

# **WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?**

(A Collection of Short Stories)



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**K. V. Dominic**



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*Dedicated to  
My dear wife Anne,  
Daughter Rose Ann,  
&  
Son Joe George*



## Preface

With immense happiness I am presenting before my esteemed readers this maiden collection of my short stories. There are fifteen stories in this book which have been written over a period of seven years. My first short story “The Twins” was composed in 2008 and the last “Best Government Servant” just three days before. It was much easier for me to find themes for my poems whereas an outline for a story came to my mind once in a blue moon. Being a social critic I could easily vent out my anger and emotion over social evils and issues instantly through poems.

Almost all the stories in the collection have been published periodically through my own edited journals as well as through other international refereed journals, both print and online. The title story “Who is Responsible?” won great acclaim and appreciation when it was published in the online journal *Muse India* issue 30 (March-April 2010). It was the leading story of a number of stories specially called for and selected by the special story editor. 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 of forests, conversion and conservation 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! He is a person who is seldom found among publishers—a philosopher, poet, critic and a great motivator to hundreds of writers like me. Pranaam to him! Wishing all my loving readers an enlightening experience,

**Dr. K. V. Dominic**

## Contents

Preface	7
1. Who is Responsible?	11
2. A Good Samaritan	19
3. Best Government Servant	25
4. Ammu's Birthday	35
5. An Email from Senthil Kumar	40
6. Fire Your Horoscope!	45
7. Joseph's Maiden Vote to the Parliament	50
8. Mathews, the Real Christian	57
9. Our Dear Bhai	66
10. Sanchita Karma	73
11. School Entrance Festival	78
12. Selvan's House	85
13. Twisted Course of Destiny	93
14. The Twins	104
15. World Environment Day	112



# 1

## Who is Responsible?

Rehman, aged seventy three is living with his wife Ramla, sixty eight, in a palatial double-storeyed house facing the Vembanad Lake at Kumarakam in Kerala, India. He is reclining in an arm-chair watching rafts, barges, canoes, cruisers and house-boats carrying cargos, passengers and tourists to and fro. He longed to be one among them voyaging with vibrant dreams and hopes.

“I too was spirited and jovial like them. Yes, in my prime youth. Gone are those happy days. I have to abide to the laws of nature. Pleasures and pains are part of life. A hill has a valley. A sunny day is followed by a dark night. But can I nurture the hope that this my winter will be followed by a spring? Might be in the next world, or in the next birth,” Rehman’s mind drifted philosophically back to his past.

Rehman retired as the headmaster of the Government High School, two kilometers away from his house. Ramla had only school education and hence remains as housewife. They have a son and two daughters. The daughters were married by two business men; one settles in Thiruvananthapuram and the other at Thodupuzha. Only occasionally they visit their parents. Even the phone calls are rare. Anwar, the son of Rehman and Ramla is working as an electrician in Oman. Since he was not very studious, Anwar had to end his education with a

polytechnic certificate. Being their only son, the parents wanted him to be always with them. Since Kerala is a State where majority are educated and employment opportunities few, neither Anwar nor his parents could fulfil their wish. Anwar was compelled to seek employment abroad and thus he got placement as an electrician in a company run by an Arab in Oman. Though the work is very risky, it is highly rewarding.

Rehman family had no landed property except ten cents which Rehman had bought with his meagre salary several years back and built a small house having tiled roof. Rehman was a very reputed school teacher. He was cent percent committed to his profession. Never in his professional life had he caned or even pinched his pupils. He was always against corporal punishment whereas his colleagues were cane masters. Rehman won the hearts of his pupils and their parents through sheer love and compassion. The return of love and respect from his former pupils and the villagers is the only asset he has and that makes him content and happy in his retired old life. In the evenings he went to the community hall of the panchayat and involved in the literacy programme of the government, educating the illiterate old who had been destined to discontinue their education in their childhood.

Ramla was becoming weaker and weaker. The joints of her limbs started to ache severely. Treatments were done in several hospitals. It was diagnosed that she had severe arthritis. She had to keep awake several nights, unable to sleep. All the domestic works were done by her, since servants were unavailable. So Rahman and Ramla decided that they should get their son married. Anwar was already twenty four and Muslim boys got married in the early twenties. Though Anwar was unwilling at

first, finally he yielded to his parents' pressure. With the money he had earned, a double-storeyed house had already been built. Proposals of marriage came from several rich families. A bridegroom employed abroad had high demand in the marriage field. Photographs of the proposed girls were sent to Anwar and he selected a beautiful girl from among the photos. The marriage was fixed. After a wait of two months Anwar got leave for the marriage—a leave for just twenty five days. The wedding ceremony and the feast were conducted with all pomp. The bride was beyond doubt very beautiful—a perfect match to Anwar. Only ten days were left for their honeymoon. Anwar and his wife, Aisha went to Ooty, an enticing hill resort in Tamil Nadu, as a honeymoon trip. They stayed there for two days. Connubial bliss seemed like heavenly bliss. The day for Anwar's departure arrived. Naturally it was heart-rending for both Anwar and Aisha to part. Tears ran like brooks over her cheeks. Anwar's eyes also sank in tears. The fact that he would get leave only after two years added their agony. Rehman and Ramla too grieved at their son's departure.

Every day after Anwar's departure, Aisha contacted him through phone. Their communication went on for hours. Anwar appointed a chauffeur for his car at home, for Aisha knew no driving. Rahul, the chauffer was young and handsome. Aisha's grief and loneliness gradually disappeared. She went out in the car almost every day for shopping, movie, to her own house as well as her friends' houses. Neither Ramla nor Rehman had any command on her. After all, she needs to obey only her husband—that was her policy. Anwar was compelled to marry as to get help to his mother. Rahul accompanied Aisha throughout and entertained her with silly jokes. He went to his

house at dusk and returned in the morning. Was Aisha crossing the *lakshmana rekha* of a bride or Rahul tempting her like Ravana? Ramla raised the doubt first and Rehman found some sense in it. How can it be warned to Aisha or Rahul? Suppose their relationship is only that of good friends? The doubts in the house spread to the neighbourhood and people started to gossip. Once when Ramla hinted at such gossip to Aisha, she exploded. She remarked that people were jealous of her or they should never accuse a woman who suffered from the absence of her husband. In fact she called her husband every day and talked for several minutes. Rehman had no courage to raise any doubt to Aisha. Similarly it was unfair to raise the question to Anwar which will damn him to suspicion and dejection. Moreover Anwar will accuse them for compelling him to marry and culminate into such a catastrophe. Aisha gradually stopped communication with Rehman and Ramla. She was young, healthy and full of passion. It was true that she was a bride, but her body knew no ethics. Who would satiate her carnal needs? How long could she control her desires? How could she resist the enticement? Was it fair for her husband to leave her hungry there for such a long time? Can Anwar be blamed as he was against the marriage itself? Who is to be blamed then?

Things were going like this with gloom and despair haunting in Rehman's house. Ramla's health was declining and she staggered as she walked. Yet she did the cooking in the morning as Aisha always got up late. One day, as usual, Ramla finished her cooking in the morning and was waiting for her husband and Aisha for the breakfast. As Aisha did not come down, Ramla went upstairs to her bedroom. The room was opened but she was not there. Ramla called her loudly, but there

was no reply. It was evident that she had gone out of the house. Rehman searched for her in the neighbourhood in vain. He then went to Rahul's house and learned that he too was missing from his house. Rehman came to the conclusion that Rahul had eloped with Aisha.

“My God, why do you test us like this? What sin have we committed? How will I report the matter to my son? How can we withstand this scandal? What will happen to Ramla when she knows the fact? What's the use in complaining to the police?” Such answerless questions crushed Rehman's mind as he walked back to his house.

“Could you find her? Is Rahul there in his house?” Ramla asked him as he stepped into the house.

“Rahul too is missing,” Rehman murmured.

“Allah, save our son! The whore has run after the Saithan,” telling this she sank into her bed. With the assistance of the neighbours, she was taken to the hospital and admitted in the intensive care unit. The doctor reported that she was paralysed.

“Shouldn't we inform this to Anwar?” one of the neighbours asked Rehman.

“How can I inform my son that his wife has eloped with the chauffer? What use is there in informing him that his mother is hospitalized because of it? He won't get any leave and come back. When he calls me I shall tell him,” Rehman replied. After a few days Ramla was discharged and brought back to the house. Rehman's brother brought a maid servant from his neighbourhood. She would serve the house from dawn to dusk and then go back to her house.

Reminiscence of his past, sweet and then bitter, passed through Rehman's mind for nearly an hour. His heaven-like house has now declined to a hell of sorrows and dejection. Anwar has not called since Aisha left the house. Though Rehman tried to contact his son, there was no reply from the other end. What has happened to him? Has he been informed by someone about Aisha's run away? Rehman's worrying thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of the postman. Rehman had a registered letter. It was from the Sultanate of Oman. With shaking hands he opened the letter. The contents of the letter made him hysteric. The letter read that Anwar was dismissed from his company as he had been arrested by the government under the charge of involvement in terrorist activities. Rehman yelled:

“No, my son can never be a terrorist. I have taught him the noble values of secularism. He believes in the Creator, the only God who fosters the whole human race and preserves the universe. How can he work as a jihadist or for a faction who believes in genocide? God, why don't you call me back? I can't bear this. I want to die. I want to die.” The maid servant rushed to him hearing his loud cry.

“Sir, what happened to you?”

“I have lost my son, Shahana. Is your madam still sleeping?”

“Yes, Sir. Should I wake her?”

“Oh no. Please don't inform her. Anwar has lost his job. He is arrested for terrorism. Shahana, please don't tell this to others. Shahana, can you give me some poison. I don't want to live anymore.”

“Sir, what are you saying? Nothing will happen to your son. He will be released. He can never be a terrorist, for he is your son. If you die, who is there for the madam?”

“My God, why do you test me like this?” telling this he went to his room and shut the door. Shahana, as usual, went back to her house at 6 p.m. after her routine work. She hadn’t told the madam what she had heard from the master. She prayed to God to give strength to his master to bear the misfortune.

Early in the next morning Shahana came to her master’s house. The front door was still shut. She pressed on the electric bell’s switch. None came and opened the door. She pressed the switch again. The bell sounded but there was no reply. She called the master loudly:

“Sir, please open the door. I am Shahana.”

There was no response. She went round the house to the back door. It was kept opened. She got into the kitchen and called for the master. Still there was no answer. Shahana rushed directly to the madam’s bedroom where the husband and the wife slept at night. To her horror, she found the madam drenched in blood. She cried loudly:

“God forbid! Madam, what happened to you?”

She turned to the cot where the master slept. He too was drenched in blood. She wailed:

“How tragic! Which villain has done it?”

Yelling loudly she ran out of the house to call the neighbours. The neighbours rushed to the bedroom and found that Rehman and Ramla were stabbed to death. The beds

became pools of stinky blood. The police came and searched every nook and corner of the house for any evidence of the crime. It was found that the safe where ornaments and money were kept was opened and the contents were stolen. The news of the merciless twin murder flashed the village and the entire State like lightning. Thousands flooded to the house. As mentioned early, Rehman family was respectable and dear to the whole village. Police completed the formalities. Inquest and postmortem continued for hours. The police dog searched for the murderer in vain. Rehman's daughters, their husbands and children sat round the dead bodies crying and weeping. The whole house became a hell of wails. The dead bodies were buried in the afternoon. Several hundred mourners attended the function. The minister from the constituency assured the crowd that the murderer would be caught immediately. The police may catch the culprit. Only fifty percent chance was there as per the statistics. Who is to be blamed for the tragedy of Rehman and his family? When thousands of villainous wolves flourish and reign, innocent lambs like Rehman are mercilessly butchered. Where is the poetic justice?



## 2

### A Good Samaritan

I am going to narrate an incident that is three fourth real and the rest blended with some fantasy to make it a short fiction. The event took place in a town in Kerala, India.

In order to attend a seminar at Thrissur I was driving my car along the national highway. Cars, buses and trucks were running like rockets along the black ribbon street. Dusk was approaching and the light of the vehicles went past like missiles. Suddenly I noticed a man-like object on the left side of the street. I steered my car to the side of the street and applied the brake. There was a man lying unconscious and bleeding through his nostrils. I felt his pulse and understood that life had not departed him. He was a lean man, aged around sixty and I lifted him to my car amassing my strength. I drove the car fast to the nearest hospital, some five kilometers away at Thrissur. Some vehicles had hit him and overthrew him to the side of the street. The driver of the vehicle sped away fearing the consequences. Such iron-hearted people are characteristic of the selfish, cutthroat, contemporary urban society. The accident victim was admitted to Amala Hospital, Thrissur. The nurses rushed in and I told them how he had been found and picked up. The doctor, after examination reported to me that the patient was critical. He had a severe head injury. An immediate operation was required and I told him to do whatever was needed to save his

life. I signed the papers for the patient as none of his relatives was present. I advanced an amount of Rs. 10,000 from my purse as the fees of the operation. Before the patient was shifted to the operation theatre I asked the doctor if he could come across his whereabouts. The doctor produced before me a wallet which had been found in his pocket. The victim's identity card was there in the wallet along with a phone diary.

From the identity card I knew that he was Mr. Xavier residing at Chavakad, a place not very far from Thrissur. The phone book helped me to call to his house.

“Hello, is it Mr. Xavier's house?” I phoned through my cell phone.

“Yes, kindly tell me who you are,” came back a female voice.

“I am Professor Mohan. You may not know me. Are you Xavier's wife?”

“Yes, what's the matter?”

“He has met with an accident and is admitted at Amala Hospital, Thrissur. Don't worry. Not very serious. Please come to the hospital.”

“Jesus, save my husband! I am coming soon,” came out her choking sound.

Within half an hour Xavier's wife arrived there accompanied by a dozen other people. She couldn't control herself and was crying aloud, tears running like streams. To her request I told her what had happened. Mariam, that was her name, cried aloud to Jesus to save her husband. The corridor

before the operation theatre echoed with the wails of Mariam, her two daughters, and Xavier's parents. I tried my best to pacify them. A few hours passed. More and more people flooded to the passage. There were some twenty five people—men and women—assembled there praying for the life of Xavier. I started to wonder how such an ordinary person could pull so many people anxious at his health and praying for his life. The sobs and wails shook the walls of the corridor and the nurses couldn't control the situation. Fortunately a nurse opened the door of the operation theatre and asked me to meet the doctor inside. I longed for good news from the doctor and prayed to God to save Xavier. The doctor told me that the operation was successful. Xavier has survived the crucial condition but if he could lead a normal life was uncertain. The brain is affected and hence it may cause paralysis as well as loss of memory. If this news is imparted to Xavier's kith and kin waiting outside I could imagine the hellish wail erupting there. Mariam would collapse and have to be admitted in the hospital. Hence I pleaded the doctor to tell them a lie and thus hide the seriousness of the case. Accordingly the doctor appeared before them and announced that Xavier had had only a minor head injury and there was a clotting of a little blood inside, which was successfully removed. He will recover soon and will be discharged within a week. The people including Mariam were relieved and the wails ceased.

My eagerness to know why so many people were anxious of Xavier's health sprouted in my mind and I couldn't but seek the answer. I preferred to stay there some more time. After all, I had nothing to do that night than sleeping in a lodge at Thrissur to attend the seminar the following day.

“Mariam, kindly tell me your whereabouts and who all are these people.”

“Sir, we are much obliged to you for saving my husband’s life. You are an angel whom Jesus sent,” she replied in a broken voice. O my God, they are relieved by hearing the lie from the doctor. Once they come to know the reality how will they face it? I prayed to God to give them the strength to bear.

“We live at Chavakad, my husband Xavier, these two daughters, and these parents. The daughters Liz and Grace are studying in the eighth standard.”

“What’s your occupation?”

“We have two acres of agricultural land and we live on it.”

“And who are these people?”

The answers came from several quarters at once.

“I am Venugopal. I met with a road accident five years ago. Had not this Xavier chettan (elder brother) taken me to the hospital then I would have been in the other world now.”

“The same is the case with me also. My name is Akbar. While I was going on my bike, a truck dashed me from behind and threw me away. Like an angel Xavier chettan appeared there and took me to the hospital. I owe my life to him.”

“I am Joseph. Three years back while I was pushing my vegetable cart along the highway a truck dashed me and my cart, and I fell unconscious. When I opened my eyes I was in the hospital, picked up and saved by this great man Xavier. He is indeed a saviour as his name designates.”

“Sir,” Mariam continued the conversation for others. “What you hear from them is true. These are only a few of the men my husband has saved from the accidents. My husband has saved five hundred and ten people from the road accidents in the past eight years. We have taken it our mission to save the lives of men who are uncared on road sides. My daughters and I help my husband in nursing the accident victims in the hospital. There were several cases in which the relatives of the victims never turned up and we had to bear the hospital charges. Forty nine victims have died on the lap of my husband on his way to the hospital. How uneasy was my husband in those days! He couldn’t eat anything and I had to wipe out the tears which ran through his cheeks.” Mariam’s eyes were immersed in tears and she mopped it with a kerchief.

“Don’t cry Mariam. God will reward you,” I tried to console her.

“Yes Sir, how can Jesus reject us? What had we done that He punishes my husband like this?” she started sobbing.

“God will never punish you, Mariam. He only loves His creations and never punishes.”

“Yes Sir, I too believe so. My husband had earlier been an employee of a private bus. He had seen so many such accidents then where victims had been uncared. Then on 20th February 2000 when I was walking along the road with my only son Williams, an auto rickshaw hit my son from behind. He was taken immediately to the hospital but he left us for ever after eight days. He was only twelve then.” She couldn’t restrain from crying. Mariam continued her sobs for a few minutes and then resumed her narration.

“That tragic end of our son inspired my husband to involve in such humanitarian service. Everyday from 10.30 am to 2 pm my husband will be at Guruvayoor ready to rescue such accident victims. From 2.30 pm to 6 pm he will be available at Kunnankulam. Very often my husband had to spend the money in his pocket for such hospital service and we had to starve those days. By the grace of God we are being helped in this service by my husband’s brother in the Gulf as well as from my own parents.” Mariam concluded her epic narration.

“God has many more plans to complete through your husband, Mariam. So Xavier will recover soon. He is indeed that good Samaritan of your Bible.”

“Yes Sir, God will save him, we are sure.” The words came out from the mouths of all the people assembled there and it echoed from corridor to corridor. No doubt God will do here a miracle, my mind murmured.



### 3

## Best Government Servant

The happiest day of his life! Dr. Krishnan Namboodiri, aged 38 is going to join as Lower Division Clerk in the Taluk Office at a small town in the State of Kerala. Though the minimum educational qualification prescribed for a clerk is SSLC (10th Class) pass, Krishnan is M.A., MPhil, PhD in Gandhian Studies. He belongs to a Brahmin family which had a wealthy family lineage in the past. His parents who are still alive and living with him were bequeathed just one acre of land. Krishnan's father is a retired school teacher and he had to spend all his hard earned savings to marry off his two daughters.

On the way to the Taluk Office to join service Krishnan seated comfortably on a seat in a bus and started to ruminate on his life journey so far. The bus will take one hour to reach the destination and there was sufficient time for him to recollect. Krishnan had a pleasant trip in life till his age of 25 when he completed his education. From there started his bitter wounding tread over brambly path. Characteristic of the ideal Brahmins, his father was an honest man, sincere, committed and affable to the pupils, colleagues as well as neighbours. He never lied in his life. Krishnan's mother, a housewife, was equally noble, affable and serviceable to the neighbourhood. Krishnan had first class for his SSLC and then joined Pre Degree Course in Newman College, Thodupuzha. His father, a Gandhian was his role

model and Krishnan was attracted to the Gandhian thoughts and way of life even from his childhood. The great values of Ahimsa, Non-violence, truth, patriotism etc. moulded and guided his life. Krishnan's ambition was to take PhD in Gandhian philosophy. After his Pre Degree course, which again he passed with a first class, he joined there in Newman College for B.A. History. He was attracted to the students union SFI (Students Federation of India) which fought for the rights of the students. He was a good orator and his basic good qualities and values enabled him to become the chairman of the college union. Though SFI was a left oriented union Krishnan was all against violence and unnecessary strikes in the college. He graduated with a high first class and he got admission for MA Gandhian Studies in the school of Gandhian Thought and Development Studies in Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam. The scholarship he got there was sufficient for his stay there and a financial relief to his father. Krishnan was very brilliant in his studies and the most favourite of his teachers. After his MA he joined for MPhil there and after that PhD. His academic life of six years in the university campus remains the most memorable period of his life.

After his heavenly campus life the real challenges of future stared at him. For a pauper youth like him education is primarily a means to earn livelihood. But in his State, Kerala where literacy rate is 95% and unemployment rate 15%, there was nothing bright for him to dream of. One gets placement not just because of his academic merit and skill but based on political, financial influence one can exert. Unfortunately Krishnan had neither money nor political connection to bargain for him. His father had already retired and his meagre pension of Rs. Rs.

15000 was the sole income of the family for their sustenance. Krishnan was compelled to seek some job and help his father in maintaining the family. He applied for whatever job opportunities he was eligible for—from last grade post to officer level. The government tests, interviews and appointment take much time, even years. He decided to take tuition classes for pupils and students. He had some command in English language and that helped him to take tuition classes for both school pupils and college students. He could also take classes on Social Studies but no pupil needed it. English always is nightmare for ordinary Indian students and hence there was much opportunity for him to teach them in the morning and evening before and after the school hours. From early morning till 9 am and from 4.30 pm to 8 pm Krishnan took classes in the students' houses. He taught in a parallel college History and Economics from 10 am to 4 pm. He could earn Rs. 15,000 monthly through these classes.

Years passed one after another and Krishnan's longing and prayer for a government job also passed unheeded by the Creator. Krishnan was now 30 and his mother became almost bed ridden due to arthritis. Fortunately father was healthy enough to manage the domestic duties of cooking, cleaning etc. The family was not in a position to keep a maid servant as it needed minimum Rs. 10000 as her monthly salary. Krishnan's father and mother compelled him to marry but Krishnan replied:

“Dear dad, how can I afford to have another member in this family when my earning is so less? Being a self employed man I can't expect a partner who is government employed. For ma's treatment we need to spare some amount.”

“Ok, son, as you decide,” father said.

“But how long will you stay single, son? You are already 30 now,” mother replied.

“Let’s wait ma. Maybe within a year I may get a government job. I have appeared for so many PSC tests,” Krishnan continued.

The reply from his mother was only a deep sigh and whisper: “Lord Krishna save us!”

Time can’t stand still till Krishnan got a government job. Krishnan entered into his 33rd year. Mother’s condition was worsening and father also showed the symptoms of old age. Finally Krishnan consented for his marriage. He being an ideal youth was against dowry system and wanted to marry a poor girl having post graduation. He hated caste system and wanted his bride to be belonging to a backward community. Fortunately his parents were never against his wishes and views. Thus he registered his name in keralamatrimonial.com showing his familial, professional, financial details and his expectancies of the bride’s qualities and educational qualifications. Being a self employed youth he had less market in the matrimonial world but since his expectancies were affordable for poor girls he got some proposals. He selected a girl named Seetha who was fair enough and a post graduate in English literature. No doubt she too was unemployed and taught in some tuition centre. Krishnan’s and Seetha’s wedding took place in a very simple manner in the Registrar Office near to his house and the guests and friends, very few in number, were given a simple dinner in a hotel.

Krishnan continued his teaching as a home tuition master as well as in the parallel college and Seetha remained in the house as a housewife doing all domestic duties and serving as a nurse to her mother-in-law. Krishnan's hope of getting a government job was waning but still he continued to apply for Kerala Public Service Commission's tests. The tests were becoming tougher and tougher as to eliminate as many candidates as possible from the lakhs who appeared. A daughter was born to Krishnan and Seetha two years after their marriage. And a son also was born after another three years. Destiny continued to wound Krishnan, and Seetha showed symptoms of liver cirrhosis. The treatment was very costly and Krishnan took a loan from a bank pledging their ancestral property.

At last God heeded to Krishnan's and his family's prayer. He got appointment as a lower division clerk in the revenue department at the age of 38. Maybe he was considered taking into consideration his upper age limit. After 36 one can't apply for PSC tests. The postman brought the appointment letter on a Saturday when Krishnan was there in his house. Saturdays are holidays for the college where he taught. He was exhilarated when he opened the envelope. He shared the happy news with his parents and wife. They were all jubilant.

Krishnan got down at the town at 9.30 am and took an auto rickshaw to the Taluk Office. The office was open but none was found there. He waited there on the verandah. By 10 am the staff strolled into the office one after another. When they were settled on their seats Krishnan approached the person seated near to the entrance door. There were heaps of files on the table before him.

“Sir, I have come to join as LDC in this office,” showing the appointment order Krishnan told.

“Go and meet the Tahsildar in that cabin.”

Krishnan went to the cabin and greeted the Tahsildar, a gray haired man:

“Good morning Sir! My name is Krishnan Namboodiri and I have come to join in this office,” he handed the appointment order to him.

Looking into the appointment order the Tahsildar asked him to sit. He asked Krishnan’s whereabouts  then he took the attendance register and entered Krishnan’s name and asked him to put his signature.

“Krishnan, this office is going very smoothly with little complaints from the public. So you have to do your duties very promptly as others are. There is harmony in our work and therein lies our success. Whatever doubts you have regarding the file works you can ask me as well as to the section clerk near to your table,” the Tahsildar told him.

“Surely Sir, I will be very dutiful in my work,” Krishnan replied.

The Tahsildar then called the peon and asked him to show Krishnan’s seat. Krishnan was led to a chair and a table heaped with dusty files. Thus started Krishnan’s office life. The section clerks seated near to his table introduced themselves to him and extended all help.

Krishnan could learn his section work very easily. The junior superintendent who was his section head was a man of

few words and rather a nagging character. Loving words never came from his mouth.

After a month in the office Krishnan became friendly with other clerks and could learn each one's character. He was the only one in the office with post graduation. He found that the entire staffs were lazy in their work but greedy for bribe. He could find on some days the peon serving small envelopes to the section clerks and others. He guessed that the envelopes contained currency since he heard the section clerk nearby to him asking the peon how much was there in it.

A week after by 4 pm the peon was serving the envelopes and he offered one to Krishnan. "What's it Raju?" Krishnan asked the peon.

"It's a tip from some generous customer, Sir."

"Sorry, I can't take it. I don't want any present for my duty."

"Sir, this is the practice in our office. Everyone is getting the share."

"I call it bribe and I am against such practice."

"In that case I will have to report to the Tahsildar. Sir, unless you accept it you may be transferred. It happened to some lady clerk a few years back."

"Sorry, I can't do anything against my conscience."

The peon reported the matter to the Tahsildar and immediately Krishnan was called to him.

"Krishnan, don't be like Lord Krishna. I told you on the very first day that you will have to cooperate with us and go in

harmony. These petty amounts are presents given to us very happily by the customers for the service we render to them. We haven't asked them any fee or reward," the Tahsildar said.

"Sorry Sir, I call it bribe. Even if they give unasked we are not bound to accept it. We are paid by the government for the work we are doing. I believe it is the people's money through taxes which we are getting as salary and we are bound to serve them free in return."

"I don't want to argue with you. There are twenty two staffs in this office and none finds any wrong in accepting these compliments. You will have to bear the consequences if you swim against the flow of this office."

"Sorry Sir, I can't tolerate it. My conscience doesn't allow me."

"Ok, you may go to your seat."

Krishnan went to his seat quite upset. Then other section clerks one by one came to him and asked to change his decision. The superintendents called him to their seats and advised him. But Krishnan couldn't change his decision and accept the envelope.

Reaching home Krishnan told his parents and wife what had happened in the office.

Seetha said, "If they transfer you to some distant place what will we do? Ma and I are sick. Father can't alone manage the household activities."

Then father said, “Seetha, do you want him to be corrupt? Whatever be the consequences, dear son, don’t accept such money.” Mother also supported father’s words.

“Dad, I never want my husband to be corrupt. I just reminded the possible consequences,” Seetha replied.

“Daughter, we will manage somehow. God is with us,” father said.

As expected and feared, Krishnan got the transfer order after a week. He was transferred to a village office at a remote place in the high ranges. Krishnan was unmoved. He decided to file a complaint in the high court after joining in the village office. He was given full support from his parents and wife. He had to stay in a house near the village office as a paying guest. Fighting against the chilly weather Krishnan continued his work in the office serving poor people of the locality. They were given the certificates and other needed documents at the earliest. He could work in the office in the late evenings and expedite the service. Fortunately the village officer was also an honest, service minded man.

Krishnan filed a bribery case in the high court against the Tahsildar and the entire staffs of the Taluk Office. As a student he had pledged that he would fight against bribery when a chance came. He pawned Seetha’s gold to meet the advocate’s fees. He had already recorded in his cell phone the talks between him and the peon, the Tahsildar, the superintendents and other clerks and other staffs in the Taluk Office regarding the cash envelope which he rejected. He produced the voice recordings as evidence to the advocate.

The trial date came after a month and he was interrogated by his own advocate and the respondents' advocate and finally the judge himself. So also the entire staffs of the Taluk Office and even a few customers who gave them bribes were interrogated by Krishnan's advocate. There was clear evidence of the bribery which the entire staffs had been accepting from the customers. The judge pronounced the verdict. He in the order requested the government to transfer the entire staff of the Taulk Office to remote areas and cut their future increments for two years. In addition each one of them should pay a fine ranging from Rs. 50000 to 10000, based on their designation, from which Krishnan would be given Rs. 2 lakhs as reward for his fearless fight against corruption. Moreover, Krishnan should be transferred to his home town with an additional increment to his salary.

The news of the verdict covered the front page of all newspapers and flashed as hot news of all TV channels. Thus Krishnan became a hero. He was given a warm reception by the Governor of Kerala where he was awarded the BEST GOVERNMENT SERVANT.



## 4

### **Ammu's Birthday**

Tomorrow is 19<sup>th</sup> November, and my Ammu's fourth birthday. And two days later, on 21<sup>st</sup> is the seventh birthday of my Anagha. Asha ruminated how their birthdays were celebrated splendidly last year when her husband was with them. God was cruel enough to call him back leaving these two kids on her shoulder. She now has to work hard as a daily labourer for the sustenance of the family. She has to look after her mother also. Her husband Laxman was indeed a yacht to her and the kids, and they knew no worries and enjoyed voyaging from shore to shore of pleasures and happiness. He was overrun by a car when he was returning from the factory on his bike.

“Dear, I don't have any money to celebrate our daughters' birthdays separately as you have done in the previous years,” Asha whispered looking at her husband's photo. In the previous years the relatives as well as close neighbours were invited for the dinner. And amid jubilant crowd, Anagha and Ammu, wearing dazzling, costly dress, lit birthday candles to the accompaniment of “Happy birthday to you...” and then cut the cakes and served to everyone assembled there. The kids were given birthday gifts. How they went with those treasures to their bed rooms and how elated they were when they took out the contents! Gone are those golden days. “Dear darling, let there be a minimum celebration at least. Buy for them new dress and

let them be happy tomorrow,” her husband seemed to tell her. Asha decided to celebrate the kids’ birthdays together wearing them new dresses, as her husband wished.

“Ma, tomorrow is Ammu’s birthday. And on Tuesday, Anagha’s. We shall celebrate the days together tomorrow. Let me go to the dress mart to buy new churidars for them. Though your son is gone, we have to celebrate the birthdays in a minimum manner,” Asha told her mother-in-law.

“True my daughter. Had he been alive, how jolly would have been the house tomorrow! Asha, have you got money to buy dress for the kids?”

“Yes ma, I have conserved some money for the purpose.”

“Mummy, let me also come to the shop,” Ammu cried.

“No Ammu. You may go with the grandma to collect some flowers for tomorrow. Ma, get some flowers from our neighbour, Rahim’s meadow. You will get bluebells and daisies there.”

“Ok daughter. You may go now or you can’t come back before it is dark.”

Asha walked along the road to the town. The gentle breeze and the chirping of the birds seemed to her wishing happy birthday to Ammu and Anagha. She entered a small textile shop, for there only she will get cheap dress. She selected a churidar each for the daughters. The stuff is not that good, for she has only two hundred rupees with her.

“What’s the price of these?”

“Three hundred and fifty rupees.”

“I have only two hundred rupees with me. Kindly show me cheaper churidars.” It was better that she had not brought the daughters or they would have cried for more attractive dress. She selected two churidars that would cost within her budget. The kids may not like them much, for their papa bought for them elegant dress in the previous years. They will understand our wretched position, she thought. Asha bought half a kilo cake from a bakery to be cut my Ammu and Anagha, the next day. She also bought some candles.

She hurried along the road. The sun has been bidding adieu to the day and the moon is peeping from the eastern sky. She reached her house and the front door was kept open. Asha got into the rooms and found none there. ‘Hasn’t ma come back with the flowers?’ She thought. She called loudly, “Ma... Ammu...Anagha...” No reply. She went to her neighbour, Ravi’s house. Only Ravi’s ten year old daughter was there. “Mini, do you know where my Ammu, Anagha and Matha have gone?” “Auntie, Ammu is missing. All have gone to the river bank in search of her.” “My darling Ammu.....Where are you?” yelling she flew to the direction of the river. The entire neighbourhood was thronged at the river bank. Seeing the crowd Asha screamed, “My Ammu, what happened to you?” Her shriek was echoed from the nearby hill and the birds re-echoed it to every nook and corner of the village and to the sky so that Ammu should respond to her mother’s call. But there was no reply from Ammu. “Ma where is our Ammu? Tell me,” Asha asked her Ma. With choking voice, and tears running like rivers, Ma said, “As there were no flowers in Rahim’s meadow, we came over here. Telling Ammu to sit here, I and Anagha went there on the riverbed to pluck some flowers. When we returned,

Ammu wasn't found here. We searched for her everywhere . . . and then informed our neighbours." The neighbours told her that they had searched for Ammu everywhere, and even in the water. Some of them were found still in the river diving and searching. "Mummy, where has gone our Ammu..." Anagha continued crying hugging her Ma. "Ammu, here is your birthday churidar. Here is the cake for you. Come my darling... Take them darling..." Asha became almost hysterical and threw the dress and cake to the river. The neighbours tried to console her. But who can console a mother who has lost her darling child? She was beating her chest and crying. Was Ammu called back by her papa to the heaven? Is he celebrating her first birthday there?

"Dear students, what do you say about this story?" English Professor, Dr. Sankar asked his degree students after reading the entire story in the class room.

"Who wrote this story, sir? Just an ordinary one," Joseph responded.

"What moral is there in this story, sir? We are fed up of reading such tragic incidents in the newspapers," Meera exclaimed.

"What Meera said is true, sir. We need to hear something merry and pleasant. The very life is full of miseries and sorrows. So we ought to seek something good-humoured," the philosophic Hari emphasised.

"What justification is there in the tragedy of Ammu, sir? She was an angel who hasn't committed a sin in her life. Yet she was called back by the Creator. Is the Creator a sadist?" the leftist Abdul retorted.

“Any more comments?” Dr. Sankar asked.

There was no more response from the students.

“My dear students, I honour your reactions. What Joseph said is true. This is just an ordinary story. I am not revealing the author’s name. And what relevance has an author in a work as per New Criticism? The author has mentioned as a footnote that the story is based on a tragedy at a village in North Kerala. As Meera has complained we are reading such tragic lives every day. Dear students, don’t forget the fact that our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts, as Shelley has written. The more we read such things the more compassionate and humane we should become. Such literature purges our mind and we get *karunyam* (compassion) *rasa*. We should not turn our faces to miseries and tragedies of others. Such tragedies are part of the flow of the system and as participatory beings we should flow with the system. Mysterious are the ways of the Creator and our little intelligence can’t find justifications for the multitudinous activities of the Almighty. Hope you are satisfied with my answers,” Dr. Sankar ended his lecture.

“Yes Sir. Thank you very much,” the class responded.



## 5

### **An Email from Senthil Kumar**

From

senthilkumar1975@yahoo.co.in

To

kvdominic@gmail.com

Hi Prof. Dominic,

I am really sorry in delaying my reply. When I opened my inbox, I found three of your mails expressing anguish and even anger at my silence. I am sure when you read this mail your anger will dissolve and turn into sympathy.

As you know my mother has been staying with me for several years and she has been under treatment for heart problem since 1990. When my wife and I go to office, my mother would sit alone in the house as the housekeeper. Though she is now eighty she can manage her personal affairs by herself. She used to take her food and medicine at the regular times. So things were going on very smooth even in our absence from 9.30 am to 5.30 pm. Though I wanted to appoint a servant, my wife was against it, since an outsider in our house would steal away our privacy. And my mother also insisted that she would manage herself without a servant or home-nurse.

My mother is over-sentimental by nature and as she was aging this sentimentalism also grew up. The tragic or premature deaths of people as it appeared in the newspaper everyday would move her mind to such an extent that she would start crying, tears flowing down her cheeks. Her doctor has advised us that her heart couldn't bear any tension or sorrow and we should see that she was always happy. So we stopped subscription of the Tamil newspaper and managed with only The Hindu. My brothers, sisters and I came to a decision that no one would tell mother sad and unpleasant things whenever they visit her.

Meanwhile my mother's younger sister, living with family some fifty kilometers away from our place, was admitted in the hospital and we were informed. She fell down from her bed while getting up and she could not stand up or walk. We went to the hospital telling mother that we were going for a marriage feast. We were sure that God would forgive us for telling this lie to mother. When we reached the hospital we found that our aunt was in the ICU and the doctor reported that she had had a stroke and she has become paralysed. We returned to our house in the evening. Mother enquired us about the marriage dinner, the whereabouts of the spouse etc. etc. We had to add lies to lies as to satisfy her. The aunt was discharged from the hospital after two weeks as the doctors could do nothing more. She is still bed-ridden and has now completed two years on the bed—can't speak, can't memorise, the food being spoon-fed. And our mother also lives here quite innocent of her sister's tragedy. She would sometimes enquire us about the aunt's news and request us to phone her. We would tell her that the aunt was perfectly healthy in her house. We have informed our cousins that we had

told such an inevitable lie to our mother and whenever they visit her they should not tell her the truth.

Once when one of my brothers met with an accident and broke his leg I was compelled to tell mother that he had a little injury caused by some very minor bike accident. Suddenly mother started sobbing and the pumping of the heart slowed down. As the breathing became very slow and difficult she was immediately admitted to the hospital. After injections of medicine and supply of oxygen she recovered after one week. The doctor warned us against telling such sad news to her. Thank God, she has had a very loose memory since then that after she was discharged from the hospital she forgot about my brother's accident and his injury. She would often enquire me about that brother and why he was not visiting her. I would reply that he was very busy with his cloth business there in his town. After his recovery he visited her as usual and she was happy at seeing him.

Then one day we received a phone call from the house of our uncle—mother's youngest brother, living some sixty kilometers away from our house—telling us that the uncle was admitted in the hospital and was very serious. Telling mother another lie we flew to the hospital. The uncle was very critical and sinking. The doctor said that the recovery was impossible. Uncle's lungs had severe spores and would meet with his end within a few days. We were again in a dilemma. This uncle is the most favourite one to our mother among her brothers and sisters. Since our mother's father and mother died young, it was our mother who looked after this uncle. She was indeed a mother to him. Whenever this uncle came to our house, the exchange of love between them often envied us. Now, he at his

point of death, what shall we do? He is not old, but only 65. What will happen to our mother if the news was imparted to her? We decided not to inform our mother of the uncle's critical case. But our prayer for his life was of no use and he died in the hospital after a week. We were telephoned about his death. We were in a dilemma again. How will we tell our mother that her most beloved brother is no more? The very news will end her life. Is it a sin to hide such fatal news from our mother? What would our relatives and other people say when they know that we had hidden the news from her and not allowed her to see her dearest brother's stilled body before it was cremated? The doctor's warning echoed in our ears as mother's death knells. We thought about it over and again for several minutes. Finally we came to a conclusion that our mother's life is precious to us and so we have to sustain her life. We went for the burial telling mother another lie of attending a marriage. We announced to the bereaved family that mother was not in a position to travel so long.

Thus mother continued her life with only happy memories. In fact her life was sustained by the heavy dose of medicines thrice a day. Another year passed slowly. One day as I was busy with files in my office I received a phone call. "Brother Senthil, it's me Muthu calling from your house. Please come fast, for mother is very serious." "Muthu, I am coming." I dashed to my house in my car. Mother was lying on her bed with her eyes shut and breathing with much difficulty. I cried, "Mother, mother." But she was not replying. "Muthu, when did you come here?" I asked. "I came fifteen minutes ago to invite you all to my father's death anniversary." Muthu is the eldest son of my above mentioned uncle who passed away one year back. "Oh, you then

told mother the purpose of your visit. We hadn't informed mother of your father's death as it will worsen her condition," I added. "I didn't know that brother. Very sorry," he apologized. "Let's take mother to the hospital soon." I suggested. We took mother immediately to the hospital. The doctor gave her injections and oxygen. Her blood was taken for diagnosis. I phoned to my wife, brothers and sisters. They all arrived in the hospital within half an hour. Mother was taken to the ICU and we were not permitted to see her. After two hours the doctor informed us that mother had had a severe stroke. The recovery seems impossible. Her life may pull on but she is paralysed. Just like her younger sister she too became bed-ridden. Mother was discharged from the hospital yesterday and lies in my house longing for her death.

Hope you have understood my position. You can do nothing to soothe me. Kindly pray for my mother.

Love,

Senthil Kumar.



## 6

### **Fire Your Horoscope!**

Praveen is a smart electronic engineer at Wipro. He is very handsome, affable and conquers minds through his ever-smiling face. He wins respect from his superiors as well as subordinates through commitment to his profession. But one problem is bothering him, his parents and kith and kin. Though thirty five he remains still a bachelor. It's none his fault that he remains single. He has been seeking a life partner for the past eight years. His parents are more worried than him. His only sibling, younger sister was married off ten years before and has two children studying in school. Praveen's villain is his horoscope. He is a Brahmin and his parents are highly orthodox. They have blind belief in horoscope. Praveen's horoscope predicts that he is unlucky to have a long married life. His wife will die within one year of his marriage. Innumerable proposals came from different quarters, from good looking, well employed girls. They all withdrew when they read his horoscope. Which girl will take the risk of death by marrying him? Which parent will send his/her daughter to the gallows? In fact Praveen has no belief in horoscope. He believes that stars and planets are just creations of God as human beings and other beings are. So they can't be any determinant factor to other creations' destiny. It's ultimately the Creator who decides what one should be. Being highly

obedient and loving his parents so much that he could not fall in love with any girl who was rational like him.

One evening Praveen told his dad, “Dad, let me advertise in the matrimonial page of ‘The Hindu.’”

“What use? The girl’s parents will ask for your horoscope,” dad replied.

“We shall include the horoscopic prediction in the advertisement,” I suggested.

“Right. If any girl or parents are willing, let them reply,” ma replied.

“Ok, you may give then. I don’t think anybody will turn up,” dad said. Praveen drafted the advertisement. It read so:

BRIDE NEEDED

PRAVEEN, BRAHMIN YOUTH AGED 35, HANDSOME, 6 FEET, WORKING IN WIPRO, BANGALORE AS ELECTRONICS ENGINEER NEEDS GOODLOOKING, EMPLOYED BRIDE. HOROSCOPE PREDICTS WIFE’S DEATH WITHIN A YEAR. INTERESTED GIRLS AND PARENTS MAY CONTACT: [praveenwipro@gmail.com](mailto:praveenwipro@gmail.com)

The matrimonial was handed over to the newspaper office along with the advertisement charge.

Sunday morning. Praveen looked into ‘The Hindu’ to see his matrimonial. It was there without any spelling mistake or typo errors. Having read it he couldn’t suppress his laugh. “Which fool will come forward?” his inner voice asked him. He just went through the other matrimonials. Nothing strange or funny in them! Suddenly his eyes locked at an advertisement:

BRIDEGROOM NEEDED

PARVATI, BRAHMIN LADY AGED 30, GOODLOOKING, POSTGRADUATE IN ENGLISH, 5 FEET 8 INCHES, WORKING AS GUEST LECTURER, NEEDS WELL EMPLOYED BRIDEGROOM. NO BARRIER ON CASTE. HOROSCOPIC ALERT: HUSBAND MAY DIE WITHIN SIX MONTHS. THOSE INTERESTED MAY CONTACT: [krishnarj007@gmail.com](mailto:krishnarj007@gmail.com)

“Hurrah! Parvati may be my life partner,” Praveen jumped up and exclaimed.

“Praveen, what’s wrong with you?” ma asked.

“Ma kindly look at this matrimonial. This is our matrimonial and this one a similar one from one Parvati,” Praveen pointed them out.

“My God, we don’t want her. If the prediction comes true . . . Even if you remain single we need you always with us,” ma cried.

Hearing our talk dad came from his office room.

“Has our matrimonial come in the paper?” he enquired.

Praveen showed him both the matrimonials.

“Very strange and coincidental! Are you interested in her proposal?” dad asked.

“Yes dad. I am going to write to her,” Praveen replied.

“What? If anything happens to you?” dad asked.

“Dear dad and ma, the Creator has decided what we ought to be. Just surrender to His will and pleasure. I have waited all these years for a match. My damned horoscope dissuaded all proposers. I have told you several times that I have no belief in

it. It's all because of your obstinacy that I couldn't search for a rational girl. This lady belongs to our same caste. It seems that she has no belief in horoscope and may accept my proposal. So if she is willing I will marry her. You may kindly allow me to propose to her," Praveen implored.

"Ok son, if you insist so, we won't object to it. Let things happen as God wills," dad replied.

Praveen sent an email to Parvati detailing his status, horoscopic prediction and willingness to marry her. He asked her to reply detailing her whereabouts. Parvati was only happy to have him as her husband, for she, like him believes that horoscope is a means of the religious mafia to exploit the laity. She wrote a long mail to Praveen expressing her willingness as well as detailing her bio data. Parvati is the only daughter of her parents who are doctors practising in their own hospital. Though a postgraduate in English she couldn't get a regular appointment as lecturer since the State government has banned appointments for several years.

The marriage date was fixed. 10th November at the nearby temple. Praveen wedded Parvati in the presence of a small gathering of close relatives and friends. The entire gathering, well aware of the couples' horoscopic prediction, prayed intensely to the gods to avert their future catastrophe. Needless to say, both Praveen and Parvati had no tension at all during the marriage ceremony, first night or the honeymoon days that followed.

To the amazement of all, the gift coupon which Parvati got from the jewelry shop when she bought the wedding ornaments, won the first prize of one kilogram gold on the

draw date of first December. Four months after their marriage another fortune embraced them. Parvaty got permanent appointment in a government college as lecturer in English. Their happy days went one after another. Five months . . . six months . . . Nothing happened to Praveen. He got promotion as executive engineer. One year passed . . . nothing happened to Parvaty except that she carried. They celebrated their first wedding anniversary burning their horoscope papers like a campfire to the mirth of their parents gathered on the front yard. The parents now understood the folly of horoscopes and how innocent people are cheated by astrologers supported by priests.

Parvaty gave birth to a cute son. Five years passed . . . Parvaty delivered a lovely girl. . . . The wheel of time passed year after year . . . ten year . . . twenty year . . . twenty five year.

Praveen and Parvaty are celebrating their wedding silver jubilee today. Their son Prasanth and daughter Pallavi have arranged a feast in their house to felicitate the best parents in the world. Relatives, friends and neighbours were invited for the function. Parents of both Praveen and Parvaty had already bidden adieu to the world content of their children's happy married life. When felicitations were over Praveen got up to express their gratitude to all. In his brief speech he narrated their bitter days of fight with horoscope before the marriage. He wound up his speech thus: "I exhort to you my good friends, neighbours, relatives and younger generation: you should fire your horoscope. Then success is yours."



## 7

### Joseph's Maiden Vote to the Parliament

“Pappa, I am going to cast my maiden vote to the parliament tomorrow. But whom to vote is the problem now,” Joseph told his father, Thomas.

“Good, my son. Thus you are going to become part of the administration of the country. Since ours is a democratic country we citizens are to be very vigilant in electing our representatives. You are politically educated and so I need not suggest any candidate's name,” Thomas replied.

Thomas is a leading Advocate in the High Court. His son, Joseph is a B.Tech. student in the Govt. Engineering College at Kochi. Thomas' wife, Mercy is a professor in a government college at Kochi itself. They have a daughter, Jane, who is studying in higher secondary school.

“Pappa, do you think democracy is the best form of government? How far is our democracy from the original concept? Where do you find equality, fraternity and liberty in our country? Isn't communism better than this?” Joseph continued.

“My son, communism is a great philosophy as democracy is. But it is impractical and utopian in this materialistic world. Man is innate selfish and hence none works for the common welfare. That's the reason why it failed in Russia and the East

European countries. Do you think China is a pure communist country? No. In fact, it is capitalistic just like western capitalistic countries. Joseph, it's time for me to go the court. We shall discuss the matter in detail when I come back," Thomas replied. He got into his Maruthi car and drove away.

Joseph is enjoying his vacation after his third semester examinations. Jane is getting ready to go to her school. Mercy, dressed in a blue sari, came near her son and said, "Son, I am going to the college. See that the front door is locked always because thieves may come at any time." "Ma, please wait. I am also coming," Jane cried. "Come soon. It's already late," Mercy replied.

Joseph, all alone in the house, started thinking about elections, democracy, corruption etc. Long sixty four years have passed since the country got its independence. What is there in the country to be proud of? Number two in population? Where is the growth those politicians and administrators are boasting of? India is becoming a super power in growth! Will outrun America and Japan! Aren't the political mafia eye-washing the innocent, illiterate masses? The UN study reports India's per capita income as Rs. 20. Isn't the gap between the rich and the poor becoming wider and wider? Could these politicians reduce illiteracy of the masses? Aren't they actually fostering ignorance and illiteracy of the villagers as to exploit them maximum? Do they ever think of the dreams of the youth here? Where are the employment opportunities when the youth pass out from their educational institutions? Joseph became restless as he voyaged through these dark realities. He shut his eyes and remained on his chair on the front verandah trying to cool him down.

Suddenly a group of men in white attire flocked to the house with election notices in their hands.

“We have come with the voter’s slips. Where are father and mother?” one man with the voters list asked.

“They have gone for their jobs,” Joseph replied.

They gave him three slips—father’s mother’s and Joseph’s. “Joseph, forget not to vote for our candidate,” another man said.

“Why should I vote for your candidate? What’s your Front doing at the Centre? 2G Spectrum corruption, Adarsh Housing corruption, Commonwealth Games corruption! How many crores? Three lakh crore rupees! Whose money is it? Poor farmers and labourers! Isn’t your government trying to protect the criminal ministers? If the money thus lost is retrieved from them the country could feed the poor people for next five years! Why doesn’t the government reveal the names of the account holders in foreign banks who have amassed five hundred billion dollars through unfair means? Even after forty years, why is it that Lokpal Bill is not passed in the parliament? Thanks to Anna Hazare, the movement has started now. A second independence struggle is the need of the day. I won’t vote for your candidate and thus promote corruption,” Joseph exploded. His mind was just a sea mounting with violent waves flinging pebbles at the shore. The campaigners were literally stunned. They had nothing to say. “Ok, boy you may vote to any one you like,” one of them whispered and they fled away from the house.

Joseph felt much relieved and relaxed. He laughed loudly and told himself, “Well done Joseph! You can’t tell these to the prime minister or the president.” He got into the drawing room

shutting the front door. He planned to go to the library to return the books and take a few more. As he was dressing he heard the sound of the door bell. Immediately he put a shirt on and opened the front door. Oh! Another group of election campaigners!

“We have got the slips,” Joseph told them with an impatient tone.

“Take our slips also and vote to our candidate,” one of them said.

“You are the people who are playing the communal card. India is a secular state and all religions have equal rights here. No preference for majority or minority. There is nothing called ethnic or national heritage. In this multicultural society religious sentiments should give way to national sentiments or even global sentiments,” Joseph was rhetoric and he saw the group retreating. Someone was saying, “This boy is mad. Don't waste our time here.”

Joseph again laughed and congratulated himself. He took the library books and went in the direction of the library. On the way he found the parish priest in front of the church.

“Joseph, where are you going?”

“To the library, Father. Father, I don't understand why the Church is interfering in politics. Why is such a pastoral letter read in all the churches? Let the laymen vote to anyone they like. It is dangerous to mix politics with religion,” Joseph said.

“Joseph, we have to elect men who protect our faith. Communists are atheists and they can't be elected. That's why such a letter was read in the churches,” the priest replied.

“Father, ours is a secular state and no MP can act against secularism. There is the Supreme Court to look into such matters. If members are elected on the basis of religion rather than their merits, the parliament will be a pandemonium of religious fanatics. Parliament is a place to discuss national issues,” Joseph retorted.

“I am none to argue with you, Joseph. I was asked to read the pastoral letter and I did. That’s all,” the priest had nothing else to tell him.

Bidding good bye to the priest, Joseph continued his walk. He took some new books from the library and returned home. After lunch he dived into the books and time went unaware. His ma returned from the college and he told the day’s proceedings. Mercy reprimanded him for talking roughly to the campaigners and the priest.

“My son, you don’t know how these irrational people will react. They are all crazy of the election and are ready to go to any extreme for their party and the candidate,” Mercy reminded him.

Thomas arrived home at seven in the evening. Joseph told his father how he had reacted to the campaigners and priest. Thomas too cautioned of his over reactions. “Joseph, corruption is part of modern democracy. Only through a mass movement this social evil can be wiped out. It is futile to fight against it singlehandedly. We do need a government here. What alternative is there for democracy? Monarchy? Don’t you see the civil war that took place in Egypt and now going on in Libya, Syria and Yemen where Monarchy prevails?” Thomas explained.

“But Pappa, presidential form of democracy as we find in America is far better than ours. There is less corruption there I believe,” Joseph replied.

“True. But our politicians may not opt for it because they can't all exploit the people as they are doing now,” Thomas responded.

“Pappa, to whom shall I vote? I don't find anyone worth,” Joseph said.

“Son, at the polling station your mind will tell to whom you shall vote. Act accordingly,” Thomas concluded.

Supper being over they went to sleep. Joseph's mind was disturbed still. The thought of maiden vote was biting him like a mosquito. Tired of drinking sufficient blood from him the mosquito flew away and Sleep conquered him at midnight.

“Joseph, get up. It's already seven in the morning. You have to cast your maiden vote. Get ready soon before there is heavy rush at the booth,” Mercy awoke him.

Thomas, Mercy and Joseph went to the polling station by walk. The station was only half a kilometer away. There wasn't a long queue. Only some fifteen voters. After father's and mother's vote, Joseph got into the station. He gave the slip to the first polling officer. His name was read aloud to the polling agents and other polling officers. His signature was obtained on the register and indelible ink was marked on the left forefinger. The third polling officer pressed the switch of the ballot machine's control unit and asked Joseph to move to the ballot unit placed in the voting compartment. Joseph went through the names of the candidates and their symbols on the voting

machine. Whom to vote? He asked his mind. His mind was not responding. Reports of the multibillion corruptions by the central ministers went through his mind like on a movie. He became very unrest.

“What are you doing there? Press the button and quit,” the presiding officer told him loudly. Joseph still remained like a statue. “Hey, can’t you hear what I say? Vote and go out,” the presiding officer shouted.

“I don’t want to cast my vote to any of these candidates. Where is the button for it?” Joseph exploded. “There is no button for it,” getting from his seat the presiding officer replied angrily.

“I don’t want to vote for traitors,” Joseph roared. “Political mafia Murdabad! Anna Hazare Zindabad! (Down with political mafia! Long live Anna Hazare) Political mafia Murdabad! Anna Hazare Zindabad!” raising his right fist up Joseph thundered and ran out of the station. His slogan echoed from the neighbouring hills.



## 8

### **Mathews, the Real Christian**

This is the story of Mathews, aged fifty. He is living with his wife and two children in the State of Kerala in India. Though he has Doctorate in Political Science he is unemployed. He is qualified for the post of lecturer but has not had the luck of teaching students. Mathews is one among the thousands of highly qualified candidates shut out from employment opportunities. Unemployment is the worst curse of Kerala where literacy is ninety five percent and nearly twenty percent of the population is graduates. Mathews had faced many interviews and done exceptionally well. Since most of the schools and colleges are under private sector, what they want is not the best candidate but one who gives the maximum amount. Schools and colleges—particularly engineering and medical colleges—are the best investments and they come up as mushrooms. Unlike mushrooms they thrive and multiply.

Mathews knocked door after door for any employment, and frustrated he went back to agriculture in his inherited farm of two acres. To the compulsion of his parents he got married at the age of thirty. His spouse, Mercy is an unemployed post graduate. They have a son, named George and a daughter, named Daisy. Mathews has been a socialist in ideology from his teen age. Highly intelligent and rational, he couldn't compromise to the fundamentalism of religions. Religions seemed to him as

cleric's means of livelihood through the exploitation of the laity. Though a socialist he believed in the existence of God. Mathews never went to church or took part in prayer gatherings in houses. Mercy, a devout Catholic attended Masses and rites in the church nearby to their house. Once when the parish priest asked Mathews why he avoided church, his reply was this: "Father, I am an Indian and like a true Indian I believe that God is in me. *Abam Brahmasmi* (I am God). Why should I seek him elsewhere?" The priest had no reply and he went back to the church thinking that Mathews could not be deceived like any other layman.

Mathews worked on his farm till five in the evening. He enjoyed every moment he spent on the farm. There were coco palms, nut-meg trees, cocoa trees, banana plants, coffee plants etc. He cleared weeds, manured, watered and collected fruits. Mathews took a radio to the farm and played music for the plants' growth. To the accompaniment of music, his hands moved and the trees and plants danced to the tune with the gentle movement of their leaves and branches. He raised cows, goats, chickens, ducks, cats and dogs which gave him and his family untold happiness. After his work on the farm he took a bath and went to the panchayat (village governing body) library and spent two hours with books and periodicals. Then he visited the recreation club where nearly twenty friends—old and young—waited for his discussion on various topics. He taught them what he had read from the books. Mathews is a man of principles, a pure vegetarian, and a follower of Gandhi and Nehru. His philosophy of life was shared to them. He spoke to them about the relation between Man, Nature and God; how man is related to other beings; how sinful it is to kill and eat animals, birds and fish; about democracy, socialism and

dictatorship; corruption of politicians and clergy; the necessity of fighting against corruptions, superstitions and all other evils in the society. The people of the village took him as their guru or teacher.

Mathews sent his children to government schools. George is studying for undergraduate course in a government college in town and Daisy is studying in the tenth standard in a nearby government school. Though the standard of education in the government schools and colleges is poor, Mathews is not willing to sacrifice his principles by giving high donations and fees in private schools and colleges.

Election to the panchayat came and both the political fronts of the State—the Right Wing and the Left Wing started hunting for sure-win candidates. The Left Wing local leaders, knowing well the leftist ideology of Mathews, approached him and requested to stand as their candidate. He told them: “Though I am socialist in my ideology, I don’t want to be labelled as your man. I like and admire the teaching of Marx, Engel and Lenin. But do you follow what they have taught you. Many of your State level leaders are millionaires and corrupt. How can they represent the poor? So I can’t stand as your candidate.” The local leaders were not willing to leave him and they compelled him to stand as an independent candidate supported by the Left Wing. As pressures came from his close friends as well, he gave the assent. He vowed that he would not spend any money for the campaign. The Left Wing was willing to meet the expense. The nomination papers were filed. He visited houses after houses accompanied by his friends and party men. His chief opponent, the Right Wing candidate was also another Catholic, but he did not have any public opinion.

Needless to say, Mathews had a thumping victory. Thus Mathews' radiance started to spread from his village to the total panchayat. The Left Wing won majority in the panchayat council and Mathews was elected the president of the panchayat. As President he was very efficient, amicable and diplomatic and hence won love and respect of the opposition members as well.

As schools came under the jurisdiction of the panchayat, Mathews was invited to every official function in the schools. As stated earlier, in Kerala, government schools and colleges are very few in number compared to government-aided schools and colleges run by private agencies. Government gives salary to the teachers and maintenance grants to the management but the appointment authority rests in the hands of the private management. The Christians who run majority of schools and colleges are a minority here like the Muslims and they enjoy the minority right to appoint any one they like getting lakhs of rupees as donations. The Indian Constitution and the Supreme Court give them the provision to do this practice. In such an aided school Mathews was invited to preside over the School Day celebrations. In his presidential address he touched many ethical issues related to school. He spoke: "Dear teachers, you should be honest in your words and action. Our aided and government schools face great challenge and threat from unaided English medium schools. These unaided schools hook parents to send their children there giving high donation and fees. Consequently there are losses of class-division in our schools and you teachers are either transferred or remain protected staff. Aren't you also responsible for the mishap? How many of your children are studying in our schools?" Shamefaced the teachers bent their heads, afraid to face him anymore.

On another occasion, a seminar on the topic “Secularism in India,” conducted by the panchayat council itself, where leaders of different religions were seated on the stage, Mathews exploded: “I request our religious leaders not to mix religion with politics. Let religion go its way and politics its way. Hasn’t Christ taught us, ‘Give unto Caesar, Caesar’s and unto God, God’s?’ You should not request laymen to vote for this party or that man. Your rights will be safeguarded by courts if politicians or governments encroach them. . . . It is high time we stop discrimination to women. Being the children of God there is no difference between man and woman. Then why should they be denied entry in God’s abode? Do you think Ayyappa Swamy (Lord Shiva’s son) will be angry if women get into his temple at Sabarimala? Do you think Allah will be embittered if women get into mosques to pray to Him? Do you think if a woman celebrates Mass in a church your God will be angry or the altar defiled? These are all remnants of patriarchy and sheer injustice to women.” You can imagine the reaction of the religious leaders on the stage. All of them quitted the place murmuring abuses on Mathews.

Mathews continued his mission of opening the eyes of the people. As the President, he did whatever possible for the welfare of the people. He was successful in getting more and more funds from the State and Central governments for developments in the panchayat. Though clergy and religious leaders were against him, laymen gave him full support. The religious leaders realized the threat, and setting apart their differences of ideology, they unanimously took a decision to pluck the hold of Mathews on their people.

Election to the State Assembly came and the Left Wing approached Mathews again for the contest. Mathews was well aware that the religious leaders were against him and they would dissuade their people from electing him. So he said no to the party men who approached him. Then the Chief Minister himself visited him and compelled him to stand as an independent candidate supported by the Left Wing. He reminded Mathews that good representatives like him are needed by the people and the State. Mathews yielded to the CM's request and nomination papers were filed. The Right Wing candidate was also a Catholic, Mr. John, a multi-millionaire distiller. Mr. John was given full support by the religious leaders of the three major religions—Christianity, Islam and Hindu. They gave several lakhs to his election fund. In the campaign— notices, posters, banners, flex boards, mike announcements—the Right Wing candidate was several miles ahead of Mathews. Still the survey in the newspapers showed that Mathews would come out victorious. It alarmed the Right Wing camp, especially the religious leaders. They published and read pastoral letters in churches and sent emissaries to each house pleading vote for the Right Wing candidate. There were hundreds of people to campaign for Mathews. He was accompanied by nearly fifty men, women and children bearing placards of his photograph when he visited the houses. None had any doubt that Mathews would have an overwhelming majority of one lakh votes over the Right Wing candidate. The day of the election came and there was heavy polling in the constituency. Ninety percent voters went to the polling booths. The Left Wing camp was very happy and there was no doubt about Mathews' victory. On the contrary the Right Wing camp was gloomy and they were sure

that their candidate would fail. The results would come only after six days.

The day after the election, as usual, Mathews got up early in the morning and went for the forty five minutes' walk along the deserted street. He was very cautious to walk along the right side of the street. Some vehicle came from behind and dashed him. He fell unconscious on the street with bleeding head. The vehicle disappeared without stopping there. There were no witnesses. Some pedestrians who came along the street took him to the government hospital. The doctor had to do nothing as Mathews had already been dead. The news flashed in the village and spread the whole State. Different news channels of TV announced the tragic death of Mathews to the whole world through 'flash news.' The hospital was crowded by people. Mathews' wife, Mercy became unconscious when she heard the news. After postmortem the body was brought back to the house. The children started crying and sobbing sitting at the coffin. The whole house echoed with wails and sobs. Mercy, who recovered from coma, put her head on Mathews' cheek, crying and sobbing. Ministers and State level political leaders came and paid homage to the dead hero.

Burial was fixed at five in the evening. Mathews' brother, Joseph visited the parish priest and sought permission for the burial in the cemetery. Without any compassion, the priest replied: "How can Mathews be buried in the cemetery? He is not a Christian. He does not attend Mass, make confessions or receive Eucharist. Hence his name is not in the parish register."

"Father, it's true that he didn't go to church. But wasn't he baptized? He was a true Christian in spirit and led a life as Christ has shown to his people. Moreover we do have a family tomb in

the cemetery for which we have paid the amount you have requested. So we have the right to bury his body here.”

“Mr. Joseph, there is no need of any argument between us. The canon rule doesn’t allow us to bury him here. I shall report the case to the bishop and if he permits, the body can be buried.”

“OK, Father, you may decide whatever you like, but we will bring the body here for the burial. Will you come to our house for the burial rites?”

“Not likely.”

“Right Father, I am leaving.”

Joseph came back to the house and reported the matter to the closest relatives and friends assembled there. They decided that at any cost the body would be buried in the family tomb.

At 5 pm the burial rites started. As the priest was absent, one pious elder read the prayer for the dead accompanied by dirges from the crowd. The body was taken to the church in an ambulance. Hundreds followed it on foot in long procession. The front door of the church was shut and the parish priest stood on the verandah along with the sexton and the cook.

“Father, please open the door and let the body get into the church,” Mathews’ brother Joseph cried.

“No, I haven’t got the permission from the bishop.”

“Then allow us to bury the body in our tomb. Please open the gate of the cemetery.”

“No, the bishop hasn’t allowed.”

“Brother, please listen to what I say,” Mathews’ wife, Mercy exploded in choking sound. “We will leave the body here on the verandah. Let them do what they like. Father, my husband is far more a Christian than you people. Please don’t forget that you are only one among us, only our representative, and not the representative of God as you falsely claim. My dear relatives and friends, let’s go back. Let them do what they like with my husband’s body.” The whole crowd assembled there started to retreat. Suddenly, the sexton was sent by the priest to Mercy who had gone a few steps from the church. The sexton told her that the priest was willing to bury the body. “Let the Father announce it and apologise to the crowd for dishonouring my dead husband,” she replied. The priest did so, and the gate of the cemetery was opened and the body was buried in the family tomb without any prayers by the priest. No prayers were needed from the priest, not even from Mathews’ wife, since angels had already borne his soul to heaven.

The result of the election came out after five days. Mathews won the seat by a margin of one and a half lakh votes over the Right Wing candidate. There couldn’t be any celebration by the Left Wing. The Right Wing won majority of seats in the State. There was no wonder in it because religions played a major role behind the victory.

Mathews’ assassins could not be found. The police are searching for the murderers. How far will it be successful is to be found in the wake of the shifting of power. Let’s hope that Mathews’ death will be avenged by the interference of court.



## 9

### Our Dear Bhai

“Sandeep Sir,” I turned back and looked at the direction of the sound. Nobody was found except that young mango tree. Was it the sound of Bhai? I thought for a moment. I resumed listening to my colleague’s chattering. “Sandeep Sir,” again the sound was heard from back. I turned back and looked. But nobody was there.

“What are you looking at?” my colleague asked.

“Sir, didn’t you hear Bhai calling me?”

“Bhai calling you? No, I didn’t hear. Something wrong with your ears,” he giggled.

“No, Sir. I heard him calling me twice.”

“Might be a hallucination, Sandeep. Let me leave you a little early as I have some shopping. You may rest here till the body cools.”

“OK, Sir. You may go. I will sit here for fifteen minutes till the sweating is over.”

We have been playing shuttle badminton as have been wont for the past fifteen years. Once my colleague left, my mind took me to Bhai again. I searched for him again in vain.

Rambahadur—we call him Bhai—is the watchman of our college. He is a Gurkha, aged 54. Characteristic of his race, Bhai is honest, brave and cent percent loyal. He is indeed our ‘bhai’ (brother), an elder brother looking after us, our college and the premises from anti-social people. He is very loving and service-minded to the whole college community. He has no reluctance to do any duty—even a coolie’s or menial’s. When we teachers and non-teachers work only three to eight hours in the day time, Bhai’s duty is 24 hours, sleeping just four hours at late night. He has conquered not only the college community with his pure love, but also the whole town. Bhai is known to all people in the town, young and old. Though he is illiterate, he can be sent as errant to any nook and corner of the country. During feasts and celebrations in the college, he is at the forefront serving food and compelling us to eat more and more. He always has the adage that our happiness is his happiness.

When after badminton play we took rest at the steps of the college library in the evening, Bhai used to come to us and entertain with his Nepalese ethos and experience. His accents of the regional language are very funny to listen to and sometimes we could not follow what he said. Then he would explain it in Hindi. He said that in Nepal he had four acres of land at the town which valued a hundred thousand rupees per cent. The news was astounding to us because he was a millionaire there, far well of than us, and here is just like a servant. He would never sit on the step near us though we compelled him. He with all his humility would say that we were big people and he only a peon. He would squat on the floor of the porch. One day as we took out seats after the play Bhai was watering a plant.

“Bhai, what’s that plant?” I asked him.

“Sir, it’s a mango plant which I bought from the nursery for Rs. 50. It will remain here in memory of me after I retire from service.”

Bhai watered it everyday all through the summer. Some days he would draw our attention to it and say, “Sirs, my mango plant is fast growing. Sometimes it may bear fruit before I retire.”

Bhai is twice married. His first wife died of some disease which is still unknown to him. He has four children in her. Bhai used to visit his family once in a year during the summer vacation. As he is a non-vacation staff he will take his earned leave and casual leaves and spend some one and a half months with his family. As money order could not be sent to Nepal, he could not send any money to his home when there was any dire necessity. His first wife died since she could not be treated at the proper time. Bhai’s eldest son is working as a watchman in another college some sixty kilometres away from our college. With the meager salary he earned plus some money borrowed from us Bhai would visit his house every year. Keeping money safe during the train travel (long five days) was highly risky, he used to say. Bhai went home along with one or two friends working in our neighbourhood. When one was sleeping, the other would sit awake. Thousands of rupees were kept in the inner pockets of the under garment specially stitched for the purpose. Though Bhai had land worth millions of rupees, his family lived in poverty. He was not willing to dispose the property to wipe out poverty. He built a house with a loan taken from the college co-operative society.

One day Bhai came to us in the evening. He was in tears. He took out from his pocket a photo and showed us.

“Sirs, this is my daughter. She is no more now.”

We looked into the photo. It looked like a film star’s aged seventeen or eighteen. Extremely beautiful!

“Bhai, what was her disease?” I enquired.

“Sir, she died last week. I received the letter today. She had some fever, it is written, and she was taking medicine. There aren’t good hospitals nearby and who is there to take her to the city hospital, sir?” he was sobbing.

“Didn’t they phone you the day she died?”

“Sir, there is no phone facility in our land.”

We didn’t know how to console him. And who on earth could do it? Bhai with that photo reminded me of Rehman of Tagore’s “Kabuliwallah” treasuring his daughter’s photo and longing for the reunion with her.

After his first wife’s death, Bhai married again and has two children in that alliance. They are below the age of ten now. Bhai has only one more year of service left here. We used to ask him what he would do after the retirement. He replied that if his service was needed in our college he would continue here as a guest watchman, ready to serve for Rs. 5000 per month. Going back to his country means sitting idle there. He would get no employment there. His wife and children can manage the work in their land. So he longed to continue here after his retirement. Moreover he has been of this country since he was sixteen, and he wishes to continue here till he is aged. In some evenings after

an intake of low-priced liquor—his greatest enjoyment—he would come to the campus wavering and try to evade us. Then we would call him as to hear his intoxicated talk. The way he controlled his words and how he failed in it was interesting to the ears.



It was a Sunday. The time is 8 a.m. my telephone rang. I took the phone.

“Hellow Sandeep, I am the Principal calling.”

“Hellow Sir, what’s the news.”

“Our Bhai is found dead in his room. Please come soon.”

“Oh my God! I am coming.”

I rushed to the college and went to the Principal’s room. He was not there. I ran to Bhai’s room. Bhai’s body was found on his bed. He was half naked. The Principal was there along with a few other staff.

“Sir, how did it happen?” I asked the Principal.

“Early morning he got up and appeared before my room with the newspapers. Then he went to the pump house and pumped water to the tank. I rang for him at 7.30 a.m. but he didn’t turn up. I tried again after fifteen minutes but he didn’t appear. So I went to his room and to my horror found him dead as it is. Might be a cardiac arrest.”

The police were informed and they came within five minutes. Soon there was a rush of college staff and neighbours. The dead body was taken to the hospital for postmortem. The

doctor confirmed that it was a cardiac arrest. We couldn't believe that our beloved Bhai is no more with us. The ladies staff cried.

Principal declared a holiday for the college on Monday. A condolence meeting was also arranged. Bhai's body, which was kept in the freezer, was brought to the college on Monday at 10 a.m. The students, management representatives and the neighbours swarmed around the body and paid homage to Bhai. Condolence speeches came one after another. As the body could not be taken to Nepal—it is a huge expensive thing—it was decided to cremate the body in the Municipal crematorium. The only kin possible to be consulted was his eldest son working in a college some sixty kilometers away. He was phoned and he came on Sunday itself. Bhai's dead body was taken in an ambulance to the crematorium. We all followed it in our cars and hired vehicles. The corpse was taken from the ambulance and placed on the mobile table to be carried to the furnace. With the help of his relatives and friends from Nepal, Bhai's eldest son did necessary burial rites. Just for five minutes. The son was crying and tears were flowing from his cheeks. We couldn't bear the sight. I just thought of Bhai's miserable wife and other children who could not see his body and give the final kiss. My eyes were filled with tears. Who would solace them? It was only one month before that he came back from his house. The warm memories of his stay with them were still in their minds and now they have to be frozen and dead. Inexplicable is the grief of that bereaved family! Compared to them our loss of Bhai is nothing. The corpse was slid to the incinerator and the door was shut. The switch was on and with a horrifying thud the electric incinerator started functioning. LPG from three cylinders was

burning Bhai's body. Smoke appeared thick at the tall chimney. Bhai's soul was going up to the heaven. I watched it for sometime. After an hour we returned to our houses. Bhai's memory haunted me for several days and disturbed my sleep.



Oh! The time is 8 p.m. I am all alone there before the college library. I looked at the young mango tree which Bhai had planted three years back. There were bunches of flowers on it. Bhai's eldest son came with Bhai's second wife to our college today to complete formalities of the pension. Some eighteen months have passed since Bhai left us. Yet his pension has not been released and come to his wife's hands. Why I heard Bhai calling me was only a hallucination, I understood. I returned to my house sad and forlorn.



## 10

### Sanchita Karma\*

“Why are you so cruel to us, chasing us for such a long time, but not falling upon us?” the male mouse asked the herd of seven cats, large and small.

“We shall tell you the reason. We are souls of the seven cats whom you poisoned to death in your previous birth. Do you know who you were in your last birth? You were Stephen, an Advocate and this, your wife, Stella, a housewife. I am Preethi, the grandma of all these children and grandchildren. These two are my first daughters, Manikutty and Ammini. The others are their children, Kinganan, Rowdy, Kittu and Kitty. Tell us why did you kill us? What harm did we do to you?” Preethi exploded.

“We don’t think that we had a life before this,” the male mouse said.

“Even if we had one we hadn’t killed anyone,” the female mouse added.

“That’s the problem with you. Your religion then had not taught you of the phenomenon of rebirths. You believed that after your death your soul will go either to heaven or hell. You believed in the shallow philosophy that man is the centre of

universe and all other creatures are created for you. You believed that you are created in the image of God and you are His choicest. You can't remember your past since divinity has lost in you by your unholy, criminal deeds," Preethy said.

"We don't understand anything. Kindly tell us what we did in our past," the male mouse said.

"I will take you back to your past. As I said, you were then Stephen, an Advocate who lived with your wife, Stella in a big mansion-like house in a vast compound. You had two daughters who were highly employed, married to and settled in metro cities. You had no domestic animals, not even dogs or cats. You had a neighbour, one Agricultural Officer named Krishnan who lived with his aged mother, employed wife and two children. Being Hindus, Krishnan family had a culture distinct from yours. They were vegetarians and believed in the philosophy of Advaita. They were our masters who loved us as their own children. We three generations lived with them for five years," Preethy broke for a minute.

"Then what happened?" the female mouse asked.

"Krishnan was also a poet. The poet in him moulded him and his family as nature lovers. He had only ten cents of land and there he planted papaya trees, not for him or his family, but for birds like crows, mynahs and cuckoos to feast upon the ripe fruits. He fed crows with rice everyday and kept a basin full of water for the birds to drink and bathe. For us cats he brought salmon fish everyday when he returned after his morning walk. Thus we were fed with rice and fresh fish. They never allowed us to be hungry even for an hour. We belonged to the Ootty pedigree with bushy tail and snow-white fur. They took us like

angels and loved like anything. Krishnan bought plastic balls for us and we enjoyed playing football in his drawing and dining rooms. Inexpressible is the happiness the Krishnan family got from our presence there. We sat on their laps longing for strokes which we got in abundance. Very often we slept on their sofa and settees which they liked most. Their guests had to sit elsewhere when we occupied their settee,” Preethy stopped.

“Then why were you killed by Stephen?” the male mouse asked.

“We cats have no boundaries as you mice too. The Creator has created this earth for all animals and plants. He has not given human beings any special right to fence any land. But the selfish man does so. The divine universal instincts in us tempt us to step over or jump over the boundaries humans make. Thus we lovers of freedom liked to run and play in the vast compound of Stephen. There were great beauties in his compound which attracted us—butterflies, birds, squirrels, grasshoppers etc. Most of the day time we preferred to play there, often running after another in great delight. Stephen and his wife didn’t like our presence there. Their petty sense of ownership couldn’t tolerate us intruding into their property. Moreover we defecated in the compound, but covered the shit with soil,” Preethy stopped for a breath.

“Then you might have entered into his house which provoked Stephen,” the female mouse remarked.

“No. We never did it. We never wanted any food since we were well fed by our masters. Stephen might not have liked us defecating in his compound. The paradox is that he and his wife went to church every day. Listened to Christ’s message that you

have to love your neighbour and even your enemy. Love your neighbour includes loving whatever possessions and properties your neighbour has. Stephen knew very well that Krishnan and his family loved their cats as their children. But the devil in him and his wife nurtured hate for us and it ended in poisoning us. Very early morning before going to church he put some rat poison in fried fish and placed it very close to my master's compound. Which cat is averse to fish? Early morning when we went out from the master's house we smelt the tempting aroma of fish and ate the pieces one after another. We were murdered in three attempts. My Manikutty and Ammini were the first victims. How much our masters shed tears then! They didn't complain to Stephen because he would deny it and insult them in return. Several months after, Kinganan, Rowdy, Kittu and myself were the victims. Our mistress went to Stephen's house then and complained in tears. But they denied the charges and pretended innocent. How my master dug graves for us with aching heart and shaky hands! The poison's effect fled us to our master's kitchen for water but we couldn't drink. My master and mistress in great agony and wails tried to drop water into our mouth with filler but we couldn't drink and after several minutes of great pain and shrieks we bade good bye to our masters. After a few months our kitty, just three months old, was also poisoned the same manner. It was beyond any tolerance for our masters and they decided not to have any more cats in their house in future. Now you are that Stephen and you, his wife. The cruelty you had shown to us and our masters are the karmas which demanded reaction. The gravity of your crimes was such that it could not be atoned by any punishment when you were still alive as human beings. So you are destined to be

born as mice to be chased by the souls of the seven cats you dispatched in your last birth,” Preethy exploded

“We don’t want to live any more. We want Moksha.\*\* Kindly kill us as we killed you,” both the mice implored.

“We never wanted to do so, but the Almighty orders us to dispatch you. It’s nothing but Sanchita Karma. My children finish them now,” Preethi ordered and in few minutes the mice were killed and eaten.



\* *Sanchita Karma* is one of the three Karmas or actions of human beings mentioned in Hinduism. The other two are: Kriyamana Karma and Prarabda Karma. Sanchita Karma is the accumulated result of all your actions from all your past lifetimes. This is your total cosmic debt. Every moment of every day either you are adding to it or you are reducing this cosmic debt. Such actions done by you are not ripe to give fruits immediately or on the spot but take some time to get ripened. Such Karmas are kept in abeyance pending in the balance waiting for the opportune time to become ripe, to give fruits in future. Till then they remain in balance and are accumulated. Until their fructification, these Sanchita Karmas would not be neutralized.

\*\* *Moksha* is the liberation from Samsara, the cycle of death and rebirth.

## 11

### School Entrance Festival

Dear readers, I am going to present before you a story which is more a reality in my own State, Kerala, the most literate one, situating in the southern part of India.

Vidya is five year old now. She has a younger brother aged three. Her father and mother are construction labourers. But the father deserted the family two years back and stays with another lady. The mother has been looking after the children continuing her daily labour. They are staying in a rented hut paying Rs. 1000 per month. The fate is crueler to them and the mother is a diabetic patient now, not able to go for work, and the family is cared by her poor old parents and auto rickshaw driver, brother.

When Vidya was destined to study in an anganwadi (child service centre of the central government), her friends in the neighbourhood studied in LKGs and UKGs run by upper class private managements. She had to walk two kilometers to reach her anganwadi, which was just a makeshift cow shed. Her mates there were all like her, coming from very poor families, clad in cheap dress. Vidya could only dream of gaudy, high quality dress which her friends in the neighbourhood wore for schools. She looked with thirsty eyes the way her neighbour tots went in dazzling school uniforms and tempting bags to their schools in the town in their school buses. They all had five or more pairs of dress whereas she had to contend with only two and that too

faded and torn here and there. Vidya could get lunch from the anganwadi—rice and lentil curry—the chief temptation for all the little ones there. She would bring some rice and curry for her brother too, which her teacher was kind enough to supply, learning the pathetic condition of her house.

Now I am taking your attention to St. Mark's High School, a government aided corporate management school in the town. It had a proud profile in the glorious past—a model school to other schools in the State. There were 1500 pupils with five divisions each from first standard to tenth and there were more than 60 teachers. Cent percent passed in the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) examinations. Ironically, the present state of the school is very deplorable. The school has become 'uneconomic' and under the constant threat of extinction. The strength has come down to fifty pupils and fifteen teachers and single division to all standards. The school could still maintain the cent percent result for the SSLC, but the candidates are only five.

The manager of the school, Fr. Philipose has called for an urgent staff meeting. The head master and teachers are assembled in the staff room. After a silent prayer the meeting started. "Respected Headmaster and my dear teachers," the manager opened the discussion. "The school will reopen next week after the vacation. First of June is the entrance fest. We haven't got any pupil for the first standard. Last year we could get a child somehow. What will we do? We will lose the first standard and that will be the first death knell to the school."

"Let Smitha teacher, who is in charge of the first standard, find tots from somewhere. Our teachers and the management are responsible for the present pathetic situation. The teachers

should have sent their children to this school and thus showed model to all parents. Where have their children studied except mine? They sent to CBSE English medium private schools. To make things worse, our corporate management also started such unaided schools. Pupils' numbers are decreasing every year as part of population control, but the numbers of unaided schools are increasing. Education has become the most profitable business," Chacko sir spoke.

"What Chacko sir said is true. It is hypocritical for you to meet the poor parents and ask for their children," the manger continued. "Even when the corporate management has opened unaided schools you should have sent your children to your own school. Now you may collectively search for a pupil or two just to retain our first standard. Smitha teacher can't get one seeking alone. Tomorrow itself you have all to go under the leadership of the headmaster to the poor houses where little children haven't joined schools."

"We shall do as Father has requested. As to get a pupil is like buying one. We will have to spend for it as we did last year. Whatever be the demand from the parents, we have to accept it. Let's take the collective responsibility and we will divide the expense among us," the headmaster, Philip sir said.

All the teachers agreed to this suggestion and the next day itself the whole staff set out to the neighbourhood in search of tots for the first standard. Being local teachers they knew very well which houses bore young children. They got into such houses one after another but the tots in those houses had already joined CBSE English medium schools paying a large amount as admission fee, tuition fee, PTA fund, anniversary fee etc. Finally they came to Vidya's house. Vidya's mother and

brother could understand sufficiently early the high demand for their child since she was the only one in the neighbourhood who was destined to study in any Malayalam medium aided/government school. They had also learned how the present pupil in the second standard was given all facilities including financial help to the family last year.

“Sister, we are teachers of St. Mark’s High School,” the headmaster introduced them to Vidya’s mother. “We have learnt that your child is of age to join the first standard. We request you to send her to our school.”

“True our Vidya is five years old and has to join in some school. Have you got any other child for the first standard?” the mother asked.

“None, but we are seeking,” the head master said.

“If we could afford to, we would have sent her to an English medium school in the town. We are poor people unlike you. You who are seeking pupils now for your school never sent your own children to your school. Why, because you have no faith in your teaching as well as the standard of your school. You didn’t want to risk your children’s education and future. You are now running for your own protection of service and high salary. Sorry, you are all educated people and who am I to speak to you so. Teachers from other aided L.P. schools as well as those of government High school in the town approached us yesterday and day before yesterday. They offered the child three sets of uniform, school bag, umbrella and free conveyance. Do you know how we live here? I am a diabetic patient and can’t go for any work. Thanks to my brother, who is an auto rickshaw driver, we are surviving. I need injections every day. If you can

meet our family's expense as well as what the child needs, we shall give you our child," Vidya's mother replied.

"How much do you need for a month, food and medicine? Kindly don't exploit us but calculate just for your necessities," the headmaster said.

"We are using ration rice from the government shop and never go for any delicacies. For food we need Rs. 5000, rent Rs. 1000 and Rs. 2000 for my medicine. Vidya can't walk alone all the two kilometers to the school. So an auto rickshaw has to be arranged for her which needs Rs. 2000. So if you give us Rs. 10000 per month we will give you our child. In addition you have to give her three sets of uniforms, school bag and umbrella. I am demanding only bare minimum since you are all my native teachers," the mother replied.

"Ok, we agree. Take this as June's charge in advance," the headmaster gave the mother Rs. 10000 from his wallet. "Where is Vidya? Kindly call her."

"She is playing with her friends in the neighbourhood. I will call her right now," the mother said.

"Vidya, please come here. Your teachers have come," the mother called her.

Vidya came running, with sweating face. She blushed when she saw such a group of teachers.

"Vidya, these are your teachers. You are going to join in the first standard of St. Mark's High School," mother told her.

"Who are my friends there?" Vidya asked.

There was silence for some time. The headmaster then told her, “Sure, you will have friends there.” Poor Vidya believed those words. “Vidya take this,” Smitha teacher took a packet of sweets from her bag and gave to her. Vidya’s face beamed with joy when she received the packet.

“Next Monday is the reopening day of the school and there is entrance festival. You should come with Vidya by 9.45 am. She will be given new uniform, bag, text books and note books and umbrella by the school manager. If Vidya doesn’t have new dress now we will bring a pair within two days,” the headmaster continued.

“She has no good dress sir,” mother replied.

“Then we will bring it day after tomorrow,” the headmaster replied.

By 9.45 am on Monday Vidya along with her mother arrived in the school in new dress in her uncle’s auto rickshaw. As part of the entrance festival, the front gate of the school was decorated with palm leaves arch and multicoloured balloons. When the first bell rang all the fifty pupils of the school in their uniforms assembled in two rows at the entrance of the school to receive the new member, Vidya. Tots of the LP level were holding balloons in their hands while pupils of the UP and HS were carrying bouquets of flowers. The headmaster, teachers and school leader marched to the gate to receive Vidya. The school leader, Jasmine was in the front. She gave a big beautiful bouquet of flowers to Vidya and they marched back to the headmaster’s room while pupils on either side of them showered petals of flowers on Vidya. Just like a guard of honour to a VVIP, Vidya was led to the headmaster’s room. The

manger Fr. Philipose was there in the headmaster's room and he received Vidya with presents of chocolates, uniform, bag and umbrella. Vidya was highly elated. She was then taken by Smitha teacher to her class. The class was decorated with flowers and balloons. There were a few small chairs for the tots.

“Teacher, where are the other pupils? Am I alone?” Vidya, a bit dejected, asked.

“No Vidya. Others will join tomorrow,” Smitha teacher told a lie.

Yes, Vidya's school life started. For the next ten months she will be alone in her class with her teacher, Smitha. For Smitha teacher it's a great relief for she can continue there without being transferred to some other remote school of the corporate management. Her salary of Rs. 40000 per month is protected by the government for teaching just one pupil. It's not a lone case in Kerala. There are hundreds of Vidyas and Smitha teachers in thousands of schools across the State.



\* According to the RTI information gathered by an NGO All-India Save Education Committee, there are currently 2,577 schools in the State that have less than 50 students on their rolls. Out of these 1,217 are government schools and 1,360 are aided schools. Interestingly, there are seven Lower Primary Schools in the State which do not have even a single student. While four schools have one student each on their rolls, the number of schools having less than 10 students is 109. According to a circular of the Department of General Education in 2012, schools from lower primary to high school-level which have less than 60 students (average of 15 students in a class) are termed uneconomic. (The New Indian Express 31 May 2014)

## 12

### Selvan's House

'Sir, sir,' I heard someone calling me and I opened the front door. There was Selvan shedding tears. He was in neat dress, a white dhoti and a light coloured shirt.

'What happened, Selvan? Why are you crying,' I enquired.

'The Engineer sir scolded me and sent me out of the house,' Selvan was sobbing.

'When? At the blessing ceremony?' I asked.

'When the Reverend Father got into the house along with others for the blessing of the house, I too got into the room. Then the Engineer sir came near me and asked why I had got into the house. He then asked me to quit the place. How can I bear it, sir? Haven't I been living in the house, guarding it for the past one and a half years from the very day the foundation stone was laid? How could he send me out, sir? There is not an inch of the building where I have not watered the mortar or plaster. I have been working hard wetting the structure—the roofs, the walls, the floors, the pillars, the compound walls etc. I have been serving him from dawn to late evening all these months. I have been the keeper of the house, sweeping the rooms, cooking my food, eating in the dining room sleeping in one of the bed rooms till yesterday. Am I just a cat or a dog to

shut me out? Haven't I the right to attend the blessing of the house, sir?

'Selvan, this is the way of the world. The masons, the carpenters, the plumbers, the electricians, painters and scores of labourers—who were the real builders of that house—were they invited for the blessing ceremony? No. You are also one among them. You are only the watchman, not the real owner of the house, aren't you? Take it that way. Don't be upset,' I tried my best to console him.

'True, sir. I am not the owner of the house and I am not going to live here the rest of my life. Though that house is not mine I have been looking after it as my own house. But now I am out it. It's unbearable, sir. You can't feel my agony,' he couldn't control himself.

I was well aware that I could not console Selvan with my logic and philosophy. I just remember the very first day he arrived here. He is a native of Kumily, the border land to Tamil Nadu State. Though a Tamil man he speaks a mix of Tamil and Malayalam. Selvan is a Christian, aged fifty eight. His wife, Chellamma and children live in their house at Kumily. His eldest son is employed in Saudi Arabia. In fact there had been no need for Selvan to come over here and keep security to this house under construction. His wife and children dislike his staying here alone for meagre salary. But Selvan, being healthy enough, doesn't like to stay idle in his house. He has only ten cents of land and there was no work in it. Hence like Ulysses, he set out seeking independence and freedom.

Selvan always appeared as lively as a squirrel. My neighbour, Thomas, the Engineer, employed him as a security to

guard the building materials. He was given only a low salary of Rs. 2500 per month. When Thomas found that Selvan was honest, innocent and meek he tried to exploit him. He was made to work—watering the mortar and plaster, cleaning the premises, spading and removing the grass from the fifty cents of the land around the building and helping Thomas in his household work a kilometre away. Thus Selvan had to work throughout from dawn to late evening. He cooked his rice and the curry was brought from Thomas's residence. He used to take his breakfast and lunch late after the wetting work. As the building work progressed, Selvan's quantity of labour also increased. He demanded Thomas an increase in salary. Thomas raised his salary to Rs. 3000 but stopped the supply of curry. Poor Selvan consumed his rice with no curry or curry supplied to him from my house or from neighbour Mr. Thankappan's house. The only enjoyment he had here was the intake of low brand liquor in the evening with two other companions.

Selvan was a very talkative man. He appeared to be the overseer of the whole construction going on at the work site. He gave direction to masons and carpenters. His Tamil toned banter always echoed the premises. I have observed him giving advice even to the owner, Thomas. The labourers found in him a real friend and entertainer. His loud utterances amused me when I was sitting leisurely in the balcony. When any one—neighbours or strangers came to have a look at the house, Selvan proudly led them inside and showed every nook and corner explaining what they were. He assumed himself as the owner of the house.

Selvan wished to plant bananas on the barren land adjacent to the house and Thomas gave money for it. He planted nearly

twenty bananas, watered them every day during the summer. Once when a labourer cut a leaf of a banana plant to eat food in it, Selvan warned him not to repeat it as it would slow down its growth. All the plants yielded rich fruits. Alas, he couldn't taste even a fruit! The bunches were sold by Thomas, not giving any share to Selvan. Selvan's over-sincerity and honesty were very often criticised by the labourers. They considered him a simpleton.

The house under construction was a two-storeyed one, estimating over ten million rupees and having all modern facilities. Thomas was a multi-millionaire landlord. But he was miserly in giving wages. The labourers who were sweating in the intolerable sunlight needed hot tea in the afternoon and there were no teashops nearby. They used to get it at other work sites provided by the house owners. But Thomas did not supply it nor asked Selvan to bring it from the teashop. Naturally the labourers disliked Thomas and I have heard them showering curses in his absence. They have complained to me about his inhuman treatment. Neither Thomas nor his wife ever spoke to these labourers or at least asked their names. They very often spoke in praise of Dr. Martin who supplied them tea and snacks regularly at 4 p.m. when they worked at his site. I too started wondering why Thomas was so inconsiderate. Couldn't he ever think that these labourers were sweating their blood for this house not for them to live in but only for him and his family? If their tears fall on the walls and floors, wouldn't that haunt him when he starts living in the house? Had Thomas remembered what the great Malayalam poet, Vailoppally taught him at school—"Whenever I eat a grain of rice I can't but taste the tear of the farmer"—he would have shown a little love and

consideration to the labourers who sweated for the building. Fatigued by terrible heat, some of the labourers came for hot water to our house in the afternoon and my wife gave them tea. Just a compassionate act!

I now remember the selfless service Selvan has done to our neighbours. When the government supply of water failed for a few days Selvan took it his duty to supply water to these houses, pumping water from his master's well. How hastily he did it before Thomas arrived at the work site! He had no doubt that his master would scold him if he knew it.

Twice or thrice I have found Selvan's wife, Chellamma at the work site. She had come to bring him back to their house. I too persuaded him to go with her. But his reply was that he would go home after two weeks. Selvan found much happiness in his work and stay here. Work is worship to him. He hated an idle life at his house even for a day.



'Selvan, stop crying. After all, that house is not yours, but the engineer's. When he asks you to get out, you have to. Face the reality. You can't live there with the engineer and his family, can you? By the by, has he asked you to continue there as a security from today?'

'The engineer sir hasn't told me anything. As his daughter's marriage is on next Sunday, I hope I will be staying there till then. I have many things to do here,' his words were choked in his throat. It seemed that he had never anticipated a goodbye to the house. Or he would not have been so much upset.

‘OK Selvan, go back to the engineer’s house. I will be coming there shortly for the dinner.’

Selvan went back hesitantly to the engineer’s house. Within ten minutes I went to the engineer’s house with my wife and son for the house-warming dinner. I found Selvan standing desolate there at the corner of the front yard. We went to him directly and asked if he took the food. He said no. Many VIPs were coming and going. We too got into the house. We were welcomed by Thomas and his wife. We surveyed all the rooms of the house which looked posh and luxurious. Then we took our food and got out. Selvan was still standing there as a stranger or even a beggar. Neither Thomas nor his wife cared for him—not even cast their glance on him. We asked him to take the food and eat. He replied that he would do it later. We came back to our house and observed what Selvan was doing. The labourers, who had been working throughout the night cleaning the premises, were assembled under the shade of a plastic sheet tied to a tree near the house. Selvan went to their company and along with them took a plate of fried rice from the kitchen and started eating it sitting on the ground under the shade.

The dinner being over, Selvan and the labourers started cleaning the premises. Though he was working, his face was very gloomy. Thomas and his family spent their first night in the new house. Selvan might have slept in the car shed. The next morning as I was reading the newspaper, Selvan came to me and announced in a low voice, ‘Sir, I am going back to my house.’

‘Aren’t you staying till the marriage?’

'The engineer sir asked me to go back as my service was no more needed.' There were tears in his eyes.

'Did the engineer give you anything extra?'

'I am yet to receive my salary, sir.'

'Alright Selvan, go and stay with your wife and children. Spend your time with your grand children. They will entertain you.'

'Thank you sir. Thank you very much for the love shown towards me. Goodbye.'

Selvan moved slowly to Mr. Thankappan's house, bade them goodbye and treaded towards Thomas's house. As it was time for me to go to college I could not see Selvan leaving our place.

The next day Salim, manager of my college canteen, completed Selvan's story from where I stopped. Selvan, straight from the engineer's house, went to Salim's hotel where he had been a customer for tea for the past one and a half years. Salim, a very kind man gave him sufficient food with chicken curry as special. Neither did he charge the food nor accepted the twenty rupees which Selvan had to give him. Salim even offered him an employment in his hotel for the daily wage of Rs. 150 in addition to free food and lodging. Selvan replied that he would consider it after consulting with his wife and children. Salim hired an auto rickshaw, paid its charge and sent Selvan to the bus stand.

'Salim, did the engineer give Selvan anything extra?'

‘Only three hundred rupees, sir. How inconsiderate the man is! He could have given him at least a thousand rupees as extra. After all the poor man had worked for him day and night for the last one and a half years! Selvan’s friends, with whom he used to drink the evening liquor, had asked him to sell the iron rod pieces scattered on his master’s work site and thus meet his expense. But he was such an honest man that he never did it. Such men are rare in this world.’

‘True, Salim. Honesty is never rewarded in this world. Had Mr. Thomas shown one percent of the love you have shown, Selvan could have gone to his house a happy man. The world has become so materialistic that love and kindness have no place here.’



## 13

### Twisted Course of Destiny

Rajiv is a youth in the early thirties. He hasn't got any permanent employment. MSc in Mathematics. Passed NET also. Still taking classes in an entrance coaching centre for Rs. 10,000 per month. His mother who brought him up and his younger sister had been working as a daily labourer at building construction sites. She is 63 and arthritic. Father died in a bike accident when Rajiv was only ten. He was a barman who never drank. Rajiv's sister, Rema is only two years junior to him and is still unmarried. She wasn't studious like Rajiv and had to end her education after Pre Degree course. Born of poor dark parents both Rajiv and Rema are not fair in complexion or attractive. Who will marry a lady who is neither fair nor wealthy enough to give any dowry? Dowry has become such national curse that thousands of ladies are destined to remain spinsters despised by kith and kin and the society as such. It's Rajiv's meager salary which meets the household expenditure as well as the medicine for his ailing mother. The family live in a hut built by his father in a three cent plot which he had bought with the money he earned from the bar.

Rajiv passed his tenth class with 90% of marks at the age of sixteen and his mother sent him to a college in the town for Pre Degree course, taking Mathematics, Chemistry and Physics as the optional subjects. Though it was an additional financial

burden to her, the mother dreamt of a bright future when her son would get a government employment after education and thus save the family from the abyss of poverty and distress. Rajiv was the most brilliant student in the class and smart in all activities—speech, music, sports and games etc. Naturally he was chosen the leader of the class. He was the favourite of the teachers as well as students. When his classmates of average intelligence attended coaching classes for the entrance examination to Engineering Degree on Saturdays and Sundays, Rajiv had to envy them since he couldn't afford to pay fees for such classes. What use, even if he gets good rank in the entrance exams? His mother won't be able to send him to an engineering college in the city.

Rajiv passed his Pre Degree Examinations with 88% marks. He wanted to go for B.Sc. but his mother couldn't send him as she struggled really hard to sustain the family. As she got a wage of only Rs. 150, there was nothing left for his higher education. Rajiv's thirst for a degree found a means for its accomplishment. There was a tuition centre in the town providing tuition classes for high school pupils. Rajiv sought for an employment there and since he was brilliant in mathematics he was appointed. He was offered a monthly salary of Rs. 2,500. With the money he earned thus he registered as a private candidate for B. Sc. Mathematics course. Teaching and study went simultaneously without any obstacles. Since he was bright enough he could learn the subjects without the help of any teacher. Years passed very smoothly and he passed B.Sc. examinations with 80% of marks.

What next? The big question mark appeared before Rajiv. In a State like his own (Kerala), mere graduation will not give

one any government employment. There was no other option for Rajiv than going for M.Sc. course. Still continuing as a tuition master he registered for M.Sc. Mathematics as a private candidate. Another two years passed and Rajiv became a post graduate with 75% of marks. His post graduation enabled him to get an appointment in a private coaching centre for medical/engineering entrance test. He was offered a salary of Rs. 5000 per month.

In the coaching centre, physics subject was handled by Ms. Sangeeta Gopal. She was fair looking and very gentle in her words and actions. Besides Rajiv and Sangeeta there was a Chemistry teacher Ms. Rohini, Biology teacher Mr. Madhu and the Principal Mr. Murali in the institution. Sangeeta had a special liking for Rajiv. She liked to be with him and talked to him whenever they were free. Which man's heart can be insensitive to the sweet loving looks and expressions? Rajiv for the first time experienced heart throbs of love and their love grew fast and started to bloom. One day when they were alone in the staff room. Rajiv told Sangeeta, "Sangeeta, do you love me genuinely? I may not be able to marry you unless I get a permanent job. When it is, I can't say."

"Rajiv, I will wait for you till you get a permanent employment. If at all I marry, it will be you and none else. I have already enthroned you as my husband in my heart and I can't think of anyone else in my life."

"Sangeeta, you are now 23 and your parents will start thinking of your marriage. You are very beautiful and your parents have sufficient wealth to meet the demands of a suitable bridegroom."

“I will tell my parents that I don’t want any marriage now. Let me get a government employment first. Thus I can drop their proposals. I don’t think they will act against my wish.”

“My mind says Sangeeta, that you will get a permanent job before I get one. Then how will you resist your parents’ proposals?”

“I will tell them then that I am in love with you and I would only marry you. Rajiv, this is my promise. Kindly stretch your palm.” He stretched his right palm and she pressed hers on it.

“Sangeeta, I will wait for you and we will live together forever.”

Their golden moments ended when the bell was rung and the other colleagues entered into the staff room.

Rajiv started to dream of a happy married life with Sangeeta. What is required for its fulfilment is a permanent job. His ambition is to become a college lecturer. He knows very well that it is a herculean task to get such an appointment. He can’t expect it in government aided private colleges as they demand high donation. He can try for it only in government colleges which are very few in number. He decided to appear for the UGC NET examination which is the eligibility for applying for the post. He cleared the NET exams in the first chance itself. As the State was going through great financial crisis, the government banned all appointments and the Public Service Commission stopped notifications.

Life never goes through easy, smooth, straight roads always. It has to climb hilly roads full of sharp curves before

coming down again to plain straight roads. Rajiv's life has been passing through the easy straight roads and the time has come for him to climb the hill before him. His mother, who has been the main bread earner of the family started to show the symptom of arthritis. The severe pain on her joints prevented her from heavy work and she was compelled to stop her sustaining job of a daily labourer. Rajiv's sister, Rema somehow passed her Pre Degree course in the third chance. She couldn't be sent for higher education and hence remained in the house helping the sick mother in the domestic activities. The sole responsibility and burden of maintaining the family rested on Rajiv. With the monthly salary of Rs. 6000 he got he had to meet the domestic expenses and mother's treatment charges.

Years passed one after another. The new government which came into power after the general elections lifted the ban on government employment and Rajiv applied for every post which he was eligible for—from last grade to that of college lecturer. Public Service Commission's test, interview and appointment go at a snail's pace taking several years. Domestic worries, agonies and tensions of Rajiv were subdued and relieved by the caressing touch of Sangeeta's love in the coaching centre. She too applied for government jobs through PSC. Both appeared for several tests and waited for the results.

One day when Rajiv and Sangeeta were sharing their domestic news, the postman appeared there with a letter for Sangeeta. It was an advice memo from PSC asking her to join in the Education Department as a Lower Division Clerk. Sangeeta was highly elated. Rajiv also appeared for the same examination but luck was against him. Sangeeta belongs to Other Backward Community which has reservations in government employment.

Though Rajiv is financially poor he belongs to the forward community which denies him any special privilege.

“Sangeeta, my hearty congrats! We should celebrate it,” Rajiv said.

“Thanks dear Rajiv. It’s surprising why you are not selected. How brighter you are! May be you will be called later from the list.”

“God knows. Let Him guide me as He wills. Which is the joining date?”

“Before 20<sup>th</sup> of this month. Only fifteen days more.”

“It is better to join at the earliest. I mean tomorrow itself.”

“My only pain is to leave you, Rajiv. The District Education Office where I have to join is far away too. Anyway we will be in touch over phone.”

“Don’t worry Sangeeta. We will be in touch. My only request is that you should not forget me when you enter into a new world and new acquaintances.”

“Don’t speak such trash dear Rajiv. How can I forget you? You will always be in my mind.”

“Your parents will insist for your marriage as you are already 26 now. How will you resist it?”

“Didn’t I promise you Rajiv that I will not marry anyone else other than you? I will tell my parents about our love and request them to wait for your permanent employment.”

“But how long can they wait? How unfortunate I am!”

“Don’t be pessimistic dear Rajiv. We shall pray to God to unite us at the earliest.”

“Ok dear. You may join tomorrow itself. Let’s stop. Others are coming.”

They ended their conversation. Sangeeta disclosed the news of her selection to the other colleagues and the principal arranged a farewell meeting. The love between Sangeeta and Rajiv was unknown to others. Both could smartly control in the presence of others. But when Rajiv spoke in the meeting his voice choked. He struggled hard to avoid bursting out his emotions. The lovers’ parting at 4 pm after the classes was really in tears. They waited for the others to leave the campus.

“Sangeeta, we never thought that we would have to part so soon. We have been here so close together for three years. In fact you have been the polestar who guided me when I have been swaying in the tempest of grief. What will I do when you are gone?”

“Rajiv, the polestar is always there and nothing can hide it from you. I will be in regular touch with you and we can meet at the park on Sundays. I plan to come every weekend.”

“You can’t measure my love to you, Sangeeta. Who can measure the quantity of water in the ocean? Or its depth? My mind can’t go on thinking without you even for an hour. Then how can I remain without you for a week?”

“Rajiv, don’t drown me in that ocean of passion. Do you think my love to you is not that deep as yours? Do you think I will be happy without you?” Tears started flowing over her rosy cheeks.

“Oh, don’t cry, my darling. I know how much you love me.” He wiped away her tears with his hand and gave a kiss on her forehead. “We should not be sentimental like teenagers. We have to be practical. Cheer up now.”

“Papa will be accompanying me tomorrow. I will seek boarding in the working women’s hostel. I will call you next evening.”

“Ok dear. You may go now. Best wishes!”

“Thanks dear Rajiv. Best wishes to you! I will always pray for your employment and our life together.” Thus they departed.

Needless to say, Rajiv was most upset, drowned in grief as his polestar left him. Sangeeta called him the next evening and detailed her new world. She was no doubt content with her new atmosphere. Both of them phoned almost every evening. As promised, Sangeeta met him at the park next Sunday. She was full of hot air on her colleagues, hostel mates, office work etc.

Rajiv got an alarming phone call from her on Monday evening. Her parents have found a suitable match for her. The boy is her father’s friend’s son, who is a teacher in a higher secondary school. She expressed her dissent and had to tell her parents of her love to Rajiv. The parents became very furious and said that they would never allow her to marry him, who has no permanent employment. Sangeeta was really upset and told him that she is willing to elope with him and get registered marriage if he can save her. A heavy lightening shot through Rajiv’s heart. Fortunately his sense conquered the emotions and could think very practically. It is cruelest of her to disobey her parents and push them to the abyss of sorrow and dejection. Rajiv advised her not to displease her parents, and agree for the

marriage. She couldn't agree to his advice first but he convinced her that there was no other option before them. He told her not to call him any more so that they could forget each other, which was what the situation demanded. Even though he was invited for the wedding he didn't attend it because he couldn't bear the sight of another person making her the life partner.

Rajiv continued his teaching in the coaching centre. He wanted to escape from the morose atmosphere there. He tried to forget Sangeeta by involving more in reading. He was writing exams after exams of PSC, Banking Service Recruitment Board etc. But luck was against him and the appointment eluded him. He has now completed four years of service in the coaching centre and was getting Rs. 10,000 per month whereas a last grade employee of a government office drew a starting salary of Rs. 13,000.

Finally, Rajiv's prayers were granted and he got appointment as a peon in the District Collector's Office. A postgraduate has to work as a peon! Something is better than nothing, he consoled himself. He joined the office which was sixty kilometers away from his house. Majority of his superior officers in the office—clerks, superintendents, accounts officer were all inferior to him in education—passed only tenth class, pre degree or degree. They were sympathetic to him but superiors are always superiors and he had to obey their commands, fetching files and serving them from section to section. His thirst for higher education and a better employment prompted him to do PhD as a part time scholar. Fortunately his college classmate Dr. Joseph was a research guide in an aided college in the town. Rajiv stayed in a lodge near his office and went home every weekend. The monotony and humiliation of

his peon work was compensated by the research activities. He availed the earned leaves and visited the research centre, completed the required attendances and submitted the thesis after three years. Only three months were needed for the evaluation and he was awarded PhD at the age of 34.

One day as part of his routine duty Rajiv was asked by the senior superintendent to serve a file to the Deputy Collector who took charge on that day. He was benumbed by the sight of the Deputy Collector. She looked very much like his Sangeeta. But how can she be here? True, it is she herself because the name board on the table read Sangeeta Gopal.

“Good morning madam!” He put the file on the table before her.

“Good morning!” She looked on his face and exclaimed, “You Rajiv!”

“Yes madam. I am that unfortunate Rajiv.”

“What a pity! You couldn’t get a better job?”

“No madam. I got this appointment only three years back. Have written many other tests, but luck is against me.”

“Don’t be dejected, Rajiv. I appeared for the Deputy Collector examinations and got this appointment. You too apply that way. What about your wife and children?”

“I am still a bachelor madam. Not planning for a marriage now.”

“Ok, I shall pray for you, Rajiv. God will save you, no doubt, rewarding your goodness. You may go now.”

Rajiv went back to his seat. How he could muster strength and energy in front of Sangeeta remained strange. ‘My God, what a test it is!’ his mind was throbbing with great agony. At the same time he experienced some occult pleasure lurking in some corner of his mind. Pleasure of meeting his past beloved after seven years! He had no jealousy to her even if she got a superior job, because his passion for her was such. But facing her as another man’s wife and his superior boss was intolerable to him. His conscience told him that it is a sin to look at Sangeeta as his earlier lover. He finds it very difficult to differentiate her—seeing her as another man’s wife. But what to do now except accept the stark reality? If God wants him to undergo further trials, let His will be done, Rajiv pacified his mind.

With a dispassionate mechanical mind Rajiv continued his office work. Three months passed. One evening he got a phone call from his home.

“Hello Rema! What’s the news?”

“Happy news, brother! You have got an advice memo from PSC requesting you to join as Assistant Professor of Mathematics in Maharajas Government College, Kochi. “

“Oh my God, what a surprise, thrilling news! I am coming home tomorrow.”

Thus God granted Rajiv’s prayers at last. May be Sangeeta’s also.



## 14

### The Twins

“Why do you let that cat into our kitchen? It will eat our food when you are away,” I told my wife who was battling in the kitchen in the early hours of the morning. “You are busy with your computer upstairs, and who is there with me to save me from my loneliness? So I have invited Sundari into the kitchen,” my wife replied. Sundari, the name my wife had given to that stray cat, was left out by our nearest neighbours who shifted to another place. Sundari was not that ‘sundari’ (beautiful), but an average cat of native breed with pink and white colours. Being a stray cat it was frightened when I or my son approached. None of us were allowed to stroke her. The very touch and cry of the cat removed my wife’s solitude. In a way I am guilty of leaving my wife alone in the kitchen for many hours. She is not a feminist and so she never insisted that I should help her in cooking. We belong to a patriarchal family line and the men in the family have superiority over women. So my wife was never demanding but I should have helped her instead of giving replies to my email friends. She didn’t like the help of a servant fearing the loss of privacy. When I teach feminism to my students I pray to God to dissuade the students from asking its practice in my own life. A teacher should be a model to the students.

My wife's friendship with Sundari continued and the bond became stronger and stronger. Still she could not stroke the cat. Sundari became pregnant and after one or two months it gave birth to two kittens, both photocopies of the mother. They were brought down to the kitchen from the berth after a week. Now my wife had three companions in place of one. Her kitchen work became smoother and happier. I was also entertained by the plays of the kittens. Then one of the kittens was found missing. What happened to it is still unknown. Since my wife was happy with the cats, I decided to buy a beautiful kitten of foreign pedigree, which we could stroke, lie on our lap, and have communication with it. When I expressed my desire, one of my colleagues told me that he would supply me a twins instead of one. Accordingly I went to his house and he presented me a cartel bearing the twins. The cartel was opened in one of our rooms after shutting its door. My wife and my son were very anxious to look at the guests. Two angels got out of the cartel. Indeed they were very very beautiful. They had snowy white fur except dark spots on their head and tails. The tails were thick and bushy, characteristic of the Ooty cats. Pairs of emeralds on their heads looked at us. The twins were not scared at all. My wife placed some milk before them and they drank a little. Then they started their running. They were identical twins; one had more dark spots on the head than the other. My wife named them Manikutty and Amminikutty.

Needless to say, these twins brought our innocent childhood back. We started to behave like children playing with these twins. Sundari and its kitten were ignored. In fact they refused to come to the kitchen as the twins encroached the place. Still, food was supplied to them in the back yard. A plastic

ball was bought for the twins. The way they played football was more thrilling than watching the World Cup. Naturally the agility of these kittens is superior to the World Cup heroes. Along with pleasures, the twins supplied us burdens and restrictions. For the first three days they found our bedroom, particularly the bed and pillows, as their toilet. We had to wash the bed sheets, replace pillows and even changing the bed. As a precaution the bedrooms and the reading room had to be kept shut always. The beautiful sofa cover was pulled down by the twins and urinated on it. The sofa remained without its cover and it became the place for sharpening their nails. Still, these problems and hardships had the sweetness. Bitter sweetness! Gradually the twins started to use the bathrooms, but not the closets. It was my duty to remove the excrement and clean the bathroom with lotion. It had to be done thrice a day. The twins, when not playing, wanted to sit on our laps. The very jump on to the lap when we were reading or writing pricked our thighs. Once when my leg started to bleed I was worried. I had read that the nail wounds of the cats could cause rabies. As the twins were not affected by rabies, I risked to not taking anti-rabies injections. Manikutty demanded more strokes and cares from us than Amminikutty. She, not satisfied with our strokes, would climb on the shoulder and even head. Though they don't bathe with water and soap as we do twice a day, how clean are their bodies! But how many times they do bathe their bodies with their saliva! We have to learn much from Nature. Their clutches with the nails pained me and I had to wear a shirt always to save my chest, especially nipples. Remember, the kittens had been fed by its mother when I brought them. The third day of their arrival, as I was reading newspaper in the morning, the twins jumped on

to my lap and started crying. I stroked them, but it couldn't pacify them. "What are they crying for? They have been fed just now. Have gone to toilet? Yes, that's also done. Then what?" I thought. Why didn't God give speech power to non-human beings? In a way it's better they don't have. The sound pollution which man makes is deadlier than the atomic radiation! The nasty, ugly words which dart from his mouth can annihilate millions! In fact it boomerangs to the Creator Himself! Man plays a discordant note to the symphony which all other creatures make in this universe. "Miau, miau, miau, miau," the twins were still pestering me. "What do you want? What are you crying for?" I asked. "Maa, maa, maa, maa," the tone was different. "Oh! They are calling for their mother," I could read their language. Probably they were asking me where their mother was. An arrow pierced through my heart. I've never thought of their attachment to their mother. I could read also their mother's moans. Was it not cruel of me to snatch away these little ones from their mother? The thought pricked me and my heart started to bleed. Shall I return the twins to its mother? No, I shouldn't be so sentimental. After all life is a sum of innumerable meetings and partings! God has given His creation the strength to bear such pangs! I sought refuge in such philosophies.

There are many things which we human beings can learn from these 'sub-human' beings. (Are we superior to them except in brain and speech?) The expression of these twins' love—their kissing each other, hugs, licking one another, sleeping on other's body, eating and drinking from the same plate, playing together etc. etc.—are real feasts for our eyes and mind. They are the real beauties! When they are around me I can't pluck my eyes from

them. Indeed they are joys for ever! Their dangling on the door curtains, climbing over the grills, sitting together on the TV, dining table, especially on the newspaper, like two marble statues--are treats for us! Once Amminikutty climbed over a window through its curtain and started dangling on the flicker lamb at the foot of my father's photograph. Had my father been alive in the photo, he would have picked the kitten and hugged it, for he was a lover of cats when he lived. In my childhood we reared a cat always to the kill mice. The cats used to sleep with us.

The twins' plays went to such an extreme that they climbed on a tender chilly plant which my wife nursed with extra care on the backyard. My wife used to pluck hot chillies from it. The plant was broken. Instead of anger we felt only happiness. Had the mischief been done by my son when he was a child, we would have punished him, because God has given him reasoning power. Human beings, having developed brains, do all sorts of crimes and evils which other animals never do. One day as I was having tea in the College canteen, one of my colleagues read the news about the five murders committed by a man. He killed his wife, hid the body in the safety tank of the toilet; two days later he raped his own little daughter, killed her and her brother and buried somewhere; after three days he brought his remaining two children from the school, killed them and locked the bodies in a room. Commenting on this diabolical act, one teacher said, "How can one become so brutal?" I told him rather hot, "Dear friend, don't dishonour animals. Never compare such human activities to animals.' Does any animal attack another without any reason? Except for food, do animals kill other creatures? Do they attack us unless they are provoked, disturbed or scared?"

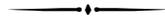
The very term “brutal” has to be redefined.” All the teachers assembled there agreed to my views.

Things went very smooth in our house. The twins made our house a heaven. Our daughter in New Delhi is eagerly waiting for the holidays after six months to experience the twins’ play. She would bring ties for them. As her birthday is approaching I shall present her this story as this year’s birthday gift. A few days later my wife told me, “Dear, what would our mother do when she comes here for stay tomorrow? How could she manage the twins when we leave her alone from ten to four on working days?” Our mother is eighty-seven years old, weak and heart patient. She is prolonging her life fed by countless tablets. She has been staying in my brother’s house for a few months. She wishes to stay with us for some months. How can I tell her not to come to our house since we have two kittens? I told my wife, “Don’t worry dear, mother will manage. Or, shall we give back the kittens to the teacher who gave us?” Though I asked her so, I never intended to do it. “No question of leaving these angels,” my wife replied. “OK, we will manage the crisis somehow,” I told her.

My mother was brought to our house the next day. She was delighted to see those kittens in the house. She enjoyed their plays. The next day, Monday, my wife had to go to her school and, I to my college. Leaving mother’s food and medicines on the table in her room for her intake at 12 noon, I went to the college. The twins were fed and they were sleeping then. Extra food was placed for them in the kitchen. I prayed to God that the twins should not create any problem to my mother. At one o’ clock I returned home for my lunch. When I opened the front door I could hear the gasping sound of my mother. I

rushed to her bedroom and found that she was struggling for breath. I asked if she took the medicine. She replied in a very low voice, “The kittens tumbled down the tablets as well as food when I was sleeping.” True, I found the scattered tablets on the white-tiled floor which she could not find out. The food was also scattered on the floor. At once I gave her emergency medicine to ensure her easy breath. I cleaned the floor. The twins were found sleeping on the dining table. I started to think, “Who is dearer to me, mother or the kittens? No doubt my mother, who gave me birth and nurtured me to this position.” Though reluctantly, I took the cartel in which the twins were brought, put the sleeping kittens in it and tied with a twine. Mother was gradually recovering. I told her, “Ma, I have to go to college now. You will be OK after a few minutes. I shall return after one hour.” “OK, you may go,” mother replied. I took the cartel to my car, and drove along the road. Beyond the town I reached a lonely area. I stopped the car. The twins were still sleeping. My heart started to tighten. I felt a kind of suffocation in my throat. It was very painful for me to depart the cats. Am I doing right or wrong? If they were to be disposed so, why did I bring them to my house? Wouldn’t they have lived happily in my colleague’s house? A series of wounding questions strangled my heart. I have to take a decision. Gathering all my energy, I took the cartel and placed it on the side of the road. With shaking hands I opened it. The kittens were awakening. They were startled by the new surroundings. Weeping, I bade them good bye. I got into the car and started the engine. The twins came to the door of the car crying. Weren’t they asking me, “Pappa, are you leaving us? Please don’t leave us. Please don’t leave us. How will we live? Who will feed us? Wasn’t it better that you killed

us?” I broke into tears. Suddenly my cell phone rang. It was my mother’s. God! Is she serious? “Ma, what happened?” I asked. “Where are the kittens? I don’t find them in the house!” mother replied. “Ma, I have left them on the road since they are trouble to us,” I said. “Are you mad? What wrong have they done? Do they have reasoning power as we do have? Bring them back,” she cried. “But ma...,” I whispered. “No but. If you can’t, then you may discard me also,” she reacted. “OK ma. I am bringing them back,” I consoled her. Life was restored to me. My breathing became normal. The suffocation and the aching of the heart disappeared. I got down from the car, took the twins, hugged them, kissed them and brought them back to my house. My mother was happy again that she got back her companions. She had experienced too much of solitude in my house that these kittens proved real companions to her. “My dear son, I can’t live without these angels,” she said. “Alright mother, I am going to appoint a home nurse for you and the kittens,” I replied. When my wife returned in the evening I told her what had happened. She was horrified to hear of my cruelty to the twins. She too agreed to appoint a home nurse. Till we get one I decided to take casual leaves. Thus our house became heaven again!



## 15

### World Environment Day

Kaatturaja is the most sought out forest thief in Karnataka, India. As his name suggests he is the king of the forest. Six footed sturdy youth of thirty, he is ebony black with a twisted moustache on his ferocious face. In addition to thousands of costly trees he has stolen he has hunted many wild animals and even elephants for their tusks. The State government has offered ten lakh rupees for those who point out him to the corps. He has ambushed the forest guards several times but fortunately none was killed.

Kaatturaja is the illegitimate son of a tribal woman named Kanni. At the age of sixteen when Kanni was collecting firewood in the forest, two forest guards raped her and left. Though she reported the matter to her parents they were not dare enough to complain to the police station which was several kilometres away from their hut. Moreover it was a futile attempt to complain since tribal people's wails were never heeded by the government. Illiterate Kanni gave birth to a son and he lived among other tribal children of the forest as a bastard. Kanni was married to a youth when Kaatturaja was only two years old. Thus Kaatturaja lived with his grand-parents despised by all except his mother. Occasionally his mother visited him and presented him sweets and delicacies which he liked most. Kaatturaja grew up from teen age to youth fed by anger and

revenge to the establishment and the world which discarded him as an outcast. The tribal people there lived in a very miserable condition. They didn't get any financial assistance from the government even though crores were allotted to them which were misappropriated and looted by the government officials. There were no hospitals, schools or even good roads for them. They survived on with what the Nature fed them through the forest—tubers, honey, fish from brooks, meat of small animals like rat, rabbit, wild boar etc. Kaatturaja was sent to a school in the nearby village and got primary education. This education opened his eyes and he learnt how his people were exploited by the government and forest mafia. Becoming a youth he decided to alleviate financial difficulties of his neighbourhood by working as a forest thief. He was helped by his friends there and started cutting costly trees of the forest—teak, sandalwood, rosewood, mahogany etc. and sold them to agents of timber merchants. They did it in the thick of forest where forest guards seldom patrolled. It was the money they earned thus which were distributed to the poor families for various purposes such as purchasing dresses from the town, getting treatment for the sick etc. Kaatturaja never had any guilt of conscience for his illegal act but took it as a sweet revenge to the government for marginalising them.

5th June 2011. World Environment Day. Kaatturaja was all alone in the forest and was trying to axe a teak. Being their own day, the forest and its inhabitants were celebrating. Gentle breeze kissed and stroked all trees, birds and animals. One could sense the mirth of the Nature from the chirping of birds, laughing of leaves, mating calls and other happy cries of animals. The teak sensed the advent of its death and cried for

help. Insensible to human beings the cry reached the ears of elephants grazing on a mound nearby.

“Isn’t it an alarming cry of a tree?” the tusker asked the cow elephants.

“True. We shall not allow any human being to trespass our dwelling place this special day,” the other elephants replied.

“Let’s charge then,” the tusker said. Kaatturaja lifted his axe to cut and the elephants rushed to him roaring. Frightened he shot up the tree like a rocket. The elephants stood beneath the tree waiting for his descent. The teak thanked the elephants through its rustling applause. Kaatturaja who has never been timid in his youth, started shivering. It seemed that the tree was talking to him:

“Dear friend, what harm have I done to you to instigate you to kill me? See how I became your saviour! What harm have this forest and its animals done to you? Haven’t you felled thousands of trees and hunted hundreds of animals? You and your people survive only because of our presence. Who will axe the branch he sits on? If you continue to destroy this forest, how and where will those elephants and other animals live?”

“I am sorry dear tree. Kindly forgive me,” Kaatturaja started weeping with clasped palms. He then spoke in loud voice to the entire forest: “In the name of this forest I promise you all that I will no more trouble you. Please pardon me for the crimes I have done. I will be your friend from this very moment and devote my life for the preservation of this forest.” His voice echoed in the forest and his conversion was welcomed by the entire forest with cheers. The trees swayed and danced. Birds

twittered. Animals cried in joy. The elephants standing below went back swinging their trunks in happiness.

With a sigh of relief Kaatturaja climbed down the tree and thanked it once again for saving his life. He went to his house, changed dress and went straight to the magistrate's office in the nearby town. He got permission to get into the magistrate's room.

He told the magistrate, "Honourable sir, I am Kaatturaja, the sought out forest thief. I have come to surrender. I would like to do penance for the crimes I have committed. You may arrest me."

The magistrate gave orders for his arrest. He told him, "It's a great thing that you have surrendered. You will be jailed now and inquest will be done. You can tell the court whatever you want when the trial comes."

Kaatturaja was sent to the district jail. As part of the inquest he was taken by the police to the forest several times. He admitted all charges against him and pointed out the places of the forest where he felled the trees. After a month he was brought to the court for the trial. The public prosecutor pleaded for the government and presented the crimes Kaatturaja had committed. Kaatturaja had no advocates to defend him and he accepted all the charges presented by the public prosecutor. The judge then asked Kaatturaja if he had anything to state or plead before the court.

Kaatturaja replied, "You honour, it is true that I have committed unpardonable crimes and did a lot of damage to the forest. I now sincerely feel that I should not have been so hostile to the forest and the environment. I should have abided to the

laws of the government and supported it in its activities for the welfare of the people and the nature. You may punish me. But if the government is mercy enough I can devote the rest of my life for the conservation and preservation of the forest I have destroyed. The court may kindly believe my words that I will no more break the laws of the government but will support to the best of my ability all welfare projects. If you allow me I will make an action force in the forest with my friends and along with them volunteer for the preservation and conservation of the forest. We will not allow any intruders to exploit the forest anymore. As a penance for the crimes I have done we will plant thousands of trees in the forest and thus make it the best forest in the world.”

The judge replied, “The court is happy to hear such good words from you. Taking your words for granted the court is giving you a light punishment for the innumerable crimes you have committed. You are going to be imprisoned for one year and it is test dose as to see if your conversion is genuine or not. If you prove your goodness of heart you will be released and then as you promised you can make the action force and serve the forest.”

Kaatturaja was imprisoned in the district jail and he was a model prisoner, favourite of the jail authorities as well as the fellow prisoners. He thus showed that he is a purified and sanctified being.

5th June 2012. World Environment Day. The court released Kaatturaja and allowed him to go back to the forest. The forest welcomed sanctified Kaatturaja clapping leaves. Gentle breeze stroked him. Birds sang his welcome music.

Monkeys chattered and led him to the midst of forest. Elephants grazing on the meadow sensed his arrival and trumpeted. It was a grand homecoming for Kaatturaja. The forest accepted him as its saviour Raja.

As pledged and promised Kaatturaja made an action force with his friends. The team of energetic twenty youth started afforestation wherever barren lands were found. The forest guards had no duty at all since Kaatturaja's team never allowed any trespassers to steal the forest. After two years the forest became a model to the world and the country nominated Kaatturaja and his team for the United Nations Forest for People Award.

