

**SHORT  
STORIES**

**DURING COVID- 19**



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**PROF. K. V. DOMINIC**



**AUTHORS P R E S S**

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**Short Stories during Covid-19**

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## Preface

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With immense happiness I am presenting before my esteemed readers this third collection of my short stories in English. It happens to be my 45<sup>th</sup> book. My first short story collection entitled *Who is Responsible?* was published in 2016 by the same publishing house, Authorspress which has generously published more than thirty of my books in poetry, short stories and critical studies. My second book of short stories titled *Sanchita Karma and Other Tales of Ethics and Choice from India* was published by Modern History Press, Ann Arbor, USA in 2018.

In my stories I have used several themes and focussed on many issues which are universal and at the same time frequently occurring in my own State, Kerala. The themes include loneliness and problems of old age, thirst for love, sexual desires, robbery and murder, terrorism, humanism and compassion, corruption and bribery in government offices, honesty and duty consciousness, fair judgement, cruel destiny, superstitions and exploitations in the name of religion, fight against superstitions, politics and political exploitations, Christian spirit versus Christian practice, miseries of the poor and the marginalised, indifference and cruelty to the poor, cruelty to animals and punishment for it, problems of educational system, problems of unemployment, beauty of animal world, love and compassion to animals, exploitation, conversion and conservation of forests, religious fanaticism and multicultural harmony, the impact of mother tongue in education, sexism and women empowerment etc.

6 • Short Stories during Covid-19

The present collection includes seven short stories written during the Covid-19 period from 2020 to 2022. The themes dealt in them include hardships created by corona virus, problems of sex workers, tragic life of lottery sellers, acid victim's struggle for existence, how nature retorts to man's cruelty, discrimination based on caste and jati etc.

Before winding up let me express my deep gratitude to my bosom friend and world renowned publisher Mr. Sudarshan Kcherry of Authorspress. A bouquet of thanks to him for accepting my book for publication! Wishing all my loving readers an enlightening experience.

**Prof. Dr. K. V. Dominic**

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## Clement's Return from UAE

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“Have you booked your ticket, dear? We are all worried about you. Are you alright there?” Merlin enquired over phone to her husband Clement.

“Don't worry dear Merlin, I am fully well. By the grace of God I have got the ticket for next Saturday's flight to Kochi. The flight will reach there by 2.30 pm. I will take a taxi car from the airport and reach there before evening. How is father now? Could you get the telemedicine for his asthma complaint? Have Meena and Jaison slept?”

“Glad that you got the ticket after a long wait! Children have already slept. Since there is no regular class and homework they went to bed at 9.30. I got prescription from the doctor online and bought father's medicine yesterday. Since it is rainy season his condition is worse now. By the by, our house is in the containment zone now. You should come directly to our house and should not get down anywhere.”

“Okay dear, I have been watching the news there every day. Since expatriates are arriving there in large numbers, the number of positive cases shoots up day after day. In fact we are all eager to fly back there to save our lives. Our Kerala government will save us, we are sure. I have to be in quarantine for 14 days before mingling with the family members. So ask mother to make a bedroom ready for me. Let it be the room near to the kitchen. There will be inconveniences, but we have to face it. Till the quarantine is over

such adjustments are necessary. Goodnight dear! I shall call you tomorrow.”

Clement has already been lying on the bed for sleep when Merlin's phone call came. Goddess of sleep hesitated to descend, embrace him and kiss on his eyes since his mind was meandering on the ocean of his past. His mind dived deep to his childhood and started recollecting.

Clement now 40 was born and brought up in a poor family. His father who is an asthma patient now, was an auto rickshaw driver and mother, a housewife. Clement has a younger sister who is married off. Since he was very studious Clement was sent to a government college for degree and then for M Sc Mathematics. Though he passed the post graduation with a first class he couldn't get any government employment. He taught Mathematics in a tuition centre for two years earning a very low salary. Meanwhile, one of his college classmates, Arvind invited him to UAE where he was working as an accountant in a shopping mall. Arvind offered Clement all expenses of his visa and travel. Thus by the benevolence of Arvind, Clement went to UAE and started working as an accountant in another shopping mall. The salary was not very attractive but compared to what one earns in Kerala, the amount was not bad. After his expenses Clement was able to save Rs. 30000 each month which he sent regularly to his father's bank account. After three years, with the money sent thus, his father bought a small house in a five cents' plot. They had been living in a rented house. Clement's sister was married off after two more years with the money amassed. Then took place Clement's marriage with Merlin, who belonged to a poor house. As Clement was against dowry he demanded nothing from her family. She is good looking, loving, meek and gentle. Two children were born to them. The elder one, daughter Meena is now studying in the 3<sup>rd</sup> standard and the younger one, Jaison in the 1<sup>st</sup> standard.

Covid-19 gripped UAE along with other Gulf countries and the lockdown started there on April 5. Clement working in Dubai became jobless as part of the lockdown. The pandemic started

spreading like wild fire and the patients flooded to all the hospitals there. Of the ten million population in UAE, Keralites are one million. A quarter of the Keralites' population has registered in the embassy for their return home. Since flights are very less, the passengers had to wait for a long time. Clement has been jobless for nearly three months now and he has been living with the little money left. The total positive cases of Covid patients in UAE have gone up to fifty thousand and more than 300 died. The Arab shopping mall owner has been compassionate and Clement was allowed to continue in his residence without charging any rent. A good amount had to be paid for his chartered flight ticket to Kochi. His wallet is almost empty now. 'What shall I do after reaching home?' Clement's mind wailed. 'There is no bank balance and how will the family survive? Since the lockdown drowned the economy of Kerala, there is no scope of getting any employment even as a salesman.' Unanswerable wounding thoughts made him most upset. It is midnight already and Sleep fears to embrace him. Clement took a sleeping pill and swallowed it. Since the lockdown started he could sleep only with the help of the sleeping pills.

Saturday came and Clement arrived at the Dubai International Airport sufficiently early. Antibody test was conducted at the airport and Clement got the negative certificate which is a requirement for arriving at Kerala airports. When the flight landed at Kochi and Covid-19 protocol formalities completed, Clement phoned to his wife, "Hello Merlin, the flight has landed at Kochi. I will take a taxi and come home by 6 pm." "Already reached? We are all eager to see you. Come soon dear." The phone was grabbed from her hand by the mother-in-law and she talked, "Dear son, Clement, our papa is serious now. Breathing is very difficult for him even though he is taking the inhaler and tablets. Dear son, will you spend the quarantine period in some hotels so that there is no risk for papa?" "Mama, I have no problem, the negative certificate is with me. Home quarantine is enough just as a precaution." Clement replied. "Still isn't it better that you spend isolated in a hotel room? Only 14 days there." Mother continued. He was shocked to hear this from his own mother. With a sigh he replied, "Okay...mama." Tears

started running along his cheeks. He is denied entry into his own house, which he built with his own money. For the past twenty years he has been working for the welfare of his family. Unable to move further, he sat on a chair near to the exit. 'What shall I do now?' He asked himself. 'There is no sufficient money for hotel quarantine. For 14 days they will charge a good amount. There are no government free quarantine centres for expats. Where to go now?' He wanted to cry out loudly. Other passengers were going out one after another. "Clement sir, do you know me? Why are you crying sir?" A young man around 35 came to him and asked. "Sir, I am Krishnan, your student. Tell me sir, why you have been weeping. What's the problem? I am bound to help you whatever it be. Had it not been your help I would not have come to this stage. I failed my tenth class public examinations and only because of your tuition class for Mathematics I passed my exams in the second chance which paved my way for higher studies. I am now an Assistant Professor of English at a government college at Sharjah. Since the college is closed now as part of the lockdown I am going home. What help do you need, sir?"

"Dear student, Krishnan, glad that you remember me. I too recollect you. I have been weeping because I have nowhere to go now." Clement cried out tears flowing. He then told about his mother's phone message.

"Don't worry sir, kindly come with me. I have got a large house which can easily accommodate you. My wife will only be happy to have you in our house for two weeks. We have got a maid who will serve you food in your room. There is TV and other entertainments in the room which will make you comfortable. God has given me a chance to return service for what you have done to me. My house is only twenty kilometers away. We shall take a taxi and go."

"God save you dear Krishnan!" Clement replied. "My service to you is negligible compared to your return service offered. I have taken classes for you and many others and I have received the payment for it. Look at what I receive as return for the lifelong

service to my family...” He started sobbing. “Don’t take it serious dear sir. It’s because of medical ignorance that your mother reacted so. Please come with me. The taxi car is waiting.” Krishnan consoled him. Clement thus went with Krishnan to his house.



## Fate of Migrant Labourers

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“Why are you crying, Aminul? What happened?” Emran asked.

“My wife is bedridden with high fever and headache. She just phoned me. I am doubting if she is stricken with covid. Many of our neighbours are in hospital and a few have already died. There is none in the house to take her to hospital. She is an asthmatic patient and has been using the inhaler for several years. As you know, there are no hospitals in our village or in the small towns nearby. What shall I do? My relatives are all far away in Kolkata.” Aminul started sobbing.

Hearing his sobs other roommates, Shakib and Tarique came near to him to pacify.

“Nothing will happen to your wife, Aminul. Allah will protect her. He knows that you are not able to go there now and take her to the hospital.” Emran said.

“As it is lockdown here and no work at our site for more than a month now, I couldn’t send any money home. We four are living here at the mercy of our builder Arjun Saab. He is providing us food free, paying our rent and how can I ask him some money to send home?” Some neighbours would have taken her to hospital at Kolkata if they were provided the expenses. But...what to do? Aminul moaned. Tears were flowing like a brook along his cheeks.

“Why don’t you approach Arjun Saab and tell him your sorrow, Aminul?” Shakib suggested.

“Right, he has been very loving to us and helping us whenever we needed.” Tarique supported.

“Okay, I shall meet Arjun Saab now.” Aminul replied and walked straight away to the house of Arjun just one kilometer away. It was very hot outside, humid with no breeze at all. Aminul felt a hell inside and outside.

Arjun is an architect-cum-builder settled at Kochi with his small family of wife and two children, studying in school. After his M. Tech he started his profession of a builder taking some loans from the bank. Since unemployment is very high in Kerala he couldn't get any appointments in any firms. That is why he launched his own enterprise. He bought five cents or ten cents plots and built houses for the city dwellers. There was a time when he had more than twenty labourers working simultaneously at four to five sites. Majority of the labourers were from North Indian States – West Bengal, Assam, Odisha and U.P. Since the lockdown started in 2020 he was compelled to stop construction of the buildings and all the labourers except the four mentioned above went back to their houses. Aminul is the most favourite of all labourers. Arjun treated him just like his own brother. Emran, Shakib and Tarique are neighbours of Aminul and they came together to Kerala seeking some employment five years back. Luckily for them, Arjun appointed them for his construction business the moment they reached Kerala. Each one of them was given charge of supervising the construction in the various sites. They are very honest and loyal to their master and even if Arjun doesn't visit a site they will ensure that the construction continues without any break or problems. When the lockdown started in April 2020 there were some twenty labourers who had to be fed in their rented rooms. Since the lockdown continued and no wages could be given to them, one by one they went back to their native places. When the 'unlock' started and construction of buildings resumed, a few of them returned. But when the second wave of coronavirus started and the construction had to be stopped as part of the lockdown they went back to their houses except the four, whom Arjun retained paying Rs. 500 each per day which they were sending to their homes for their families'

sustenance. Arjun had to find out a good amount every month to repay the loans in the bank, for subsistence allowance given to the labourers and for his own family expenses. Whatever profit he had earned so far had to be utilised for it.

“How essential is our presence in our houses is evident when one is sick there.” Emran said.

“My mother would not have died of covid if I were there when she showed the symptoms.” Shakib replied.

“Similarly I would not have lost my father if I could reach there on time.” Tarique said.

“Millions of migrant labourers like us are destined to live through an excruciating life. For the past one and a half years we have not experienced any peace of mind.” Emran said.

“Millions have lost their jobs; thousands died of road accidents when they made exodus to their States; many have committed suicide when they failed to support their families.” Tarique added.

Meanwhile Aminul reached Arjun’s house. He was sweating like something and panting since he walked very fast. Arjun was reclining in an armchair ruminating about the cruel fate which he had to face.

“Hi Aminul, what’s the news?” Arjun asked.

“My wife is very sick dear Saab. She called me this morning and informed that she is having high fever, headache and cough. She is almost bedridden and there is nobody to help her. As you know we have no relatives around us and the entire village is stricken with covid. Majority of our neighbours are covid patients and many are in the hospitals in the city. A few have already departed the world. What shall I do Saab?” Aminul cried.

“Aminul, do you want to go home now?” Arjun asked.

“Yes Saab. The earlier I reach there the better will be the possibility to save her life.” Arjun replied.



“In that case go by flight today itself.” Arjun said.

“But I haven’t that much money to buy a ticket, Saab. I shall go by train.” Aminul replied.

“Don’t worry about the money. I will bear the expense of your travel. You are like a brother to me. You have been serving me for the past five years. It is nothing but my duty to serve you back in your urgent most need though I am going through a financial crisis. Go to your room and get ready for the journey. I will take you to the airport. There are daily flights to Kolkata and you can go by the afternoon flight.” Arjun said.

“Thanks a lot dear Saab. I have no words to express my gratitude to you. God will reward you, Saab.” Aminul replied with folded hands. He walked speedily to his room. It started raining to cool down his body and mind. Birds were chirping in merriment as if they had heard what went between Aminul and Arjun.

Reaching the room Aminul shared with others the happy news of his flying soon to Kolkata. His friends were relieved and excited to hear that their master is acting as savior. Within half an hour Arjun reached there in his car and took Aminul to Kochi airport taking forty minutes drive. Before getting down from the car Arjun handed over a small bag to Aminul and told him, “There is one lakh rupees in this bag. It is for your ticket and treatment of your wife. Reaching your home, take her to a good hospital at Kolkata and give treatment for her possible covid symptoms. Once she is recovered and able to travel, you come back to Kochi with her and your children. I will take a rented house for you and your family near to my house and you can stay there as long as you like. These corona days will go within a few months and you can earn much to sustain your family. You kids can be taught in the neighbouring government school.”

Tears were flowing from the eyes of Aminul out of happiness. “You are my God, dear Saab. I will never forget this love and kindness shown to me. I will be at your service till I die,” with

trembling voice he replied and got down from the car, bade goodbye to the Saab and entered into the entrance of the airport.

After three hours journey, Aminul landed at Kolkata airport. Then he took a taxi car to his village, fifty kilometers away. His visit was a surprise to his wife and children for he had not informed them of his immediate arrival. The condition of his wife Aabidah was critical. In the same taxi car he took her and the children to Kolkata. She was admitted in a government hospital and the treatment started. The RT-PCR test showed that she is positive and detected coronavirus infection in her body. Since it was in the initial stage her lungs were not infected much, though she was an asthmatic patient. After a week's stay in the hospital she recovered fully and was discharged from there. Reaching home Aminul made preparations for their departure to Kerala. He sold the two goats and a dozen fowls that they grew in their compound. He requested his only brother who lives in Kolkata to look after his house now and then in his absence.

On a fine Monday morning Aminul and his family took the flight to Kochi. Arjun was there at the airport to receive them. They were taken to a rented house near to his house, as promised. Fortunately Arjun was able to resume the construction of a building which situated at a green zone ward of the corporation. Aminul and his colleagues could work there and earn Rs. 1000 each everyday as wage.

In an inhumane society where employers show least love and kindness to employees and labourers, Arjun shines like a star – a polestar showing an exemplary model to all.



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## **Nature Teaches**

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The Chairman of the Municipal Council addressed the councillors: “One of the agendas of our meeting today is to discuss and take a decision regarding the construction of a shopping complex at the municipal plot near to the Gandhi Square. That plot has been lying there barren for several years. If we build a shopping complex there, it would be an additional income for our municipality.”

“But there is big fig tree on the roadside in front of the plot. And it is a bus stop also. Passengers waiting for the buses take shelter from the scorching heat of the sun under its shade. There will be objections from the people if we cut the tree,” Councillor Jairam said.

“This is the only tree left in the neighbourhood. In the name of development we have cut almost all the trees on the roadsides. Those were the trees planted by the kings who ruled before our Independence. Unlike us they were Nature lovers and knew the importance of trees and plants for the survival of human race and other beings. That fig tree is the abode of hundreds of birds in this town. Not only birds, squirrels, flies, honeybees, wasps, chameleons, spiders, ants and several other creatures survive only because of that tree. Haven’t other beings, plants and trees and all that reside on earth have equal rights to live here as we human beings?” Councillor Krishnan exploded.

“How do you equate other beings and plants to human beings? Aren’t all these created for human beings? Our priority should be welfare of human beings. Even if that tree is felled the birds and

other creatures will survive. Trees are there in the suburbs and they can live there. It is my opinion that a shopping complex should be built there and thus increase the income of our municipality. Whenever we councillors request for some fund the reply is always negative. By renting the rooms for shops we can earn lakhs of rupees every month,” Councillor Joseph said.

“I fully support the views of Councillor Joseph. Let us worry first about our own people and then we shall think about other beings and plants,” Councillor Ashraf stated.

“We should come to an agreement,” the Chairman Yusef said. “Those who support the project of constructing a shopping complex may raise their hands.”

Out of the thirty councillors twenty five voted for the construction of the shopping complex. Thus it was decided that a three storeyed shopping complex will be built there and for that tender should be invited. The lowest bidder will be given the work and the construction has to be completed within two years.

Councillor Jairam warned: “I don’t think we can cut the tree without any opposition from the people. There are some Nature lovers in our town who assemble there every evening under the tree.”

“We will seek the help of police when the tree is cut,” The Chairman said. The meeting thus ended.

There was a crow sitting on a window pane listening to the discussion of the councillors. It used to frequent there as to eat the leftovers of the snacks after each meeting. The decision to cut the tree thrust like an arrow on its heart. Once the meeting was over, it flew to the fig tree, not waiting for the leftover to eat. It was going to be dusk and all the crows and other birds had come back for their sleep on the branches of the fig tree. The crow cried loudly as possible: “Dear friends, I have alarming news to convey. I have been listening to the meeting of the municipal councillors at the council hall. They have decided to destroy our abode, fell this tree and build a shopping complex here.”

Then all the crows, mynas, cuckoos, bulbuls, treepies, flowerpeckers, drongos, woodpeckers, owls and several others birds resting on various branches of the huge tree came closer to the announcing crow. The eldest among the crows then said, “Dear friends, this is our only shelter in this town. Human beings have destroyed all our houses least bothering about our existence. If we lose this house where will we sleep? This fig tree is not only our house but our feeder also. We survive eating its fruits which are found in abundance on its branches. Cutting this tree is equal to killing us all. We shall never allow them to do so.”

The eldest myna supported, “What right has man to cut this tree? This earth is not his grandpa’s. We never trespass upon his house and shut him out. Then why should he destroy our house and deprive us our food and shelter?”

A squirrel listening to the talks of the birds then said, “I support your views dear friends. We can defeat man’s attempt of cutting this tree fighting unitedly.”

The eldest crow declared loudly, “So we have all decided to fight against man if he comes to cut this tree. Our messenger crow will collect the news of the council’s agenda everyday and thus caution us for action when necessary. We should teach man a lesson that non human beings are never inferior to him, but superior.” The meeting was dispersed and all the birds and other creatures retired for sleep.

The tender for the construction of the shopping complex was finalised and the work was tendered to a company named Vision Construction Company. One Monday morning two woodcutters of the company came with necessary tools—axes, chainsaw etc. The messenger crow had already informed the entire birds and other creatures on the tree about the move of the construction company. So no bird or other animals had gone away in search of food.

Seeing the woodcutters moving to the tree, a group of Nature lovers who anticipated the tragedy to the tree surrounded them and their leader asked, “What are you going to do?”

“We are requested to fell this tree,” the woodcutters replied.

“Who requested you?” the leader asked.

“Our Company’s manager. The Company is allotted the construction of a shopping complex here.”

“No, we won’t allow you to touch this tree. It is a shelter to thousands of passengers and abode to hundreds of birds and other creatures. Tell your manager that we won’t allow you.”

Immediately the woodcutters phoned to the manager and within ten minutes the Chairman of the Municipality and the Manager of the Construction Company arrived there with the escort of a jeep full of police.

The Chairman then told the protesters, “The Municipal Council have decided to fell this fig tree and build a shopping complex here. It is for the welfare of the people that we have taken such a decision.”

The leader of the protesters replied, “It is for the comfort of the hundreds of passengers who wait for the buses everyday that we are requesting you to spare this tree. You have not built a waiting shed in this area even though the people have been requesting for it for many years. Those hundreds of birds and other living bodies depending of this tree for food and shelter have nowhere to go. You have destroyed hundreds of trees that served men and other beings on the roadsides of this municipality. What a noble, selfless sacrifice these trees have been rendering! You administrators have no heart to read it. We won’t allow you to fell this tree.” Telling this he and his followers, some twenty men, lay down around the tree. The Chairman asked the Sub Inspector to remove them.

The Sub Inspector told the protesters, “If you do not go away we will arrest you and take you to the police station.”

“We won’t move.” The leader of the protestors said. Thereupon the Sub Inspector ordered the police constables to arrest them. The constables dragged the protesters one by one to the police jeep.

“Now is our turn,” The leader of the crow gave signal to all birds. All the crows, mynahs, and other birds flew down and started pecking on the head of the Sub Inspector, police constables, Chairman, Manager and woodcutters. The Sub Inspector gave order to shoot the birds with the guns. The gun shots went up and one hit the huge wasp nest on one of the branches of the tree. Thousands of wasps flew down angrily and attacked the offenders. The police, the Chairman and the Manager got into their vehicles and sped away for their lives. Still the wasps were chasing them. The wood cutters ran away into a hotel nearby. The protesters also ran away to another hotel. The birds flew back to the branches of the tree. After a few minutes the wasps returned to the tree.

One could hear the chirps, tweets, twitters and all such merry sounds of all the birds from the tree, celebrating their victory. The chorus music of the birds was accompanied by the humming of the wasps and honeybees. The squirrels and crickets also played their parts with sharp notes. It seemed like a great celestial symphony.

An urgent meeting of the Municipal Council was held on the next day. The Chairman addressed the councillors, “Even though we have decided to build a shopping complex, we are not permitted by the Nature to fell the tree. It is a lesson to us that we should be considerate to non humans because this earth belongs to them also. As a compensation for the deforestation done in this municipality, let us plant as many trees as possible on the roadsides. I hope you all will agree to it on the ground of what happened yesterday.” All the councillors agreed to the proposal of the Chairman.



## Seetha's Resolve

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“Seetha, how long are you going to remain alone? So many marriage proposals have come and you don't agree to any. You are already 27 now and if you are prolonging, you may not get any husband. Men always want their wives to be younger to them and most of the youths here marry before they are 30. You are our only child and we want you to be married off at the earliest. See, both your dad and mom are not very healthy. Anything can happen at any time. A new proposal has come now through my college classmate, Gopi. His son, Anand is a teacher in the government high school. I have seen Anand in his house. He is very handsome, smart and gentle,” Raveendran spoke to her daughter.

“Dad, I have been postponing my wedding as to get a permanent job in the government service. With my small salary from the unaided college what can be done? Nowadays no family can survive without the earnings of both husband and wife. Moreover an unemployed wife will have no voice in her husband's house. She will be treated as a slave by the in-laws. But as time is fast running and my permanent government appointment is remaining as an oasis I am yielding to your proposal. Dad, I have no faith in any horoscope and if they want to match my stars with his, then tell them that I have no plan to marry him,” Seetha replied.

“Seetha, Gopi is just like me. As we have no faith in astrology and horoscope, he too doesn't have. We used to talk about the exploitation done in the name of horoscope many a times. So that



won't be a problem. Another advantage is that they won't demand any dowry, as Gopi is against it. Whatever we have is for you and your future family. As you know, we have no bank deposit except what you have earned through your teaching. With my meagre pension our family is running. You can imagine how small an amount a primary school teacher gets as pension," Raveendran said.

Seetha's mother Laxmi then interrupted, "In fact your dad got a lump sum amount when he retired, some three lakhs. We planned to use it for your marriage. Since you didn't agree for any proposal at that time, we used the amount for the construction of our house. I too have seen Anand when I visited their house with your dad. I find in him a perfect match for you."

"If both of you like Anand, then request him to come here as part of the proposal next Sunday," Seetha said.

The next Sunday Anand came to Seetha's house with his father, mother and his married elder sister. They all liked Seetha because she was very beautiful in appearance and smart and gentle in her dealings. Similarly Seetha and her parents liked Anand as he was handsome and appearing perfect match for Seetha. The marriage date was fixed for a Sunday one month after.

Seetha has a neighbour named Venu who was her classmate in the school as well as for the degree course. Venu failed for his degree examinations and thus stopped his studies. His parents are labourers working in the cardamom estate nearby. Since Venu could not get any government job he bought a taxi auto rickshaw and lived by its income. He has a passion for Seetha which he nourished in his mind from the school level. Venu is not handsome and because of that inferiority complex he could never disclose his love to Seetha. He offered to take her to her school everyday in his auto rickshaw. Since there were no frequent buses to the town where she is teaching she had to accept his offer. It took twenty minutes journey to reach the town.

Since Venu's house is very close to Seetha's, he could learn all developments in her house. Venu came to know that marriage proposals are going on for Seetha. One day when they were going to the town in the auto rickshaw Venu stopped the rickshaw on the way and told her mustering all his courage: "Seetha, I have been keeping in mind all these years some secret which I would like to tell you now."

"What's it? Tell me Venu," Seetha replied.

"I love you and would like to marry you," with a shaky sound he replied.

"Sorry, Venu, my marriage is fixed with Anand, my dad's friend's son. He is a teacher in the government high school," Seetha said.

It was a shocking information to Venu that he would be losing Seetha shortly. He loved her so much that he could not think of a life without her. He was under the impression that Seetha loved her mute as his silent love. They have been talking so friendly for several years and he thought that she loved him, though not expressed explicitly. Venu said, "Seetha, we have been known to each other for several years and I promise you that I can look after you very well. I am earning sufficient income."

"Venu, ours is not good match. It is true that you are a nice person, but my parents won't agree to our marriage. See, though not a government job, I am a teacher by profession and what about you? Very sorry, ours is not a good match."

"Okay. I dreamed a lot . . ." Telling this, Venu started the engine of the auto rickshaw and it moved to the town. They didn't speak anything further. The rickshaw stopped at the gate of the school and she got down telling thanks. He didn't accept the fare she offered. He looked very moody not even caring to look at her face.

Seetha too lost her peace of mind. Venu being her neighbour she will have to meet him everyday. In the evening when she returned home she told what happened to her parents.

“What qualification he has to marry you?” was the reaction of her father. Her mother too was worried of Venu's approach to Seetha.

The next morning as usual Seetha got ready for her journey to the college. As to avoid going in the auto rickshaw of Venu, she got ready early to catch the bus that goes to the town thirty minutes before. When she moved to the road there came Venu with his auto rickshaw. Reaching very close to Seetha he threw some liquid on her face and sped away. It was acid and Seetha ran back to her house crying loudly “Save me.” Reaching home she cried, “Venu threw acid on my face. Dad, pour water on my face and take me to the hospital soon.” Seetha's dad and mom were horrified to hear it and crying they took a bucket of water and poured on her face with a mug continuously. Raveendran immediately phoned to his neighbour Joseph and he came with his car. Seetha was taken to the Medical College in the town and the doctors immediately started treatment for her burns. The right side of her face and neck was burnt deeply. Fortunately acid has not fallen on her eyes, lips or ears. The first aid with the water lessened the gravity of the burns.

Raveendran reported the case to the police station and Venu was arrested within a couple of hours. Venu cooperated with the inquest and accepted that he did the crime. He told the police that he committed the crime as to avoid Seetha being owned by someone else through marriage because he loved her so much. None filed for Venu's bail since the crime was unbailable and he was imprisoned in the jail till the prosecution at a later date.

It took nearly one month's treatment in the hospital for Seetha's burns to be cured. Though the skin and the flesh below got cured the acid hit area got disfigured with shrunken black skin. It was horrific to look at her face. Seetha was discharged from the hospital after a month and she was totally upset. She didn't want to face any one on earth except his father and mother. She refrained

from looking at her face on a mirror which made her cry. She preferred remaining in her room shut. Needless to say Seetha's marriage with Anand had to be dropped and her dream of a happy married life burst out like a bubble.

Meanwhile the prosecution of Venu was completed and he was sentenced to ten years of rigorous imprisonment and a fine of one lakh rupees to the victim. He was put in the Central Jail of the State.

The entire village was shocked at the tragedy of Seetha and the people wept at her fate. Her neighbours, relatives, colleagues, teachers and students prayed for her recovery and return to normal life. Many of them visited her house but she was unwilling to face them. Three months have passed after the mishap and one day Seetha's dad went to her room and said, "Daughter, how long are you going to lead a secluded life in this room? The world around you is full of love and sympathy for you. They all pray for your happy future. Your loving students have come here with the principal to visit you. Please come to the living room where they are waiting for you. You can hide the burns with your saree."

Seetha very reluctantly, covering her head with her saree and hiding the frightening scars, appeared before the visitors with a smiling face. The principal and the students greeted her good morning. She too greeted back and sat on a chair. The Principal, Dr. Mukundan then said, "Seetha teacher, we are all extremely sad at your tragedy. We can be happy only when we find happiness in you. You have been so indispensable to our college and your students love you so much that they don't want any substitute for you to teach them. Kindly oblige to their request. You know how loving your colleagues are. They are all waiting for your return. As to avoid the gaze of the public we would arrange a taxi car for journey."

"What the principal sir suggested is acceptable dear daughter. You will have no problems from anywhere and moreover regaining your favourite profession will bring you back the happiness lost," Raveendran said.

“Absolutely true,” Seetha’s mother Laxmi said. “How long are you sitting sad in your room? It will kill you and both your dad and mom. By doing service to your loving students God will reward you with happiness.”

“If all of you are pressing thus I shall continue my teaching. After all what is left in my future? Because of me I don’t want to see my dad’s and mom’s tears. So I have decided to live for others doing whatever service possible,” Seetha replied with tears welled from her eyes.

All were happy at her decision. The principal then said, “We are extremely grateful to you dear Seetha teacher. You may regain your teaching from tomorrow itself. We will send you the taxi car in the morning.”

The Next morning Seetha got ready for her teaching profession wearing a saree and covering her burnt face with the tip of it. The taxi car took her to the college and she was given a warm welcome by her colleagues and students assembled at the front yard. She was given a bouquet of beautiful flowers by the principal Dr. Mukundan and led her to the staff room. To the shower of love from the students and the staff Seetha’s sorrows and loneliness surrendered. She became as happy as before. She found peace and happiness in her life with the students.

Needless to say Seetha became very popular in the town and media published reports on her miraculous come back to life. Usually acid victims are neglected by the society and they take refuge in the rehabilitation centres established by NGOs. She took special classes for the weak students in the morning and evening – before and after the regular class hours. The taxi car was avoided as per her request and she started commuting in the line bus. She would reach the college at 8.30 am and leave only by 5.30 pm. Thus in addition to the regular classes she taught the weaker students three hours. Besides, she was in charge of the National Service Scheme of the college and did marvellous exemplary social activities under it.

The State government decided to promote Seetha's unaided college to a government aided one taking into consideration the best result and the social service activities. Thus the teachers including Seetha started to get higher government salaries. It was a great relief to Seetha and her parents. Even though a married life is impossible for her there was nothing to be financially worried about their future life.

The NSS unit of Seetha's college was awarded the best unit in the State. Seetha's service and commitment came to the notice of the State government and she was chosen as the best teacher of the State and recommended her name for the national award. The nation no doubt honoured her as the BEST TEACHER of the year. Receiving the national award from the President, she spoke, "I dedicate this award and honour to the thousands of acid victims in the world. I could come back to my life and rise to this stature only because of the love and compassion shown to me by the people around me. Hence I request all my countrymen to shower love and concern to the victims who are destined to live hellish miserable life in their houses and rehabilitation centres. It is for no reason of theirs that they became victims of such inhuman atrocities. Given proper love and compassion these victims can come back to normal happy life like me." The entire audience welcomed her request with huge applause.



## What's Wrong with Us?

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“Why is it dad I don't have qualifier to my name? Some of my classmates are named M. Krishnan Namboodiri, T. P. Chandran Nair, S. Subramanyan Pillai, K. N. Achyutan Potti, Kuttikrishnan Varrier, S. Mohanan Varma, G. Sankaran Menon, P. S. Sasidharan Kaimal. But I am just K. G. Vijayan” complained sixteen year old Vijayan to his father, Gopalan.

“Dear son, they all belong to higher castes and those tails to their names denote the caste they belong to. We are low caste Dalit people and we don't have such qualification to be proud of” Gopalan replied.

Vijayan: “Why are we born as low caste and they all as high caste, dad?”

Gopalan: “I asked the same question to my father when I was a child, but he couldn't give any satisfying reply other than he did not know, my son. For many generations we have been living as low caste. I don't think our creator God plans some people to be born in high and respectable families and the others in low despicable families. He treats all His children equal and never shows discrimination to any. We don't find any caste system among animals and we human beings who are evolved from them are also born in the same manner with no labels. Caste is man's creation dear son.”

Vijayan: “Now I understand dad, why I am ignored by the teachers, asking less questions to me and never complimenting when I say the right answer. Those high caste, white skinned pupils

are their favourites, and I have less friends in my class. My friends are all black like me. Our neighbour Joseph is my best friend among the classmates. Girls in our class never speak to us.”

Gopalan: “Don’t bother about the treatment of your teachers and classmates, dear son. You can overcome all these through hard work. Study well and try to get the highest marks for examinations. Then you will be applauded by your teachers and classmates. Haven’t you heard of K. R. Narayanan, our former President of India? He was born in our own State, Kerala in a low caste poor family like ours. He experienced much discrimination than you from his teachers and classmates. He had to walk 15 kilometres to reach his school every day. Like you, he too studied in a government school. By hard work he could get degrees after degrees from India and abroad and even served as Vice Chancellor and Indian Ambassador before he became the Vice President of India and then the President. It is very late now. Go and sleep, child.”

“I will study well and become an honourable high level government officer. Good night, dad!” Vijayan went for sleep.

Gopalan: Very good decision! Good night, son!”

Gopalan prayed to God to bless his child and fulfill his dreams and wishes. He is a daily wage agricultural labourer, working in the lands of rich people in his neighbourhood. Being a low caste, he had to bear all discriminations shown to him by the land owners. He was never offered a chair to sit near to his boss in the evenings when he returns after work for his wage. He had to sit on the veranda or stand on the front yard to drink the tea served by the boss’s wife or maid. He has no complaints since he knows well that what he experiences is the ill-fated predicament of the category of his society. Gopalan is the only income earner of his family consisting of his wife, son Vijayan, daughter, aged five, and old parents. His father was a daily labourer and he is now under treatment for asthma and can’t go for any work. His mother too is a patient of diabetes. They both get government’s old age monthly pension of Rs. 1600 each which can meet their medical expenses.



As mentioned earlier, Joseph is Vijayan's best friend studying with him in the same class. Though he and his parents are Christians by birth they too face discriminations from the society. They are close neighbours of Gopalan's family. Joseph's father Mathai is a rubber tapper who works in the rubber plantation of a Christian land owner nearby. On holidays Joseph accompanies his father to the land owner's house. Mathai gets his wages on Saturday. One day while he was receiving the weekly wages from the boss, the little son of the boss, seemingly twelve years old appeared there and asked him: "Mathai, is this your son?"

Mathai: "Yes, he is my son, Joseph who is studying in the tenth standard in the government school here."

"I am studying in the sixth standard of the CBSE public school." The child said.

"Very good! Study well!" Telling this Mathai walked back to his house with his son. While walking, Joseph asked his father, "Dad, why did that boss's son address you by name with least respect? Why didn't he add 'Chetta'" (elder brother) after Mathai as is our custom here? You are of his father's age. He has no manners at all."

"No need to accuse the child, Vijayan. He is trained in such a manner to call the low caste people by their names." Mathai said.

"But we are not low caste, dad. We are Christians as they are. Christians belong to forward community. How then are we low caste?" Joseph argued.

Mathai: "Dear son, it's true that Christians are a forward community. But there is discrimination among us in the society. Unfortunately our family is labelled as converted Christians. Our great grandfather belonged to a low caste Dalit family when he was converted into Christianity by some Christian priest. He might have been promised that he and his family would be looked after by the church and they could lead a decent life like the forward classes. It is to be assumed that the church did not keep its promise and he and his family and the generations after him continued their hellish

life, working hard for the rich people and facing all discriminations from the society. The irony of the conversion is that the converted Christians were never supported by the church and they lost the scheduled caste reservations offered by the government for education, employment, medical treatment etc. So they are never considered a forward community and lost whatever support they have been getting from the government.”

Joseph: “I will study hard and get a government job to save our family from the financial problems and earn respectability from the society, particularly the rich whom we serve now.”

Mathai: “Excellent ambition dear son! Get high marks for your 10<sup>th</sup> class public examinations so that you can get admission for higher secondary in the merit quota. Though there are several higher secondary schools and colleges run by the Christian management, we can’t get any admission in the management quota since we are poor. And when it comes to appointment as teachers in government aided Christian schools and colleges, candidates from converted Christian family like ours are very seldom selected. So try to get maximum marks so that you can get admission in Government higher secondary school and colleges. After your graduation or even post graduation you can apply for government jobs, perform well in the PSC/UPSC examinations and thus fulfill your ambition.”

Joseph: “I am determined dad, I promise you”

“Best wishes dear son! If there is a will there is a way.” Mathai replied and they reached home.

Joseph and Vijayan go to school together and they used to speak about the discrimination and ill treatment they had to face from the classmates, teachers and the society as such. They want to send back the arrows that pierce their hearts. But how it is possible is a question which gives no answer. On a Monday they planned to ask some doubts and clarifications to their social science teacher regarding the caste system in India. The social science teacher,

Ramesh Krishnan is a low caste and he got appointment on the basis of reservation.

Ramesh entered into the classroom of 10<sup>th</sup> Standard, Division A where Joseph and Vijayan are studying. After taking the attendance Ramesh Master asked the pupils some questions as to check if they had studied the portions taught in his previous lecture. Before beginning the new topic of lecture for the day, Ramesh asked if any pupil has any doubt. Then Vijayan stood up and asked: “Sir, I have a doubt regarding the caste system in our country. We would like to know the origin of caste system in India. Why are the people divided into high castes and low castes? Is there any justification in the division and discrimination shown to the low caste?”

Ramesh: “Very good question, Vijayan! Kindly sit down. It is a very relevant question now since so much of discrimination, cruelty, mob violence, torture, lynching, burning houses, murder, and police persecutions are going on in our country in the name of caste. “ He then opened his bag and took a notebook. “I am going to present before you a renowned history professor’s research findings on caste. She is Dr. Kallie Szczepanski, a history teacher specialised in Asian history and culture. She has taught at the high school and university levels in the U. S. and South Korea. She states that the origins of the caste system in India and Nepal are not fully known, but castes seem to have originated more than 2,000 years ago. Under this system, which is associated with Hinduism, people were categorised by their occupations. The four primary castes are Brahmin, the priests; Kshatriya, warriors and nobility; Vaisya, farmers, traders, and artisans; and Shudra, tenant farmers and servants. Some people were born outside and below the caste system; they were called “untouchables” or Dalits meaning “the crushed ones.”

Early written evidence about the caste system appears in the Vedas, Sanskrit-language texts that date from as early as 1500 BCE. The Vedas form the basis of Hindu scripture. The “Rigveda,” however, which dates from around 1700–1100 BCE, rarely mentions caste distinctions and is taken as evidence that social

mobility was common in its time. The “Bhagavad Gita,” which dates from around 200 BCE–200 CE, emphasises the importance of caste. In addition, the Laws of Manu or *Manusmriti*, from the same era, defines the rights and duties of the four different castes or *varnas*. Thus, it seems that the Hindu caste system began to solidify sometime between 1000 and 200 BCE.”

“With regard to dining habits, at mealtimes, anyone could accept food from the hands of a Brahmin, but a Brahmin would be polluted if he or she took certain types of food from a lower caste person. At the other extreme, if an untouchable dared to draw water from a public well, he or she polluted the water, and nobody else could use it. Untouchables were barred entirely from temples, and sometimes they were not even allowed to set foot on temple grounds. If the shadow of an untouchable touched a Brahmin, the Brahmin would be polluted, so untouchables had to lay face-down at a distance when a Brahmin passed.”

“Untouchables were considered so impure that any contact with them by a caste member would contaminate that member. The polluted person would have to bathe and wash his or her clothing immediately. The untouchables historically did work that no one else would do, like scavenging animal carcasses, leather-work, or killing rats and other pests. Untouchables could not eat in the same room as caste members and could not be cremated when they died.” Ramesh ended his reading from the notebook and continued speaking:

“Dear children, from what I have read you can feel and understand that the caste system and the discrimination based on it are all manmade. It is all misuse of the power and wealth of a few people in the society. God the Father or the Creator can never show any discrimination to his children. The law of Nature also gives equal right to all inhabitants, be it humans or non humans. Hence, caste discrimination is a canker of our society and we should all pledge to fight against it. No one is superior or inferior to others in a society. All professions have their own glory and importance in a society. The profession of a pujari and that of a scavenger should be

treated equal and dignified since a society can't exist without them. Caste system in its origin as we find in the Vedas and Shastras was just the division of a society based on the professions assigned to. The Vedic dharma is very prominently seen in the division of the controversial caste system. In the real spirit of the Veda, there is no need of the controversies on the caste system. Only people who can lead a very pious life are supposed to be Brahmins. Kshathriya should possess iron fist. Vaisya should possess productivity. And sudra must be able to do manual labours. Any person unfit for the former three castes will become Sudra, because all the human beings are born as Sudras and the state of being Sudra is common in each and everyone.

The entire people come under one caste or the other and they are all dignified and essential for the existence of the society. As it is now, the service sector constitutes the vast majority of the people in a society. As per the original concept of caste division they all belong to the Shudras. In fact Jati and Caste are different. There are more than 3000 Jatis in India. Caste groups as political pressure groups work very well in a democratic system. Caste may provide psychological support that people seem to need. Economists and political scientists are finding that caste is no real barrier to economic development or political democracy. Degeneration happened in the caste system and the British government used it in India when they ruled, to break the unity of the people and to divide and fight among themselves.”

“My dear children,” Ramesh added, “We should learn the dignity of labour from the West. An Indian Brahmin has no reluctance to serve as a sweeper or a scavenger abroad, but in his own country, his or the society's false pride doesn't allow. This mentality should be changed. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar the architect of the constitution of India was all against the caste system. He is renowned for championing the rights of Dalits and their upliftment in the society. He is of opinion that Hindu social order doesn't recognise liberty and fraternity. The unit of Hindu society is caste. Ambedkar does not agree with the argument that economic power brings power to the lower caste. Caste superiority is inculcated in the minds of the people. To eliminate hierarchical nature of the caste, these beliefs need to be changed. He opines that caste is the

state of the mind. Dear students, it has come to a pathetic stage now that Hindu religion can't exist without Jati. What is Hindu religion? It is a communion of people who believe in the principles of the four Vedas. Since caste and functions of the castes are mentioned in detail in the Vedas, caste has become an inseparable part of Hindu religion. So caste is a reality but the superiority and discrimination as we find now was not there in the early period. I hope you have all heard of Sree Narayana Guru who is acknowledged as the "Father of the Renaissance in Kerala." His philosophic statement on caste system is "One Caste, one Religion, One God for mankind." What he means is that everyone is equal in this world."

"Sir, how can we put an end to this discrimination shown by the higher caste? Isn't there any law to punish those who torture the poor low caste people for no reason?" Vijayan interrupted.

"Surely, all offences and assaults done in the name of caste are punishable. Dear students, future India lies in your hands and it is your duty to fight against this irrational discrimination and tortures done to the poor low caste and dalit people. Haven't you heard of Daya Bai, the social activist from our own State Kerala? She is a nun turned activist working for the welfare of the tribal people in Madhya Pradesh. She is now 81. She studied law and took the degree to plead free for the tribals in the court. You cannot eradicate caste system from our country but you can fight against the discrimination and tortures like her."

Vijayan stood up and declared, "Sir, I have decided to become a lawyer and devote my life for the low caste and Dalit people."

Immediately Joseph also stood up and declared, "I too have taken a decision to go for LLB after my Plus two and plead for the lower caste people in the court."

"Excellent decision! You are real sons of India. The entire nation feels proud of you! Let us give a big clap to Vijayan and Joseph." Ramesh said. All the pupils stood up and clapped continuously for several seconds. And Mother India smiled with immense happiness.



## Aren't they our Sisters?

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Rajesh landed at Mumbai Airport and went straight to the pre-paid taxi booking desk. He booked a taxi car to Kamathipura paying the charge of Rs. 600. Rajesh got into the car and the journey started.

“Driver, what’s your name?” Rajesh asked.

“I am Arun, sir”

“How long is it to Kamathipura?”

“18 kilometers, sir”

“How much time needed?”

“Maximum 20 minutes, sir. Where are you from, sir?”

“Kerala”

The dialogue ended. Arun appeared to be very gentle and good mannered. He didn’t intrude into the privacy of Rajesh by asking unnecessary questions. It was long back that Rajesh visited Mumbai and the city has changed a lot. So many flyovers and skyscrapers and very busy traffic! The car stopped. The driver said, “We have reached Kamathipura, sir.” “Oh, we have reached very quickly,” replying, Rajesh got down from the car. “Thanks a lot, Arun.” “Welcome, sir” Arun replied and drove away. Immediately, a middle aged man in neat dress came to Rajesh and asked:

“Sir, I am Kishore, agent of the brothels. What type of girl you need?”

“I need a pretty Kerala lady aged between twenty and thirty.”

“Okay, I will make arrangements. If you are ready to pay Rs. 1500, the lady will come here and take you to her room and after the business drop you back here. Or if you want to choose a girl going straight to her room, you can have her for Rs. 500.”

“I would like to go to the lane where Kerala girls are available and choose one I like.”

“Okay sir, let us take a taxi and I will drop you on the lane where you can find your choice.”

“Alright call a taxi, then.”

Kishore called for a taxi car and they reached the lane within five minutes. The entire city looked very dirty, crowded lanes with people of all ages – both sex workers, their families and customers, dogs, cows, rickshaws, vegetable, fruit vendors on roads. The buildings on both sides seemed centuries old, without proper maintenance or painting. A person who visits once will never wish to visit again, except for sex. Rajesh got down from the car, gave the taxi driver the fare of Rs. 100. He gave Rs. 50 to Kishore and walked along the lane. He was beckoned by many ladies standing in front of their doors and windows. Though beautified by lipstick and powder some appeared young in the twenties while others in the thirties and even forties. Rajesh was attracted by the beauty of a lady standing in front of her room on the first floor. He went straight to her, climbing the narrow steep wooden staircase. She invited him to her room and asked to sit on a chair. The room appeared very congested with an old chair and table and a single cot. The strong smell of the low cost perfume was suffocating for him. Without wasting any time she told him:

“Give me my rate of Rs. 500 first. There have been cases of cheating me after the business.”

Rajesh gave her a 500 rupee note. Then pointing to the attached bathroom she told him:

“Kindly take a bath and come. You have to use condom when you do. I won’t allow you to kiss and won’t remove my dress.”



“Sorry, I have come not for any sex. I am the owner of Govind Mills, Kochi which produces cloths and exports. My name is Rajesh,” telling this he showed his identity card. Rajesh continued:

“Trust me; I have come to save you from this filthy, hellish life. Kindly tell me your whereabouts, from where you are and how you happened to be here.”

“Trust men? I am here since I trusted a man I loved most. Don't waste your time. You may go. Here is your money.”

“Please don't misunderstand me. You might have been cheated by a man. But all men are not like him.”

“Why are you so much concerned about me and saving from here? One of my friends in another room of this building has been offered by a man like you and she believed his words of marrying her and went with him. But what happened? They lived in a rented flat not very far away from here for six months. She was not confessed how he earned money during day time. He would go out from the house in the morning and return in the evening with whatever needed for the cooking. He didn't marry her as promised. He postponed the date of the marriage telling one reason or another, whenever she insisted. Meanwhile she became pregnant. One day he went out in the morning as usual but didn't come back. Thus cheated by him she returned to our building, aborted the fetus and resumed her profession. Now tell me, how can I trust you?”

“Sister, your argument is right. It is very difficult for you people to trust men. I have come here to save you, in the sense to offer you a way of living. You asked me why I am concerned about you. Now listen to my history. I have great respect for people like you because I am the son of a sex worker. Though I am immensely rich now, I am the son of a father who deserted his wife and her child (me) in Mumbai. Having no other option for survival my mother was compelled to seek the profession of a sex worker here in Kamathipura. I was sent to a boarding school and then for higher education and finally got employment abroad. I could earn a lot and we are now settled there at Kochi. It is my mother's wish that I

should do something for the sex workers. As per the statistics, there are more than 5000 sex workers here. And the number in our country is over 800,000. As I am a man who has experienced the hardships and pangs of a sex worker's family, it is my duty to do whatever I can to uplift them from their hellish life. My mother is the Managing Director of Govind Mills, the textile factory I mentioned earlier. If you are willing, you can work there in the factory. Not only to you, but I can provide jobs for some twenty of your friends here. You will be given very good salary. There are family quarters near to the factory where you can live with your family. Day cares and playschools are there in the campus and you will never have any problem of alienation, isolation or discrimination. Now what do you say?"

"Very sorry sir for misunderstanding you. I would like to be saved from this filthy life. Let me introduce myself. I am Stella, the only daughter of a rich bank manager. My mother is a school teacher. Our house is in Thrissur (Kerala). While studying for my degree course I fell in love with a face book friend from Mumbai, named Rajender. Though we had not met in person our love became stronger and stronger over phone and face book chats and we decided to marry one day. Somehow my parents noticed it and gave me strict orders not to entertain that love. But love, as you know is blind and I could not forget him. While I am a Christian, he is a Hindu and that was the main reason why my parents dissuaded me. Moreover we do not know anything about him and his whereabouts other than what he has disclosed to me. He told me that he was an engineer working in an IT company and drawing good salary. My parents were not satisfied with what he has reported. It might be a lie, they warned me. I told him about my parents' objections. What to say more! One day Rajender arrived there at Thrissur and compelled me to go with him to Mumbai by the afternoon train. My infatuation made me surrender to his wish, totally ignoring my parents and my future. As requested by him I gave him my mobile phone. He removed its SIM, broke it and threw out the phone when the train departed from the station. The train reached Mumbai the next day and he took me to a room in a hotel.

We stayed there for a week very happily like husband and wife. Though the thought of my grieving parents troubled my mind, it was conquered by the happiness of love showered by Rajender. He would go to his office at 9 am and return by 6 pm. One evening when he returned he told me that he had to go to Kolkata that night for the firm's business purpose and would return only after a week. He said that till he returned I would be looked after by his friend's family living in a flat not far away. He asked me to get ready soon. It was already night approaching and dark outside. He took a taxi and after some thirty minutes drive the car stopped before a double storeyed building. He asked me to get down and brought me to a room where a middle aged lady welcomed us. Rajender spoke to her in Hindi which I could not follow well. He assured me that I would be properly cared by the lady and her family till he returned after a week. Then he went away in the same taxi car. The lady then spoke to me in English, asked my name and whereabouts. I told her my name and from where I was coming. She then told me that the building I had reached is a brothel and she was sold to them by the man who brought her. Hearing this I yelled loudly: 'No, you are telling deliberately a lie. Rajender would never cheat me. He loves me so much and we are going to marry. How can he desert me and sell to a brothel?' The lady tried to pacify me: 'Cool down Stella. Your Rajender is not Rajender by name. He is one of our pimp's agents. You will never see him again. From this building you can't go out. Be practical. There are twenty sex workers living happily here in the various rooms. They are earning money from the customers, giving us the rent of the rooms and are living comfortably. Many have their children who are studying in schools staying in the hostels. Nobody can come here to save you. How can you live without money? Already you are sexually abused by your lover and then cheated you. If you adjust with us you can survive, earn money and live happily. We will provide you food free for a day or two. Then you will have to accept customers and earn. Think about it seriously. I am going out now and will return within an hour with your dinner,' telling this the lady went out of the room, and she locked it from outside. I cried and cried for several minutes.

Thoughts about my parents came to my mind. They might be searching for me still. They might have reported to the police. Since Rajender is fake name it is difficult for the police to find him out. Since my mobile phone and SIM are destroyed the police can't trace me also. I was full of revenge for him. But how to execute? It is the curse of my loving parents that brought me to this tragedy, I guessed. My life is doomed. It is better to die than live like this. I thought of ending the life ... But how? No courage for suicide. My mind dragged me to my childhood... How affectionate my parents were!... How jolly was the school and college days! ... Those happy moments spent with Rajender now turned out to be pricking like thorns to the mind. Meanwhile the lady opened the door and put the dinner plate on the table.

'Kindly take your dinner,' she said.

'I am not hungry now,' Stella replied.

'Okay, you may take when you feel like. By the by, have you decided to adjust with us?'

'Yes, but kindly give two days for my mind to adjust with the life of a sex worker. Then I will accept the customer.'

'Surely, you may make a mental preparation for the work. You will be served food from time to time here. There is bathroom attached to this room for your use. You can call me through the intercom whenever you need.' She went out of the room and locked the door from outside.

Thus my life as a sex worker started. No doubt I hate this profession. It is now five years I have been living in the dirty mire. This is my story, sir." Stella sighed and her eyes were brimmed with tears.

"Really shocking and pathetic! The man who cheated you should be punished. I will seek the help of the police and try to put him in prison. Before that I will take you and your friends here, if they want, to my factory at Kochi. I am going back today and will return after a week. Meanwhile you may contact your friends here

and tell them my intention to save them. There will be no objection for the building owner to relieve you, rather he would be happy to vacate you and construct a new building here. This is my card. You can call me whenever you like. If all your friends are willing to come I would arrange a bus for your conveyance to Kochi. Goodbye Stella! I will meet you next Saturday. Before that, kindly call me and give the number of persons coming with you.” Rajesh got out the room, took a taxi car and went straight to the airport.

Stella contacted all the fellow sex workers in the building. They were all happy to leave the place and lead a good life at Kochi. Stella called Rajesh and informed him that all the twenty friends were willing to come with her.

Rajesh returned to Kamathipura on Saturday by noon. Stella and all her friends were ready having packed all their belonging in bags. A bus was already brought there. Stella and her friends got into the bus with their baggage. Thus they bade good bye to their hellish life there and were in exodus to a heaven on earth. The bus reached Kochi the next day and stopped at the gate of Govind Mills at 5 pm. There was a huge welcome arch made of flowers at the entrance of the gate. The entire place had a festival atmosphere. There were so many people assembled there. Stella and her friends got out of the bus one by one and were warmly welcomed by Rajesh's mother, the MD of the factory, with bouquets. They were then led to the stage in the campus where celebrations were conducted. The stage was beautifully decorated with flowers. Nearly 500 people – factory workers and their families were seated on the open ground. They all stood up and went on clapping till all the twenty ladies took their seats on the stage. There were VIPs on the dais including the Mayor of Kochi and a retired chief justice of Kerala High Court. Rajesh in his welcome speech spoke in detail the reasons behind his humane act of rehabilitating the guests from Mumbai. Rajesh's mother, Radhadevi in her address requested the audience and the society as such to be compassionate to the tortured, abused and exploited people of the world. The Mayor in his presidential address congratulated Rajesh, Radhadevi and their Govind Mills for doing such a marvelous humane service to the

neglected, outcast section of the society. He added that the Company's unique act should be a model to all big firms and billionaires in the world. The wealth they amass is indirectly the wealth of the society and so part of it should be returned to the society by way of humanitarian activities. The retired chief justice in his key note address reminded the society that it should never treat sex workers with contempt. Having abused and exploited for carnal pleasures, treating them like curry leaves is cruelty of the high degree and unpardonable. After all aren't they your own sisters? Stella in her vote of thanks expressed deep gratitude to Rajesh and his mother Radhadevi for saving them from downing in the ocean of grief.

As promised, all the twenty ladies were given employment in the factory based on their education and skill. They were given salaries ranging from Rs. 20000 to 25000. All were given free quarters. They could get food from the factory canteen at a very cheap rate. Those whose children were studying in the schools at Mumbai were brought back to Kochi and admitted in the government school near to the factory. Thus heaven was open to them and they started a new life full of happiness and hope.



## **Bhagyalakshmi's Fate**

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“What's in a name? that which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet.” William Shakespeare states in Romeo and Juliet. Contrary to Shakespeare's view, one who is in contact with Bhagyalakshmi would raise the question: ‘Who gave her this name?’ Bhagyalakshmi has neither Bhagya (good luck) nor the blessings of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Aged 35, she is a widow with two kids and old parents.

Bhagyalakshmi is an intimate acquaintance of Prof. Krishnaraj who meets her every day in his morning walks. She sustains her family selling lottery tickets. Income from lottery and liquor sale is the main revenue of the literate State Kerala! It is a tragedy that both lottery and liquor have become addictions to thousands of men in the State. Whatever they earn from their occupations are spent on these two things leaving very little money to feed their starving families. Several lakhs of families live by the commission received from the sale of lottery tickets. Prof. Krishnaraj teaches English in a government college at Kottayam. He lives with his family in the town itself not far away from the college. When he goes out for his walks he meets Bhagyalakshmi at a junction very close to his house. She was fascinated to him by her looks – very beautiful with a smiling face and neatly dressed. Krishnaraj has no interest in trying luck through lottery and he rarely buys tickets. Out of sympathy to the lottery sellers he buys a few tickets occasionally. One can come across weak and old men and women walking to and fro along the roads with tickets in their hands in unbearable heat and incessant rains. So also handicapped persons on crutches,

persons with no palms at all, blind, deaf and dumb and all such people with deformities are found throughout the State in all busy towns and cities.

After a few days of meeting Bhagyalakshmi at the junction, Prof. Krishnaraj decided to learn her whereabouts. As it is unfair to ask her name directly and seek other details, he bought a lottery ticket first and then introduced himself to her:

“I am Prof. Krishnaraj living near to this junction. I am teaching in a government college in the town. I meet you every day here when I go for my morning walks. What’s your name and where are you from?”

“My name is Bhagyalakshmi, sir. Unlike my name I am NirBhagyalakshmi, the most unlucky lady in the world. My house is two kilometres away. I live in a hut with my two kids and old parents.”

“What about your husband? Is he dead?”

“No sir, he deserted us and eloped with another lady. Where he is, I don’t know. He was a labourer in the construction company and he used to come home drunk in the evening, quarrel with me and the children for no reason and beat us. Not able to bear the torture more I came to my parents’ house with the kids.”

“What are your parents? Do they earn anything?”

“No sir, they both are sick and old. My father has been working as a labourer in a saw mill. Becoming an acute asthma patient he had to stop his work and is under treatment now. He is 70 now. My mother is a housewife and has serious diabetic problems. For both their medicines I need to spend nearly Rs. 3000 a month. I am a graduate, but I couldn’t get any job.”

“How old are your kids?”

“I have two daughters. The elder one is 12 years old and she is studying in the 6<sup>th</sup> standard. The younger one is 10 years old and she is studying in the 4<sup>th</sup> standard. Both are studying in the



government school near to our house. After the birth of the first daughter my husband longed to have a son. But when the second one also happened to be a girl child he started accusing me of my inability to give birth to a male child. His parents also supported his views. It was of no use educating them how an infant takes birth in the womb. In addition, he and his parents found another reason to rebuke and abuse me telling that my parents had given them very little money as dowry. In fact, our marriage was not an arranged one; we loved each other and married with no demand of any dowry. We were neighbours as well as classmates.” Tears ran through her cheeks.

“Cool down, Bhagyalakshmi! How much do you earn a day?”

“I am here around from 7 in the morning till 4 in the afternoon and from the sales of the tickets I may get Rs. 300 to 600 maximum. It all depends on the weather. If it is continuously raining, the sale will be less and there have been such days which starve us bringing only Rs. 200 or less. There have been many days when I could not sell all the tickets I have bought from the agent. The draw time of tickets in all days is 3pm. By the time if I could not sell the tickets of the day then I would be losing the money I have spent for them. When many of the other lottery sellers win small prizes for their unsold balance tickets, I have never won any prize, not even a hundred rupees. That's why I believe that I am the most unlucky lady on earth. When the customers are trying their luck, we lottery sellers are playing with our lives. Being a woman I have to face lusty looks and obscene words from indecent, perverted men. If I could get some other job I would have sought for it.” She started weeping again.

“Don't cry, Bhagyalakshmi. God sees your struggles and will find a solution for it.” Prof. Krishnaraj took one thousand rupees from his purse and gave it to her. “Keep it with you. When you come across days struggling to meet your domestic expenditure, don't be reluctant to tell it to me. By the grace of God I am financially sound enough to help you.”

“I don’t know how to express my gratitude to you, sir. God will bless you for helping us.”

Prof. Krishnaraj continued his morning walk. The fate of Bhagyalakshmi and millions of poor people like her grieved his mind. He lives very comfortably with his wife, who is also a college teacher in an aided college, and two children who are studying in the CBSE public school.

Days went on and Bhagyalakshmi greeted Prof. Krishnaraj happily at the junction when he went for his walks. And Krishnaraj enquired if she had any financial difficulties. He was happy to hear that she earned enough money to meet her family’s daily expenditure.

For some days Bhagyalakshmi was not seen at the junction. Prof. Krishnaraj became anxious. What happened to her? There was no source of information for him to enquire about it since he had not collected her phone number. He doesn’t know the exact locality where she lives. She might be sick, he thought.

After the absence of two weeks Bhagyalakshmi was found at 2 pm with tickets in her hands. As it was a holiday, Prof. Krishnaraj was going to the market in his car. It has been raining continuously from 10 am. He didn’t go for the morning walk as had a little cold. Bhagyalakshmi was standing half drenched under a small umbrella. She was found very weak and tired. Krishnaraj stopped his car and asked her, “Why were you absent for two weeks, Bhagyalakshmi?”

“We were under treatment for covid infection, sir. I might have caught it from some customers and it spread to all others in the family. How much we struggled for the past two weeks! I pawned my gold chain, the only ornament I have, and took Rs.10000 from the bank. With that money I bought the medicines and essential food items. With the balance amount of Rs. 3000 I bought 100 lottery tickets for today’s sale as it was a sunny morning. But most unfortunately it started raining from 10 and continues now without any break. There are very less people on the road. Look here dear sir, I could sell only ten tickets and only one hour more for the draw

of the tickets. What shall I do with the balance 90 tickets? How unfortunate I am?" she started crying.

"Cool down, Bhagyalakshmi! Give me the balance tickets." She gave him the entire tickets in four books. Krishnaraj took Rs. 2700 from his purse and gave it her. She could not believe her eyes.

"Keep these tickets with you. I don't need them. You may go to your house now. After all you are very weak and not fully recovered. This is my visiting card. I hope you have a mobile phone. Whenever you need any help from me, you may call to my number." Giving the card he drove away to the town.

Prof. Krishnaraj bought some vegetables, fruits and grocery items from the market and returned home by 3.15 pm. He told his wife how he helped Bhagyalakshmi. She was very happy to hear that her husband could help a person who was totally helpless. Krishnaraj's mobile phone started to ring. It was from Bhagyalakshmi.

"Hello Bhagyalakshmi! Why did you ring me?"

"An amazing news, dear sir! The first prize of today's lottery draw is to your ticket with me. You have won 60 lakhs rupees! Shall I bring the ticket to the junction?"

"What a surprise! Thank God, your prayer is heeded finally. Keep the ticket with you. It is your ticket and not mine. Didn't I give you back the tickets? You are the owner of it. You have proved worthy of the name your parents gave."

"No sir, you have given the cash for the tickets and so the tickets are your own. I am a part of your great fortune and I will get six lakhs rupees as its commission. That is more than enough for me and my family."

"Bhagyalakshmi, listen to what I am saying. God has used me as a tool in showering his blessings on you. I am financially very stable and I don't need any money more. Moreover salaries of mine and my wife can meet whatever needs we have. You will receive the entire amount of the prize after the taxes including your agent's

commision. You don't have a good house. With the money you can buy a house and the balance amount can be used for future use taking the interest of the fixed deposit. You need not continue your present occupation; rather look after your parents and children comfortably. Since you have struggled a lot, God wants to save you from the hellish life. I will help you in buying a good house. You may bring the prize ticket to the junction now and we shall hand it over to the State Bank of India for safety and later encashment. Take your aadhaar and a passport size photo. Kindly don't flash the news to anyone."

"Okay, dear sir, I am coming now with the ticket."

After ten minutes Bhagyalakshmi reached the junction where Prof. Krishnaraj was waiting for her in his car. They went to the SBI branch and handed over the prize ticket. The manager verified the ticket and found that it has won the first prize. A saving bank account was opened in her name and the ticket was kept safe in the locker for further proceedings of encashment. Thus Bhagyalakshmi proved herself that her name is worth the meaning of the two terms BHAGYA and LAKSHMI.

