wonder how he alone entertained a lot of love for his ancestors, their lifestyle, their traditions and their economic prosperity and other such aspects of their life. When I realised that a study of generations is a characteristic of one's craving for knowledge I felt that I should make a study of the institution of the family. The self-confidence, collective happiness, the feeling of responsibility, the respect and a peaceful life devoid of stress and tension observed in joint families are not found in single families. I wanted to discuss the reason for the dissipation of the joint family in the context of social, economic and individual propositions. This idea is the main prop for the present novel. The manner my father brought me up, the culture my father's elder brothers and his sisters taught me, the respect I have for my father's mother, my brothers who shared their deep love with me, my husband who has been a bulwork of strength to me and my children who are endowed with a lot of self-confidence — these have been my credentials that prompted me to write this novel.

My father's elder brother who took upon himself all the specialized work connected with cultivation and agriculture, who worshipped the plough and got into the field with the yoke on his shoulders to break the ground before the bullocks ploughed the fields, the huts all round with hay roofs, the pandals with palmyrah leaves, the black gram, the green gram, turmeric, paddy, and onions spread all round reflecting the very image of the goddess of crops .....and the distribution of the grain to the barber, to the dhobi, to the achary, to the workers and labourers.....all these are memories which cannot be erased from my mind.

The henna patterns drawn by my father's mother on my palms, the tickling starting with the index finger, the uncontrollable laughter, the face turning crimson..... and such other remembrances..... calling the neighbour Padma to play with me, taking her up the tree, tying up her two plaits to the branch, going home leaving her there on the branch.....pretending fever and covering myself up in the blanket creating a scene —all these and more such pranks....

From the curry puffs, fast foods and dieting ,,,,and the 'raw food' which we call stylishly in the present day.....going back to nature and the gifts mother earth has given to man, to the moon, to the tender paddy and corn heads,,,,to the natural food we ate as children, the thick cream of milk and curd, the twittering songs of welcome by the birds in the morning, the sprinkling of cow dung water in front of the main doors of the house, songs and music, playing hide and seek in mango topes, playing 'chemma chekka' and 'thokkudu billa'.....how wonderful was childhood ! the experiences of those days should be recorded and preserved, computerized in Eastman colour and in 3d.... though I will be gone..... these memories will not be lost. This novel was concluded with this thought at the back of my mind and at the same time feeling disappointed that much more could not be included.

These were my thoughts when I wrote my second novel 'Moodu Tharalu'. Later my yearning to prove myself as a writer turned into a determination. I wrote many novels, stories, poems, and songs. All the journals and papers printed my writings and encouraged me giving me a prominent place. The Potti Sriramulu Telugu University honoured me with the Best Woman Writer award. I was honoured by many awards, puraskaras later and won appreciation from many literary organizations.

In course of time my writings and ideas attained a little more perfection. The opinions expressed by intellectuals on my works gave

me an impetus towards gaining perfection. I could find a special place in the literary world.

With this background I decided to bring my novel 'Moodu Tharalu' in English. Mr. D. Ranga Rao helped me in realizing my dream by translating the novel into English as also in the securing the opinions of critics as well as in the printing and publishing of the English version. I do not find words to express my thanks to him.

In my Telugu writings I was known as Srilatha. If anyone asked who this Srilatha was, I was satisfied with the answer that Srilatha was a writer.

I did not use the surname of my parents or the surname of my in-laws after marriage. The reason is I was told that a woman does not have a surname of her own.....if there are surnames they are the surname of the parents or the surname of the in-laws only....more over in Indian culture woman was never given a surname at all.... which means the divine mothers Lakshmi, Parvathi and Saraswathi or the pouranic women like Savithri, Droupadi etc. were not embelished with surnames by the ancient poets. Lord Sri Rama was called 'Ravikula Raghurama' but his consort was never called 'Ravikula Sita'. I thought that as an Indian, why should I give importance to something that was not in Indian culture.

Now that I decided to bring out one of my works in English translation and step into the international literary scene as a writer, I thought that the surname which I acquired from birth and the surname of my in-laws which gave me life should also be given due place with gratitude in return for the honour I derived from them.

Now, the feeling that the girl of the family should take the responsibility of taking care of the old parents is growing and ,,,,,also that the woman of the family should have the right to perform the

obsequies of her parents at their demise...though she gets married and goes to the house of the in-laws, I feel she should continue to retain the surname of the parental house as well as the parental bonds...and in order to put into practice my thinking, I am introducing myself as Molepalli Srilatha Kotapati from now on,Molepalli being my husband's surname and Kotapati being my father's surname.

My desire is to reach the international forum with the blessings of the Telugu literary field - and a place along with international writers.

I express my gratitude to the translator, to the critics who expressed their opinion on my novel, to the publisher, to those who released this book, and also to every reader that would go through this novel.

I eagerly await the reaction of the readers to my experiment in writing this novel about a typical Indian joint family placed in an agricultural backdrop to know whether my experiment has been a success.

Dr. Vasi Reddy Sita Devi, popularly known as Andhra Pearl S. Buck, to whom I dedicated the Telugu original of this novel, expressed her desire that this novel should be translated into all Indian languages and blessed me saying it would become famous as another 'Matti Manishi', written by her and wanted me to carry forward the torch as her literary heir. I place the novel before the readers to fulfil her wish.

MODEPALLI SRILATHA KOTAPATI

SRILATHA'S MOODU THARAALU : A CRITIQUE

Ms. Srilatha attempts to trace the rise-fall-rise of three generations of a joint family over a period of seventy years in the Telugu novel *Moodu Tharaalu* (Three generations). This is a period of vast and rapid changes in the political, social, economic, cultural and other spheres in India. These events inevitably impacted on the joint family system in our country. While the general impression is that this system is breaking up under the enormous stresses and strains of the economic and social forces, and yielding place to the nuclear family, the novelist sees hope for its continuance and healthy survival provided attitudinal changes and appropriate responses to the new scenario are made by members of the joint family. It is a matter of common experience that societies, cultures, families and individuals who adapt themselves to the emerging environment by learning newer and newer survival skills continue to thrive whereas those who resist changes fall by the wayside.

Raghavaiah is the patriarch of a large rural family which depends entirely on agriculture which seven decades ago meant raising only food grains. A generation later and a dip in the fortunes of the family, more profitable commercial crops like Virginia tobacco are tried without neglecting food crops altogether. It is a male dominated society; women are neither consulted nor even informed about the property affairs of the family. In that set- up the decision making is in the hands of one man, the head of the family. Such a dictatorial system worked for a time but when the younger generation had different aspirations, more enterprise and more money, the investments are diversified into business and then to industry. But then even with modern education and exposure to urban life, Narahari who belongs to the second generation continues the dictatorial and secretive mode of making decisions. Wilful and total disregard of the views of the next generation and of the women leads of avoidable misfortunes.

The author who was brought up in this *milieu* has a clear understanding of the rural society and its values. She has provided some

penetrating insights into the working of the joint family based in the countryside and heavily dependent on land. We often liken a family to a tree. A joint family is a large tree with many branches and sub-branches. It provides shelter and sustenance to many including birds. It takes several decades for a tree to grow to that stage but it takes just a few minutes to cut it down.

The "generation gap" which has become a *cliché* since the 1960s is usually caused by lack of consultation among all members, by a desire on the part of the head to dominate over and dictate to the younger generation. This naturally triggers resentment and revolt on the part of the upcoming generation. George Bernard Shaw says in the preface to his play *Misalliance*, that there is a wall ten feet thick and ten miles high between parent and child. Parents usually do not take their children into confidence and this leads to misunderstandings which widen the gap between generations. There is a chance for the joint family to survive if the older and younger generations freely and frankly exchange their views as equals. The master - servant mentality that prevails in the older generation must be given up. Srilatha recognises this as a *sine qua non* for the joint family to flourish in the new environment.

The novelist who has a master's degree in Telugu uses language to good effect. Her command over Telugu idioms and proverbs is a great asset to her narration. She quotes Telugu proverbs with ease and tries to integrate the distilled traditional wisdom of the proverbs to the events in the novel. Sometimes this appears as an authorial commentary; sometimes as folk wisdom; sometimes as a strong prop in defence of a character. The idioms and proverbs help in re-creating an appropriate Telugu cultural and linguistic back drop.

The English translation of this novel, done by an experienced translator, Sri D. Ranga Rao, is competent, commendable and enjoyable.

Hyderabad
May 18, 2008

E. Nageswara Rao.

CAN'T WE HOPE TO CHERISH IT?

Love is said to be the panacea for all ills in human existence. "To love is to place our happiness in the happiness of others," says Leibnitz. To be happy by ourselves is to make others happy. That happiness is love which we always feel for others. If it is found mutual and cherished, it tends to expand to the magnitude of divine love, the greatest of all loves rolled into one. Hence, Luther says, "Love is an image of God, and not a lifeless image, but the living essence of the divine nature."

We get the first taste of love from the mother. Next from other members of the family, also from kith and kin. As we grow up, we learn to reciprocate the same love in the modes of expressions our culture has developed. Happily we cherish and share it with others, until we are bitten by venomous creatures like selfishness, pride, avarice, ego, despotism or violence.

Beyond all necessity and compulsion, the members of a family like to live under one roof because of their love for eachother, with a sense of togetherness. They share all pains and pleasures and all material things with others, knowing that 'Love is love's reward' as Dryden had said and as 'Love gives itself; it is not bought' as Longfellow says. So, we can agree that the basic need for a human heart is love, beyond all things. It is clearly expressed and nourished to the fullest extent in a family anywhere in the world.

As Paramahamsa Yogananda has rightly put it, we are given families to learn to love eachother selflessly and to give the same love to all others, both human and non-human. Happily for us, the greatest ideals like, '*udaara charitaanaam tu vasudhaiva kuTumbam* (for the noble-minded, the entire world is one family) and '*yatra Viswam bhavaryeeka niiDam*' (where the universe has become a single nest) are naturally ingrained in the core of Indian culture.

Srilatha's novel 'Three Generations' (MooDu taraalu in Telugu) is a welcome addition to the treasure of Telugu and Indian literature, since it breaths of love that binds all members of a joint family rooted in rural life. Chandramma, wife of Raghavaiah, has three sons and three daughters. The eldest son Nageswara Rao follows the footsteps of his father and becomes a successful agriculturist. The second one becomes a journalist, and activist. The third one, Narahari, becomes a businessman and settles down in Hyderabad. After the death of Raghavaiah, Chandramma plays the main role in the family, keeping harmony and love among the members of the family intact. After her death, Nageswara Rao continues to maintain the traditions of the family. Some children of the family, of the third generation, are shifted to Hyderabad to pursue their studies and to assist Narahari in his business activities. Although there are some ups and downs in his occupational career, he succeeds and establishes firmly.

Tradition requires the head of the establishment to hold the reins of all affairs, whether they are of business or any other matter related to the family. Even if he becomes a despot, he can show his benevolence any time. But if that benevolence is shadowed by his egoistic style of functioning and his dealings with the other family members, it gives rise to misunderstandings, frustrations and separation. Every younger member of the family suspects the motives of any other member, especially the head of the family. At the end of the story, all clouds of misunderstandings are cleared by overcoming the communication gap.

Even a happy ending of the family story cannot change the earlier bitterness to sweetness nor does it compensate to the hatred, envy, loss and heart-burning. So, the younger members of the third generation nequivocally voice their wish to cherish their mutual love, not in the stem of a joint family, but in the nuclear family.

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Srilatha has done well in depicting the happy life of a joint family in the traditional rural background. Her dexterity in handling such a theme of wide canvas is commendable.

D. Ranga Rao is well known for his faithful translations of Telugu fiction into English, which run into thousands of pages, giving a natural taste of English to a product of Telugu culture. He has successfully transferred the core of scores of proverbs and idiomatic expressions into good English.

I congratulate the author of the Telugu novel and her experienced translator for their best efforts in making the reading pleasurable.

Hyderabad
03/06/08

Poranki Dakshinamurthy.

FROM THE TRANSLATOR'S PEN

I enjoyed translating Srilatha's novel 'Moodu Tharaalu'. The novel is a unique blend of the old and the new, the village and the city, the scene moving from the rural agricultural setting to a sophisticated city life, from the plough and the farm land to the factory and marketing center, from the tradition bound joint family to the unconventional nuclear family that remains united in a larger context. The interim is all activity, buzzing with births, marriages, children and deaths. The novel abounds in the joys and sorrows of life, envy and jealously, success and failure, disappointments and hope, the pendulum swinging to both the ends alternately.

Chandramma holds the stage in the first part of the novel, caring, affectionate, running the house with a firm hand and a good heart, loving, loved and lovable. When the action shifts to the city, it is Narahari, the third son of Raghavaiah, who holds the sway, enterprising but ambitious, succeeding and failing by turns, almost bringing down ruin on the family with a couple of misadventures, exhibiting a haughty nature and a stubborn high-handedness in the management of affairs both at home and in business. The youngsters of the third generation are sober and sensible, loving and affectionate, and vote for individual freedom of action and thought while remaining united in the circle of collective planning. The children of this generation provide the required liveliness to the novel with their intelligent pranks.

The feminist novelist makes the women characters highly tradition bound and they play a silent part only to show that in silence and absolute obedience there is a strength and a cementing force that keeps the family intact and together.

The special features of the novel, apart from the easy run of the story, are the style and language that give the narration a simple and

natural dignity, and the use of Telugu proverbial sayings which are integrated into the structure of the novel with great skill by the novelist through the incidents, dialogues, situations, and character delineation. There are more than a hundred such sayings in the narration which tempts me to say that they help the novel in its progress running as an under current playing a significant role. I tried to translate them into English as naturally as possible doing justice to their use by the novelist. The novel is an interesting saga of the progress of generations in the journey of life.

D.RANGA RAO

3

GENERATIONS

Let the land be cultivated always and ever, O you little brother!
Your labour will not go unrewarded for sure, O you elder brother!
Hei! Ho! Ahom!.... Hei! Ho! Ahom! .....He! Ho!.....

The yokes on the shoulders of the labourers swing rhythmically to the song as they walk on field bunds carrying water pots back home. Water mixed with cow dung is splashed by hand in wavy motions by women before their door steps. Perched high on tops of huts the lusty cocks crow, shrill and clear, waking up people from their sleep, in keeping with the saying ' the restless cock wakes up the entire village.'

The daughters-in-law of the households wake up grudgingly. "Why all this haste?.. Won't the cocks stop crowing till we wake up?" they murmur. They comb their hair lazily into plaits and get ready the hay bundles to light the fire. They pick up a charcoal piece from the cold hearth and crush it in their mouths and brush their teeth with the powder.

Having cooked and packed their food the coolies tuck up their dhotis and sarees and wait at the spot in the market place where they gather everyday to be called for work. They sit and eagerly wait orders from the big landlords. They gaze expectantly at every landlord that passes that way and feel disappointed if ignored by them.

"The sun is going up... it looks as though there is no work for us today. No one seems to need our services..." the labourers grumble. If in the meanwhile the head of the coolies shouts from a distance " the big land-lord wants us to clear his harvested field of the corn heads and grain and take them away, " the labourers get up hastily. The women workers walk behind their menfolk on the bunds with their baskets tucked under their arm-pits, in a bee-line to reach the fields. The trees and the plants, the bunds and the bushes smile silently at the way the men toil everyday to fill their hungry bellies.

It was not yet day-break. The cock had not yet crowed. The birds had not left their nests yet. The door-steps of all the houses in the village were already wet with cowdung water sprinkled on them. The stars were still shining mistily in the sky. Jayalakshmi had already swept the wide open space before the doorway and had sprinkled cowdung water over the half-acre area of their house. She tucked up the pleat folds of her saree and started drawing patterns connecting the dots with white limestone powder on that misty morning. Her husband Nageswara Rao carried water pots on his yoke and filled the water troughs for the cattle. He was well-built and tall. His hefty body kept a rhythmic sway as he balanced the two heavy brass water containers suspended from the yoke on his shoulder.

"Jayamma! The little fellow hasn't yet come though it is morning. My eldest son doesn't scold the servants. He does their work also... that's why the cursed fellows take it easy". Chandramma was sorry that her son was doing all the work. She hated scolding her son. On such occasions she directed her anger at her daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law knew her mother's mind. So she keeps silent.

"What's wrong if we do our own work now and then? The workers are also human beings. You are sorry your son is working hard. The little fellow is also a son to his mother," said Nageswara Rao as he collected the cowdung into a basket and twisted the hay into a rope. In the meanwhile, Ramudu came there and lifted the cowdung basket to

his head, murmuring that he could not wake up early. "Okay! Okay! Finish your work and follow me. We have to go to Amrutaluru by cart. I have to bring our Lakshmamma for the festival. Her people are harsh by nature. I've to bring my younger sister also. When can I complete all these tasks?" shouted Nageswara Rao. Ramudu started working silently. Nageswara Rao walked in dusting his upper cloth with a swish. The second daughter-in-law got ready to cook food by lighting the fire with dried palmyrah spines. The third daughter-in-law prepared coffee. Chandramma was sitting on the pial.

The youngest daughter-in-law brought hot milk in a brass tumbler and placed it on the pial by the side of her mother-in-law making a little noise. The daughters-in-law do little talking in the house. The vessels they carry in their hands speak! She went in to get coffee observing her husband approaching them.

Whenever she looked at her eldest son, Chandramma felt sorry for him. Her worry for him grew with the advancing sun. After her son's return in the evening from the fields she would feel light. The next morning as he starts to go to the fields, again the heaviness in her heart increases....The past flashed hazily before her as she sat there.

*****

It was a huge household where many servants and workers moved about busily engaged in work. The house enjoyed the glory of a small zamindari once. People equated Raghavaiah's name with goodness. When Gandhiji started his Salt Satyagraha Movement, Raghavaiah led six or seven villages in the Movement and went to jail. He was a six footer and sported a bushy moushtache. His khadi dhoti, shirt and upper cloth never had a wrinkle. He was the only educated person in the family! He solved litigations along with his younger brother Balakotaiah and uncles through discussion. That was the time when the Independence Movement was in progress... All activities connected with the struggle were run from the Ashram situated in the village. Monetary or moral support for the Movement was arranged through

Raghavaiah. The women folk of the village went to the Ashram along with Chandramma after completing their household chores. They used to spin yarn on the Charkhas in the Ashram and bought blankets there. In those days, the village was noted for running the national movement with genuine involvement.

Raghavaiah had a younger sister, Manikyamma. They were the only children to their parents. His father's younger brother and five elder brothers made a big family with many members in it. They all lived together happily. The paternal family of Chandramma also had many members. The street in which Raghavaiah's house was situated was known as 'Kotapati vari veedhi' and the other street where Chandramma's parents lived was called 'Raavi vari veedhi' in the village.

When Raghavaiah married Chandramma and reached the village, he on horse back and his bride in the palanquin, the women folk welcomed and received them in the traditional manner burning camphor in a brass plate. They were pleasantly surprised at the handsome made-for-each-other couple. For many days the palanquin was placed behind the house for use by the women and the horse with his dark shining body in front of Raghavaiah's house for his use. Two hefty wrestlers, Mastanaiah and Sultanaiah, accompanied Raghavaiah on their horses when he went to the court. In those days of glory and pomp, Chandramma gave birth to three sons and three daughters.

Nageswara Rao was the first born followed by Mahalakshmi. Then Basavaiah and Poornavathi. Narahari and Saraswathi were the last two.

Chandramma suffered an abortion because of the shock when she witnessed the burning down of their haystack. Nageswara Rao used to say that Saraswathi would have had a little brother but for the fire accident. Raghavaiah put into practice the saying 'daughters-in-law should be from poor families and daughters should be sent into wealthy families.' He selected docile girls as brides for his sons. He chose his sister Manikyamma's daughter for his eldest son, and the daughter of his brother-in-law for his third son Naarhari. In the case of his second

son, Raghavaiah the Gandhian, faced a problem in choosing the bride. The second son Basavaiah was not like his brothers. He did not readily obey his father. He was educated and was working in the newspaper office.

Basavaiah gathered students in the evenings and taught them. He condemned child marriages and encouraged widow-marriages. The village boys flocked around him to hear his talks. They called him endearingly 'Basavaiah Mastaru.' He gave them the latest information about the progress of the Independence Movement and the new trends in social reforms. He was least interested in looking after agricultural operations or household duties.

Raghavaiah expressed his displeasure now and then to Chandramma on Basavaiah. "Neither does he care for agriculture like his elder brother nor does he bother to lead a quiet life like his younger brother. Why does he involve himself in these foolish activities?" he would ask her.

One evening the mother and sons were gossiping, sitting on cots under the coconut trees. The two daughters-in-law were standing behind the door whispering between themselves. Basavaiah returned from the office and placed a fruit in his mother's hand.

Though she did not get full purport of her husband's anger on Basavaiah, Chandramma said to him, " your father does not like your doing a job, engaging tuitions and giving lectures. Why don't you give them up?" Nageswara Rao joined his mother. "Why do you do things father doesn't like?" he asked curtly. "Annaiah, don't be annoyed. What I do are good deeds. For how long do we depend on agriculture? You are taking care of our lands ably. If I too join you, will not our extra income get reduced? You better take care of agriculture. I'll work like this," replied Basavaiah firmly.

"What is the need for us to take up a job?" said Nageswara Rao angrily. He felt infra-dig for them to seek a job. He was also hurt that Basavaiah did not heed his father. He tried to kindle self-respect in his

brother. "How shameful it is to work under someone else?" he asked. Basavaiah left the place in a huff.

Such conversations took place now and then in the family. "Instead of doing our work why should we work for others? Everyone says you are a communist," Nageswara Rao said to Basavaiah often. Sometimes he would tell his brother pleadingly. "It is not proper to do something father doesn't like." Chandramma would gently put an end to the conversation between the brothers so that there would be no flare-up. "Okay. Okay. The white cow has a calf. Cheese has been prepared. First eat the cheese and then talk," she would say. As her daughter-in-law handed her the dishes, she served food affectionately to her sons. The women ate after all the men had their food.

Raghavaiah never discussed family affairs with his children. If he had something to convey, he would tell Chandramma. She would then discuss with her sons and pass on their views to her husband. Then he would announce his decision. His decision was final and no one opposed it. Chandramma managed such occasions with deftness and skill. She saw to it that her sons were not hurt, maintaining at the same time the authority of the head of the family. She would talk softly and very calmly exhibiting timely intelligence. Everyone declared that Chandramma was responsible for Raghavaiah enjoying peace and happiness. If Raghavaiah attended to property matters and other affairs with efficiency, Chandramma managed family affairs with equal efficiency and skill. That was the reason why Raghavaiah had never any occasion to discuss family affairs with his children or to spend time on them. This system of management was given a stamp of authority in the house as well as in the village. As a result people declared privately that Raghavaiah was soft compared to his wife proving the adage' the head of sixty villages has to bow before his wife.'

That night Chandramma told her husband about the argument between the two brothers. She also suggested that if the second son's marriage was performed he might go steady in life setting aside his

principles. Next day they consulted Raghavaiah's elder brother and other relatives and a good match from Kesaripadu was fixed. The bride belonged to a big agricultural family. She was beautiful. She had the support of her brothers. It was a decent family. These points were sufficient to decide upon the match. The auspicious time for the wedding was atonce fixed. The representatives of both the families sat on the palmyrah mat spread on the pial and wrote down the 'lagna pathrika', detailing the date of marriage, time etc.

Basavaiah had no say in the matter. In their families the bride or the groom had never, at anytime in any generation, a say in matters of marriage. So no one felt it strange. Everyone accepted it as the normal practice. Chandramma was sitting on the rope cot under the coconut tree talking to her elder son awaiting her second son. Sudararajamma, a distant relative of Chandramma and a good friend, turned up.

"Chandrappa! I learnt that Basavaiah's wedding has been fixed. Your sister Kamalappa told me. By the by, will not people accuse the mother if the son who has come of age and has grown a moushtache and a beard, is not married off," said Sundararajamma as though it was also her responsibility to perform Basavaiah's marriage.

"Ayyo Rama!" she continued. "Instead of entrusting me with some work and allow me to enjoy the wedding dinner, why do you feel sorry as though the wedding is forced on you! By the way, when is the wedding?" she asked.

In the meanwhile Basavaiah turned up. "Oh! Sundarrajakkayya! What are you talking about?" he questioned her giving his mother a few oranges. Chandramma gave one to her eldest son, another to Sundararajamma. She beaconed Jayalakshmi, her elder daughter-in-law who was sitting beyond the doorway, signaling her to take away the rest of the fruits. Jayalakshmi atonce obeyed her mother-in-law and took the fruits into the house quickly. Manikyamma and Jayalakshmi's brother's wife were eager to hear what Sundararajamma would say to

Basavaiah. "What do you want to know? Is it not about your wedding? Should not the black gram and cucumber crunches be prepared? Chillis soaked in buttermilk be got ready? Should we not attend your wedding in our Chirala sarees and partake wedding dinner?" she asked joyfully. "Whose wedding? Mine? I won't marry," said Basavaiah annoyed, lifting up the rope cot with a flourish. He walked towards the water trough, washed his feet, went in, raised the wick in the lantern, picked up a book, drew the chair close to the table and started reading.

The women observed him from behind the doorway, Chandramma from under the coconut trees. Nageswara Rao and Sundararajamma were surprised at Basavaiah's behaviour and reaction.

"It's okay, Chamdrappa! I'll come again tomorrow," said Sundararajamma and got up.

"Look here! Don't tell anyone what Basavaiah said just now! In these days do boys agree instantly for their marriage the moment it is proposed to them? They'll say 'no' first. My eldest son made me entreat him for six months before he consented to his marriage," said Chandramma making light Basavaiah's refusal. Her object was to prevent discussion in the public on this point.

"That's true appa! A man should put up that much show of stiffness on such occasions. If you agree to any proposal the moment it is put across to you, you will be looked down with contempt, goes the saying. Okay! Okay! I'll get going "said Sundararajamma and walked away in the dusky darkness. She eagerly looked forward for the day-break when she could break the news the first thing next morning in the village.

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Those were times when the older generation was not prepared to accept the fact from their experience that it was natural for the grown-up children to understand the physical and social world around them and express freely and frankly their personal views. So the elders of the

family decided the individual's likes and dislikes. It was felt that the family which provided the basic necessities like food, shelter, love and affection had the right to decide the future of the individuals. The decision of the head of the family was the deciding factor for everyone in the family. That was why Chandramma felt amused at the forwardness of her son. 'When once his father had decided, fixed and written down the auspicious time and date, will his marriage stop though he refused?" thought Chandramma.

That night she served her sons hot and steaming food with butter, horse-gram soup, thick curd and crisp, fried black gram crunches for taste.

"Why don't you marry?" she asked her son sticking the big ladel into the vessel containing thick curd.

"I'll marry a widow. Please find the right girl who has lost her husband" replied Basavaiah.

The food which he was about to swallow got stuck in Nageswara Rao's throat at his brother's words.

"Your education seems to have given you the benefit of negative intelligence. You are only proving the saying ' imparting education results in losing one's natural intelligence' said Nageswara Rao in an angry tone.

"Brother! You care only for agriculture. You are not interested in observing the changes taking place in the society. You do not wish to develop a few ideals in your life. I don't blame you for this attitude. But try to understand me," said Basavaiah calmly to convince his brother.

"It is as good as your not being a member of this family if you have the audacity to say 'no' to father. Whatever father does or says, no one should use the words 'why?' ' What?' 'No!' These words should not be heard in this house, " said Nageswara Rao, got up abruptly washing his hands in the plate and walked away. His wife Jayalakshmi who came in

unexpectedly just then, gave way to him by stepping aside quickly. This pious lady had not seen her husband any time from close quarters except in their bedroom. That was the system followed in those days.

That night Chandramma said to her husband, "Our boy doesn't want to marry now." "Is that so?" said Raghavaiah puffing out the smoke from his long cigar.

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The palm-leaf porch was erected. Mango leaf buntings and festoons were hung all over. Guests showered their blessings on the couple with sanctified rice. The marriage was celebrated, children were born and they grew up. Yet Basavaiah had to put up with the accusation that he defied his father. He did not disobey his father. Yet he was branded a rebel. But the 'revolt' did not break the bond of the brothers. They all lived together.

Chandramma felt very much elated with her second daughter-in-law who came from a wealthy family. A handsome son and three beautiful daughters were born to her. Her first son had three children. The household was now teeming with the children of the two brothers. Like the bumper crop at holy Sankranthi, festive joy and happiness prevailed in the house.

The third son Narahari was doing leather technology in Pune. "Your marriage with Sulochana, your maternal uncle's daughter, has been fixed. Come away soon" the letter informed him. Pat he came in time and tied the three sacred knots around the bride's neck. He went back without staying on for the consummation and the three nights' ritual.

Narahari looked handsome in his neatly combed curly hair, pants and shirt. "Narahari proves to the hilt that he is Raghavaiah's son. How obedient he is and how much respect he has for his father? He stands next to his father among the brothers!" everyone praised him in the village. His relatives also showed him a lot of respect. He did not go to

his wife's place when he came down for the holidays. He did not even take a look at his wife. He decided not to go through the consummation ritual until his father fixed the time. The bride's father Ramaiah had no courage to say 'no' to Raghavaiah on this point. He folded his arms and talked falteringly with Raghavaiah. He did not dare to ask him to get the three days' ritual gone through without delay after the marriage. Raghavaiah was of the opinion that their consummation could be postponed until Narahari completed his education. Narahari accepted his father's opinion. So everyone treated Narahari as the true heir to his father. They treated him with the same respect and honour they showed to his father. Nageswara Rao also used to say "let it be according to father's wish. Let it be as Narahari desires." Nageswara Rao dedicated his life to hard work and agriculture transferring all authority to his brothers.

Chandramma's eldest son cultivated the land and brought home wealth to the household. Narahari followed in the footsteps of his father. Basavaiah talked of ideals now and then and kept himself away from agriculture. But he attended to his job. Yet he had great love for his people. Looking after the needs of the children of her daughters who were married into wealthy families and the children of her sons kept her busy always. Her two eyes were not sufficient to witness and feel the joy of the big family. But many other eyes were struck with envy and jealousy at the beautiful bonds of love that existed in this joint family. There was only one want - Narahari had no children yet. Chandramma was always cool, happy and composed. She never lost balance like a pot filled with thick butter.

Chandramma felt that she should keep a watch on her eldest son's appetite, second son's emotion and the third, his sleep. Such was the mother's anxiety for her sons whose weak points she knew. She managed the household so well that her husband never felt the burden of running the family. She would sit on the pial in the verandah at the back of the house and manage her daughters-in-law. Sitting on the rope cot in the

front verandah, she attended to her sons. She saw to it that there was no need for her to lift even a pin and place it elsewhere. Her daughters-in-law did the household chores with silent efficiency. The rustle of their bangles was never heard as they worked. The lady of the house Chandramma got work done by the young daughters-in-law in the family with a quiet and mild authority. People often commented that Raghavaiah could become a leader because of his wife's efficiency. Manikyamma, her husband's sister said frequently that she never observed her sister-in-law lighting the oven any time. Chandramma allowed her sister-in-law all authority with respect. She also stood up to traditions and behaved decently. She knew that if her husband's sister complained it would affect six generations to come and treated Manikyamma with affection.

When things were thus going in a 'kingly state' came the bolt from the blue.

Raghavaiah had been attending court for two years in connection with a property law-suit filed by his cousins. One day he returned home at nightfall from the court, ate his meal, drank a glass of milk and slept off and died in sleep. Observing that her husband had not sat on the pial long after day-break, Chandramma went to him to wake him up and shouted aloud for her eldest son. Nageswara Rao and his wife had their cots under the coconut trees in front of the house. Her second son and wife were in the verandah at the back of the house. They all heard Chandramma's cry and ran to her. They had never heard her shout in such a loud and agonized tone. By then Raghavaiah's body had grown stiff and cold like a statue. The neighbours also assembled in large numbers quickly in no time like crows that flock together in an emergency. A man of importance collects around him a hundred strong crowd, be it in life or death. A message was sent to Narahari.

The whole family was dumb-stuck. The entire structure of the family collapsed. Daughters and their relatives and others came and filled the village with their carts.

Balakotaiah, Raghavaiah's younger brother told Nageswara Rao that his brother had lost the law-suit and said the news might have broken his heart.

Raghavaiah had not revealed the anxiety he experienced in the court case to his wife or sons. There was no such tradition in the family. The head of the house should bear all problems silently and secretly, be it joy or defeat. He suffered defeat and never felt anytime that he was keeping his sons ignorant of the family affairs. He never discussed with his children details of the properties he had.

The generation gap was striking. Age and authority were conditioned by rules. A wall of deafening silence had grown between the father and sons. As a result, the news of the law-suit being lost in the court was learnt through others.

The last journey of Raghavaiah commenced after the arrival of Narahari. Nageswara Rao's grief was uncontrollable as he got ready the bier. Basavaiah was stunned into inaction. Narahari was dumb-founded. A shroud of darkness covered Chandramma. No one knew how the last rites were planned and performed. No one knew how many men changed shoulders to carry the bier. Countless numbers of people, like stars in the night sky, followed the bier to the cremation ground. The entire village participated in the funeral procession.

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No one had any idea where Raghavaiah had kept the money or the keys. It was Balakotaiah, their father's brother, who came to their rescue. He alone knew details about the earnings and spending of his brother.

The three brothers shared quietly the sorrow in silence. The traditions in the family encouraged mutual talk or discussion only when it was absolutely needed. Words could not be found to share their grief. For how long would close relatives keep quiet?

That night their father's brother called them together. "All of us have to face death. All harvest goes into our belly, all wealth into the grave. My turn may come tomorrow, yours later. We are also grief-striken. What is to happen has happened. Let us search for the keys and take out the property papers. Let us verify how much property is distributed among you and how much has been lost in the law-suit. Get up," said Balakotiah. On hearing these words, Basavaiah got up impatiently and went out and sat in the verandah. Narahari looked at his eldest brother. Nageswara Rao himself felt a false note in his uncle's words. His ego provoked him. Can't we manage our affairs? My brothers are educated, he thought. His father's death made him feel a distance from his uncle. He felt it was their family matter. Unconsciously he felt he was head of the family. He removed the upper cloth from his shoulder with a flourish. "We can manage our family affairs ourselves. There is no need for others to look into our property matters. It is enough if the remaining rituals are completed properly," said Nageswara Rao curtly.

His two brothers remained silent. Their uncle helped in completing the rituals in a stand-offish manner. "As a senior to you in age, I thought I could give you some advice. Perhaps I was wrong, " he said in a pained tone and left the place. Though Nageswara Rao blurted out what he felt, the three brothers fell into confusion after everyone left.

To their knowledge, they had fifty acres of land, ten acres of mango and palmyrah grove and agricultural operations connected with these lands. Handing over the income to his father out of the agricultural operations and taking money for investment was what all Nageswara Rao did. Nothing else. Education, ideals and the work in the press were the only avocations known to Basavaiah. Narahari had not completed his studies. He used to sit by his father and listen to court declarations in general. He did not take interest in property matters. The three brothers reclined on three rope cots in the verandah that night with blank minds. They couldn't sleep. "What shall we do, brother?" asked Narahari. "Can't we manage to live?" asked Basavaiah. "There will be

no problem till I am active," replied Nageswara Rao. The man who knows the hard nature of difficulties is not afraid of defeat and loss.

For the first time the day dawned heavily transferring responsibility to the next generation. At midnight Chandramma shifted her cot into the midst of her three sons. She saw her husband in her three sons and slept off with that satisfaction.

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The house had a long and wide central hall with a huge kitchen at one end and big grain storage rooms at the other end. On either side two long verandahs. There were coconut trees all round, ten buffalos in the backyard and some cows. The backyard was noisy with the shouts of the workers. The smell of boiling milk and the sounds of the churning butter always attracted one's attention. The front yard was washed by cow-dung water and was decorated with patterns drawn by limestone powder. Dried chillies and all other items needed for daily consumption were spread out for drying in the open front yard. Garlic clusters were hung from the roof. The atics were full of brass vessels of all sizes and shapes. This house was presided by Mukundaiah and Lakshmamma, the father and mother of Raghavaiah. Chandramma set foot into this house when she was hardly able to manage the pallu of her half saree, twisting round her waist her long plait. Everyone, old and young in the house envied her beauty. Her mother-in-law treated her with care and affection. Her husband felt proud of her who, he said, resembled the goddess of wealth and prosperity, 'Lakshmi Devi'. Chandrammma remembered the leadership of her husband who led the Freedom Movement, how she, along with other women, had taken off and given away all her ornaments and jewels she wore for the freedom struggle, the whirling of charakas when she spun the khadi yarn with others, the blankets and khadi dhotis she wove on the charkha... all these memories flashed before her like a dream, disturbing her composure. Yet she did not lose her grit. Her inner voice told her that her hefty and handsome sons would support her with ease and would retain her glory in the

family. The assurance gave her stability to her mind. Though she lost the authority to use pasupu* and kumkuma**, though she had to do away with the rustling bangles, though her long plait got twisted into a smooth flowing knot, though the saree with pleated folds gave place to a plain saree, her eyes did not lose the luster emboldened by her courage.

She did not imagine that this luster would stand as beacon light to her sons in the future. As the human civilization developed culturally, security in old age, accumulation of wealth and protection of property, growing affections and children, these became the main objectives of life. Culture is what one generation learns from another generation. All animals have the talent to learn. It is only man who has the ability to teach!

The secret which binds the joint family system was taught by Raghavaiah silently to his sons. The strength needed to continue the family cultural traditions had already been furnished. Chandramma who was the bulwork of strength to him was trained to give his sons also the same strength. Hence the joint family bond which had strong foundations in the culture of that family was ready to takeoff smoothly.

Raghavaiah's properties and the details of his property lost by him in the law suit were hotly discussed on the village. The village pial was busy with these discussions. The women folk also felt sorry for the widowhood of Chandramma and the glory she lost in her husband's death.

Raghavaiah's generation sought typically the express need for male progeny in a family. It also believed that agriculture alone was the profession that kept the families going economically strong. Male children were considered necessary not only to support the family but

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** Turmeric powder.*

*** A crimson powder prepared with turmeric, alum etc. which married and unmarried women use on their foreheads. Their use is prohibited to women whose husbands are dead.*

to give salvation to the ancestors also in the other world. The culture of the generation believed in the dictum ' the children that are born and the money that is saved are a necessity ' as a wise adage. So people envied Chandramma's family of three sons and three generations and a house full of children and relatives. Some commented out of jealousy that although Chandramma lost her husband and some property, nothing was lost by her in reality.

At the end of the rituals connected with the obsequies it was realized that possessing children was just not everything but practical solutions for the sound establishment were also needed. After all the relatives left, the actual work of taking stock of the situation commenced.

The keys of Raghavaiah's huge wooden money chest were not found anywhere. The sons realized that even their mother was not aware where they were kept. They had to break open the locks. The children, daughters-in-law and Manikyamma who were at the back verandah heard the noise. "What is that noise, mother?" asked Jayalakshmi's second son. She quickly shut his mouth saying, "it's cold. Lie down quietly. You have to go to school tomorrow early in the morning."

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The three brothers examined the papers. With the other clues available they came to the conclusion that they had only six acres of gravel fields, two acres of dry land, ten mango trees, the palmyrah grove and ten buffalos left as their share. And a debt of ten thousand rupees!

That was the time when a bag of paddy was sold at two and a half rupees. After distributing grain to the labourers, dhobis, barbers, the carpenters who supplied agricultural instruments and the homeo doctor and after storing enough grain for the family for the entire year, the rest of the grain was weighed, sold and the amount kept away to be ploughed back for ensuing agricultural operations. The institution of economy was such that any extravagance would not procure a loan for investment. A debt of ten thousand rupees was so huge an amount that the selling

of houses and lands also would not fetch the money needed to clear the debt.

The brothers and the mother kept this fact strictly to themselves. Though the family experienced untold agony they put up an outward show of calm. The daughters-in-law did not know why the old lady and their husbands were not eating food. They dared not ask the reason. ey too stopped eating. For some days the ovens were lighted and od was cooked but it was committed to water-troughs of the cattle. he sons and their mother wondered whether they would be forced to ll faggots in place of flowers' as the saying went.

Narahari was sitting cross-legged on the floor and was shaving. How long will I stay at home? I'll take up my job again. I'll get a onthly salary" said Basavaiah to his brother one day. Narahari did not reply. Nageswara Rao had filled the cart with manure and was about to go to the field. "Won't you take up the household responsibilities atleast after father's death? Won't you attend to the agricultural operations? Don't you change your ways?" asked Nageswara Rao putting on his creeking chappals.

"Won't I get money if I take up a job? Do you think that my salary can't be used for the family?" replied Basavaiah quietly. After a pause he said," You can take care of the little land we have. Where is the need for us both to take care of it?"

"Do as you like! You'll never listen to others," said Nageswara Rao annoyed as he climbed the cart. He lashed at the bullocks hard in anger.

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"It's time for lunch to be taken to brother" said Narahari.

"Yes. Jayalakshmi has got it ready. Hasn't that fellow Ramudu come yet? He knows only his hunger. How can he understand the hunger of others?" Chandramma cursed the servant boy as it was getting late for her son to eat his meal.

"I'll take it," said Narahari and fastened the container to the cycle. Chandramma's third grandson wanted to go with Narahari on the cycle. "Why does this fellow want to go to the field instead of going to school?" said Chandramma and pulled him away. Jayalakshmi gave him a few blows. Sudarshana took him and gave him eats to pacify the boy.

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Narahari sat on the field bund with the vessel containing his brother's lunch. Nageswara Rao saw his brother, stopped ploughing and went up to him.

"They want to demarcate their field with a bund. They sent word to us to do so on our side" said Nageswara Rao to his brother. His voice trembled as he said the words.

"What shall we do?" asked Narahari.

"What's there to be done? Let us cultivate the sandy fields and also the dry land and clear the debt. The palmyrah grove, the coconut and mango trees are our assets" replied Nageswara Rao with a brave face. He did not want his brother to feel shaken.

"If we do so, by the time we clear the principal and the interest, we would have grown old. Our children will also be in debts," said Narahari receiving a morsel of food offered by his brother.

"What else shall we do now? We can do nothing else," replied Nageswara Rao who knew only one way of earning - through agriculture - since his childhood.

"Let's do business!" said Narahari.

"Don't say it! It is done by banyas! We are not adepts in it! We'll go bankrupt! By the way, where is the money to start business?"

"Let us borrow."

"Have you gone crazy after father's death? Have you lost your courage? There is no tradition of borrowing in our family. It is we who

measured out grain for others in the village! Have you forgotten the past?" said Nageswara Rao a little angrily.

"There is no point in boasting that our ancestors wallowed in wealth, annaiah! The produce we get from our limited cultivation is just sufficient to run our house. Our family is not small. We have to satisfy the in-laws of our three sisters also. We have to educate four boys. How can we pay back the debt?" asked Narahari. Nageswara Rao thought it over for a while.

"Do you mean that our problems will be solved by doing business?"

"In a way. That is, if we make profits."

"Look here! You have been educated in Madras and Pune. You have seen the world. Why should I set aside your suggestions? Let's do so! Let's go to Chinnanna* in the evening and find out whether he can extend any help."

Nageswara Rao could say only 'help' but could not utter the word loan'. His ego did not allow it.

"To chinanna?" hesitated Narahari. He remembered how his uncle was put to shame by Nageswara Rao telling him that they had the ability to look after their affairs themselves.

"Bonds grow by comings and goings. Giving and taking encourages business. Let us not talk of relationship with him. Let us mean business. We will ask him help by executing a bond as he does in the case of others." Nageswara Rao tried to convince Narahari.

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"Mother! You know the details of the property we now own. You also know our present condition. I feel that we should seek help from someone. I want to do some business. Tell me, whom we could we approach for help?" asked Narahari as he chewed the boiled chana his mother gave him.

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* *Father's younger brother*

"My dear boy, who do I know? Where there is water, there are frogs. When there is money, there are relatives. Who will help us in our present situation? All people received help from us. We have lost that glory now, dear boy" said his mother with a tremour in her voice. She could not reconcile to the manner their father left his sons in such a quandary. She was pained at her sons who were losing courage. Her eyes moistened. "We aren't thinking of tomorrow. Not of yesterday. Of course father is gone. But we three sons are alive" said Nageswara Rao with a view to give her a sense of assurance. He did not want his mother to be in tears.

"Mother! Annaiah says that we should approach chinnanna seeking his help," said Narahari.

"He won't help without your executing a bond," she said. It was infra-dig for her to take help from others on a bond!

"Who will give money without signing papers? Then, do you know anyone else whom we could approach?"

"Everyone depended on your father! What can they give? Their help is only of moral nature," said Chandramma thinking of her own people. Her very words expressed consent to go to their uncle!

Both the brothers asked their wives to get hot water ready for bath. The ladies could detect that their husband's eyes were moist. They understood that mother and sons discussed some important matter. They understood that the situation in the house was not as good as it was before. Yet they remained silent and did not discuss before their husbands. They conversed with their eyes among themselves!

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'God resides in gold.....' goes the proverb.

Nageswara Rao never stepped into anyone's house seeking help for any of his wants. He had two educated brothers. They had the ability to crush mountains into powder. 'it is the mischief of time that makes

me seek help' thought Nageswara Rao as he crossed the threshold of their uncle's house with his brother.

He knew the mental makeup of Narahari. Though educated, though close to father, he could not muster courage. He did not imbibe his father's firmness also. If he revealed his thoughts his brother might wilt, his intelligence would be of no avail. He observed his brother wavering to step in.

"Get in! This is also our house! You have been coming here since your boyhood. Why do you feel that you are a stranger here?" Nageswara Rao spoke encouragingly to Narahari.

Balakotaiah had just then sat on the chair. He had taken his bath and was dressed in a white dhoti and covered himself with an upper cloth. He was reading some papers in lantern light. He looked up at the noise at the door. He signalled the brothers to go in and started reading the papers. Perhaps he had not forgotten the snub he had received from Nageswara Rao.

As the brothers walked in a dignified manner, the elder one in dhoti and lalchi, the younger one in pants and shirt, Balakotaiah thought that though they lost wealth, they did not lose dignity and that was the way with sons. Balakotaiah had no sons. He had a daughter. Yet he maintained a high profile.

The older generation believed in assumed dignity as a mask and a mark of authority.

Balakotaiah's wife walked to the doorstep shading her eyes. "Is it Nageswara Rao and Narahari? Come in.... come ! why do walk like snails?" she invited them. She called her daughter telling her who they were and offered them the tape cot and spread a blanket on it for them to sit.

Bujjamma, her daughter, ran out holding the pleats of her skirt swirling the ends of her long plait. She held them both with her hands and sat on the cot between them.

"Why did you come to our house after such a long time, annaiah? How is peddamma? Why did she not come?" she shot questions in quick succession at Narahari. "How could peddamma come now? God took away her husband with envy," said Bujjamma's mother. Her eyes grew moist.

The two co-sisters were great friends. Chandramma loved Bujjamma dearly. The brothers kept silent for a while. Nageswara Rao sat adjusting his upper cloth and looked at Narahari.

Balakotaiah's mother brought eats in a brass plate and kept them on the cot.

"Start off! Eat them! Why do you look blank?" asked the old lady. Though bent with age she was sturdy. She sat at the other end of the cot.

"I don't want to eat. Narahari will eat," said Nageswara Rao pushing the plate towards Narahari.

"Are you dieting or what! This is the age when you can digest stones. Eat ....eat " forced their grandmother. Nageswara Rao had no choice. He also started eating.

"How is your mother? I saw her wear skirts and blouses and grow up. Now she lost her husband before my very eyes." She could not control her tears. The eats got stuck in the throats of the brothers and they coughed.

Their aunty handed them water in brass glasses. "Allow them to eat slowly, mother! They'll talk to you later," she said. The brothers ate hesitantly. They looked downcast. There was no enthusiasm in their faces. Their grandmother thought that the brothers had grown docile after their father's death.

" 'The person not born is righteous. The person not dead is a sinner' goes the saying. Look here! All of us have to die one day or the other. If you lose your heart, how can your mother bear the grief? Be

courageous!" said their grandmother to pep up their spirits. The brothers looked at each other in response to her words of encouragement.

"Bujjammai! Take your grandmother inside," said Balakotaiah without lifting his head.

Their aunt understood her husband's words. She also followed the two.

There was silence for a while again.

"Have all the relatives left?" asked Balakotaiah without lifting his head.

"Humm... " replied Nageswara Rao.

"Why did not Basavaiah come along with you here?

"He hadn't returned home when we started. Perhaps he is back home now," replied Nageswara Rao dryly.

Balakoraiah guessed that the brothers had come to seek help. He expected them to broach the topic themselves first. The brothers waited for their uncle to talk of property matters so that they could discuss the problem. Some time was spent in mutual expectation that the other would speak.

After a while Nageswara Rao opened the topic bluntly. There was no need to hide the pot when buttermilk was needed.

"Uncle! You know everything. We are hard pressed for money. Narahari says that agriculture alone will not help us to overcome our problems," said Nageswara Rao and stopped abruptly.

"They are your family problems. What need is there for you to tell me?" their uncle's anger for being snubbed earlier was evident.

"Even if places change or words are exchanged, relationships remain unchanged. Whether we fall out or support each other we are one always," said Nageswara Rao looking at Narahari. Narahari nodded his head in appreciation of his brother's attempts to pacify their uncle.

"We came to you seeking your advice as the elder member of our family. If you don't like our coming, tell us. We'll leave," said Nageswara Rao. Balakotaiah liked Nageswara Rao's habit of talking without mincing words and cornering people with his words.

"Okay. What's your idea in coming to me?" asked Balakotaiah equally directly.

"Narahari wants to start business," Nageswara Rao.

"What business?" asked their uncle turning to Narahari.

"We have not yet decided what it should be. I told annaiah we need money. Brother suggested that we should meet you," replied Narahari transferring the responsibility to his elder brother.

"You don't tell me what business you want to do. Okay. Will you atleast tell me how much you need?" asked Balakotaiah surprised at their strategy of secrecy.

"Not much. Only five thousand rupees," answered Nageswara Rao frankly.

"What do you mean! Do you realize how much it is?" said their uncle who did not expect them to ask for such a huge amount.

"We'll execute a bond," said Nageswara Rao in a voice that spoke of their assured ability to repay the amount. The discussion took place between these two men. Narahari was a silent spectator.

"It's alright. Come in," said uncle and walked towards the iron chest in the room.

"Give it to my brother," said Nageswara Rao and walked out to the cot where his grandmother was relaxing. He sat on the cot and started gossiping with the old lady.

After a while his brother came out with a promissory note for signature. He signed his name at the appropriate place and gave it back to his brother. After sometime his brother came out with a bag in his hand.

"We'll lunch with you another time grandma. Mother will be waiting for us," Nageswara Rao told the old woman and followed his brother out.

"Be careful," cautioned their uncle.

"Okay. Okay," they said and went home.

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Chandramma had by then paced about in the verandah nearly fifty times. She could not walk anymore and sat down at the doorway. She saw in that dim light two hefty persons walking towards her house. She recognised them as her sons and met them halfway and came in with them into the house.

Narahari handed over the bag to his brother and went into the backyard to wash his feet. Nageswara Rao gave the bag to his mother, washed his feet, took back the bag and put it in the iron trunk. He locked the trunk with the new lock he had brought with him.

They all slept off after their night meal except Chandramma. She sat looking alternately at her husband's photograph and the trunk. Now she did not remember her past glory. She was anxious how the future would take shape. She felt heavy in her heart. She felt humiliated as people said that her family had gone bankrupt.

Next day a few changes took place in the household. Eight servants were removed from service. Only two were retained, one for the fields and the other for the cattle. There was no need to tell the daughters-in-law that they had to look after all the work at home. Eight buffalos were sold and only two were kept for their daily needs. Jayalakshmi was all tears when the cow she had brought as a presentation from her family was about to be sold.

Chandramma observed her daughter-in-law. " Why do you sell it?" She asked and the cow was retained with them.

The two younger daughters-in-law were not good at sweeping the open yard at the doorways. It was Jayalakshmi who swept, sprinkled cowdung water along the wide spaces in front of the doors and drew the patterns with limestone powder everyday, tucking up the pallu of her saree. Cooking and washing the dishes were done by the other two daughters-in-law.

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Early next morning the third daughter-in-law started vomiting. Chandramma went to her aid. Jayalakshmi closed her sister's ears. The second daughter-in-law brought ginger essence. "God knows when these vomitings would stop for Sulochana! Shall we send for achary, the doctor?" she asked .

"Don't say it aloud foolishly. Men are worried with their problems. Do you send for the achary for women's prenatal vomits? They will laugh at you and abuse you," said Jayalakshmi.

"But the vomitings are not getting controlled! I never experienced them so severly!" said the second co-sister not being able to bear Sulochana's suffering. "Did I ever know them myself? I did not know I was pregnant till my tummy showed up! I did not know that I was delivered of my baby till the baby cried after birth! Everything went off silently!" said Jayalakshmi helping Sulochana with ginger juice.

'It would be helpful if atleast Manikyam aunty would suggest some medicine' the second co-sister thought.

"Don't worry. A buxom baby would be born when the labour is hard, they say. Perhaps wealthy Raghavaiah would be born to Sulochana the more she vomits," mumbled Manikayamma without removing her blanket.

"How many months have gone by?" asked Chandramma quietly.

"She says it is the fourth month. She didn't tell anyone imagining that it may happen every two or three months. Mother found her

vomiting for four days, got angry and confronted her. She admitted then that it was the fourth month," said Jayalakshmi and left with the broom to sweep the front yard.

'My husband was worried that Narahari had no children though seven years passed after his marriage. If he had been alive how happy he would have felt' thought Chandramma. She was confident that he would be born as Narahari's son.

'It'll be a baby boy. The eldest and the second had sons. It was so on her side as well as the other side,' said Chandramma to herself looking at the dewdrops falling from the roof.

*****

To play successfully a part in society, intelligence, beauty or handsomeness or physical strength are required. Ability and skill are also needed. Sometimes the society itself imparts status to a family without the need for individual talents. The status one enjoys in a family by birth is status that has been handed down to their heirs. There is no need for individual recognition for this kind of status. It is enough If one has the stamp of the brand name of a family!

In the case of Narahari and Nageswara Rao, they had anyway acquired the status form their family. To add to this they also enjoyed the respect which society had attributed to them. Just as tamarind does not lose its sourness even if the tree is dead, in a similar manner though the brothers lost their wealth they did not lose their strength of mind and fortitude.

As Narahari boarded the bus for Hyderabad, Nageswara Rao did not ask him to let him know by letter what business he wanted to start there. 'He is going to start business. He will do it. That's all. He wouldn't go without having an idea. Our Narahari is an intelligent boy' thought Nageswara Rao. This is what is called status 'thrust' on a person. It is status that is a sure shot. As the matter of fact, Narahari himself did not know which business to start. He wanted to go to the city with money.

He thought he could decide later. There was no one in the village more educated than him. There were none who could give him the right advice.

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Nageswara Rao went to the house of his cousins direct from the bus station. He did not sit on the rope cot that was offered to him. His father died because they won the law-suit. He knew it. Now they were demanding the construction of a new bund separating the fields. He went there to discuss that point. "You there, annaiah! Your father wants to construct a bund as he won the case. Do you want to cultivate the land?" asked Nageswara Rao point blank. His cousins were not cultivating the land. They gave the land on lease. Their father was bed-ridden. The sons were lazy. They had plenty of money! What they got from the lease was more than sufficient for them to live. So they lived happily without any exertion.

"No! Not at all. My sister-in-law's uncle wants to cultivate the land on lease," said Nageswara Rao's cousin.

"If that is so I will execute the agreement to cultivate that land myself. Don't construct the bund. Even without the bund your part will be yours. You can visit your land anytime you want. I'll deposit the grain from your land at your doorstep. I'll give a bag more than what your people offer you. Come to me in the evening and tell me what your father says in this matter," said Nageswara Rao and left the place without waiting for a reply.

Nageswara Rao did not like the idea of talking to the old man. So he told the son. If the old man did not agree to his proposal, the bund had to be raised. It will be a humiliation for him if the bund was constructed. Even if the bund did not come up, the money for investing will not be sufficient. Whatever process was followed, it was like going from the frying pan into the fire. Nageswara Rao set aside the investment in preference to prestige and status.

In those days, selling land or losing a law-suit on borrowings resulting in raising a demarcating bund was a humiliating experience to the loser family. Such a development was considered a result of the ineffectiveness and inefficiency of the sons of the family. Nageswara Rao felt that in their family they were three grown up brothers and four boys making seven male members. If still a bund had to come up in their land, it was suicidal.

It was late in the evening. The third daughter-in-law was cleaning the lanterns. Jayalakshmi was winnowing the pounded rice to be cooked for the night meal. The second daughter-in-law was helping her. In former days, Subbaravamma used to pound the paddy into rice. Now they stopped calling her. The three young women attended to the pounding of paddy for cooking. There were no mills in those days. The women folk used to pound paddy into rice sufficient for three or four days and stored it in a tin box. They attended to this work whenever they had leisure at their disposal. When their father-in-law was alive, the young ladies took great care that their bangles did not jingle when they were working. Now they were a little relaxed. That evening they were removing earthen sods from rice and were gossiping. Sundararajamma turned up.

"Jayalakshmi! Did Nageswara Rao tell them not to construct the bund?" she asked.

"I don't know! Ask my mother-in-law. What do we know about family affairs!" she said signaling her sisters not to say anything.

"Okay. I'll ask her. Chandra! Chandra!" she went into the front verandah calling.

Jayalakshmi's son who was leaning on his mother's shoulders abruptly shouted, "All India Radio!"

"What do you mean by that? Explain it for us to understand you," said Jayalakshmi angrily.

"Her name is All India Radio," he said pointing his fingers towards Sundararajamma. Everyone kept silent. "What ! didn't you understand? We hear news on the radio. Similarly she too broadcasts news. Father and grandma are sitting in the front verandah. This radio went to them. Tomorrow by now the entire village should have got the news!" he explained swinging on the shoulders of his mother.

"You! You! Wait. I'll teach you a lesson. You shouldn't talk like that about elders!" Jayalakshmi cautioned him as he ran away.

Chandramma, Nageswara Rao and Basavaiah were talking among themselves there. Sundararajamma hid herself behind the wall thinking that they would stop talking if they saw her.

"Let's take care of our property ourselves. Why should we ask them or take money on loan? Power and prestige shouldn't be given to a higher place than us," Basavaiah told them.

"You go on your job in the morning and return in the night. Narahari has gone to Hyderabad. It is I who move about in the village. I can't walk holding my head high. I'll solve my problems in my way. There is no question of constructing a bund in the field, " replied Nageswara Rao with definiteness in his voice.

"If the old man doesn't agree some problems may arise. Why do you act on prestige?" said Basavaiah revealing his mind.

"Let the problems arise! Let's face them. Let heads roll. No courts and no litigation! We'll know each other's strengths and the property each owns," replied Nageswara Rao emotionally.

Basvaiah felt that his brother's anger and determination were out of tune. Their cousins had won the case in the court. He did not understand how it affected their prestige. He felt that there was no point in trying to convince his brother that prestige and honour were not involved in the present instance. So he got up, took a book, raised the wick in the lantern and began to read. Basavaiah was not interested

in quarrels and prestige. He decided that they should hit up an agreement if the bund question created an unpleasant situation.

Sundararajamma went out quickly on observing Basavaiah getting up. In the meanwhile Yerrodu, their cousin, came there. "Anniah! My father agreed to your proposal. He wants you to remember the extra bag offered by you for the cultivation on lease," he said and went away. After receiving this information, Nageswara Rao ate his meal. That was how he was made. 'They can't cultivate the land. He had offered an extra bag. What else would be their decision!' That was Nageswara Rao's confidence. It was that confidence which made him speak emotionally before his brother. He was always confident that his thinking would never go wrong. He was also proud that his brother would never say 'no' to him. So he took the decision himself without consulting them. Now he undertook the cultivation of all the fifty acres. He dismissed the servants and handled the plough himself. He held the plough firmly and pressed down his foot on it in the furrow and ploughed the field. He cut openings in the canal bunds with the spade. He stamped his feet into the slushy soil and made the seed beds. He began to work along with the labourers without observing any distinction between master and servant. Basavaiah was getting information from his mother about the happenings in the village and was attending to his job. His elder brother did not seek his help in the agricultural operations. Basavaiah was sure that managing fifty acres was easy for his brother who had the skill and knowledge of cultivating land. So he bought provisions needed to run the family from his salary. The ' joint' family was running smoothly as usual. Chandramma had by now reconciled herself to the new set-up and remained calm. Now and then she recollected old days and her husband. Whenever relatives visited her, the talk centered around her husband. Yet she did not feel depressed and lost. Though much of the property was lost she collected courage from her grown-up sons.

The entire village was surprised at the way the family was being run after Raghavaiah's death. Though the head of the family died, though

they lost the court case, the field was not divided. The debt amounts were being cleared regularly. Sowing of crops did not stop for want of money. How was all this possible! The secrets of their family remained as secrets and no one spoke of them in the village. 'Tiger cubs are tiger cubs' thought the villagers.

Basavaiah was going home late one evening. An old man challengingly asked, "Who is walking past this way unmindful of people sitting here?"

"Who else! He is Raghavaiah's second son. He is proud of his education. He is haughty because he is the only person doing a job," said the boyhood friend of Basavaiah who was leading the life of a vagabond. He had no education and was a failure as an agriculturist. He vented his spleen against Basavaiah with words. The people sitting on the pial turned towards Basavaiah. Now the drama started. "Basavaiah! Come here once!" said the old man.

Basavaiah stopped pedaling his bike. "Yes. Grand old man. What is it you want?"

"Your dad and I were good friends. He used to talk to me affectionately. By the by, are you not Raghavaiah's son? I am not able to recognise you in this darkness."

"Of course. I am his second son." He replied and was about to pedal off. The old man held him by hand and made him sit.

"Sit down! Your work and your home always! Don't you have interest in anything else? Don't you need the company of people," he asked passing his hand on Basavaiah's back.

"That fellow talks only with books," said one of his cousins who envied Basavaiah.

"That's okay! How are you running the family? Your father used to manage everything when he was alive. You were all children!" said a voice. The ridicule in the voice was evident.

"Don't you know there is no dearth for those who can lend money? They will borrow money and manage quietly," said another voice equally envious. He was sure that Nageswara Rao had borrowed money somewhere.

"Look here! The street pial should be used to solve problems, but not create problems. If my elder brother, myself or my younger brother come to you with a problem, talk to us then. Stopping me and talking to me in this manner is not an act of culture. We can decide how we should live," said Basavaiah and walked towards his bike.

"Enough! Enough! When wealth is lost and when adversity stares into one's face people lose their senses. This fellow is haughty. His eccentricity also has increased! He can't walk on the ground because he is educated!" another boyhood friend emptied out his venom.

"Humility comes of education. Because he is educated, he left calmly. If it had been his brother Nageswara Rao, he would have lifted the plough-share and broken your heads," said an elderly man.

"Why bother about what happens in the village? Take interest in your own lives," advised another elderly person shutting the mouths of youngsters. Though Basavaiah could hear the words of ridicule, he remained calm.

"Fine! One man looks after agriculture! Another does a job! The third runs a business. If all the three follow three different avocations let us see how that joint family runs the show," said another person spitefully. This person's father used to talk of the three brothers as a model to be followed by everyone. Naturally he wanted the downfall of Raghavaiah's sons out of envy.

"Better keep quiet. 'You neither can work or sing, come to me, I'll trim the hair on your head,' said the barber, it seems to a good for-nothing fellow like you. Your father is bed-ridden and moaning. Instead of calling the Achary, you are sitting here idly and making dirty comments shamelessly! You have time to talk about the village gossip

but no time to attend to your sick father," said the old man. He wanted to send him away from there.

"Hey you old man! Why are shouting emotionally? If we abuse them why do you feel bad? Why are you showing up your anger?" said a person in the crowd.

"Though they have lost much, they are living in a respectable manner. Whereas you fellows who are worth nothing are shamelessly making an empty boast! Any respectable man would talk like me about you. The leaf that has been served fully does not move. The one that has nothing in it flies about. So learn to walk with your eyes on the ground. You will lose your teeth if you tumble forward!" advised the old man in a severe tone. The men left the pial and went their way one by one.

'A huge cucumber gets cut by the knife easily'. However great a man is, he is only a puppet in the hands of time. Time never plays into the hands of man. It is man who is a puppet in the hands of time. All-powerful time moves unseen' thought the old man and left the place.

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It being a village, whatever happened in a corner gets announced by the cock in no time. By dusk Sundararajamma revealed to Chandramma that the idle young men at the pial spoke jeeringly at Basavaiah.

"Sundararajamma. Don't you know that ash is the medicine for the donkey's wound? Those jeers boomerang on them. But don't let the eldest fellow know about it. He is of an explosive nature like the green gram seed on a frying pan," said Chandramma. Her tone was one of request. She also detained Sundararajamma till it was dark by engaging her in conversation and gave her a large quantity of the sweets cooked for the festival. But her eldest son's children, Surya Deva, Harishchandra and Dharmendra who had returned from the school

and were reading their books, heard Sundararajamma's words. They signalled messages with their eyes among themselves. They told their mother that there was a puppet show in the library and that they wanted to witness it. Mohan, Basavaiah's son also followed them.

They reached the pial where the people were sitting and gossiping. Surya Deva pulled his knickers up and addressed the people on the pial. "Who among you spoke ridiculing my chinnanna yesterday?" he demanded to know.

"It's I. What will you do?"

"Get off the pial. That is the pial where my grandfather used to sit and settle disputes. It is not for the riff-raff like you."

"Ah! Look at this fellow who talks of his grandfather. You lost all your property and will be begging on the streets soon," jeered another person.

Surya Deva leaped on to the pail and held the shirt collar of the man who jeered.

"What if we lost? You fool of an ass" said Harishchandra and gave him a blow with his fist.

"Let's also give him blows, brother," said Mohan to his third brother.

"No! I don't like a quarrel," replied Dharmendra. Mohan rushed to the man whose collar was held by Surya Deva and gave him a blow. Harishchandra pushed the fellow down and he fell from the pial. In the meanwhile four or five people went there and separated them. Dharmendra stood aloof observing what was happening. "Why are you fighting?" someone asked. The boys were afraid to give an answer. Those who had collected there cleared off one by one. They were afraid that the elders might interfere resulting in a major quarrel. The four brothers walked home in the darkness holding each other's hands. Arundhati and Anuradha accosted them. "Pedananna came and enquired after you," they told the brothers. The boys quietly went into the backyard

and washed their feet. They went in and began to read books as if they had not gone out. Jayalakshmi shivered at what she heard. If their father came to know what his sons had done, what would come of it?

"Oh god! I'll feed you with milk on the sacred day of Nagulachavithi. Let not their father learn of the scuffle at the pial," she prayed silently to the snake god. She was unhappy that her sons took after their cousins and that the boys were not calm-going.

At this juncture, Nageswara Rao's youngest brother-in-law came there. Chandramma enquired about the welfare of them all and went in. "Great people do not come for nothing. What brings you here? Where are my sister and her children?" Nageswara Rao asked him sitting on the rope cot adjusting his upper cloth.

"Your sister is busy at home. My brother wanted me to meet you without fail. That's why I came here," he replied. Jayalakshmi brought milk in a brass tumbler and some eats. She placed them on the cot and went in.

"What's all the news?" asked Nageswara Rao who guessed that his brother-in-law had come with some specific request.

"Why should I hide the pot when I want buttermilk? I'll tell you why I came. My brother wants to know when you are going to transfer the three acres of land promised as dowry to your sister and execute the documents. He wanted me to tell you that things should not be allowed to go out of hand between brothers-in-law. He wants you to execute the bond without delay."

Basavaiah came there unnoticed just then. "Our elders say that a son-in-law is not a relative just as a castor oil plant is not a shade giving tree. It is only during difficulties a son-in-law should show his mettle. Should not your brother understand our circumstances before asking for the transfer of the land?" cut in Basavaiah.

"Basavaiah! Look here! I asked your elder brother. I didn't talk to you. Don't interfere."

"There can't be any difference between me and my brother. What respect have you shown to my elder brother? Your coming with the question now is like the coconut falling on the ailing fox," said Basavaiah angrily. Basavaiah could not bear the thought that the other party doubted their ability to pay the dowry now that their father was dead. Chandramma, who was standing behind the door, signalled to Basavaiah not to prolong the talk.

Nageswara Rao felt that the discussion was hotting up. "Basavaiah! Why do you accuse Vasudeva Rao? His brother instructed him to ask us. Anyway they are not insisting on us to transfer the land now," said Nageswara Rao trying to support Vasudeva Rao.

"No! Brother-in-law! My brother wanted me to ask you in all earnestness."

"Okay! Ask your brother to come tomorrow and get the documents signed." Basavaiah was shaking with anger.

"Please keep quiet Basavaiah. Listen to me Vausdeva Rao. I have to work hard this year to get settled in the agricultural operations. I'll execute the documents next year. I'll pay you the lease amount for those three acres, as we give to everyone else!" Nageswara Rao tried to make the matter easy.

"If that is so, my brother wants you to pay interest on the profits you make...." Vasudeva Rao revealed the main point.

Chandramma felt aghast. She was reminded of the proverb 'the son-in-law's authority should be seen in the mother-in-law's house and the bull's strength in the castor field.' If it was not greed will anyone pay interest on the profit?' wondered Chandramma.

The daughters-in-law were over-hearing the conversation from behind the door. Manikyamma could not hear clearly. "What does he say?" she asked Jayalakshmi.

"He wants interests on profits," replied Jayalakshmi.

"The son-in-law is greedy of wealth. The cow, of its calf," murmured Manikyamma.

"Please keep quiet," Jayalakshmi cautioned her. She was afraid that her mother-in-law would hear. Jayalakshmi riveted her ears to hear what her husband would reply.

Vasudeva Rao went on. "My brother wanted me to remind you of the silver ware promised by you at the time of marriage."

"You'll certainly have them. We care more for our sister. Tell your brother that I invite you all to our house for the festival," replied Nageswara Rao.

When Vasudeva Rao was about to leave, Nageswara Rao stopped him and invited him to eat lunch with him. "He demand and you yield to his demands! He is behaving as if we are debtors! Why do you talk to him mildly as though you have taken a loan?" Basavaiah asked his brother though in a soft tone.

"The point is this. We are in the wrong as we did not make over to them what we promised to give them as belonging to sister. They are afraid that we will not be able to keep our promise after father's death. They got their doubt cleared. There is nothing wrong in it. We treated them with honour," replied Nageswara Rao to passify his brother.

"I don't know all that. I didn't like your soft approach," replied Basavaiah feeling angry that his brother lowered himself in the estimation of their relatives.

"We belong to the girl's family. We have to be modest. Or else she will suffer there." He tried to convince Basavaiah.

Nageswara Rao could not sleep that night. There was no one to share his agony. His wife was an innocent woman. She had no interest in managing affairs except in doing the household work. She had lost her parents and was in low spirits. Narahari had not returned from Hyderabad. Nageswara Rao felt lonely. He looked at the verandah. He

saw four boys and three girls sleeping in a row. He was reminded of his responsibility and felt heavy at heart.

Not sharing problems, thoughts and fears with others, shouldering burdens alone silently, thinking of family affairs quietly - that was the life of the head of the family. Chandramma observed that her son Nageswara Rao who was sturdy and healthy when his father was alive had now thinned down considerably.

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Narahari wrote two or three letters. "I've been moving about and meeting people in connection with my business. Things are very encouraging. I'll tell you the details when I come there," he wrote in his latest letter. Next day his wife was taken to Chirala in a cart as she developed labour pains.

A girl child was born. Chandramma was disappointed that 'he' was not re-born. Jayalakshmi attended on Sulochana during her confinement. Nageswara Rao thought that they had now four boys and four girls in the family. He wrote to Narahari. "Sulochana has given birth to a baby girl. The child is very weak. The doctors are not confident of the child's survival. Make it convenient to come over here once."

"What is it I can do when you were all there? What is to happen will happen. It may take six months for me to go over to you. I have taken up Sitaphal fruit business on a whole-sale basis. I have to go round the state and settle the retail rates and so have very little time at my disposal. I may need some money. About ten to fifteen thousand rupees. Think of it," he wrote back.

That night Sulochana hugged her baby girl and cried that her husband did not care to visit her when she attained motherhood.

That is how the 'family' lives. The 'joint' family. It is a gathering of some people. No one belongs to anyone. All belong to everyone. Joys are for everyone. Sorrows also are for everyone. The thought 'this is not mine' does not occur.

When Jayalakshmi was with child, she went to her mother in her fifth month. Nageswara Rao saw his first son only after the boy was a year and a half old. He was not allowed to step into the house earlier than that by his aunt. He himself did not feel like going there to take a look at his son.

He took his baby boy into his arms when the little fellow approached him with faltering steps. So now he did not react adversely to Narahari's letter. Jayalakshmi and the other sister-in-law took great care of Sulochana and her baby girl. The baby picked up and survived. Another member had joined the joint family.

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"Amma! annaiah wrote that he needs another ten to fifteen thousand rupees," said Nageswara Rao to his mother one day.

"Where from can we get that much amount? We are already in difficulties. Write to him that there is no need for him to do business. The cultivation we have is enough," replied Chandramma.

"Why do you say so? He is educated. He moves among different people. He strongly feels that we cannot manage without doing business. Should we not send him money when he is working so hard?" replied Nageswara Rao. He thought that he should support his brother.

"Where can you find the money?" Chandramma had lost her nerve. After her husband's death she had lost courage.

Without selling the property, without anyone's knowledge they had to raise fifteen thousand rupees. Nageswara Rao did not know how to raise the amount. Just then Ramaiah, short, sturdy and dark, his mother's brother, walked in.

Ramaiah was afraid of Raghavaiah. So he did not frequent their house when he was alive. When his nephews took over, he started visiting their house to meet his sister and others. Earlier he used to look at his sister from a distance without talking to her.

"Welcome uncle! Welcome. You have come at the right moment," said Nageswara Rao. After he sat on the cot, Nageswara Rao explained the problem to him.

"What do you propose to do?" his uncle asked.

"Would you agree to what I propose?"

"Will you keep quiet if I don't agree? Don't I know the determination of Kotapati family?" said his uncle rolling his cigar.

"Won't you sell for us the land you gave as dowry to our mother? Sell the land as though you are selling it yourself. People will not make adverse comments on us then," suggested Nageswara Rao directly.

"Will not people comment on me then? Does honour or dishonour apply only to you?" questioned his uncle driving his point mildly.

"That is not it, Ramaiah! We fell into bad days after their father passed away. People are already wondering how we are getting on. If we sell the land we will lose face. No one will comment if that land is sold by you. People will think you did so to make some adjustment," joined Chandramma to convince her brother.

"Let it be so appa! You have grown old. Your sons have taken up the management. So now you say it is 'your fields'. You used to say 'our fields' till recently," replied Ramaiah. He did some plain speaking

"That is alright. 'Our' fields. Agreed. Sell the two acres of land offered to me by you without a fuss but do it secretly," said Chandramma to bring him round to her thinking.

"Okay! I'll send for prospective buyers. I think there is one at Gantarevu, who wants land."

After his uncle left Nageswara Rao said to his mother," If we sell those two acres we'll get ten thousand only. We need five thousand more."

"Look here my son! If you don't think otherwise, I will not be using the gold I have. I am not moving about now as before. My gold

chain and those six pairs of bangles are lying in my box. Why don't you sell them?" suggested Chandramma gently wondering whether he would get angry at her suggestion.

"No mother! Keep your ornaments. We'll sell Jayalakshmi's jewels," replied Nageswara Rao after a while.

"Don't be silly. She is young and should ware them and go about. I have anyway removed them from my person. It is as good as I lost them along with your father." After a pause she said "Anyway, what use are women's jewels when they don't help the family in times of need?" Nageswara Rao kept quiet.

Basavaiah came home just then with provisions and sundry items. He made the payments. He heard the conversation between his mother and brother. But kept quiet without asking for details. It was all clear to him. Moreover his uncle, whom he met on the way, told him everything. Nageswara Rao himself did not tell the details to him. 'What is there in this matter for my brother to say 'no' to me' thought Nageswara Rao.

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Nageswara Rao was sitting under a tree with a turban around his head.

"What do you propose to cultivate this year?" asked Bapaiah, his friend.

"Paddy, black gram, green gram and jute. What else could be cultivated?" he asked. He looked at the labourers and shouted," Why do you hit the cattle so rudely?" the cattle were dear to Nageswara Rao. He had bought them by convincing his father. He washed them, and fed them too though there were servants for that purpose.

"Why do you love the cattle so much?" asked Bapaiah.

"What difference is there between us and the cattle? We work hard and they too. We speak, eat and wear clothes. They also work like us

and eat if we feed them or starve if we don't. Okay. By the by, what do you want to cultivate this year?" asked Nageswara Rao

"I came to tell you about that! All our people want to grow tobacco, Virginia tobacco. They say the profit will be high."

"What about the food grains?"

"We will go in for food grains, of course. But what profit is there in growing them? If we cultivate paddy in eight acres, we get ten bags. We get a little more than two hundred rupees after paying the labourers. If it is tobacco in eight acres, for one barren we get two thousand rupees, they say. I want to grow tobacco in my eight acres. My father doesn't like it. But I want to go ahead."

"This sounds interesting and good. Tell me when you go in for cultivation," suggested Nageswara Rao. "I'll do so. You also go in for tobacco this time. Let's both cultivate the crop together. If we make profit, it's okay. If not, doesn't matter!"

Nageswara Rao began to think deeply over this new idea.

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Change in the field of economic policy and in production methods points at cultural revolution. Changes in production system denotes improvement not only in the thinking process of the land-lords but also in the economic policy. These changes take place without people realizing that they are taking a step in the right direction. These reforms vastly change the society in the name of cultural revolution.

Introduction of tobacco in place of paddy and other grains, jute in the Narasaraopeta area of Guntur district was a revolutionary change. Though farmers cultivated the local variety, now Virginia tobacco as the 'white man's' tobacco got imported. Good crops and good profits brought about a new awakening among farmers. The idea that agriculture meant only food grains got erased from their minds. A new business attitude got introduced in agriculture. This thinking was a

great change in all facets of life, speaking economically, in the thinking process, in social, cultural and in the aspects of family management. It was a revolutionary change.

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Nageswara Rao made enquiries about the new crop, the methods of its cultivation, the profits expected etc. and got a letter written to Narahari. "This year I want to cultivate tobacco along with paddy. You should come at once to discuss the idea."

Narahari replied that he was arriving soon in a few days.

On the day he was expected, Sulochana bathed her child using Mysore Sandalwood soap. She dressed her up in an attractive frock and powdered her face. In those days this brand of soap was the only one made by a reputed company and people wished to use it atleast once in their lifetime. The baby girl had just learnt to walk with faltering steps.

Sulochana got the plait arranged on the child's head resembling little Krishna's and left the child with her mother-in-law who was sitting in the verandah along with Nageswara Rao and went in. Jayalakshmi who went there just then took the child into her arms. "This girl has picked up after being fed by buffalo milk," she said to her husband.

"I bought that buffalo only for the child," said Nageswara Rao. He wanted to hold the child in his arms and turned his head towards the road. He saw Narahari walking towards them. His face brightened at once! Chandramma moved forward happily. Jayalakshmi went in to tell Sulochana about her husband's arrival. Basavaiah came out of the house.

"Dear boy! You have thinned considerably," said Chandramma taking the bag from his hands.

"That is a natural feeling," said Narahari and sat on the cot. Jayalakshmi handed to her mother-in-law the water glass from behind the door. Narahari drank off the water and placed the tumbler on the

ground. He saw the child in Nageswara Rao's arms and asked," Who is this child?"

"Guess who the child is!" said Nageswara Rao smiling.

"She is our younger sister's daughter," said Narahari.

"She is not. She is your child," said Chandramma looking at the face of the child and her features.

Narahari looked keenly at the child twitching his brows and was undecided. "She is your daughter... Raghavamma. We named her after your father," said Chandramma happily.

"Is she still alive?" asked Narahari. He remembered the letter in which his brother had written that the doctors were not sure about her survival. Those were the days when new born babies died soon after birth. Moreover the child was a baby girl. Hence his remark.

"What a dreadful question you ask! The child is fine and kicking," said Basavaiah angrily.

"No. Not like that. Brother wrote to me about the doctor's opinion... that the child may not survive..." Narahari tried to explain it away. In the meanwhile all the children surrounded him shouting that their uncle had come. Arundhati took Raghavi in as the child was getting naughty.

Jayalakshmi rushed into the kitchen and told the ladies excitedly, "Narahari babu did not recognise Raghavi! He thought it was his younger sister's daughter."

Narahari was three years old when Jayalakshmi got married. He was sitting in her lap at the time of her marriage and was eating the sacred rice showered on the couple. Someone took him away from her lap. As she brought him up from his childhood she called him Narahari babu. She was happy that they took care of his sick child of his and groomed her into a chubby baby.

The day passed like a festive occasion. Everyone was happy at his arrival. Special dishes were cooked along with horse-gram soup and mushroom curry. In those days breakfast was not eaten. The main meal was eaten at ten O'clock in the morning. The second main meal was in the night. If some relatives or sons-in-law came, idli, dosa and other such dishes were prepared only for them. Eats which children generally liked were prepared and put in containers on the attic. Palmyrah-nut jellies, mangoes, boiled horse-gram fries etc. were anyway available to eat throughout the day.

The children were very happy and boisterous. Everyone forgot that the head of the family was no more. The change in their behaviour was clearly seen. The three daughters-in-law spent the whole day cooking in the smoke using dried palmyrah spines.

Manikyamma went around telling everyone that her nephew Narahari had arrived. Many people visited them to meet him. The house was noisy. The children cut classes and stayed at home. The little girls wore silk skirts and moved about in the house with an air of importance. The brothers felt happy. Chandramma's eyes glowed with joy. Her daughters also came. The house was full of children and their excitement.

The daughters-in-law swept and cleaned the front of the house with cowdung water and drew patterns and designs with flour. In the evening the three sons and their wives sat on the cots gossiping. Chandramma's eyes were filled with jealous joy. Manikyamma pressed her palms to her temples till the knuckles cracked to drive away the effects of evil eyes! The brothers of the daughters-in-law also arrived. It was considered an unfriendly gesture if the relatives did not make a visit when a member of the family came after a long time from a distant place. Those were the social manners of the day.

Chandramma's legs and hands began to shake and shiver as she moved about busily. Such was her joy at her son's visit. Manikaymma moved in and out and went around all the rooms talking to everyone offering help. The daughters-in-law cooked food blowing into hollow

tubes at the fire place. The house again enjoyed the activity seen in the days when Raghavaiah was alive.

The neighbours commented that a house with sons and a forest with trees make a beautiful sight. They were happy at Chandramma's house buzzing with activity again.

Chandramma sat with her sons late in the evening after all relatives left.

"Should we grow tobacco? Is it a must?" asked Narahari.

"I feel it'd be good if we do so. For how long do we drudge with these foodgrain crops? What is it we get after all the expenditure is met? Everyone says that tobacco will be profitable," explained Nageswara Rao.

"Then I'll take Harishchandra along with me to select the best variety."

"Okay! The teacher told me that Suryadeva was not upto the mark in studies. A male member has to handle the plough. If we go in for tobacco he will be of help to me as he is a boy. Suryadeva will help me in cultivation," said Nageswara Rao and turned to the boy.

"Why are you not studying well?" Narahari asked the boy.

"I don't want to study. I'll work in the fields," mumbled Suryadeva.

"One can attend to the lands throughout one's life. There is no age restriction for it. But education has age limits. You must go to school at the school-going age. There are many people to work in the fields," Narahari cautioned Suryadeva mildly. The boy had grown tall and reached Narahari's shoulders.

"I don't want to study."

"'While ambition wants to rule over kingdoms, fate forces man to carry firewood.' That is the saying. Why do you want to work when we want you to study?" Basavaiah asked impatiently.

"We can admonish our boy though he has grown as tall as we are. We can't force him to do our bidding. If you want to study, stay here. If not, come away with me. I want some help there," said Narahari. He thought he could put Suryadeva to studies in Hyderabad. Nageswara Rao dusted the rope cot and sat on it as though Suryadeva's problem was not his concern. Basavaiah's expression on his face clearly revealed that he did not like Suryadeva giving up studies.

"Food is posing a problem to me. I am thinking of taking Sulochana along with me," said Narahari quietly.

Nageswara Rao turned towards him startled. Chandramma was disturbed. No daughter-in-law in that family had ever set up a hearth outside the house in any generation.

"If you are expecting difficulties there, give up your business. Come away. Let us all live together here." Nageswara Rao spoke his mind.

"That's not it. How can I come away having started business there? What does it matter where we live? We are all one. I can't eat the hotel food. It does not suit me," said Narahari softly.

"Won't people comment that after their father's death each son went his way? All of us should live together at one place. it can't be otherwise," said Nageswara Rao firmly. "Mother! Serve us food. I am hungry," added Nageswara Rao indirectly telling his brother to drop the topic. Chandramma's face lost colour as if she had heard something that should not be heard. While eating food the brothers did not speak to each other. The two younger brothers kept quiet as their elder brother was angry.

In that culture, the members of the family, particularly the sons, were considered the life-giving elements of the body. The other members of the family were like the limbs of the body. That was the relationship between them. The entire family suffered even if a 'limb' distanced itself. That was the cultural bond in those days. The three brothers were the three heads. The wives and the children constituted the body. That was how the family bonds were established.

The daughters-in-law had not yet heard of the proposal of Narahari. No one knew when the husbands would talk to their wives. Chandramma herself never spoke to her husband in the presence of her children. So long as their father-in-law was alive, either Jayalakshmi or the other two co-sisters never faced their husbands during the day. Even if she was not well, it was Chandramma who served meal to all the male members. If it could not be helped because of severe illness, Mnikyamma took on that duty. The women ate together after the children had eaten.

After Raghavaiah's death, Jayalakshmi was meeting her husband now and then during the day. That too only to give him something or the other. She was still managing within the control of her mother-in-law. Just as she managed with her mother-in-law, the other two daughters-in-law followed suit with Jayalakshmi.

After nightfall sometime late in the night, the sisters-in-law would go to where their husbands were sleeping with drinking water in containers and tumblers. They would carry blankets also with them. If someone was already sleeping there, they would go where Manikyamma or the children were sleeping. The jingling sound of their bangles should not be heard, be it night, be it day! Even if they managed to sleep with their husbands they should wake up before the cock crew. That was the relationship between husbands and wives in those days!

That was why the women did not know what was happening in the house. If they heard any news it was through Chandramma. She herself did not reveal things in a hurry to them. She managed to win the appreciation of her three daughters-in-law and her sisters-in-law with her dignified silence.

That night Basavaiah and Narahari slept on the cots on either side of Nageswara Rao. Chandramma slept in the verandah.

Narahari woke his brother up early in the morning.

"Brother! Is it proper for you to say that I should give up the business and come away if I feel inconvenient to eat hotel food?"

"That is not the point. What will the people think in the village if you take your wife with you? They are eagerly waiting to see us break-up so that they could ride over us. If you take her away now, people will begin to make taunting remarks. It will be like rubbing salt over a raw wound. Heed my words. Let us eat what we have. If it is not enough, let us starve." Nageswara Rao's inner voice was not for accepting Narahari's plan.

"Should food be cooked by burning down the village? Why should we care for the villagers and their opinions? In the circumstances in which we are placed, we can stand up only when each one of us take up different professions. If all of us depend only on agriculture, the earnings will not grow but we will be under heavy expenditure. We have four grown-up boys. When will we prosper if all of us think only of agriculture without finding out other avenues? We have not cleared so far the arrears due from us to our sisters. Moreover, there are four girls in the family. Think it over calmly. Do we hang ourselves for the sake of the society? If you prevent Sulochana from following me I will be put to a lot of difficulty for my food. Anyway, I'll take her only of you agree to it. It depends on you," said Narahari.

Narahari looked at Basavaiah to find out whether he was listening to him though he had turned away. Basavaiah did not disturb or question him in the middle of his talk to Nageswara Rao. Silence was acceptance.

Nageswara Rao did not say anything. Chandramma let go a dry cough to signify that she was awake!

Nageswara Rao got up and took up the yoke to start his work. Basavaiah raised the wick in the lantern. "Wake up boys! It is day-break, start reading your books." He goaded them to study.

The boys got up and rolled their beds. They brought their lanterns and books. Arundhati also joined them. In the meanwhile the children of the neighbouring houses gathered there. Basaviah taught them lessons everyday. Chandramma could not tolerate the noise. She lifted up her

cot and put it by the wall and went into the backyard to see what her daughters-in-law were doing.

Narahari sat on his cot and observed all his people as though he was witnessing a play. Could he convince his people and carry out his wish? What should he do if they did not agree to his proposal? He fell a-thinking.

*****

Nageswara Rao returned early that evening. The children were playing different games. The children of the neighbouring houses also joined them. Raghavi was running hither and thither.

"Pedananna! Pedananna! Won't you twist the rope for me? We will play the rope game," Arundhati ran behind Nageswara Rao.

"Can I say 'no' to you? Will you keep quiet even if I say no? I'll do it for you," he said wiping the sweat on Arundhati's face with his upper cloth. "Why didn't you plait your hair? What is your peddamma doing without grooming and plaiting your hair?" he asked peeping in.

"She plaited my hair but it got dishevelled in my play," replied Arundhati.

"Look here girls! You have grown up. You shouldn't be playing games played by little girls. You should bathe, plait your hair, make yourself up, sit and read hereafter," said Nageswara Rao drawing the three girls towards him.

"Oh yes! We'll do so," they said in one voice and ran in.

Arundhati stayed back "Pedananna! If I read well, will you make me a doctor?" she asked sitting on the cot dangling her legs.

"Don't dangle your legs. It'll bring bad luck to your mother's brother. If you study hard, I'll make you a doctor. Then there is no need for all these games," replied Nageswara Rao. Anuradha joined them.

"Pedananna! Will you buy for me dolls when you go next to the temple fair? I'll keep them carefully with me," said Arundhati..

"O! Surely!"

"Won't you buy silk ribbons and a silk skirt for me?" asked Arundhati.

"Is that all? I'll get them for you."

Raghavi ran to them. She too wanted to ask something as her sisters were asking for things. She had not learnt yet to speak.

"Come. Come. Come. What do you want?" Chandramma took Raghavi into her arms. "The little girl also wants to be taken into account. She has come to ask you for this and that. It is said that a girl's ambition will not be satisfied till the main beam of the house gets pulled down. Look. These little girls are already increasing your responsibilities," said Chandramma with a happy smile. She felt very much elated at seeing her grandchildren. They were the generations that sprang from her.

"What is the use of all the earnings if we don't fulfil the wishes of these girls? We feel happy only when they keep asking," replied Nageswara Rao looking at the girls. Chandramma heaved a sigh.

"It is said that as soon as a girl is born income is also born. But don't get disturbed. Wait and see! A grandson will be a doctor, another an engineer and third..."

"Enough! Enough! People will laugh at you. Your words sound like a joke in the story dealing with corn-flour," said Chandramma with a happy smile.

"Grandma! Won't you tell us that story?" the children gathered around her.

"No! No! I have no stories to tell. I said it for fun!" Chandramma tried to escape..

"Pedananna! You tell us."

"Okay! Sit here! Once there was a boy who had no work..."

"Why didn't he have no work?" asked Arundhati.

"He had work to do. But he did not do any work at all. One day that lazy boy chanced to get some corn flour." The children began to listen to him with their palms under their chins. Jayalakshmi brought balls made of black gram flour, ghee and sugar.

The children pounced eagerly upon Jayalakshmi for the eats. Just then the servant brought the cart and released the bullocks. Nageswara Rao observed a wound on the neck of a bullock. He was angry.

"You there! Finish your meal quickly and go to the veterinary doctor. He said he would give the medicine for the bullock's wound. If you don't get the medicine I'll remove you from service. You are growing lazier day by day. Agriculture will prosper only when the bullocks are healthy. It is not enough if we eat and enjoy. We have to think of the cattle also," he reprimanded the servant and returned to the story.

"Yes! Where was I in the story? So the boy laid his hands on the flour. He put flour in a small pot and kept the pot at his feet." He stopped the story saying the rest of it will be narrated the next day.

The children saw Narahari dressed in white and walking towards them in the twilight. They ran into the verandah noisily shouting that their uncle was approaching. The daughters-in-law went in. None of them generally dared to walk towards him. "Brother! I want to leave tomorrow," he said looking at Nageswara Rao and sat behind him on the cot. The cot sagged with a creaking noise at the weight of the two brothers.

"Can't you stay on for a few days more?"

"I have work. I should go."

Nageswara Rao did not bother to ask Narahari questions like how the business was running, the profits if any, the nature of his work etc. he believed that if there were any important things to be discussed, Narahari himself would raise them before him.

Narahari did not talk anything about his business. Nageswara Rao did not speak of the agricultural operations. A dignified distance developed between business and agriculture!

*****

Next day Jayalakshmi awoke Sulochana early in the morning. "It appears you have to go to Hyderabad with Narahari babu. You have to take with you some utensils etc. for cooking. Get up and get ready."

Sulochana did not ask 'why'. Provisions, pickles, cooking utensils, a bag of rice were got ready.

Everyone in the house observed silence. Nageswara Rao broke the silence. "Take leave of everyone and start. It is getting time for the bus."

Narahari was about to take Raghavi into his arms. "Why that child? She has been put on buffalo milk ever since she was born. The sachet milk of Hyderabad will make her sick there. She will stay here," said Nageswara Rao. Jayalakshmi took off Raghavi from Narahari's arms. Sulochana quickly removed the clothes of Raghavi from the bag. "Come along with us," said Narahari to Harishchandra.

Harishchandra went in without a word, collected his clothes and came out with a bag in his hand.

Narahari, Nageswara Rao and Basavaiah in the front, Sulochana and Harischandra behind them walked towards the bus station. After they left Chandramma's eyes became brimful with tears. Sudarshana and Jayalakshmi also shed tears. The three sisters-in-law lived like sisters.

People from the neighbouring houses and those on the streets observed what was going on. They did not understand who were going and where. The affairs of Chandramma's household took shape secretly without any one getting an inkling of it. Hence the inquisitiveness of the neighbours.

*****

Family culture does not remain static all the time. It keeps changing every now and then. Change, they say, is an important feature in human society. Change in the economic policy is a strong reason for changes observed in families. Cultural adjustments take place in families because of changes of this kind. The constant changes that occur in technical and scientific fields, social reforms, social behaviour and the spread of cultural aspects too play their part. In joint families, It is the word of the head of the family that runs without any opposition. The person who shoulders the responsibility has the authority to take decision. But the changes that take place in economic policies and other aspects present an opportunity to the members of the family to question and oppose the authority of the head of the family. On such occasions the authority enjoyed by the head of the family receives a dent and suffers a setback.

That was the reason why Nageswara Rao agreed to send Sulochana along with his brother. If his brother set aside his suggestion and acted according to his will, his authority would suffer a blow. Nageswara Rao knew that his goodness as well as the welfare of the family also would be at stake and receive a dent. He wanted to avoid such a situation. As the head of the family it was proper for him to say ' as you please'. These words imply the sense 'respect our feelings also'. Though Narahari 's proposal put an end to the continuance of the joint family system flourishing in the family, Nageswara Rao agreed for another hearth to be established in another place. This was no doubt an example of 'new thinking' in the joint family philosophy. The thought that the feelings of the family members should be respected is the characteristic quality of discerning people. The reason for such a noble thought occurring to Nageswara Rao who had no education and degrees was because the welfare of the family was uppermost in his mind. It was this quality of broadmindedness that retained his authority as the head of the family till the end.

The street pial stopped the brothers returning from the bus station.

"Is it Nageswara Rao? You seem to have seen off some relatives!" asked an elderly person beaconing him to sit on the pail.

"Hum! Not relatives. My younger brother was going to Hyderabad," said Nageswara Rao dusting the pial with his upper cloth before he sat. Basavaiah stood there. He did not sit. He hated the pial and the people who sat on it. He would have proceeded home but stopped. He was afraid the pial people might taunt his brother.

"What! Is he establishing a family there? Anyway, youngsters do not possess patience like the elders in the family," said another person kindling up a spark.

"Let's get going," said Basavaiah to his brother.

"It's not like that. He was thinning down because of the food problem. We sent his wife along with him so that he could enjoy good health. My second son has also gone with them. Narahari will not be able to manage his business well with the hotel food. Mother and myself convinced him on this point and sent his wife with him. He refused to take her there in the beginning. He agreed at the end," explained Nageswara Rao. Indirectly he hinted to the gossip mongers that it was a collective decision taken by all the members of his family and that others need not interfere in their affairs.

Before leaving the pial he shot an arrow at the old man," why? You have been reduced into a reed? Is not your wife feeding you well on time?"

"Are you cured of your craziness? I told you not to meddle with them. I cautioned that trying to make fun of them is like inviting the scorpion to sting us. So you had a taste of it," said the man next to the old man and dragged him home abusing him all the way. The old man did not dare to speak again. Nageswara Rao shut the mouths of all others who tried to wag their tongues.

*****

The cousins of Nageswara Rao of the Rayaprolu family, particularly Subbarayadu, thought that Ragahvaiah's family would break up after his death or after his sons started taking loans to run the family.

But he could not bear the sight of the brothers leading a united life and managing their affairs with a quiet efficiently, while his own sons, four of them, spent all their time in quarrels neglecting their cultivation and agriculture.

His eldest son Sundara Rao had no education. He did not take interest in his lands. He would go about talking in a boastful manner and Subbarayadu used to abuse him for his vain talk. When he heard that Harishchandra who was of Sundara Rao's age went to Hyderabad to assist his uncle in his business, he could not bear the heart burn he suffered.

At lunch time he opened the topic with his sons.

"You have to learn what a joint family means from them, what unity means and what quiet efficiency means. Their children are like the parents. You know that the young boys beat black and blue those on the pial for talking ill of Basavaiah. If you are united like that none dare to talk ill of you or do any harm. What is your example? Each one of you want to rule over the other and you fight among yourselves."

Sundara Rao, the eldest son was offended with his father's words. He hit back. "Did you live unitedly with your brothers to accuse us? We heard from grandfather that you got the field bunded the moment you married to safeguard your share."

Subbarayudu lifted his hand, "Will you oppose me and pay back in my words?"

"If the mother cow grazes in the field will the calf graze on the bund? We follow your example. Did you not kill grandfather pushing him in the verandah?" said Sundara Rao licking his fingers.

"My father's land got split up because of the mistake committed by me. If you stay united your property will be intact. Hear me and be united with your brothers. Heed my words," he said coming down a step.

"Okay! My word and Dhuryodhana's manner are the same. My brothers never disregard my word. I'll also do business. I'll learn what Harishchandra wants to learn. Send me also to Hyderabad," said Sundara Rao.

"The lowly people are full of pride. A small quantity of rice throws up great effervescence, they say. You gave up studies. You don't visit the fields. Now you talk of doing business," said his father and washed his hand in the plate half-way through his meal. "I can't study. I am ashamed to work in the fields. I'll do only business." Sundara Rao stuck to his point. "Okay! I'll find out from Nageswara Rao what Harishchandra wants to learn in the city."

"Why should you ask them? If I go to Hyderabad I'll know all about it. I'll go tomorrow."

"Don't be so headstrong. One must be subdued like a well-served leaf," said Subbarayudu.

Joint families were built on internal self-effort and acquired efforts over the years. Subbarayudu desired to establish a joint family unit by acquired efforts. Whenever he had an opportunity he explained and described the inherent greatness of a joint family unit.

"Take a look at them!" he would say showing his finger at Raghavaiah's house. Slowly an earnest thought began to take root in Sundara Rao's mind. A sense of competition developed in his thinking.

*****

The paddy fields were ready for harvesting. The corn heads were bent with weight and were lulled heavily by cool breeze. Birds were twittering in their nests in the mango grove. The atmosphere was animated by the twittering of these birds. The birds were brushing their noses in a playful mood. A row of cranes was flying away in the eastern sky.

Chandramma could see only her family in the sky, in the row of the cranes, in the field filled with corn heads, in the group of birds. Till

recently, her life was also full of verve, full of her huge family. But now she felt as though the tree trunk had split vertically into two, as though the clouds in the sky were dissipating, as though the corn heads were separating themselves from their stalks.

Chandramma sat looking all around and above for nearly half-an-hour without winking. She sat with her two hands on one of her knees, raising her chin on it. She turned her look towards the bund with the mango tree. Nearby, the mortal remains of her husband, the ashes, were buried in a pit and a sapling was planted. Everyone called the growing sapling "Raghavaiah tree." The girls of the family cleaned the place and drew patterns with flour and lime powder on every festival day. When her daughters visited their mother, they invariably walked round the mound before reaching their house. The famous Banganapalli mango sapling and a 'vusiri'* sapling were planted there. Whenever she saw the sapling she would think that her husband was the mango sapling and herself the vusiri sapling. She would feel she was sitting by her husband whenever she sat near the mound. That day she left everyone and sat there as was her habit.

She thought of her husband. 'You went your way leaving me alone. Was it proper for you to do so? Who did you think would shoulder the burden of this family and run the house?' she expressed her sorrow remembering her husband.

'A house is no house without children, a grove is no grove without birds' they say. You and your mother filled the house with children and left me alone to take care of them. They say the past is better than the present. Today the cart of life missed its way.

As though to prove it Narahari took his wife to a distant place and established his family there. The harmony of the cart of our house was disturbed by him. Did you ever change the routine run of the family?

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* *A plant of medicinal value with sour fruits called AMLA.*

Now the cooking pot has changed its place. When I live here agitated by all these developments, you are lying there happily in the paddy field unmindful of what is happening to me. I don't know what else I have to experience in the future. The people in the village always talk jealously about my sons. Couldn't you come and stop Narahari from going?' Chandramma expressed her anguish expecting an answer from her husband.

The mango tree did not talk nor did it move. The leaves of the tree rustled in the breeze.

"Mother"! Called Nageswara Rao. She stared through her slit eyes.

"It's me! Why do you stare like that? With whom are you talking? Come. Let us get going. Everyone at home is worried about you wondering where you had gone," said Nageswara Rao. He sat behind her with his hand around her shoulder.

"I don't know why, I am very much worried," she replied and placed her hand on his head.

"I think I too should have followed your father," she added wiping her tears.

Nageswara Rao smiled.

"Sure, you may do so after celebrating the marriages of your great grandchildren," saying so he helped his mother to stand up and escorted her towards their house through the mango grove.

"I don't like Narahari taking his wife to Hyderabad," she revealed her mind.

"What is to come will come! What is to happen will happen. We have to move with times. By the way, he did not ask for his share of the property. He did not ask for the share of the land. He went there to help our family. How can we live depending only on cultivation? He went there with the idea that all of us should prosper. He will come back soon. Won't he?"

"You are now the head of the family. He should listen to you. He went without heeding your advice. That is what bothers me."

"When did I say he should not take his wife? Sulochana did not get ready with things till Jayalakshmi asked her to do so in the morning. They started only after I told them to go." He tried to pacify his mother.

She withdrew her hand from his and moved away a little from him. "That means both of you are hand-in-glove in this matter! Can't you cultivate lands and support your brother and his wife?" she asked a little angrily.

"That's not it, mother! He is educated. He knows many things. Won't he feel uneasy if I go on prodding him as his elder brother? Moreover, whatever he does, he does only for the good of our family. Aren't we the sons of Raghavaiah? Did not Chandramma bring us up?" he tried to humour his mother.

"There is a saying that the image of Mahakali could be made to smile with words. You are trying to boost my morale with words," said Chandramma. Jayalakshmi saw them approach and brought a lantern. Grandsons and grand daughters surrounded her.

"Nanamma! Where did you go? We went round the whole village in search of you." Her grand children asked her. Chandramma's heart gladdened and her joy knew no bounds.

"Why do you bother where I go? Why did you search for me? What do you care which way I go? You have your mothers," she said pretending annoyance.

"We want only you. Not so much our mother or grand aunty. Who will decorate our hands and feet with henna? Who will tell us stories? Who will dress our hair except you?" asked Arundhati loudly.

"Nanamma! If you want to go anywhere, tell us. We will take you," said Suryadeva and Dharmendra.

"How can you take me to places?" she asked.

In a trice Suryadeva, Dharmendra and Mohan suddenly lifted her off the ground and carried her in their arms. The girls began to shout," Our grandma is coming. Give way," and walked in front pushing Jayalakshmi, Sudarshan, the servant. Nageswara Rao carried Raghavi who was following them with unsteady steps.

"Did you observe mother! You don't miss anything. Your grandsons and grand daughters will take care of you in this manner even if we are not there."

"Enough! Enough! Put her down. Your grandma will fall and break her back," said Jayalakshmi and supported Chandramma who was about to fall. They all went in laughing heartily.

Basavaiah came out of the house. "Where did you all go leaving me alone in the house?" he asked and joined them smiling. They all settled down on the rope cots in the open.

Sundararajamma and her sister Subbulu arrived there calling out "Chandrappa!"

"Our grandmother will not talk to anybody today," said Mohan moving his arms up and down and sideways.

"What! Has the goddess of silence possessed you? The village may wake up without the cock crowing. Day may break without the sun rising. But if Chandramma doesn't talk there will be no food served in this house. What happened Chandrappa! Are you worried that Narahari left for the city?" asked Sundararajamma tying the loosened knot of her hair.

"People say children shouldn't be born and there shouldn't be labour pains for mothers. Yet people crave for children. Sometimes the children are the cause for the pain in the heart of parents!" sighed Chandramma.

"What is it you say, Chandrappa? Your son is not the bride sent to the mother-in-law's place. He is not Sri Rama who was sent to the forest. Your sons would have discussed and planned to send him to the

city for the good of the family. Raghavaiah's blood is not senseless, nor is it crazy."

"Say, so, Sundararajakka," appreciated Basavaiah.

"It is easy to say things to me. Will you send your son away?" challenged Chandramma.

"Why don't I send? If only I had four sons as you have, all tiger cubs, I'd have sent not one but two! Unfortunately, I have only one son for all my life. I can't live by sending him away. Your case is different. You have princes for sons. grandsons and grand daughters. To add to his, people from your side. You are the very queen of this place!" said Sundararajamma. Her words soothed Chandramma.

"Keep aside my queenship. I am only worried that people may think that Raghavaiah's sons left the village not being able to live together," Chandramma spoke her mind.

"Mother! Keep quiet. You unnecessarily think too much," Basavaiah was a little angry.

"It is not good to scratch the healed wound. But perhaps even if he were alive, things would have taken this turn. Think of Jagannadha Rao of East Street. His son left the village for another place and returned as a lakhpathi. People who spoke ill of him when he left are now praising him to the skies. Vantenapu Venkatrayudu's son ran away from home. Now all are appreciating him for having returned and attending to agriculture. People are like crows! They poke their nose in every affair of others. By the by, are you worried about your son or are you angry at the world?" asked Sundararajamma directly for she was not in the habit of hiding her thoughts. Nageswara Rao looked at her mother smiling.

"Hmmm! Answer her!" goaded Basavaiah.

"Children! World! That is .... I mean that the world shouldn't talk ill of my children. How can one bear it when everyone taunts the children? Tell me, Subbulu," replied Chandramma trying to take

Subbulu's support. Chandramma spoke many words but could not decide whether her worry was for the world or for her children.

"It is the tree laden with fruits that invites the stones. A mother with children cannot escape a little pain. Anyway, what do you lack? What happens if one of your sons is a little away from you? You can go to him whenever you feel like," replied Subbulu reprimanding Chandramma for her unfolded fears. Chandramma kept silent.

"Have you eaten your meal?" asked Sundararajamma looking at Jayalakshmi who was standing behind the door. Sudarshana remembered then that they had not eaten food.

"Jayalakshmi! Your mother is worried. It's okay. But what happened to you? The children also have not been fed. I am afraid they will sleep off. Quick! Serve them food," said Subbulu. Jayalakshmi took the children in. In the meanwhile, the men also returned. Sundararajamma and Subbulu left saying it was getting late... 'Even if we miss worshipping god, worshipping the stomach is a must' thought Jayalakshmi and served food to her mother-in-law.

"Why do you think of the people in the village when there are not differences among us? What does it matter what they think? Whatever happens, we three, your sons, stand on one word. Are you satisfied?" assured Nageswara Rao who understood the conflict in his mother's mind.

"You are mistaken, amma! Distance does not decrease love. On the other hand love increases it many fold," said Basavaiah.

"Our bond should not break as long as I am alive," said Chandramma wiping tears off her eyes.

"You have lost courage because father is no more. Has there been the thought of separation in our family anytime? Don't entertain such thoughts," said Nageswara Rao firmly. He knew that his mother was thinking of the future. At the moment it did not occur to him that he should take a close look at his mother's feelings. So he did not give a

chance to anyone to talk on that topic. Nageswara Rao believed that social values and mutual understanding among persons was more important than wealth and property. So he gave greater weight to the family and social feelings than to life. This attitude prospered as a culture. Raghavaiah handed it down to Nageswara Rao. The son obeyed this principle... whichever way things moved, whatever happened, even if the yoke got twisted, if one reached home, that was enough. Members of a family may live in different places but they should feel that they belong to the same family - such was the philosophy which Nageswara Rao developed for himself over the years.

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Sulochana and Harishchandra began to feel a little inconvenient to adjust themselves in the new place. Narahari chose a tiled house for his residence in the outskirts at a low rent. It was the house of a milk vendor. There were two portions situated side by side in the house. Rajaram, the milk vendor and his wife Kamala, treated Narahari and his family with affection and made them feel at home. Harishchandra followed his uncle wherever he went on his business of finding agents to sell the seetaphal fruits. Sometimes they stayed away from home for a week. Though he was moving closely with his uncle, Harishchandra did not feel free in his uncle's presence. Rajaram was not happy at this. One day he asked the boy, "What is this, Harishchandra! Your name sounds big and grand but you are so mild and soft? Why are you afraid of your uncle?"

"Oh! Nothing. It is our habit to be quiet before our elders," explained Harishchandra.

"It's okay. I've been observing you since morning. Why are you moving about agitatedly like a tom cat that had burnt his feet?" He suspected there was something wrong.

"A good bargain came its way in the mandi. I accepted the rate without telling uncle. I am afraid he may not like my action."

Harishchandra was afraid that his uncle might take him to task for taking the decision independently.

"The offer was good, but without his knowledge..." mumbled Harishchandra.

"The offer came seeking you. You won't get such an offer again even if you go to Kashi! How can you forgo a good offer? Your uncle will not be annoyed. He will appreciate your decision," said Rajaram encouragingly. Yet Harishchandra was disturbed. He told his uncle about the transaction when he came home for lunch. His uncle was upset.

"I wanted to give my word to Mandi Subba Rao. I told you that you shouldn't do anything in a hurry without informing me. Money is not important for us. It is the word that counts. We have to keep our word if we want to prosper and come up." Narahari left in a huff washing his hands in the plate.

Harishchandra sat on the pial lost in thought. "That is not so bhai (brother)! Why do you sit and look like a man gone bankrupt? Elders should scold and youngsters should get scolded," said Rajaram in the typical Telangana slang and made Harishchandra smile.

*****

That year Narahari made good profits by selling seethaphal fruits. He wanted to invest the money in some other business. Rajaram also expressed the same idea. "In your area, crops grow well. Why don't you buy pesticides and sell them?" suggested Rajaram casually. Narahari liked the suggestion. Rajaram took him to a shop known to him for guidance. The owner of the shop told them that the sales were not encouraging and that he had no time to sit in the shop all the while. He further said that he was prepared to sell the shop if anyone was willing to buy it.

Narahari gave thought to the shop owner's offer. Next day he told the man that he would buy the shop. The agreement was made satisfactorily to both the parties. The shop was now Narahari's.

Harishchandra ran the shop. Within six months they made substantial profits.

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"Harishchandra! Go to our village by night bus and give the money to father. Return by the night bus without staying on there. It wouldn't be good to close the shop. Bring Dharmendra also along with you. He will go to school here," said Narahari and sent him. Harishchandra returned on the third day. "There was a good crop of tobacco this year. Father cleared half the debt and took back the documents. He cleared the remaining half from the amount given by you," said the boy returning the balance. Narahari put Dharmendra in the pesticide shop and sent Harishchandra on marketing tours.

Narahari's business picked up fast and grew two-fold. He had two more daughters also. Jayalakshmi attended to both the births. Nageswara Rao could not visit Hyderabad but suggested the names through letters to both the baby girls. Chandramma felt sad that Narahari had no male child. Nageswara Rao pulled her up saying that there were enough number of boys in the family.

"Make it convenient to be here. The east street family is offering their daughter to Suryadeva. You should all be present," said the letter from Nageswara Rao. They all left for the village, decided the auspicious time and date and celebrated the marriage. Within seven days, Narahari and family returned to the city.

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The tobacco crop began giving bumper yields. Nageswara Rao worked like a bull with the help of Suryadeva and multiplied the crop yield. There was money in his hands. Investments increased. Narahari could supply fertilizers to the whole district. Harishchandra developed a pleasing salesmanship-talk and easily mixed up with people and improved his sales. Dharmendra was confined to the shop. He looked after the accounts connected with the fertilizer business.

Observing the sprightliness of Harishchandra many parents came forward offering their daughters in marriage to him. Nageswara Rao also thought he should celebrate Harishchandra's marriage. "There are five or six offers for him, visit us once," wrote Nageswara Rao to Narahari. Narahari reached his village. Chandramma welcomed him. She had grown thin and become mild. Prosperity had made its presence in the house. Chandramma told Narahari that his brother was at the barren.

Nageswara Rao had tucked up his dhoti knee high and wound a turban round his head. He was standing in the hot sun and instructing the coolies. The coolies were making three heaps of the tobacco leaves separately according to their colour, those in golden hue, those brown in colour and those which were black. Nageswara Rao was personally supervising the work. On observing his brother, he escorted Narahari to the cot under the mango tree and enquired after the welfare of the family. "We lost half an acre of the leaf because of pestilence. This cursed pestilence gave trouble to everybody," he said to Narahari.

"Myself and Suryam had to manage everything. We have only one barren. We need one more. Each barren accommodates the crop of eight acres. We cultivated twenty acres. Of course I hired the neighbour's barren. The labour is also available in plenty. Suryam wants another barren to be constructed," said Nageswara Rao offering water in a vessel to Narahari.

"If there is no attack of any pest, tobacco grown on eight acres yields a profit of two thousand rupees. We had profit of five thousand rupees. I paid half of it to Chinnanna and spent the rest in constructing a barren. The paddy also has been stored. We need not worry for this year. We sent black gram and green gram to sisters. We kept some for our use and sold the rest. I waited for your arrival to give away silver ware to Poornavathi. We have cleared all debts," said Nageswara Rao in one breath without giving a chance to Narahari even to breathe. He took a deep breath and said again, "Father would have felt happy if he had been alive." In the meanwhile Chandramma went to them.

She carried groundnuts in the pallu end of her saree and put the nuts in the German silver plate between them. She called the servant and asked him to get palmyrah nuts.

"Labour pains are followed by birth. Adolescence is followed by marriage, they say. Harishchandra is getting matrimonial offers," said Chandramma.

"It is natural when there is a grown up boy. But what is the hurry for his marriage now?" said Narahari. Nageswara Rao kept silent.

"That's not so. There are many offers from outside our family. I feel that our Chinnamma's daughter should be taken as his wife. Why should we seek an alliance outside the family?" Chandramma revealed her mind.

"If we accept alliances from outside relationships grow. The family members grow in numbers. Father himself did not opt for marriages from the maternal side. Why should we do it now?" replied Nageswara Rao putting forth Jayalakshmi's idea as his thought.

"Chittemma has no sons," he added.

" 'An alliance that does not take the wife's brother will be of no avail even if it fetches a fortune' goes the proverb. If we celebrate Suryadeva's marriage there will be three brothers-in-law and a lot of strength. Chittemma not having sons is no doubt a want," said Chandramma. When it came to decide between the mother's idea resulting in losing the daughter's alliance and increasing the strength of sons, the balance went down in favour of sons. "Then let us accept the alliance from Pesaralanka," said Chandramma.

By the time they returned home, the second son-in-law and his elder brother had arrived. Jayalakshmi had by then cooked the meal. They all ate their meal together.

"When your father Raghavaiah sent word seeking marriage alliance for your sister with our boy we brought the purohit along and the

almanac. Now you too should do the same and come to our house for the sake of your sister," said Venkata Rao, their brother-in-law's elder brother looking at Narahari.

"It's okay. We didn't say no," blurted out Narahari without a thought. Nageswara Rao and Basavaiah looked at Narahari angrily. Jayalakshmi rushed into the house annoyed adjusting the pallu end of her saree.

The brothers agreed to the match not being able to take back Narahari's word... Wedding preparations commenced immediately.

"Bring Chinnamma and children. Your marriage has been fixed," wrote Narahari to Harishchandra.

The marriage was celebrated within fifteen days. Mahalakshmi the eldest daughter did not keep quiet. She threatened, "I'll hang myself if the third son Dharmendra is not given in marriage to my daughter," That marriage was also settled. The wedding took place within a month. In the family the bride or the bridegroom has no say in the matter of their marriage. Their likes and dislikes are not taken into consideration. One family decides with the other family. In those days no one knew who was marrying whom till the date and time for the auspicious occasion were written down on paper. But things went against the tradition of the house once. It happened in this manner.

The maternal uncle of Arundhati suggested a good alliance for her. Arundhati was pampered by Nageswara Rao, her father's elder brother. She was given to speaking frankly. She was good at studies. She overheard her people talking about her marriage when she was in her tenth class. She heard her people say "marriages and vomits cannot be stopped. How is it possible to complete the preparation if the muhurtham (the auspicious time and date of marriage) is decided at short notice?" She went direct to Nageswara Rao who was twisting the rope for a cot. "Pedananna! I don't want to marry! I will study medicine and will become a doctor." People around her laughed at her words.

"Okay. You may become a doctor after your marriage," said Nageswara Rao looking at her affectionately.

"Not after marriage! I will marry after I become a doctor like Papa Rao's daughter," said Arundhati with determination. Jayalakshmi who heard the words expressed surprise, she unconsciously pressed her cheek with her finger.

"Oh god! Can girls talk with such courage! If your father learns what you said he would accuse us that you were not brought up properly by me. Keep quiet!" admonished Jayalakshmi.

"You better keep quiet, Peddamma! I will study. That is all. If you force me to marry I will starve and die," threatened Arundhati.

Those were the days when women's education was gaining popularity.

Girls were enthusiastically taking to higher studies. Arundhati had a great desire to become a doctor from her childhood.

"Chinnanna has given his word. Nothing can be done now." Nageswara Rao tried to convince her.

"That is not it pedananna! When I wanted a silk skirt whom did I ask?"

"Me."

"When I wanted a radio?

"Me."

"Now when I tell you that I want to become a doctor, why do you talk of Chinnanna?"

Basavaiah who was sitting there looking into some papers heard his daughter. He knew that Arundhati was a clever girl. He too wanted his daughter to become a doctor.

"How can you oppose Chinnanna? He will lose his face if he can't keep his word," said Nageswara Rao cajoling her.

"What if he loses his word? I want to become a doctor."

"You shouldn't talk like that! When elders give their word, you have to obey them and marry."

Basavaiah turned his head towards Nageswara Rao suddenly. But he did not say anything.

"Pedananna! If you stand on prestige, I will not eat food," said Arundhati crying. "You want to throw me out soon," she added. Nageswara Rao took her into his arms. "No father thinks of driving his daughter away. But the shastras have laid it down so. The law states that it is the duty of the son to perform the obsequies and that the daughter should feed the parents. Yet, the law does not permit the daughter to stay in the house."

"Does it mean that I should go away to the house of others? Why should I go? All my brothers live here. I too will live here," said Arundhati embracing Nageswara Rao.

They say that a girl loses half her life span when she is born and loses the rest of it when she goes to the house of the in-laws.

Nageswara Rao brought up the girls of the family in a very affectionate manner. He used to say that Mahalakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, will not leave the house where a girl plays before the doorstep and where a calf moves about in the backyard. Of course, he liked Arundhati's idea. He told his brother Basavaiah that she wants to continue her studies.

"She needn't study and rule countries. Our boys have voluntarily given up studies and got into jobs and agricultural work and business. How can we give education to our girls? Anuradha, Annapurna and Raghavi are in the list already behind Arundhati. We may have to educate them all one after the other in that case. Tell he not to talk of studies. The marriage party is visiting us. Get the lagnapatrika* prepared," said Basavaiah. Nageswara Rao also felt there was reason in his brother's words.

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* *Details noting the auspicious time and date for performing the marriage.*

Arundhati did not relent. She gave up food and started crying. None could convince her. Her eyes turned into balls of fire by crying. Her ambition of becoming a doctor got melted in that fire. Basavaiah did not say a word more. He had the right to speak. He did not utilize the right. Sudarshana, Basavaiah's wife could not reconcile to her husband's decision. Her looks troubled him for some days. His silence was interpreted as his ineffectiveness.

Six months after Arundhati's marriage, Anuradha's marriage was also celebrated. Anuradha did not dream of becoming something. She had no ambitions and aspirations. So no problems were faced in her case. Narahari took away Mohan also to the city after Anuradha's marriage.

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' The one who has faith in his mother and Mother Earth will never be let down' goes the saying. The tobacco crop brought in high profits for Nageswara Rao. He began to export good quality tobacco to other countries through the ports of Guntur and Prakasham districts.

Nageswara Rao continued to work like a bull. Narahari took over the dealership of three districts and increased his hold on the markets which set new records. His mental make up, his brevity in speech and gentlemanly manners won the hearts of everyone for him. He acquired a good name as a fertilizer dealer also and soon joined the ranks of reputed businessmen.

Nageswara Rao and Suryadeva remained in the village and got involved deeply in cultivating tobacco crop. Harishchandra turned into an expert in meeting sub-dealers and cornering orders. Narahari looked after all the money transactions personally. Accounts were taken care of by Dharmendra. Mohan attended to sundry responsibilities. Though they all handled the work, there was much work left to be done. Their business prospered as each of them took care of the duties entrusted to each of them. They could amass a substantial amount of money. Who

will stop what is ordained? Another enterprise came knocking at the door of Narahari. His Madras friends who were living in Hyderabad encouraged him to turn into a film producer. He had money, intelligence and friends. Why wait any longer? Narahari left for Madras. His friend was a noted director. There is a saying which goes: ' fortune lifted persons to the pinnacle and misfortune pulled them down holding their feet.' Narahari never imagined that the money he had earned by hard work during the year would be washed away because of his inexperience in the cinema field. He had supreme confidence that there would be no defeat for him in whatever he did. He burnt his fingers by stepping into a new field thoughtlessly.

No one in his family asked him what he was doing. Though he neglected the tobacco business, though the fertilizer shop was not functioning properly, though he was rushing to Madras from Hyderabad often, they kept quiet. They did not even know that he was running into heavy losses. When people asked "is your Chinnanna a cinema producer now?", they just smiled. They did not know the details also to reveal to anyone. They felt a little ashamed to tell the people that they did not know the details. The comings and goings of people in cars, a lot of hungama with parties and get-togethers made everyone imagine that something big was being achieved by Narahari. They did not dare to ask what it was. The activities connected with sowing of the crop, marketing it and the keeping of accounting etc. were maintained with precision as usual.

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One day Narahari got off the taxi with a three day old stubble on his chin, dressed in soiled clothes. He looked like a chronic patient. Harishchandra and his brothers were shocked at their Chinnanna's appearance. They telephoned their father to reach Hyderabad without delay. The children also wanted to visit Hyderabad. Nageswara Rao did not tell anyone why he was going to Hyderabad.

"I too will go with you to that land," said Chandramma.

"You are a heart patient. You can't travel such a long distance. Anyway Sankranthi is coming around. They all will be here. Don't be perturbed," said Nageswara Rao.

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Nageswara Rao felt deeply disturbed at his brother who looked a sick man. Sulochana could not control her tears.

"What happened to you?" asked Nageswara Rao with great concern.

'Pain in the heart' Narahari made gestures.

"Didn't you call in the doctor?"

Harishchandra replied, " I got him examined by the doctor. He said nothing was wrong. Only anxiety."

Nageswara Rao signalled Harishchandra to leave the room with his eyes. Everyone left that room quietly.

"What happened?"

"I suffered losses in the cinema production," Narahari reported to his elder brother the first time.

"How much?"

Nageswara Rao stood open-mouthed on hearing the amount. They had lost what all was earned by their hard work. They would get sunk into debts again! He could not speak for a while. He looked again at his brother. He was skin and bones. Nageswara Rao spoke in a loud voice with determination. "We lost only money. No one is dead. Let the money be lost. The six acres of land bequeathed by father has not been lost. That is our principal. Whatever we got later was all the interest. We lost only what we gained on the land. Let it go. We'll earn the noney back. If we lose money we'll get it back. If people die can we get hem back? Father died. Along with him we lost property. We worked ıard. We got money back. But did father come back?" Jayalakshmi and

Sulochana heard what he said. They were standing behind the door. Harishchandra was standing at the window. Dharmendra was all ears. Mohan went into the room as if he wanted something, took a towel and went out.

Narahari moved about uneasily.

"Did you think of departing along with the money? Why do you look so lost? We shouldn't be afraid of difficulties so long as we are strong. Fortune shouldn't make us forget ourselves and misfortune should not make us cry. We should accept them both with balance. If we work hard for two years we will get back everything in tobacco.....Get up! Eat your food. Everything will be allright," said Nageswara Rao and turned to his wife.

She came with food in a plate.

"Father wouldn't have lost his heart like this. Come on. Eat," he said and fed his brother himself morsel after morsel. Narahari remembered the boyhood days, the field bund and the scene of being fed by his brother.

Nageswara Rao made his brother walk about within four days.

When a person has money and intelligence there is no need for human company. His ego will be his companion. The ego makes the person feel that he is on the top of the world with no rival. He would feel that he had no equal to him among others. A change will be observed in his words, actions, and life style. If money is lost for want of intelligence, human help is sought. Even a youngster's support and company will be accepted happily. Narahari recovered quickly as no life was lost though money was lost.

A hundred words are not needed to be uttered for inspiring courage and confidence. Two words are sufficient... if one is strong-minded.

Though Nageswara Rao spoke to console his brother with brave words, the debts made him feel uneasy whenever he was alone ' We

came back to the starting point, to square one' he thought with dismay. The youngsters did not exhibit any change in their behaviour or work. They did not even ask what happened. They understood silently whatever they heard.

Harishchandra's wife Rupa wanted to seek some information. He cut her short saying, "No need for unnecessary words." Dharmendra kept silent when his wife tried to tackle him though conversation. The wives should not evince interest in the economic and financial aspects of the house. That was the tradition handed down from one generation to the next hereditarily. There was the fear that the gingily seed will not get softened in the mouth of a woman. He suspected that if the details were revealed she would pass them on to her parents.

Narahari was recovering fast. As Nageswara Rao was planning to go back to the village, the Karanam's son visited their house in an agitated manner.

"Basavaiah gaaru sent me. Chandramma is not well. You are wanted urgently."

On hearing the news they all left in a small car.

There was a crowd around their house which created anxiety in their heart. Nageswara Rao and others slowed down in their pace. In the open place under the coconut trees Chandramma's body was lying on a white blanket spread on hay. Her body was covered with a blanket. Her face was pale. Cotton swabs were stuffed in the nostrils. The big toes of her feet were tied together.

She used to move about from dawn to dusk tucking up the pleats of her saffron coloured saree, sacred ash smeared in a circle on her brow between her eyes, calling everyone by name. When they saw her now lying on the hay mat, the sons and daughters-in-law could not believe what they saw. She used to meet her sons midway when they returned from the fields and walked home with them conversing. She was now lying silent and unmoving.

Whenever her sons called her out "amma", she would respond quickly saying "yes, I am coming," and go to them however busy she was in her work

'Amma! Amma! Please get up! We lost money again. We have fallen on evill days! If you are also not with us now, how can be bear it? To whom shall we narrate our owes!' Nageswara Rao wanted to cry. But he could not. His respectability came in the way. Basavaiah cried hoarse like a baby. Narahari controlled himself pacing about this way and that. The boys kept themselves a little away. The daughters-in-law could not bear to see her dead. She never behaved like a mother-in-law. There was perfect understanding between them and never any ill-feelings. If there were problems the mother and sons bore the burden and the daughters-in -law never heard what the problems were. Jayalakshmi wept inconsolably.

The daughters of Chandramma also could not bear the death of their mother. She used to tell them " the daughters should reveal their mothers' qualities. Whatever you do reflects on me. Be always obedient. Show respect to your husbands outside the house. They will respect you in the house. " Whatever the girls wanted she saw to it that the sons attended to their wants. They always felt assured that whatever they had or lacked, it did not matter. They had their mother to support them. Their fathers-in-law used to say that Chandramma was the 'right shoulder' to their father and life to their brothers. The daughters felt sorry they did not inherit their mother's intelligence and patience.

There was a proverb which says, ' the house without a mother and a curry without onion are insipid.' How can there be sweetness in the house without Chandramma? No one in the house, particularly the womenfolk of both the houses, exchanged an unpleasant remark. The credit for this went to their mother. She used to keep people in their proper places. No one was praised. No one was ridiculed and lowered in status. Those who agreed for marriage alliance with Chandramma's daughters did so because of her respectability. They were reminded of the saying 'choose the she-buffalo by noting the milk yield.'

If the girls faced problems in the houses of their in-laws they used to appraise their mother of their difficulties when she visited them unexpectedly. She used to give them effective tips to solve the problems quickly, very intelligently. She never whispered with her daughters in the presence of her daughters-in-law. She whispered things when all had gone to bed.

The grandchildren assembled around her body crying. Suraydeva, of all, felt he lost a great friend.

"You inherited all the anger of your grandfather" she used to reprimand Suryadeva mildly. She used to crack her knuckles on her temples in great joy at his wife, Suvarna, who moved about in the house like a beautiful golden doll. Rupa, Harishchandra's wife and Harini, Dharmendra's wife were her granddaughters. She showered all her affection and love on them. These filial connections made the entire household wail in great sorrow which moved the entire village. The whole village turned up in mute sorrow to give moral support to the girls. It is said that the last journey of a king will suffer in comparison with that of the mother with daughters. The granddaughters tried to wake their grandmother with their finger tips which were still wet with the henna she had applied lovingly the previous night.

The married women lifted the body of Chandramma, changed the saree and the blouse. They loosened the hair and made her sit against the wall. As Nageswara Rao bathed the body of his mother in warm water, Jayalakshmi applied oil to her mother-in-law's head with trembling hands as the heir to the next generation. As she did so she felt that her mother-in-law passed on to her the authority over the house. As she washed her mother's face she felt she heard her say ' live as I lived. You will go the way I went.' And again as Jayalakshmi twisted her mother's hair into a knot ' just as I entwined my children and my family to myself, you too entwine your children and your family.'

Jayalakshmi had not shouldered family responsibility until then. Now the rituals of obsequies thrust upon her new responsibilities and

authority. She went through the process mechanically. Sudarshana's position was no better. Her mind and body were benumbed. Chandramma had taken her into her family with great liking as her daughter-in-law. She was never made to work as she came of a well-to-do family. Her mother-in-law did all her work. Sundararajamma used to say that Sudarshana got into the family where she was destined to enter. Chandramma used to smile it away without expressing her thoughts in words. She felt happy that her daughter-in-law could control the haughtiness of her son Basavaiah.

Chandramma never pampered Sulochana, her third daughter-in-law who was her brother's daughter. She kept a little distance form ner lest others should misunderstand her. She used to take all precautions to avoid problems among the three daughters-in-law. If she had to convey anything she used to tell Jayalakshmi to pass on the message to the other two. She never, at anytime, interfered when all the three were together. That was the reason why the family prospered like a happy kingdom. She made the villagers feel that there was no difference in ruling a kingdom or a household and that it all depended upon the skill of the ruler.

As the bier was being made ready, the sons could not stand the sight.

If Nageswara Rao hurt himself Chandramma never allowed him to step forward until she gave him first-aid by using betel leaves and lime. If Basavaiah's eyes reddened by constant reading she used to curse those who invented books that affected her son's eyes. If Narahari covered himself with a blanket because of fever, she kept all the other members on pins and needles. Now the sons could not think of bidding her farewell to such a mother. Someone called out to Harishchandra for a rope. When he went near his grandmother's body he almost heard her saying in great joy 'Subbulu! Look at my second grandson! Is he not a photocopy of his grandfather! If only the boy sports a bushy moustache, wears a dhoti, puts on the upper cloth on his shoulders and walks with

a hand stick, will not people think that my husband had grown young again?'

The bier was lifted as voices went up crying 'Rama! Rama!' Chandramma left the family like a queen without an inkling of the problems faced by the second generation. The sons and grandsons carried her body changing shoulders without making her feel the ruts and pits on the ground. Suryadeva's four-year-old son led the procession holding the pot with fire. Sundararajamma and Subbulu stood there in tears stretching their hands towards the bier. The daughters-in-law and other women stared with stunned looks. Chandramma moved away from all her people with a queenly grandeur.

'If the father dies the debts are written off. If the mother dies the generation stops.' In keeping with this saying the curtain was rung down on the first generation.

Chandramma nurtured, established and passed on the 'culture' to the next generation. She got ready successfully another stage-setting as part of her responsibility.

Salutations to you, O mother! Salutations to thee!
When the plough furrows the soil, you are happy.
When the babe kicks in the belly, you do smile,
When the earth is dug, you quench our thirst,
When the heart throbs, you support our lives,
When fire devastates, you make flowers bloom,
When the pyre is lit, you laugh in your thoughts.

Chandramma developed and nurtured the culture for the next generation. She prepared and set successfully the stage for the drama of the second generation as part of her duty.

*****

The three brothers fell flat literally after all the relatives left. When their father passed away there was their mother to console them and

hold them together. She was the cementing force. Now when she died the brothers collapsed like bricks. When their father died they looked into property matters and details of debts. Now they began to look for affection and love among themselves and shed tears at the loss of the main fountain of love and affection - their mother.

*****

Time is the best healer. Nature heals wounds, mental and physical. The deep sorrow experienced on the day of death of a dear one will dwindle by the eleventh day ritual. If time had not the quality of making people forget, mankind would have been put to untold suffering and unrest. ' Time that made them forget their mother could not make them forget hunger,' thought the brothers who ate their first morsel without their mother. They all sat together, but this time there was no confusion in their minds as to what they had to do. They thought out the solution independently. It was the lesson which experience taught them. The lesson was clear. When you take a fall you must rise steadily keeping up balance. The three brothers sat in the glow of flight coming from the electric light fixed on the tiled roof. Harishchandra and Mohan sat on the rope cot nearby. Suryadeva collected all children and sat in their middle. Whatever the state of mind of the brothers, they were all thinking of the loan they had to raise. "Ramesham is known to us. He is a tobacco dealer. He will first invest and later collect money after profits are made. Shall we ask him?" said Nageswara Rao taking Akshita into his lap and extending his hand to Sahana.

"No need to ask him. I want to sell Sudarshana's lands situated in Kesharapadu. The amount will come in handy as investment," said Basavaiah.

"Let us not sell our property. If you don't like taking a loan from Ramesham, let us tackle Sundaram. He is earning well in Hyderabad. He will help us in our need if we ask him. We supported them for many yeas by way of lease." Nageswara Rao looked around at his brothers. Harishchandra expressed his dislike at the suggestion in his

eyes. Sundar was an obstacle in their way acting as as a rival in their business in Hyderabad. ' Why should we ask him?' thought Harishchandra but did not speak out.

"Asking Sundaram! No! If we take a loan from him he will announce the fact all over the village. It will be like kicking the ball into our goal ourselves," said Basavaiah throwing the newspaper with impatience.

"We want money. No one should know that we are running losses. Then let us raise a loan on the fertilizer shop," said Narahari.

Everyone kept quiet when they heard this suggestion.

"I'll send money through Harishchandra. Don't think of any other plan," assured Narahari and took the bus to Hyderabad. Nageswara Rao wanted to caution Narahari not to get involved in any misadventure this time but he kept quiet. He wanted to find out how much amount could be raised by way of loan. But he did not ask Narahari.' If he knew how much, he would have told me' thought Nageswara Rao. A similar thought occurred to Narahari also. 'What is the use of telling? It could be revealed in actual implementation.' Narahari waved his hand as the bus started. Again a screen of silence between the brothers about finances!

*****

One day Rajaram asked Harishchandra.

"Why are you moving about with a listless expression on your face like the dark evening in an acacia grove? Are you feeling bad that your father's brother is unwell? That your grandmother passed away? You and I won't live on this planet forever! We too have to go one day. Why do you feel so much for it like a child?"

"That's not the point. We have come back to square once again." Rajaram understood the point without Harishchandra explaining it.

"Worship a dirty god with filthy leaves. That is the saying. What goes should be allowed to go. What remains is ours," said Rajaram patting the back of Harishchandra with some force. He lost balance

and lounged forward. Rajaram laughed heartily at Harishchandra and his cigar fell off his mouth. "My dear boy! Why do you sway like that? Be a young bull. Your parents should forget all their worries seeing you. If you have money do you eat gold? Money comes and goes. Do you lose heart because of that?" said Rajaram in a reprimanding tone. He called his wife," bring millet roti for this boy. He is getting weak and worried. He has to grow strong."

Rajaram's wife brought jawar roti and buttermilk. "Eat son! We have no children and we feel bad for it. If you, who are like our son, pull a long face with anxiety, my husband cannot bear the pain in his heart," she said handing him the roti and buttermilk. Harishchandra derived a lot of strength from their care and support. At home his parents were not that close with him and the children. So he felt happy. He ate the roti and drank the buttermilk and came out.

"Harishchandra! How are you?" accosted Sundar. Harishchandra nodded his head.

"I hear you lost all your money in a cinema venture. Is it true you are mortgaging your shop? Why don't you sell it to me? I'll pay you the amount in one lump... you'll also profit by it," he said mockingly.

Sundar's father always used to compare him with Nageswara Rao's children. He used to taunt Sundar," If a son-in-law who has no value dies no one cries just as no one bothers if a beam which does not carry weight falls. Your being alive is as good as your being dead. You should learn from them. How united they are! And how silent!" But now things were different. 'They have been taught a good lesson and are cured of their ego. Once they did not walk on the ground,' thought Sundar.

"Who told you that we are raising a loan?" asked Harishchandra angrily.

"Your Mohan told me. ' the cowardly prawn has long whiskers' they say. What if he tells me? What's wrong? I thought I could help as you are in difficulties," said Sundar raising his shirt collar.

"Don't ever interfere in our affairs. Your very touch is thrice cursed. If at all you want to extend help there are many beggars. Go and help them," said Harishchandra. His nostrils widened and he shook with rage.

" 'Granny, why do you shake your head?' asked someone, ' what do I do keeping it still?' replied the old woman, they say. What all you can do now is only to shake your head in useless anger," said Sundar smiling.

Harishchandra went into the house quietly thinking that there was no need to pick up a quarrel with Sundar.

*****

Where is Mohan? Harishchandra asked his wife Rupa. " He is bathing," she replied. Mohan came out of the bathroom. "What rotten nonsense did you say to your friend? ' We are losers. Give us some alms' did you beg?" asked Harishchandra pushing back Mohan. Mohan looked confused.

"In our family even if we eat dust and drink water, the third person does not know about it. Such being our discipline, that useless fellow offered help to us," said Harishchandra pushing Mohan again. Mohan hit the wall at the impact. As Rupa tried to stop him, he looked at her angrily. Rupa stood motionless.

"Money beacons us today and leaves tomorrow. If we lose face in the society, the humiliation haunts us all our lives. What have you learnt by being a member of our family? Can't you control your tongue?" Harishchandra hit Mohan on his chest again. Mohan kept quiet. Sulochana came out hearing the hubbub. Dharmendra stared and stopped writing. Rupa and Harini stood like statues in their places.

"Why did you reveal our difficulties to others? What did you lose, anyway? If you go on shaving, some hair is left. What is left remains. That doesn't mean you go about telling everyone that you lost your

hair," said Harishchandra angrily, walked out and reclined on the cot. No one said anything. No one spoke to Mohan also. Everyone kept silent.

When Narahari returned everyone busied themselves in their activities as though nothing happened.

They all had their meal. But Mohan did not get up from his cot. Harishchandra went and sat on the cot. There was silence for a while. Harishchandra patted Mohan. "If the lamb cries does the wolf feel sorry? We should not imagine that everyone is our well-wisher. Those who feel happy at our differences are many, Mohan."

"I didn't tell anything to anyone. I don't know anything, annaiah," said Mohan.

"But that fellow Sundar cooed that you told him so."

"Upon our grandfather, I didn't tell him anything," tears trickled from the eyes of Mohan.

"Then you could have told me," said Harishchandra passing his hand on Mohan's head lovingly.

"What actually happened?" asked Mohan confused.

"I abused you unnecessarily. He irritated me with his words. I got angry." Harishchandra sounded apologetic.

"Whom did you beat? You hit your brother...why do you feel as though you beat some outsider?" said Mohan. Harishchandra's eyes became moist at his words. Sulochana brought food in a plate.

"Get up and eat your food," said Harishchandra handing the plate to Mohan.

"You too eat. You too didn't eat," said Sulochana offering another plate to him. As they both started eating, Dharmendra went there and sat between them. The 'unity bond' of another generation got started.

That night Harini said to her husband, Dharmendra ,"It's unfortunate, poor Mohan received blows."

"You didn't receive those blows. Why do you worry? Sleep off," replied Dharmendra putting an end to her talk.

*****

Next day they received Nageswara Rao's letter.

"To Chiranjeevi Narahari.

Blessings from brother. Raghavi came of age and attained puberty. Your sister-in-law and other ladies are keen on celebrating the festivities. That is also the tradition of our family. You should all be here. With good wishes.

Nageswara Rao."

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"Namaskarams to elder brother,

We have learnt of Raghavi coming of age. There is no need for all of us to be there spending a lot of money on such a trivial matter. Attend to all those rituals yourself. I don't think there is need to celebrate the occasion on a grand scale.

Your loving brother Narahari."

*****

Information was sent to all neighbours and relatives. Jayalakshmi dressed up Raghavi in a white saree. Nageswara Rao went to the palmyrah grove and brought raw palmyrah leaves. Sudarshan spread the leaves on the floor and covered them with a white cloth. Turmeric powder and kumkum were sprinkled on it. Also sanctified rice. They broke coconuts and placed the broken halves at all the four corners. A doll was made of palmyrah leaf and a saree was draped around it. A bindi was put on the brow of the doll. A married woman sat on the palmyrah leaves first. Then the doll was placed in the centre. Raghavi was made to sit by the

side of the doll. All the married women applied kumkum to Raghavi, and sprinkled the sacred rice on her. They offered 'harathi' by burning camphor in a plate and blessed her by turns. Each lady wanted the others to sing the auspicious songs of the occasion, each fighting shy to sing. Finally five songs were rendered by them.

A stone mortar was placed before Raghavi. Coconut and jaggery was crushed in it and 'chimmili' was prepared. A small earthern plate was placed in her hands. The 'chimmili' preparation was put into the plate. Then all the women received betel leaves and areca-nut pieces.

On the eleventh day a grand feast was arranged for all. Jayalakshmi personally felt happy and was satisfied at the festivities.

*****

Narahari learnt that the festivities in the village were celebrated on a grand scale. He wrote a strongly worded letter asking why, like the menace of a pestilence in a drought, so much money was spent.

"Though wealth is lost we cannot forget traditions," came the reply. Sulochana felt bad for not attending the celebration. Narahari dismissed her resentment saying ," sister-in-law can manage things better than you." He did not give a chance to the ladies to say anything.

Raghavi also did not feel the absence of her mother. She was happy that her Peddamma and Chinnanna were there. In fact Raghavi was not much attached to her mother. Her love for her mother was not deep to seek her. She treated her mother as the other children behaved towards her. There was no special feeling for 'mother' in Raghavi's mind.

This is the important quality observed in a joint family. All are treated alike in it. No one entertains the feeling 'mine' in it. 'Mother' is mother to all. Now it is Jayalakshmi who is the mother to all in the family. All children consulted her for their problems. No one is given special preference. All are equal among the family members.

*****

Narahari mortgaged his house and lands along with the fertilizers shop and raised a loan. He took the loan sanctioning officers and showed them the house and the lands in his village. Nageswara Rao thought that the strangers were his brother's friends. Narahari did not tell the truth to Nageswara Rao thinking that his brother would feel pained. Basavaiah came to know of it but he kept silent.

Some amount was allotted towards investment for tobacco by Narahari to Nageswara Rao and Suryadeva. Narahari started dealership again in a small way with the balance money. Tobacco cultivation spread to Nellore district also along with Prakasham district. Guntur district took the third place. Nageswara Rao spent some amount on cultivation and reserved the balance for dealership. Narahari did not discuss in detail his business enterprises. He gave instructions to his sons. They implemented his directions. The experience gained in the past taught him the lesson to be cautious. The profession chosen by him demanded experience for success. Narahari and Co. gradually picked up profits.

Sundar started going about with his brothers using the money accumulated by his father as investment. He became Narahari's rival provoking Harishchandra at every turn and creating obstacles in their way.

Sundar and his brother grew up as pial boys. They knew that competition was necessary for growth as also haughty pride. Sundar was not satisfied with his prosperity. Moreover he developed envy and began creating obstacles in Narahari's way.

Narahari never created problems for Sundar. He did not hesitate to help him if he sought it. The brothers of Sundar began to emulate Narahari by growing wise and tried to present a united front. They were also afraid that if they were not united they would incur the displeasure of the townspeople. They tried their best to impress upon Narahari that they were united and that they were earning well. Narahari used to smile at them. He treated them as cousins...he was happy they were prospering.

*****

Narahari bought Rajaram's house and built a big house in the vacant space of the house. The family began to grow big in course of time. Harishchandra had a son and a daughter and Suryadeva too. Arundhati had only a daughter. With the birth of grandchildren, the three brothers of the second generation became grandfathers. Arundhati's husband also joined hands with Narahari in business as another' pillar'. The children of Suryadeva, Harishchandra, and Dharmendra stayed with Nageswara Rao and pursued studies there. Harishchandra's son Bhargava, Dharmendra's son Phani, daughter Sharavani left for Hyderabad. Also Tulya, Arundhati's daughter. The houses in the city and the village were buzzing with the activities of children and their childish pranks.

*****

Raghavi got a seat in MBA and was keen on studying the course. Nageswara Rao had no choice but to send her to Hyderabad.

She felt strange and uneasy in Hyderabad though she lived with her parents. She relished the love and affection of her pedananna and her peddamma in the village. In the city, she felt suffocated and thought she was in the midst of people who were mechanical in their habits. The noise and mischief of the children and the books of Mohan gave her some relief. Yet she felt strange and out of place.

The married members had separate bedrooms. All the children used the hall. There was a study table in a corner. The T.V was in another corner.

Mohan and Raghavi were sitting on chairs. Tulya, Bhargava,Phani, Shravani sat square-legged on their cots and were watching the T.V. The movie was 'Agni Sakshi." Bhargava could not bear the tension. He rose saying ' now the hero will come and attack." He was studying tenth class.

"Nonsense! He won't attack. He will scold," said Phani to relieve his tension."

"Observe carefully."

"Don't be silly. He won't hit or scold," said Tulya.

"Oh! You seem to know everything," intercepted Shravani fanning herself with her hand.

"You dud! Shut up and watch," said Bhargava hitting Tulya on her head with his knuckles.

"You dull head! You don't know anything," she said pinching his hand. Mohan silenced them by hissing, "Shhh." In the meanwhile the hero made his entry.

"He's coming! He's coming! Oh go! He has come! He'll hit!" everyone began to murmur. Suddenly the T.V. went off. Everyone cried "Haaaa" and sighed. Harishchandra was standing at the door with the remote in his hand. "Do you realise that the tenth Public exams are round the corner? Why do you waste your time watching the T.V.? Who switched on the T.V. first of all?" he asked angrily.

"I said 'no', uncle. It was Bhargava who wanted to watch the T.V." said Tulya.

"I too didn't want it daddy. It was Phani!"

"It was not I, Pedannannagaru. Shravani wanted to watch the movie," said Phani transferring the blame on her.

"No! It was not at all me! Raghavi aunty switched it on", said Sharavani and hid behind her.

Harishchandra rushed towards Raghavi who felt terribly afraid and was about to give him an answer. Mohan quickly intervened saying that he switched on the T.V. for news. "I'll take the blame on me and apologize five times," he said and repeated 'sorry' four times. The fifth time all others joined him and said 'sorry' in a chorus. "You are all at fault, you thieves! Mohan! Why do you take the blame on yourself?" said Harishchandra smiling. "Get up. Let's all have food." He walked away with his hand on Raghavi's shoulder. Others followed him.

It was a huge dining hall with a big dining table. Narahari sat on the king chair with Dharmendra and Harishchandra on either side. Arundhati and her husband Kamalnath sat by Dharmendra. The children settled down drawing their chairs. There was silence. Sulochana, Rupa, Harini and Arundhati served food silently.

"I heard at the Board office that tobacco was sold at a lower price in Khammam district. We may face a strong competition there this time, " said Harishchandra addressing Narahari.

"But Krishna district will cover up the deficit," put in Dharmendra.

"It is encouraging in Godavari district. Guntur district is not so promising," reported Kamalnath.

"The crop cultivation covers a total of 1.67 lakh hectares in all districts. The yield will be about 1.87 lakhs. To what extent we can make the purchases depends upon how quick we are in cornering the agreements. Many companies will be alert this time," explained Narahari.

"That fellow Sundar had already sent agents to make the bookings," informed Harishchandra.

"Though Sundar sent his agents, our customers will not go to him," assured Dharmendra.

The ladies busied themselves in serving without taking any interest in business matters.

"We cannot be complacent and depend on our customers. The ryots are choosing those who offer higher rate. We have to hurry up," said Kamalnath.

Sulochana's hand hit a glass inadvertently and it fell off the table spilling water. Narahari looked at her annoyed. She quickly cleaned the table with the pallu end of her saree.

"S.H.3, H.R. 70-50, THX-R.R-2, TMXR.R-3 Hema, G.T.S. G.T.4, G.T-7, varieties are now in crop. I telephoned to Eshwar to

report to me which variety is good for purchasing this season," explained Narahari.

"We have our company's variety 'Santosh'. It has no rival," said Kamalnath addressing his father-in-law.

"No company has so far released its own variety. I learn that a Gujarat company has plans to do so," said Dharmendra.

"Whatever it is, we may have to increase our investments this time," opined Kamalnath.

"None of you need discuss money matters," said Narahari curtly.

"That is not it. If necessary a loan has..."

Dharmendra was cut short by Narahari.

"I'll attend to it. You think of work-plans," in a reprimanding tone. Everyone kept silent.

The call bell buzzed. The servant went out and opened the door. "Sir, Eshwar sir is at the door," said the servant. "Ask him in," replied Narahari

"Come in and join us," said Narahari showing him a chair at the table.

"The report is ready. Our varieties..." he tried to take out the papers.

"Eat food with us first. Let's look into the papers later," said Narahari without raising his head.

Roopa's bangles made a jingling noise as she served food. Dharmendra looked up at her. She quickly pushed her bangles up her arm. The children were bored with the business talk of the menfolk.

Bhargava pressed quietly Sharavani's foot thinking it was Phani's. Shravani pinched Phani. As Phani looked up in pain, Tulya laughed at him. Phani thought it was Tulya who pinched him. He tried to reach her foot with his leg and bent forward. His hand hit a dish on the table

and it dashed against the sambar bowl. The sambar bowl in its turn fell on the water jug. The jug lost its balance and all the water poured into the vessel with curd. The curd vessel dropped into the lap of Dharmendra. He tired to get up and in the hurry dislocated the entire table top. In a moment their clothes got soiled by curries, chutney, sambar, curd etc. The papers in Eshwar's hand also got wet. Narahari was very much annoyed at what happened. He stood up.

Mohan and Ragahvi stared at the children. The disaster took place in a trice.

Bhargava was all sweat but maintained his calm. Phani trembled. Tulya drew lines with her finger on the table as if she knew nothing. Sharavni looked blank. Sulochana, Rupa, Harini and Arundhati did not know what happened. The servant Pasha recovered quickly and started to clean the mess. The ladies also recovered and tried to remove the vessels. "Stop," said Narahari in a quiet tone. Everyone stood still in their places.

"Who has done this?" he asked the children. They all looked at each other, nodded their heads in the negative and stood bowing their heads. Raghavi was scared that they would all give her out as they did previously. She looked at Mohan timorously. Mohan understood her predicament. "That is not it chinnanna garu, ..." he began ." I didn't ask you,",said Narahari. After a pause Bhargava came forward and nodded his head to denote it was he who was responsible for the mishap. All the children did the same after him. Narahari got wild at the children. "All of you clean the dining table and the floor," he ordered. "Some of you come to this side and do the cleaning," he instructed. Shravani and Tulya collected the napkins and began to clean the clothes. Bhargava approached Eshwar to clean his clothes. Eshwar stepped aside. "No. Don't move. Let him clean your shirt," said Narahari.

Bhargava tickled Eswar's waist as he cleaned his shirt. Eshwar could not control laughter but dared not laugh. The children collected under

the dining table and began to giggle. Mohan and Raghavi did not know what to do. They quietly began to walk towards their rooms.

Tulya threw a tomato slice under the feet of Eshwar who was about to go into the hall. He stepped on it and lost his balance and slipped. While slipping his hand touched Raghavi. Harishchandra got terribly angry.

"Please walk carefully looking at the people around you," said Harishchandra softly but firmly.

"I'm sorry Harishchandra garu. The tomato slice...."

"It's alright! Get along! Get along!" said Mohan and led Eshwar away.

Raghavi joined the children. The ladies went into the kitchen. That was Narahari's style of functioning. His word should be carried out whether he was present or not. He would not scold anyone if they have not obeyed him. Each one would ask the other why his word was not obeyed.

The children called Pasha. "Pasha clean karo," they ordered him. They began to accuse each other for the mishap. Raghavi helped Pasha. After the cleaning was completed all the children walked into the hall. The children changed their dress and sat on the cots with books in their hands. Raghavi too sat on her cot exclaiming. "The danger has passed." She felt elated at the unity of the children. The atmosphere would have been different if it was known who did the mischief. The elders would have brain-washed the culprit giving a lecture on 'manners' until he or she went into a depression. All the children would then go into a gloom. That was why she felt relieved. Though all the children were mischievous, they took care that no one of them got caught. They were afraid of the 'treatment' they would receive from the elders. But they did not give up being naughty. After a while Mohan reclined on his bed. Ragahvi said, "good night annaiah," switching off the lights.

All the children cooed in a chorus "good night" covering themselves up in their blankets.

"Good night". A loud voice. They all looked from out of their rugs. Anil and Ajanta laughed standing at the window of their house. "Why is it these days these two have been greeting us ' good night' stylishly? They were not talking to us until recently," murmured the children among themselves. Mohan got up and closed the window.

*****

Narahari was in his office. He was feeling impatient.

He received two phone calls and he instructed the receptionist not to connect any call to him.

Senior assistant Srinivas approached him. "Sir, there is a cheque to be drawn today." Narahari cut him short. "The moment you all arrive at the office you start making humble demands. There is no hurry for those cheques now. You can draw them tomorrow. Is Sandeep available in the office?"

"He has not yet come," murmured Srinivas.

"When will he come?"

"I don't know sir."

"What else do you know? Office work does not mean burrowing your heads into the files and papers. You should also know what's happening around you and what is to happen," shouted Narahari at Srinivas. Srinivas knew why Narahari was cross that day. He knew that if he spoke he would be branded a chatterbox. If he kept silent he would be called a dumb creature. It was disadvantageous both ways. He decided to keep silent. The problem was not trivial. It was a question of twenty lakh rupees. "It's alright. You may go," said Narahari. Srinivas walked out with relief. When the junior assistant 'Naveen took the general ledger for posting orders, Srinivas transferred the anger of the boss on Naveen.

"What do I know about it? You all ask me for everything. Our boss is in a terrible mood today. Don't try to do things in a haste today. He will scold me. It appears none of you want me to enjoy some leisure. Won't you be satisfied without annoying me?"

The other clerks giggled at his predicament. Naveen in his turn, not being able to attack his senior, shouted at the office assistant, "I asked you to get me white papers half an hour ago. Why didn't you get them?"

"They were not available sir, I'll get them in a trice," said Balaraju, the office assistant. "I know you won't carry out orders. Unless you are hit by a clenched fist you won't get any movement."

Balaraju understood the situation. "What you say is very good sir! By the by, with whom is our big boss annoyed today?" he asked Naveen.

"How do you know all that? Don't stand before me posing as a future leader," snarled Naveen to Balaraju.

"One morsel of rice will reveal whether the rice has been cooked well, sir. The state of the office can be described on looking at you," said Balaraju in a relaxed manner. Just then a beggar appealed for alms at the gate. "Is this the time for you to seek alms? Get out, you and your dirty hair!" shouted Balaraju at the object of charity feeling happy at his authority. But the beggar was not afraid of him. He had no need to be irritated as he was not an employee.

"Don't bark at me when you cannot give alms. If you can help, help me. If not, ask me to go," moralized the beggar as he left the place. The office staff observed Prasad walking up the steps and buried their heads in files. Srinivas went into Narahari's room in a hurry holding a file in his hand. Narahari got angry on looking at the file.

"How many times should I tell you that I won't go through files today? Didn't I tell you not to disturb me?"

"Prasad has come... I wanted to inform you about his arrival." Srinivas said hesitantly.

On hearing Prasad's name, Narahari got up suddenly from his seat. "Ask the driver and Prasad to be in the car. I am going home. Don't disturb me today even if there is urgency," he told Srinivas. Srinivas quickly got ready the car. Narahari sat in the car and banged the car door shut. Srinivas was startled at the sound and walked back into the office. He observed Balaraju smiling at him. "Don't you have any other work than looking at the road to know what's happening there?" he hissed at Balaraju.

"Promise sir! I didn't see anything. Not even your getting startled," said Balaraju mock seriously.

*****

Raghavi was watering the lawn. Pasha was removing the weeds around the plants. The children had returned from school and were getting ready to go to their tuitions.... As the public exams were round the corner their brains were getting heated up with tension. There was no chance to relax or enjoy some entertainment.

Someone said "Hello!" Raghavi looked back. Pasha looked at her holding the sods of earth he had cleared around the plants.

"Attend to your work first. You can learn English later," she said to Pasha. Pasha did not understand why she said so to him. He lowered his head and busied himself in his work. Again "Hello." Raghavi looked round this time. She saw Anil of the neighbouring house on the other side of the compound wall. The children also saw him and stared at him with an expression like C.I.D. officers as they stare at thieves.

"Come! Come! All of you! It is Anil, the marwadi who thought it below his dignity to talk to us. Observe how he is trying to make friends with Raghavi," said Sharavani calling all the children. They all crowded around Raghavi.

"Hello! Here! I am greeting you!" said Anil to Raghavi ignoring the children. She turned towards Anil with the hosepipe in her hand.

Anil got sprayed with water from the hosepipe. He lost balance at the force of he jet and fell off the stool behind the wall. The children began to dance saying "Cheyya! Cheyya !"

Raghavi rushed to the wall and looked over. "Sorry! Really sorry!" she said.

Anil got upon the stool again. "It's okay. The first sight is very touching. Any how, nice to meet you. I am Anil. What 's your name?" he asked.

"Raghavi! I am Raghavi. I am sorry. My people will scold me if I talk to strangers," she said turning back. The children tapped their foreheads saying, "Ooh! Sixteenth century."

"Hello! Raghavi garu! You needn't talk. You are Andhras aren't you?" asked Anil.

"As though he doesn't know. What a pose!" murmured the children.

"Yes," Raghavi said turning to him.

"You prepare avvakai, the mango pickle, very tastily. Don't you?"

"What! Avvakai?" Raghavi said surprised.

"Yeah! Avvakai! I mean the pickle."

"Oh! Aavakai you mean? Yes."

"Ptch! Our candidate just says 'yes' all the time and nothing else." The children expressed displeasure.

"Okay. Tell me something else. What are you studying?'

"M.B.A."

"I am also in the final year of M.B.A." he replied joyfully.

"Aha!"

"Your hobbies?" he asked wondering whether she would tell him.

"Nothing! Helping at home. Keeping the house neat. Tending the plants. Clearing children's doubts, watching the T.V. drawing sceneries now and then."

"Wow! You have so many hobbies and yet you say 'nothing'. Nice hobbies. Okay! Your friends ... I mean girl friends, boy friends..."

"Oh god! I have no boy friends. My people will kill me. I have girl friends in my village. Not here." Water was flowing through the hosepipe she held in her hand. The lawn turned slushy.

Raghavi garu! Do you know! You are very beautiful," he said looking directly into her eyes. She felt very much disturbed.

"I'll get going," she said throwing the pipe away. Anil did not understand her. He wondered whether his words hurt her. After a pause he exclaimed, "Hello! Avvakaya! One minute. Can you read this?" he showed an ad balloon hanging up in the air. It was an ad by a soap making company, "FOREVER I LIKE YOU", written on it.

Raghavi stared at the balloon...

"Can you read the words on the balloon from this distance? Impossible," he said challenging her, putting up his thumb.

"I can read it. I have no sight defect... for...ever...i...like you" she read stressing every word.

"Thank you! I too," he said pointing his fingers at her.

Raghavi realised that he fooled her. The children, who had gone in, stood at the window. Bhargava shouted "I three." Shravani cried "I four". Phani said " I six. Tulya followed" I seven".

Anil got confused at what the children did. He waved his hand saying, "Bye!" and went away. Raghavi bent her head and went in. The children surrounded her.

"Oh god! Aunty! You can't be so innocent here as in our village. These people fool you here making you say, ' I like you' " they cautioned her.

"I don't know all that. By the by, why did you not go to your tution?" she asked angrily. They heard the car arriving. "Grandpa has come!" they signalled to each other and kept silent.

They saw Narahari going into the office with Prasad, shouting at him loudly. Observing that their grandpa was in an angry mood, they quietly went away to their tution collecting their cycles. Raghavi walked into the kitchen. Harini and Roopa were cutting beans into pieces. She joined them.

*****

Harishchandra, Dharmendra, Kamal, Eshwar and Mohan were sitting in the lawn.

Narahari was reading a paper. He was a little restless.

"Since how long has he been careless in his duties?" Harishchandra opened the topic.

"Perhaps for four months," Dharmendra guessed.

"That means he has not been verifying cheques for nearly four months," said Kamal. Narahari did not like Kamal saying so. He did not like such statements.

"Sometimes, owing to pressure of work, such things do happen. But it doesn't mean he should cheat us. Anyway, we are not going to allow him to get away with it. What does the youngling of a crow know about the strength of an eagle?"

"What do you propose to do?" asked Dharmendra.

"What else? We will give a police complaint. It is not a simple affair. Nearly twenty lakh rupees! It is a case of cheating." Narahari suggested the solution. He had a remedy for every problem even before the problem arose. He keeps answers written out for the problems that may arise in the future. The future keeps moving in his mind along with his quick moving thoughts.

"We too may have to run around courts if we decide to give a police complaint and seek the help of law," said Mohan.

"That's true. If you file a case, you'll have to keep visiting the court. Others have to attend to their work and business."

"Before we think of going to court we could first threaten him and find out what he did with the money and retrieve it. If he refuses to surrender the money, we can think of going to court. Why use the most powerful weapon on a sparrow in the beginning itself?" suggested Kamalnath. Harishchandra agreed with him.

"Then attend to it yourself," said Narahari and went in. He always acted like that. He never spoke more than what was necessary. It was the telegraphic method.

After he left there was silence for sometime and Harishchandra asked, "How did it happen?"

" 'Sir' always hands the cheques to Prasad. This time also he did so. Whenever Prasad received five or six cheques, he must have kept away one cheque. He collected such cheques. When a large amount was credited in the bank he drew the money. He might have withdrawn nearly fifteen lakh rupees from the bank within these four months."

"How did father-in-law come to know of this?" asked Kamalnath.

"When 'sir' sent Srinivas to the bank to draw the money he was told that there was no balance in the account. When he telephoned, the bank officials verified the counter signatures and found out that Prasad had drawn the money. The cheques with those numbers were not credited in our ledgers. When the cheques, which were not credited, were counted, the truth was out. When 'sir' pulled him up he resigned and left," explained Eshwar.

"He has done it in a very clever manner. Prasad counter-signs the cheques each time. So it doesn't' raise any doubts. The only consolation is we could detect in our ledges the cheques which were not credited But this is not legal evidence. Just a suspicion. That is all," said Kamalnath.

"Then will not the case be strong?" Dharmendra expressed his doubt.

"No. We can't do anything by going to court. That's why Prasad resigned boldly and left. He planned it very cleverly," replied Kamalnath.

Harishchandra called a number using his mobile phone. "Hello! This is Harishchandra speaking. Can you find out if our Senior Assistant Prasad had purchased any properties recently? Please let me know."

None who were there knew to whom he telephoned. He too did not reveal it. So no one asked him about it.

"His transactions will not be in cash. If it is so, it will amount to legal evidence. Then we can catch him easily. If the dates of the issue of the cheques and the dates of credit in his account of the cheques tally, it comes in handy as convincing evidence," explained Kamalnath.

"But Prasad is not so foolish. He wouldn't have acted like that," said Eshwar.

"Psch! The snake had been fed with milk." Dharmendra said feeling disconsolate.

"Tit for tat. I'll go with my friends and collect the money," there was emotion in Mohan's voice.

"Don't be hasty. Let us consider together what is to be done and then do it. You know where he lives. Go to his house tomorrow morning and bring him here saying there is some work to be done," instructed Harishchandra to Mohan.

"That's correct. It is good to decide any issue through talks," Dharmendra supported his brother.

"How easily he deceived us!" they all expressed surprise for a while. "How quickly he got caught!" they all said with happy smiles.

*****

Dharmendra was silent and turned away towards the wall. Harini turned him towards her. "What is the matter? You and father-in-law seem to be terribly agitated. What happened?" she asked her husband.

"Why all these tensions for you? Atleast you people can enjoy some relaxation without bothering yourself with our problems," replied Dharmendra patting her head. He asked her to sleep off.

"We should be in the know of things. Shouldn't we?"

"No need Harini. You will not achieve anything with that knowledge. Your mood will get spoiled. You made the sweets today. Didn't you. They're so tasty," said Dharmendra with a happy smile to change the topic.

"Don't try to change the topic. I know what Prasad did. Having joined service like an innocent man he turned into a villain," said Harini smiling and switched off the light.

*****

"I was afraid to look at father-in-law today. He has been tensed up since morning. Why?" asked Roopa giving Harishchandra soump.

"Chinnanna could not bear the cheating by the person whom he had brought up since his childhood. Perhaps he wouldn't have felt so bad had Prasad taken the money as investment.

"What happened actually?" Roopa asked him to know the details.

"Something happened. He deceived us. We'll collect the amount. Okay? Do you want to know anything more? "he said and turned away from Roopa.

"Aru! I kept some papers here. They are missing. There should be a cheque book also there," said Kamalnath searching for the papers.

"They are here. By the by, chinnanna was talking of cheques. What is it all about?" asked Arundhati.

"It appears father-in-law gave Prasad some cheques. Prasad fellow quietly encashed them. We have to collect the money," said Kamalnath placing his hands on his wife's shoulders.

She took his hands and placed them in her hap. "He is generally very careful. Why did it happen?"

"It is overconfidence. No one should be trusted fully in business dealings. No one should also be suspected too much. Because Prasad has been with us since his boyhood, there was some negligence," replied Kamalnath caressing his wife's ringlets.

"Will it lead to complications now?"

"It'll ," he replied very casually.

"How then?"

"Silly! Such situations arise handling huge turnovers. These all are part of the game. But father-in-law should be careful hereafter. If not there'll be problems."

"I am sure he will take all precautions as he tasted a bitter experience once."

Kamalnath couldn't control his laughter. "So you are a practical thinker in the king's court. You will be of great help in giving suggestions." He laughed again heartily. Arundhati too joined him in the laughter.

*****

The children were all lying on their cots. The cot of Raghavi and Mohan were side by side. Raghavi was reading a book. Mohan covered his eyes with his hands. Raghavi observed him. "Anniah, is it headache? Do you want me to apply Amruthanjan? she asked.

"No need! I am just restless. That's all. You carry on with your reading."

"Uncle! You are feeling bad as Prasad deceived us. Am I right?" asked Bhargava.

"Shut up! He is planning the strategy to fight him down. Why do you disturb him?" snarled Phani.

"You too shut up! He is wondering who should be the next senior Assistant Manager. There is no need for your harangue now," Shravani shouted.

"All of you shut up! He is taking rest after handing over everything to elders," decided Tulya.

"Correct! One shouldn't think too much on any subject. There are elders to think and take decision. It is our job to implement their decisions," explained Mohan.

"Suppose the decision goes wrong!" Bhargava expressed his doubt.

"They should be set aside," suggested Mohan.

"If someone insists to know why they go wrong sometimes?" asked Phani.

"It should be explained clearly," Mohan.

"If they don't heed?" asked Tulya moving her thumb finger sideways.

"You should escape quietly, that's all. You shouldn't attack".

"Then how can work be done?" Shravani expressed her doubt.

Suddenly a stone came whirling into the room. Another hit the window. The glass pane broke and the pieces fell on them all. Mohan sprang and reached the window. A third stone hit Raghavi on her forehead. She cried in pain. "Lie flat on your bellies," shouted Mohan. Raghavi's forehead was bleeding. The children quickly lay flat on the floor. Stones continued to be pelted into the hall making a lot of noise. A stone hit the T.V. screen and it broke with a heavy thud. Another stone hit the dressing table breaking the mirror. Shravani shouted aloud and the boys rushed to the window.

"Who is that idiot?" shouted Mohan. The pelting stones stopped. Everyone rushed into the hall at the shouts of children. The girls were still lying on the floor on their bellies. The hall was full of stones and

broken glass pieces. Raghavi was still bleeding. Shravani pressed her hand hard on her forehead. Harishchandra, Dharmendra and Kamalnath were terribly angry on seeing blood on Raghavi's and Shravani's faces.

Harishchandra rushed to the window,"Who are the cowards there?" he shouted angrily.

"If you have guts come out and talk," said a voice from outside. The boys looked at each other at the challenge.

"Who are you? How dare you call us out! If we come out nothing will be left of you!" shouted Mohan.

"You rascals! Come out! Why do you shout like women from inside?" Two voices from outside. The brothers went in and came out into the hall with cricket bats and hockey sticks. Narahari stopped them at the door. "No! Don't! Let them shout. Let's take action tomorrow morning," he said.

"Why do you stop us when they are challenging us using abusive language?" asked Harishchandra emotionally.

"We should first know who they are. Let them go out and find, " suggested Kamalnath.

"I know who they are! Don't go out now," ordered Narahari. With that everyone settled down on sofas. The girls stood in a corner very much agitated. Raghavi's head was bandaged. There was a sudden silence in the hall. Voices from outside were still being heard.

"Do you know who they are?" asked Harishchandra.

"Yes. I do," said Narahari quietly.

"Do you know that they would attack us?" asked Kamal.

"I know."

"You could have given us a hint earlier." Dharmendra annoyed.

"I didn't inform you purposefully."

The voices continued shouting. "You fellows... you feminine creatures! Come out. If you are men and have a moushtache come out. Let's decide who is wrong! You good-for-nothing fellows! We'll show you what we are, come out...."

Fingers tightened on the bats and blood congealed in their hands. But no one could overshoot Narahari's order. They all stood motionless. Narahari closed his eyes and sat taking the support of the wall. Those who threw stones went on shouting for some time and left. No one slept in the house that night. Raghavi developed headache by morning.

'I came to the city crying hoarse at home in the village. What are these quarrels? What is all this violence? In our village there were no problems even if we slept in the open at nights. The situation is very bad here. I'll leave tomorrow itself. I can as well stay there and study,' thought Raghavi. She remembered her pedananna, Nageswara Rao. She was in the habit of sitting supporting her back against his and sleep off without scratching his back. This recollection made her cry. She cried with her head resting on her knees. Shravani too cried observing her. Tulya also started crying. Bhargava and Mohan tried to console them.

'We have subjected these girls and children to a lot of tension in the name of business and earning money' realised the menfolk. Narahari sat in the hall throughout the night.

*****

In the cool A.C. room Anil was lying on his bed in his lily-white dress. He quietly moved his head and pressed the switch. Melodious and lilting music, as if birds were twittering in pleasant breeze, as though water was flowing down softly in a water-fall, filled the room. He listened to the music closing his eyes. He remembered the innocent face of Raghavi dressed in skirt and voni, the half saree. He opened his eyes and turned aside. Ajanta, his sister was in deep sleep on her cot beside his.

"Good morning, Anju!" he tried to wake her up.

"Good morning, bhaiah! Please, don't disturb me," said Ajanta lazily turning away. He went and opened the window.

He saw the hall opposite. It looked like an open theatre. Glass panes of the window frames were missing. He saw everyone sleeping in the hall. He saw Raghavi sleeping with a bandage around her head.

"Hello! What happened?" he shouted loudly. He could see clear signs of an attack. He had no acquaintance with the elders of the house except the children. In a city no one bothers about the neighbours. So he could not hit up acquaintance with them. Ever since Raghavi's arrival he developed the habit of looking at their house. He liked her innocent and quiet nature and wanted to make friends with her. So he tried to talk to her. He realised that some struggle or something took place in the neighbour's house and rushed out. "What happened son?" asked his father as he came out.

"I think a decoity took place in the opposite house. Look at the windows daddy."

"Phone them up and find out," said his father. Anil dialed the number looking up the directory.

"Hello!" answered Narahari.

"One minute, sir! Papa, uncle's on the line, you talk to him," said Anil and handed the phone to his father.

"Hello! Namaste saab! I am your neighbour Ratanlal speaking! Was there any galata in your house last night?" he asked.

"Namaste! Yes! We have given a police complaint also! Anyhow thanks," said Narahari and kept quiet. Ratanlal waited for a few moments expecting Narahari to say something more. As Narahari did not continue the conversation, "Okay...see you," he said and put the telephone down.

Narahari decided to tell only to the police and no one else about this incident. In such cases, information gets twisted from mouth to mouth leading to misunderstandings and new meanings.

"What happened, papa?" asked Anil anxiously.

"He is not revealing anything. But something has happened. He says, he gave a police complaint," said Anil's father and walked away reading the newspaper.

Anil was confused. Everyone was sleeping. He thought for a while. He tore a piece of paper, made an arrow, put it between his fingers and released it with great force at the window opposite. The paper arrow hit Raghavi on her foot. She shrieked aloud closing her eyes. All the children woke up. Everyone rushed into the hall.

"What happened?" asked Harishchandra.

"Stone! A stone fell on me!" said Raghavi crying. Everyone searched for a stone. There was no stone near her cot. They thought she had a nightmare.

"Everyone is terribly shaken. Why add to it with your shrieks? The children, younger than you, are more courageous," chided Sulochana. The elders went back into their rooms.

Raghavi turned to the children. She found them calm and composed. She hit her head with her palm in anger and was about to lie down. She saw the paper arrow and opened it. She read the word "Hello!" written on it. She looked at the window quickly.

"It's mine," said Anil smiling. He signalled to ask, "How are you?" Raghavi nodded to suggest she was well. "What happened to your head?" Anil asked in his sign language. She did not understand. He went in and rushed back to the window with a handkerchief around his head and asked "What?" showing his bandaged head. Raghavi picked up a stone at the window and threw at him. It hit Anil on his forehead. That was the answer to his question.

"Oooh!" he cried in pain. His mother rushed to him in great anxiety. Ajanta also ran to him. On seeing them all Raghavi quickly ran to her cot and covered herself fully in the blanket.

'Oh god! I wanted to show him by demonstration what happened. But I hit him with the stone. Even before I could say sorry, all his people gathered there. God knows what he thinks of me. The other day I sprayed him with water. Today I hit him with a stone! Cha! Cha! I have no manners!' thought Raghavi and felt miserable for a long time.

She turned to look at the children. They were all sleeping soundly after a tense night.

'Thank god! No one has seen me. If anyone had seen me hitting Anil with the stone, I would have been killed. Poor Anil. The stone seems to have hit him hard.' she thought and quietly got up from the cot and looked at the window. She saw him standing with a real bandage around his forehead and rubbing his forehead. Her fingers touched her bandage.

Anil threw another paper arrow saying, "Hello! Avvakai! You seem to lack 'hypothalamus'!"

Raghavi took a pen and wrote something and shot the same arrow into his window.

Anil opened it anxiously. 'I have too much of 'karisal,' it read.

Anil showed his thumb finger to mean 'well done' and closed the window. Raghavi returned to her cot and covered herself with the blanket. She felt happy and was about to sleep. "This scene is enough for today sister! Sleep off happily," said Bhargava in a whisper.

"Sister has no capacity to create greater scenes than this. You sleep off Mr. George Bush!" said Tulya.

"Both of you don't have commonsense - don't observe the private scenes between two people and enjoy it. Or else you wouldn't do what you did. Sleep off you fools," said Phani.

They all sat up on their cots smiling! Signs of last night's tension was not seen on their faces.

"Congratulations sister! Carry on," they all said in a chorus.

"Shut up... all of you. I don't know anything!" she said closing her eyes.

"Don't you know anything avvakai! Avvakai!" they all said in chorus clapping their hands and making fun of her. Children are like flowers. They close into buds at minor incidents If a little water is sprinkled they blossom forth. They don't have negative thinking. So they can keep themselves happy always. They keep the surroundings happy. That's why the saying: 'stay among the flowers or keep company with children. Then your heart will be filled with laughter and gladness.'

Mohan rushed into the hall at the noise made by them. "Shh! Don't shout. Everybody is tense inside," he said. There was a sudden silence.

*****

Narahari was sitting at the round table in his office. There was silence in the room. The phone was ringing now and then. He had learnt from experience that successes and failures follow alternately in life. They both should be accepted as part of life. Today's anxiety will not solve tomorrow's problems. That was the policy of his. He learnt to face problems silently and fight them or accept them silently.

"Why did Narendra act foolishly?" asked Harishchandra in surprise.

"This is cheating the government. The punishment will be severe," Dharmendra expressed his opinion.

"So that was the reason why he came in the night with his gang to see that their affair did not get focused," Kamal said.

"It is true. If we had gone out, there would have been a scuffle," agreed Mohan.

"Not just a scuffle. One of you would have gone to jail on a murder charge," said Narahari calmly. Everyone expressed surprise and agreed that it could have happened so.

"Yes. They had planned to drag us out and involve us in a quarrel. They would have killed one of their own men in the melee and would have hoisted the killing on one of you," continued Narahari in a quiet tone.

Everybody murmured " my god!"

"That's why you were so calm," said Mohan. Narahari nodded 'yes'.

"I didn't tell you then what it was as I knew you would be tensed up. I wanted you to be calm till it was all over," replied Narahari.

"We should have sought police protection before hand," said Kamal.

"What you say is okay. But we should have some evidence."

"Uncle! How did you learn about their plan?" asked Harishchandra.

"The clerk who works with Sundar told me. He heard Sundar talking to Narendra on the phone in the office. He telephoned to me then. I didn't believe him in the beginning. I didn't expect Narendra to dare in that manner. I kept quiet thinking there was no need to make an issue of it. I learnt that the clerk's information was correct by last night's incident," explained Narahari.

"Then shall we let off Narendra?" asked Harishchandra.

"The police would have arrested him by now for having cheated the government. I spoke to Commissioner Papa Rap," said Narahari.

Eshwar turned up then.

"Thank god! You all are okay. I heard some bad news," said Eshwar. "Sundar supporting Narendra pains me," said Narahari.

"What actually happened? Could I know if you don't mind?" asked Harishchandra.

"You know that I am the Secretary of A.R.D.R. Government sanctioned money for rural development. The D.Ds were received on

the name of the Secretary. Narendra opened an account on his name stating that he was the Secretary and used the money. I too didn't know about it until I took up the Officer's Rural Programme. When they asked me about the D.Ds, I told them that they were not transferred to my account. Then they acted and found out the truth. Narendra's deception was exposed. He was afraid he would lose his job and pressurized me to accept the fault as mine. I refused to do so. He grew angry and planned to create a situation and send one of you to jail. I don't understand how Sundar got into this affair," explained Narahari.

"Will fruits fall to the ground if a squirrel shakes the tree? Please don't give importance to Sundar sir," said Eshwar.

"No, Eshwar. The effect of this will be seen later. Why he took interest in this affair will be known in the future. It may be because of his jealousy in business matters. It may also be a strategy to defeat and beat us at the personal level as he could not beat us at the business level," Narahari tried to assess the situation. Those who were present there looked at each other at his analysis.

"Sir, I have brought Prasad ," said Srinivas walking in.

"Send him in," said Narahari. Prasad walked towards the door hesitantly and stopped dead looking at them all.

"Come in Prasad," invited Narahari in a friendly tone. Prasad approached him hesitating. Narahari signalled him to take a chair. Prasad sat on the edge of the chair.

"No one is asking you why you cut the branch that gave you shade. I want to know what your solution is for what happened," said Narahari. Everyone looked at Prasad angrily. Their reaction depended on his reply.

"Sir, it was a mistake sir," he replied softly.

"Okay. Because you have been caught you are a thief. Or else you would have been a lord. Is that so?" questioned Harishchandra angrily.

"No sir. It's not like that. I just don't know why I acted like that," he said more softly.

"If you can reach, it is the hair. If not, it is the feet. Are you not ashamed to have worked with us with honey in your words and poison in your heart?" asked Dharmendra vehemently.

"No sir. It is not at all like that. I did it at the instigation of Sundar. Please forgive me sir," said Prasad joining both his palms.

They were all surprised at his confession. 'So that is the matter. We didn't give importance to Sundar thinking he was innocent. Now we realise he is putting his finger in every pie and interfering in our affairs' thought everyone.

"That's alright. What did you do with the money?" asked Harishchandra.

"Look at these papers, sir. I bought a house." He handed the papers to Harishchandra and continued. "The rest of the money is in the bank. I'll draw it now and give it to you. Please don't do me any harm sir. Please let me off for this time sir," he begged.

"Prasad! I'll send Dharmendra with you. Draw the money and give it to him. As for your job, what will the staff think of such a person like you, if taken back into service? There is no question of entertaining you in this office. I am letting you off without a police complaint. You may go," said Narahari.

The office staff learnt a good lesson. Prasad had cut the branch on which he was sitting. Prasad lost his honour, also the money as well as the job. Everyone sighed with relief as the problem got solved easily.

But everyone realised that Sundar was planning his moves carefully.

*****

Jayalakshmi was eager to spend some time with the children and pestered her husband to send her to the city. Nageswara Rao sent Suryadeva along with her to keep her company. She took with her balls made of black gram flour mixed with ghee and jaggery and different varieties of savories the children liked.

Raghavi felt happy with Jayalakshmi's arrival. The children had a busy time with the eats their aunty brought.

All the womenfolk were in the kitchen busy attending to their duties. Jayalakshmi was washing the leaf vegetable. "I learnt that people from the city attacked our house. I was very much shocked when I was told that the children received injuries. We should all have stayed at one place. Instead we are scattered at different places without help from each other. Your brother-in-law did not sleep the whole night because of anxiety. Sudarshana and myself sat up the whole night," said Jayalkshmi to Solochana. Raghavi was about to eat the sour leaves of the vegetable. Jayalakshmi prevented it saying, "Don't eat the raw leaves, your teeth will get sour."

"People gossip like that about imaginary things. They make mountains of mole hills," said Sulochana switching on the mixer.

"Why! We too were frightened," said Roopa.

"I sweated all over," Harini cooed.

"Believe me! I am not getting sleep at all in the nights," Arundhati chimed in.

"You don't know how much I was frightened. Ours has always been a happy home. The incident was definitely a result of some evil eye. When I go back I'll consult Shastri garu and perform Shani pooja," said Jayalaksahmi holding again Raghavi's hand stopping her from eating the sour leaves.

"There are no vegetables for curry," Roopa reported to Sulochana.

"Then tell Pasha," suggested Harini.

"I think he is not available. Raghavi! Will you go and get vegetables. The market is not far." said Sulochana.

"Why send her alone? I'll keep company with her," offered Jayalakshmi getting up.

"By the by, you have thinned down like a lamp post. I can hold your waist in my palm. Are you not using ghee at all?" she asked Raghavi seizing her up.

"I am fine, peddamma. Though I am like a pumpkin, I look like a reed to your eyes. Why did not pedananna accompany you?" asked Raghavi.

"Do you think he will leave that house? Moreover he does not like the city. He always talks about you. He always feels that you should be by him.

"I too like our village. I don't feel like staying here."

"What's wrong with this place? You'll forget everything if you go to the college. It's okay. Get going to the market quickly," said Sulochana to Raghavi. Turning to Jayalakshmi who was about to start," she can go alone. It is not far. Help me with this flour," said Sulochana.

*****

Raghavi was walking fast with the bag in her hand. "Hello avvakai!" she turned her head. She saw Anil smiling at her.

"Please don't call me by that name."

"Okay. I won't. Where are you going?"

"To the market."

"I wanted to telephone to you. I am glad I met you.

"Why? I didn't hit you intentionally. It happened unexpectedly. If you tell my people about it, they'll kill me." Raghavi was very much agitated.

"Silly! Not for that. I wanted to invite you to our house," said Anil smiling.

"Okay! Do you go to movies?" he continued.

"In our place we all used to go together. But here the children don't find time." In the meanwhile they reached the market.

"Is that so? How do you like 'Dil se'?"

"It's a nice movie."

"How do you like the song ,"Hei ajnabi tubhi kabhi..?" ' he asked casually. He wanted to find her tastes.

"I like light songs," replied Raghavi buying vegetables.

"Oh! I see! What kind of light songs?" he asked picking up the vegetables that fell on the ground.

"Like the song "Won't you tell me that you love me?" in the movie "This is love." Raghavi replied paying the vendor.

"Really?" asked Anil looking sharply into her eyes.

He looked intently at her. 'Why does he look piercingly at me? Like the fishing hook piercing the heart of the fish?' she thought. 'Perhaps it is his normal look' she tried to answer herself. His eyes were smiling at her. She crooned the lines of the song within herself once again. She understood the meaning of his smile.

" I repeated to you only the words of the song!" she said a little flustered. She was afraid that he might mistake her as having asked him a question.

"Achcha! I didn't say anything now!" he replied still smiling.

"Everything is okay. But why do you address me 'andi' , 'andi' respectfully as if I were an elderly man?" he asked.

"We address strangers like that. In our place it is the tradition."

"But I don't want to be addressed like that. Please stop calling me 'andi'". He continued," Anil, my name is Anil," he said stressing on Anil. "Don't 'andi' me!" he added.

"Okay, Anil." Replied Raghavi with a twinkle in her eye.

"Superb, simply superb! It is thrilling to hear my name through your lips," he said looking into her eyes. She felt a little shy. She bent her head with a shy smile. Sweet little flowers rolled out of her smile.

Anil felt like holding out both his palms to collect the flowers! He had gone round the country on tours. He had never come across this youthful sweetness anywhere. Raghavi appeared like a dahlia flower washed in snow. She resembled a beautiful red diamond etched in green velvet grass. He felt like looking at her just like that. He loved to listen to her parrot like talk in reply to his questions. Anil never experienced such feelings before. Whenever he met Raghavi, he didn't know why, he felt like that. He asked himself 'why?' many times. He did not find an answer.

"Do you remember the day I met and saw you first?" he asked.

"No", she nodded her head. She did not feel like asking when.

"Don't you want to know?" he asked after a pause.

'If I say 'no' he may not speak. If I say 'yes' he may think I have personal interest in him. What should I answer?' she thought and nodded her head side ways and up and down to express her inability to answer him.

"Okay! Nothing is lost If you don't want to know. It's all right. I won't misunderstand you." He looked sharply into her eyes again.

Raghavi was confused. She now nodded her head up and down to express her willingness to know.

"Will pearls roll down your lips if you talk? I am here to pick them up. I'll return your pearls to you... don't be afraid," Anil said laughing heartily.

"Thank you! Your looks make me feel uncomfortable Anil. I don't get words out. Please don't look at me like that," she said without hesitation. 'He will not desist from looking at me like that if I don't tell him plainly. How many times should I undergo the discomfort of being stared at like that. Now I have cured him of his disease!' she thought with relief.

"What? Do you think I am a thorn to prick you? You are imagining all sorts of things! I look casually and in a normal manner," he told her again with a piercing look.

'Why do I imagine? His looks do pierce me' she thought. Perhaps it is normal for him to look at people like that. Moreover he is explaining it clearly,' she answered herself and fluttered her eyelids. Anil felt as though a little bird fluttered its wings to dry, having got wet in the rain.

'It is said that girls provoke boys with their modern dress, fashions and the free behaviour. Why is it said so, I don't know. But these innocent girls without the help of the so called modernness, can shoot up the heartbeat of boys with the movement of their eyelids' thought Anil as he walked along.

"You haven't told me when you saw me first," said Raghavi breaking the silence.

"That day! The children surrounded you and started teasing you. Do you remember? You were looking confused. I started staring at you observing your confusion for a long time! I liked your confused state, indeed! You look very beautiful when you look flustered and confused. Do you know how? Like a dove taking off....like a frightened little deer.. like a fish swimming away with a squirm....in many more ways..." he stopped. ' Oh god! This chap is getting poetic. I have to be vary careful with him!' thought Raghavi. Then she spoke out. "It is like that in our house....elders frighten me with their seriousness! Children tease me and confuse me."

"Tease! You mean 'satana'?"

"Yes...yes...tease...tease..They tease.

" 'satana mujhe achcha lagthahai'! teasing is enjoyable. Isn't it?"

"I don't feel happy. That's why I don't like it," said Raghavi point blank.

"I see! If you are made to feel happy it will be okay! Then why don't you practice!" said Anil smiling. ' I don't understand why he keeps smiling all the time' she thought.

"Why do you always look serious as though George Bush had directed a missile at you?" asked Anil.

"I like such an expression," she replied thinking at the same time how he could read her thoughts so easily.

"If so you'll die soon. Do you know, laughter works as a tonic for good health. If you don't use the tonic called laughter, your life span gets reduced." In response Raghavi spread her lips and laughed artificially.

"Raghavi garu! Don't laugh artificially. Laugh easily, happily, naturally in a joyful manner. Don't hide the joy." He said laughing. This time she also laughed spontaneously.

"That's good...that way." Anil also laughed. The road took a turn and they both went their different ways. But they didn't notice that Nishant, Sundar's brother-in-law, saw them talking together.

*****

That night Raghavi embraced her aunty on the bed and gossiped with her until midnight.

When they both were murmuring between themselves, the children warned them a number of times, "Please allow us to sleep." "You sleep off," shouted Raghavi and continued her story-telling and gossip. She told her aunty in great detail about her desire to study in the college, how well she wanted to study. What all happened in the house after her arrival, including her acquaintance with Anil, her neighbour. Jayalakshmi slipped into sleep while responding her with 'hums' and 'ahas' to Raghavi during the narration.

*****

The office was lively with the staff who had gathered for their work. They had not yet started to 'look' into the files.

"Is Venkatesh sar available?" asked a boy, walking in.

"Aha! When did Venkatesh become a 'sar' asked Balaraju smiling. Venkatesh worked in the tea-stall. He got tea for the staff. He addressed everyone 'sir' and was chummy with the staff.

"Venkatesh fellow had not become a 'sar' until yesterday. But then, how did he become a 'sar' today!" exclaimed Balaraju laughing loudly.

The boy replied "Don't you know? He became a 'sar' since he tipped Dasara 'maamul'" and looked at Balaraju suggesting surprise at his ignorance.

"I see! Is that the fact! By the by, those who sell tea do not sit in offices and sell it. Go and ask on the footpath. People will tell you about him," Balaraju ridiculed the boy.

The boy got offended. "This fellow appears like the person who asks about expenditure at carnivals. I wonder who gave him a job here. None can understand his temperament," the boy murmured angrily and left.

"You never keep quiet. You kindle a fire unnecessarily," Srinivas reprimanded Balaraju.

"That's not it sir! Venkatesh fellow became a 'sir' by giving Dasara 'maamul' to this fellow. I too will tip him and become a 'sir'!" said Balaraju as if he discovered a great truth.

Everyone had a hearty laugh at his words. There was laughter where Balaraju was present. In the meanwhile Narahari entered the office and everyone stood up.

"You all seem to be very happy. What's the matter?" asked Narahari stopping for a moment.

They all nodded their heads to denote there was nothing special.

Unless one is happy one will not be able to enjoy the happiness of others. The entire staff heaved a sigh of relief that their boss wasn't in an angry mood.

Happiness is a mental state. It is exhibited through bodily expressions. The person who is happy can speak his mind freely. However great a genius, if a person lacks happiness he cannot exhibit his intellectual superiority. As a result, success may not be within his reach easily. That's why important decisions should not be taken when one is unhappy. Narahari knew this very well.

"Sir, they haven't sent a message to you," said Srinivas.

"Okay! Get the important files into my chamber," replied Narahari and went in.

Business means tension. There is no business without tension. In this age of keen competition tension is common and would be taxing.

Harishchandra and Kamal went in. Srinivas was asked by Narahari to meet him later.

"I think it is good to buy increased quality of Barni tobacco .Did you read the papers today? The government has increased the export quantity," said Harishchandra.

"We are buying Barni tobacco more than is necessary already. If by chance the rate falls we will lose the whole transaction," explained Narahari.

"I visited Kurnool. I arranged a meeting of all the ryots who grow the country variety. They may not turn up in large members this time," Kamal expressed his opinion.

"Then if we buy more of country tobacco instead of Barni tobacco, our profits will be more," decided Narahari. He asked Kamal whether the report on Virginia tobacco was received. "'No'," said Kamal.

"Let us give fertilizer loans to our ryots from our company. Then fertilizer sales and marketing will be done simultaneously. Convey this information to all the ryots in the districts."

"What you suggested is good. But we may have to pay to the tune of nearly a crore of rupees. If we distribute such a large amount, our turn-over may be effected," cautioned Harishchandra.

"I'll take care of the turn-over. You look after the works," replied Narahari annoyed.

Kamal and Harishchandra bent their heads a little distressed.

"Did you talk angrily with Sundar on the telephone yesterday?" asked Narahari.

"There was a quarrel. I had to talk firmly," explained Harishchandra.

" 'Words act as enemies to words just as fibrous food is a nuisance to the mouth' goes the saying. Whatever Sundar says or does, it is good for us to keep silent. If we react to whatever he does or says we would have given prominence to him unnecessarily."

"What I spoke about was not an unnecessary affair. I spoke firmly because it had some importance. A dog bite has to be given a chappal treatment," replied Harishchandra firmly.

"Who said it? Anyway, what was the need for you to get angry at him?"

"He knows we don't agree to his proposal. He purposefully broached the topic and tried to make fun of us saying that we will not be able to find a better match," replied Harishchandra moving the table-weight round and round.

"What reply did you give?"

"Don't we get angry if others talk about the girls of our family?" Kamal supported Harishchandra. He continued," How dare he ask our girl to be given in marriage to that good-for-nothing fellow?" Kamal grew emotional.

The menfolk are very sensitive in that house about the girls of the family. They can't control their anger. They don't think twice.

"In business enterprises our opponents should not get an inkling of our thoughts regarding what things we react emotionally and about which we react calmly. You will be caught if they can assess your weaknesses." Narahari explained business logic.

"Sorry. I don't like discussing family affairs in the office. If you don't mind, I will go," said Harishchandra and was about to leave.

"Okay! Then sit down. You proceed to Prakasham district. Kamal will go to Kurnool." Narahari changed the topic.

"I may need some money this time. We may have to take out the D.Ds we bought on behalf of the ryots," said Kamal and took out the list.

"There is no cash in the bank now. Let's think of it sometime later. You go and attend to work there in the usual manner," Narahari told them. Kamal looked at Harishchandra. A few minutes earlier he had suggested that they should give loans to the ryots. Now he said there was no cash. Kamal could not reconcile the statements. 'How can we give loans if there is no cash?' Kamal thought. Harishchandra could read his mind from his expression on his face. Harishchandra walked out quietly. Kamal followed him.

It was like that in the family. Doubts were not clarified through questions. In that family only one person has the authority to question. This right was so strong that it did not provide a chance to others to think over it. In order to question, one has to think. Once a question occurs to the mind, one has to think again for an answer or a solution. Then the brain naturally gets into action.

Narahari was of the opinion that if his people, who were busy going on tours and visiting the fields, began to think, they'll not be able to take up physical work. But he could not foresee that their opinion will create problems to him in the future.

Harishchandra and Kamal were bothered by questions. The questions certainly exercised pressure on their minds.

*****

Kamal telephoned Narahari in the afternoon. "A few sub-dealers have arrived. We had decided to give them loans...they want to talk to you about that issue."

"Kamal! In the morning I had thought so. But now I don't feel like doing so. Without telling directly, send them away saying that it would be taken up later."

"That is not it. I had given them my word. It wouldn't be proper if we deny it now."

"To whom it won't be proper? In business decisions keep changing every minute. Send them away giving them some explanation." There was annoyance in Narahari's voice. "Listen to me. It were you who said that a word carries greater value than money. I gave them my word after you agreed," said Kamal gently suggesting that Narahari should understand his predicament.

"Is that what you say? Okay. I tell you again. Tell them that you changed your opinion," said Narahari impatiently. Kamal put the receiver down.

"When should we meet you sir?" asked the dealers anxiously.

Kamal had raised high hopes in the dealers telling them that he would arrange loans. They were happy that with that money they could improve their business. If they were refused payment now, they may feel disappointed. They may rush to any other company for whatever little incentive the other company may offer. If he had not told them that loans would be arranged there would have been no problems. It was wrong to deny now, having made the proposal.

Kamal was hurt. He waited for few minutes. "Sir is a little busy now. He wants you to meet me later. Meet me when I telephone to

you." he convinced them, engaging them in conversation and sent them away. After they left he was lost in thought and was disappointed at happened and why his father-in-law had changed his mind.

*****

The children were playing cricket opposite Rajaram's house. Rajaram was close to all the family members of Narahari. He was liked by children and adults alike.

Bhargava was bowling. Tulya and Shravani were batting. Phani was fielding alone. They were lost in the game shouting noisily. Rajaram was a part of their game helping them with the ball. Raghavi encouraged them clapping looking through the window.

Jayalakshmi passed that way and saw Raghavi.

"'The woman who has a lot of hair can try many types of knots.' Look how dry your hair is like jute yarn. Get some oil," she said holding Raghavi's arm.

"I don't want it, peddamma! I'll then look like oily Alamelu," protested Raghavi.

"You won't look like oily Alamelu or muddy Mangathayaru. In our days we used to rub in a lot of castor oil and used soap-nut shampoo for our oil-bath. Our hair glowed then like a flower. If you take to fashions, you will lose your hair. You won't heed me till you lose all your hair," reprimanded Jayalakshmi.

In the meanwhile all the children invited Raghavi to join them in the game.

"I'll go and play," murmured Raghavi.

"I'll break your legs. Do you want to play like a boy? You people play on. She won't play with you," shouted Jayalakshmi to the boys angrily. The children were disappointed but got immersed in the play again.

"You neither learn anything and nor allow me to learn anything," mumbled Raghavi.

"What do you want to learn? This is the age when you should learn how to cook. This is not the age for you to play silly games," said Jayalakshmi hitting on Raghavi's head with her knuckles.

"Peddamma! You don't know anything. It is not a silly game. It is called 'cricket'. Women also have been playing it. Didn't you watch it on the T.V.?" frowned Raghavi.

"Oh god! Do you want to play because they are playing? You are old enough to be a mother. I was a mother at your age. Suryadeva was three years old when I was your age. Aren't you ashamed to say you want to play?"

"Who is ashamed to bring forth children or play games? In those days you married and brought forth children having nothing else to do. We cannot act like you, peddamma! We have to study," Raghavi got ready to argue.

"You have learnt to talk! I can't manage you," she again hit her on the head.

"Let pedananna come. I'll teach you what it is," said Raghavi holding both the cheeks of her peddamma affectionately.

"Leave me! Leave me alone!" shouted Jayalakshmi. Raghavi was not close to her mother as she was with Jayalakshmi.

"Peddamma! Look! Look! That is the boy!" exclaimed Raghavi raising her head.

"Jayalakshmi looked up. She saw Anil walking towards the children holding a book. He was dressed in white kurtha and pyjama and looked dignified.

"Who is that fair and handsome boy?" asked Jayalakshmi.

"Didn't I tell you in the night? That is the Marwadi boy. I told you I splashed water on his face and that I very nearly broke his head. That is the boy," replied Raghavi pointing at him.

Anil looked at Raghavi just then and moving the fingers of his hand he said, "hello" imagining that she greeted him.

"What is it, he is moving his fingers as though he is counting something," said Jayalakshmi narrowing her eyes.

"Nothing peddamma! He is greeting to say 'hello' ".

"Why?"

Raghavi also wondered why Anil did so. She answered herself 'because he is a friend, he said so.' Jayalakshmi again asked why the boy moved his fingers.

"It is nothing peddamma. That is just the way of greeting and conversing. It is like our asking 'how are you?' when we meet people known to us," she explained.

"How nice! He appears to be a good boy. He is talking to me though he doesn't know me. He seems to be a friendly type," said Jayalakshmi happily.

"You tell him you are well," encouraged Raghavi. Jayalakshmi tried her fingers. "I am not getting it," she said feeling shy.

"Doesn't matter. Don't worry about it."

"Ayyo Rama! Will he not think that this village woman cannot even greet?" so saying Jayalakshmi too moved her fingers. Anil saw her action and laughed. Just then the ball flew past him. He tried to catch it, lost balance and fell. All the children once again called Raghavi to join them.

"I'll also go and play, peddamma!" requested Raghavi.

"Didn't I tell you not to go?" Jayalakshmi smacked Raghavi's shoulder.

"Look... Are they all not playing? You don't know anything," Raghavi brushed aside her peddamma's hand.

"Yes, yes. I brought you up without knowing anything."

"Yes! You brought me up well indeed!.... did you dress me up in pants and middies? Did you bob my hair? Did you sing English songs? And you say you brought me up. Even children are ridiculing me calling 'avvakaya', 'mudda pappu', meaning a dud", complained Raghavi flourishing her hands.

"Oh god! Once you were innocent. You prove the saying that the young of a crow started cooing under the influence of city breeze. Now you have grown up to call my upbringing names. I brought you up feeding you with buffalo milk, honey and ghee. You were so chubby that everyone in the village complimented me saying," In Jayalakshmi's care, the child will have no problems." I dressed you up neatly in skirts and voni. Now you say I didn't make you wear pants. Ayyo! If you stay on here you will not be of any help to me. No studies for you hereafter. Let us go back to our village. If tomorrow you talk in this strain at your wedding engagement, people will accuse me saying that I spoiled you as I was not your mother. Oh god! Let us go away to our village." Jayalakshmi pressed her cheeks in great anxiety.

"That is not it peddamma! Children here won't dress like chitti, bujji or chanti of our village. Let us both go to the bazaar tomorrow. I will show you many girls. You will yourself declare that I don't look well in my attire," replied Raghavi.

"Me! Never will I say it! Who will stand comparison with you? When you walk about in skirts and voni, tucking up your long plait at you waist, you look like me when I was of your age!" Jayalakshmi went into a reverie with her hand under her chin.

"Hello!" shouted Raghavi, bringing Jayalakshmi back from her past. "Yes, yes, I'll look like you when you make me up like a scare-crow. Anyway, who can argue with you and win..." said Raghavi dragging her aunty away.

Anil saw Raghavi wearing skirts and a blouse in copper sulphate colour and a rose colored voni. He was reminded of the colourful and beautiful Kondappalli dancing doll as Raghavi talked to her aunt animatedly moving her round big eyes and her hands.

'Oh god! I thought she was a tongue-tied girl. But she has been talking like a termagant,' mused Anil. He turned back as someone touched his shoulder.

"Anil bhayya! Avvakaya went in long ago. You may stop staring at her and go home. She is a pappu sudda.(meaning a dud) .One way is of no use. You'll get disappointed" cried Tulya and ran away.

*****

Raghavi was surprised at the silence observed by the children.

Shravani was lying on her belly swinging her legs in the air while cutting coloured papers and pasting them on the drawing sheets. Bhargava was making a doll in all seriousness using marbles. Phani was getting a bouquet ready with flowers and leaves. Tulya was busy looking at some condiments. Everyone was busy in his or her work.

"What are you all doing? Raghavi asked Bhargava. He laughed at her loudly imitating the famous cine actor S.V. Ranga Rao. Phani winked his eyes and frowned. She asked Tulya. She looked daggers at Raghavi suggesting not to disturb her.

Raghavi moved back. "Please tell me! Why are you doing all those things with such urgency?" she asked addressing everyone. No one answered her. Jayalakshmi walked in and observed what was happening. "Why don't you heed Raghavi and answer her? Her voice is going hoarse asking you again and again. Your indifference reminds me of the reaction of a he-buffalo to a heavy down pour."

"If this Lata Mangeshkar loses her voice India will not feel sorry," replied Bhargava.

"Look peddamma! They have been teasing me ever since I came here," complained Raghavi.

Phani observed Jayalakshmi getting ready to enter the fray supporting Raghavi. "That is not it grandma! This avvakaya doesn't understand whatever is said to her."

"Tell her, I will see how she will not understand it."

"Listen carefully," she said addressing Raghavi.

"Tomorrow is Thanks-giving festival. Don't you know it mudda pappu?" asked Tulya.

"Is tomorrow the Thanks-giving festival? I don't know about that," replied Raghavi.

"Aha! You know everything in the world except this. What a pose!" laughed Shravani.

Raghavi felt embarrassed. "Tell me please," she requested them all.

"On Thanks-giving day, we give gifts to our friends. But the gifts should not be purchased. They should be made by us and given to them. The gift should be preserved carefully throughout the year," explained Bhargava.

"Is that all? Bujji, Chanti and you also used to celebrate this festival in our village," replied Jayalakshmi. All children laughed.

"Why do you laugh? Raghavi used to give them black gram flour balls mixed with sugar and ghee. They used to give her pressed rice and refreshments. You celebrate the festival here once a year. In our village, it is celebrated everyday!" Jayalakshmi made light of it. The children laughed again. Raghavi felt a little ashamed.

"Keep quiet, peddamma. You make me lose my face. You don't know anything. This is an English festival," explained Raghavi.

"Then, you too celebrate it. I am asking you to do it now. Later don't blame me that I didn't make you learn it." Jayalakshmi declared without mincing words.

"Yes, yes. Our avvakaya has no friends. If others talk to her, she cannot answer them. Who will accept to be her friend?" Tulya laughed. Raghavi's face turned pink. "I too have friends. I too will celebrate this festival," she said with some force. She rushed into the balcony with a drawing sheet and coloured pencils.

"Don't think high of yourselves. She too can make these boxes. Don't make fun of her again," shouted Jayalakshmi raising her eyebrows. The children all cried in one voice" Yes, yes, she too knows," and laughed loudly as Jayalakshmi walked into the kitchen.

"Avvakaya seems to have got an idea," declared Bhargava. Everyone laughed again.

Raghavi was busy throughout the night. She quietly reached Jayalakshmi's cot. "Ammulu! What were you doing all the while? I too am not getting sleep. Sing some song sung on religious occasions," said Jayalakshmi to Raghavi. "Aunty! Close your eyes. I won't sing now. I will never sing the good old songs, I stopped singing them." Raghavi spoke with definiteness in her voice.

"Then what songs did you learn? Why did you give up singing? If tomorrow you are asked to sing at the time of your engagement, what will you sing?" asked Jayalakshmi feeling worried. Was it not foolishness to stop singing old ritualistic songs learnt with great care from childhood?

"Aunty! I've learnt Usha Uthup songs."

"What is Usha Uthup songs?" Jayalakshmi was confused.

"Ptch!... abba! You don't know anything. Sleep off."

"Ammulu! Ammulu! Won't you sing it once. I want to know what it is like."

"*Lali thera guppu theppa raupa thera lalini ahoi*!" sang Raghavi.

"Oh god! What is that song? Is that a song at all? It sounds absurd. It's fine. Fine indeed! Sleep off," said Jayalakshmi.

'It is said that ' the lice started biting the entire head when it was given authority.' This girl came to the city to study. Now she is learning silly and foolish songs and entertaining mad thoughts. If she behaves like this who'll marry her tomorrow,' murmured Jayalakshmi." Yes, yes. Did not pedananna marry you! In the same way someone will marry me also. Don't get worried. Sleep off," whispered Raghavi. Jayalakshmi wondered that things were going from bad to worse and sighed deeply.

Raghavi behaved naughtily with her peddamma. She was docile and quiet with her mother and sisters-in-law.

*****

If an institution has to prosper and run well, there should be perfect understanding among the members. When an ideal or aim has to be achieved, the members should love the institution more than the individuals. If the members suspect that the institution is going to get a bad name because of a member, the others don't hesitate to hate him and get rid of him.

It is only when the members could imbibe the values and standards of the originator, will they be able to extend cooperation and declare their loyalty to him, his objectives and his aims.

When the institution achieves a break establishing greater values and registers the victories, the credit should be assigned to all the members and they should be made to share the benefits. Then the institution grows into an establishment with a solid base and encourages the members to develop their individual talents. If the management utilizes the growth to suppress the members, they will react negatively. They may remain silent spectators. When a family runs an establishment, the individual member may lose his identity if he rebels. He may lose importance if he keeps silent.

*****

"You are given to too much thinking these days," Arundhati said to Kamal.

"There is now need to think and so I am thinking," replied Kamal.

"You generally say that chinnanna takes up any project keeping the future in mind."

"Yes. I say it even now. One should not take one step back when it comes to implementation. Going ten years ahead doesn't help. He never agrees with me. I don't understand why he acted in this manner now. I felt ashamed before the dealers."

"Are you pained because you couldn't keep your word or are you unhappy that you could nor give loans to them?"

"What is there in a word? It can be explained away somehow. I had telephoned to all districts and informed them all that loans would be given. They will come to me with great hopes. Can I send them back empty-handed? Will it be proper? They will interpret it as the inefficiency of this company. Sundar will utilize this opportunity to his advantage. Our firm gets the bad name that it could not keep its word. We will ourselves be creating an impression that companies opposed to us have a better name." Kamal felt restless.

"Could you not talk to brothers?"

"If I tell them that father-in-law failed to keep his word it may sound as a complaint."

"How will it be considered a complaint?"

"It will sound so. If anything, I'll have to ask your father again."

"So you found the solution. Now you can stop thinking."

Kamal felt that there was some hitch. If he gave his word and withdrew it by afternoon, that too when the amount was rupees one crore, there must be some very strong reason for it. This feeling of disappointment adds to the problem. It was only the beginning.

Kamal decided that he shouldn't ask Narahari again the second time. If insisted upon he will treat it as forwardness. Kamal felt that there was no point in losing face by asking, again.

*****

Kamal was looking into the files in the office. The telephone rang. He did not respond. Srinivas received the call outside the chamber. "Sir! There are calls from Prakasham district continuously for two days. They want to know when the loans will be distributed. There is a dealer on the line. What shall I tell him?"

"Tell him that it will not be now."

"I told him. He wants to know the next date."

"Tell him that a decision has not been taken yet."

"I informed him so. He is angry why an announcement was made..." Kamal grew restless and annoyed. He too received such calls in the morning.

"It is our will... we make announcements, we will take back our word. So what? There is no one here to give explanations. What is the need for you to talk in a detailed manner? Tell them briefly that loans are not being given now," said Kamal and threw the file with a bang on the table. Srinivas who had never seen Kamal in such a bad mood was surprised. Kamal felt belittled.

"That is not it, Srinivas. Why should they pressurize us the moment we make the announcement? We have to get the money ready," said Kamal in a mild tone.

"The problem is this sir, Sundar is giving his offer to those who go to him after visiting us. Some of the dealers are not accepting his offer though they get less here because of the regard they have for our company. There is the danger of these dealers also walking into his fold if we tell them we are not giving loans now. They have interest in their

business naturally," Srinivas explained the prevailing situation. Kamal nodded in agreement.

"Why did we postpone after having made the announcement, sir?" questioned Srinivas.

"Mister Srinivas! Don't evince interest in affairs unconnected with you. List out the dealers who are attracted by Sundar's offer. Tell me how much money is involved in it. Arrange a meeting with all of them."

Kamal had taken a decision by then. He found a solution that would not bring a bad name to his company while at the same time another company would not get a chance to make the most of it. 'I should implement it' he decided.

When an institution tries to suppress the opinions of a member, unable to oppose the institution and unable to reconcile himself to the circumstances, he turns his mind to other ways and assumes to himself the power to take a decision without consulting the company. This may not result in monetary loss to the company but the authority of the boss takes a beating. That is why the man at the helm of affairs has to know the mind of the members and the changes taking place in their attitudes.

*****

The reason for Kamal taking a decision without consulting anyone was the resentment he developed towards Narahari. The boss has to take care that no one develops any resentment against him. If he does not succeed in this aspect the members ignore the boss. He has to be aware that the resentment may develop into refusal to accept his authority. Narahari realised this truth late.

*****

Silence....Meditation! Nature's omni presence. Receding darkness and mist enveloping all over. That was the time when snowdrops were twinkling on the half-opened petals! The chicks of birds were silently

huddling themselves into the cozy wings of mother birds. The nascent leaves were trying to hide in the mother branches to avoid the chill. Snow flakes were enveloping the earth floating down from the sky.....with great ecstasy! Nature was absorbing this phenomenon with intoxication into its fold.

Oh silence! Carry on with your quiet music. The creation of dawn is going on like a tapasya! The blossoming flowers may startle at the sound of a soft movement! Younglings of birds may get frightened: Birds may twitter! O silence! Keep dripping softly like the shower of snow-white reed flowers! The tender bud which is closing its eyes in her little dream may get frightened and blossom forth in a haste hearing you! The green leaves seem to be quietly appealing to silence to remain noiseless, perhaps! The snowdrops which landed on the spine of the leaf began to slip and stopped at the edge....thinking that it would create a noise if she dropped down!

Raghavi was in deep sleep. Her head was resting on the mukhmal pillow with one of her hands on her cheek. Her small tender ruby lips, slightly open, resembled rose petals. Her pearly white teeth were peeping through the lips. Her closed eyelids looked like almond slices. Her long plait was dangling on the floor. The face still showed traces of child-like features though she had attained adolescence. She looked like dame Nature sleeping in human form.

Anil opened the windows. He saw Raghavi hazily at a distance. It was a wonderful experience of a beautiful sight like that of sun rise at Kanyakumari, like a meteor piercing utter darkness, like a reflection seen in a dew drop!

Anil smiled at Raghavi. He turned round to take a look at the flowers on his table. Ajanta, his sister was sleeping. He pursed his lips for the thrilling act he was about to perform.

Chitti, Bujji, Chanti and Raghavi woke up early in the morning, had an oil bath, wore silk skirts, decorated their plaits with tassels, applied

turmeric paste to their feet, finished their morning breakfast of curd rice with gongura chatni for taste and gathered under the trees. A rope swing was arranged with a wooden plank to sit upon. They started swinging, one by one. They were shouting and clapping as the swing went up and down. Raghavi felt going up and down the swing and the experience filled her with a peculiar emotion in her sleep. She dreamed of the festival when girls fly off into the space on the swing holding her breath, holding tight the rope with clenched fists.

She felt as though a cloud of mist and snow had covered her face, as though pearls were rolling down, as though round, soft and cold objects were sliding down and touching her neck, face.....and opened her eyes in surprise.

Colourful rose petals, yellow, red, white had filled her pillow and neck. They were tickling her.

She saw Anil at the window. He held a long iron rod pasted with colourful papers. At the end of the rod, a small net used in catching the little fish in an aquarium was arranged. There were colourful petals in it.

'Was it Anil who sprinkled the petals on her through the net?' she asked herself and sat up. The petals fell into her lap.

'Oh! How many colours! How many petals!' she touched them all gently. Her eyes grew big in wonderment at the beautiful sight. Her mouth opened slightly in utter surprise.

"Hello Avvakai!" Anil greeted her waving his hand.

"Hai!" said Raghavi hardly moving her lips. A new and colourful world welcomed them, opening the golden gates of a new path for them.

"Happy Thanks-Giving Day!" said Anil making signs.

"Same to you!" gestured Raghavi with the thumb towards her and the index finger towards Anil.

"How do you like the gift?"

"I like it very much, very very much! As much as the sky!" Raghavi raised her hands enthusiastically to show him how much. Her fingers hit the frame of the cot. She held both her hands down in pain.

"So sorry! Khayal se," he said.

Raghavi nodded her head in agreement, blowing to sooth her fingers.

Anil thrust his palms out at the window and blew out fern leaves towards Raghavi. They rose into a fountain and reached her window. He blew more and more of the leaves. She extended her arms attempting to catch them. Anil continued blowing. Some of the leaves fell inside from the window near the rose petals in Raghavi's room. In the meanwhile Bhargava jumped down from his bed above. Raghavi bade Anil 'bye' in haste, withdrew her hands, closed the window, jumped on her cot and closed her eyes. Bhargava wondered at the fascinating scene in the room, full of coloured petals and fern leaves. He began to run about in the room humming a tune very happily. He felt he was in wonderland. Everyone woke up at his humming. They all felt happy at the unexpected and strange 'greeting'. They were glad at Bhargava's 'super taste.' They appreciated his presentation of the Thanks-giving day in a very special manner. They complimented him for doing better than Americans. They all said in a chorus "Happy Thanks-Giving day."

Raghavi also joined them in the song thinking that one should sing on the festive occasion.

"Vva! Brother! What a surprise gift!" said Phani jumping down from his cot holding Bhargava.

"Fantastic!" exclaimed Tulya. "You are my first close friend in the world!" she said fluttering her eyes.

"Thank you! Thank you!" responded Bhargava pulling up his collar. "I am very sorry I have not done this to greet you. It is Raghavi sister

who has taken pains to greet us! Raghavakka! Thank you! You are my first close friend," he said in American slang.

"Oh no! Is this not your hand work? We thought so! You don't possess such an artistic talent!" said Shravani.

"What if I don't possess it? My friend Raghavakka has it. If you call her avvakai, I'll kick you like I kick a football. She is my yaar. I'm very proud of you Raghavakka," he said looking at her.

Raghavi guessed that they were under the impression that she had made that greeting arrangement. She was worried that there was some mistake! That what was not true was taken as being true! That untruth was taken as truth!

"It's not I that did all this! I don't know anything!" said Raghavi turning and twisting her hands. Bhargava, who was posing as a hero, suddenly lost colour.

"Very good! Very good! He is feeling elated that this dud is his best friend! He is cured of his ego!" said Tulya clapping her hands.

Bhargava felt hurt. "Then who has done all this gala arrangement for whom?" he said and opened the window. They all saw the rose petals and fern leaves covering the distance between the two windows on the ground and looked at each other. They all surrounded Raghavi shouting "Raghavakka" stressing the elongated syllables and held her as a thief is held. Raghavi quickly got up from her cot and covered herself fully in the blanket. They pulled away her blanket saying, "You've got a special friend! You've got a special friend!" in a rhythmic chorus. She covered herself fully again in the blanket.

*****

"I think we are acting in haste," said Arundhati. She included herself also to make him feel he was not alone in his enterprises. That was her skill! Whatever her husband did, be it good or bad, she also felt a part of it. This system dispels the 'I' and introduces 'we' in their relationship making the bond strong between them.

"No! No! Aru! I am not acting in haste. This is the age of keen competition and everyone looks forward for a good opportunity. A person will never let go an opportunity if it beckons him. Indeed he rushes to catch it. We are taking a chance. Sundar is in haste. We can do better than him if we keep the opportunity away from him. If we don't do so, he will gain the upper hand," said Kamal rising from the sofa.

"Can you raise such a large amount?"

"It's difficult. But we have no choice. I've to face rough weather in the future if I have to manage Company matters. We'll take the hard line from now on."

"Can we manage to find money?"

"We've to manage and find it. I am making attempts."

"If it proves too difficult, give it up. Why should we bother?" suggested Arundhati the second time.

"What is not difficult? We can't achieve anything if we start feeling difficult. We have to face such situations. If we prepare for it, we can face it easily and overcome it. If we imagine that there would be no problems, we'll have to get worried later."

"As you like. Suppose we discuss the situation once with brothers?"

"Why?" Kamal expressed impatience.

"They should also know. It is better each one knows what exactly is the difficulty." She felt that her brothers might do something in the matter.

"There is no need Aru! They are also observing the situation. They understand it. Let us answer when they ask how the distributors got loans without the D.Ds reaching us. There is no need to explain before hand.

Arundhati kept quiet with this answer. She understood that she wasn't supposed to know about the problem till her husband revealed it to her.

That was the time when individual thinking was taking place as against collective thinking. There was a fear that individual thinking may get suppressed in following collective action. This fear prevents the sharing of thoughts with others. The feeling that individual thinking may be known after the action has been taken induces the implementation first. Once the implementation is carried out, it cannot be stopped.

Arundhati had her fears. She felt uneasy at his bringing in a large amount of money from outside. She was worried that if Kamal failed to return the money for some reason, he will be in difficulties. She still felt that Kamal could act after consulting her brothers. In case Kamal's plan failed, her brothers also would share the responsibility of paying back the money. That was her idea.

There was a difference between the thinking of Kamal and Arundhati. She leaned towards collective thinking while he opted for individual decision-making.

That night Kamal slept soundly. Arundhati couldn't sleep because of anxiety. She did not realise that once anxiety grips a person it will prolong endlessly.

When a woman begins to think, anxiety starts in her mind automatically. When she knows that what is going to take place has not been properly worked out, and nothing can change the situation, her anxiety is all the more greater. A person should not get a thought. When there are thoughts not supported by freedom, a feeling of agitation starts in the mind. To put it briefly, thinking is the parent of rebellion.

*****

The process of giving loans in the office commenced. Kamal could assemble the dealers and satisfy them. Those who wanted to go to Sundar came back to Kamal. He got control over the ball from Sundar's court. It was a blow to Sundar. He couldn't bear the sight of all the dealers

going to Kamal. Sundar and his brothers worked together using their tactics and intelligence to no avail. It inflamed Sundar's ego. He did not understand the reason for the success of his opponents and his own failures. He did not realise that their victory was due to calm decision-making. He was startled out of his wits. He felt that indirect attacks would not help him. He should face the enemy boldly. His ego and envy acted as fuel and fire. A fight between two parties is possible when both are emotionally charged. Sundar could learn atlast that he would not be able to provoke his opponent.

Sundar suddenly remembered Harishchandra flying at him in rage when he proposed an alliance with his brother-in-law for Raghavi. He hit upon the idea that Raghavi was the weapon to beat them. She should be humiliated to fray their tempers.

*****

Harishchandra, Dharmendra, Kamal and Mohan were all chatting in the sitting room. Arundhati brought coffee and joined them.

In that family, daughters-in-laws should not be seen in the presence of male members. But daughters could. Moreover the brothers loved Arundhati most. She talked less, demanded little, did not ask anything for herself. They themselves gave her what she needed. Indeed, she did not know what her wants were. She read books and attended to household chores but never showed interest in women's gossip. Women took her as an innocent person. Menfolk thought her a good woman. Sparkling eyes and smiling lips were her only assets.

"Father telephoned asking us all to spend Sankranthi in the village. He wants you and Arundhati also to be there," said Harishchandra addressing Kamal.

"I wanted to live separately with my wife. But you kept us here saying she should be with you everyday. Don't my parents feel bad if we don't go to them for the festival? I decided to invite you all to my place

this time. Why don't you visit our place this festival?" Kamal invited them all.

"Father will be upset, Kamal. He would say 'If you can't come for atleast the festival why do you do business at all?' He will be angry if Arundhati is not taken there. If we also do not go he will take on parashurama avatar in a rage," replied Dharmendra smiling.

"Then, let's take Arundhati with us. Brother-in-law will go to his place," resolved Mohan.

"Where I am, Aru is there with me. Won't my parents get angry if I don't take her with me?" said Kamal with a smile, looking at her. After a pause he added, "Two of you go to your village, two will go with me."

"To see that no one is hurt, you take the children with you. I'll take the adults with me," said Harishchandra.

"The distribution between the brothers and brother-in-law is okay. But I won't support you if father gets angry," cautioned Dharmendra looking at Harishchandra.

"Let him. I'll tell him that the children were sent to keep company with Arundhati," said Harishchandra. Narahari walked in just then and everyone became silent. Arundhati went in.

"You seem to be making some distribution. What is it about?" asked Narahari in a dignified tone.

"We are discussing who should go to which place for the festival," murmured Harishchandra.

"This time no one is going anywhere. We are all staying here. Every year ten days' of work is being lost in the name of festivals." Narahari passed the order. No one said anything. The decision about the festival was taken. Everyone kept silent for a while.

Rolling up the cigar, Dharmendra broke the silence. "We may have to concentrate more on our 'Santosh' variety this time. We have to

bestow more care on the quality than before. Dealers are very keen on our variety."

"Take care of it....what is there to think about it?" replied Narahari.

"The research section needs few more hands," informed Dharmendra.

"Increase the number of employees. Send call letters to M.Sc students of the Agricultural University," said Narahari very casually. He did not look at things as problems. He was made like that.

"We may have to invest more on the labour also this time," explained Harishchandra.

"Give permission to elderly persons only in the research section," said Narahari mentioning only about labour and dropping out reference to investment as though he heard only about the labour requirement.

"Gutka companies are buying more the 'Reminent' variety of tobacco. If we buy this variety from the ryots, our dealers will buy it from us. Perhaps we can ask our ryots to sell all the 'Reminent' variety to us this time." Harishchandra.

"Tell them so," said Narahari treating it as a simple matter.

"It is not just telling them. We have to assure them that the D.Ds will be got ready soon. We are delaying this aspect every time." Harishchandra explained the position in clear terms.

"I'll take care of the D.Ds. you attend to the work," said Narahari gently snubbing them.

"I may have to give my word," mumbled Harishchandra.

"Do you mean to say that I won't support your promise? How is it I hear new expressions and words from you people?" Narahari twitched his brow and expressed annoyance. Everyone sensed the impatience in his voice.

Harishchandra did not understand what new expressions he made. He did not know why Narahari got angry. He turned towards Kamal. Kamal was reading the newspaper. He realised that Kamal did not utter a single word during the conversation. He felt as though there was some unnaturalness in the situation. This made him silent.

"I studied the budget of a company which exports grapes and it looks a very profitable business. Would you like to take a look at it?" asked Dharmendra addressing Narahari opening his brief-case. He wanted to change the topic.

"No! No! Don't entertain any business venture that requires fresh investment" said Narahari preventing Dharmendra from opening the brief-case.

"Our Mohan has no work. This will help in keeping him busy," explained Dharmendra.

"I too think so, chinnanna!" said Mohan enthusiastically.

"If you have free time, share work with them and give them some leisure. We are not in a position to make new investments now," replied Narahari looking at Mohan without mincing words. Mohan felt disappointed. Further discussion on the topic was closed. But that topic generated an interest in everyone.

'Why are we not in a position to invest money? Our profits have doubled over these five years. What happened to all that money?' thought everyone. Yet no one asked any question. They felt strange that Kamal, who always asked questions kept silent. Yet they did not ask either Kamal or Narahari any question.

Harishchandra did not generally entertain a doubt. Once he had a doubt he cannot sleep till it was cleared.

"Did you and Kamal fall out on any point? I find Kamal a little disinterested. Kamal who generally is very active and talks something or the other is silent," he asked his sister.

She thought she could tell his brother about the loan Kamal gave to the ryots. She was about to speak out but felt that Kamal may get annoyed. "Why should we fall out?" she asked looking directly into his eyes. The smile that plays on the lips of Arundhati camouflages her thoughts. So Harishchandra could not detect her mind. He looked at her questioningly.

"Don't feel any tension annaiah! There are no problems between us. Perhaps he is tensed because of business worries. Of course, Kamal is not in a happy mood. I'll find it out," she said to him to ease his tension.

Harishchandra looked again at the full and smiling face of his sister. 'Perhaps it is so' he told himself.

*****

Mohan folded his hands and stood near Narahari who was relaxing in his easy chair reading. Mohan coughed after a little while to draw his chinnanna's attention. Narahari did not turn to look at him. A newspaper sheet slipped and fell on the floor. He bent down to pick it up. Mohan quickly picked it up and handed it to Narahari. Narahari stared at Mohan for having entered into his room at an odd hour. He cleared his throat. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"If I take up the grape marketing as suggested by annaiah I too will have some work. Brothers and brother-in-law are looking after all the work. They don't give any work to me. I am terribly bored, chinnanna!" said Mohan quietly.

"No one allots you any work, Mohan. If you take the initiative and do some work they will allow you to do it. If you do the work successfully, they'll give you responsibility to complete it. You'll have to prove your mettle in running business efficiently," replied Narahari reading the paper.

"That is not it, chinnanna! They have distributed the available work among themselves. They feel that they should take up some new

work. It does not appear necessary for me to share their work," murmured Mohan.

"Have you grown so big as to tell me what is necessary and what is not?" said Narahari, though in a gentle tone, a little authoritatively.

"I don't mean..."

Narahari cut Mohan short.

"We don't have sufficient number of people to do our work. Why new enterprises? From tomorrow you look after the accounts section in the office," said Narahari. He folded the paper and gave it to Mohan. This action symbolized his order 'you may go now.' Mohan couldn't say anything more. He turned back.

Intimacy and closeness builds a bridge between elders and youngsters. Intimacy was wanting in that family. Between father and sons, between father-in-law and son-in-law, delicacy stood as a wall. They were all afraid of consequences if they wanted to make a point openly. The tradition of that house was that elders should never be opposed in any circumstances. This tradition ruled over the old generation binding them together. It took the spirit out of the new generation and mocked at the system.

Mohan grew depressed. He understood clearly that he had to share available work and that proving his efficiency through new projects was impossible. This feeling made him listless.

Raghavi observed that Mohan was dispirited. "Brother, why are you so dull?" she asked.

"I am alright. Are you studying well?" he asked without any connection.

"I think you know it!" replied Raghavi equally out of context without understanding the connection between his being spiritless and her studies.

"You work hard and study well. Don't enter into our business."

"When did I tell you that I want to enter into your business?"

"What else will you do? What Arundhati and brother-in-law did, you too will do."

"No! No! I will take up a job," she said nodding her head sideways.

"They won't allow you to do so. No businessman likes to lose manpower. In our house everyone has a business mentality. How will they let you and your husband go without getting into business?" he said to Raghavi who looked confused. He realized that she did not understand him. "Okay. Let me sleep. You may go," he said. He himself did not know which way his mind was thinking. Raghavi covered him with a blanket and left. Though confused, she began to think.

*****

Jayalakshmi was counting her bags and wiping her tears. She was piling up her things in a hurried manner. Raghavi held her peddamma's hand.

"Don't go, peddamma. Don't go away," Raghavi said the twentieth time.

"Why are you following me since morning like a female Nakshatraka*?" said Jayalakshmi annoyed.

"You also stay away here for the festival," requested Raghavi.

"Your pedananna sent me here to take you all to our place for the festival. You are all staying here. I can't but go." She was disappointed that no one was following her.

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*Nakshatraka is the disciple of sage Vishwamitra. He entrusts Nakshatraka with the job of collecting the promised dues from King Satya Harishchandra. Nakshatraka pesters the King for the dues without leaving him even for a minute.

"Having come, stay away here and preside over the festival. Please! Please! Brother will telephone pedananna about it," said Raghavi. Raghavi was worried that her peddamma would leave them and go. She did not drink her tea and was following her peddamma wherever she went.

"Minutes are not sufficient to build a thing but it doesn't take a few seconds for its destruction. If your pedananna gets angry his shout will blow off the roof. He is already wild at the delay. The horns that grow later are sharper than the ears which are present from birth! He complained bitterly that you children have been overlooking him completely after you have grown a bit. If I stay here for the festival he will devour me like a demon. I have to go, dear!" said Jayalakshmi. She had a mind to stay back. But her husband was in the village. The children were here. Half her mind was there. The other half here. What could she do! She was the typical average Indian woman. If asked to choose between husband and children she would vote for her husband. Raghavi rushed to her cot in disappointment and covered herself fully in the blanket as her peddamma did not heed her request.

The children who had gone to give gifts to their friends returned holding the gifts they got and were in a very jolly and jovial mood. They surrounded Raghavi the moment they returned.

"Hey! Avvakai! Take a look at the gifts our friends gave us," said Phani

"Won't you give a gift to your friend who surprised you?" provoked Tulya.

"Okay! Sleep off! You are a village belle. You don't know anything," said Shravani and pulled off the blanket. Raghavi pulled it from Shravani and covered herself again.

"Raghavakka ! What happened?" they all asked in a chorus. They could not bear to see her looking dull and morose, she who was generally active. They believed that someone had scolded her. There were two parties in the house, those of the adults and those of the children. The

children quarreled among themselves. But if anyone from the other party scolded one of them, they all presented a united front.

"No one scolded me. But peddamma is going away," said Raghavi in a complaining tone. The children felt relieved on hearing this.

"Is that all? We thought someone scolded you and we wanted to support you. We were afraid you went into a depression," said Shravani feeling bad that they missed a chance to attack the elders.

"Okay. Nannamma should not go to the village. Is that all?" Raghavi nodded in the affirmative.

"We'll take care of that. Get ready and give your gift to your friend," grinned Bhargava.

"Bad luck! What gift has Raghavakka to give her friend?" Tulya expressed her dismay. Raghavi got provoked.

"Don't talk as if you alone know about gifts. Look....." Raghavi quickly controlled herself. "No.....it's a surprise! I won't show it to anyone," she said and went in to dress and get ready. The children felt happy at her getting back into a good mood again. After she left they started appreciating their gifts.

Raghavi stood before them smartly dressed.

"Wah! Raghavakka! You got ready so soon?"

"I am ready. But you must also go with me."

"Aha! You are a princess. We are all your ladies- in- waiting following you shouting 'the princess is arriving.....aho!' " Phani said mockingly.

"Why do you think so? Anil also is your friend," said Raghavi casually.

"If he is our friend, did he send the gift to you or to us?"

"Not for me and you.....he sent to all of us. By the by, do you make friendship only if gifts are given?" she made a sentiment-filled dialogue.

"Sorry chellai! However much you take the help of sentiment, Anil is not our friend. He is your friend. He never spoke with us before you came. After your arrival, he is himself greeting us and talking to us whenever he meets us," explained Bhargava standing in a stylish manner as if he knew everything.

"That's correct! That's correct!" said everyone.

"Then, don't any of you accompany me?" she asked as though annoyed.

"No! Not at all."

"Don't think I am a dud. Observe me. I'll give the gift to him and return in five minutes," she said and started off. Her pace slowed after she opened the gate. She had not given a gift to any boy till then. She did not know what to say after handing him the gift. She wanted to greet him very gracefully. She was hurting him each time she met him. She wanted to avoid an untoward incident.

Raghavi was dressed in a white shiffon marble skirt embroidered with rose flowers, a white blouse and a rose coloured voni. She plaited her long hair loosely and twisted the end of it on to her left arm like the pallu end of the saree. She stuck a single rose in her plait at an angle. She looked exactly like a painting by Bapu, famous for his highly stylish line drawings.

Anil was surprised to see her holding a big packet in her hand, and struggling to open the gate.

"Hai! Avvakai! What a surprise!" he said and rushed to the gate. He pulled the gate with both his hands with force. Raghavi's fingers got squeezed between the two frames of the gate.

"Eai! My hand ..." shouted Raghavi in pain. The gift which she held in her hand got loose from her grip and fell at the feet of Anil.

"Maa!" called Anil and opened the gate gently. As he tried to pick up the packet, Raghavi quickly picked it up and began nursing her fingers.

"Sorry! Very sorry!" said Anil looking at the reddened fingers of Raghavi.

"Don't worry! Please take this gift," she handed the gift to him.

"Arre! Please come in....will you give me the gift at the gate? Come in. I'll introduce you to my parents."

Raghavi did not move. She wanted to go back having given the gift.

"Please come in," he requested her in a pleasant manner. She had no choice. She pressed her lower lip and walked slowly towards the door.

*****

Dharmendra was sitting with the account books all round him. He was going through them in the night. He was verifying the accounts spread over five, six years. His eyes were fireballs.

The company had two production units. Harishchandra and Dharmendra looked after one. Kamal looked after the other. Harishchandra was not in the habit of looking into the accounts from the beginning. He hated looking into files. But he was perfect in executing work. Dharmendra attended to the accounts with 'Aravind Processing Unit'. Kamal took care of the accounts of 'Uthpatti Kendra' unit.

Dharmendra checked the accounts for five or six years. How much tobacco was marketed, the rate at which the ryots were paid, the market rate etc. after deducting the amount invested what was the profit? — these aspects were verified by him and he arrived at the profit figure. To counter check with the Marketing Manager, he rang up Eshwar.

"Hello! This is Dharmendra speaking."

"Hello sir! I am Eshwar."

"I'll tell you the details about the tobacco we processed during these five years. Can you inform me how much the margin of profit we gained in the market?" asked Dharmendra directly. Eshwar was surprised at Dharmendra's question. It was only Narahari who asked about accounts and money. Eshwar felt it strange that Dharmendra should be asking the details. He thought that he should give details only after talking to Narahari. "I think the office will give you a clear picture better than me. Why don't you try there, Dharmendra garu," said Eshwar who decided to postpone giving the details.

"What is the objection to tell me?" asked Dharmendra directly, suspecting that Eshwar was trying to put off giving the details. Dharmendra knew that the marketing manager had the correct information but not the accountants.

"I am afraid there may be problems if I give the information without the knowledge of the boss....."Eshwar put the phone down.

Dharmendra understood his problem. He too felt it wouldn't be nice if chinnanna came to know of it. But the company had a lot of money in reserve after deducting the investment. He did not know why chinnanna was averse to start new ventures, or take up research or start new buyings. It was only Narahari who had cheque drawing powers in the company. Others had no knowledge about the money matters. Everyone was working without being aware of how much money was getting credited and how much was being drawn. Narahari decided which way to divert the profits. He did not consult anyone. The work vas being distributed among others. Money and authority was centered n his hands. Work turn-out was everyone's responsibility. Money matters vere in the hands of only one person. Those who worked never aired ieir grievances. Their dissatisfaction was never attended to and cleared.

Now when their opinions faced opposition, the thinking started. Collective responsibility kept going as new thinking was not suppressed y the older generation. Now the central authority had stiffened. That

was why Dharmendra telephoned to get his doubt cleared. Senior Accountant Srinivas lifted the telephone. "This is Dharmendra speaking. Mr.Srinivas. Could you tell me how much amount is available in the account?"

"I don't know sir. Everything is looked after by our boss."

"Was any amount drawn recently?"

"I don't know sir. I was on leave. Please ask Narahari garu." Dharmendra did not get the doubt cleared. There was no chance to talk freely with the Accountant.

"Okay. Is Kamal sir there?" asked Dharmendra. He thought it would be profitable to talk to him.

"You know that Kamal sir has given loans to dealers. They arranged a small party. He has gone there."

"Loans to dealers?" asked Dharmendra.

"Yes sir. He gave loans to 'Uthpatti Kendra' unit dealers only."

"Okay. I'll talk to him. When he comes to the office, ask him to give me a ring."

'When myself and Harishchandra talked about D.Ds we were told that there was no money! How could the dealers of this unit be given loans? That means chinnanna arranged money only to Kamal and told us that there was no money! That was why Kamal was silent when this topic came up for discussion. 'Dharmendra began to think in different angles.

Whiffs of smoke were observed rising in the family business. New doubts arose adding fuel to fire.

*****

Accounts Srinivas informed Kamal about Dharmendra's phone call.

"Anything urgent?" asked Kamal.

" I don't know sir. I was asked to inform you as soon as you returned." Srinivas considered passing the message was his duty.

Kamal dialed Dharmendra.

"Hello! Kamal on the line...."

"Hello! I am Dharmendra." Harini was by him.

"Did you inform Srinivas that I should telephone to you? Anything special?"

"Nothing special. It seems that 'Uthpatti Kendra' unit dealers were given loans."

"Yes, I arranged the money myself," said Kamal. He felt very happy that the topic came up for discussion.

"Then should not the Aravind Processing unit dealers also be given loans?" asked Dharmendra impatiently.

"You'll have to arrange it yourself," replied Kamal casually.

"What do you mean by my arranging it?" Dharmendra asked a little angrily.

"It's like that. The Company did not arrange it for me. I managed it myself," explained Kamal.

"Then who will arrange it for us?" asked Dharmendra with a little uncertainty.

"Ask my father-in-law."

"He says he has no money."

"He told me the same thing. How could we lose the dealers saying we have no money? So I arranged the loans myself - only to my dealers."

"How did you mange such a huge amount?"

"Do you think I don't enjoy that much status and influence?" Kamal's ego was tickled.

"That's not it. I thought chinnanna arranged it for you," said Dharmendra making his mind clear to Kamal. He did not like an indirect war of words.

"It is as good as thinking like that. But it's not true."

"Okay! I too can arrange it," said Dharmendra a little upset.

"Best of luck!" said Kamal. Dharmendra put the receiver down with force.

Harini observed Dharmendra talking in an angry tone. "Did you talk to Kamal?" she asked. She was not sure it was Kamal.

"Yes," replied Dharmendra.

"Your tone was a little angry," she wanted to confirm her doubt.

"Yes."

"I was not happy at what you did." She expressed her reaction.

"I too didn't like it. But I couldn't help it. He received money from chinnanna and gave loans to his dealers only. Will our dealers keep quiet if we don't give them loans? I can't appreciate chinnanna's action. I diverted my anger on chinnanna to Kamal."

"Couldn't you discuss this point directly with father-in-law?"

"He says he has no money...but anyway why all these details to you? You better look after the home front." He put an end to further conversation.

The tradition of that house was that the womenfolk should have knowledge of only certain things. That was the reason why the ladies of the house did not know full details though they had some inkling of problems. They could neither think nor could keep quiet. They remained as bare stalks without flowers or leaves.

*****

Raghavi felt enchanted with the decoration in the hall as she stepped in. The walls were in ivory colour. The curtains had light chocolate coloured flowers. There was a sofa-set and the T.V. in a corner. She looked at the wall paintings and gently touched the picture in her hand. She thought ' we south Indians do not give such importance to interior decoration.'

"Is that for me?" asked Anil looking at Raghavi who delayed in giving the gift.

"Ha. It's for you," said Raghavi stretching both her hands. He received it gracefully and smiled deliciously and said, "Thank you." Raghavi returned his smile.

"Baitiyena!" he showed the sofa. She sat quietly at the edge. She was anxious to go away. Anil was unwrapping the gift. She felt she should have left without waiting. She was afraid he would not like it. Opening the pack, Anil looked at it with wide-eyed wonder. He stood still, open mouthed looking at the gift for sometime. "Fantastic! What an idea! What a feeling!" he exclaimed.

"Do you like it?" she asked anxiously.

Anil did not reply but kept staring at it. It was a pencil sketch. A little girl was running behind a cart selling ice-ream. She was dressed in a silk skirt and blouse. She had a long plait. She held a kitten in her right hand and stretched her left towards the cart. There was a pup at her feet. Two birds were flying in the sky. The time was evening. The path was strewn with chrysanthemums. The girl's eyes were fixed at the dripping drops of ice-cream from the corners of the cart. Her eyes were eager to collect the ice-cream drops.

"Really fantastic!" he said again. Raghavi smiled again.

"Did you not name the picture?" he asked. Raghavi nodded her head to say 'no'.

"Shall I name it?"

"Yes."

"Desire," he said.

"Desire?"

"Yes, desire, small, little desire," he replied.

Raghavi liked the title. She felt there was a lot of difference between 'desire' and 'little desire'. There was a noise inside. "Mother! See who has come!" Anil said aloud.

"I am coming my boy!" she said as she walked in.

She was glad to see Raghavi. "Is she not our neighbour's daughter?" she asked Anil in Hindi. Anil nodded in agreement. He introduced his mother to Raghavi "My mother." Raghavi wanted to say 'namaste'. But she could not speak out. She just folded her hands standing up. "Jeethe raho beti!" Anil's mother said asking Raghavi to sit. She made Raghavi sit by her side. She appreciated the picture and said," Anil keliye laye kya?" Raghavi nodded her head.

"Bahut achcha hai," she added.

Anil went in and brought his father, sister and uncle. He introduced them all to Raghavi.

"She is Raghavi, my friend," he told them. His sister Ajanta sat by Raghavi. She told that she was doing fashion-designing course and that modeling was her hobby. Everyone spoke very pleasantly. They all appreciated the picture. Anil's mother brought gaajar halva and chips.

Raghavi wanted to leave in five minutes but stayed on for two hours. She got rid of her shyness soon. They all spoke with her as though they had known her for many years.

"I'll get along," Raghavi said. Anil's mother wanted him to see her off at the gate.

"How are you? I mean how did you feel?" he asked.

"I am happy. ....Very friendly nature. I like Ajanta," said Raghavi. She could not say anymore. Her voice chocked with gladness. Her people at home were serious. In Anil's house they were friendly. The difference was glaring. Though she had grown up, she could not face her father. She could talk very intimately with Anil's father! She could mingle with them freely.

"I liked your picture very much as I like you!" said Anil observing that she was silent, trying to draw her into conversation.

"Did you? I couldn't think of any other scene?"

"Do you think that it was just a simple thought?" he began to explain it.

"Your picture depicts a beautiful thought. The little girl is not worried about the skirt obstructing her movement while running behind the ice cream cart with her pup. The stretched hand and the small open mouth of the girl symbolize her desire very eloquently, did you note? Particularly the dripping ice-cream drops and the eyes riveted on them. The expression is really great. It denotes the real lifeline. Man reaches heights by stages. Do you realize it?" said Anil.

Raghavi nodded her head to say she did not know what it signified. She didn't know that so many meanings were hidden in her picture. She just drew the picture. But many ideas occurred to Anil. She felt as though she was being explained to herself, as though Anil was picking out new meanings from her being, as though he was like a ray of light, presenting her with new shades of colour while she was hidden in shade.

"Raghavi! It looks as though you know nothing except getting flustered," said Anil smiling. She moved her head in a very coy manner. After a moment's thinking he asked her in a causal manner," Achcha! What's your small ambition?"

"Me? Ambition! I don't have any," she replied confused. She felt that to entertain an ambition was a crime.

"Don't you have ambition? Do you know what those who have no ambition or desire are called? 'Desert dwellers.' Such people do not have any interest in life. They'll become pessimists and will be in depression always. As you are not like that you should certainly have some desire or ambition," he said as though he knew more about her than she knew about herself.

"Is that true?" she felt amused and smiled. Anil fluttered his eye lids as if to say it was true.

"Think it over and tell me after a while," he said.

Raghavi thought for a moment pursing her lower lip ' what desires do I have?' she questioned herself. An idea flashed across her mind. "Yes! I've! I've!" she exclaimed in great excitement like a child.

"Then tell me," Anil said anxiously.

"Hmmm! Hmmm! I have a great desire to do M.B.A." said Raghavi spreading her arms wide.

"That's not a desire. You are doing M.B.A. now. You'll complete it anyway. It is not called a desire. It is a process. Verify again what you have in your mind."

"Hmmm," she thought for a while again looking into Anil's face. "Shall I tell you?" she asked smiling.

"Come on. Tell me."

"I've many. One. I want to take part in Satyagraha like Gandhiji. Two. I want to talk about politics with Indira Gandhi. Three - sing like Ghantasala. Four- dance far better than Vaijayanthimala. Five- act like S.V.Ranga Rao. Six- climb the eastern hills before the sun rises. Seven- fly like birds competing with them. Eight- stand for ten minutes on Mount Everest. Nine- swim in Amazon for half an hour. Ten- open a school in Andamans...." said Raghavi counting her fingers and felt confused at the end of the tenth finger. She stopped for a moment and

was about to speak. "Bas, please stop Raghavi! Bapre! Are these all desires?" said Anil exhausted.

"Not only these. There are many more," she said happily.

"Oh god! I can't bear to hear you. Your desires seem to be very small. I feel like renouncing this world hearing your desires. Please don't tell others about your desires. It's indeed desirable that none should know them," said Anil.

"Anil! Are not my desires good?" asked Raghavi. She pursed her lips and expressed her anger and disappointment.

"They're very good. But they can't be fulfilled or realised."

"What do you mean? When I said M.B.A. you said it is no desire at all. When I gave you my list of desires you say they can't be fulfilled. It is not good manners to discourage people," said Raghavi and walked towards the gate.

"What an Avvakai!," thought Anil. "Hello! Good night," he said aloud. She also responded 'good night.' Though she bade him good night, she stood at the gate without leaving.

"Why have you stood there like a statue? Are you not feeling cold? Come in," shouted Jayalakshmi.

"Haven't you left peddamma?" asked Raghavi embracing her with a happy and broad smile.

"There are thousand and one obstacles for the wedding of Lord Ganesha, they say. I thought that today being padyami, a good day, I could leave. When I was about to start, all the children sneezed. Your mother and all other elders stopped me from leaving saying that sneezes are bad omens."

"The right thing happened," said Raghavi happily.

"Why do you say things went right instead of feeling sorry? This is like one person crying that his buffalo died while another felt happy that he would get its skin," said Jayalakshmi.

"That's what I said peddamma! I said things didn't take the right turn," said Raghavi changing her expression.

" As someone said ' the man has gone crazy. Wind the wooden pestle round his head,' this is also like that. God knows what she talks at times," murmured Jayalakshmi as she went in followed by Raghavi,all smiles.

*****

"I don't like the manner your brother talks," said Kamal annoyed as he walked in.

"Which brother?...what did he say?" asked Arundhati.

"Who else? Dharmendra! He spoke as though I humoured your chinnanna and got the money."

"Did you not explain to him the truth?"

"He doesn't' believe me. 'What happened to the money chinnanna has?' he asks."

"Why suspect each other keeping chinnanna in the background? Is it not better to ask chinnanna directly?" she said. She did not like her brothers and her husband accusing each other.

"Your brother doesn't ask him because the father and sons are one. What could have happened to the money in possession of chinnanna? He must have adjusted the amount to Aravind Unit," replied Kamal accusingly.

"Please don't say so! Mutual suspicion between you and them is not proper. If the staff or the outsiders come to know of it, you will all lose face."

"Keep aside losing face. Tell your brother first not to accuse me without the knowledge of how money is being spent and where it is going."

"You can yourself ask him. What is the need for my mediation?"

"If he and I begin to talk, it may develop into an exchange of words. You are his sister. He'll listen to you. I am an outsider. They attribute meanings to my opinions," said Kamal speaking his mind.

"Why do you say so? Did they ever treat you as an outsider?"

"Haven't they started it now? They will continue doing so," he said going into the bathroom taking the towel from her.

"Okay. Finish your bath first. I'll get dinner ready. Let's discuss after food," she said and went in.

Harini and Roopa were in the kitchen. Arundhati cleared the dining table and arranged the plates.

"Kamal telephoned to your annaiah this afternoon," said Harini, Dharmendra's wife, as if it were a new development.

"Is that so?" said Arundhati as if she did not know of it.

"He spoke a little harshly, do you know?"

"No. I don't."

"Your brother was also a little upset." Harini spoke as if she alone had knowledge of it.

"I don't know," said Arundhati, pouring water into glasses.

"Kamal has been getting upset of late."

"I have no idea."

"What else do you know?" asked Harini growing a little impatient.

"She knows everything happening around except what happened in the house," mocked Roopa placing the dishes on the table.

"I don't know even that."

"What do you know at all?" they both asked Arundhati.

"I know that the wives of my brothers are good girls," she said smiling. Harini and Roopa both laughed.

"Stop laughing and come over here. All are ready for dinner," said Sulochana.

The children and the men folk settled down for dinner.

Arundhati stood at the doorway ready to serve whatever the men or the children wanted.

The children bent their heads and ate silently as the adults were eating with a grave expression on their faces.

The dining table is a conference table of the family members. This has been the case all along. Whether it was going to be a pleasant conference or an unpleasant one depended on the moods of the members of the family at that moment. Narahari commenced the conference as usual.

"It'll be good if we increase the production area. We have to increase atleast 25 acres in each area. Then we'll have a hundred acres in each unit."

"A few ryots are interested in our company. Shall we take them in?" asked Harishchandra.

"Find out to which Companies they have been supplying. If there are no complaints against them from those companies, we can accept them," replied Narahari.

"They have some difference of opinions among themselves. That's why they are approaching us," explained Harishchandra.

"Then take them in."

"That's not it. They are asking for some advance money as they are new to us. They may be afraid that we may refuse them later," Harishchandra made it clear.

"Sorry. Advances cannot be paid," replied Narahari.

"The stick shouldn't be broken. The snake shouldn't be killed! How is it possible? How will the ryots invest without receiving advances?" said Harishchandra boldly.

"So, they want to use our money for their investment and earn money by selling our material. Such ryots will be a burden on us," said Narahari helping himself with rasam.

"Shall I tell them not to think of us then?" asked Harishchandra. His tone was angry.

He was justified in his anger. He attracted the ryots very skillfully turning them away from Sundar. Once the ryots get registered as 'company farmers' they'll not leave the company easily. If new ryots are not taken in, the production area doesn't increase. So the same importance should be given to the ryots as is given to the company. There were instances when more than half the investment was made on the ryots to encourage them. If so, why should Narahari discourage paying advances to them? Harishchandra was at a loss to know the reason.

"It's better to discourage those who demand an advance," said Narahari. It was an order.

"If that is so, we will not be able to attract ryots for the coming year." Dharmendra was disgusted. He did not know why chinnanna was adamant though the position was clear.

"It doesn't matter," decided Narahari.

"What is your problem? We assembled the farmers with great difficulty. Why do you want to lose them?" asked Harishchandra directly and angrily. Dharmendra raised his head and looked up. Kamal showed some interest in the discussion. Mohan listened looking down at the floor.

Roopa was scared at the harshness in the voice of her husband. Sulochana was angry that he was opposing his chinnanna. Arundhati looked disturbed - Harini's aura increased.

Generally Harishchandra did not talk in such clear-cut terms. He never bothered about money matters. But this time he felt it absurd that Narahari should say there was no money. For five years no company of theirs suffered loses. Everyone knew they were making profits. New business ventures were also not started to think that money was diverted towards them. How come there was no money? Profits apart, there should be money available for investment that year. It made Harishchandra think deeply when Narahari said there was no money.

"I can't arrange money now. Do as you like. If you manage it, I won't object to it," said Narahari with equal emphasis. Before Harishchandra could say anything, Kamal said, " I too need money for dispersal."

Narahari turned towards Kamal.

"As a part of bonus I want to distribute clothes to the staff. If you give me a cheque, Srinivas will encash it tomorrow," said Dharmendra.

"Should I tell you individually that I have no money? There is no money. If it is so necessary, make your arrangements by borrowing somewhere. If not, let us raise a loan on the sheds," Narahari was emphatic. Dharmendra and Kamal became speechless. They did not know why loans should be raised on the sheds.

"I've already borrowed from outside. It will be beyond my capacity to raise money," said Kamal objecting to Narahari's attitude.

"Then give up. Or raise a loan on your poultry sheds." Narahari made it clear there would be no change in his decision.

"What is the need for raising a loan now? There is money." Kamal came direct to the point. He did not prolong the discussion. Narahari was upset at Kamal asking him point blank. No one questioned him so

frankly. It is Kamal who had the habit. Narahari felt that Harishchandra and Dharmendra started asking him questions. They both followed his instructions blindly all these days. But today, they questioned him about money matters. He believed that they did not possess individuality or courage to ask him directly. They should have learnt it from Kamal. That was why Narahari implemented the principle of preventing Kamal from asking questions in order to shut the mouths of Harishchandra and Dharmendra.

He followed the same principle now also. "I have no need to explain to you the accounts," he said visibly annoyed. Arundhati who observed his annoyance was perturbed.

She went and stood by her husband to prevent him from confronting Narahari. "I need to learn the details," said Kamal stubbornly. Narahari did not like this attitude. Others should listen to what he said. He could not tolerate if individual opinions were expressed. Narahari felt that his authority was eroding.

"Even if you want to know there is no one here who is free to give details. First look to your work. Don't indulge in unnecessary talk," he said and left angrily. Kamal made to get up. Arundhati made him sit.

"You like this item dearly! Try to taste it," she said serving him his favourite dish, payasam. Kamal controlled himself and calmed down at his wife's timely action.

"Brother! Are you still eating sambar rice?" she asked Harishchandra helping him with papad. With that Harishchandra was restored to his original mood. She offered sweets to the children who were tense with anxiety.

"Dharm! These kids are not eating anything at all in the name of exams. They say they feel sleepy if they eat. Tell them that they should eat well," she said addressing Dharmendra.

"What? Studies without proper food ? You'll grow weak," said Dharmendra looking at the children.

"You'll get sleep because of weakness," said Harishchandra smiling.

"You shouldn't read without sufficient sleep. You should read after you have slept enough," said Kamal. When they all got into normal mood, Arundhati left the place quietly. She stood at the door to observe what would happen. The children looked at her helplessly. She glanced at the children as though she said 'sorry'.

The three adults gave the children instructions for nearly fifteen minutes. The children silently heard them and left one by one.....tired, with swollen heads, to sleep off, giving up reading! Raghavi and Mohan followed the kids.

Raghavi considered the dining table as an examination table. Everyday she wondered how the day would be - whether 'tough' or 'easy'.

Jayalakshmi, who was in the kitchen, faintly heard a partridge cooing some where inauspiciously. Though she had been listening to the men folk in their discussions ever since she was married , the conversation that day sounded different. It lacked common understanding. She decided to go to her place. She felt that the atmosphere was losing its naturalness.

She took the bus next day without heeding the requests of her people. She explained to her husband very clearly what was happening in the city. Nageswara Rao had a very clear idea of the situation prevailing in Hyderabad.

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" Arundhati, let us go and live in the unit as before," said Kamal.

"We came into this house with grace. It wouldn't be proper for us to leave feeling bad over such a trifling matter," replied Arundhati.

She too did not like staying there any longer, though.

It was Narahari who pressed them to live with him.

Kamal had been working with Narahari in his business for nearly fourteen years. Narahari managed affairs with authority all these years but he had never insulted Kamal. But now Kamal could not relish the manner in which Narahari spoke to him.

"You were not willing to come here. Now you don't want to leave. Perhaps you can't live without the company of your people," said Kamal.

"It is not that I cannot live without my people. What is the need for us to go now?" she replied indirectly suggesting him to understand the situation.

"We should not pose as though we are important persons where we are not needed. Aru! Should we stay here until we lose all respect?"

"We are not going to lose respect. Many opinions will be expressed in business matters. First of all, you shouldn't have acted in haste." She tried to divert him from his thoughts.

"Listen to me. How can we run business blindly without a clear understanding of profit and loss and the amounts available in the bank? He gets annoyed the moment we ask for money. From where can we get money? We have to pay back the borrowed amount later anyway. But all this cannot be done if we don't have money. Why should we go in for loans when we have money? The interest will keep growing. If we ask for money he just says that the sheds could be mortgaged. I wonder whether he thinks before he talks. Or is it that he tests us and our thinking." Kamal was angry. His eyes were fireballs. His nostrils expanded often as he talked. Arundhati had never seen him so angry.

"Whatever you say, he does things only for our good."

"Whether he is doing things for good or bad is not the point now. How can business progress without money? I have stopped payments for six weeks by now. Our customers are not moneyed people like us to

wait if it is delayed. They don't buy provision for the whole month at one go like us. They live on daily wages. Imagine how painful it is to explain matters to them. If we take their services and don't pay them, will it not make them hate us? How can we allot work to them from tomorrow?" Kamal explained his predicament.

"Perhaps chinnanna did not receive money from the market," suggested Arundahti hinting that he should consider the issue from the other point. Kamal got up and telephoned Eshwar. "Eshwar! Did the money due to us from the market get blocked?"

"No. It is getting cleared regularly. There is no problem. Why did you ask?"

"Nothing special. It was just by the way. What is your opinion about our processing and the market this time?" he asked Eshwar to make his call sound natural and routine.

"It is superb! The ryots who have joined us recently are also satisfied. So we can expand our business easily closing our eyes," replied Eshwar with great confidence.

"Can you tell me how much money got credited this year?" Kamal tried to be casual.

Kamal was disturbed at the figure mentioned by Eshwar. He put the receiver down.

"There are no dues in the market. All the money due has been credited. That too in father-in-law's account. But he says there is no money. Whom should we suspect? Eshwar? Father-n-law?" Kamal asked aloud.

"You need not suspect anyone. You talk to chinnanna alone calmly. Not before others as you did today. You can get all doubts cleared, also suspicions," Arundhati said smiling.

"Our elders say 'kaaryeshu mantri'. As suggested by you, I'll talk to him tomorrow...even if he feels annoyed," replied Kamal with a relaxed smile.

The telephone rang. Arundhati lifted the phone.

"Harishchandra here!"

"What is it brother? You could have walked into the room."

"Chinnanna is sleeping. I didn't want to disturb him. Is Kamal awake?"

"Yes. Talk to him."

"Hello", said Kamal.

"Kamal! How much money did chinnanna give you?" Harishchandra asked directly.

"Harishchandra! Why don't you believe me when told once? I told Dharmendra that I arranged the money myself. Your chinnanna did not give me a single paisa. If you want you can ask him." Kamal was angry.

"If I had that intimacy with him, why do I ask you? What happened to the money if he did not give it to you?"

"This is indeed interesting. How do I know what he is doing with it?"

"That is not the matter Kamal. I am sure he tells you. He doesn't do any transaction without your knowledge," said Harishchandra calmly expecting to get some information from Kamal.

"He may not do anything without telling me but in money matters I stand where you stand."

"How can that be so? He has great regard for you. You are the son-in-law." There was an echo of irony in Harishchandra's voice. He suspected that Narahari would have told something to Kamal.

"Though I am his son-in law, I don't weigh equal with the sons." Arundhati observed Kamal losing his temper and moved her head side-ways looking at Kamal suggesting that he should cool down. Kamal

couldn't talk more. Harishchandra put the receiver down as there was no response from Kamal.

Harishchandra didn't desire to cross swords with Kamal. He imagined that he would be able to get some information if he was harsh in his talk. Actually it was Narahari who forced Kamal to join business in the beginning. Once Kamal proved his mettle, he was made to resign the lecturer's job. Kamal rose so fast that he could maintain a production unit all alone by himself. He was so skilful that he managed it all alone where as Harishchandra and Dharmendra had to work together. The brothers were afraid that if all the investments were turned towards Kamal, their own units would suffer. They wanted to be cautious. That was also a problem now. If their chinnanna had given money to anyone, it should be either to Kamal or to one of them. But the old man says there is no money. As the money hasn't been given to them, it should have been given to Kamal. That was Harishchandra's opinion. So he tried to kindle fire by igniting his doubt.

"Did you note? It is not Dharmendra alone. Harishchandra also suspects me. Perhaps your chinnanna is making a fool of me having given money to them both."

"The mutual suspicions between and among you sounds silly indeed. You are suspecting each other like children. Meet chinnanna tomorrow, talk to him in privacy and get your doubt cleared. Forget all about this and sleep off soundly," said Arundhati and covered Kamal with a blanket. Arundhati felt bad at the development. Dharmendra also could not sleep that night. How should the Units be run from the next day? Chinnanna declaring that there was no money was an absurd statement. It was not good to borrow huge amounts from outside. Narahari announcing that there was no money created a crisis.

Chinnanna was also growing old. He doesn't move about freely as before. He has to sit at a place and run his affairs. He has to transfer his responsibilities to someone in the future. If he chooses Harishchandra

or Kamal for that, what will happen to himself? Dharmendra could not sleep because of this fear. Next morning he walked into Harishchandra's room. Harishchandra was already up and was pacing about in the balcony. Harishchandra was also agitated. The effect of the previous night's dining hall conference was clearly visible on their faces.

"I am not able to understand chinnanna's words." Dharmendra broached the topic directly.

"I too didn't understand. How can we understand if he doesn't speak plainly?" said Harishchandra.

"What is the need for him to cover up matters? He can be plain with us."

"Perhaps he is afraid that his authority will be lost if he makes the things clear."

"Keep aside authority. The work suffers first. The company that has fed us all these years is going to fail us. Does he think of this aspect?"

"You have been maintaining accounts all these years patiently. How is it you don't know how much money is available?" questioned Harishchandra.

Narahari treated Harishchandra as a ' working person' who carried out instructions without question. Narahari did not discuss money matters with Harishchandra at any time. It did not occur to Harishchandra also that he should ask his father. Everyone had the confidence their chinnanna would attend to all problems. Now he began to feel that this confidence turned him into a person who knows little. He also imagined that Dharmendra was in the know of everything. Now he suspected Dharmendra as giving away money to others without telling him. Harishchandra revealed his mind to Dharmendra with the question.

" I maintained accounts for the Production section only. Kamal also does the same. But the accounts of the Marketing section are looked

after by Chinnanna himself. He alone knows how much money is white and how much black. Moreover cheque powers are fully in his hands. He alone knows how many cheques are being made and for whom. Even god does not know it. There is no use if one knows production accounts because one will not know the margin one gets in the marketing section. Production accounts become clear to every one whether they are maintained or not. But unless he tells us, no one knows the marketing accounts. You think as though I know all details," Dharmendra expresed his disgust to Harishchandra. Dharmendra wanted to share his worry with his brother and seek some solace. But when his brother suspected him, Dharmendra felt hurt.

"Why do you get angry on such a small matter and feel guilty like the pumpkin thief who brushed his shoulders? Why do you feel as though I suspect you and chinnanna to be hand-in-glove with each other?"

"You are afraid that I maintain and look into accounts. Chinnanna does not shower special favours on me. You were with him right from the beginning. He gave more importance to you than to his own son. He would have revealed to you the actual position. You're hiding facts from me."

"You are indulging in unnecessary talk. His business is to entrust me with work to be done. He discusses with you all affairs. Because he entrusts me with work, you should not think that he gave me the money. To think so is your mistake," replied Harishchandra angrily.

Harishchandra was feeling out of sorts ever since he spoke to Kamal in the night. Now Dharmendra's words provoked him further. He felt that if he talked more with his brother, it might lead to a clash. He quickly left his brother and went in.

It takes years for a sapling to grow. One hast to wait for many more years to see the sapling grow into a tree. When the tree has grown and branched out and when birds build their nests, the tree could be

felled with a few strokes by an axe. This big tree called joint family received a blow from the axe called indifference. The process of its collapse commenced.

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Narahari was relaxing in the easy chair. Sulochana was searching for some tablets. He felt belittled when they all started asking for money. Why should they ask him about money? He will do anything. Why seek explanations? His father had never asked him such questions. His mother never questioned him. Even his eldest brother dared not ask him any details about his activities.

These youngsters were the children who learnt trade tricks from him. They had already started taking decisions. It is like the bird going up the hill and cooing loudly the moment it learnt to coo. How dare they ask him 'when?' 'How?' Even Harishchandra who obeyed him implicitly began to question him. Dharmendra, who used to write whatever he was asked to, was now questioning. Kamal who supported his every action, was shooting questions at him. Should they not be grateful to him for having put them in business because they were not good at studies? Kamal, whom he wanted to make a crorepathi by taking him out of his job, was getting out of control. It was strange everyone was questioning him.

Such thoughts provoked and troubled him and he felt uneasy.

Hereafter whatever problem cropped up, its very base should be broken so that it wouldn't be mentioned again. Or else, he'd lose his importance. His authority would get eroded. Those who were older than him had no authority over him. These kids questioning him, was absurd. This disobedience should be put down! It should be put down! Such thoughts bothered him and turned into a pain.

"I got very angry when everyone began questioning you. It is like the egg mocking the chicks," said Sulochana to her husband. Her words

added fuel to the fire. But he controlled his reaction. He never revealed his feelings to his wife. Why should he discuss business with her? He would seek suggestions from her only when he failed to act or think. She herself was not given to deep thinking. She thought only at the surface level and took decisions at that level. 'What is the inside story? Why? Why did they behave in a manner they never behaved?' such questions never occurred to her mind. 'They were in the wrong. Her husband was the master. What ever happened, his word was law. If they did not listen, where was the authority? What was the respect he commanded?' she would think only in such terms.

"The tree that grows in the house is not fit for medication, they say. While all others are praising you for your intelligence.... I am not able to bear the humiliation you have been subjected to by our own people in the house," said Sulochana again. She thought that she was expressing her deep love for her husband. She thought that her words would have a soothing effect on her husband. She did not know that her words roused in him bitter feelings and made him impatient like the proverbial monkey that stepped on fire.

"You! Get out of my sight," Narahari cried venting all his impatience on his wife.

"So, that is that! Very good! When we worked our way with great perseverance, they are asking questions now. When I am trying to support you, you are angry with me. It's true, I am here only to cook for you and eat what is left out and for nothing else," she said wiping her tears with the pallu end of her saree. She was not able to understand why her husband shouted at her when she tried to sooth his feelings. She got an opportunity to talk to him after a long time. But the chance didn't work well in helping her but ended in disappointment. She decided to keep quiet for the time being.

But her thoughts travelled in a different direction unconnected with the problem. Will they care to give her importance when they

dared her husband? To retain her importance her husband should not lose his. So long as her husband enjoyed authority, she can rule the roost in the kitchen and be the queen of the household. If the men folk stop respecting her husband, she too will be ignored. The value a woman commands lies hidden in her husband. She has to protect herself by all means. She should not step back in this regard.

How much she worked for the family! Do any of them respect her for what all she did for their welfare? If her husband had treated her with respect, she would have been given respect like her mother-in-law who commanded respect from everyone in the family. But Sulochana never tried to understand the difference between herself and her mother-in-law. She laid the blame squarely on her husband and felt unhappy. Though she had no clear knowledge of things and affairs she felt disappointed that she lost an opportunity to talk to her husband.

Narahari did not care though Sulochana was hurt. He was of the opinion that women's words were like water in a sieve. They won't remain stable. Let it be pleasure or pain, it is men who should decide things. Why should women be involved? That was his thinking. Was joint living system the cause for the contempt with which women were treated? Or was it his disregard for Sulochana? He could not decide. He would realise later that a woman's word could kindle a fire that would devastate generations of families.

The telephone rang as they both were thinking in their own typical ways. Narahari cooled down after listening to the voice at the other end. His anger and annoyance suddenly disappeared. With a pleasant and loving voice he asked:

"What's the matter?"

"I want money."

"How much shall I send you?"

"Twenty lakh rupees."

"When do you want it?"

"Within a week."

"Okay. I'll send you ten lakh rupees tomorrow and send the balance later."

"Thank you."

"That's nothing, okay."

The voice at the other end was a woman's voice! Narahari slept off very happily after the telephone call. Sulochana did not bother about the phone call. She continued murmuring to herself.

*****

Mohan understood the company matters to some extent during the dining-table arguments. The production units, research units and the dealers required money. The amounts pertaining to the products released the previous year were credited to the company. The reserve money was with the company. Money was needed for production. But chinnanna was saying that there was no money. If money was not found, the works which had been going on should be stopped. If works stop, the company's business suffers. The nature of their business was such that they could not hide the product and close the company for some time and re-open when money was available. This business involved continuous and instant sales. An agriculture-based business has to run like that. It has to proceed forward without taking into account profits and losses. There will be no future if it gets stopped in the middle. The dealers and the ryots will be lured away by other companies. Once they leave a company, it is impossible to lure them back. If the future has to be retained, the work should continue setting aside the problems. To keep the work going, investments have to be made. So money was needed. But there was no money! Borrowing was inevitable.

'There is money. Why take loans?' was an argument. "There is no money. Do as you like' is another opinion. "Why is there no money?'

was another question. 'I've no need to speak about it,' is the answer. Mohan had no authority to speak out as to which was the truth and which the untruth, which a reasonable argument, which an absurd one.

It was so because no one asked Mohan. No one sought his opinion. If asked 'why', the same cycle of arguments would turn round. Mohan was a youngster. The others were all adults. What was the need to ask youngsters or listen to them? The youngsters should carry out the instructions of the elders. 'There was no need to consult the youngsters' was the opinion of the elders. That was the insight handed over by Harishchandra, Dharmendra and Kamal to his generation. There was no end to it.

Elderly authority was the silent rock that stood between man and man in that family. It was a common quality found in every person. In some, it was intense. In some others, it was subdued. This quality distances the child from the elders. It considers closeness with younger people as infra-dig, separates the youngsters from elders and makes the future hard.

It makes the elders look down with contempt on youngsters and attributes to itself greatness and perpetuates authority on them as a right.

The youngsters who bear today the burden of indifference and autocracy of the elders will perpetuate absolute authority tomorrow. They forget the quality hated by them as youngsters. The reason for intelligent youngsters getting lost is because of the authority forced down on them by the elders. That same authority is now putting down Mohan. That was the reason why he took resort to silence and loneliness. He was struggling not being able to reach the elders as a youngster and as an adolescent not being able to develop the mentality to control the youngsters. He missed friendship from both the sides in that joint family and was becoming a victim of loneliness. This is a human crime committed silently and jointly with indifference in families. There are

no witnesses to it. The crime is committed under the cloak of responsibility. So there is no chance of catching the criminals. The criminals are all those who have accepted responsibility jointly.

Revolt against authority takes place at such times. When the elementary principle that youngsters should also be given equal status and respect is forgotten in a joint family, revolt against authority commences. That is the first blow aimed at the principle of joint living. That is the hard blow at authority. The foundation for initiating individual action is laid then.

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Green lawn, velvet-soft makhmal carpet, dew drops on the grass blades appeared as if they were offering their salutation to the beauty around. The thin blade-ends of the soft meadow were mischievously tickling the toes and wetting the feet producing peculiar sensations. Raghavi walked lightly on her toes holding her skirt on the chrysanthemum flower bed.

She was sitting resting on her heels and was plucking the small chrysanthemum flowers which resemble little lumps of yellow balls. "Who taught to this branch to offer the flowers on each and every twig?" she crooned softly.

"Hello Avvakai!"

She turned round but couldn't find anyone. She started plucking the flowers. Her plait-end fell into the wet flower bed when she turned her head. She picked the plait-end and placed it in her lap and continued plucking the flowers with concentration.

"Hello, Avvakai!"

Again the voice. She looked up and saw Anil standing before her. She stood up and the flowers fell from her lap.

Anil collected all the flowers and was about to give them to her feeling sorry for frightening her. She threw them away. "Why... why....

why did you come here?" she asked, very much disturbed. She started sweating. 'Everyone at home is in a bad mood. If any one of them sees me here with Anil, they'll be terribly angry at me', she thought.

"You see, I introduced you to all my people. I wanted to introduce myself to your people," said Anil with a smile. He felt strange that Raghavi should look at him as if he were a ghost or something.

'Oh god! Did you find time to come now and create problems for me?' she murmured to herself.

"Why? Should I not come?" he again asked.

"You may come. But not without prior intimation you should come by informing first. You see. It is like that." she thought he would leave her saying that next time he would visit her by informing her first.

"I wanted to surprise you and so I came," he replied making it clear that he had no intention to go.

"I am sorry. I am going out now." She said as though she remembered something suddenly. 'If my people see you and me, they'll give a bit of their mind' she thought.

"Is that so? Then let's go together. I've to do some shopping," said Anil happily.

'Oh god! This chap is not going to leave me today. I am finished,' she thought again and turned her head. She saw Narahari coming out of the house talking to Harishchandra. Anil turned towards them. "Is he not your papa?" he asked thinking she would introduce him to them. Raghavi closed her eyes while her heart pounded hard. She began to chant Lord Anjaneya's sthotra in great agitation. She thought of her peddamma. ' I am finished' she decided.

"Raghavi, who is that man?" thundered Narahari. Harishchandra neared her quickly.

"Brother.... This boy ...is..."

"Anil....Anil Varma. I am ...." He tried to complete her sentence. He stopped in the middle and stared at her wondering why she was agitated.

"Hai father! He is Anil. His sister Ajantha is my classmate. She sent her brother to get her notes. This is the book," said Bhargava who came there just then and gave Anil a book.

Raghavi felt relieved. Narahari and Harishchandra cooled down. Anil was confused. He did not know why Bhargava lied and did not introduce him as Raghavi's friend.

"Then why does he keep talking to Raghavi?" asked Harishchandra twitching his brow.

"No! His mother wanted chrysanthemum flowers. I asked Raghavi to pluck them for me. She is helping me," explained Bhargava.

"Hmmm...Raghavi, go in!" Narahari ordered and walked off followed by Harishchandra. Raghavi ran in. As she ran in, she turned and looked at Anil as if to say 'sorry'. Anil turned back with a sigh.

"Anil bhayya! Sorry! My people are not that broad-minded to receive friends as your people do. Our family has not yet developed the culture to welcome boys or girls of other families as friends of our girls or boys. That was the reason why I had to lie. Had I not said so, I don't know what would have been the fate of my sister Raghavi today," explained Bhargava accompanying Anil to the gate. Anil felt humiliated.

Anil did not like the habits followed in Raghavi's house. 'Won't students have friends? Shouldn't the elders welcome the friends of their children? How do they know what the friends of their children are? What do they know of their own children if they don't bother about their friends? Does bringing up children mean feeding and clothing them and nothing else? When will they realise the importance of friends? Pappa, mamma, chachi, chacha, Nanima, Ajanta.....all respect the

friends of everyone. Were all Andhras like that? Oh god! I went to their place unnecessarily' thought Anil and remained moody for a long time. 'They did not even call me in. They don't seem to feel like talking to their neighbours. No! No! I shouldn't look at their house again' thought Anil.

But Raghavi's innocent face, her big panicky eyes, her gentle manner of conversation, her friendliness, her little desires, her beautiful sketch...all these freed him from his agony when he remembered them.

He and Raghavi were friends. He should think only of her. Why should he bother how other members of that family behave?' decided Anil. That thought gave him relief.

Anil opened the window. Raghavi and all children were waiting for the window to open. They all cried 'sorry' together in a chorus suggesting him to understand their helplessness.

"No! No! It's okay," he said with a gladdened heart. The doors of friendship which were closed five minutes ago, opened again.

Yet, the feeling of contempt developed in Anil's mind about the elderly members of that family. The 'northern part' of Anil's brain told him that the elders of that family were bringing up their children more with fear than understanding.

*****

Kamal appreciated Arundhati's suggestion. He decided that he would learn the truth if he met Narahari when he was alone. He left for the office immediately. Narahari would be there alone and in a pleasant mood.

Narahari was talking to someone on the phone. He looked happy. The moment he saw Kamal, his smile changed into a frown. Generally he did not hide things from Kamal. But now he has to. He put the receiver down and asked Kamal, "What! Haven't you left for Warangal

yet?" Kamal should have left for Warangal by then according to the programme.

"No! I'll leave in the afternoon," Kamal replied sitting.

Narahari kept silent. If he opened up conversation, many problems may come up for discussion.

"Please tell me why we had to face a problem with money. If the money had been really spent we can make adjustment elsewhere," said Kamal getting directly into the topic.

"There won't be real problems and unreal problems. I said there was some difficulty. That is all," replied Narahari. His words suggested that there was no need for further talk on the subject.

"That's alright. Why did that problem arise?" Kamal did not let go his point.

"There is no need for me to explain things to anyone," replied Narahari. He was equally stubborn.

"There is need to tell us. We are only four. If we don't explain things among ourselves, nothing can be run properly." Kamal was determined.

"I am not thinking of the company."

"Then what are you thinking about?" Kamal tried to eek out information.

"What I do and what I am going to do, need not be informed to anyone." Narahari did not mince words.

"Then what is the need for our existence?"

"To do work. Not to ask for results." He began to talk dictatorially.

"How is it possible to work without learning of the results?"

"If it is not possible, give up working."

"If you ask us to give up work, why did you think of me? Why did you make me resign my job? Why did you promise to make me the M.D.?

"That was my idea once, not now."

"I worked supporting your idea. If you change your mind now, tell me where I'd stand now?"

"What is there for me to tell you? You have to decide what you are."

"Then finalize the amounts due to me. It is not possible for me to work with you in this company."

"What amounts? The immovable property which you have built up all these years is yours."

"Not only that. Give me the share of money which you promised from the properties of the company."

"No one has any authority on the monies of the company, including yourself."

"Do you mean to say that is all yours?"

"Yes."

"Does the work turned out by me comes under the category of "Janmabhumi" programme then?"

"You have gained profits for the work done by you. If you are paid a monthly salary for the work done by you, you'll indebted to me a great lot of money if a calculation is made," replied Narahari taking up a negative approach. Kamal felt hurt at his words. He stood up, bent forward on the table, looked directly into Narahari's face and said, "Do you mean to say that I was a paid servant?"

Narahari couldn't face him. He whirled the chair and turned hi face to the wall. He did not reply.

"Then there is no need for me to work in this company. Even if I make a start now, I can do more business than this company," said Kamal suppressing his emotions.

The word 'salary' uttered by Narahari hit him hard. He felt that he should meet Narahari never again.

"Those who question me need not continue in my company," said Narahari with his face to the wall. Though he turned his face away, he did not hide his opinion.

"I have taken the responsibility for half the company. Don't forget this company will get split to that extent," shouted Kamal. He thought that Narahari would understand him atleast then. Narahari did not react. He decided not to speak. If he spoke he may speak his mind out. So he chose to keep silent. Kamal left the place in a huff thinking that Narahari would not talk to him about anything. Narahari felt very disturbed after Kamal left.

*****

It takes a long time to form attachments and develop a sense of belonging. Though the feeling of closeness grows like a bulky tree and the sense of nearness increase many fold, a single word, like the hacking axe, will destroy this relationship. One incident is sufficient to convert the bond into a bare stump preventing the growth of leaves on the tree.

A person may lead a glorious life. It does not take much time to lose that glory. A single expression can do the mischief. It may not be possible to win back again the glory in all its fullness in one's life however much one tries, once this discordant note is struck.

The word 'salary' used by Narahari snapped the attachment Kamal had developed towards him. It removed at one stroke Kamal's regard for Narahari. If an enterprise has to be carried on, attachment, affection, regard and faith among those who share the responsibility should be nurtured. If not, the enterprise will not succeed.

That was the reason why Kamal took such a drastic decision.

"Aru! We are going back to the Unit. Get ready as quickly as possible," said Kamal.

"How is it possible for me to get ready if you ask me to pack instantly? First eat your lunch. We will think later," replied Arundhati. She realised that Kamal was in a disturbed mood.

"I am not hungry. Will you go with me or not?"

"What else can I do? But, you wanted to meet chinnanna. What happened?" she asked gently. She could guess from his tone that something unpleasant happened between them. She wanted to learn about it from Kamal.

"He is prepared to lose you and me for the sake of money," he said. He did not know how to start his answer.

Kamal had grown pink and he fumbled for words. Arundhati understood that he was under a great stress.

"Did chinnanna talk harshly?" she asked touching his shoulder.

"Not just harshly. Like a dictator," said Kamal in great anger which he could not control.

"Tell me in a detailed manner," said Arundhati giving him a glass of water.

"I was telling you from the beginning. That I would do business independently, 'we are all one. Is this not yours also' your father had said offering me a share in the running of the company. You know it. Don't you?" asked Kamal. He wanted to share his emotion with her.

"Yes. So what?"

"He made me resign my lecturer's job saying he would make me the M.D. and that I have to run the company myself. You know that also "

"It is so. But what happened?" she asked him again holding his hand.

"I developed the company by working hard all these years. Now he says that if a calculation is made salary-wise I owe him money! This is what your chinnanna says," said Kamal showing his index finger towards her.

"Why did you talk about salaries and figures at all?" she asked in a confused manner.

"I asked him why there was a problem in adjusting money. I think his ego got hurt. He said those who question him need not work with him," clarified Kamal.

"This is surprising! He has a great regard for you! Why did he speak like that? Perhaps he directed his anger on you thinking of someone else. It is usual with him to do so." She expected that Kamal might have misunderstood his father-in-law.

"There is no other thought. He has done something with the money. He couldn't tolerate when I asked him. He is trying to throw me out so that I would not question him again about money matters," replied Kamal. He now had a clear understanding of the situation.

"First tell me in detail what transpired between you during your talk." Arundhati heard him fully, patiently and then said," I don't understand why he spoke humiliating you. But, please! For my sake, stay on for this night. After brothers arrive, let us discuss with them and take a decision. If chinnanna spoke hastily, what is the use of our being in haste also?" she tried to pacify Kamal.

"No. I can't live in this house. You talk to everyone and go over to me later. I am leaving for the Unit. Don't stop me please!" said Kamal. She saw Kamal's eyes moisten. Though she too wanted to leave, she controlled herself. She realized that going without talking to her brothers and chinnanna was not proper.

"Kamal! For my sake! Don't take to heart chinnanna's words. After he cools down, he will himself call you back."

"I'll think of it when he calls me. I can't meet your brothers and say 'father-in-law wanted me to leave the company. What shall I do?' and seek their advice. I am going to our Unit. If they ask me why I went, then I will tell them the reason." Kamal got ready with his briefcase.

"Please! Don't take a hasty decision. Heed my words, please," requested Arundhati.

"Sorry, Aru. If I stay here any longer I lose respect on myself, " he said and walked out. Arundhati followed her husband to the gate.... That gate was the Lakshmana Rekha*.

Arundhati too wanted to leave but could not without telling others. She could not stay on in the place where her husband was not respected. She stood there helplessly looking at her husband till he turned the street corner. She was worried how this situation would create complications in the future.

Money. It was money that created suspicion between brothers and their brother-in -law. It brought about enmity between the father-in-law and the son-in-law. If there was no money, okay, it could be thought there was no money. If they incurred loses they could accept the loses. But the situation of "poverty in plenty" had raised a storm among them all. Arundhati felt that it would be fine if chinnanna revealed the actual position.

In the meanwhile all the children arrived with their cycles. Tulya went close to her mother and asked " Mummy, why are you standing here?"

** Forbidding line. A demarking line, crossing which would result in evil . The reference is to the line drawn by Lakshmana, the younger brother of Sri Rama, asking Sita, Rama's wife, not to cross it, before he went in search of Sri Rama who followed the golden deer.*

" Daddy left for the Unit . I was looking at him," replied Arundhati. She faltered in her speech.

Arundhati did not express her feelings before children generally. But now she could not hide them. " He goes to the Unit usually at this time. But why do you look depressed? " asked Tulya looking keenly at her mother. The little girl knew that the problem was severe if her mother looked worried.

" There is nothing special about it. He was not in a good mood," said Arundhati.

" Will Daddy's mood improve if you also go moody? " asked Tulya holding her mother's hand, pulling her into the house. Arundhati wanted to tell Tulya what happened but restrained as Tulya would not understand the problem even if explained. She went in silently.

" Aunty.! What special sweet-meats did you prepare? " asked the children surrounding her. Tulya kept silent. Arundhati was deeply disturbed ...wondering how this situation would turn out and what would happen in the future.

Everyone thought that Kamal went to the Unit as usual. But there was no phone call from him as was his habit. People at home thought there was a clash between Kamal and Arundhati. Narahari who knew the reason kept silent. Arundhati also controlled herself thinking that she need not speak out until they asked her the reason.

A week passed. She could not bear staying away from Kamal. She wanted to talk to her chinnanna and walked towards his room... She heard Dharmendra talking in a loud tone and stopped.

" I am not asking money for my personal expenses, " he said.

" Whether it is for your personal expenses or for the company, don't ask me. I cannot make any kind of arrangement for money now. Anyway why should you depend upon me still? Try to manage yourself, " he replied angrily.

" How can we manage affairs when you keep all the money with yourself? Transfer the money to our account. We'll manage without asking you, " said Dharmendra, losing patience.

" Is it your money to put it into your account?"

" I am not talking about your money and my money. I can attend to some work if some money is allotted to me. I can't get loans. That 's what I mean," explained Dharmendra to clear the misunderstanding.

" Why should I make the arrangement? It is my money."

"How d id you make money? We all worked together. We credited the amounts in your account. It is not correct for you to say now that all the money is yours."

"What works did you carry out? You wrote down the accounts learning from me. You ate sumptuous meal and slept well at home. What else did you do?" questioned Narahari. Narahari mastered the art of saying things that would make others feel hurt.

"Let us talk of what I did later. First turn your attention to Sundar. He is giving advances to all our ryots and taking agreements from them. If we don't act quickly our company will have no future. Please understand," said Dharmendra swallowing the humiliating words of Narahari.

"I can't make any adjustments whatever you say. Do what you want."

"Why? Why don't you arrange the money? Do you want to give away to Kamal all the money? If you had allowed us freedom earlier we would have decided upon our courses. We improved the company by spending all our energies all these years. We worked hard thinking that you were there to help us. If now you say you don't have money, what is to happen to us?" Dharmendra burst out emotionally.

"Why do you ask me about that? You decide for yourself what you want to do." Narahari revealed his autocratic tendency again.

"If it is so, why this joint family and joint earnings? Is it not better to keep separate accounts and earnings?" suggested Dharmendra gently.

"Do it as you say. How long can I help you?"

"How will we do it? We gave you what all we've earned. Now you show us empty hands."

"Then give up!"

"Okay. We'll manage it somehow. But we can't tolerate if you give all the money to Kamal as he is your son-in-law." Dharmendra left the room in a huff.

He saw Arundhati at the door, frowned at her and went away. She understood that Dharmendra suspected Narahari being favourable towards Kamal. That was the meaning of her brother's frown.

She called him but Dharmendra did not stop. She wanted to talk to her chinnanna. The telephone rang.

"Hello! Narahari speaking!"

"....."

"I'll arrange the balance amount tomorrow."

"....."

"Don't feel bad for the delay. Have faith in me."

"....."

"Don't worry. I'll send the amount."

"If it is not for you, for who else is all my money?"

"....."

"Yes...okay. I'll send it."

"....."

"No one can prevent me. I'll proceed. Whatever I decide should happen....I don't mind whatever happens to others."

"……."

"Okay! It's all right. Don't worry yourself. I'll take care of it……."Narahari was going on speaking. Arundhati turned back. She did not feel like disturbing him.

Dharmendra started out with his briefcase. Harini followed him. She told Arundhati that her uncle was not well and so they were going to visit him. Narahari did not bother though he guessed their departure. Arundhati realised that a dangerous storm was going to breakout. The huge tree was about to collapse. She knew that the brothers and brother-in-law who were closer than brothers were turning out into enemies. She could do nothing though she knew that the reason for the misunderstanding was Narahari withholding the money.

That day, the chairs of Kamal and Dharmendra were empty at the dining table. Harini was not there serving food. Narahari ate a few morsels quickly and left without talking to anyone. Harishchandra and Mohan ate quietly without looking up. But the children ate their meal happily as on any other day.

*****

Some persons believe arrogantly that everything happens favourably to them. In their conceit, they don't try to judge themselves as long as things are in their favour. They don't even take a look at themselves and their actions even when someone question them. It is only when they receive a near fatal blow they try to shake off their haughty pride. They are prepared to lose their life than get rid of their haughtiness. Haughtiness has such a strong quality. So long as they keep an upper hand over others, this quality keeps itself under control. Once they realize that the opponents may take a hit at them, their arrogance breaks itself loose. When anger, envy and hatred take control, people would be prepared to take any risk. They cover up their arrogance with the mask of self-respect.

"Chinnanna! Why is Kamal staying away in the Unit?" Harishchandra's question echoed the thought of others for the first time in the house.

"Imagine I asked you that question. You give me the answer," said Narahari looking out of the window without turning back.

"I approached you as I did not find an answer."

"I too don't have it."

"Why did Dharmendra leave to his uncle's place?"

"I don't know that also."

"Did anything happen in the house ever without your knowledge?"

"They are happening now."

"No. You know the reason. Yet you are hiding things."

"I don't know. You better ask them. Those who left, Was it they or me?"

"They are not revealing anything."

"I too don't have the need to tell you."

"Do you realise what you are doing? Your son-in-law, whom you treated more affectionately than your sons, left the house and you are keeping quiet as if nothing happened. Does it not have some significance?" asked Harishchandra angrily.

"So you feel that I am behaving without realizing what I have been doing. Is that your opinion?"

"I didn't use such big words. I asked you whether you know what is happening."

"I don't know. I don't want to know."

"I am unable to understand whether you are a genius or a stupid fool. You have no answer for any of my questions," said Harishchandra impatiently.

"Harishchandra! I don't like to be questioned. If you did not know what was happening all these months, it only shows your lack of understanding of things."

"Your reply is like throwing petrol on burning houses. I am very nuch in distress. Don't convert it into anger." There was harshness in Harishchandra's tone.

"Then....what will you do?" asked Narahari in a severe tone.

Harishchandra remained silent for a while. "Chinnanna! I am not old enough or have experience to tell you. Yet with my little knowledge I say this. We are collapsing like a pack of cards. Not one! All of us! The mind works perversely when the time for annihilation arrives. Your silence on money matters is going to destroy our joint family. The members of this family are going to turn into enemies. We need not be surprised if horrible things happen in future." Harishchandra had never spoken for so long any time with Narahari. He stopped his speech suddenly.

"Do you want me or money?" asked Narahari.

"You know very well that we would choose only you. That is why you are shutting my mouth with that question."

"Harishchandra! That is no answer to my question."

"Then listen to me. Once when you lost all money with your cinema venture, we all kept quiet taking the loss as a gift to goddess Pochamma. Our children were young then. But now they have grown up and it is your responsibility to support them."

"Is not your responsibility mine? Are not your children my children?" cut Narahari in the middle.

"It may be true. But we did not bring them up as our children. We brought them up with a common future for them in your hands."

"Why did you realize your responsibility with such urgency now?"

"Because we've lost faith in you!" Harishchandra revealed his mind in no uncertain terms. Narahari felt a thousand volt shock.

'Could Harishchandra also speak his mind so clearly? Harishchandra, who was afraid to bargain by himself the price of tobacco, has he grown so old to question me today?' thought Narahari. His mind got shattered at the answer given by Harishchandra.

"You.....don't have.....faith .....in. me?" repeated Narahari stressing each word.

"When you don't have faith in us, why should we have it in you? How can we entertain it?"

"Who said I don't have faith in you?"

"If you had it, you would have told us, even before we asked you, about the monies you gave on loans. The secrecy you have been maintaining regarding money matters raises doubts in our minds and makes us lose faith in you."

Narahari stared at Harishchandra speechless.

"You see chinnanna! All these years we consulted you when we wanted to buy sarees for our wives, as to how much to be spent on them. It doesn't show our incompetence. It shows our faith in you. Now that confidence is slipping out. We are unable to bear the pain at your losing our confidence more than our losing money. Kamal and Dharm are also undergoing this agony and torture. Mutual suspicion between them is breaking their loving relationship. You have to reveal facts about money matters before utter disaster overtakes us all."

"Are you asking me for the accounts, Harishchandra?" Narahari asked with a hoarse voice.

"No chinnanna! Kamal is taking loans from different places for his Unit. Dharm also has started his attempts for raising loans. All our properties have been kept under mortgage. If we don't make profits in

this production, we'll all get bogged down in losses. Think of it," said Harishchandra. Narahari did not reply. After a pause Harishchandra continued. " I am also going taking Roopa with me. If we sit in the city on the loans we have taken, we'll be left with begging bowls. Then we have to go back to our village and hold the plough. We'll have to start afresh our life," he said and went out. Harishchandra started sweating having spoken those few sentences. He struggled a great deal to control himself and not lose his temper before his chinnanna.

Narahari felt that Harishchandra was giving him pain. But he could not imagine how much he had hurt Harishchandra. He did not guess that Harishchandra was prepared to leave, controlling himself and assuming for himself an authority. Kamal and Dharmendra apart, Harishchandra too stooped so low as to ask him accounts and they were ready to destroy the joint family venture! But he did not realize that Harishchandra too had grown up. A person who does not want to be questioned should see to it that such a situation does not arise. Having provided a chance to question, when a question was raised, saying 'don't question me' sounds strange and absurd. Man is the superior most being in creation. The reason lies in his ability to question. When a human being has such a brain, a person can't consider this quality as his own private quality and try to rule over an institution. Some persons never question others. Their fear complex, regard, love, hatred, envy etc....which they entertain towards others prevents them from questioning them. But still the question would have occurred in their mind.

If a joint venture runs successfully, there can be only one main reason, be it in old times or in the modern. It depends on the ability of the man at the helm of affairs who manages without giving an opportunity to raise a question against his work-philosophy. He takes care that such a situation does not arise. He may sometimes even lose his identity in the cautious approach he makes enabling the joint venture to progress without obstacles.

If the 'Kotapati family' flourished in the joint family system it was because the head of the family followed this principle. In Narahari's rule this principle was dropped and questions cropped up. Authority gives a person a stature and a grandeur. It also injures as deeply.

Narahari moved about hiding his panic behind a mask of dignity.

'Let them go! Let them go! Can't I live alone? How intelligent he is! Why should I answer those who had grown up before me! I should not talk of money matters at all' he thought. He did not realise that his decision would play with lives. He guessed that Harishchandra was getting ready to go. Before he could stop him the telephone rang.

" Hello! Narahari speaking."

" Hello!...the material has not yet reached us this week." A woman's voice at the other end. Narahari sat up.

" There is some difficulty for money."

" Once an agreement has been accepted it cannot be given up!"

" It may be so, but all my children are opposing it."

"So your word has no value in your house. What happened to your authority?"

" It is not like that. I have to know about the likes and dislikes of my children also. I have given you enough. I can't send you more."

" Everyone here thinks that you are running the joint family successfully. We have realised now that you can't say 'no' to your children."

" Not that my children opposed me. .... Okay! Send me the list for the material. Tomorrow I'll send the lorry with the load."

" Good! Now you proved that you are Narahari! Bye!"

"Okay."

Arundhati lifted the phone at that time to ring up Kamal. She continued listening to the conversation on the phone much against her will. She could not get full purport of the conversation. The female voice was very authoritative. Arundhati repeated the dialogue many times for herself.

Who was the woman! Who was she who could order chinnanna? What is the affair that makes him ignore his own family? Arundhati did not give much thought though the question occurred to her mind. She wanted to keep quiet till she discussed this matter with Kamal. She observed Harishchandra getting ready to leave. She wanted to tell him what she heard on the phone. Sulochana and Roopa were talking to each other.

"It's true mother. If I leave it will be difficult to manage the children. But he wants me to go with him," said Roopa to Sulochana.

"If you all go away, what is to be done with this huge house? It will be good if we all live in one place."

"Whom should I listen to? Your son or you!" asked Roopa arranging clothes in the suitcase and closing it.

Sulochana guessed that Roopa decided to leave and that she would not heed her entreaties to stay away. But she did not know why they were all leaving. In that house. Women do not learn of happenings in all their fullness. This half knowledge creates poisonous thoughts.

"That's right. I am not your mother-in-law to wield authority over you. I brought up Harishchandra with greater care and affection than my children. Now you are leaving, bag and baggage. You are all one. I am a fool. I believe everyone," said Sulochana feeling sorry for her innocence.

"Don't feel so much worried, amma. We are going to our place. I'll return within a couple of days convincing your son. It is difficult for you to manage all the children," consoled Roopa. Harishchandra

sounded the car horn. Roopa moved out with her suit-case. Arundhati came there with the idea of telling about the phone conversation she overheard.

"Annaiah! Wait a minute! I want to talk to you."

'What does she want to talk?' murmured Roopa

"Very important matter. I've to tell annaiah."

"You remember all the things when people are about to start," said Roopa trying to cut her. Arundhati went round and reached Harishchandra at the steering.

"Brother! I want to talk to you for a moment."

"Arundhati! Why do you women bother about business affairs! Problems come and go! Don't worry about them all," he said thinking that his sister wanted to stop him from going.

"That's not the matter. It's an important one," repeated Arundahti.

Sulochana and Roopa were there. She did not want to tell Harischandra anything in front of them. He was not taking her seriously. She held the steering. Harishchandra removed her hand from the steering. "Arundhati! You can talk to me after I return,"

Arudhati got worried. She appealed to Roopa to stay away. "I want to talk to you," she told Roopa. She thought if she could stop Roopa from going Harishchandra also would stay away.

"You may be happy without Kamal. But I can't leave your annaiah at all. He doesn't eat with any regularity of time." She indirectly jeered at Arundhati for staying on even when Kamal left.

"That's not it, annaiah...."Arundhati tried to speak to him.

"Enough of your entreaties. Why do you stop those who are going? Let them go," said Sulochana. Arundhati couldn't say anything more.

*****

If only Arundhati revealed to Harishchandra what she wanted to tell him, disasters of the future would have been prevented.

*****

Raghavi made it a habit to go to Rajaram's house to spend the evenings as there was none in their house. One evening, she stretched herself on the rope cot as usual looking at the sky.

The moon was moving slowly in the sky and neared a cloud. Raghavi began to worry that the cloud would devour the moon.

"You there! O moon! Don't move to the left. Move to the right! To the right. There are no clouds there," she said.

"What are you shouting at," cried Rajaram's wife.

"Its not about you, attend to your work," she replied and started giving directions to the moon again.

"This way....slightly to the left...no! No! You are moving away towards the cloud! That's okay! Now you can proceed straight. There are no clouds," said Raghavi relaxed. She did not observe Anil's arrival. Anil stood quietly staring at her who was directing the heavenly bodies with her index finger. Anil thought Raghavi looked exactly like the moon with the moonlight reflected on her.

He looked at her and the moon alternately. 'What is there in the moon? Does the moon possess beautiful eyes? Does the moon have the ruby lips that shine brightly like strawberries? What is moonlight before the honey-dripping smile of Raghavi? Does the moon have a lovely face with a chin like the end of mango fruit? More than all these, does the moon look innocent like Raghavi? No. The moon does not have any of these beauties. Not at all. The moon has only moonlight and nothing more,' he thought.

"Oh god! You moon. You are again moving towards a cloud. Take care! Turn this way, to the right," Raghavi moved her hand. Her hand touched Anil. Immediately she sat up on the cot.

"Hello Avvakai!," said Anil.

She stood up and opened her small mouth in surprise and looked as if to say, 'when did you come?'

He nodded his head as if in reply 'just now' and said "Shall I ask you a question?" Raghavi nodded 'yes'.

"Do you like me? " he asked in a quivering voice looking directly into her eyes. Raghavi turned her head side ways and up and down. She widened her round big eyes.

"Do you love me?" asked Anil staring into her eyes.

Raghavi fluttered her eyelids. "What is meant by love?" she asked.

Anil did not know how and what to answer her. He put both his hands into his pants pockets, bent back and laughed happily. He nodded his head. "Do you feel like talking to me always?" he asked.

"I think so," she replied casually.

"Do you feel bad if I am hurt?"

"I think so. I felt bad when I hit you with a paper weight," she said with an innocent expression.

"Do you feel that you should be with me always?"

"Certainly I feel so."

"Do you feel I am your man?"

"I feel so in truth."

"Do you think you are born for me?"

"Funny, how do you know ?..... I feel like that."

"Do you think your life is empty without me?"

"Yes it will be deepest darkness."

"Then, that is love," said Anil as though he discovered a universal truth.

"On whom? For whom?" she asked.

"On me, for me, of course!" he replied looking into her eyes.

"Shall I tell you something," she asked languidly.

"Tell me...tell me what all you have in your mind," he said as though he had gone there only to hear that. "When you are mine why do you hide the thought in yourself?" he said again.

"For me..."

"Yes. For you.."

"I feel all those things when I see you. But...but"

"Yes, go on, but..."

"Not only you, when I see my peddamma, my pedananna, my brothers, Rajaram uncle....and others I get the same feeling," she said counting her fingers.

Anil kicked the cot and cursed himself for his energy going waste. 'How does she understand me? In what way should I tackle this dummy?' he thought to himself.

"Don't you feel anything special when you see me?" he shouted loudly.

"Mischief! I want to play mischief," she shouted back equally loudly.

Thank god! I am happy you have atleast one special feeling for me. That is what is meant by love," he said as if he could understand her mind.

"Truly?" she said looking doubtful. "But Bhargava, Tulya..." she was about to say something more. He stopped her in the middle. "No, stop. Please! You told me what you wanted to. Enough. Don't break my heart by bringing in all your people with me in the list," he said quickly. Raghavi looked at him as if she did not understand him.

"Don't make my love for you go waste. Whether you love me or not, let me atleast entertain such a thought," he said, bringing his palms together in a namaskar.

Raghavi twisted her long plait around the neck of Anil, looked directly into his eyes and breathing slowly she said in a very low voice, " I like you so much as to feel my life a waste without you."

Anil removed the twisted plait from his neck and did the same to her with her plait saying," Having known everything, you pretended innocence."

"No. I am playing mischief," she said, held her skirt pleats up and ran away jumping like a young calf.

"I feel my life a waste without you," mumbled Anil as he left the place.

"Where did Raghavamma go, babu? I wanted to give you both some eats. Why did she leave you like that?" asked Rajaram's wife as she came out.

" I don't know peddamma. She ran away."

"Did you say anything to her?"

No! No! I didn't say anything to her," he faltered as he replied.

"Then what did you tell her for half an hour with your nose on hers?" she asked as if she understood what happened between them.

"Oh god! Peddamma! You too want to play with me?" he said.

"I observed you already! I didn't want to disturb you in the middle. Did that girl tell you that she likes you very much? You too have a deep love for her. Do you want me to talk to her people about you?" she asked moving her hands around his face, breaking her knuckles at her temples.

"I'll get along peddamma!" said Anil changing the topic.

"Yes, get going. You are the right person to hold the little finger of Ragahvamma," said Rajaram's wife with great affection. "Me and my man should sprinkle the sacred rice on your heads." That was the response of the childless woman who was moved by motherly love.

*****

The children were playing 'passing parcel' game when Narahari returned home. The music stopped when the parcel reached Shravani. All the children cried "ye! Ye!" Shravani opened the chit.... 'Act like a monkey' was written on it.

Shravani imitated a monkey by scratching her sides and made faces. The children clapped in appreciation. The music started again. It was Tulya's turn. 'Act like Charlie Chaplin' was the instruction. She immediately brought an umbrella and stood in the typical posture and moved about like Chaplin. The children congratulated her.

The music started again. It was Bhargava's turn now. 'Act like grandfather' was written on the chit. Bhargava lifted the receiver of the phone. He changed his voice. "Hello! This is Narahari speaking. What is all the news?.....I'll take care of the money matters. Attend to your work," he said exactly as Narahari speaks. But no one clapped in appreciation. He wondered whether his act was not perfect. He observed that they all were looking at the door. He turned to the door and was stunned. He saw Narahari standing there. ' I am finished' he thought and hit his forehead with his palm. The children stood up silently.

"You fellows! Your fathers started treating me with contempt. Have I become a laughing stock with you also?" Narahari cried in anger.

"That...that was only a game...I was asked to imitate you. It was written on the chit. I did what I was asked to do. Is it not so, Phani?" he asked everyone and they all silently nodded their heads up and down.

"That's alright. Do you know that your parents left for the village? Your grandma is alone and can't do all the work. It is better for you to shift to a hostel " said Narahari in all seriousness.

The children went pale. They quickly left to their rooms and started packing except Raghavi. She did not know what to do. The children felt very unhappy to leave each other. They had lived together like one soul all these years.

The children left to their village by the night bus. The elders in the village learnt the reason for their being sad and glum. There should be a very strong reason for such a change in Narahari. He was not that harsh with the kids. Someone was 'misguiding' him thought the elders.

*****

Narahari was lying on the terrace looking up in the sky in a thoughtful mood. The clouds were coming close to each other. The stars were together in pairs and groups. Fragrance was keeping company with the breeze. The moon had the support of the moonlight. But he ...he had none by him. The patridge flying about, was cooing again and again. "You are alone! You are alone!" the bird said. What was the mistake committed by him? What was the reason for his being left alone? Why did his sons and son-in-law who used to stand with folded hands before him, leave him? Though he was not praised to the skies by them, they showed him a lot of respect. The very thought made him feel heavy at heart. Distance makes people realize the value of things, he thought.

'Won't they come back to me? Won't they support me? 'These questions bothered him. He could not relish food. He felt as though he had hacked his limbs himself by sending them all away. Would they come back to him once he hurt them with his words? Will they bring back to the house the earlier grandeur?' such thoughts pulled him down along with his distaste for food. What did he want to achieve by subjecting so many of his people to distress?

When he went bankrupt twice his children stood by him. Now why did they leave him? Perhaps they took the earlier setbacks as fate or the mischief of time and now take the present crises as a result of their

inefficiency. Narahari's mind was in a turmoil. Finally he came to the conclusion that what he did was wrong. ' I did wrong! I did wrong!' he said to himself again and again until his words pierced his heart like arrows.

Sulochana was not at home. She had gone to the market. The pain in his heart increased. He did not know what to do. He signalled the watchman at the gate. The watchman did not look at him. As he walked towards the steps he hit the garden chair and it over-turned making a noise. The noise attracted the watchman and he looked up. He observed his master falling and ran to him. Narahari pointed at his heart and mumbled "doctor, doctor....phone." The watchman helped his master to his room and telephoned the doctor.

The doctor came immediately, examined Narahari and telephoned the cardiologist who came and attended on Narahari.

The doctor told Sulcohana who walked in then, that her husband suffered a minor stroke and told her to take good care of him. He should take complete rest and should not subject himself to tension. "If there had been delay of about half an hour, things would have ended tragically," he informed her. Sulochana started crying. She realized that there was no one to help or console her. She sat by her husband's side the whole night keeping awake.

During the night, Narahari was in a delirious state and went on mumbling 'I have done wrong.' By morning he recovered and became his usual self.

Again his ego began to claim its place in his heart. Perhaps it happens like that to those who enjoy authority in their lives. When they are unwell mentally or physically, they feel that they should be friendly with everyone. Once they recover the 'I ' factor claims its place. They fight to keep up their personal prestige to the end. Even if they change in the last moments of their lives, its too late and their lives end without realization helping them.

Narahari sent for Mohan. When he came Narahari asked him," Mohan! Are you also angry with me?'

Mohan turned his head sideways.

"Come! Sit by me," he invited Mohan.

Mohan sat at the edge of the cot. Mohan never felt free with him.

"Come nearer." Mohan moved a little closer. Ever since Narahari shouted him down about the grapes business, Mohan had been keeping distance from him.

"What would you have done had I died?"

"I would have cried my heart out."

"Then?"

"I would have cried more."

"After that?"

"I would have placed your photograph by the side of those of grandfather and grandmother, and I would have tried to stand on my legs taking your example though you were forgotten."

Mohan's words almost killed his ego. He had thought highly of himself, his intelligence and abilities and wanted everyone to recognise his self-engendered importance. All this would be forgotten once he died.

Did he ever call Mohan to him anytime? Did he ever ask Mohan what he wanted? Yet that fellow told him that he would cry if he died! The children's love for him and their heart-felt feelings towards him made him respect them. Narahari guessed that Mohan had felt all along that he was ignored and neglected by him.

In the meanwhile, Raghavi went there. "Come, dear girl. Sit here." She went near him but did not sit. He realized then that he had lost the love of his children because of his mask of authority. 'How can I win

back your love and affection? Though you have love for me you aren't able to express it to me because of this iron wall called authority' he thought.

He hid his face in the pillow and shed tears for the first time. He remembered his mother and cried behind the pillow. He had not the courage to converse with Sulochana. She was also standing away from him.

The cordless phone rang. It was a woman's voice that said," Hello". He wanted to cut the call but said, "Hello".

"When will you send me the balance amount?"

"Please! I am not well. I'll send it later. Don't telephone to me."

"I am sorry. I'll be disturbing you until I am sent the entire amount. I'll ring up after two days. Arrange for the money by that time," said the voice. There was a threat in the voice.

Narahari threw the pillow down impatiently.

The decision he had taken without telling his children had distanced them from him. Now, it's distancing him from himself. He did not foresee this development. Sulochana who was observing everything could not do or say anything. Women in this house had no right to speak. Now, it had made them speechless to console him.

"Sulochana! Tell me! Am I a lonely man? Don't I have anyone? Have everyone distanced themselves from me? Okay. Let them go. So what? I have money. I can take any number of people into service with money. I am not a lonely person!" said Narahari incoherently holding her hand and shaking her up. She could not say anything.

"Eshwar...is not he my son? Is not accountant Srinivas my son? Is not Balraju my man? Can't I love them all as my sons? We can make relationships of people with money. It is money indeed that brings about relationships. Do you know?" he asked Sulochana. She stood

taking the support of the wall without saying a word. She did not know what was happening to her husband. He went on speaking and finally slept off overcome by weariness. "No....No one can win love and affection with money. It is love that wins people..." he murmured in his disturbed sleep.

"Do you know Sulochana! Relationships are of two kinds. One is blood relationship and the other relationship is by marriage. I slew them both with my words. Now I have to give life to the bonds that have been cut. Or else, I'll have to remain a bare trunk. I want my sons. I want my son-in-law. Without them I'll have to die like an orphan in the arms of the watchman or in the hands of an unknown person. I want my people! I want my people!" he cried in delirium and slipped into deep sleep again.

*****

The city was still in deep sleep. The autos began croaking their horns. The street lights which had burned the whole night keeping watch over the city felt tired and closed their eyes. A large group of birds settled on the terrace of the top floor of a tall building noisily proclaiming that they were higher than the highest. People started bestirring themselves to enter into the 'body' of the city on their errands. Raghavi was very much worried at the developments in the house. As everyone left the house it depressed Sulochana. She was directing her anger and disappointment towards Raghavi now and then. Raghavi herself began to feel unhappy and panicky.

"Haven't you grown old?" said Kamala adjusting her bindi looking into the mirror.

"You silly! What if the hair has grown grey and I hold a stick in hand? I am young in spirits. Don't you see me playing cricket with the young boys?" replied Rajaram twirling his bushy moushtache. Raghavi laughed heartily at his words.

"If Raghavamma laughs. Don't rubies roll down?" said Kamala with her husband.

"It's true! What does Raghavamma lack? She resembles the 'gobbemma' deity adorned with cucumber flowers sitting in the middle of Sankranthi rangoli pattern. We don't know into which house she sets in her foot. That house will turn into gold," said Rajaram smiling.

"You! Peddaiah! You always praise me like that. I feel shy if you talk like that," said Raghavi. He too laughed heartily at her words.

"Oh my! Oh my! When she feels shy she looks like goddess Sitamahalakshmi," said Kamala snapping her knuckles at her temples.

"I'll go away if you talk like that!" said Raghavi.

"No! No! Sit down. I'll not praise you. You there! You too don't praise her. She will get angry like the western sky in the evening," he said and looked at her. "What is the reason? Your face looks distressed and drawn. Didn't you eat food in the night?"

"There is no one in the house Peddaiah. I feel forlorn."

"It's true! When your father came here, he lived in this tiled house. He grew up with difficulties but prospered. He was like a blade of grass n the beginning but soon grew into a flowering tree. I feel happy when I look at your house or your people, my child. You know we are childless." He continued after a pause. "Your family has fallen on evil days. I don't understand what would happen," he said smoking a cigar.

"I feel depressed in that big house Peddaiah. I like your house, small though it is," said Raghavi thinking of the silence that rules her house.

"How well you spoke! Big people's thinking is also big they say. You say you like this poor man's house!" said Rajaram caressing her cheeks. The rough wrinkled hands of the old man gave her solace. Her eyes became moist. Tears rolled down her smooth cheeks. Anil who went just then collected the tears in his palm saying "no...No! It's bad."

"Oh good! Anil babu has also arrived. Sit down. Sit down babu," said Kamala offering another rope cot.

"Look Avvakai! We don't know where this water was when it was in your eyes. But now....." he said and poured the tear drops on her locket. The water drops turned golden in colour. She wiped her tears off her cheeks and looked at anil with wide opened eyes. She forgot her agony.

"Now you see," he said and took his palm near his pearl shirt button. The tear drops began to shine like pearls. Raghavi was surprised at what she saw.

Rajaram also took a look at it bending over Anil's palm.

"Now tell me, what is it?" asked Anil, showing the tear drop to Raghavi.

"Gold.....no, pearl," she said.

Anil let the tear drop fall on the ground. It got absorbed quickly into earth.

"Now tell me what it is" said Anil showing the place where it soaked into the earth. Raghavi did not speak.

"Look Avvakai! The tear drop is very valuable. It reveals that your mind felt the pain. If you cry for others it becomes gold for their lives. If you cry to remove darkness it becomes a pearl. That is, if you work hard for the sake of others it becomes a pearl. If you cry for yourself, the tear rolls down your cheek and becomes one with dust. Now tell me. Do you let go waste the most valuable gift that generates from your brain?"

"No....I'll not cry hereafter," she said.

"Let your mother live happily. How nicely have you explained it, my son," appreciated Kamala.

Raghavi smiled pursing her lower lip. Anil's face glowed like the full moon. Raghavi suddenly felt shy. She got up and went away to her house.

"Beta! I'll ask a question. Will you answer me?" asked Rajaram addressing Anil.

"You should only ask. I'll answer any number of questions."

"I think you like Raghavamma," he said directly.

Anil faltered to answer. "What is there in it chacha! I like you also," he said.

"Will he answer if you ask him like that? Ask him in English," prompted Kamala smiling.

"Then tell me, do you love Ragahvamma?"

"Raghavi has a good mental makeup, chacha. Now I like her friendship. I am not thinking beyond that", said Anil getting up from the cot. "We shouldn't think deeply of any matter, chacha," he said and left the place.

*****

Arundhati was feeling impatient. The brothers and brother-in-law had all lived together happily like one family in that house. Raghavi remained mostly silent. Sulcohana was always in the kitchen. Arundhati did not feel like staying at home. But she had no habit of going out. Her mind was disturbed. She felt uneasy.

It was the first time for her to live away from Kamal for such a long time. She felt panicky. Kamal was a man of self-respect. He would not return unless her chinnanna requests him to come back. Her chinnanna was egoistic and equally stubborn. If he took a decision he did not change it easily. So there was no surety that he would call Kamal back. She realized that it was impossible for Kamal to live in that house.

To add to all this, Sulochana was herself in depression. She was directing all her anger on Arundhati and Raghavi. Narahari also did the same on both of them with a vengeance. Spending a day was turning into a horrible experience to Arundhati. She was pining away for Kamal. She telephoned to him.

" I am not able to stay here, won't you come away?"

"How can I come there, Aru? Think of it! Can I come there and live as if nothing went wrong?"

"There is no one here. chinnanna, chinnamma and Raghavi are here with me. I can't live alone here. Shall I come away there?"

"This is a lonely, god-forbidden place. I can live here. But how can you?" he could understand her condition there. But could not go there.

"For how long should I stay here?"

" I am also equally worried. I am getting loans on production finances. If I don't concentrate here, all the effort put in all these days will go waste. At the same time, I too can't live away from you," he said. Ever since their marriage, they had lived as one, hand in hand, heart in heart. Now they were not able to bear the separation.

"Kamal, I want to tell you something important. Can you come once?" she asked. She wanted to tell him about the phone call which she overheard.

"Why should I come there? Tell me on the phone."

"It has to be told personally, not on the phone."

"Then, can you come here?"

"Tomorrow I will talk to chinnanna."

"Why the talks on phone? Why feel so bad? He can come here and talk," said Sulochana in a loud voice. Arundhati put the receiver down. Sulochana's words hurt her. She could not sleep in the night. She got prepared for the impending disaster.

*****

Nageswara Rao was sitting on the rope cot under the coconut trees. He was coughing drily. Jayalakshmi was sitting by him. Suryadeva drove the tractor into the shed and came out.

Suvarna brought coffee for Suryadeva. Nageswara Rao tried to get up from the cot with difficulty on seeing Suryadeva.

"Don't get up father, your cough doesn't seem to have abated."

"It is worse today," said Jayalakshmi rubbing her husband's chest.

"Are you giving medicines regularly?"

"Your wife is more careful than me in giving him medicines," said Jayalakshmi.

"Whatever medicine is taken, my cough is not the ordinary type," said Nageswara Rao.

"There is no medicine for mental sickness. Your ailment will not get cured if you take things to heart. We are reaching the final days of our lives," said Jayalakshmi.

"Father has carried the burden of the family all these years. He knows how to manage," replied Suryadeva.

"Yes, he knows. But what can he do? Is there any one to tell him what is happening. Why and how? He gets disturbed often."

"Do people know what's happening? Everyone looks without knowing what's happening. Then who will tell father what the situation is?" Suryadeva expressed his annoyance.

"What happened there? Why did the elders and children come away here stopping all work there? Why should Kamal stay in the far off Unit? What exactly is happening?" asked Nageswara Rao

"Look! Your second son is coming. Ask him," said Suryadeva.

"I'll ask him. Why should I be afraid? I'll find out what's wrong and who is to blame. I'll speak my mind out," said Nageswara Rao with some force.

"What is it? Father says he will speak his mind" smiled Harishchandra nearing them.

"His teasing cough is troubling a lot. The family problems are troubling him more," said Jayalakshmi expressing her worry for her husband.

"What is all this? I don't know what is happening. You are not telling me anything. Do you already think I've become useless? What's happening amongst you all? You who should be living together are living at different places. Why? You who are very friendly with Kamal are not even telephoning to him. What has gone wrong with you?" asked Nageswara Rao raising his voice.

"Nothing happened to us. We are all okay," said Harishchandra playing with the tractor keys.

"Are you okay and happy? Did we ever live like this, like one-eyed giants? I feel you are hiding something in your hearts and pretending to be normal. When I asked you to be here for the festival, none of you came. Now you all have come away as if there was some urgency. You are not revealing what is happening. Have you already considered me as a back-number, as one dead?" Nageswara Rao's eyes filled with tears as he spoke. He wasn't able to stand the division in the family.

"What is the use asking me? Ask your younger brother," replied Harishchandra going in. He was feeling disgusted. Whenever he tried to telephone chinnanna to find out about money, Eshwar was cutting the phone each time. He was interfering in the affairs of the brothers and their brother-in-law and complicating matters.

"That's alright. I'll find out from my brother. Suryadeva! Telephone to the city and ask chinnanna to come here once," instructed Nageswara Rao to Suryadeva.

*****

"Father! It seems chinnanna went to Bombay on urgent work. Eshwar spoke to me," said Suryadeva.

"How can he come if he has work?" Harishchandra did not want his pedananna to learn that Eshwar was playing mischief. That will make him feel bad.

"When I am so much worried, you don't seem to be least bothered. When you stay like this separately from each other, I feel as though my limbs have been cut into pieces. You there, Suryadeva! Try the phone once again," instructed Nageswara Rao.

"What can I do when I am informed that he can't get over here? Each time I call, Eshwar is speaking. Anyway, what is there to talk? Just as we lost all our money twice earlier, we lost it this time also. Let us start our lives again!" Dharmendra who walked in just then, expressed his impatience.

"Let the money go. Why should you fall out? If all of you join hands it is easy to earn again," said Nageswara Rao. He did not understand why they should separate if money was lost.

"We are racking our brains to know where the money has gone," exclaimed Dharmendra. He was angry with himself. He did not know how else to explain it.

Nageswara Rao was under a great stress having understood the problem. He was angry with his brother as well as at his authority. He wanted to go in, tried to get up and collapsed. The doctor was sent for immediately. The doctor examined Nageswara Rao and told his sons that there was the possibility of his suffering a paralytic stroke. He gave the prescription and left. All the members were grief striken.

*****

Narahari was sitting on the lawn. The house was once buzzing with noise and activity. Now it looked like a dilapidated and deserted temple. Rajaram walked towards him.

"Sit down Rajaram! Are you all well?" asked Narahari.

"Who are all the people? We are only two, myself and my wife. We two are okay. I think you are all well."

"We are all well. By the by, what is all the news?" asked Narahari to change the topic.

"I want to tell you something, if you don't misunderstand me."

"When did I say 'no' to you?"

"Once your house resembled a marriage house. Do you realize how forlorn and deserted it looks now? Having earned so much if you hurt your children, can you be happy? Tell me. Can you be happy at all," said Rajaram without mincing words.

"I didn't hurt anyone's feelings."

"They removed the thorns and made the way clear for you to walk. If you hurt their feelings, your children won't prosper. Their sighs will hit you adversely." He was more direct now.

"Why do you say this? Did anyone tell you anything?" Narahari expressed his suspicion.

"Should anyone say anything? A look at you and your house reveals everything. It is clear that what should not have happened has happened. No. No. Let it not be so, son. Do you have now the unity among you which you enjoyed when you came here with a rope-cot and lived in a tiled house? Money comes and goes, son. If people leave, they won't come back. I came here to tell you my mind. I'll get going," said Rajaram and walked away without looking back.

Narahari felt as though he came out of a stupor. He remembered how everyone worked hard to reach a high level of achievement. He thought it was a great feat that they all lived together without opposing him whatever he did.

'I did wrong,' he said to himself after a self analysis.

His inner voice told him that he did wrong.

That night he did not sleep and moved about restlessly. He realized that he had made everyone suffer with his silence. He wondered whether his children would suffer from his actions. Yet, he did not give up his obstinacy. He wanted to retain his authority and his hold on others. So he became silent again. He came to the decision that he should not lose his authority whatever happened to others.

*****

Arundhati was cutting the leaf vegetable. Sulochana was at the grinder. The telephone rang.

"Hello!" said Arundhati.

"Is it Arundhati?" it was Kamal's sister.

"Yes. It's me. How are you all? It's long since I saw you."

"What business do you have with us hereafter?" said the voice at the other end.

"Why do you say so? Do people meet each other only when they have need?"

"I don't know about others. But you are like that. You needed my brother's presence there and so you kept him. Now that you don't need his help you drove him out of the house. The others may not be sensible. Should you not be as his wife? Do you know the difficulty he is facing for his food there? You all called him a son, not son-in-law and made him work like a donkey. After you all reached the other shore successfully, you drove him out unceremoniously. Your brothers told people that Kamal was one among them, a brother and now is it proper for them to leave him alone in the forest?"

"Please do not talk so harshly"

"Tell your people that it is not good to subject my brother to difficulties. Our sighs won't go without effecting you, they take lives also".

Arundhati put the phone down, unable to hear any further. She wiped the sweat on her brow and went to Sulochana.

"Who was that, Arundhati ?"

"My husband's sister."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing. She asked me whether her brother was available. I told her he was at the Unit." She did not want to trouble Sulochana.

"Did you speak those few words for such a long time? Whatever it is, attend to the milk on the stove."

*****

Harishchandra was driving the tractor with fertilizer bags. If he reached home early, Suryadeva would take him to the field. He wanted to reach home soon and drove fast. A jeep was going in front of him. He guessed that Sundar was in the jeep.

Sundar also observed that Harischandra was alone. He started driving the jeep in a zigzag manner across the road obstructing him. Harishchandra went on blowing his horn continuously. Sundar stopped his jeep and jumped down from his seat. There were four or five others with him.

Harishchandra tried to avoid Sundar and tried to drive the jeep without stopping. One of Sudar's men jumped on to the tractor and held Harishchandra. He stopped the tractor. Two other persons pulled him down from the tractor. Sundar wanted to provoke Harischandra into a brawl.

"What Harishchandra! I learn you have gone bankrupt again! Your company ryots came and told me."

He did not reply. He pursed his lips. He did not like to get into an argument.

"When your chinnanna was pouring all his money into the lap of a woman why are you keeping quiet like women? Are you not men?" taunted Sundar.

Harishchandra flew at Sundar and held his throat. "You have nothing to do with our property and money. I'll kill and bury you if you talk of women," shouted Harishchandra at the pitch of his voice.

"When a fact is known the emotion is great. A fellow working in your office told me that your chinnanna gave him a briefcase full of money to be handed over to a woman. If you want I'll produce evidence," challenged Sundar. Harishchandra stood stunned for a moment. He quickly recovered. "We don' t care if the money is lost. If you utter again this dirty accusation anywhere, I'll see your end. Not only yours, that of your four brothers also," cried Harishchandra without letting loose his grip on his throat.

"Direct your anger at your chinnanna, whom you obey, sit and stand at his commands, though you have grown up into a man."

"I'll break your bones if you talk anymore," threatened Harishchandra.

Sundar got himself free from the grip of Harishchandra. "Is it not true that I took the people into my service when your brother Dharmendra couldn't pay salaries to the coolies and stopped packing? Is it not true that your brother-in-law Kamal was getting loans himself and using that money for investment? Why do you jump at me in anger? After a little time you'll have to leave the city again as you left the village when your grandfather died," taunted Sundar.

Harishchandra decided not to pick up a quarrel with him, let him off, jumped into the tractor and drove off.

*****

"Kamal threatening on the phone is not a happy development," said Sulochana angrily.

"Did he telephone? When?" asked Arundhati anxiously.

"In the night. He wanted money to be arranged for payments. He threatened that production will suffer if money was not made available. Your chinnanna had no sleep throughout the night. He was in agony that all were asking for money. He struggled a great deal with chest pain also."

"How is he now?" asked Arundhati to know about his health.

"He is better now. In case, Kamal telephones, please tell him not to worry his father-in-law with requests for money. If anything happens to him...." She couldn't complete the sentence. Sulochana went in with tears in her eyes.

Arundhati telephoned Kamal.

"Kamal! It's me!"

"Aru! Go on."

"Did you telephone chinnanna last night and threaten him?"

"Of course! What is wrong? Cheque power is his. Whom should I ask for money? Should I ask you?" he was casual in his talk.

"Chinnanna felt very bad at what you said to him. Do you know?"

"The labourers do not wish to forego their salaries because chinnanna felt bad. Where from can I get money and pay them? I've already borrowed a lot of money. I can't do so anymore."

"I don't know how you manage. Please don't ask him money."

"Women's words don't have meaning at all. Whom should I ask when all the money from market is with him? Don't be silly. Be calm without interfering in these matters. I'll take care of things here."

"How can I remain calm when you both exchange words? I do not know whom to support."

"Don't worry about these matters. Do you hear?"

"I am not interfering purposefully. It is being stressed by persons here in the house."

"In business matters exchange of words can't be helped. Don't get worried because of that."

"I don't mind if outsiders say anything. I am not able to bear the conflict created by insiders," Arundhati could not control her tears.

"Okay, Aru! I won't ask him. Is it okay? But tell me. Am I wrong in asking or is he wrong in not giving?" asked Kamal in a gentle manner.

"It is not the question of right or wrong. Chinnanna told me that none should ask him for money." Arundhati revealed the truth. "Anyway what do women know about business matters? When all the money is with him how can we mange here with empty hands? I think it is better if you keep your mouth shut." Kamal was a bit harsh.

"I am getting mad between your anger and their pressure."

"No fears. Eat well and sleep well."

"For how long? When will your misunderstandings get cleared? If I want to go there, you say there is no security. Here I can't put up with the abuses heaped on you. I am giving a warning to you. I am sure something untoward will happen to me if I continue staying here."

"Nothing will happen. Entertain patience for sometime." Though he said so, Kamal himself did not know when the problem would end. Arundhati put the receiver down in anger.

She walked into Narahari's room.

"Chinnanna! For how long should we live separately like this, clashing with each other constantly?"

He was surprised at her words. She had never talked to him so directly.

"How can I say," he said after a while.

"You can. These separations have taken place because of you."

"What did I do?" he said angrily.

"Not doing anything is what you did. Your silence is burning up many hearts. It doesn't do you any good. The men folk may not speak their mind out of respect or fear for you. But hatred for you is burning up every heart. It'll destroy not only you but also everyone in the family. The result will be total destruction," said Arundhati emotionally.

"You are talking too much."

"You created the situation for me to talk in this manner.If those who gave their lives to you are asking you questions, it is because of you and your mistake," she continued her argument.

"We men will discuss all those things. There is no need for women to interfere. Go in," said Narahari in an angry mood.

"Other women may not need to know anything with the details. But I need them since I am the connecting link between Kamal and you. I know the details about this side. I have the responsibility and right to keep the link intact," said Arundhati in a loud voice. Sulochana came in hearing Arundhati talking loudly.

"Why are you talking in such a threatening manner forgetting that he is your chinnanna?" asked Sulochana. She was angry with Arundhati.

"I am not threatening him. I am telling him that everyone was suffering at what he is doing."

"Is it for you to say it? All others are keeping quiet bowing their heads. Do you know?"

"They feel shy to talk to him. They are afraid that he would feel bad if they oppose him. Perhaps you do not know. They are very much worried about the future."

"Have you taken the responsibility on behalf of all of them?" Narahari said sarcastically.

"Not on behalf of all. I am asking you on behalf of Kamal. As money has separated you from him, I had to take the responsibility."

"Did Kamal instruct you to ask me?"

"No. He never, at any time, asked me to question you regarding money. He won't do so. Kamal is pained at the manner you talk to him whenever he wants money. You know how much support Kamal gave you in solving your problems, when you were in difficulties. If such a person today hates you or questions you, you are entirely responsible for the situation."

"You say that I am to blame entirely."

"I am not talking about the mistakes. You are entirely responsible for what is happening now."

"What do you want me to do now?" he tried to understand her mind by asking this direct question.

"Sit with brothers and Kamal. Tell them why the difficulty arose with regard to money. They will understand your problem without analyzing whether the money was well spent or ill spent. You will stand as the accused so long as you remain silent."

"I know what I should do. Shut your mouth and go in."

" 'If the cat is given the authority it will create havoc in the house' goes the saying. Everyone wants to exercise authority," murmured Arundhati as she too went in. Arundhati did not feel like standing there. She turned quickly bending her head and hit the door frame with force. She somehow retained her balance and walked slowly to her room though she was feeling faint. She remained lying on her cot the whole night. Sulochana thought that Arundhati was still in an angry mood.

Arundhati felt that Kamal woke her up. She tried to hold him. Kamal stepped back. She tried to catch him and took two steps forward.

Kamal moved back many steps. She moved forward. Kamal moved back. The feeling went on like that for sometime.

*****

Sulochana peeped into Arundhati's room in the morning. She was not seen on the cot. The front door was wide open. She was shocked. She awakened her husband. He got up and searched all over. He telephoned everyone.

Harishchandra, Dharmendra, Kamal and the children reached in no time. They were not told of the argument between the two. Also about the head injury of Arundhati. They were told that Arundhati was not seen in the morning. Each one reacted in his/her manner to the news. The men went to the houses of relatives to enquire, including Sundar's house. On hearing the news Sundar felt happy. He could fish without using the bait.

Sundar immediately telephoned everyone saying that Arundhati eloped with someone taking advantage of the absence of her husband. The news spread all over like wild fire. There were phone calls to Narahari expressing sympathy at the elopement. The three phones were busy ringing and everyone was being told something or other.

Narahari almost collapsed holding his chest. No one expected that Arundhati would take such a step. Harishchandra alone remained silent. Arundhati was not that type. There was some mistake somewhere. Dharmendra was undecided and wavered. Kamal was crest-fallen. He was crying, sitting on the cot. The children did not know what happened and were stupefied.

Anil threw the paper arrow into Raghavi's room as usual calling her 'Avvakai'. Raghavi threw it out in anger.

"What happened?" Anil asked.

Raghavi told him in sign language that Arundhati sister had disappeared.

Bhargava was sent by all the children to the elders to find out what happened to Arundhati. The elders pushed him away as they were not willing to tell him the reason. The youngsters closed the door and bolted the door inside. They tied the ends of their jeans pants one to the other and slipped down one by one. They jumped over the compound wall and went to Anil. They took Anil's help and dashed in his car towards Kamal's Unit. As they took a turn towards Kamal's unit, an elderly person tried to stop their car by standing in the middle of the road. Anil applied sudden brakes and the car came to a screeching halt.

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Narahari waited till the afternoon and then gave a police complaint. Announcements were made on the T.V. The whole city came to know of the incident. People visited Narahari to console him. 'How did this happen?' 'How did she go out?' 'Did she carry away the money with her?' 'Did you check if all the jewels etc. are intact?' 'Since how long has this story been going?' 'What were you all doing?' 'With a grown up daughter ready for marriage, what a horrible act?' 'If my daughter had done like this, I would have hanged myself' 'She brought down shame on seven generations that side and seven generations this side, 'Could she not atleast think of her brothers and stop away?' 'Can the girls of this house ever dream of getting married now?' 'People talk of this great family. Perhaps this is what that greatness is - ' people whispered to each other. The visitors began to talk in this manner thinking they were consoling Narahari. If she had eloped - there should be a man involved. In this case, there was only Arundhati. Who could be the man? This thought did not occur to anyone. Everyone thought she had just eloped.

That is the way of the world. Bad news is broadcast by everyone at great speed If it was an insignificant incident, they dismiss it as something usual, common or normal and don't show any interest in it. Some do not heed ears, some others mouths.

In Narahari's house the hearth was not lighted. Those who visited him to console did nothing to trace Arundhati. Anil's parents brought food for the inmates and spoke words of courage. After the inmates ate a few morsels of food, they got a little strength to think of what was happening.

That night Narahari told them about the argument between himself and Arundhati.

"Arundhati left the house because of me....silly girl...I am afraid she had committed suicide," said Narahari and fell into great depression.

Arundhati might have left the house pained by Kamal's words on the phone, thought Narahari. Harishchandra remembered that Arundhati asked him to stay back when he started out for the village. "If I had stayed back this tragedy would not have taken place," he said. They all awaited the help of the police.

*****

The children were with the man who stopped the car.

"Get out of our way! We have to go!" shouted Anil at the man.

"Please! Please! Stop for a while."

"We ourselves are facing a problem. What is this nuisance?" cried Bhargava and the man gave way. The car picked up speed and reached the Unit. They quickly went round the unit. Arundhati was not found anywhere. They went round again calling her. No trace of her.

Tulya began to cry uncontrollably. They all tried to console her and got into the car. As they turned a corner, the same man and his people stopped the car again.

Anil drove the car to a side of the road to avoid the men. One of them threw a stone at the car. Anil stopped the car, got off and caught hold of the fellow's collar. Bhargava also got out to hit the fellow and turned his head. A crowd was standing there under the tree. Bhargava rushed into the crowd. "Hei! Arundhati aunty is here," he shouted.

All the youngsters ran to the tree.

"We found this lady lying here. She is not able to speak and has been looking madly at us. She had an injury on her head. We gave her our treatment with the juice of leaves. We wanted to take her to the hospital. People are not stopping their cars. Please take her to the hospital. You will be blessed," they said.

When they came to know that the youngsters were searching for the same woman, they were happy. Arundhati was lifted and put in the car.

*****

Anil's car stopped at Narahari's house. The children helped Arundhati to get off the car. The entire household ran to the car.

"Where! Where is she?" asked Kamal in a hoarse voice. He rushed to the car, carried unconscious Arundhati in his arms and brought her. The family doctor was sent for. Every one heaved a sigh of relief on seeing her. Those who talked ill of her a moment ago started uttering words of comfort. The crowd quietly dispersed. The doctor came and examined Arundhati. "She seems to have suffered mental agony. She has hurt her head. It may take nearly two months for her to recover. She needs rest," said the doctor prescribing medicines.

Nageswara Rao and Jayalakshmi were not informed of the incident as they would get very much agitated. But Sundar sent his brother purposefully to their house with the information.

Nageswara Rao telephoned Narahari. He did not feel satisfied until he heard the voice of Arundhati on the phone.

Nageswara Rao immediately left for Sundar's house without his upper cloth.

He saw Sundar's father smoking his cigar.

"Where is your son?" roared Nageswara Rao.

"He is in the house. What's the matter?"

"I'll tell you by and by," said Nageswara Rao and went in. He pulled Sundar out by his hair and hit him before everyone. "What did you people tell about my daughter?" he asked and gave him a heavy blow. Sundar vomited his food at the blow.

"You rascal! My child is a cub of a tigress, not a dog or a fox like you! Show your spite on men, you envious rascal," cried Nageswara Rao.

"Oh god! He'll die," cried Sundar's father and rescued him from Nageswara Rao's grip..

"You! Just because we have not been close to each other, our relationship is not lost. That girl is your younger sister. You have no humanity in you if you speak ill of your sister," said Nageswara Rao and kicked Sundar.

Sundar fell at the feet of Nageswara Rao. "Please forgive me pedananna!" he implored. Nageswara Rao left Sundar alone and turned homeward. That night Jayalakshmi was afraid to talk to her husband.

*****

Telephone calls were made to everyone that the paralytic stroke of Nageswara Rao turned serious. All his people went to him except Narahari.

By then his right hand and leg had got paralysed. His speech also was affected. He looked round at all the children helplessly. Sons, daughters, sisters, sisters-in-law, grandsons, grand daughters.....all.....his entire family was before him. He felt that every one of them was standing separately before him. He felt like absorbing all of them into himself happily. After some hours, Narahari also turned up.

Collectiveness.....collectiveness means singleness, oneness. A person is everybody. Everybody is the person himself. His happiness is

everyone's. Everyone's happiness is his happiness. His sorrow is everyone's. Everyone's sorrow is his. Problems, joys, situations and changes all these have to be shared in life by all. There is nothing that does not belong to everyone. Nageswara Rao turned towards Narahari. There were tears in Narahari's eyes. The three brothers sat silent.

After everyone recovered composure, Kamal spoke first. "Why did you build up this unnecessary tension, father-in-law?" he asked.

"It's because of you all," said Nageswara Rao with great difficulty looking around. "This stroke has not hit my limbs but our family," he said with an effort.

"Actually what are your problems father?" asked Suryadeva.

"All of you quarreling among yourselves."

"You don't listen if you are asked not to entertain any thoughts of that kind," said Jayalakshmi with grief.

"The children have grown up. He doesn't listen if he is asked to take rest," Swarna, Suryadeva's wife expressed her grievance.

"If you all stay together, it gives me rest," said Nageswara Rao with tears.

"Why are you worried?" they asked him together.

"You.....all of you together have pulled me down...not me .....its not me that have collapsed. It is our family that has collapsed." Nageswara Rao strained every nerve to speak the words clearly. He paused for a while. "A girl of our family.....if she left the house because of loneliness.....are you not responsible for it?"

"We?" they looked at each other.

"Yes. You. You lost faith in each other. You started suspecting each other. Clashing with each other. Losing peace. When you behave like that how can I take rest? Even if money is lost, if people get distanced, if time changes.....that which doesn't change and should not .....is

collectiveness. We three brothers....though we have grown old, have lived like one person. You are already fighting with each other. Why? For money! Dirty money.....I can hold now the plough and support you all. But you are setting flame to your hearts. How can my heart remain calm when your hearts are burning? So, that is why, set yourself right after my burning pyre cools down into dust." Saying so, Nageswara Rao closed his eyes.

"Brother!" shouted Narahari aloud. He stood open-mouthed. The brothers and the sons, everyone stood aghast. The cattle in the shed lifted their heads and lowed. The two Ongole bulls raised by Nageswara Rao, broke ropes and began to move about restlessly. The cock on the house top stopped crowing. The yokes of the servants carrying water pots on their shoulders lost their rhythm.

The entire village collected there. The authority of another generation became lifeless. Why did this strong man, one who had gritty bones, why did he collapse much before his time?

No one could answer this question. No one understood the reason. The heart lost its equanimity.....the heart split because of the division among them.

A man who should live long, an institution which should last long will crumble because of a minor defect. Nageswara Rao stood as a personal example to this fact through his life and experience.

Jayalakshmi now looked like a bare tree that had shed its leaves. Whatever happened, whoever sacrificed, the sun did not stop rising in the east. But the sun hid behind the clouds not being able to bear the sight of Jayalakshmi lying crouching in a corner, she, who used to sweep the doorstep before sunrise, sprinkle cow dung water and draw patterns with flour.

Everyone developed hatred and disgust against the' third person' who brought about the separation and loss of peace among them. The main prop of the idea of 'collectiveness' crashed to the ground. How

does that house stand? The members of the family silently analyzed the problem within themselves.

*****

The obsequies were performed. The relatives left to their places. The members of Nageswara Rao's family were under a gloom. The children were listless and sorrowful.

Narahari's thoughts raised a storm in his mind. He never imagined that the silence he adopted to earn more money would claim a valuable life. He never revealed accounts to anyone. No one asked him any question about money from the beginning. Then, why should they ask him now? Did they lose faith in him and his decisions? Are his intellectual abilities dwindling? Was each one trying to exhibit his own individuality? The more he thought it over, the less he understood what the problem was.

The mental makeup of people changes in tune with changing times. No one likes to lead a blind life without trying to assess what he is. The social organization stands on this assumption today. Atlast, Narahari understood this fact. He came to the conclusion that the clash was not just for money, but a result of awareness of one's individuality. He understood how his silence harmed and injured every one, how it gave scope to make his people treat him as an enemy.

He also realised the difference between the responsibility shouldered in the collectiveness of the past and that of the present. In the modern joint-family collectiveness, the person who accepts responsibility wants to share his decision with others. Such a social institution will have a strong foundation. The significant distinction between the collectiveness of the old times and modern times is this. In olden days, the head of the joint family had full powers bestowed on him. Today, each member exhibits his individuality and treats the head of the family not as an authority but as a friend and well-wisher. It is clear that the modern collective system expects the head to discuss every proposal with all the members.

Narahari realised that he committed a mistake in not making a distinction between the old and modern methods of thinking and the changes that had taken place in the new thinking. He did not implement them. That was the reason why the collectiveness of his family failed. The lack of friendly approach in him was the main obstacle. So he called them all together for an assembly.

Though they all sat together at one place, each member was thinking in different directions, but everyone felt that accusing and suspecting each other for worthless money, breaking away and clashing on this point was resulting in losing the sanctity of collectiveness.

They also realised that money should not be treated as an 'after all' commodity in the modern economic structure. Money that had gained importance and value in society was the reason for the differences that rose among them.

They asked themselves, "Was the manner in which I behaved proper?"

When they questioned themselves thus, they felt their behaviour was correct. They could not assess rightly which was right and which was wrong in the context of changing social and economic systems prevailing then.

Why do collective or joint families change into individual families? There is a significant reason. Each individual member is a part if the whole is called' the collective'. But the 'individuality' should not be the prerogative of the members in it. It should not be allowed to be so. If allowed, each member will break the collectiveness and establish an individual family. As a result, he'll suffer loneliness and move closer to death. Narahari's family realised this truth from experience.

Narahari broke the barrier of silence and cleared his throat. As he spoke, everyone listened intently.

" I could not imagine or assess that your needs and money problems will turn me into your enemy. It is true that I was a little harsh with you

thinking you would support every action I took. I now learnt how much you were agitated because of that confidence I had for myself," he looked round and after a pause began again.

"I didn't think that this minor mistake would lead to such serious consequences. I assure you that I'll take all precautions to prevent such developments. I've realized that our collectiveness will progress only when I treat myself as a member like you, not treating you merely as members, myself taking on the role of authority. Each one of you suspected that I gave money to one of you. This created hatred against each other among you. I realised that the cause for this was my silence. I have not spent the money extravagantly. I decided to establish a steel industry in the name of all of you. We can't get on for long hereafter on agricultural business. I wanted to start a new venture from another quarter and develop it. So I channalised money into that direction. I bought the company from a Marwadi woman," he said, opened his brief case and took out the papers, shares etc. on each other's name connected with 'Steel Industries Company". When he extended his hand containing the papers no one came forward to receive them. They indirectly told him that there was no need for them to look into the papers as they had confidence in him.

But everyone thought 'If this had been done earlier, everyone would have felt happy.' Narahari could guess their thoughts.

"I have to tell you an important point. When I entertained the idea of buying it, the Steel Company was in profits. But when I took actual charge of it, I learnt that it had many bank loans and that it was running into losses. I had got it registered by then. I got stuck in a quagmire. I couldn't' tell you about it. Nor could I pay the amounts. For my having taken a decision without your knowledge, you all suffered great mental agony. It resulted in brother's death and the unfortunate condition for Arundhati. I am pained very much by these developments," said Narahari. His eyes moistened as he said these words.

They all looked at him with affection.

"Do we get separated on such a small issue, father-in-law! If we are okay, the question of money doesn't arise. We can earn again," said Kamal.

"It's true. There is no problem. Losing money in our lives is not new for us," said Harishchandra making light of the issue.

"You seem to have under-estimated us chinnanna, can't we understand that much?" said Dharmendra.

Narahari felt proud of them.

'I am not a lonely man. Even if I lose my properties and my stature, I'll not be abandoned by my people,' he thought. He felt now that collectiveness meant sharing difficulties. His sons and son-in-law had grown very tall indeed! He could hand over responsibilities to them without any reserve.

They all turned towards Jayalakshmi, now in a white saree, having lost her man. They turned towards Arundhati who was looking blank and confused.

Their looks wanted him to give an answer for their condition.

Narahari guessed their thoughts. "You know I can only repent for what has happened and nothing more. Don't trouble yourself on that account," he said, his voice going hoarse.

The children were listening to him with interest and were looking at everyone. Narahari who observed this said, "Children! Learn from us. If our collectiveness continues, your collectiveness continues. So atleast to continue the old 'collectiveness, receive the papers."

"Sorry grandpa! We are not willing to continue the collectiveness," said Bhargava.

Narahari was shocked. He recovered quickly. "Have differences of opinion started to bother you?" he asked.

"Don't talk to elders in such a manner," Harishchandra corrected his son.

"That is not the matter pedananna! You worked collectively and got separated. We'll remain separate and work collectively," said Phani in clear terms with dignity.

"How many times should I tell you not to show interest in the talk of elders?" Dharmendra scolded his son.

"That is right uncle! This is the lesson we learnt having observed you all from our childhood. We will live separately and run the business collectively," clarified Tulya.

"Enough! Shut your mouth!" ordered Arundhati.

"You may shut our mouths, but not our thoughts, aunty," said Shravani.

Narahari stared at the youngsters in great surprise.

'Where was the defect? What was going wrong? Why is the new generation rejecting collectiveness? Why is this generation opting for doing it alone?' these questions began to work in his mind.

'How should this trend be stopped?' this question began to trouble him.

"Our generation desires respect for the individual, self confidence and individual growth. We don't find these ideals in the collectiveness you have followed. That is why we reject your system and start afresh system of collectiveness. In our system, each of us would grow and develop in our own style, understanding and sharing each other's difficulties. In our system, no one will have any authority over anyone else. But there will be perfect understanding among us. This understanding helps us to support each other. We desire to achieve this support for our joint venture," explained Bhargava.

Narahari mellowed, hearing the views of the children. He could see the mistakes committed by him as through a magnifying glass.

He extended both his hands and signalled to them to come to him. He embraced each of them and kissed them affectionately. The children were over-whelmed with happy emotion of the loving countenance of their grandfather which usually wore an annoyed expression with a frown. This change was beyond their imagination. The children surrounded their grandfather in a friendly and affectionate manner. It appeared as though their embrace bound the feeling of 'collectiveness' with a new bond of understanding.

Narahari himself was over-whelmed with a new sense of joy and happiness.

*****

Anil opened the window observing glowing lights and activity as in earlier days in the house of Narahari. The children were all talking animatedly. He observed Raghavi staring at his window. He felt like talking to her as he saw her after a long gap.

He sent a paper arrow with the words," Hello Avvakai!"

Raghavi moved aside just as the arrow came, which went and hit Narahari. As he opened the paper arrow, all the children got transfixed. Raghavi was terror-struck imagining the storm that was to come.

"Who among you is 'Avvakai'?" asked Narahari smiling. All eyes turned towards Raghavi.

"Is it you?" asked Narahari looking at Raghavi.

Raghavi moved her head, whether sideways or up and down was not clear.

"Hello! Young man! If you want to talk to Raghavi, you could come to our house as a friend. Don't you know that you should go to the house of your friend if you want to talk?" he said smiling.

All the children opened their mouths in utter disbelief as Narahari went in smiling.

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ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

D. Ranga Rao, M.A.(Andhra University), P.G.D.T.E., M.Litt. in ELT (CIEFL) has been a teacher of English at degree college level since 1953, teacher trainer and educator at college and University levels since 1976. He was Principal of Degree, P.G. Govt. and private colleges from 1983 to 1995. He has been on the External Faculty of the School of Distance Education, CIEFL, since 1984. He was Senator, Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupathi, during 1983-86.

He was Chief Producer and Co-ordinator for PRAGATHI, an Educational Programme of 365 episodes for +2 students telecast for three years from 1996 to 99 by the ETV. He was translator and script writer for scores of episodes of educational value and general interest telecast by ETV during 1995-99. He produced and recorded audio-lessons in English for the Board of Intermediate Education during 1986-88. He was producer, K.U. Band (Mana T.V.) during 2001-2003 for educational programmes at +2 and +3 levels, of the Govt. of A.P.

He took to translation work in earnest in 2000. His English translations of Telugu novels and stories published are : THE PEARL PALANQUIN (Muthyala Pallaki), 2001, LIGHT AND SHADE (Velugu Needa), 2002, by Govindaraju Sita Devi. THE PEARL PALANQUIN was awarded the first prize for the best translation by Vishwa Sahithi, Hyderabad, in 2002. KAUSALYA by Polapragada Satyanarayana Murthy, 2003. REED BUSHES (Rellu Podalu) by Polapragada Rajya Lakshmi, 2003. LIVING TOGETHER AND OTHER STORIES (20) BY D. Kameswari, 2003. BED OF THORNS (Ampaseyya) by Naveen, 2004, FRESH SPROUTS AND DEW DROPS (Kotha Chigullu Manchu Binduvulu) by Polapragada Rajya Lakshmi, January 2006. Dedication by Itha Chandraiah 2007.

MADHURANTHAKAM RAJARAM'S STORIES (49) published by SAHITHYA ACADEMI, 2007.

TARGET (Lakshyam) and GOAL (Gamyam) by Prabhakar Jaini, MANDADI KATHALU by Mandadi Krishna Reddy, five novels of Yaddanapudi Sulochana Rani and STORIES of Amballa Janardhan (Mumbai), STORIES of B.N.Ramulu, THE TRAVELLERS' BUNGALOW AND OTHER STORIES by Polapragada Rajya Lakshmi, MANASA SAROVARAM - KAILASAGIRI (travelogue) by Sukanya, Famous Journalists of Andhra by Sri R. Ekambara Charyulu are ready for publication.

THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE by Thomas Hardy was translated into Telugu, (abridged) for Ushakiran Movies. Twelve biographical stories of the saint singers of Maharashtra from Swami Sundara Chaitanyananda's Chandra Bhaga Tarangalu were translated into English for a local T.V. agency.

Also children's stories into English/Telugu, THE PRINCE AND OTHER MODERN STORIES by Rabindranath Tagore into Telugu for Vishalandhra Publications - 2004.

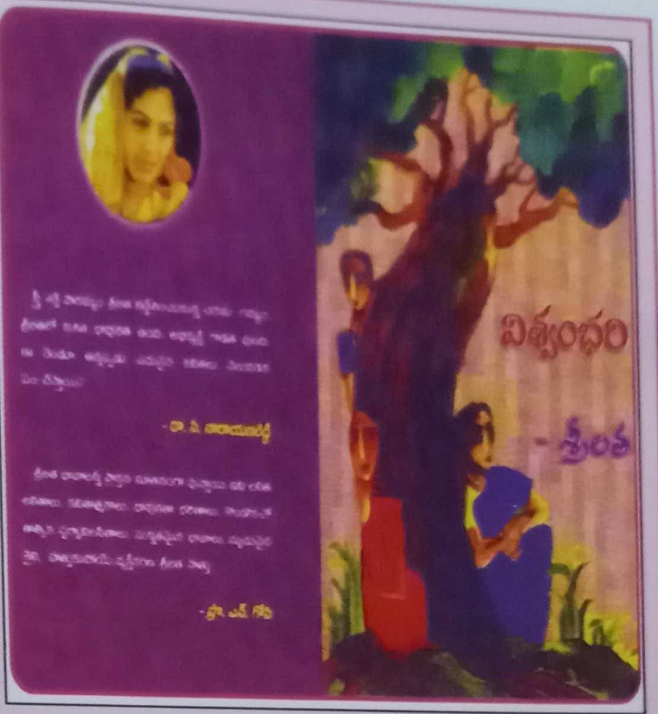
SELECTED STORIES OF O. HENRY for the above publication are being translated now.

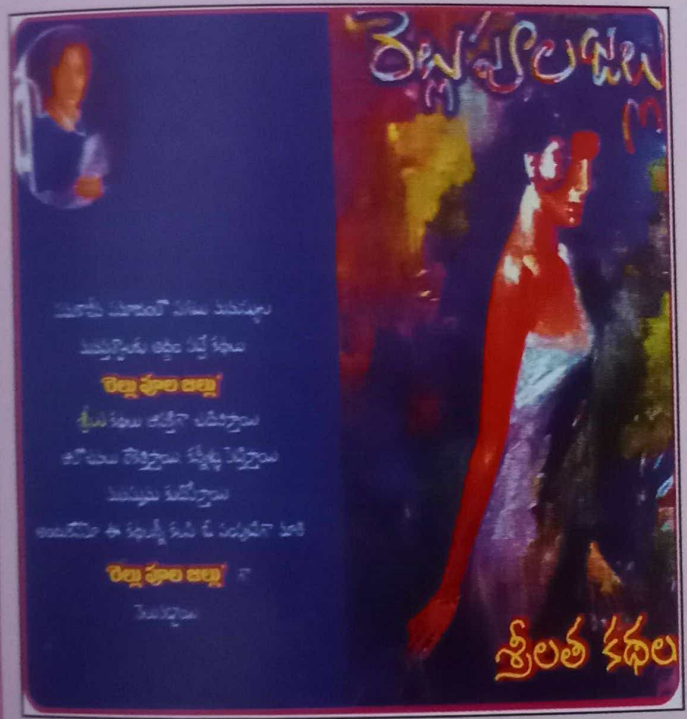
He was honoured by Vishwa Sahithi, Hyderabad, 2005 for his services in translating Telugu works into English.

He has been Associate Editor, TRIVENI, the English national literary and cultural journal, since 1998 which celebrated its Platinum Jubilee in 2004.

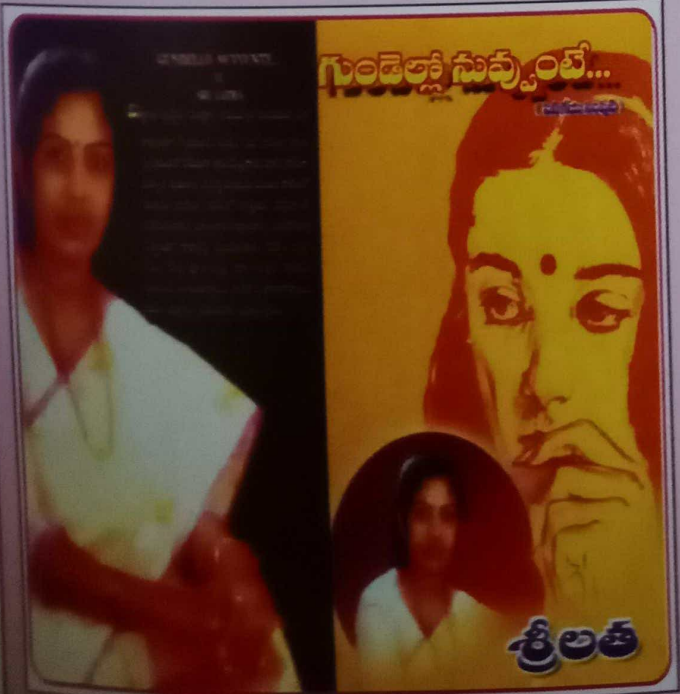
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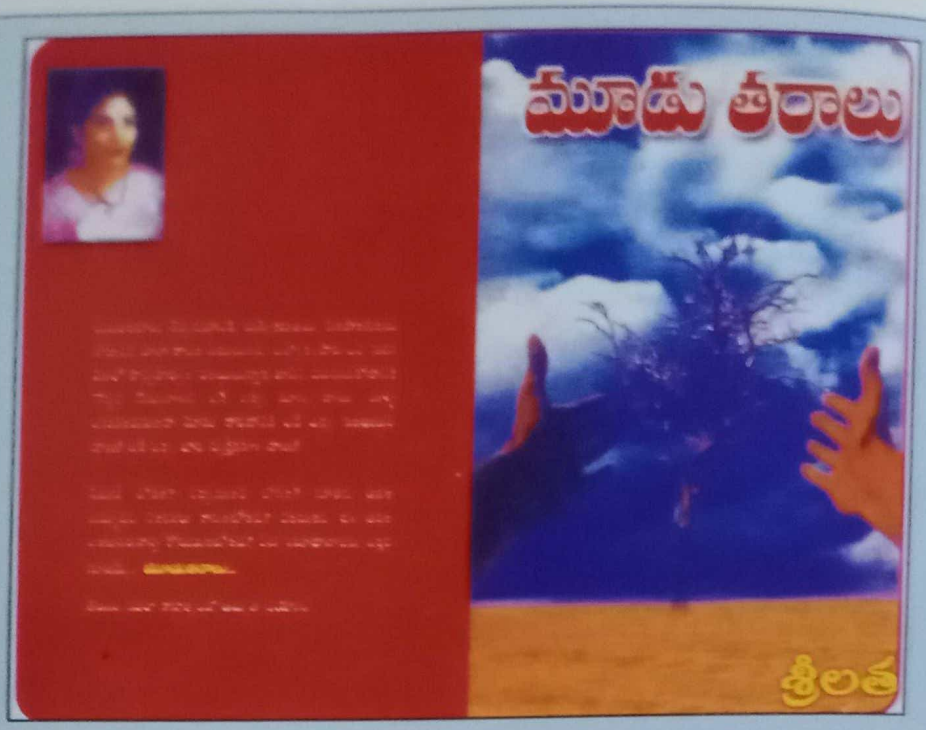

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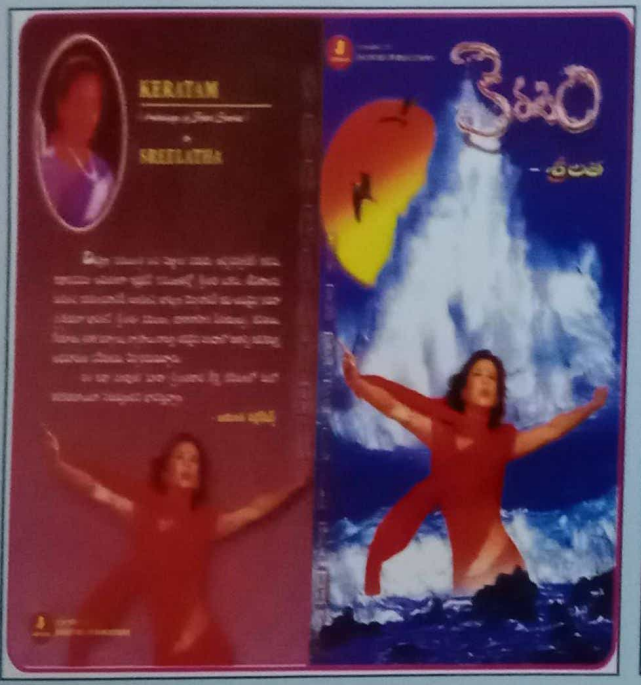

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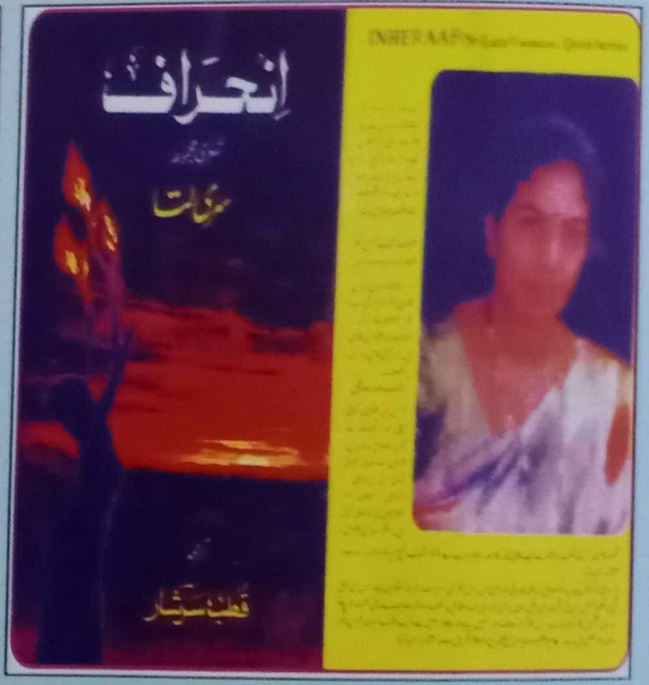

ఖననమ్
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గుండెల్లో నువ్వుంటే...
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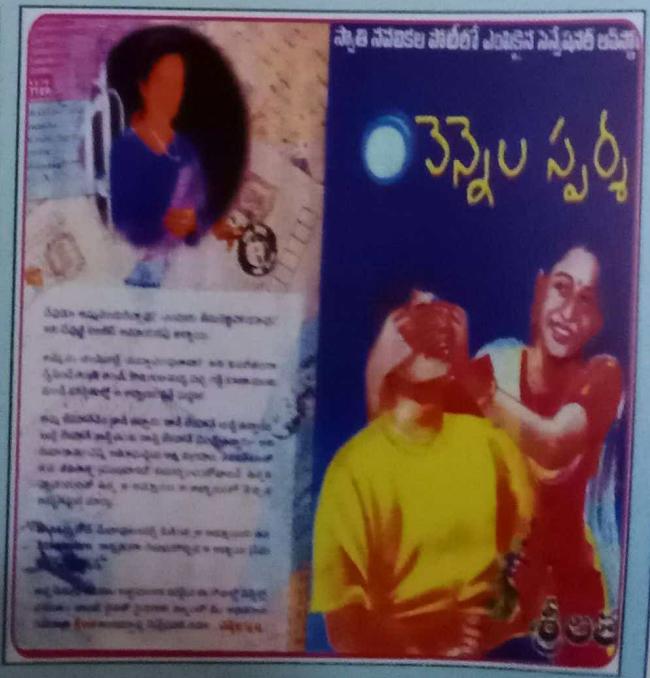

MANASA... PREMINCHAKE NUVVILAA
SREELATHA
మనసా... ప్రేమించకే నువ్విలా!
శ్రీలత


మూడు తరాలు
శ్రీలత


KERATAM
SREELATHA
కేరటం
- శ్రీలత


انحراف
قطب سيثار


ధిక్కారం
శ్రీలత


వెన్నెల స్పర్శ
శ్రీలత



Modepalli Srilatha Kotapati

Titles

1. "Vibhinna Katha Rachayitri" by Jayanti Publications, 2003.
2. "Bharata Jyoti" title by International Integrity Peace and Friendship Society, 2004.
3. "Sahiti Ratna" title by International Gopikan, 2004.
4. "Vilakshana Rachayitri" title by Vuyala Communications.
5. "Hindu Ratan" title by International Integrity Peace and Friendship Society.

Awards

1. Dasharadhi Award by Mahaboobnagar Cultural Association, 1997.
2. Kinnera Art Theatres Puraskar, 2002.
3. Smt. Sidda Surya Kumari Puraskar by Prakasham District Young Woman Writers' Association, 2003.
4. Sarojini Naidu Award by All India Poets' Conference, 2003.
5. Koduri Kausalya Devi Award by Vamshi International Association, 2004.
6. Ketavarapu Kanakadurga Award for the story "Psyclopre planiya" as the best comic story published in Rachana monthly, 2004.
7. Ravi & Ravi Puraskar, 2004.
8. Best Woman Writer award by Potti Sriramulu Telugu University, 2004.
9. Michael Madhusudan Award by Michael Madhusudan Academy, Kolkata, 2007.
10. Aradhana Delhi Telugu Academy Award, 2007.
11. Narayana Pulla Reddy Ugadi Puraskar, 2007.
12. Ugadi Puraskar by Delhi Telugu Academy, 2008.
13. Ugadi Puraskar by Jyotsna Kala Peetham, 2008.
14. Navyanataka Samithi Puraskar, 2008.
15. Ugadi Puraskaram by Sangam Academy.
16. Vishista Puraskar by Yuva Arts.
17. Ugadi Puraskar by Bharatiya Samskruti Parirakshana Samakya.
18. A cash award of Rs. 5,000/- by Swathi Weekly for "Vennela Sparsha".
19. Cash award of Rs. 10,000/- from Andhra Bhoomi weekly.
20. Cash award of Rs. 25,000/- from Andhra Bhoomi weekly for the romantic novel "Mattuga - Gammattuga".
21. Cash award of Rs. 15,000/- each for the novel "Manasa Preminchake" and "Khananam".