

Kalaaignar in English Translation



# As Is in the Original

(Short Stories)



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BHARATHIAR UNIVERSITY

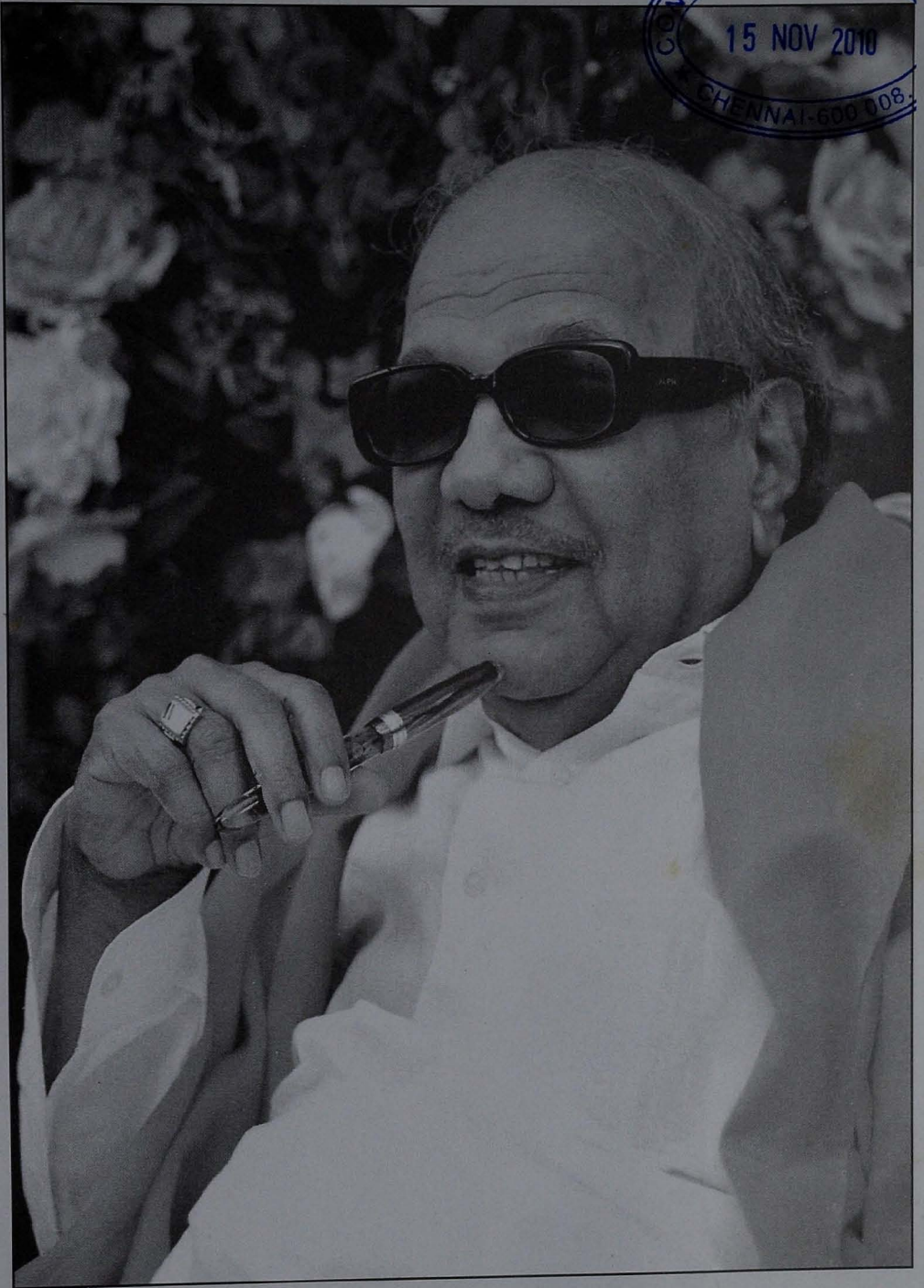
Kalaignar's fiction is a case of trusting the teller before trusting the tale. It is the imposing personality of Karunanidhi the man that defines Kalaignar the artist in him.

A writer with a reformist zeal and an uncompromising rationalist bias, Karunanidhi uses the medium of fiction for exposing the maladies that affect the psychic health of the society. The caste system and its perpetrators, the irrational, superstitious beliefs and practices, the subjugation of women and the indifference of his fellow Tamils towards their language and culture frequently come in for polemical analysis and criticism, in his short stories and poems in particular. This he does by dexterously exploiting the resources of satire. But it is not the satire of an angry young man but is that of a matured social critic freed of resentment and malice, often wrapped in gentle irony and humour.

Kalaignar's is then art with a purpose, which does not degenerate into propaganda, nor does it mark a conflict between entertainment and edification. They in most cases work in unison, thanks to Kalaignar's unfailing wit and humour, fun and repartee.



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Dr Kalaigarnar M. Karunanidhi



**Kalaignar in English Translation**

# **As Is in the Original** **(Short Stories)**

*Translated by*

**P. Raja**

*Edited by*

**P. Marudanayagam**

**V. Murugan**



**Bharathiar University**  
Coimbatore, India



**MACMILLAN**



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**M. Karunanidhi**  
Chief Minister



**Secretariat**  
Chennai - 600 009  
Date: 12.05.2009

# Foreword

I am extremely happy to know that Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, has taken the initiative to bring out a selection of my writings in English.

Bharatidasan, a formidable revolutionary poet, instilled in the Tamils an intense love for Tamil in such exhortations as


May you thunder, O Conch!  
That the never diminishing Tamil  
Is our life-breath and our prosperity.

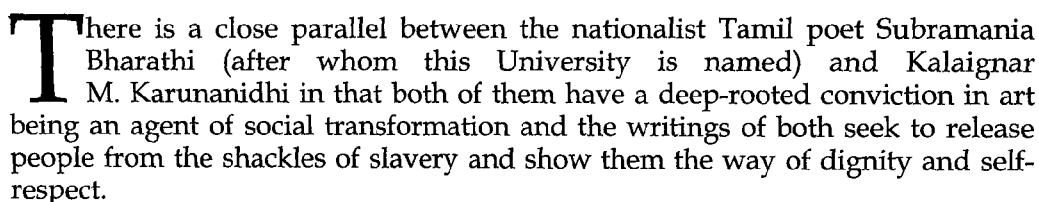
Periyar E.V. Ramasamy and Perarignar Anna devoted their entire lives to promote among the Tamils an awareness of the dignity of their race. Following in their footsteps, from my childhood to this day I have immersed myself in the task of writing in order to keep the Tamil youth ever vigilant because of my desire that the Tamil land and the Tamil society should progress rising to the level of the rest of mankind. With this end in view, my writings have taken numerous forms such as poetry, drama, fiction, essay, epistle and travelogue.

Many have admirably observed and continue to observe that my literary output has also contributed to the onward march of the Tamils in several spheres. In such a context, let me unreservedly and to my heart's content praise Bharathiar University, especially its Vice Chancellor, Dr G. Thiruvassagam, for his efforts to publish the most significant of those writings in English.

My thoughts have always centred round the idea that the Tamils should awaken and that the Tamil land should achieve worldwide progress. May these translations effectively serve that cause dear to my heart!

To  
**Dr G. Thiruvassagam**  
Vice Chancellor  
Bharathiar University  
Coimbatore

சென்னை  
  
(M. Karunanidhi)



Bharathiar firmly believed that at the root of all social problems lay the evil of the caste system. All his life, he stressed that there were only two castes – the righteous and the unrighteous, the former superior and the latter inferior. A standing example of the might of the pen over the sword, Bharathiar's writings played a very significant role not only in gaining freedom for India from foreign yoke but also in unfettering his countrymen from the utterly dehumanizing beliefs and practices of the Indian society.

Kalaighnar, remaining in the forefront of the fight against social inequality in all its forms, is a writer with ingrained social consciousness and has fathered numerous social reforms as the head of the government and as the leader of a political party, thanks to which people from the sections of the society once looked down as being incapable of thought and knowledge are today intellectuals, professionals and leaders of men.

A grand fusion of Periyar, Anna and Bharathiar, Kalaignar stands as a towering personality. Kalaignar now at 86, age has not withered his intellect nor has time made his writings stale.

Determined to secure a presence for Tamil literature and culture on the global scene, this University has already translated Bharathi's poems into English and conferred the "Bharathi Tamil Chemmal" award on Kalaignar in 2007, the University's Silver Jubilee year. The present endeavour, translation of Kalaignar's works into English, is a major step towards realizing this goal.

### G. Thiruvvasagam



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# Prologue

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**K**alaignar M. Karunanidhi's literary works in English translation should constitute a gift of the Tamil language to world literature.

In so far as Kalaignar is both a visionary writer and an active practitioner of his vision, he is a phenomenon unto himself, standing a rung or two above his fellow artists of all genres.

Kalaignar's significance in the history of Tamil literature primarily lies in his restoration and renewal of the pristine glory of Tamil, the language that is the mother of the Dravidian family of languages and that is one of the primary classical languages of the world.

Kalaignar's creativity began to manifest in his concern for the ethnic identity of the Tamils and the aesthetic exuberance of the Tamil language, and today it has matured into a seminal contribution to world literature.

Looked at the need for winning international recognition for Tamil literature, especially in the context of the other pan-Indian language, Sanskrit, enjoying worldwide attention and study, the present translations of Kalaignar's selected works into English are an attempt in the right direction.

Such of these translations are also a need of the hour for the Tamil language to demonstrate its capacity for indestructibility and rejuvenation, at this hour of the prognosticatory threat of the social scientists that globalization would in its wake see the languages of ethnic communities either wear off or die out.

**Kavippperarasu Vairamuthu**



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# Contents

ଓନ ❖ ଓନଓନ ❖ ଓନଓନ ❖ ଓନଓନ ❖ ଓଓନ ❖ ଓନ

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xvii</i>
1. Fame	1
2. Nalayini	5
3. Temptation	10
4. The Dancer	14
5. The Bin	20
6. Sandal Paste Cup	25
7. Godman	34
8. Love Life of Ganga	43
9. Mother's Love	46
10. The Great Escape	54
11. No Escape	60
12. Supporter	66
13. Secret	70
14. Three Hundred Rupees	73
15. The Poor	75
16. As Is in the Original	78
17. A Bunch of Palmyra Fruit	83

18. The Story of a Dead Woman	87
19. Inquest	94
20. Doves of a Banyan Tree	98
21. Birds of Passage	102
22. Love Letter	105
23. A Rose in the Desert	108
24. The Last Phase	112
25. Sweet is Venom	116

ଓଡ଼ିଆ ଶବ୍ଦମାନଙ୍କର ସଜ୍ଜା

# Introduction

ଓଡ଼ିଆ ଶବ୍ଦମାନଙ୍କର ସଜ୍ଜା

Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi, born in 1924 in a hamlet of Thanjavur in the southern part of India, has eminently succeeded in making spectacular contributions both as a statesman and as a man of letters. His has been a full life providing ample space for diplomacy, social reformation and creative writing. Neither a philosopher nor a full-fledged academic living in an ivory tower, he has the courage and the wisdom to think and to act remarkably. A prolific writer endowed with unusual powers of observation and meditation, he has been ceaselessly adorning his beloved Mother Tamil with a steady stream of writings, leaving no genre untouched. It may be poetry or prose, song or verse, essay or story, play or fiction, social novel or historical novel, creative writing or criticism, memoir or autobiography, script for a film or a play, broadcast or speech – he can handle it with astonishing ease. What he has written till today may run to more than fifty volumes of 300 to 400 pages each.

What Karunanidhi states in the first volume of his autobiography about the year in which he was born is a telling comment on the ethos of the times as well as on the political, social and cultural forces that moulded his world-view. That was a year that witnessed momentous events. Lenin, the supreme architect of the communist revolution in Russia, died and Stalin came to power. Trotsky's advocacy of violent worldwide revolution was abandoned in favour of Stalin's plan for "*socialism in one country*" and the communist leaders decided to adapt the movement to the differing situations in various countries. Turkey became a republic under the presidentship of Kemal Ataturk during whose fifteen-year reign, the country's political and economic structure as well as its religious and social bases was totally transformed. Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, written during his incarceration in Bavaria, preaching anti-semitism, power worship and disdain for morality and outlining his strategy for world domination later became the bible of

the Nazi party. Since all the empires had been weakened by the first world war, many colonies boldly rose in revolt against them.

When Nazism, Fascism and Communism were becoming prominent in the West, Gandhian ideology started taking shape in India. It was in 1924 that Gandhiji, released from prison, became the President of the Indian National Congress and Jawaharlal Nehru was elected its General Secretary. India had awakened from its deep slumber and Gandhiji's appearance on the political scene electrified the Indian masses. The Belgaum Congress meet had the party's future course of action mapped out. Though most of the Indian political leaders were unanimous in their view that the British should be driven away from the country, they were hopelessly divided with regard to the strategies to be developed for dealing with the foreign power. The labour unions in the country were gradually becoming stronger and stronger. The feudal lords and zamindars were waging a losing battle against the tillers of the soil. If in the south seeds were sown for organized fights for social justice, in the north there appeared signs of disruption of communal harmony.

It was in 1924 that Periyar E.V. Ramasami planned an epic battle against the evil of untouchability that later earned him the title of Vaikkam Hero. Besides laying a firm foundation for the labour movement in Tamilnadu, Thiru. Vi. Kalyanasundara Mudaliyar became a fierce fighter for the country's freedom. Finally, Karunanidhi significantly adds that it was the year in which "the revolutionary of revolutionaries, who dispelled the thousand-year-old darkness of the Tamil land," Arignar Anna, was a high school student equipping himself for the historic role he was going to play.

In this chronicle he is able to identify, of course with the benefit of hindsight, the intellectuals and men of action who later became his models as well as those against whom he had to define himself. Though all those personalities, movements, parties and ideologies might have attracted his attention at an impressionable age, he was going to choose Periyar and not Gandhiji, Arignar Anna and not Jawaharlal Nehru, the party wedded to Dravidian ideals and not the Congress, Periyar's Marxism and not Nehruvian socialism, and Tamilnadu and not India. To him, as to his guides and companions in the Dravidian Movement, the social and cultural emancipation of the Dravidians was of greater importance than even the political freedom of the country.

Even as a fourteen-year-old adolescent, Karunanidhi was captivated by the self-respect movement of Periyar E.V. Ramasami, whose fiery speeches and writings exerted an irresistible influence on several thousands of young men and women of Tamilnadu during the early decades of the twentieth century. To the politically,



socially, economically and culturally oppressed of the Tamil land, Periyar appeared as a new messiah who could save them from the atrocities perpetrated against them in the name of religion. His words and deeds, ideas and activities, principles and practices took the southern part of India by storm as he travelled the length and breadth of it tirelessly, asking the Dravidians to become aware of their racial identity and to boldly fight for their release from the shackles of slavery, superstition and inferiority complex which, in his view, had been the handiwork of an alien race. The young Karunanidhi was one of his prize catches.

If Periyar's thoughts made an indelible impression on him, Arignar Anna's powerful oratory became a perennial source of inspiration. He thoroughly soaked himself in Anna's speeches and writings, committed numerous admirable utterances of his to memory and revelled in quoting them as often as possible. When it came to his own speeches, he didn't slavishly imitate Anna but scrupulously developed a distinct style of his own. If Anna's ornate and colourful prose is almost verse and if every paragraph of his can be turned into a *viruttappā* by a few slight modifications, Karunanidhi's prose is punchy, heavily ironic and full of witticisms. If every sentence in the former's speech, having a lyrical charm of its own, is a case of "linked sweetness long drawn out," every sentence in the latter's speech moves fast and quickly reaches its carefully planned climax. If Anna's mastery of Tamil prose is almost unsurpassed, every speech of Karunanidhi is a sparkling performance. One would be reminded of the comparison Dryden draws between Demosthenes and Cicero:

One warms you by degrees; the other sets you on  
fire all at once and never intermits his heat. ...  
One persuades, the other commands.

Of all the modern poets, it was Bharatidasan, the organ voice of the Dravidian movement, who won his heart by a poetry that galvanized the Tamils into action. He can use Bharatidasan's similes, phrases, lines and whole poems to dramatic effect in his own speeches and dialogues for films. Inspired by Bharatidasan's play *Irāṇiyan allatu Inaiyaṁ Vīraṇ*, he reconstructed the myths relating to Ravana, Vali, Hiranya and Indrajit. The Dravidian stance on many more legends, myths, literary representations and historical personages was later exquisitely articulated by Karunanidhi in different genres and modes.

Kalaighar's lack of college education or of classroom learning of ancient Tamil writings never stood in the way of his becoming an accomplished writer and competing with the university wits of his time. Energetic and strenuous self-schooling more than made up for it. Plunging into studies of classical and modern Tamil works, he got as much out of them as any contemporary Tamil scholar

could. He took to *Tolkāppiyam*, *Tirukkuraḷ*, *Eṭṭuttokai*, *Pattuppāṭṭu*, *Cilappatikāram*, *Maṇimēkalai*, *Kalīṅkattupparaṇi* and *Sundaraṇār's Maṇōḡmaṇiyam* just as fish take to water, and a sound knowledge of these stood him in good stead by shaping his vision of life and having quite an impact on the texture of his prose and poetry. Besides writing learned expositions of some of these texts, he could provide new renderings of many of these into lucid modern Tamil so that they could easily reach the masses. Because of his re-presentations of *Tirukkuraḷ* in more than one form, Tiruvalluvar became a household name in Tamilnadu.

There is no simple yardstick with which the performance of any writer can be assessed. It has to vary from group to group if not from individual to individual for there are writers and writers. Their missions vary; their methods differ. Gandhiji was a prolific writer but would never claim the title of an artist. Among those that have produced many works of lasting value, there have been political revolutionaries such as Lenin, Trotsky and Mao Tse-Tung, political theorists such as Hobbes, Thomas Paine and Karl Marx, statesmen such as Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill and Malraux, philosophers such as Voltaire, Bertrand Russell and Sartre, activists such as Mahatma Gandhi, Periyar E.V. Ramasami and Martin Luther King and scientists such as Charles Darwin, Julian Huxley and Einstein. The writings of these can't be measured against those of creative artists such as Flaubert, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, who firmly believed that artistry was of primary importance and that their loyalty to language came before everything else.

Karunanidhi is almost equally split between his responsibilities to art and politics. He may be in or out of power; he may be the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu or the Leader of the Opposition but his creative vigour shows no signs of abating. The older he grows, the more voluminous the literary output happens to be. For the life, career and achievement of Karunanidhi, we can find three amazingly close parallels in contemporary world history: Arthur Koestler, Pablo Neruda and Wole Soyinka. Koestler, who, interestingly begins his autobiography with an account of what happened in different parts of the world on his birthday, was a communist when he was in his twenties, left the party during the Stalin purge trials, became an influential spokesman of the non-communist left and is now remembered for his writings characterized by an impressive journalistic style and a sense of commitment. Neruda earned a name as a poet, diplomat and communist leader, received the Nobel Prize for literature while serving as ambassador to France and is known for his highly personal poetry in the collection *Twenty Love Poems and One Song of Despair* and for his writings that glorify his home country's landscape

and condemn the exploitation of the Red Indians. Soyinka, a Nigerian revolutionary, playwright, poet and novelist, has won international acclaim for his writings which combine Western and Yoruba traditions.

Karunanidhi's writings, dashed off in the white heat of inspiration in the midst of a hectic schedule, are in Tamil, at once a classical and modern language that has, because of several centuries of constant use, become a supple medium of prose and verse. They have to be made available in English if the world at large, especially the West, has to recognize their power and glory.

**Prof. P. Marudanayagam**



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# Preface

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“What next?” Maharishi Vyasa asked himself after successfully completing the marathon job of compiling the *Vedas*. He was not a sleepyhead and he knew for certain that he was born to achieve. A plethora of thoughts rushed to him and vied with one another to plead with the blessed sage to give them shape. He was in a quandary about what to choose, for great minds could only think of lofty thoughts. Finally, the best in the whole lot elbowed its way into his thought process.

Sage Vyasa conceived *Mahabharata*. Having devised the scheme of an excellent work, he was in search of an able amanuensis who could record on dried palm leaves every syllabus that fell from his mouth.

Brahma, the creator, came to the sage’s rescue. He recommended Lord Ganesha, as nobody else, in his opinion, could be treated on a par with the pot-bellied, elephant-headed God of knowledge and success.

On invocation, Ganapati (another name for Ganesha) appeared before the sage who told him his wish.

“Agreed,” said Pillaiyar (another name of Ganapathi) and raised a warning finger. “I shall do as you wish,” He continued, “on condition that you must dictate without a break and not allow my stylus to pause even for a second.”

The sage nodded his head. The Lord smiled at his nervousness.

Vyasa, to be on the safe side, told the Lord, “But first grasp the meaning of what I dictate before you move your stylus on the leaf.”

Pillaiyar grinned as he nodded. Now it was the sage’s turn to smile.

Thus began the composition of the noble poem, the *Mahabharata*, possessing in a supreme degree the qualities of a true epic, heroic characters and stately diction. Words, like a torrential downpour rushed from the sage and the Lord’s stylus was moving at breakneck speed. But the moment of acute embarrassment came when the fast moving stylus broke into two.

The sage in his meditative ecstasy continued to dictate. And the elephant-headed Lord too without a moment's hesitation broke out of his tusks and helped the writer to complete the work.

Thus goes the legend behind the broken tusk of Pillaiyar. But do not stop with the story. Read between the lines.

To an elephant the tusk is a matter of pride. Yet the Lord sacrificed it for a noble cause. Hence this action of Pillaiyar can't but be a symbolic demonstration that no personal sacrifice is too much in the cause of spreading *gnana* and *dharma*.

Storytelling which is as old as the world itself, apart from the purpose of entertaining children of all ages, played the major role of educating them. In India (the original home of fiction), storytelling is serious business. Storytellers of yore strongly believed that great truths are easily understood when expressed through a simple tale or legend. In short, stories are sugar-coated pills for swallowing without much fuss. And the result is easy cure.

Our traditional stories are often cautionary tales and guides to behaviour. Not a single story was told without a purpose.

Kalaighnar Karunanidhi's stories are invariably told with a purpose. For him, like C. N. Annadurai, storytelling is serious business. He is one of those few writers who can express in flowery language issues of considerable importance while entertaining us: while making us laugh or cry, happy or sad.

As a social critic, Kalaighnar uses the short story form to depict the passions and foibles of man as they surface in different circumstances. His targets are often the pretentious and pompous men. As one who understands human psychology, Kalaighnar makes some very observant comments achieving this in a sympathetic way. The reader also develops insights into several typical Indian situations, a process in which the author helps him/her unobtrusively and unprejudiciously.

Kalaighnar's short stories, mostly in satirical frames, comment on varied aspects of life. He has stories with hardcore realism, stories of psychological import, and satires in the garb of tales as well as man's encounter with supra- or infra-human elements. He portrays admirably the beast in man as well as the man in man. He shows us the thin line that separates alone is worthy of a full length study.

A Kalaighnar story might contain humour, satire and irony all at once. Young and old charmed by his style. His extensive knowledge of adult human nature and his ability to stimulate in his readers the age-old urge to enjoy a story are the major factors in his popularity as a writer. He is doubtless a significant storyteller who, giving an authentic portrayal of the Tamil (read Indian) scene, presents his characters in an entirely credible frame.



A poet at heart, Kalaighnar combines modern ideas and techniques in his short stories. Transformation for the future of mankind is the motive behind Kalaighnar's creative writing. He has been a crusader against the invasion of Tamilnadu's intellectual climate by decadent values. He has not only been a social critic of the first order, but also, what is more important, he has stressed the intellectual and the psychic splendour inherent in man, through his creative writings. There may be many social critics whose voices may be thunderous, but leaving any lasting impact is a different matter. We believe that Kalaighnar achieves this purpose because he drives home this point through his literary art. Through his creative writing, he has brought about a new awareness about the sweetness and serenity that pervades life in general and the rural Indian life in particular.

Every situation in the short stories of Kalaighnar is tinged with satire and a dash of humour. This is what makes his stories irresistibly effective. The writer laughs at the society, of course, but he does as though without the slightest sign of a sardonic smile on his face. He gives us clues to make out for ourselves the ways and means by which the society thrives on a pack of false values, and pinpoints how an innocent individual can be reduced to a scapegoat. His characters are not just characters moulded out of the blue but types-types of exploiters we encounter in our day-to-day life.

Kalaighnar's short stories reveal his technical mastery of the storytellers' art in bringing most adroitly all the threads together so that the plots are carried forward with speed, suspense and vividness along with the imaginative probing into the human soul. Mere imagination is not so interesting and heart-touching. Facts plus powerful imagination create fiction. If worked out in a lively and artistic form, it can become a mirror of the society concerned reflecting its clear picture, with inherent contradictions as well as promises. This forms the basis of the short stories of Kalaighnar Karunanidhi's

**Dr P. Raja**

Reader in English

Tagore Government Arts College

Pudhucherry

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# 1 Fame

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**N**one was there to equal him in the field of scientific research. The Sub-Continent hailed him as the Einstein of India. And in historical research he had attained consummate scholarship. What were the main events during the reign of Charles? What were the characteristics of Shah Jahan? What do you know about Nasser's period or about dauntless Caesar? Answers to these questions were at his fingertips. To cut matters short, he was a walking encyclopaedia.

Like to discuss with him the field of literature? He was prepared. In the genre of poetry whose poems are to be taken up? Kamban? Shelley? Kalidas? Tennyson? Byron? Bharati? Whoever it may be, he would come out with his irrefutable comments. Have you a doubt in economics? He would start delivering his lecture on economics as if he were a descendant of Karl Marx. What is the worth of America? What is the secret behind the success of Russia? He would dwell on these subjects with effortless ease. A genius in mathematics. A giant in geography. On a par with Plato in the field of politics! A Socrates among philosophers. A blend of Shakespeare and Shaw in literature. Such an intellectual was he, with a path of his own. People hesitated to call him by his name for they feared that by doing so they would bring disrespect to him. And so the world called him '*Maythai*', meaning genius.

A few poets explained his pet name in an excellent manner. '*May*' is a day of celebration in honour of workers. '*Thai*' denotes the festival of the Tamil working class. Two days of celebration join hands in that word and so was an apt name for him. Several others delighted in saying that that was the appropriate word for him who had enchanted them. He was not yet thirty and was bubbling with youthful enthusiasm. Yet fame had catapulted him to dizzy heights.

Students and workers, pundits and the poor always surrounded him singing of his glory. He was pleased with himself when he was shown to what great heights he had grown. Yet he found it difficult to hide his heart fuming like a volcano.

Fame! Fame! Fame!

Who wants this fame? A giant in history! His knowledge of geography appreciated by the whole world. A king among poets. Emperor of letters! Oh, blabbering of the world! Yet what a torture he underwent! Down with Fame, howled he with his broken heart. And reason – he couldn't move about in public on his own. Could he go for a walk on the seashore? Couldn't. Not that he was prohibited from doing so, but it was 'fame' that restricted his movements. Hundreds and thousands of people would surround him. And news would spread fast of his coming. To escape from the big botheration that his fame had brought him, he had to rush back home. Couldn't travel by train. Couldn't even show his face in the bazaar. Couldn't set his foot in exhibitions. Fame! Fame! Fame everywhere! There was none who didn't speak of his glory.

"How beautifully he has described the park wherein the lover and his lady love coo into each other's ears! No writer has so far described such a scene as lively as he has done. Just a reading of it is enough and we are overcome by a kind of stupor. What could have been his state when he wrote such lines? Maybe he wrote them from his imagination but won't he have desired his visualization come true? Won't he have experienced a state of distress when he felt the urge to fulfil his desires? And in such a state of distress, won't he have set his heart upon an unfragrant Cassandra in the absence of a fragrant rose?"

Thus spoke they, the common crowd.

"Surprising indeed! But we don't have to doubt his authenticity. We can be quite sure that he is not of that type," certified many.

"How can one assert that he has a flawless character? He has travelled in many countries."

"He is well read too. Why could not he be of a man of character?" The conversation went on like this.

"He has determined not to marry till his life's goal is achieved and the world honours him with the greatest reward."

There were many rumours about his views. No one knew whether he said it like that but people were made to believe it. Many words which were not his were attributed to him and people spoke high of those words. And the helpless *Maythai* would not argue over his unsaid words.

"It seems he won't even sleep till his goal is achieved." Out of love for him, people would spread such rumours. Some dared to verify the truth of the matter. "What a determination! What a decision!" they would speak of him in glorious terms.

"No! No! I don't long for such goals." He could have said thus. But he couldn't. and so he would say, "How can I sleep?" To make people believe in what he had said, he would wait till the people around go to sleep. And then under the pretext of thinking he would go to sleep still sitting in his chair. Poor man! His would only be in a half-awake state.

"Our *Maythai* doesn't even care to wear good clothings. That's because all his thoughts are about finding a better future for the world." Some would comment.

"No! No! I can dress luxuriously," he could have said. But he couldn't. Poor fellow! He would put on dirty clothes stomaching the stink.

"What difference can there be between our *Maythai* and a great soul? Nothing. Our man doesn't even look in the direction of women." Several spoke like this wondering at his character.

"Woman! Oh, no!" *Maythai* too would respond with such words. What else could he say, if he wanted to save himself from being ignored?

One day a college in a distant place extended its invitation to our *Maythai*. He was requested to deliver a lecture on 'knowledge of science'. The principal of that college arranged for his comfortable stay on the first floor of his house. He stayed there without any disturbance. At the appointed hour he delivered his lecture in the college. In his inimitable style he spoke at length of the glory of science.

Girls outnumbered the male students. In that crowd of jasmines there was a lovely rose too. It was gulping down through its ears what all he had said and through its eyes his well built physique. *Maythai's* eyes too glanced at her beauty a couple of times but didn't settle on her. Perhaps he was pretending not to acknowledge her beauty. The lecture came to an end. Students surrounded him; he spoke to almost everyone before he left for the Principal's house.

Dinner over, *Maythai* preferring to be alone, moved up to the terrace and began walking up and down. The moon was quite bright. As his legs began to ache he searched for a chair and sat in it. A boy appointed to care for him, rushed to him and began massaging his feet. His ache disappeared as soon as it had appeared, all because of the boy's attendance on him.

*Maythai's* eyes as if let loose wandered in different directions. On the terrace of the house just opposite his stood the rose he had seen in the college. Her eyes were sending out powerful love darts towards him. But something in her said that they

would all be powerless before him. Her whole face contorted in anguish. The boy who massaged his feet went out after work. And no one knew how the boy reached the terrace opposite. *Maythai* could see the boy involving her in a conversation. And she too was replying to his question in a hushed voice. She then took his hands into hers and placed them on her eyes as a mark of respect. As *Maythai* witnessed the scene, the words the public said reverberated in his ears: "He would never even look in the direction of women, and never think of marriage, till his goal is achieved."

On the morning of the next day, the boy came to *Maythai's* room to help him. He asked the boy, "Why did she place your hands on her eyes?" And the boy explained, "Oh, that! These hands massaged your feet. And so she showed her respect for them."

*Maythai* didn't speak further. He said to himself: "I am ready to place her feet on my eyes. But she kissed your hands that touched my feet. Is this what fame is capable of? Vicious is fame. It gives me death in life." He whispered these words a thousand times.

The rose made her appearance again on her terrace. Meanwhile a crowd of fifty boys and ten teachers climbed up the stairs to say their parting words to him and then see him off. He couldn't even look in the opposite direction. After spending a short time with them, he took leave of them.

"Long Live *Maythai*!" the students and the teachers hailed, before they dispersed.



## 2 Nalayini\*



A real beauty she is. The glow on her face speaks volumes about her charms. Her white apparel enhances her gait. A necklace of black beads adorns her fair complexioned neck. Her lovely tresses are rolled into a bun and above that sits a basket. She is seen walking in the street. Surely a parade of charming beauty, a class of its own. Is she one of those stars that has come down to earth? Her very sight in the dark street makes one think thus.

That charming lady of golden hue carries a basket on her head. What a stink that basket emanates!. A putrid figure inside the basket. Her gentle hands supporting the bottom of the basket are trembling due to overweight. Yet that beauty goes ahead taking no rest. Her well-structured physique is proof enough to poets that beauty can thrive in sadness too. And the putrid fleshed figure in the basket is all smiles. That smile seems to be a preamble for better joy to come. Like to know the anxiety of the smile? Those interested can take a look at the foolish grin. The figure inside the basket is a man.

This disfigured man has lost one fourth of his original body. A great soul he is and passes for Maharishi. Like education, money and power that change a man, a disease too can change a man. That disease is leprosy. It is this great disease-affected great soul who is found going in the street inside a basket on his wife's head.

"Hi! Walk faster!"

"I am walking faster, my lord, my life."

"Walk faster Nalayini! But don't put me down, even if you fall."

"What makes you think of me thus, my lord! I will not let you fall even if my soul leaves my body. What do I carry in my basket? Any goods for sale? Or am I



carrying household items? Aren't you a precious gem to me? How can I afford to drop you down? Sacrilege! What a sacrilege!"

Carrying her leper husband on her head in a basket, Nalayini goes, her lovely face laden with sorrow. Wherefore is she bound? Does her husband want to take a holy dip and pray to the Lord? Is she carrying him to satisfy his love of piety? No. No. Then what for? Is he moving from one hermitage to another, using his wife as a vehicle? No. Then where are they bound? This journey is not meant to reach a temple or do obeisance to God! What then? Well! He is journeying to reach a harlot's house. What for? It is not with the intention of advising her to give up her profession and to turn her mind toward the Lord. That leper's purpose is not to convert the harlot's house into a divine place or to preach her about the divinity of the Lord. The sage is going to sleep with the harlot. He doesn't long to see the triple-eyed Lord. But he is there to allow the meeting of the four eyes and to hug the graceful body.

The lady who is carrying her husband to the house of the woman bartering pleasure for money is a rose in full bloom. That rose is carrying a decaying bee to a dried-up flower. They are nearing the street housing women of easy virtue. Nalayini's troubles are over. Her husband's anxiety too began to subside. On reaching their destination, Nalayini transferred the basket to the floor. Her body aching to the bones made her twist and turn a little.

Had there been a poet he would have compared her to a rainbow. Had there been a script writer, he would have written: "I doubt if a deer would gambol like her!" Had there been a painter he would have said, "Stand as you are for a second. Let me paint a portrait of you that can be exchanged only for the world." Such a flourishing beauty has come to the house of ill-fame all for the sake of her husband needing a companion for the night.

She knocked on the door with her graceful hand. It opened even before it could be knocked. A face peeped out before the door could be opened wide. "Pleasure! Indeed pleasure," howled the sage like the musician who lost his notes. His wrinkle-laden face glowed. His blood-oozing cheeks showed dimples and his frittered lips showed signs of lust. He stretched his hand sans fingers and blessed the harlot. And the harlot looking at his face expressing boundless joy asked, "What is the matter?" "Personal matter only" said the Rishi.

Nalayini began. "Listen O woman! He is my husband. I never cross swords with my husband. He desired to meet you. Make him happy."

Shocked stood the harlot. Nalayini's words sprang a surprise in her. "For the first time in my life I see a wife who has brought her husband to a harlot's house", she said to herself and looked at the leper's ugly face with hatred-filled eyes. And

before he could jump out, Nalayini dangled a bag of gold before her face. The harlot's eyes said yea. She hugged the leper sage and carried him to the 'celestial' bed.

Nalayini heaved a sigh of relief. Leaving the basket at the entrance, she told the guard "Will come back in the morning" and left.

"Nalayini, dear friend! Stop awhile." A voice from behind stopped Nalayini who resembled a dust-covered bouquet. She saw a woman running towards her. The beauty is from the nearby hermitage.. "Oh, you, Ulaga! (meaning worldly) what brought you here to this house?" asked Nalayini mopping the tears rolling down her cheeks. "I was on my way to the grove. I saw you going... Let me ask you something, only if it will not hurt you!" Ulaga said with a lot of hesitation. "What is it, Ulaga? Go ahead," Nalayini replied trying her best to smile.

"You may have a lot of love and affection for your husband. But to help him go to a harlot's house... I can't approve of it."

"Stop it, Ulaga! For every woman her husband is god. It is the duty of every chaste wife to fulfil the desires of her husband. The sight of my husband may be sickening to others. But to me he is honey, know that! Don't ever advise me as to how to treat my husband. Learn from me and correct yourself."

"Pardon me, Nalayini! I misunderstood your love and piety. Forgive me for that. It is rare to come across an understanding and determined chaste woman in all the fourteen worlds. You are chastity incarnate."

"It is enough if you have understood me, Ulaga. I don't have to pardon you. Try to be as chaste as I am. Follow the footprints of chaste women like me. See you."

After uttering such words, Nalayini moved towards her hermitage. Ulaga too realizing her mistake went on her way all the time repeating the words "Nalayini is chaste." Right at that juncture a lad rushed towards her and blindfolded her eyes with his hand. Together they laughed as they moved into the grove.

Sobbing all the way Nalayini entered her hermitage, fell down and wept. Torrents of tears gushed forth from her pair of blue eyes. Like the clouds that hide the full moon, her dark unkempt hair hid her face.

From inside the grove floated out a song. Nalayini with her tear-filled eyes could listen to the song. "Oh, that's the voice of Ulaga. A male voice has also joined hers. Ulaga who has accepted me as a chaste woman and showed all sorts of respect, is now singing a duet with her lover, her paramour. She is only of my age. But I am a better beauty than her. And I am here with none to love me. Her paramour would be cooing into her ears sweet nothings."

Nalayini went on imagining things that she had never imagined before. She wept again. But she did not wipe her tears. A woman barged into her room. She

resembled Nalayini more or less. If both were found together, it would be difficult to distinguish between the two. The woman came and sat beside Nalayini. "Come, come, Idhaya," (meaning heart, conscience) Nalayini sobbing all the while welcomed her.

"Why are you weeping, Nalayini! Why should you continue to weep?"

"You want to know the reason, Idhaya, eh! Aren't you aware that I turn like a worm on hot sand! I hope you are also listening to the song of that pair of love birds in the grove! Don't you ever understand what feelings of desire that the love song would create in a young woman like me? You know, Idhaya, I know that you know. And yet you are silent because you want to console me. Am I right?"

"You are very right, Nalayini. Ulaga called you chaste and blessed you. You should be satisfied with that powerful light of fame."

"Tell me, Idhaya! Tell me the truth. Am I a chaste woman? How? How?"

"Certainly you are. Because you have sent your leprosy-infected husband to a harlot."

"Don't make fun of me, Idhaya! I don't desire to have fun with a leper. But he calls me to his bed desiring me. My hands tremble even to hug him. This is why I sent him to the harlot's house. Let him quench his thirst without harming my beauty. That was my plan. Can't you understand my stratagem. Idhaya?"

"What is it I do not know, Nalayini? But Ulaga believes in your love for your husband. In what better way can a wife express her love and respect for her husband? Nalayini proved it by carrying her leper husband on her head to the house of a harlot. This is what Ulaga strongly believes in."

"You say that I carried my husband on my head. Correct it. I carried only the basket on my head. He was in the basket. Am I out of my senses to touch a leper with my hands and carry him on my head? I was cautious enough to put him in a basket and then carry him."

"Yesterday too I heard Ulaga praise you sky high by saying that you spoke no word against your husband even if he abused you with harsh words."

"The husband abused me. I didn't speak a single word. Fine! I ignored his words for they were spoken by a leper. If I do not ignore his words then I will have to argue with him. And to argue with him I will have to stand close by him. That's what I hate. That's why I allowed the leper to bark at me."

"I see.. Anyhow you are known for your chastity now. A devoted wife... Chastity incarnate... That's how the world thinks of you. Ulaga spoke of you in glowing terms."

"What does Ulaga know of the live volcano in me? What are such titles to a woman wasting her youth? Speak out, Idhaya, speak out! Tell me a way to enjoy the conjugal bliss."

"I'll tell you, Nalayini. I'll bless you with a new boon. Spend out this life as quickly as you can, and take your next life as early as you can. In your next birth you will be born as Draupadi. In spite of having a husband you ran short of bliss. Your life was dull and disappointing. Your mind was never at ease. And so I bless you that in your next birth you will live with five husbands."

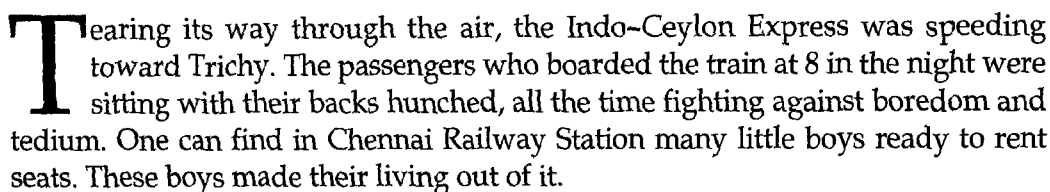
"Idhaya! Five! Are you sure?"

"No joke. A new life awaits you. New life... Resurrection. Both mean the same. Understand it, my dear friend."

"Yes! I've understood it," Nalayini jumped for joy. She embraced Idhaya. Tears of sorrow turned into tears of joy. And on that day began a sweet song in that hermitage.

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\*According to Hindu mythology, Nalayini in her next birth was born as Draupadi.



At a time when passengers, be they moving inside the train or moving about on the platform, frantically searched for seats, a little boy would prop up before them like a god in folktales and say, "Oh, sir! Here is an excellent seat for you." All that we have to do is to follow him. He would point at a very good seat inside the coach, before he takes away his 'silken towel' and wears it as his headgear. And for that sleeper seat one had to pay an extra four annas besides the train fare. One can find many boys like him doing such a business. Passengers blessed by such boys were found enjoying deep sleep. Those unblessed beings finding the heaviness of sleep on their eyes beyond control were found dashing against one another. Heads that had lost control of necks hit against knees or their neighbours' shoulders. Some heads used the windows as their support. On the whole, they made a pitiable sight.

In that 'sleep country,' there were also people whom sleep refused to hug. For every one hundred there was at least one to count. And in the sixth coach some snored with their legs stretched a little out through the window. A man sitting in a corner of a long plank caring little about sleep rowed his eyes here and there, and also below the plank in front. And in that plank sat another man whose eyelids were half-closed. Surely he was not sleeping. And through his half-opened eyes he was looking alternately at that young man in the opposite plank and the young woman lying below the plank.

He and Chandra with their child got into the train only in Chennai. And by the time they found their seats and sat, that sleepless youth occupied the seat in front of them. It is not that he came and sat just like that. He scrutinized almost every coach and finally jumped into it.

The child in Chandra's arms playfully tugged at the grey hairs of the old lady sitting next to his mother and the old lady smiling a toothless smile released her hair from its wee hands. She didn't stop at that. By nature all oldies are talkative and nothing need be said when they encounter children. "Hai, sweetie! What is your name?" She spoke softly. "Murthy." Pat came the reply. "Your Papa's name?" asked the old lady. "My papa is Kumaresh. And what is your name?" these words drove the old lady to the edge of joy. Kumaresh and Chandra smiled at each other. The man who sat opposite to the couple broke into a guffaw. Chandra noticed him. And he too looked intently at Chandra.

His very sight startled her. She was stunned. Yet she consoled herself and continued to look at the child. Now and again, her enchanting eyes were gobbling up the young man. The fellow was quite handsome. His eyes were broad. He sported a slender moustache and to enhance the beauty of his physique he wore a dazzling silk shirt. And whenever his eyes turned towards Chandra they looked intoxicated. Chandra too as if unaware of her husband's presence, looked at him now and again. Kumaresh didn't fail to notice what was going on. As the train was speeding, Chandra continued to look at the child, her husband and the young man, all alternately. Kumaresh found it difficult to control himself. He couldn't even imagine his wife sitting by his side and ogling at some other man.

He married Chandra because of her beauty. And in due course he was delighted to find her an intelligent woman. Their family life was going on smoothly till they undertook the train journey which, of course, was responsible for driving a wedge in their relationship. While a mayhem was going on in his mind, his wife continued to ogle at the stranger. Kumaresh was fuming within. He decided to put an end to his wife's play. And then he cooled down.

The child was fast asleep. The train was nearing Villupuram. And the people in that coach were half awake and half asleep.

The old lady affectionate towards Murthy was found snoring with her mouth agape. Chandra pulled the sash off her husband's shoulder, spread it on the floor below the seat. She put the child on it and before stretching herself by the side of the child, she smiled at her husband. Kumaresh didn't reciprocate her smile. How would she know of his tortured mind?

The man in the opposite seat got the opportunity to bend his head down. No one knew what special attraction Chandra had on her face at a time when she



was trying to hug sleep. His face was lit with joy. He couldn't restrain himself. What can be expected of one who sits facing a full meal, especially when one is hungry for days? Every moment of his betrayed that he was not himself. And Chandra's looks were enough to make him spin like a top. His was a golden opportunity on that day. After a thorough search for the best seat in the whole train, he occupied his present seat and his search didn't go waste. He aimed at a star and what he got was the moon itself. He gobbled her up through his eyes for a very long time.

Kumaresh who had three-fourth of his eyes closed was watching all that was going on under his very eyes. He was waiting for an opportunity to catch his wife red-handed. The other man now and then looked at Kumaresh to verify if he was awake or asleep. And then he would push his leg forward to touch Chandra's hand softly. He would then look around and keep quiet.

The train crossed Nellikuppam. Chandra was fast asleep. Her graceful hand was hugging Murthy. The young man sighed heavily with a renewed vigour. He looked at Kumaresh intently. But Kumaresh like an experienced spy pretended to sleep with only one-fourth of his eyes open. The young man touched Chandra's cheek with his hand. Startled, Chandra awoke. The young man withdrew his hands, shivering all over. The child too began to whimper. Chandra's eyes went up to know what her husband was doing. She found him sleeping. She failed to detect the cruel eyes lurking behind his half-closed eyes. She then directed her eyes towards the young man. He gulped down the spittle that had collected in his mouth. She planted a kiss on the cheek of the whimpering child and cajoled him into sleep. And she too slept off.

Kumaresh had seen his wife kiss the child every time before she put him to sleep. But this time her kiss added fuel to his burning fire.

A few minutes passed. The lad's hands touched Chandra's cheek. Chandra woke up! She patted the child and closed her eyes. Kumaresh became restless. His mind behaved like a live volcano. And he stood up with a cruel decision. He took the child into his arms. The child whimpered. Chandra too opened her eyelids and seeing the child in her husband's arms she peacefully went to sleep. Kumaresh moved away from the scene crossing five to six seats. That made the young man happy.

The train was moving at breakneck speed. Kumaresh looked around. He then threw the child away out of the window into the dark. Did the child land in any forest? Or did he hit a rock and get torn to pieces?

Kumaresh heaved a sigh of relief. "Now I've cut off all my relationship with a harlot. The child too is gone and he won't speak of me in future. Now I am free. Let

the harlot go away with that fellow," thus spoke his mind. He began to wait for the train to stop at the next station. Meanwhile, his eyes went back to his seat. He saw the young man touching Chandra's cheek without any fear. The young man was seen pressing his finger against her cheek. Chandra woke up with a start. He smiled. Quickly she jumped up and slapped him across the face again and again. Every passenger woke up. Kumaresh too rushed towards his seat. He felt as if he was going to swoon. "Hubby, dear!" Chandra hugged him.

"From the start your eyes were on..." Kumaresh was about to say something nasty.

"He resembled very much my elder brother who passed away when he was quite young. And so I looked at him often. But this wretch..." she sobbed. The other passengers abused him.

The train reached Cuddalore station. The flesh crazy fellow got down and disappeared into the crowd. These fellows get into the train to fulfil their carnal desires. A voice came from somewhere.

Chandra who for a time had forgotten all about the child because of the shock she had received, asked anxiously "Where is the child?"

Kumaresh's face darkened. He said, "He is here only..., get down."

"Why? What happened?" she asked.

"Get down. I'll tell you," so saying Kumaresh got down carrying the luggage. She too got down. "Where is the child?" she asked.

Tears streaming down his cheeks, he said, "Two miles away."

"Hasty and rash Kumaresh".

"Angry idiot."

Such words rushed from different directions and lashed his ears.

The Indo-Ceylon Express started scuttling away from Cuddalore.

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# 4 The Dancer

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“**A**тта kavadi is no Bakthi kavadi. People who shoulder Bakthi kavadi to fulfil their religious vow are usually piloted by a troupe of dancers and musicians. This pilot troupe is known as Aatta kavadi. Most of the dancers gulp down seven to eight mugs of toddy and go on dancing. Are the people who participate in Bakthi kavadi in any way different? You seem to ask. They are drunk with religion, a more fierce intoxicant. And so listen to me, Kanimozhi. Please understand that the Aatta kavadi I will be participating in is not out of devotion. Kavadi will be on my neck. But don’t ever think that my mind would be deep-rooted in the thought of God. Drunk with false faiths, they would come with their tongues pierced with *alagu*<sup>1</sup> and carry the kavadi tied with vessels of milk. Mine won’t carry any milk, but I will only put on airs. The art of dancing, I know. But it won’t lead to murder of knowledge. Peacock feathers will adorn the kavadi. It will bring to mind only your face and I can never think of Lord Murugan on his peacock vehicle. So allow me to go, my sweetie!

“They promise to pay me one hundred rupees. Sweating all through the day for four to five months together won’t fetch me a whole hundred rupee note. If I do the dancing in Palani, I may even get new customers. Two to three new customers would be enough. I would be able to save for you three hundred rupees at least. Permit me to go, Kanimozhi. I should start tomorrow in the morning. Pilgrims who go to discharge a vow are well-to-do people. And I have promised them. I

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<sup>1</sup>A handy spear pierced into one’s tongue, lips or any part of the face or the back, as an act of discharging a vow.

have to keep my word. Don't stop me, dear! If I fail to keep my word, they may not be able to find a dancer. Further, they will curse me till my last days. So say 'yes'. Look at me, won't you say 'yes'?..."

Kandan was cajoling Kanimozhi all the time looking at her intently. Kanimozhi's eyes were brimming with tears. She looked at him with sympathy-filled eyes.

"It is greed for money that makes you speak like this to me, isn't it? You are strong enough. You are endowed with active limbs. Then why should you...? The ten to twenty rupees you earn through weaving is more precious than the hundred rupees you get through dancing for the pilgrims. So don't go, my love! Listen to me. Our neighbours will make fun of you. This fellow got married according to the laws of *Thirukkural* declaring that he doesn't believe in God and in Satan. And now he wants to make a living by dancing *Aatta kavadi*. What a shame! The village will laugh at you, my love", so wept Kanimozhi.

"Those who do not know the real meaning of *Aatta kavadi* will only laugh. This is also like any other dance."

"You say *Aatta kavadi* is just a dance. Then why don't you stage it? You don't have to go all the way to Palani and dance for the pilgrims' sake?"

"There is money in it, you know."

"It is a shame on you, you know!"

"Listen Kanimozhi! I've told you several times. What I dance is *Aatta kavadi*. And what the pilgrims carry is *Bakthi kavadi*."

"Let them dance *Bakthi kavadi* on their own! You go on some other day and dance. There you show off all your histrionic talents. Nobody will stop you. But don't mix up both. You will be looked down upon. You will be blamed. I myself will arrange for your show where you can come out with all your talents. We will fix a day and on that day we'll collect all the people of this place. At that time you show all your talents in dancing. I'll enjoy it. But just for the sake of money, you don't have to stoop so low."

"Are you crazy? A hundred rupees is no joke."

"What for is that one hundred rupee note? Do I ever pester you to get me gold jewels and silk saris? Porridge is food enough for me. Your heart is good enough for my shelter."

"Kanimozhi! I have decided to go to Palani tomorrow. My decision is final," so saying he rose to his feet.

Kanimozhi held him by his hand and said, "Think it over. You will be looked down upon. Your intimate friends too will have to bend their heads out of shame. Think of your friends and reconsider your decision."

"OK. Permit me to go only this time. I'll not go again!"

"Permit you to take poison only once, eh?"

"Kanimozhi! Doing a certain thing may be sin. But on certain occasions we have no other option!"

"Years ago you were an authority on *Aatta kavadi*. Had you continued with that profession, we could have gone not only to Palani, but also to Thiruchendur, Thiruttani, Ettukudi and Kathirkamam. But we have moved away from it and switched over to rationalist movement. Think of it, my love. You'll never think of committing that mistake again."

Kandan stood motionless. Kanimozhi's eyes stood glued to him. Her thoughts were flipping open the pages of her past.

Kanimozhi was born in a weaver's family. Her father Nellaiyappar was a seasoned rationalist thinker. With great love and affection he brought up his only daughter in the lines of his thoughts and in due course she became a thinking garden. Nellaiyappar used to boast that Kanimozhi was the very first woman who could be called the very epitome of rational thinking but of course in the dress and behaviour of a villager. Right from childhood she became a student in the School of Rationalist Thought.

During Deepavali, all streets would sport a festive mood. Colourful sparklers, fire crackers that shoot up to the sky and burst there to challenge the hues of a rainbow, etc... but she showed no interest in them. She would sit at the entrance of her house, hold the book *Celebrate Not Deepavali* presented by her father and read it aloud. Her words vied with the sound of Chinese crackers that the other children burst there.

Fire-walking festival, festivals of Goddess Mari and Kali and the like would come and go. But Kanimozhi would sigh for a modern world.

Kanimozhi became a lonely tree, when her father passed away. She had lost her mother long ago and so was reduced to the status of an orphan. And the local people tried to predict her future and what turn her life would take. It was during that period she heard the different drums played.

She used to ignore all such entertainments but on that day something in her had pushed her towards the door. Her eyes got stuck at the sight of the handsome and well-built man carrying *Aatta kavadi* on his sturdy shoulders.

The inspiring music from *pambai* drums – the youthful gyrating dance to the tune of the drums – the handsome young man... Kanimozhi felt that someone spoke those words from within her. She directed her eyes a little away from that sight. She got the shock of her life. She saw Mirasudhar<sup>2</sup> Mrugandu Mudaliar, a local men. By his side were his wife and his son, a school kid– and all the three were found standing with the *alagu* sticking out from their tongues. They were carrying on their head a pot full of milk each. She lost interest in the art of *Milk Kavadi* too.

“My God! What a lovely art? But why should it be wasted in this manner? Why should they mix sandal powder with sewage water? What if you mix milk with venom or venom with milk? The result is the same”, thus she stood with awe and with an inquisitive mind. Mirasudhar Mrugandu’s attention turned towards Kanimozhi. He had the *kavadi* on his shoulders. But his heart was chanting the name of Kanimozhi. Such was his devotion to the Lord.

“He is Kandan... the one who dances with *kavadi* attracting the attention of every onlooker,” thus said a neighbour to Kanimozhi. In a confused state she went inside her house.

Mrugandu Mudaliar moved away with his *kavadi* from that sight, all the time looking at Kanimozhi.

The music from *pambai* drums slowly faded away. But an unknown music sounded in a subdued tune in Kanimozhi’s heart.

One night Kanimozhi opened her door to answer a knock. Mirasudhar Mrugandu Mudaliar entered the house as fast as he could and bolted the door.

What is there to explain? Don’t bats go in search of ripe fruits?

“Hei! Who the hell are you? The other day I saw you carrying *kavadi* with all devotion. And now what mischief are you up to?” Kanimozhi howled.

“Yes, my parrot! That was only a show. But you show your love to me,” so saying he held her by her hand.

Being a rationalist and having read the life story of Kannaki, Kanimozhi slapped Mrugandu across his face repeatedly. Yet what can a deer cub like Kanimozhi do in the hands of a ferocious tiger? Sensing danger she cried for help. Just at that moment, Kandan, the *Aatta kavadi* dancer came to her rescue. Mrugandu became jittery. Kandan used his strong legs to bash him up and thereby saved Kanimozhi. The heroine facing danger is rescued by the hero making his

<sup>2</sup>(formerly) a freeholder of some status who manages his farm himself as part of a village.

appearance at the right moment, and then both of them falling in love' had become common in the stories we read these days. So too it has happened in the life of Kanimozhi, all unexpectedly. But to start their journey of life together Kanimozhi laid down several conditions.

That he should immediately stop dancing for temples was one among her conditions. He had no way but to accept. He stopped it and she became his guru. Kandan became as important as her eye. Then they got married to the astonishment of the local people.

Several youngsters followed the footsteps of Kandan and soon he became their leader. Swimming in the sea of delight, Kanimozhi looked all aglow. Dancer Kandan now came to be known as weaver Kandan. Of course, the money he made through weaving was not enough to make both ends meet. He managed everything with great difficulty. Yet he was afraid of going against his wife's wishes.

Mirasudhar Mrugandu's son, Pitambaram became more active than ever. He planned to demolish the fort of rationalism that was built by Kandan. As a first step, he became Kandan's intimate friend. He began to lecture to Kandan on the importance and glory of money. And this he did often. He pretended to have accepted Kandan's faith and now and again made a few alterations here and there. And it was his idea that he could go to Palani to dance *Aatta kavadi*.

Kanimozhi stood like a stone as her husband went on explaining as to what brought the change in him.

That night, Kandan quickly disappeared from the scene, as he was scheduled to proceed to Palani on the morning of the next day. And in the streets of Palani, Kandan's dance performance was much talked about. As he had expected, three to four customers vied with one another to book him for their turn. He could earn three hundred rupees. He felt happy to go back home with his earnings. He entered his house with the absolute belief that the sight of money would drive her anger away. But Kanimozhi was not there. That rationalist sparrow took to her wings. He could find only a rolled piece of paper lying on the cot. He unrolled it and read:

Public life is not like tasting sugar cane. It is like running your hand on it. Only then you'll know that the prickles have stuck all over your palm.

After the decision you made on that day, I too have to take either one of the two decisions.

One, to consume poison.

The other is to go in for divorce.  
As I am unable to make my choice,  
I am still wandering in some remote corner of the world.

Yours,  
Kanimozhi  
(Rational Woman)

Kandan finished reading the letter. As if an *alagu* had pierced his eyes, he writhed in pain and fell down unconscious.



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# 5 The Bin

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Just below that storeyed house at the corner of the street – it has become the place of my penance for a long period. My penance is not with any intention of appeasing any god for a boon. Only yesterday I came to know of the kings who performed penance to bring the world under their thumb, the asuras who performed severe penance to gain immortality and also of Rishis who with their austerity and discipline got the power to curse others and take vengeance on their enemies. To sit in one place without food or water and meditate only upon the Lord for His *darshan* is penance. And then ask Him for a boon when He makes His appearance. As for me, my penance stops with just remaining immobile in my place.

Several of those who did penance had a hard time in focussing their minds. An army of women in Heaven kept themselves alert to hunt for people who do penance and interrupt them. The notable stars belonging to such an army were Menaka, Ramba, Urvasi and Thilottama. Whether these beauties had the task of interrupting their penance or the Rishis themselves did penance only to attract the attention of these heavenly beauties is a good enough topic for research.

Several were the things that were thrown into my stomach. And yesterday an ancient text fell into my stomach. It didn't look like a book but it had only stray sheets, most of them moth-eaten. I read whatever was available and gathered information regarding penance and the stories that go with it. I came to know of how the adventurous Menaka came down to earth with the intention of interrupting Viswamitra's penance and all those acrobatics she did with him after he fell for her; all those love innuendos they played by the waterfalls in the forest; of how they turned the hut meant for meditating upon the Divine into a

palace of pleasure; of why Kama, God of Love, made his presence felt even before the Lord could make it and made the Rishi roll on Menaka's thighs and legs; of how the Rishi's hands that had the rosary beads held the enticing hip; of how the Rishi's thick lips quivered craving to touch the soft lips of Menaka's to drink nectar... And while I was lusciously reading such a thing with a lot of interest, ah, me! The garbage collector came.

He cleared out the garbage in a jiffy and dumped it in his cart. Along with the garbage disappeared the ancient text too. On certain days my stomach would bulge bigger and would breathe with a lot of difficulty. And the garbage cart that rarely showed its face for four to five days at a stretch all of a sudden came on that day and spoiled my study of Puranas. It was all unexpected. Maybe a newly recruited officer passed his way. Special care is shown cleaning this street for the past two or three days. How long will this last? There is a proverb, you know: "No sooner did mother-in-law come than she kicked the ball around. But as time passed she was reduced to a donkey." This will also become like that. Four to five houses away from me is a *Bhajan mutt*. I listened to the lectures that came through the microphone speakers. How far the *Bagavathars* had bungled with the Puranas in their colourful lectures I came to know only after reading the ancient text. Even after realizing that it was Indran who had entered her house in the absence of her husband and raped her, Ahalya felt, "Oh! Great is this pleasure. Today I had the great feast I was longing for all these days" and hugged him with great satisfaction – I read of her only in that book.

The *Rishis* in the forest of *Tharuka* were more than one thousand in number. And their wives were all golden hued. Yet-to-be-plucked *Parijatha* flowers, bubbling with youth. God too was pulled towards them. He had used not one or two, but the entire lot to appease his urge. They were wives of those *Rishis* seeking the boon from god. And it was expected of god only to bless them. Yet he hugged the wives tight till his palms turned red. He fondled them till his eyes turned red as an upshot of pleasure. This vulgar tale was told very decently, you know, by the *Bagavathar* of the *Bhajan Mutt*.

The musicians supporting the *Bagavathar* sang, "Lord Shiva blessed the wives of *Rishis* with his presence and took them into his fold," appreciated him with all their heart, ate the '*prasad*' and threw the leaf plates into my stomach before they left. One among those devotees for want of a leaf plate had used a paper perhaps. I intently looked at the paper crumpled and stained. I was too shy to read it. I was carried away by a strange feeling. Can't dustbins have feelings? You are quite eager to know what was there on the paper, aren't you? Let me tell you.

\* A long-stemmed sacred oil lamp.

*Kuthu Vilakku*\* is burning bright. One can easily guess it is the time of night. A woman after describing an incident that took place in the night prays to the hero of that incident. We may think that in a woman's prayer nothing indecent might crop up. But the *Shringara rasa* is so overwhelming in the prayer that we would not miss it. Let us take another look at the description. A cot comes to light as the *Kuthu vilakku* burns. A cot is no cot if it is not covered with a soft mattress. Jasmine and roses are strewn over the mattress. Will the scene be interesting if there are only cot, mattress and flowers? Will the sky ever look beautiful with its galaxy of stars but no moon? Like the cool moon a woman is found lying on the cot. She is beauty incarnate. Nappinnai is her name.

Cot, mattress and beautiful lady alone cannot make a full circle. On the ripe mango-like breast of the lady rests a revered man with his chest against hers. Is he a man? No... no... He is a god. The lady praying to him is Andal. She is the lady who wants to attract Him by saying: "Open your mouth and bless me, O Lord with flower soft breast". She doesn't want to invite Him to her chamber; instead she enters His bedroom. And what she saw in that room brightened up with was the scene filled with fun and fanfare.

With the long-stemmed sacred oil lamp brightening up the room, you stretch yourself on the four-postered cot laden with soft mattress bearing the weight of Nappinnai's breasts on your flower soft chest and she who had decked her flowing hair with a bunch of flowers, oh, open your mouth!

I was reading only this stanza from the crumpled paper. Oh, can't this ~~nasty~~ place where I sit by the side of a gutter transform itself into such a beauty-decked cot? Can't a female dustbin join me here? If only I am blessed with one, I will pour all sweet nothings into her ears and enjoy myself. Instead of calling her 'Darling', I would call her 'binling' and hug her tight, I would speak to her of the way of the world and time will fly away. The song of Andal created such a sensation in me. Poor Andal! That girl knew not of her parents. They abandoned the child and one of the Alwars brought her up. No one knows why that lady had put so much eroticism in her spiritual poetry. If I got to read all her poems, no doubt, I should be kept by the side of a mental hospital.

It is not that I quite often get such sheets of paper or books. What I often get mostly are used banana plates, banana peels and also the peels of orange and *kamala*. Sometimes dead rats are also dumped into my belly. And all that I could do is to hold my nose and wait for the garbage van to come.

A servant from a house in a corner of this street comes to me after twelve in the night. He would look around and then throw the corks (lids) of whisky and

brandy bottles and go back as fast as he could. All through the night I would feel jittery... in case the police become suspicious of me and throw me behind bars! But then I would console myself: does the place really matter for a bin?

One day someone from the third house from here passed by me in a car and dumped into me a letter torn to pieces. With great curiosity I read it. Since it was shabbily torn I couldn't read it from beginning to end. Some cheat had swindled some lady of three hundred rupees on the pretext of getting a teacher's post. I couldn't make out the names for they are all torn. Whoever it may be, what does it matter? I have understood that it is a matter pertaining to our department. To whomsoever the complaint had been made, he had ignored it. As a proof he had relegated the letter to me. Oh! What a pity! Don't know what had happened to that woman. It is better that I do not see her. Not only that helpless woman... I have developed hatred towards all and sundry. Restless they are showing no concern for others. They are fanatics and enemies of wisdom. One feels like calling them thus. I brim with anger at the very thought of a man who lived in my shadow but turned ungrateful to me. He came here from somewhere. He couldn't even walk properly. And he was shivering all over. I too couldn't bear his stink. Taking pity on him I endured his stink and asked "who are you?" "Can't you make out from my appearance? I am one among the kings of this country. I want to be by your side and reign. Would you give me shelter?" He asked me. I replied: "Have I grown that much tall and bushy to shelter you? If you like, you can sit huddled close to me for ten days." He ate, stretched himself and slept by my side. His rule went on smoothly. He showed all his teeth at the passers-by and collected his taxes necessary to run his government either in coins or in currency notes.

I too passed my time happily with him in all these ten days. I was carried away by the cinema and folksongs he sang. One night this beggar king brought a woman with him. Under the pretext of sleeping I was watching their every movement. Even while she came she murmured that she should go back quickly. "Huh! Don't be in a great hurry. Here is your money," so saying the king gave her an eight anna coin. I closed my eyes tight but cocked up my ears.

"Darling!"

"Hm! My King."

Sweet nothings were coming out in muffled tone. That stupid king had no sense of shame for I, his friend, was very much there. Minutes later I opened my eyes and I found my friend curled up there. Sorry. The king of this country was fast asleep. The queen was missing. She could have left for the adjacent kingdom. On the morning of the next day, I saw two to three policemen having a conversation

with my friend. Since the conversation was going on at a distance I couldn't make out much. But the king came quite near to me and said: "Do not fear the police. Do not ever think that they are there to arrest me. It seems a very important minister has come from abroad. These policemen are inviting me, the king, to meet him."

I was flabbergasted. "Oh! I see! Where will you go to meet the minister?" I asked.

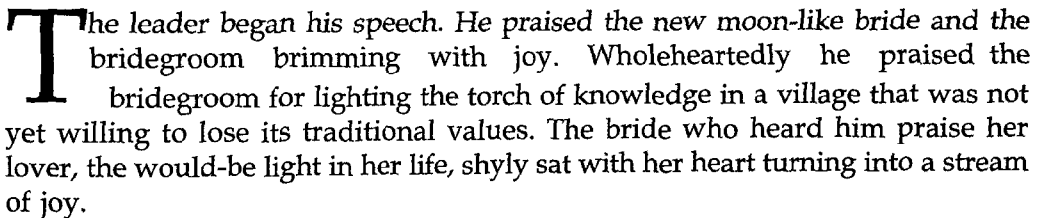
"I will go and be in my jail palace as usual. He will come there to see me. You too may see him, for he will be taken on a procession through this route." So saying, he got into the big police van and disappeared. As he had told me the minister from abroad passed through my street. But my friend didn't come again to see me. He is one among the kings of this land, you see. I don't know behind which bin he is hiding. Thankless fellow.

So let it be... In my not so happy life I have come across everything. How many marriage invitations I would have read! How many feasts I would have enjoyed! How many invitations both to good and bad ceremonies I would have gone through! How many of the love letters exchanged by lovers clandestinely and then torn to pieces before they were thrown into me – Oh! I've read every one of them and laughed. I welcome with outstretching hands all those meant for hiding and for discarding.

My patience is one step ahead of all ascetics admired for their patience.

Several are the people in the land who go without enough food. But my stomach gets filled up as it gets cleared. Alas! As I am speaking to you, I see a woman coming towards me showing fear for the public. She has in her hand a new born child. Huh! There's blood all around its neck. Is it sleeping? No! It's dead.

Its neck is twisted. Yes! She is the child's mother. She is going to fling the child into my stomach. She did it. She is now running away. Landing me into trouble with the police, she is running away. Why is she running away? I can understand. She does not have a *thali* on her neck.



He explained also what exactly marriage is and what should be the appropriate age for marriage.

Dravidian is a race. Evil forces name it 'perpetual poison.' For the evil forces it is certainly perpetual poison, he said.

In a breezy style he spoke at length of how effectively the word 'Dravida' is used in '*Dravida Utkalavanga*' by Tagore in his 'National Anthem', in "*Thekkanamum Athir chirantha Dravida Nattiru Nadum*" by Prof. Sundaram Pillai in his play *Manonmaniyam*, in the book *History of the Dravidas*, in a stone inscription at Mahabalipuram saying "chiselled in the Dravidian style at the time

of Mamalla", and in 'Dravida Vidyapooshanam', a title given to Saminatha Iyer.

He stressed the need to safeguard 'Dravidianism' and the young married couples' role in it, by reciting a couplet:

In love and verse words matter.

Dravidianism for couples is their life breath.

And then he talked about the bends in the journey of life and pepped up their courage to face them. Talking about family, he said that it is no child's play of building doll houses of sand and keeping wooden toys inside. He blessed them by saying: "You are now spreading your wings to fly in the sky of life! Let you live with all the wealth you need." During his talk he thundered many times of the need for mothers like the ones we read about in *Purananuru*. He gave a new life to a short and crisp poem from *Purananuru* saying it in an easy to understand style. And it took the shape of a ballad.

Just a hut. Yet on one side  
sat in a row sharp spears and swords.  
Dazzling is that armoury  
aiming at conquering the world, and  
putting an end to eternal enmity,  
Tiger's cave is not beautiful; nothing new!  
Fear, surprise and slips  
are unheard of in a soldier's palace,  
the very abode of honour.  
At the hut's threshold an old lady,  
with her hair gone completely gray,  
prepared to eat a bowl of rice  
mixed with jaggery.  
A handful of it did she push  
into her toothless mouth.  
A soldier came running and said  
"I've news, grandma"  
"You gasp for breath like a girl  
after play. Are you a man?  
Rest awhile to breathe fully  
before you divulge the news."

said the old Tamil lady, a born teaser.  
 "This is no appropriate time, old lady!  
 Put aside all your teasing and listen!  
 Your son is dead in war," said he.  
 Heart-broken old lady straightened herself up  
 "In the game of dice killing is common.  
 So is it with war.  
 But tell me: is he wounded in the chest  
 or in the back?" she asked.  
 "Back," replied he.  
 The old lady squirmed.  
 Her heart went heavy.  
 She picked up a sword and rushed in the direction the wardrum sounded.  
 "Did I suckle a coward?  
 Isn't it a shame  
 to call someone a soldier  
 who is dead with his face down?  
 On a day in the past  
 my valorous husband  
 confronted an arrow and  
 died bearing it on his chest.  
 Huh! Is this fellow born of his loins?  
 Oh! How shameless he lies  
 amongst the rubble!  
 The bold can laugh on  
 the peak of Mt. Himalayas.  
 Music will throb  
 in the stings of veena.  
 It too will spread  
 the message of bravery.  
 Are you as shameless as those  
 who dine on wine and fish?  
 Tell me, oh! You who spoiled  
 the sanctity of the bold Tamil culture?



I suckled you; I brought you up.  
Why didn't you put to use  
Your broad shoulders  
that I gave shape to?  
Didn't you feel the itch? Alas!  
Oh! You coward who failed  
to route the spear!  
Answer me for the milk of courage  
I fed you with."

Thus screamed the poor old lady  
nearing eighty.  
To the war front she went  
and turned up the dead Tamils  
lying pell-mell.  
A flood of blood flowed  
to safeguard the honour of the dear Tamil land.  
Breathing heavily she walked  
amongst mounds of corpses.  
Such a joy she never experienced  
even on her wedding day.  
Limited too was her joy  
when her boy was born.  
Her joy knew no bounds when  
she sighted her dead son  
wounded in his chest.  
That set her mind at ease.  
"I do not bother about anything anymore.  
My son died as befits a soldier.  
I was about to cut off the breast  
that suckled him.  
Thank God!  
Where is the culprit who told  
the lie with an evil intention?  
Here is the sword. Where is his tongue?

The leader finished his song of courage. The pandal reverberated with the applause of the audience. When the noise subsided, the leader said in all jubilation: this song is not authored by me. It is written by the bridegroom here." The pandal reverberated with applause once again. The tender cheeks of the new bride turned rosy in colour. Who can ever say what joy she would have felt! The leader completed his graceful speech. Then there began the ceremony of giving away presents to the couple. Under the pandal sat a woman who has a better understanding of the bride than the bridegroom himself. She is the bride's good friend Vijaya. Kamala and Vijaya are intimate friends not only in college but right from their childhood days. Vijaya is already journeying in the marital path. Kamala is setting her foot on such a path only today, along with Kandan. Vijaya's joy knew no bounds when she understood that her friend is blessed with an affectionate life-partner who is appreciated by eminent men. Whenever her husband was praised on the stage Kamala looked at Vijaya from the corners of her eyes and only Vijaya understood its meaning. When the gift-giving ceremony was coming to a close, Vijaya who was in bliss woke up to the situation and rushed to the stage. She unrolled a scroll of paper and read: "Kamala, dear!... Blessed you are. Accept this, as a token of my love. In dire difficulties too, don't ever forget this love symbol. This sandal paste cup is a replica of your joyful heart."

She then hugged Kamala with love and affection. Tears of joys rushed out of her eyes. There were tears of joy in Kamla's eyes too. Life got inaugurated.

Family life for the newly married began with fun and joy. Kamala was a traditionalist. For a few days all their quarrels were over tradition vs modernity. Then both of them began to make fun of gods.

"The devotees carry Siva and His consort in a palanquin everyday to the bedchamber. But how is it that they didn't have more than two children - Ganapathi and Murugan?" Kandan would ask.

Kamala would laugh and say, "Oh, don't you know! They underwent family planning operation."

"The White man saw fish in the sea. And we too saw..." Kamala would begin a statement.

"The White man saw the fish and invented submarine. And we created *Machavataram*." Kamala would conclude his statement.

Their life of joy progressed in this manner. Kandan's mother too felt happy about their joyful life but she was a bit angry with Kamala and said to herself: "Oh, Kamala too abuses gods. Why should women poke their nose in such things when

their place is only the kitchen...?" For fear that her son would feel bad, she chastised her indirectly. During such times, Kamala would think of her husband's lovely face and try to forget the disturbance. She would also think of Vijaya's advice to her: "Never hurt the feelings of the elders at home. Try to adjust with them," and calm down. She would also rush to take the sandal paste cup, presented by Vijaya, and hold it against her cheek. She would imagine the brim of the cup as the lips of her friend. And in the dazzling of the cup she would find the smile of her friend. Whenever her husband was away she found a companion in the cup. Due to the tiff between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the former cold-shouldered the latter, even when the latter offered to speak. Her childhood friend and schoolmate Vijaya showed her cheek in the dazzling of the cup and made Kamala pinch her cheeks. The letters 'VIJAYA' inscribed on the cup told her many a tale and Kamala too would listen to those stories of bliss, with her eyes closed.

Tamilnadu experienced a tremor all of a sudden. The dissident groups were gathering a force to quell the Tamil language. And to stop it the race that ruled the earth marched. The Hindi language of the north was thrust on the Dravidian race. The war of the languages began with a greater force.

The Tamil battalion marched voicing the song. "Prison to us is nothing but a flower garden housing singing koels". The lion got imprisoned. The gruesome mouth of suppression gobbled up several mothers with her babes. Two of the warriors with a mission to safeguard the Tamil language – Thalamuthu and Natarajan couldn't breathe further because of the Hindi language fanatics. The entire Tamilnadu boiled, surged up and turned into a cyclone.

Kamala stood on her balcony and looked down on the street. In her hand was the sandal paste cup. And now she was expecting Kandan's return from office.

Her eyes became tired. Kandan was yet to come. Sighing heavily she began to move from the balcony. The street that was so far calm reverberated with thundering noise. Kamala hurried back to the balcony and looked at the street. An army of the Tamils was found marching and raising slogans: "Long live Tamil; Down with Hindi. Long live the glory of Thalamuthu and Natarajan." An elderly lady with a flag in her hand was leading the procession. And everyone wondered how her hunch, crescent moon-like, got straightened. An indomitably bold man who was tall and broad-chested like King Cheran Senguttuvan played captain of the army. Their tiger-like roar instilled courage into Kamala.

She was reminded of the poem recited by the leader on her wedding day.

"In love and verse words matter.

Dravidianism for couples in their life breath."

Her thoughts were carrying her away when a slogan in a breezy style "Long live Tamil" and in a disastrous style "Down with Hindi," brought her down to earth. The slogan shouted in two different styles were uttered by Kandan. Kamala rushed outside. Kandan with a flag in hand was marching with all others. Kamala ran into the crowd. She stopped Kandan. Kandan couldn't make out. He doubted what others in the crowd would speak of him and felt bad about her behaviour in public. Kamala in a fit of fury asked:

"Who asked you to join Hindi Agitation?"

Kandan blinked. After a pause, she completed her sentence, "... without me?"

"Who asked you to join Hindi agitation without me?" Kamala's words attracted the attention of the old lady leading the procession and she moved fast towards Kamala and hugged her. The slogan shouting resumed. As the procession crossed the street, the police pounced on them as a tiger would on a deer. The sound of let loose bullets was followed by cries of agony. Yet the words "Long live Tamil" tore the sky. But the voice of power 'invited' all of them to prison.

Kandan and Kamala found themselves in prison. "Dravidianism for couple is their life breath" – their mind murmured.

The reign of suppression limped. The Hindi language fanatics feared that their efforts would no longer hold water. The plan of thrusting Hindi failed. The Tamil army won the battle. The brave sang of their glory. The idea of thrusting Hindi faded into oblivion. Tamil emerged victorious in the war of the languages. Kamla and Kandan returned home with their hearts filled with the joy of victory. But before him reached the letter of dismissal from his office saying: "Involved yourself in an action that does not go with your service. Hence you are fired." His mother acted like a live volcano.

"Ma! Won't I act when something goes wrong with you? Likewise I acted when my mother tongue was targeted. Am I at fault?" Kandan wept. His mother's anger was more on her daughter-in-law than on her son.

A job lost makes it difficult to find one. It leads to a life of sorrow. Unemployed Kandan devoted all his hours for the benefit of the movement. He was the secretary of that place and everybody knew him. His fame began to spread. On behalf of the movement, a public meeting was organised in his place. He has done

all the preparations. And he is yet to send an amount of twenty rupees to the chief speaker for his travelling expenses.

The amount he collected was not sufficient enough. He became anxious about the meeting. At home he was restless. Kamala's health too deteriorated for want of proper food and safety in the prison. And he could not buy her the medicines the physician prescribed. All the silver household goods were sold and the money they brought was utilized for other expenses. Finally, what was left at home was the silver sandal paste cup. "Why don't you sell it to buy medicine?" advised his mother. But he was reluctant to sell it. He refused, for it was a present to his wife from her dear friend. But now when he had to find money to send it to the chief speaker, his eyes searched for the cup. When the sick Kamala was sleeping, Kandan took the silver cup with shivering hands. He mortgaged it and sent the money to the chief speaker.

The day of the public meeting came up. Kandan was getting ready to go to the railway station to welcome the speaker. He found his mother abusing his wife. He looked at them intently. His mother was accusing Kamala of losing the silver cup. Sick Kamala was silently shedding tears.

Kamala wept because she felt that she had lost her friend. Kandan wiped his eyes and rushed towards the railway station. The train arrived. But the speaker was missing. Stunned stood Kandan and sobbed. He would not have bothered if a personal guest didn't turn up. But the guest was invited for a public function. He felt very bad for the contributors to the function fund would be disappointed. He managed to go to the stage and begged for forgiveness. The gathering too dispersed murmuring.

Kandan came back home. Kamala's temperature had shot up. The light in her eyes was diminishing. His mother was found sitting by her side and weeping. Kandan ran towards them shouting the name of Kamala.

Kamala slowly opened her mouth. "That sandal paste cup, dear!" she warbled.

"I have stolen it... I have mortgaged it. I'll retrieve it when I have money" he said sobbing. As he sobbed Kamala closed her eyes. She didn't open her eyes again. Kandan wept and continued to weep.

Today Kandan is no more a poor man. Though he is not rich, he has enough money.

He could very well retrieve the silver cup he had mortgaged for twenty rupees if he paid an extra amount of thirty rupees towards interest.

But, what for?

To whom would he give the silver cup? There was no Kamala. The prison of the Hindi language fanatics killed her slowly and finished her off even after the victory.

Yet Kandan is prepared to retrieve the silver cup. When? Some time later in a function celebrating the victory of the movement the cup can be used to distribute sandal paste to the warriors.

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# 7 Godman

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“Hail, Sangiliananda Samy!”

“Hail, O Hail, Sangiliananda Samy!”

The devotees jumped for joy and danced in a trance as they sang the celestial song of joy.

“Praised be the Lord well-versed in *ashtama siddhis*!

Praised be the immaculate Lord who clips the wings of rogues!

Praised and praised be the Lord on Earth who solves all our problems!”

Thus sang Sambandam, the disciple of the godman, in a louder tone. His facial expressions, self-imposed body language added more vigour to the song and in this way he drove the crowd of devotees to an ecstatic state.

Finally, the devotees all hailed in a chorus: “Glory be to Lord Shiva.” A sudden silence engulfed the crowd. China Pannai Mudaliar touched the feet of the godman and decked them with flowers. The devotees too followed suit and performed pooja to the feet of the godman by adorning them with flowers, coins and currency notes. And the godman, Sangili Samy blessed all those who touched his feet with a murmur ‘Om Sankara Siva’.

Devotees fall under many categories; their requests too are varied and wide.

“My case should win in the court of law.”

“I should be cured of paralysis.”

"Childless... should be blessed with children."

"Lost my money. Show me the thief."

For all such requests the cure was one and the same... Holy ash. As the godman distributed holy ash, an indescribable joy flooded amidst the devotees.

"Sambandam," called out the Godman.

"Lord!" so saying his disciple fell and bucketed his way towards the Guru. Meanwhile, Chinna Pannai Mudaliar folded one hand against his chest and with the other pressed against his mouth, cocked up his ears.

"Sankara commands me that I should stop and call it a day," Godman said in a sweet voice.

"OK. then, Lord". It was Sambandam.

"The lord is going to rest. People can move out," said Mudaliar.

"My God! Look at him... as if he is from the heavens."

"What an excellent complexion like Lord Siva's. Wow! How graceful! How graceful! His saffron clothing adds to the glow on his face and looks as if the Lord Himself has landed here from Mt. Kailash."

"He is all teeth whenever he turned to address women's wing. But... He is as bonny and as colourful as a lemon. That speaks for his divine birth."

"Our husbands!... Huh! Can they speak as soft as he does?"

"Hei! The holy ash he gives is more than enough. It is panacea for all incurable diseases."

"Isn't he really great? He saved thousands of people from impending disaster."

"What was that?"

"Oh! Don't you know?... Do you know why he got the name Sangili Samy?"

"Did he perform pooja to Sangili Karuppan?"

"Don't be stupid. It is not that... one day Madras Mail was moving fast like a mail..."

"To what destination?"

"To Madras."

"Hm! Continue."

"Our Samy too was in the train. He was keeping to himself."

"Then what? Did he disappear?"

"No! He pulled the caution chain in the train."

"Oh! The train had stopped, right?"



"Yes... of course. The train did stop. The guard came rushing to the coach and asked for the one who stopped the train."

"And what did Samy say?"

"It's me..." said Samy and continued, "Danger awaits us. Go and look for it on the railway track."

"Wah! What power! What a great power!"

"Almost everyone rushed to see the track. Miscreants have dismantled the iron rails on the road to sabotage the train."

"My God!"

"The public prostrated before the Samy and then hugged him, calling him God who saved their lives."

"Tcho... Tcho... He is the very incarnation of God. And in such bad times, we are really blessed to see Him."

"And from that day he came to be known as Sangili Samy. Our Chinna Pannai Mudaliar too was in the same compartment. He became enamoured of the Samy."

"Oh! I see... Now I can understand why Mudaliar is celebrating with fun and fanfare. What a stingy man he is! Otherwise he would not spend so lavishly."

Sangiliananda Samy was relaxing on a silken mattress kept on the top floor of Chinna Pannaiyar's house. Sambandam was massaging his feet. Pannaiyar was fanning him. On another mattress, Pannaiyar's Pomeranian dog was relaxing.

"Om! Shankara Shiva..." These are words that emerged from Samy's mouth once in every quarter hour.

"Mudaliar! The Lord commands me to start my pilgrimage."

"Oh! If it was the Lord's command... then it had to be immediately obeyed," Sambandam was anxious.

Mudaliar stood up, "Samy! You will have everything by tomorrow morning... And to go on a pilgrimage at this hour..."

"Oh, no! no! The Lord will be angry with Samy. And such a petty thing should not be a wedge between the Lord and Samy."

Sambandam was restless. The Samy signalled to him to keep quiet and said, "Mudaliar shows lots of love toward us. We should not disappoint him. Fine then... Let me seek the Lord for a day's extension. How much have you collected till date, Mudaliar?"

Mudaliar began to beam with joy. He said:

"Silver worth the weight of one thousand rupees. By tomorrow morning we will have one such load of silver."

"Pleased! Altogether silver worth two thousand rupees. Is it enough if I turn them into gold?"

Mudaliar scratched his skin, nodded his head and showed all his teeth.

Lines appeared and disappeared on the forehead of Sami.

"Sambandam."

"Samy".

"Tomorrow morning as soon as the pooja is over, nobody should come up to the top floor."

"Okay."

"It's applicable to you too."

"Okay."

"I should be left to myself when I perform pooja in honour of Lord Shiva. And I'll be performing all through the night."

"As you please, Samy".

"Mudaliar!"

"Samy".

"Do you understand?"

"Yes!... yes!"

"The night pooja will be over when it is dawn. And you should come to the top floor. You'll have your dream realized. You asked for gold, didn't you?"

"Yes!...Yes! If you can turn them into something more precious than..."

"Let me see! It can be turned into lumps of diamond too. It all depends on the Lord's blessings."

Mudaliar gave a cup of milk to Samy. But the godman's disciple Sambandam got it and kept the container against Samy's lips.

On the morning of the next day when the routine pooja was over bars of silver arrived. The godman looked at the silver as long as his eyes were pleased and then said. "Like a stupid man who is turned into a spiritual being, like an atheist turning into a theist, you are going to turn this into gold."

As the godman was saying these words, Sambandam nodded his head and Mudaliar beamed with joy. It really made a beautiful sight.

The godman sat to perform the pooja. The fragrant smoke of frankincense and josh sticks, the fine smell of grinded sandal paste... the alluring smell wafted from garlands of jasmine...

"Samy has created a heaven itself in the top floor," said Mudaliar.

"Only when a heaven is created can we expect god to come," said Sambandam

All through the night Mudaliar had dreams. The glittering gold metamorphosed from silver, developing his business in far off lands by putting to use his gold, his business picking up very well, he becoming a multi-millionaire, and from that looking down upon the richest landlord – he was wallowing in such dreams. Yet Mudaliar woke up with a start when he dreamt that he was caught by the police when he was selling gold. Unable to believe himself he squeezed his eyelids. It dawned. Anxious to see gold he ran to the top floor followed by Sambandam.

The aroma of frankincense still wafting out gave a grand gala welcome to Mudaliar. As he entered the room, he yelled, "Samy! Samy!" And that was the end of it. The next minute he swooned.

Sambandam tried to console him. A strong rope hanging from the room window and going down into the garden got slightly disturbed by the wind. Mudaliar after coming back to life looked intently at Sambandam. His expression was so sad that it seemed to say, "Hei, Sambandam! All the silver weighing two thousand rupees is gone."

Sambandam's looks seemed to say, "Greed leads to heavy loss."

"Sambandam! My predicament is like that of a Brahmin\* lady who lost her dried fish to theft."

"Yes! Yes! What a shame it would be if made public."

"Should go behind bars now."

"Yes! That scoundrel has brought it on us."

"You must pardon me, Mudaliar! I too was responsible in a way. That wretch cheated me too."

"You acted as if you were his sincere disciple."

"You wouldn't not have believed me had I not acted like that."

"Oh! What a rogue you are! Ever since I saw that fellow on the train the devil caught me."

"It's not the devil... it is greed that caught you, Mudaliar. All greed leads to disaster."

"Enough of that philosophy... I listened to your philosophy and to what disaster that led me!"

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\*Brahmins, by virtue of their religion, are vegetarians. It is shame on them if they are found eating non-vegetarian food.

"I'll no more talk any philosophy. I'll find out ways to put an end to that cunning fellow."

"My property that got washed away by the sea... Will it ever reach the shore?"

"Sambandam's ship will trace everything and bring them back lock, stock and barrel. Don't you ever worry, Mudaliar!"

"Lumps of silver... Lumps of silver."

"I'll give you lumps of diamond... Don't feel sorry."

"Why? You too need ingots?"

"Don't ever misunderstand me, Mudaliar! You'll take pity on me if you listen to my story."

"Go ahead with that nonsense."

"I am a common man."

"That everybody knows."

"Sangilisamy too was a common man."

"Who told you that he is not?"

"He saved the people from the train disaster."

"Oh! That made me fall for him."

"Not only you... the whole world fell for him."

"Necromancer... With his abracadabra magic he made everyone fall for him."

"It is no magic... he is a trickster, a very great one at that."

"Trickery?!"

"Yes! Do you know who dismantled the railroad?"

"Who? Is that the same scoundrel?"

"No!... It's me, Mudaliar. I struggled all throughout the night to put the rails out of shape... but he pulled the chain and became a godman."

"What an excellent way to make a living!"

"It's an excellent way, true. But that cunning fox had cheated me too."

"Sambandam! This is no time for talk. We have to plunge into action to wreak vengeance on him. What do you say?"

"What a fine idea, Mudaliar! Immediately close the door of the top floor itself."

"Why?"

"The public will be here at any moment. They will ask for the godman. All that we have to tell them is that the godman is having a tete-e-tete with god himself through his yoga and so the doors could not be opened."

"What are we going to get out of it? Will I get back my lost silver?"

"I'll clear the way for you to build a house of silver. But you must do what I say."

"Okay... I will."

"Good! I'll start my journey now itself."

"Where? Where do you plan to go, Sambandam?"

"I do not know my destination. But within a week you will receive a parcel. Without anybody's knowledge you carry it to the room on the top floor and break it open."

"Will the parcel contain my lost silver?"

"Yes!... let me take leave of you... You should not open the room on the top floor till you receive the parcel."

Sambandam disappeared. A sense of seriousness began to pervade the face of Mudaliar. The godman still in *tapasya* became the talk of the people."

"Godman is having a chat with God."

"Perhaps he will disappear into heaven."

"With whom is he talking? Lord Siva? Or Lord Vishnu? Who knows?"

"He is a worshipper of Shakti. He would be chatting only with the goddess."

One day Chinna Pannai Mudliar received a box parcel through railways.

Mudaliar full of anxiety asked the parcel service to unload the box in his house.

On the box was written the words: Incense material.

Mudaliar was eagerly waiting for the dark.

Very soon darkness spread.

All the servants were sent away before time.

A pleasing smell continued to waft from the parcel.

All of a sudden Sambandam appeared from somewhere.

"All of them are silver bars, right?" asked Mudaliar very eagerly.

Nodding his head, Sambandam commanded, "Yes! Yes! Now lift it up."

The two joined hands and lifted up the parcel. Mudaliar who in the least knew the meaning of work would have understood it for the first time. Breathing heavily and sweating profusely they took the parcel to its destination. Now you know how hard work is!" Sambandam teased Mudaliar a bit.

"Hard work for silver," Mudaliar grumbled.

Sambandam began to break open the parcel. Mudaliar became restless and so he asked: "Sambandam! You are sure that it is silver, eh?"

"Yes, of course," ... Sambandam broke open the box. Mudaliar swooned. A little while later he came back to his senses and before he could yell, Sambandam gagged his mouth.

Inside the box was a corpse lying cuddled up like a huge worm.

True! It was the corpse of Sangilisamy.

"Hei! What have you done, Sambandam?" Mudaliar was very much perturbed. "You were instrumental in losing my silver... now you made me a murderer... Huh!"

"No!... We are not murderers... We are devotees of the Lord... perfect *Bhaktas*." So saying Sambandam pulled out the corpse and placed it in such a posture that the dead godman would be easily taken to be in a state of self-consecration. He lit up the lamp nearby. He then came out of the room pulling Mudaliar along with him. Mudaliar blinked and blinked.

Sambandam after a pause said: "Don't panic, Mudaliar. You have lost only two thousand rupees weight of silver. I'll give you silver worth the weight of twenty thousand rupees."

Morning came. News spread. The godman is going to come out of his meditation. The door will be shortly opened. Mudaliar was commanded to open the door in a dream he had. Such a publicity lured a large crowd in front of Mudaliar's house. The door opened. Everyone of them rushed up the stairs. Sambandam broke into tears. Mudaliar wept. They successfully staged the drama as planned by them.

A letter was found there. Sambandam read it out:

"We do not desire any more to live with this stinking body. We will come in the astral body to bless you all. Let people offer their prayers and offerings to my *Samadhi* and be blessed with all things on earth."

yours,  
Sangilisamy.

The opening ceremony of Sangilisamy's *Samadhi* was celebrated with fun and fanfare. And on the same day, the amount offered by the common people totaled to one thousand rupees. The year that followed saw the celebration of Sangiliananda Samy Guru pooja.

A huge mutt was built in honour of the godman. Sambandam became the poojari of the mutt. Mudaliar became the boss of the mutt.

What was lost was silver worth the weight of only two thousand rupees. But what was gained was silver worth the weight of twenty thousand rupees. And the profit was bound to grow. The profit will never be on the decrease as long as people continue to be fools.

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# 8 Love Life of Ganga

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Lord Shiva was fast asleep in his heavenly abode, Mt. Kailash. His snake slithered away from his neck and was found playing with a young deer. Shiva's consort, Parvati Devi, was also fast asleep least aware of her husband's vehicle, the bull, licking her feet with its serated tongue. Heaven dwelling women all perhaps are not disturbed even by the falling thunderbolt. Or else how could Lord Indra's son taking the shape of a crow gaze at the physical charms of Sita, when she was fast asleep? Beaded sweat emerged on the face of Parvati. Lord Shiva's body too showed no sign of life for he was fast asleep. He is blessed with five heads, you know! So he has dismantled four of his heads, and rolled them up in a deer skin and kept it aside. Otherwise it would be uncomfortable to sleep.

Deep asleep, the Shiva couple's snoring was heard tearing the silence asunder.

A plait from Shiva's head showed signs of moving faster. Ganga was found walking. She placed her feet as soft as cat's paw on Shiva's head and then looking askance at different directions she was fast moving towards an unknown destination.

She then stopped under one of the Lord's plaits and holding on to a branch she began to wait for someone. Two long hands that came from behind the branches blindfolded her blue black eyes.



Ganga's hands as if by reflex action held those hands tightly. Those joined hands looked like a rose stuck to a lily's stem.

"Chandra!" Ganga uttered the name in a mesmerizing voice that resembled the drone of the bee, drunk with nectar.

Chandran! Yes, the very same young man residing in Shiva's head. It is said that no cotton should be kept with fire. Lord Shiva blessed his son Murugan with a peacock and a snake. He had Ganga (River Ganges) in his head. Poor Shiva! He should have kept the Moon in his leg. Poor Shiva! That is his fate.

"Ganga, my darling!"

"Chandra! Beauty Incarnate."

"Why didn't you turn up yesterday, my love?"

"Yesterday was my turn. Today it is Parvati's"

"Speak in a hushed tone... Don't wake up Shiva."

"He has no eye on his head... that's good... nothing to worry even if he wakes up."

"You are a born teaser, Ganga!"

"What are you if not one?"

"Ganga!... Are you happy with the old man?"

"If I am happy, why should I search for Chandran!"

"Your tone is akin to that of Thara... She complains to me of her aged husband with long grown moustaches and beard troubling her a lot."

"If oldies get women like us - Thara and Ganga - as partners, then it is a feast to men like Chandra."

"Whatever you might say, we actually sin, don't we?"

"Chandra! Only Earth dwellers will not be able to reach Heaven if they commit sins. But we are all already in heaven. We should find out if there is a bigger sin than this. Agreed? We are not in any way responsible for the so-called sins we commit... Thara was in love with you. The stupid said that she was unfaithful to her husband. She has a mind that desires to enjoy life. Why should her desires be stimulated and then she be called a harlot? They say it is a sin to sleep with one's Guru's wife. I would say that to be the blabbering of a madcap. A *shishya* is expected to be of service to the guru. But you have done a greater service to the Guru's wife by driving away all her suffering. Is it not a greater service?"

I too have done no sin. Bagirathan called me from the skies. My body quivered at the sight of that handsome man. Why body? My heart too quivered. I can't express in words the sexual hunger I had for him! You need poet Kampan to do it.

My sexual feelings were out of control. I had contacts with a king. He was as powerful as an emperor. I had dreams of trapping him into my life and through him realize all the dreams of my life. But that good for nothing fellow pushed me into the hands of this old man of Kailash. This old fellow is not only old but worn out in the services of Rishis' wives. That is not all, Chandra. He has Parvati by his side, and maintains a schedule for fun in bed. His women have to take turns. What shall I do? For that matter, what can any young woman like me do? What did Parvati herself do? If you are interested in that story, dear Chandra, you have to ask Brahma himself. Everyday you visit the earth... Will you please put a word of advice to the people of the Earth?

"What is that Ganga?"

"Do not marry off your daughter to an old man. Never consent for a second marriage... Will you please tell this to them?... Please on my behalf... Tell them so that no woman is pushed to my level."

"So let it be, darling... Come let us slip to the mane side of Shiva. It will be darker there."

Chandran and Ganga disappeared. A little later Shiva woke up with a start. Parvathi was sleeping by his side undisturbed. He felt for his head. Ganga hurriedly rushed to her place and sat there.

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# 9 Mother's Love

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“**B**y virtue of my physical charms and cunning stratagem I have by hook or by crook killed the love the king had for his queen. The queen, Kopperundevi had carved a niche for herself in the heart of the king. But I have painted the inerasable carving in black. “At one time the queen was the glowing lamp in the dream palace of the king. But today the lamp got deserted in the street. Surrounded by beauties the king and the queen strutted on flowery paths in the royal garden where peacocks danced. That has become a thing of the past.

Today the beautiful form of myself – Suzhal Kanni – like the decorated portrait of a goddess in a pooja room holds a predominant place in the king’s heart. Dead are those days when the queen claimed rights over the lap and the sturdy shoulders of the king. Today the crowned king has become a magic puppet dancing to my tunes. It is a grand success to me. Yet my mind is not at peace. Though the queen had lost the king’s affection and love, she has not lost the title ‘queen;’ she has not given up the right of making her son the crown prince.

How can I find peace with myself, my beloved, as the things stand? The public are in her favour. The commoners invariably believe that the separation of the royal couple would bring havoc to the country. The council of ministers beat their chests in sorrow and rage about the king falling into my trap without understanding my character. The countries refuse to recognize me even as a junior queen.

Kopperundevi rules from the king’s bed; she herself is a warrior in battlefield. When compared to her, where does this woman, who had bracketed the king with the tinkling music of her bangles, stand? – This is how I am talked about in the weaponry. I am equipping myself to face all such growing enmity. But you see, my

love! Before her son, Inbasagaran, grows up to wear the crown, he should be killed. The king of Sundarapuri should become the property of Suzhal Kanni. The foetus growing up in my womb should hold the sceptre. And the one who will be an obstacle is the crown prince. Tell me a device to jump over this obstacle, my beloved! Only with your support, I will be able to hoist my flag of success.

My love! Only through you will I have to fulfil the goal of my life. Why are you so silent, my beloved? Are you angry with me because I am at arm's length from you? It is time for the king's arrival and that's why I keep my distance. Here I am... Let me with my petal soft rosy lips open your rude lips... kiss... kiss... Enough? A royal dinner on some other occasion. My love! I should be made the queen of Sundarapuri. This kingdom should belong to my yet to be born son. Will a bright future await me? Will a plan to this effect be your brainchild at the earliest?"

"You don't have to fear, Suzhal Kanni, my dear! My brain doesn't run short of such devices! Like the sweet kisses you have given me, I will magnanimously bestow on you plans that work. Don't ever forget that it was I who devised the plan for you to become the beloved of the king. Likewise I will device for you an apt plan to weed out Prince Inbasagaran from the bush of life. Inbasagaran is after all a bud. I can easily nip him, if I want. But the bud is in the royal garden. It is no fenceless field... And so the plan has to be executed by taking utmost care. The prince must die. But we should not be anywhere in the picture. In fact, nobody should be able to find out that it was a planned murder. The ruler and the ruled should be made to believe that the prince died a natural death... I will tell you of a plan."

"Come on, quick... quick."

"Give me one more... I'll tell you."

"Why one? Take nine."

"Wah! Wah!... I am flat... I am flat... My dear Suzhal! Drunk with your kisses, my brain has stopped functioning. I will meet you tomorrow with an excellent plan."

"Come after the king leaves my chamber."

"I am no madcap to enter the chamber when he is there."

"Fine! Come with a perfect plan."

"As perfect as you are."

"No... As perfect as our true love."

"What an adept are you in getting things done, Suzhal Kanni! In bed with the

king you should be telling tales like this."

"I have two hearts, my beloved. One always desires you. And the other always dreams of the throne of Sundarapuri. Only with my second heart, do I praise the king, worship him and give him the pleasures of the flesh."

"It is time to leave, Suzhal! I think the king is coming."

"The plan... at dawn... Do not forget."

"The royal dinner... Don't ever forget that."

Suzhal Kanni nodded her head as a sign of approval and then smiled. Deetchanyan moved out enjoying her smile. Running his tongue heavily on his thick lips and enjoying something that was sweet, he moved out of her sight. The time he disappeared from her sight coincided with the time the king entered the chamber cooing sweet nothings only to have a taste of her physical charm.

No sooner did the king sit in bed than Suzhal Kanni fell on his lap as if to prove that what all she said was true. She was in the grip of a man.

Suzhal Kanni was the junior queen of the king of Sundarapuri. Deetchanyan was her nephew... a distant relative of hers.... In the palace he worked as king's bodyguard. And during his free hours when opportunity arose he should hold on to Suzhal Kanni's body. These two duties were routine for him. Who would miss the opportunity of tasting wine? He was as hairy as a bear. Suzhal Kanni was like a honeycomb. No wonder that she was after him. A honeycomb bending itself to pour honey to appease the bear's hunger is beyond anyone's imagination. But in the palace of Sundarapuri this had become a daily happening. Like a green parrot she was clinging on to his rough boulder-like chest.

And he was singing sweet nothings into her ears. And the king unaware of what was going on behind the curtain praised her by calling her chaste, immaculate and the like.

Unfortunately, the king, an admirer of beautiful women, failed to understand that a spate of arrows had come in the guise of Suzhal Kanni to transform his empire of Sundarapuri into a graveyard.

A dancing peafowl in the king's harem, a good counsellor in the palace, a real warrior following the king at the time of entering the battlefield, an affectionate mother to the citizens of Sundarapuri, a glowing gem in the king's palace - That was Kopperundevi, the queen. To turn such a great woman into a raging sea, a cyclone had come in the name of Suzhal Kanni.

At a time when queen Kopperundevi gave birth to Inbasagaran, Suzhal Kanni jumped at the opportunity to invade the heart of the king. She did. The king surrendered. What one thousand charioteers, five thousand foot soldiers, an army

of elephant riders and horsemen could never do, she did by giving an enticing look. The fortress of his mind broke to smithereens and her charming figure danced in every piece.

The queen was declaring to the world the greatness of motherhood by showering her love and affection on her son Inbasagaran.

But the king was merrily drinking the wine of the junior queen's lips, blabbering: "Sweeter than grapewine." And she was new to him.

Inbasagaran came like a glittering diamond in the dark life of queen Kopperundevi. He was to her what the moon was to the dark sky.

Isn't joyful to look at the distant full moon from your balcony? Likewise, queen Kopperundevi though unable to be close to her husband, paid her respects to her lord from a distance.

But the moon at least would rain its light on the balcony viewer. But the poor lady was unfortunate...

Inbasagaran was the only source of consolation to her. But Suzhal Kanni was bent on burying this source. Deetchayan too got a plan ready to this effect.

And these two necromancers with a mission to destroy the country hugged each other and clamoured "victory to us in this treachery."

The first step in the treacherous plan was brought into effect.

Suzhal Kanni, all of a sudden, began to shower her love on Prince Inbasagaran. She even started advising the king by saying: "Like me, sister Kopperundevi would entertain desire for you. Is it not your duty as a king to spend your time merrily with her too?"

She then approached queen Kopperundevi, fell at her feet and wept out: "It was by the vagary of fate I interrupted your smooth life. Please pardon me for that. But now where will I go? Consider me as your younger sister and grant me my life."

She played her part so well that the king, his queen and their prince have fallen a prey to her.

Everything got changed in the palace. Joy and merry-making returned. Everybody in Sundarapuri said: "The king and the queen are reunited. Suzhal Kanni had realized her fault and now feels penitent. You must see the junior queen showing affection and love toward the prince Inbasagaran; a real mother too won't be so attached to her son."

The prince these days rarely stays with his mother. He is found most of the time playing in the junior queen's palace. He insists that only she should give him food. He listens only to her. To the astonishment of the entire palace, everything took a different turn. The king renewed his love for Suzhal Kanni. The queen too

treated her as if she were her own sister. But she never knew that Suzhal Kanni was burning and fuming in her heart.

One day Inbasagaran entered the palace of the junior queen with a piped musical instrument. Suzhal Kanni playing innocent asked him, "Where did you get this?"

"Deetchayan gave me, Ma," so saying Inbasagaran played on the instrument and danced.

The drama of treachery moved on to the next act. With the decision that here should be rising action, she hugged the prince and lifted him up on to her bed and showered him with kisses till his face went red.

Those who pluck roses for eating never admire its softness and colour. They would only pull out one petal after another and finally throw out the stem. Her making the prince sit close by and kissing him incessantly was very much akin to that.

"Little darling! I will teach you a tune. If you play that tune on this flute it would sound excellent," thus began the beauty, junior by age but senior by treachery.

"Teach me, Ma," he said passing on the flute to her.

She began to play on it.

"Pleasant! Pleasant" appreciated the maids in waiting.

That tune enticed the prince's mind. He felt inspired to learn the tune.

"You must by all means teach me this tune, ma." The prince was adamant.

She too expected such words from his young mind.

The prince struggled with the tune for two days. He began to play it like an adept.

"Excellent dear boy, excellent! When you play the tune which is unlike mine, I could hear the lovely lisps too. It enhances its value. Wow! If only you played this tune in the royal garden, peacocks would volunteer to dance," she said cunningly all her words clothed in affection.

"I will go now to the garden and play the tune. Let me see how many peacocks come to dance," so saying the boy ran with the flute.

Suzhal Kanni's eyes opened wider. A new life began to flow on to her face. "Success! Success!" she spoke to herself with glee.

In the royal garden the handsome young prince began to play on the flute by the side of a jasmine shrub. He repeatedly played the tune taught to him by the junior queen. Poor fellow! He was in the least aware that the tune he was playing would lure cobras.

He should be made an adept in playing the tune. And when he plays such a tune in the royal garden a venomous cobra should be let go free into it. Lured by the tune the cobra would slither its way towards the boy and dance with its hood. And the moment the boy stopped playing the tune, the cobra would become furious and hit him hard with its fangs.

Such was the plan of Deetchanyan. For providing the junior queen such a plan he was amply compensated. She too started executing the plan by sending the boy to the royal garden. Inbasagaran's tune was quite pleasing to the ears, and gave the feeling that a gentle breeze was hugging the listener tightly.

The tune played on the flute was indeed more pleasing than the same tune played on the snake charmer's flute.

Deetchanyan, the very incarnation of cruelty, was awaiting the right opportunity and so he released the cobra he held in captivity near the jasmine bush. The freed cobra slithered its way towards the music of the flute. But that little boy unaware of the impending danger continued to play on the tune his junior mother taught.

With the great hope that in another few minutes all the peacocks would come and dance before him, the boy prince continued to play on the flute raising it a few decibels more.

The cobra moved towards the boy; charmed by the music it remained in front of him spreading its hood. But the boy was so enamoured of his own music that he closed his eyes and so failed to see the cobra.

He closed his eyelids dreaming that when he opened them after repeating the tune several times he would see several peacocks dancing.

How did the poor boy know that the cobra was nodding its hood with murderous venom in its fangs!

Charmed stood the cobra. Once it woke up to the situation the prince would fall a prey to it.

The moment the music stopped, the cobra would come out of its charmed state.

The junior queen was eagerly watching from her balcony.

Deetchanyan from behind the bush was smiling.

Kopperundevi too arrived on the scene. She too was lured by the music. She keenly searched for the place from where the music was wafting. Her joy knew no bounds when she found out that it was her son who was producing that vibrant music. But the joy disappeared as soon as it appeared for she saw Death dancing



before the would-be king.

A gem of a boy was he from her womb. Death was gleefully dancing in front of him to bathe him in venom.

"Alas! What can I do now?" she straightened herself. Her sixth sense told her that the junior queen and her Deetchanyan were very much there. Yet she played blind to them and moved towards the back of the boy. She had understood what a treacherous drama was being enacted. She was not unaware of the fact that the moment the music stopped the boy would die of cobra bite. Like a worm on hot sand the mother in her wriggled.

Which mother could tolerate such a thing? Which mother would digest the fact that her child would very soon fall down lifeless with the venom colouring his body blue?

If she called him by his name to caution him, he would stop playing on the flute and the cobra would immediately strike him dead. She was in a predicament. She howled, but differently: "Do not stop playing on the flute. Do not stop... go on and on." His mother's words fell on his ears. He opened his eyes. In front of him stood a hooded cobra. He began to tremble all over. He was in a fix.

His mother went on shouting: "Do not stop... go on... and on..."

He didn't stop playing on the flute... he went on without knowing why.

"Play on... play on," so saying the mother moved towards her son.

The music went higher by a few more decibels. The cobra too raised its hood and nodded.

"Don't stop... play on... play on" she continued to shout. Then there came from her an alarming cry.

Yes. Kopperundevi fell with a thud in front of the cobra.

The hooded cobra pounced on her. Venom began to spread all over her body. What next? The cobra slithered away faster than before. The king who came there jumped on the cobra and cut it into two with his sword and while doing so fell on the ground.

"Lord! My Lord!" Kopperundevi cried.

"Please take more care of our beloved boy," she said dragging the boy and handing him over to the king.

"Ma!" cried the prince.

A genuine motherhood has done her duty and closed her eyes.

The king looked intently at the junior queen and Deetchanyan. They began to take to their heels.

"Catch them... let them not escape," he commanded.

"What a misfortune! Had I been here a second earlier I could have killed the cobra and saved my wife and son," blabbered the king.

What a helpless situation! The value of mother's love should be made known to the world. Maybe because of that the king arrived there late by a second.

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# 10 The Great Escape

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A hullabaloo was going on in that place. From corner to corner police lorries were seen plying. The shouting of the *red-topeed* man was disturbing the night's peace and was darting into every house and street all over the place. Not any door of any house remained closed. And no sound of snoring was heard from anywhere. The tiny-tots too were gleefully watching their parents speak in a hurried tone. An old lady sitting at the entrance of her house and hand pounding areca nut was dozing off, without her knowledge, of course. Poor woman! Her aged eyelids! The honking sound of the van's horn startled her from sleep and she in a fit of fear began pounding the floor with her little pestle. Witnessing such a scene her grandson rollicked with laughter all the time clapping his hands.

Policemen who got down from the van entered the old lady's house ignoring her presence and began their search. They looked into the loft, searched in the kitchen and scrutinized through the hinges of the doors. They then pouted out their lips and made their way out. Only the old lady's grandson fell down crying: "Oh! Bogy." The police ransacked all the houses. The entire place was in turmoil. It was all because Mr Ramadurai, the proprietor of Leela Mill was found dead at 7 o' clock in the night. No! He was murdered. The killer was a mill worker. His name was Vittal.

The policemen were moving about at breakneck speed on their vehicles such as lorries, cars and bicycles and were trying to trap the murderer to put him behind bars. Who is Ramadurai? Is he a poor man who calls a name of the God when he gets up from sleep in the morning and then curses his fate before he goes out to earn his bread? The killing of a poor man is akin to the crushing of an ant. But how can Death ever think of snuffing out the life of a moneyed man like Ramadurai! The only prayer of the rich to God, who has given them wealth and thereby indefatigable joy, is that He should also extend their life, a thousand times.

"Alas! Ramadurai was not yet forty. A nice man! The whole nation glorifies his generosity. He sponsored the Navaratri festival in Nageswaran temple. The thousand-pillared mandap in Akilandeswari temple was built by him. What a Satanic force is he who murdered this patron saint?

Did Ramadurai in any way disturb the workers? Has his mill ever experienced a strike? Or has he ever dismissed a worker in his mill? Nothing like this ever happened. But the murderer killed him for not sanctioning him a loan of Rs. 200. Will the killer ever live in peace?

The rich man's wife was like Mahalakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, herself. Their two children are tiny-tots. What sufferings they would undergo! Imagine the sufferings of his wife who always thinks that her husband is such a gem of a man that she could never get a man like him even if she prayed to God in all her seven births. O Sinner of sinners! Won't your wife feel the butterflies in her stomach if you are murdered in that manner? Hm! You will also be killed sooner or later.

That scoundrel should not be hanged. He should be cut to pieces and tortured to death.

Such words have become the talk of the place. What is the motive behind the murder? Vittal was not given two hundred rupees. And so he murdered Ramadurai.

Leela Mill is a big weaving mill, situated in a beautiful place of the city. About three thousand workers were employed in that mill. The mill specialized in transforming raw cotton into yarn and then weaving it into cloth. A little distance away from the city was a place known by the name Leelapuram that accommodated the three thousand workers and their families. Vittal is one among the three thousand.

That day as usual at five in the evening the siren was heard. The workers heaving a great sigh of relief released themselves from the clutches of the mill and began to move towards their houses. Vittal chose to stand under a tree facing the

entrance of the mill and from there he watched the women workers move out of the mill. There was a separate exit for women and his eyes stood glued to the place. All women had moved out but she was not there in that list. Yes! His eyes were searching for his wife. He became tired of standing.

Has she already reached home? He began to walk fast. He ran towards his house. It was still locked. He retraced his steps. "She complained of headache when they started towards the mill. Has she fallen sick?" He doubted. Vittal can't bear the sight of even an ant biting her. Such was the affection he had for his wife. What greater pleasure can there be for the poor than caring for the spouse? Vittal walked swiftly towards the mill.

Anxious to meet her husband, Thangam started as soon as she heard the siren. Her duty was in the Blowroom Carding section of the mill. Her dark complexion and her lovely countenance played a vital role in driving away the sad thoughts of Vittal on many occasions. Her very presence was enough to serve as a panacea whenever he got tired of work. Likewise, she too found it a pleasant experience to see her husband after a gap of hours at a stretch. She would find no time to dust off the cotton dust settled on her head but would rush to see her husband.

That day too Thangam started for home. Singaram, the peon, rushed after her and said, "Boss is calling you." Thangam stood stunned.

She then stood in all humility before her boss in his chamber. Ramadurai, lighting up a cigarette, asked: "The day's work is over, isn't it, Thangam?". Thangam nodded her head indicating 'yes'. "Manager told me that you are quite good at wok." She kept mum but let out only a smile. Ramadurai looked intently at the smiling face. "I have already advised the Manager to hike your salary from this month on."

Thangam again kept quiet. Dimples formed on her cheeks. She was very eager to convey this news to her husband at the earliest. The boss looked at Singaram who was showing all his teeth and commanded, "Hi! Rush now and fetch coffee." Singaram took to his heels.

Ramadurai tapped his cigarette. Even before there was any ash formation, he repeatedly stubbed his cigarette. He pulled out another cigarette. The burning match stick went out. Shit! The wind! He closed all the windows and began to strike a match. But there was no use. "Huh! What a wind! Devilish wind! Thangam! Why don't you close that main door?" As he said this, Ramadurai's voice was shaky, like an old man's shivering in cold. It took little time for Thangam to understand the motive of her boss.

"I will take leave of you," she said and took her forward step to the entrance.

Unable to control himself Ramadurai pounced on Thangam. The doors got closed.

She howled for help. "Oh, my parrot green! O, my talking statue! Yield to my temptations, O, my golden dove." He said in a voice laden with lust. She shivered. "Why should you shiver, my walking golden beetle!" Ramadurai hugged her tight. She released herself and blubbered. She fell at her boss's feet and wailed, "Let me go chaste." But he advised: "A dirge in the battlefront, a mourning song in the bed of love are coward's act, my beauty."

Thangam couldn't escape from the clutches of that rhino of a man. Her soft lips, the lips that graced only the lips of her husband, now got pressed by the lustful lips of Ramadurai. She lost her senses. That human beast satiated his lust for her. Thangam sagged.

The clock struck six. The doors opened. Ramadurai pushed a hundred rupee note into her hand. Thangam tore it into pieces and ran away.

Vittal had already reached the mill. His joy knew no bounds when he saw Thangam. He rushed towards her. But Thangam looked like a worm on hot sand.

"Don't touch me, dear. I am unworthy of your touch." She wept.

"What do you mean, Thangam?"

"The Boss... rape..." She didn't complete her words... She couldn't. Sobbing she fell at the feet of her husband. He ignored her. He flew towards the mill.

The gorkha at the entrance stood looking at him open-mouthed. Vittal looked at the gorkha's hip. A glittering dagger adorned his hip. He snatched it in a trice and rushed towards the Boss's chamber. That was it... Even before Ramadurai could forget the taste of Thangam's lips he fell down dead.

Hiding the dagger in his waist, he rushed out. But the gorkha gripped him so tight that the dagger pierced into one side of Vittal's chest. But Vittal stabbed the gorkha in the neck, threw him out and ran towards Thangam, all the time sealing with his palm the wound that was gushing out blood.

Thangam lay curled up on the floor. With one hand he hugged her and lifted her up and moved fast into a dried up canal.

Mill workers ran in various directions. Telephones went on alarming.

Thangam tore up her sari and bandaged her husband's wound. Vittal couldn't stand up erect. He began to wobble. Blood continued to gush forth from his wound. "Kill me dear," Thangam whimpered. "Sh..." he patted her back. Her cheeks went wet. They hugged each other. They felt that they were going crazy over their impending disaster.

"If we proceed through this canal, we will soon reach the nearby railway

station. Somehow let us make our escape,” said Vittal in a grave voice. Thangam poured out her tears.

Both of them began to walk.... They walked and walked. They walked as the police spread their net to trap the murderer.

In the city, the police boasted that they had searched for the murderer everywhere except the sky. As they found it futile to search for them in the city, they thought that the murderer would make his escape in the nine o'clock train. Hence several police vans rushed to various railway stations within a ten mile circumference. One rushed to Kamalapuram railway station too.

Vittal and Thangam were moving only towards that station. Ten more minutes for the train to reach the station. They too had almost reached the station. But Vittal couldn't proceed further. There was a darting pain in his wound. “Huh!... Huh!...” he began to howl. Thangam's heart went pit – a – pat and she could hear the beating of her heart. To what a pitiable condition Thangam is pushed down! Unimaginable indeed.

“Darling,” she cooed into his ear. She then took his hand and allowed it to rest on her shoulder. Holding him tight, she held her breath and began to move forward.

She was sure of taking him to the railway station. If only they could catch the train... then they could easily make their escape. That was her wish. It was this wish that drove them forward. Vittal began to breathe heavily and Thangam moved faster with a determination.

Her face blossomed. She could see the red light of the railway station. They will have to climb up the canal in a few minutes. That's all... Train will be there in another few minutes. They could certainly make their escape.

Thangam hugged Vittal and cooed “Darling.” Tears and laughter mingled only to increase their sad thoughts. She stood on the bank of the canal and with all her strength she helped her husband climb up. “We have reached the station” she said holding him tight. That hug dispelled the pain in his wound. “Thangam,” he said joyfully in a low key. Thangam began to panic.

Policemen were getting down from their vehicles. Torch lights flashed in all directions. Thangam felt giddy. Her thoughts began to swing.. Vittal handcuffed... Then he is in the gallows... Thangam turns a widow. She was startled by the very thought. “We are trapped, dear.” She squealed. Vittal turned his eyes in different directions. Her cheeks remained drenched with her tears. Thangam mustered up all her love for her husband and kissed him on his lips. Kissing was

over.

“Stop them! Catch them!” They could hear the police shouting thus and rushing towards them. Thangam pulled out the dagger resting on her husband’s waist belt. She found a way to escape from the police. She stabbed her husband in his chest with all her might. He fell down dead. She then pushed the dagger into her throat and slit it. She saved her husband from the police. She saved herself from awaiting sorrows.

Both of them made their great escape from the torture of the society.



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# 11 No Escape

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**S**hards of glass fixed on the top of that long wall stood like spikes. Close by that wall was an electric fence. He sat beside a well and looked at the amazing structure of the wall of great height unaware of the tears threatening to spill out. He was a prisoner. As the wooden planks covering the mouth of the well hide its depth, he perhaps wished that the feelings generated in his mind should go unnoticed.

He was well-built. His face was quite charming. The moustache he sported aptly suited his face. And he still retained his charm in spite of his incarceration. He was only moving his lips as if he were cursing the wall that stood majestically separating him from the outside world.

It was not certain whether he was aware of the fact that the great walls that were raised to protect great kings and their capitals got blown up into pieces in days of yore; but he daydreamed of the huge wall crumbling under his very eyes. He may not be aware of the historical fact that the Bastille prison in France was broken by revolutionaries in a single day to release their imprisoned leaders. But he thought if some saviour would come to break open the wall and rescue him.

There was nothing wrong in thinking of his freedom but there could be no reason in it, for he was no political prisoner. He was not one of those prisoners whom the police department foolishly prided itself on keeping them behind bars under anti-goondas act or some other act. In fact, the police might stoop to the extent of creating chaos and confusion in the state, and on that pretext arrest the law-breakers so that they could puff up their chest in pride. He was not one among those who fall under that category. And no history of the world goes without a few pages at least discussing the various revolutions against dictators who made their country wallow in the dark and ended in the blowing up of fort-like prisons.

But he was differently charged and punished accordingly. His mind like a live volcano erupted and subsided keeping his sorrow to himself. And whenever it subsided he let out a deep sigh that found an outlet through his nose burning its tip.

He was found sleeping on a coir cot placed on the pial at the entrance of the house. But his gamboling thoughts during his sleepless hours took the shape of scenes in his dreams and he frolicked in his dream world.

His parents were poor. Yet desiring their only son to lead a married life they searched for a suitable girl and finally settled on a good-looking one. Her fair complexion, her fish-like eyes, her lips like the colour of a cock's comb - all these made him go crazy after her. And they got married.

Preparations for the first night celebrations were on. Inside the frond-roofed hut a corner was selected and curtained off with the palmyra leaf wattle. That much for the nuptial night. A plate of guava, a plate of hill banana, a *kalayam* brimming with buffalo milk, new reed mats and leather pillows stuffed with coconut fibre, all adorned the room.

She came. She stood with her face and body betraying coyness. For a time he looked at her as if he were to gobble her up. He tried to utter her name - Thangam, but couldn't. His lips had gone dry. With his trembling hand he tried to hold hers. She moved a little away. He got up and hugged her. Both of them sat together. She tried to slip away from his clutches. He was not willing to leave her. And at that sweet moment the oil lamp tumbled down and filled the room with darkness.

He opened his eyes. It was all a dream.

In front of him stood policemen. He rubbed his eyes to make sure. Yes! They were policemen. He wanted to scream but the sound got stuck up in his throat.

"Hei! We are arresting you in connection with Pannaiyar's murder," howled the Sub-Inspector. In silence he stood. He was handcuffed and dragged. He had no time for the joyous thoughts of his marriage. He was thrown behind bars. Poor fellow! He was enjoying the breeze that hugged him in that open place. But now he was pushed like a slave into a nasty room that resembled the cage of a civet cat. The next day, he was remanded in custody for a period of fifteen days in a sub-jail.

Did he kill Pannaiyar? "No... no..." That was the only answer he was screaming night and day. His aged parents' hearts went heavy at the thought of their son's incarceration and thereby the separation. And all that they could do was to mutter words of discontent.

"What a pity! Our son is a decent fellow... a gentleman. He never picked any

quarrel with others. Several in our place were nurturing a grudge against Panniyar. He was the wretch who appropriated Uthandi Konar's fertile lands. And so won't Konar have planned to finish him off? When Sivaraman's sister went to the brook Pannaiyar misbehaved with her. Sivaraman could have taken cudgels against him. The whole village knew that Pannaiyar had cheated his business partner Durai Pandi in opium trade. Durai Pandi could have murdered him. But the police had brushed them all aside and took away our son who was driven out of the land by Pannaiyar. Oh God! Only the poor and the helpless are taken for a ride in this world. We wanted him to marry and settle in life. Alas! His life has taken a different turn. What shall we do now?"

His parents were in tears all through. But he who was remanded in custody had still hope left in him. And that was the innocent would never be punished.

During the fifteen days of custody an incident took place. It was like a drop of honey to his bereaved mind. In the sub-jail, nearer to his 'cage' was another which housed four to five girls.

One of them resembled exactly the woman of his dreams. On inquiry he found that her name, though not 'Thangam', was close to that meaning 'gold' - yes. Her name was Ponnu and that really surprised him. She had a face that was blemish-free and she was in her early twenties. She was brimming with youth. "Who is she? Why is she in prison? Is she also remanded in custody under the charge of murder?" Questions such as these began to pound his head. He probed into the matter. The very first answer he got from others was heartening to him. She was not yet married. He dreamed of marrying her in the sub-jail itself in the presence of the jailor. He was jubilant.

She was in the jail, charged with bootlegging. That was the second information he got. He found it difficult to digest. But he didn't consider it mean even if she was arrested under that charge. He saw several poor mothers like her in prison along with their children. He didn't find fault with them, instead he pitied them.

There is no way to make a living in this country. As a result, hunger roasts the poor. Can the head of the family ever see his wife and children go hungry? The rich get their permit to drink. And society accords a special respect to such an act. But the poor wishing to drive away their sorrow seek solace in liquor. And so a few people brew illicit liquor to cater to their need. The heads of families find it easy to get and the brewers make easy money. And so they go ahead till they are caught by the police.

And what can be expected of their poor children? They had to helplessly contribute their share to their family business. The children of oil merchants know how to run an oilpress. The family members of the cheroot makers take special

lessons in the art of rolling the tobacco leaf. Likewise, illicit liquor brewing has become a sort of small scale industry in many places. And all the misunderstandings that happen with regard to sharing of money and the profit and loss account throw the chief organizers behind bars. But no one can feel proud that rules and regulations, and honesty are ensured in anyway.

Under such circumstances, Ponnu became a prisoner. Her fault was that she refused to yield to the temptation of a short fellow who was a partner in business. And the result was that she was betrayed to the police one night when she was transporting a pot load of illicit liquor.

Muthu remanded in custody on the charge of murdering Pannaiyar found solace by looking at her. In a couple of days he understood that she too found solace in him. It is true that they were unable to meet each other and share their thoughts, since they were in two different cells and under the vigilant eyes of jail warders. Yet who is there to draw a curtain between their eyes or dam their toothy smile?

Muthu who was usually locked behind bars by evening, would sit beside bars by morning and watch the dark sky turn blue. Since women prisoners were given first preference to finish their morning duties, Ponnu, when she passed through the corridor towards the well, looked anxiously into Muthu's cell. He too would look at her. And when the eyes met they spoke a lot.

That couldn't go on for fifteen days. It was because the case registered against her was dismissed and she was released. And on the day of her release, she ventured to meet him and took leave of him.

Only after she left him he found prison life unbearable. So far he was praying for his release to free himself from the charges levelled against him and also to win the heart of his parents. But now one more reason got added to it. He wanted to see her again by hook or by crook.

The remand period was over. Court proceedings started and his case was taken to session's court. And the judgment was passed. The court decided that Muthu murdered Pannaiyar. But he escaped from the dangling noose for he was sentenced to life i.e. rigorous imprisonment for fourteen years. But depending upon his character and according to rules and regulations he could see the outside world within eight years. Alas! What would be the fate of his parents? Would Ponnu, the girl he loved, wait for him till he was released? He sat staring at the high wall.

"Hi! Muthu! What's all the news?" His cellmates surrounded him patting him on his back.

"Don't be stupid, Muthu... take my case. In the sessions court I was sentenced

to the gallows. I appealed to the High Court. There I was sentenced to life. And so if you appeal to the High Court, your punishment would get reduced and you may even be set free."

Thus preached a prisoner. Several others followed suit. Muthu began to think. Should he spend his youth in prison? Should his parents weep away the rest of their lives? Should he be in prison longing for his beloved? He asked himself. But he needed money to appeal against the life sentence he had been given. Nobody came forward to help.

One day Muthu was informed of some visitor waiting for him. He moved to the interview room. He was really shocked to see Ponnu along with an old man. With tears in her eyes Ponnu stood. The old man spoke:

"I am aware of all that had happened to you. My daughter Ponnu had informed me. I've heard many people say that if you appeal you'll definitely be released. And I'll arrange for your marriage immediately in the week that follows your release.

"Appeal! I've no money for all that," Muthu heaved a sigh.

"Don't you ever worry about money. I've made some money. Let the money that I earned through evil means be used for some good cause."

"In case the High Court fails to release me, will Ponnu marry me after I am released say after ten years. Will she wait?"

Ponnu herself came forward to answer: "Tell him... I am ready."

Muthu's eyes began to brim with tears. Those were tears of joy.

Muthu told the glad news to his prisoninmates. They wished him good luck. There was an astrologer among them. He prophesied that all his evil days were over.

Days rolled by.

Muthu's case was taken to the High Court. His dreams infused fresh blood into him. The dream that he dreamt when he was arrested by the police began to unroll itself again. And he slept on a raised platform inside his cell. It was time for him to enjoy his nuptial night with his beauty, Ponnu. They recollected for each other the meeting in the sub-jail, their heart to heart conversation through the eyes and also the arranged wedding.

"I was fondling the bars of the prison cell taking it for your fingers," said Muthu.

"Are my fingers that much hard?" Ponnu asked and laughed.

To hide the dig that was made at him, he closed her lips with his.

It was after all a dream. He woke up. He realized that he was still in prison. He

was not sure of the result of his appeal. He saw the jailor coming towards him. Warders too were moving towards him.

"Come on, Muthu!" the jailor called him. He followed them. He was unable to make out anything from the jailor's face. The faces of the higher-ups usually resembled that of glass without mercury. The jailor's face was one such.

He was craving to know the result of his appeal. The jailor entered a lonely prison cell. Muthu was pushed into it and the cell was locked. Muthu blinked. He was not sure of what was happening.

"Sir! sir! What's happening?" Muthu yelled.

"You appealed... and this is the result."

"Oh, sir! Am I not freed?"

"Yes! You'll be freed. You'll be freed from the clutches of this world... This is the punishment given by the High Court over and above the one given by the sessions court," said the jailor, locking the prison before he left.

"The innocent will never be punished" —Someone's word stood before his eyes taking a shape and laughed at him.

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# 12 Supporter

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**H**is name is Punniyakodi. He involves himself in all sorts of social work. He may not be known in all parts of the world; he may not be famous throughout the Tamil country; but in his native place it is difficult to see him without his admirers around him. A news item like "Municipal sweeps on strike' may get floated. But even before it could reach the public he would start for the battle. He would tom-tom: "Gear up, you Municipal sweeps! Let's shed blood and drive out the cheats." The leader of those sweeps too wouldn't dare to roar like him. But Punniyakodi would do it with ease. He wouldn't rest till that agitation is buried and forgotten. He would give out several reasons for its failure all on his own and would conveniently sit to think of what new agitation would come up. Even the little benefits enjoyed by those workers would considerably go down all because of his entry.

"Only then will they fight for their rights all the more..." He would give one more reason for the failure of the agitation and then proceed to search for roses in the garlands he was honoured with. If he found them his next action would be to calculate the number of days the rose petals would last for his coffee.

All of a sudden one day the Municipal officials would announce free distribution of food to one thousand brahmins.

"Surely... it has to be done. Make the brahmins happy... God will be pleased," Punniyakodi would explicate.

Punniyakodi would become a much talked about man during the free food session. And the crowd that eat to their stomachs' fill would laud Punniyakodi

more than they would the Municipal Chairman.

The Chairman Vellaiyappa Pillai might not be as open-hearted as his name implies, but he was not very bad. He took some interest, of course, in the upliftment of the city. Earlier bearing all the difficulties and spending a share of his hoardings he jumped into the election fray and got elected too. He always had love and affection for Punniyakodi. Perhaps Punniyakodi's popularity was in a way responsible for this. And Vellaiyappa never understood that Punniyakodi by his subtle stratagems was grabbing the fame due to the former. Even if he had known he would not have bothered. All that he aspired for was only a top position in the society. By a top position he meant only the post of the Municipal Chairman. And so he never bothered whom the public favoured or who was popular. He believed that at the time of election the agents of the public could be brought under his control. That could be done with no difficulty at all, especially when a social worker like Punniyakodi would surrender to money.

Punniyakodi led a double life. In private he was a slave to the moneyed and in public he was a social worker.

The hut dwellers praised him thus: "Wow! What a good man! He too suffers at the sight of the suffering poor. Surely he is the saviour of the downtrodden."

When the river was in spate a battalion of common people thronged to build a dam. People from different walks of life came to work and the municipality spent the money. But Punniyakodi made his presence felt there by commanding all those who worked there. Without giving any physical support and shedding a drop of sweat, he carried away people's appreciation: "Punniyakodi - the leader who stopped the unruly water."

A beautiful house - a life of luxury - Social Service without tears - an introvert life under cover - this was how Punniyakodi's wheel of fortune was moving on.

A good decision was taken in the Municipal office. As the election was near Vellaiyappa in power was forced to take a few decisions to lure the public towards him.

All roads had to be macadamized. All streets had to be properly shaped. And all work in this regard should be effected immediately.

It was also urgently decided to renovate the Municipal office building.

But where to shift the Municipal office till the renovation work was over! The problem cropped up. Punniyakodi, the Social Supporter, came into the picture. "For the benefit of the common people I am giving one of my houses on temporary basis and without rent for accommodating the office". He began to tom-tom.

His broadminded act became the talk of the town.

The renovation work began. The office began to function from Punniyakodi's



house.

The inauguration of the new building was celebrated. In the function Punniyakodi was applauded for lending his house to run the Municipal office temporarily though. The Municipal officer, the chief guest of the function and all the speakers uniformly praised him.

Punniyakodi had earned an excellent certificate from the common people. His next duty was to make money. That was his goal. His mind started to function in that line. He secretly sent a letter of request to the Municipal Chairman:

"So far I have allowed the Municipal office to function in my house brushing aside my own wants, my work and also the criticisms levelled against me. This house too needs to be renovated and I may need Rs. 10,000/- for doing that work. And so I request you to give me this amount as compensation".

But before this letter could reach the chairman, Vellaiyappa had to actively involve himself in the forthcoming election. The competition was tough and money was allowed to flow. But the result was quite disastrous. Vellaiyappa couldn't even become a councillor.

Punniyakodi felt very bad because he couldn't get the amount he had sought. And all that stuck to his name was the title 'Social Worker'.

A dramatic change took place in the Municipality. The rule of Vellaiyappa was rooted out, and a new party called Yellow Party that was becoming famous came to power. The leader of that party by name Raja Nilayathar was sworn in as the Municipal Chairman. He did not like Punniyakodi. Had Punniyakodi known that the election would come so quickly and that Raja Nilayathar would win, he would have joined hands with him and would have worked for him. Even now nothing much had happened. And Punniyakodi kilted up his dhoti and plunged into action.

He sent a copy of his old letter to the Municipal Chairman and asked for the compensation amount. And the reply he got was: "This is old story... collect the amount from Vellaiyappa himself."

Punniyakodi grumbled like the brahmin lady in a folktale who lost the meat she had secretly purchased to cook. If the public come to know of it, they will laugh and say, "Oh! He proclaimed that he was lending his house without any rent. But now he demands so much!"

Agitation! Agitation!... These words began to circulate in public. The brain behind such a cyclone was Punniyakodi. But all his attempts ended in a fiasco. At a time when he spoke very ill of the new chairman in a public gathering, all with the intention of gathering support from the public, Raja Nilayathar filed a

defamation suit in the court of law. And the judgment was that Punniyakodi should pay Rs.10,000 as compensation.

Punniyakodi felt butterflies in his stomach. He addressed the people on public platforms. The public collected donations and gave the entire amount. Punniyakodi paid the amount in the court.

The much admired Social Worker happily moved about weighing heavily on the hearts of people.

The Municipal election came again. Punniyakodi was dead against Raja Nilayathar and he was the only one from his party to lose his seat. But several members of the Yellow Party won in the election. And the net result was that there was change of chairman but the party retained its hold. The new chairman was thought to be cruel to people and would do no good to their city. The people rushed to Punniyakodi and bemoaned: "Oh! You did your best. Yet that wretch had become the chairman." Punniyakodi too shed tears.

A few months rolled by. Unable to tolerate further the atrocities of the new chairman, the people behaved like a rumbling volcano. At that time Punniyakodi publicized that he was going to speak in public about the new chairman. People thronged to hear him. Punniyakodi's secretary spoke first. He vehemently attacked the new chairman. People began to rejoice. Then came Punniyakodi's turn. People eagerly awaited his speech.

Punniyakodi began: "Friends! I am all support for the new chairman." With these words he got down from the platform.

People were dumbstruck.

"His secretary howls... But Punniyakodi speaks like this... Wonderful!" The whole city was amazed by the two different reactions.

"You attack him... I'll support him... that's their plan," murmured a few.

Some said: "Some transactions would have taken place between the new chairman and Punniyakodi."

Poor people! None of them knew the inside story. The new chairman has considered Punniyakodi's newly sent reminder for his old request and has sanctioned him Rs. 10,000 for renovating his house. He has also returned the amount of Rs. 10,000 that Punniyakodi was asked by the court to pay. Somehow all these have taken place under cover.

Punniyakodi enjoys popularity among the public. His secretary goes about boasting.

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# 13 Secret

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He was a poet. He found delight in adorning Mother Tamil with golden ornaments studded with diamonds all with his powerful words. He created in words an ivory cot and sandalwood cradle for the child Tamil to rest. He wrote verses to girl Tamil by calling her darling and dear, and fondled her. His fame spread like a lamp seated on a hill.

People began to call him 'King of Letters'.

Poets sang in praise of him and gave him the title "Rich man of ideas."

His years and years of experience, his powerful words all made him proud and stand lofty in the Tamil world.

No journal was pleasant to read if it failed to carry his string of words.

No drama was fit enough to enjoy if it failed to accommodate his songs.

No cinema was good if it failed to carry his sweet songs.

He would inspire the poor. He would instil courage into the coward.

The sharp teeth of a screw pine flower and the soft tender leaf of a plantain - are they one and the same? He would ask and thereby explain that the culture of the Tamils and the arts of the Aryan race would never go together but would only get torn apart. Several wrote in praise of him.

"O, Poet! Commander of Arts! Rich man of ideas! I read your poem, a sweet one that tells of the saddest thoughts of a widow... I was in tears. I would like to be of secretarial assistance to you. Will my dream come true? Awaiting your reply, Yours - Villavan.!

Thus read a letter.

"Your poem in the journal. O wizard of words! I am carried away by your poem. I am a poor man. Would you be considerate to me? I am well versed in

writing poetry. If only you could help me in gathering my poems between covers, I would consider myself a blessed being. Answer me at the earliest. Awaiting your reply, Yours - Immozhiyan.

This was another letter.

"Your powerful words in the drama deserve applause. It is your songs that brought fame to the hero and the heroine of the play rather than their own acting. Will I be given an opportunity to sing your songs on the stage? I would be happy to do a minor role like fanning the king in his darbar hall. It is enough if people talk of me as one who played a role in the drama that uses your songs. O broadminded! O incarnation of humility! O growling tiger! O roaring lion! Please be kind enough to give me a chance. Thank you - Vanangamudi.

Thus came yet another letter.

"O Lamp of Cine World! O Old Gold! Bold! I have dreams of entering the cine world. One needs a catamaran to set sail on the sea, they say. It is not for making money but to render my service to the tinsel world... and that too to sing your songs. O Comrade! I'll be immensely delighted to work for you. Will you lend me your helping hand? Yours - Thooyamani.

A letter came like that.

"O Lord writing about the poor! Mine is a sad life. Show me a way out."

"All that I need is a role in your drama."

"Only in a scene in the cinema."

"A chance to write in your journal."

"Money is not my quest. I'll be of great service to the world of cinema."

"I must be given an opportunity to sing your song."

"Say yes to my request. Or else you'll witness my death."

"I have written several letters to you. But there was no reply to any of them. Why?"

"No vacancy, you replied. My heart is very heavy."

Drama, cinema and newspaper offices. Thousands of letters piled up in all these offices, all applauding him sky high. And almost every one of them sought his help in one way or the other. He rose... rose to great heights... greater heights.

One day his house was reverberating with a mourning song. All those who heard the cry rushed to his house. He is dead. The poet who attained immortality passed away. Poor fellow! He killed himself. The poet who instilled courage into the hearts of cowards had committed suicide. He was the one who adorned Mother Tamil with lovely anklets and precious ornaments with the power of his

words.

His body was found hanging from a ceiling.

"Why did he kill himself?" the people asked.

The world wondered. It couldn't make out why he did so when he was hale and healthy. But he coolly dangled from the ceiling. Came the police. They investigated and found a piece of paper in the dead poet's pocket. The letter was in the poet's handwriting:

"For my death, the box beneath my dangling feet is responsible."

Police broke open the box. The public too were curious to know and looked into the box. The box contained thousands of letters from his fans all seeking his words of recommendation to get a job in the cine world, and the like.

Everyone's doubt got cleared as to why he chose to die.

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# 14 Three Hundred Rupees

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“**M**y mother is blind... My father is crippled. For the past one year he suffers from paralysis. And I had an elder sister... She was a widow. She died leaving her child with us.

“I am the pillar of my family. I work in a pawnshop for just Rs.10 per month. I have lost that job too. Even when I had that job I could eat only once a day. And now...? Help me out, please, lest I should hang myself,” so said that poor young man in tears. His name is Lakshmi Narayanan. But he suffered like Dharidra Narayanan.

He sought a job not in a big office or with a Mill owner, but sought the help of a school teacher whose monthly salary was Rs. 150/-. Thangappan taught mathematics in a high school. When he was struggling to make both ends meet how he could ever think of supporting Lakshmi Narayanan!. Quite soft at heart, he wished to bring a dramatic change in the society. And amidst his circle of friends he was known as Karl Marx. His very presence on the stage was enough to inspire the people. He was such an excellent speaker. Since his speeches were peppered with words like ‘poor’, ‘downtrodden’, ‘sympathy’ and ‘pity’, several people with the intention of finding out how true he was to his words emboldened themselves to seek financial help from him. Thangappan

magnanimously spent a major share of his salary for the welfare of such people. Lakshmi Narayanan, was one among the beneficiaries. Thangappan was greatly upset by the sad story of Lakshmi Narayanan.

"You have your food in my house for a period of ten days. Meanwhile I'll try to find a job for you," he promised. Seven to eight days rolled by. But no job was found.

One day, Thangappan received Rs. 300 by money order from a friend who had borrowed that amount from him some six months ago. Exhilarated by the return of his money he forgot to keep it safe in his trunk box and left it on the table before he went to school. When he was in the classroom teaching, the thought of his money came. A sudden suspicion arose in his mind about Lakshmi Narayanan. He completed the lesson as early as he could and started for home. He was not himself on his way. "He might be good... But the lure of a huge amount?!" His thoughts centred only on his money. He reached home. Lakshmi Narayanan was not found at the entrance of the house. He walked in. Money too was missing. He smiled a careless smile and walked back to school.

Lakshmi Narayanan got into a train on the same day afternoon at Salem railway station and reached Erode. Once in Erode he entered a readymade shop and came out of it differently dressed.. He was speaking to himself! "A pawn shop with three hundred rupees. I'll be the boss." He went on repeating the words.

A dirty boy, lean and haggard looking, in the market called him 'Sir.'

The moment Lakshmi Narayanan's eyes fell on the boy, he was carried away by his own thoughts. "Hi! Boy! Would you like to go with me? Do you feel confident that you can manage my pawn shop?" he asked.

The boy nodded his head in all glee. He told the boy to accompany him. He had automatically gained the gait of a boss. The two got into a train with one and a half tickets. The poor boy was all teeth. Lakshmi Narayanan sat majestically in the train smoking Players brand cigarette. The train was scuttling along towards Trichy.

The inauguration ceremony of the pawn shop took place with fun and fanfare. Lakshmi Narayanan's status went up as a boss. And that servant boy, oh! What an active fellow he was! The pawn shop flourished. In Trichy it is estimated to be the best.

Lakshmi Narayanan opened his eyes, when the train pulled up at Trichy at about four in the morning. He looked for the boy. They boy was missing. He looked into the bag. There was no money. He heaved a sigh. It looked as though Thangappan himself stood before him with a mischievous smile on his face. Thank God! He had the ticket at least to go out of the station.

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# 15 The Poor

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Banu's pram, as usual, was heading towards the park. Parvathi was pushing it all the time answering the lisping of little Banu. Banu was not yet six but yet she was hyperactive. To be precise, she never allowed her parents to speak at all. Her father Nallakannu Pillai right from the morning looked into the accounts of the village, clearing the amount for lease holders, solving the problems created by the *kissans*, solving the problems of sales and finally reached home only after six in the evening. And the child would lie in wait to make the best use of the time available with her father. His wife Karunambal waited for her husband's arrival for she too found delight in spending her time with him. And their lovely time of being together was interrupted now and then by the child. She had enough love for the child, true, but she loved the company of her husband more. Further, the couple was not poor enough not to know what really joy is. It is only the pauper kings and queens who dwell in huts who never can devote time to the joys of life. Harassing moneylenders, nagging curd-seller and several such people have to be tackled in the morning. And at night worries about money badger them and they pray to god and weep. And very rarely they find time for any pleasure. In the kingdom of the paupers the population is quite a good number. There would be not fewer than seven to eight children. And the last child would be six or seven years younger than the first. And their mothers, poor creatures, are not as affluent as Karunambal to go in for birth control.

Parvathi was really blessed to have a handsome young man for her husband. He would have reached home at 5 in the evening after his work in the mill. But she was not free to welcome him home and refresh him. And that poor man's young wife controlling all her youthful feelings was taking Banu to the park. It



was not happening only on that day but almost everyday. She could never be considered a woman at all for she worked like a bull all through the day in the house of her boss. The sun too goes to rest by evening. But for Parvathi there was absolutely no rest. She couldn't even think of a rest. Why did the great creator create a stomach for everyone after creating a heart?

Who... Who is to be blamed?

She pointed out to Banu the swaying plants and their blooming flower bunches. Right at that time she found the sky turning murky. In fact, she had seen a much darker face when she asked her boss for her salary at the end of the month. And so the murky cloud did not frighten her and she began to walk back home. And her thoughts were all about her dear husband... nose pin... and kissing competition. Had she not been dreaming sweet dreams, her lips would not have let out that smile. Since the dreams were sweet her eyes too glittered. A dream of her husband kissing her... or the thought of the kiss given the day before... her cheeks had turned red.

Her husband would be bringing home a nose stud. The savings of several days have now taken the shape of the nose stud. A tiny segment of a broom stick that she wore as nose pin was thrown out and he himself pressed the nose pin to the wing of her nose. That white nose stud studded to her black complexion was really beautiful. It reminds us of the starting journey of the moon in the blue sky. "Give me mine... Parvathi - so saying he rounds his lips. Parvathi too rounds her lips. The two buds clash with each other and together they bloom.

The dream ran back. Parvathi came back to her self. In the pram, child Banu sang: "Rain is coming... rain is coming." Two heavy raindrops dashed against Parvathi's face and then broke to smithereens.

The thunderclaps that send tremors to the earth are in fact the skyman's giant laughter; a spine-chilling lightning. Rain poured as if the ocean got upturned. A tremor as if the Himalayas rolled against the Vindhya.

Parvathi feared that the child Banu would get drenched. Poor woman! She was loyal to her boss... no, no... she had a lot of affection for the child.

Mankind is nothing more than a congregation of the poor. The rich are a herd of animals. Sometimes by mistake men are born in that clan. And a few amidst the poor unable to bear the suffering turn into beasts. Parvathi had not become one so far. Such words would make Nallakannu Pillai say - oh! This is all Russian. For him the word 'Russia' was like swallowing poison.

Parvathi got completely drenched. The frightened child began to howl. Parvathi took shelter under a tree. In spite of all the difficulties and disasters her

face showed that the thought of the nose stud made her happy.

One unexpected moment a big branch of the tree broke and fell down. The rain stopped. The wind was playing calm.

Nallakannu's car plied very fast in the street.

Pillai got down near the tree with its broken branch, howling: "Banu." She was in a swoon. He cuddled her and brought her back to her senses. The child opened her eyes and said, "Daddy." He got into his car with his child. The car started and moved towards a doctor's clinic.

Under the same tree another being opened her eyes. "Alas! My darling husband!" she said and heaved a long sigh. Her eyes closed. Who is she? A poor woman!

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# 16 As Is in the Original

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"**T**his should go in bigger font."

"Yes, sir."

"You should never change anything from the original. Compose it as is in the original. *Katha Kalakshepam* and not *Kalatshepam*."

"....."

"Let the 'Amman' block go to the centre. Design this corner with a nice border and frame Chettiyar's block."

"Yes, sir."

"Hm!... Okay? Do you understand? Don't use your chaste Tamil here. As is in the original."

"....."

"Chettiyar is a furious man. If you want to show off your knowledge of chaste Tamil, then we will have to close down our press."

"That you have already told me, sir! I'll compose as is in the original."

"You are absent-minded. Okay. Then rush."

This conversation took place between compositor Kandasamy and Velayudham Pillai, the manager of Vedanthi Press, when the compositor showed the manager a specimen copy of a leaflet he had composed.

Kandasamy tore away the leaflet in secret, called his manager names and then read the original again.

Every letter looked like a finely shaped bead. But Kandasamy's face only betrayed pity.

Maha Kumbabhishakam (the consecration ceremony) of Draupadi Amman Temple – That is the heading of the advertisement. Under the list of programmes there was a note that read "Shri Jagath Yogananda Swami would deliver a lecture on the Swayamvara of Draupadi." Kandasamy bit his lips. He laughed behind his sleeve that was followed by a vulgar sigh.

"I am working in this press for the last five years. And what am I doing here! Only composing from a dirty dustbin of a purana. I should have killed myself long ago. O, Tamil letters! Flowers are strung into garlands to garland the lamb to be sacrificed at the altar of Mahakali. Flowers are strung into garlands to adorn the necks of couple on their marriage day. So too, you Tamil words! You weave between covers the sweetest songs and essays teaching the art of living. Also you create puranas overflowing with lies, cheating and cock-and-bull stories. Yes! Like the garland that gets torn in the hands of human beings, the Tamil letters too suffer.

He cooled. Kandasamy opened his eyes wide as if he had discovered something. He took up the original and looked into the script again. Every letter from the original stared back at him. They tried to probe into his heart. He began to mumble: "Mahakumbabishekam... What a stupid world!" Hatred filled his heart and it created wrinkles on his face. He began to mumble again.

"A merchant who fleeces people is performing *Kumbabishekam*. He shows off and the result is the place is made thoroughly useless. And the people blindly believe him. I know him very well. He is the one who raped Ekambaram's wife. I know that story. When Periyanna Padayatchi was in his deathbed, this fellow walked away with his money-box and thereby came to be known as a rich man. He removed all the diamonds from the crown of Lord Venkatachalapathy of Vedapuram and thereby built a palatial house. And to cover up all his sins he is performing a *Kumababishekam*. Rascal! Every nerve in your body deserves to be bitten by cobras if only a place called hell exists. A temple you are constructing, eh! A temple, eh! Hei! Ramanathan Chettiyar. Wait and see. I'll do what best I can for you. It doesn't matter even if I die in my attempt."

Kandasamy tilted up his head in pride. He stood like a Dravidian soldier of yore who by looking at his enemy soldier called him for a fight. He imagined that Ramanathan Chettiyar was standing before him. And then he started composing the work as fast as he could. His lips only mumbled.

"Compositor. Have you finished?" It was the manager who howled.

Kandasamy showed him the specimen copy he had composed.

The leaflet looked grand with excellent framework and beautiful fonts.

A car pulled up in front of the press. Ramanathan Chettiyar got down. "Over?" he asked with anxiety-filled eyes. His servant who followed him picked up the sash that slipped and fell from his white silk shirt and placed it on his shoulder. Kandasamy gulped down the spittle that had collected in his mouth at the plight of the servant. The manager stood with his mouth agape, not sure of the comment that would fall from Chettiyar's mouth.

"Wow! Very fine. Print ten thousand leaflets."

"Yes," said the manager who stood like a hunchback.

Chettiyar looked at this servant and said, "Hei! Ratnam! You wait here and collect the leaflets... And after collecting it..."

"I will paste them on all walls."

"Don't be stupid! This is no wall poster. All that you have to do with these leaflets is that you have to deliver them in all streets. You have to exhaust all the ten thousand by today evening. Okay?"

"As you wish, Boss."

The manager bowed before him and bid him goodbye. Chettiyar's car rushed out.

"Oh! Machineman! Ten thousand leaflets. Print immediately all the ten thousand leaflets. Print it in blue ink. Come on! Get it done. Quick... Quick..."

The manager put a note to this effect and left the Press for his lunch. Kandasamy went back to work with the specimen copy in his hand. He filled the composed work to an iron frame. He felt his hand shivering as he pulled out several letters from it. He picked up several letters and filled up the gap.

The iron frame got fitted to the printing press. One... two... three... hundred... thousand.... Ten thousand leaflets... the work was over. Kandasamy bundled them up and passed on the bundle to servant Ratnam. The slave carried the bundle on his head and distributed all the ten thousand leaflets in all the streets.

The next day was *Kumbabhishekam*. What a milling crowd! Chettiyar dressed up for the occasion reached the temple in his car with his men. His women came in another car. He looked at the crowd. "They speak my glory," his upright head said. There was a wry smile on his face. His eyes widened as his ego bloated.

The crowd had noticed him. There was a hullabaloo.

"Hei! Kamanadhan Chettiyar... Kamanadhan Chettiyar..." There was a hue and cry over that name. There was an unwanted applause, followed by a mischievous laughter. Then questions like, "Oh! Kamanadhan Chettiyar! Where is Swami Bhogananda?" got hurdled from the crowd. "What a match, these Kamanadhan and Bhogananda," came a comment. Applause and laughter resumed. Then there came a lonely voice: "Kamanadhan Chettiyar who rapes all and sundry". "Jay! Jay!" the crowd shouted. Meanwhile, the confused children looked at the blinking Chettiyar and thought him to be a rich madman and began to pelt stones at him. All these led to police lathi-charge. Chettiyar's face dried up. "No *Kumbabishkam*... nothing.... "Reverse the gear of the car" he roared. The cars suffered stoning. The crowd jeered as it thought that Chettiyar was retreating!

As per the decision of the pundits, *Kumbabishhakam* was performed on time without the Chettiyar being present. As per the schedule, Swami Yogananda had reached Chettiyar's house to deliver his lecture. Chettiyar with a sorrow-laden face leaned back in his chair. Swami Yogananda's face was quite contorted.

"O you Chettiyar! Were you waiting for an opportunity in all these years to put me to shame?" screamed the enraged Swami.

"I don't know what you are talking about, Swami", said Chettiyar in a calm voice.

"Take a look at this." Swami Yogananda flung a leaflet in front of Chettiyar.

Chettiyar read: "Draupadi Amman temple *Kumbabishkam*." He then asked: "What is wrong, Swami?"

"Continue reading."

Chettiyar continued reading. He then howled: "What wretched fellow has done this composing in the press! Yogananda is printed as Bogananda. Panjali's character is also vilified by printing errors." Chettiyar continued to growl while Swami Yogananda's limbs were shaking vigorously though he uttered no word. And at that time Chettiyar's accountant showed the leaflet and said: "Notice this! Notice this."

"In the service of Goddess - Kamanadhan Chettiyar" Those words were printed in bold letters. Ramanathan Chettiyar began his dance of Shiva. He gnashed his teeth.

"The press fellow has composed nothing but the truth," the accountant thought to himself.

"Hi! Driver! Start the car," Chettiyar commanded.

The car stopped in front of the Vedanti Press. The manager's room became the very incarnation of chaos.

"Hi! Compositor! You fellow!" howled Manager Velayudham Pillai.

Compositor Kandasamy came rushing.

A big sound slap... the manager slapped Kandasamy heavily. But Kandasamy neither wept nor retorted. He only laughed.

"Why do you laugh, you dirty scoundrel?" asked the manager and threw the leaflet on his face.

"I only followed the original, sir."

"Original! What original? Does the original talk of Panchali's prostitution?"

"Yes! Of course! The real original is *Mahabharata*; and not this handwritten piece of paper. In the original *Mahabharata*, Panchali was wife to five men. She was also in love with Karnan. That is how the epic depicts her. And so as per the epic original instead of writing Panchali *swayamvaram* I felt it should be composed Panchali prostitution.

"Not only that.... This Chettiyar is 'Kama' to the core. That is his life's original. That is why I composed Kamanadhan Chettiyar.

"The Swami supposed to deliver lecture is a Baktha only in the morning but at night he is a Bhoga cat. I didn't want to change the original truth and that is why I composed 'Swami Bogananda.' Am I at fault?" Kandasami laughed like a shower of granites falling on a tin roof.

"Ah!" - The manager's mouth went agape.

"Stop it! You only told me to follow the original," so saying Kandasamy laughed to his heart's content as he moved out of Vedanti Press.

Chettiyar and the manager had no other go but look askance at each other.

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# 17 A Bunch of Palmyra Fruit

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“**A**re your parents alive?”

“No! My mother died long ago. I am not sure whether my father is alive or dead. When I was still in my mother’s womb, my father was maliciously charged with a murder case and he ran away to an unknown destination. I had an elder brother too. He too got lost when he was just two. Since misfortunes came not in singles but in battalions, my mother wept her life away and then died one day. Now I am an orphan.”

“Don’t call yourself an orphan. Till yesterday it was a different story. Today that word loses its meaning. Listen, Kamalam. We two are in the same boat. At least you had your mother to bring you up. You have seen your mother’s face, and you have also enjoyed mother’s love. But I don’t even know the comforts of mother’s lap and father’s shoulder. I don’t even remember their faces. I am brought up in an orphanage. But now two orphans are together and we have erased the word ‘orphan’ from our life,” so saying he hugged Kamalam.

She found herself in tears. Both of them experienced the joy they were craving for all these days. Kamalam’s mother cooked idlies for sale, sold in the market



things like tender coconut and *nungu* (the kernel of the palmyra fruit) and thereby made a living out of it. And in this way she was able to bring up her daughter. After her death, Kamalam took up her mother's business. She was involved in the sales of the seasonal fruit - *nungu*. She was forced to make both ends meet by buying palmyra fruit wholesale and sell the *nungu* at retail price and she thereby made a margin.

Only during her sales session, Velan came to her to buy *nungu*. He was tempted to come again on the next day. Then he began to frequent her. And if he didn't turn up for a day she felt that it was not a profitable day at all. She would return home with a sorrow-laden face as if she had incurred a heavy loss.

One day he asked her: "What profit do you make in this business?"

She gave the details.

"I'll get you bunches of palmyra fruit from tomorrow. You cut them and sell the *nungu*. You'll make a lot of money," he said.

"No... Leave that to me," Kamalam shook her head and went back home.

The next day Velan came carrying four to five bunches of palmyra fruit. "Where did you get them?" asked Kamalam. "I myself clambered up a tree and brought down these bunches," he said in all glee and looked at her. "Are these from your tree?" she asked. "No man's property is everyman's property," he answered. But before he could close his mouth a ruffian howled, "Hi! Robber! Do you know from whose tree you have stolen?" he attacked Velan's head with a round and thick staff.

Velan fell down unconscious. Kamalam rushed to care for Velan. The hard faced man collected all the bunches of palmyra fruit, "Oh! To satisfy his lust for this girl, this fellow steals fruit, eh! And that too from me, eh!" he moved a little and then he stopped. He noticed Kamalam running here and there in a state of excitement in an attempt to help Velan. He saw her sprinkle water on his face and fan it with the loose end of her sari. The ruffian's face showed signs of lust. He walked back to Kamalam.

"You girlie! If you need palmyra fruit, ask me. I'll give you. Don't ever believe these rogues. Come on, you take all these fruits. Why are you sweating out your youth doing this work? Had you asked me for a job, I would have made you a heroine in my drama company," so saying the ruffian showed all his teeth.

"Mind your business...Get lost," she said and continued to care for Velan. The ruffian nodded his head and moved out deciding on some plan. Kamalam was not unaware of the fact that the ruffian Vinayagam Pillai was the proprietor of the drama company named Murugananda Mohanagana Sabha. She also knew that he robbed the public of their property like a bandicoot. And she knew that

he claimed property rights over the palmyra trees on no man's lands. But no one knew that he would claim property rights over Kamalam.

Kamalam took Velan home as soon as he regained consciousness. After taking the necessary treatment, he thanked her profusely and when he wanted to take leave of her she was not happy. He too understood her. Both of them shared their past life. They met as orphans. Now they are no more orphans. They hugged each other tightly and found delight in doing so. That night moved slowly but joyously.

The early morning the cock crew. The sun too came up. A new life dawned for the couple. The inspired hut that was so far echoing the breathing sound of a lonely girl began to echo the love duet of the couple.

Several days passed. One midnight when the lovers were fast asleep there came a knock on the door. Kamalam opened the door and found a well-built man with a grey beard standing at the door.

"Who are you?" Kamalam asked. Velan too woke up and moved towards the door.

"Don't you recognize me, my dear daughter? Kamalam. How can you know me? How will you know this wretch? How will you ever know the man who abandoned his pregnant wife and ran away? My dear daughter, I am your father Ayyasamy."

"Ah! Father! My father!" Kamalam screamed with joy. She hugged the old man and wept torrents of tears.

"Is this young man your brother Velan? My lovable son! You can't imagine how much your mother Meenatchi and I wept when we lost you when you were two years old. How did you manage to make a living, my son? When did you meet your sister Kamalam? Away from the police I was living under cover of darkness. Only yesterday I inquired into the orphanage where you were brought up. The authorities informed me of you. I thought I had lost you. But one of my friends told me that you were being brought up in an orphanage. I went there. I was happy to know that you were alive and grown up. Who stole you when you were a baby? Do you remember, my son? I am told that my enemies only kidnapped you but left you in the middle of the street afraid of the police. Then the orphanage took charge of you. Oh, how well my son has grown up! But tell me, my son, how you managed to search and find your sister here."

The old man joyous to the core, continued talking.

Velan all of a sudden screamed, "Oh, my God! It is father." That's all. He took to his heels. He ran and ran and disappeared into the darkness.

Kamalam fell down unconscious. "Kamalam! Kamalam!" the old man called her. He lifted her and kept her on his lap. He hugged her tight. He kissed both her

cheeks alternately. He sucked her lips with his. Something in him told of something. He placed Kamalam down. He felt her legs. They were cold. Disappointed the old man stood up. His mind said:

“My plan didn’t work out well. I thought by falsely informing them that they were brother and sister I would separate them. He would run away. And this girl would be mine. My disguise helped. But the booty is lost.”

The old man heaved a sigh and removed the moustache and the beard he had sported. The ruffian Vinagagam Pillai moved out of the hut. He was returning home through the no man’s land on which he was claiming property rights. At a distance he heard something fall with a big thud. He thought someone was stealing palmyra fruit. “Who is it? Who is stealing my fruit?” thus roaring he rushed to the tree. It was no palmyra fruit but Velan. He was the one who fell with a thud. He struck a match and looked at Velan in close quarters. His head got broken to smithereens, like the palmyra fruit that rolls off its bunch. Yet the man who was responsible for breaking the family went home and had an undisturbed sleep.

Several such fellows we can find on this earth.

Hanuman then set fire to South Lanka with his tail;  
Mother set fire to dead oven;  
I too set fire to elephant brand cigarette.  
Burn O burn!"

"Hei! Is this by a modern Pattinatthar?" one is tempted to ask.

"No Pattinathar... or any other... This humorous verse is composed by Ellappan.

Even before the cigarette could emit smoke, Chellayi laughed noisily. She watched the movie 'Pattinattar' only the night before.

"You see dear! In one scene Pattinattar throws ottappam on the roof of a house and says 'ottappam burns the house', and the house too gets burnt."

"Why not? The house should burn better in a movie than in a drama."

"How can a saint like Pattinattar ever think of setting fire to a house? What a movie they have shown!"

"There is a chemical called phosphorous. He could have pressed it into that edible and thrown it. The whole house would be easily burnt to ashes."

"Oh! I see! Let it go. But in the burning ground he placed the barks of the plantain tree on his mother's corpse and by singing a song he burnt it. How did he manage it?"

"Just like that... but don't go on asking me questions. Whenever you watch a movie you pester me with questions and baffle me. What a nuisance you are!"

"Okay... I have decided not to watch any more movies. My decision is final."

"Ah! What a fine drama? If you do so the sky would turn upside down and there would be a heavy downpour."

"Oh! You men! We women can't even go out on our own when you men are around."

"I see!... So you mean all men should kill themselves, eh?"

"When women go out they should hide in a big box and go. Or else all men should blindfold themselves when they go out."

"Chellayi! Tell me dear! You are passing rules that will never come into effect. What happened? Tell me in detail."

"What to say? Can't walk in the street... Why, for that matter can't even stand facing the street. And when we go to a cinema theatre, a fellow walks up and down fully groomed."

"Who? Who is it?"

"Who else but Govindan of that corner house. A walking mountain of flesh... He ogles at me ignoring that I am wife to a man with a full grown moustache."

"I see! And then..."

"As you are fondling your moustache now, you see... he too does the same whenever he sees me. He smiles at me lighting a cigarette. He follows me wherever I go."

"This is all quite common, Chellayi. He is still a bachelor. And you are a real charmer though dark complexioned. I see you all the time... yet you infuse new life into me."

"Okay... fine... stop it... as if you have no other work."

Chellayi stood up and moved into the kitchen. Ellappan lit up the half-burnt cigarette and moved out of his house.

"What a fine body she has! What a fine structure!"

"Have you noticed her while she laughs. Just like a child."

"Does she ever care for anyone? She doesn't behave like a woman."

"She behaves as though she is a soldier."

"Ah! Now it is clear why our Veeraiya Chettiyar had shifted his residence here."

"What is the reason, eh?"

"His plan is to trap her..."

"Oh! That'll never happen."

"Chettiyar is a rich fellow. He can buy her with his money."

"Money can't buy everything... Such a thing can happen only when a woman doesn't like her husband. One may be a millionaire... but a woman should take a liking for him you know... If a woman likes she would jump beds..."

"But, you see, Chellayi's husband is handsome and majestic like a king. And she won't take a liking for this Chettiyar's money."

"Yes! Ellappan is really a lucky fellow. Some fellows spend a huge amount of money on marriage and what do they get? They get half-blind and semi-deaf women as wives. But you see what Ellappan is blessed with... like a lovely shaped spinning top."

"What a fine match they both make! She is like a pigeon and he is a suitable bird for her."

These are comments made by youngsters on Ellappan and Chellayi.

Supper over, Chellayi couldn't sleep. Ellappan went out of the city promising her to come back in the evening, but he had not kept his promise. She opened the door four to five times to look into the street to see if he was anywhere in sight. Many of the passersby, and some of them very old, looked like Ellappan to her eyes till she realized that her eyes were cheating her. Her presence at the entrance of the house in the moonlit night gave her the grace of a temple statue and she stood and stood till she became tired of standing. At a distance she saw the shadow of a man and she was sure that it was Ellappan. In an untold joy she gamboled and ran into the house.

From inside her house she saw Govindan of the corner house pass by.

Disappointed she said to herself, "Oh! It is Govindan," and then closed her door with a bang.

Like a fruit that is brought down by a whizzing stone she stretched herself on the floor. The speed with which she fell to the floor frightened the kitten that was purring and playing with the mat and so it ran for its life.

A little later Chellayi breathed heavily and was soon fast sleep.

Through the holes of the roof made of coconut fronds the moon was peeping into the house. Now as time went by, a single ray of the moon highlighted the

latch of the door. A thin iron rod as if it sprang all of a sudden from beneath the latch was found bobbing up and down. After moving to different directions it pushed the latch up and then rotated it a full circle and finally withdrew its head and disappeared.

The door opened making no noise. He entered. Yes! Govindan of the corner house.

He had in his hand orange peel, half-eaten halwa and mini globules of *kara boondhi* and looked at them once again.

In case Chellayi screams at the sight of him, the public would barge into the house. They would even beat him black and blue. And to escape from such a disaster he has brought those goodies to shield him. His plan was to tell those people: "Come in, sirs! She is playing chaste. These oranges we have tasted together. I fed her with this halwa. A major chunk of this *kaaraboondhi* she stuffed into my mouth. Now tell me! Who is at fault? She screamed for some other reason and you people have rushed here as if you had no other work. Go... go and sleep." This way he could drive out the public who come to help her. Secondly, his plan was to show to Chellayi all the things he had brought with him and tell her of his vicious plan. His plan would scare the shit out of her and he could easily finish his business and walk away gently.

Such gruesome ideas rolled in Govindan's mind.

Chellayi was fast asleep. Govindan sat besides her looking at her face. He slowly touched her cheek with his fingers and gently pinched it. She was so down with sleep that she rubbed her cheek and turned to the other side. Govindan became anxious. He bit his lips.

"Chellayi! Chellayi! His dried up tongue struggled to warble words. Every syllable in the word shivered. He saw her long tresses and cuddled it. Once again he pinched her cheek. Chellayi woke up with a start.

"Ah!" She yelled. She slapped him so hard that the syllable she uttered spoke volumes about it. Chellayi's mouth was gagged.

Inside Chellayi's hut a dumb battle took place. Chellayi fought only a losing battle. But blood was oozing from Govindan's cheeks, eyelids, the sides of his neck and also from his hands.

Chellayi's mouth was no more gagged. Yet she was dumb, perhaps dumbstruck.

"Look here! Whatever had happened had happened. Do not give any publicity to his incident when your husband is back and incur his wrath. I can tell you only that much." He said.

Govindan left her house without even noticing her tears threatening to spill over.

The rustling coconut leaves on the roof top seemed to sing what Ellappan would have done at that moment:

"At first fire burnt from Shiva's third eye;  
Then Hanuman with his tail burnt South Lanka;  
And my wife burnt her modesty..."

Ellappan returned in the morning. She had already picked up all the peels and leftouts, and thrown them out.

"What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing... a slight headache."

"Apply this balm."

Chellayi simply buried the incident. She was not sure whether her husband would continue to be with her if that incident was brought to his notice. Days flew.

Govindan made it a point to walk up and down Chellayi's house as many times as possible everyday. And he kept on changing his dress and hairdo. One day Chellayi stood at the entrance of her house. And when Govindan passed by, he threw a packet at her. And before Ellappan could come back home, she opened the packet, ate the *jilebi* and threw out the leaf in the backyard of her house. Later one day Govindan smiled at her. She too reciprocated his smile. On yet another day he threw a packet at her. She picked it up only to find ten silver rupee coins. She treasured the packet in her safe.

One day Ellappan went out of city. There was no moon that night. It was new moon.

It was past midnight. The revolving world was all that time expecting the rising sun. Ellappan was moving towards his house. His gait betrayed his eagerness to meet his wife.

He knocked on the door... at first gently, then loudly and louder still. The door didn't open.

"Poor wife! She is fast asleep. What can she do when she has to slog all though the day? All homemakers like her can find a rest only during such hours!" Thinking loudly thus, he searched for something in the roof and finally found it. It was an iron wire. The wire then entered through a little hole of the door. The latch inside made a circle and opened... Like the way Govindan did before.

Ellappan pushed open the door and entered the house. Dim was the light inside. "Chellayi", he cooed and touched her on bed.



"Who is it?"

Startled Chellayi got up from her bed. Ellappan was dumbstruck. Govindan moved towards the doors and then flew away.

"Pardon me," wept Chellayi.

"Don't weep... weeping has no meaning in this world. The prostitute weeps. So does the chaste... The goodman weeps... So does the bad. The rich weeps... so does the poor."

"But I wept..." Before she could complete her sentence, Ellappan interrupted. "I know... you weep, not because you committed a crime, but because the crime has come to limelight. Chellayi! Several reasons are given for women prostituting their body. Some call it social disorder. What are they going to say about you? Widows, women who have lost their husbands while still young, and women married to aged men... to this list should be added nymphomaniacs like you. Why did you become a harlot? Tell me, why have you turned unfaithful to me? Come on. Come out... Just give me one reason."

"It's all my fate."

"Fate! A very useful word to make an escape. Go and tell this to a temple-goer."

"I don't know why I have gone cranky."

"Hm!... A woman's life fails to flourish if she doesn't find a man of her choice. They say. If the husband is not a young man, life will shrivel up. They say. I don't know what they will say about you when you got a life according to your choice. Will they say that you are a monkey jumping from tree to tree?"

"Chellayi! I always thought very high of you. I always think about you even when I am out of town. You know that I don't even look at other women. Your picture is embedded in my heart. But you... you have broken everything into smithereens in a jiffy.

"Chellayi! You are worse than a worm that lives in the gutter. Losing yourself in luxury you have killed reason thereby. What are you but a moth attracted by light? Today I have understood that because of their monkey mind women go dirty. But society is not to be blamed for this."

"Don't kill me with your words. If you like, plunge a knife into my heart."

"I will kill... Tomorrow I will face Govindan, not as a 'pimp' but as a killer. I have told you several times in this very same bed that I would die the minute you die. But I will live even after putting you to death." Before the conversation could end, Ellappan pounced on Chellayi.

Chellayi fell down dead. He took off his hand that strangled her throat.

The dead Chellayi was taken to the burning ground. Ellappan lit the funeral pyre.

"What a nice lady! Now consigned to flames," said the public.

"She is no nice lady! But a woman of easy virtue," Ellappan said to himself.

Chellayi was burnt to ashes.

"At first fire burnt from Shiva's third eye;

Then Hanuman with his tail burnt South Lanka;

My wife burnt her modesty.

And I set fire to a harlot...

Burn O burn."

This verse was Ellappan's song in 'honour' of the dead woman.

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# 19 Inquest

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**D**r. Pitchamurthy was flipping through the pages of a Book of Morals as he smoked a 'Wills' brand cigarette. The smoke began to spread all over the room. Kandasamy Naidu, his compounder, arranged bottles of drugs in his cupboard and safely locked it. He straightened up his blue coat and then moved towards the operation theatre, switched off the 500 watt power bulb, cleared his throat and tapped his snuff box. The wall clock began to strike. It was nine o'clock. "Quick... Quick... lock everything up and let us go," so saying the doctor threw out the stub and closed his book.

Somewhere from the street there came a tom-toming sound and the voice of a male followed it: "Tomorrow at eight in the morning Harijan entry into Vinay Theertha Swami Temple will take place with fun and fanfare. All temple goers are invited." "Ha! Ha! Compounder! What a hullabaloo is created here in our place. How do you react to Harijans entering the temple?" the doctor after asking such a question looked intently at his compounder's face.

"Why should I react? 'As you sow so you reap'... the whole world is going to upturn. The compounder said coolly as he slipped his key ring onto one of his fingers and whirled it as he moved out. Dr. Pitchamurthy switched off his office light and moved out.

As the two came out, a bulb at the entrance was struggling to drive away the darkness outside. A shadow-like figure was plodding its way towards the entrance of the hospital whimpering. It speeded up and began to climb up the stairs.

The doctor flashed his torch light he had in hand. It was a woman who had not yet crossed thirty. She wore a red sari torn here and there. Wisps of her

uncoiled hair were dangling over her forehead and back. The unexpected light from the torch made her close her eyes. Her hands and legs showed the sufferings of a fully pregnant woman. She found it difficult to stand. Holding on to the door, she bent down and screamed for help: "Oh! God of gods! Please save me... God will give you long life."

"Oh, shit!" the doctor murmured.

"Where is your husband? Why are you troubling us by coming here all alone?" The compounder showed no interest in her. He switched off the main entrance light too.

"I have no one to call my own. You are a god to me... You have to save me. Please," she screamed in pain again.

"Come on, quick... lock the gate," the doctor commanded his compounder. He flashed the torch once again on her face and said sarcastically: "You call yourself an orphan. How did this orphan become pregnant?"

"All for the sake of money," said the compounder, with a mischievous smile on his face and proudly looked at the doctor as if his words spoke for his genius.

"Hei! You! Your caste? Do you have money to pay the doctor's fees?" the compounder asked her, twirling up his moustaches.

"I am a Harijan, sir. How can I have money?"

And before she could complete her words, the doctor spat and howled: "Untouchable! Throw this untouchable ass out. Move... Go away from me. He then walked down the steps in a hurry. His compounder laughed like a villain in the celluloid and said: "You are an untouchable woman and you want to deliver your child in a hospital, eh? And that too at dead of night! Go to the temple tomorrow and make your entry along with your people. Go." He then switched off the light on the hospital nameboard.

The nameboard that advertised "Vinay Theerthavoor Village Charity Hospital: treatment round the clock" got submerged in darkness.

The doctor and the compounder walked past her very fast. "O, gods! Can't you show mercy to this poor woman?" the Harijan woman yelled. Those words of disappointment echoed from the nearby Vinay Theertha Andavan Temple."

A motor car came rushing towards the hospital. "Doctor sir! Our landlord complains of a slight headache. You are called to attend on him!" said the driver.

"Compounder! Do you have the medicine kit?" asking this the doctor got into the car. His compounder too nodded his head and occupied the front seat of the car. "Is he quite serious?" Pitchamurthy expected an urgent answer from him. The car sped.

The Harijan woman at the end of doorstep was still holding on to it. Her voice of pain continued. Those words of his continued to reverberate in her like the lash from a whip. Her thoughts ran to different directions.

"Where is your husband?" the words sarcastically asked by the compounder sent her down memory lane and she wriggled like a worm on hot sand. "Husband!" she uttered the word in all disgust and with anger.

She didn't weep. She stood erect like a tree. In her life's history, a page turned. And that's a three year old history.

Karuppayi was wife to Kathamuthu. Kathamuthu was a labourer in the farm of the elder landlord. The landlord was Annamalai Mudaliar and everyone gave him the title 'Dharma Durai,' meaning a very charitable lord. He found extreme delight in constructing temples and performing *kumbabishkam*. Parthasarathy Iyengar, a resident of the quarters owned by the landlord, that was close by the landlord's house, praised him sky high: "How much money he has contributed to charity! How many inns of charity he has constructed! He is the very incarnation of help!"

"This temple is constructed by Annamalai Mudaliar. And everyone should dance to his tune. Harijan entry into the temple, eh! He will never allow the untouchables to enter his temple. He will never concede to any unfair act. Don't you know?" so said Kannayiram Pillai, the accountant of the farm.

Three years ago, the construction of Mooshika Vinayagar temple was going on. Being now the season of Harijan entry, people are taking necessary steps today to allow the untouchables inside. But when the temple was under construction a granite stone that was lifted up for the sanctum sanctorum fell on Kathamuthu and he died on the spot.

Kathamuthu who maintained a well-shaped body was crushed to death inside the sanctum sanctorum. His head, like a coconut, was broken and he died paying oblations to Lord Vinayagar with his blood. He left his beloved wife and went away to the other world. Thus Annamalai Mudaliar sacrificed Kathamuthu and completed the construction of the temple.

Karuppayi had no way but to make a living of her own. One day she was sweeping clean the cowdung in the landlord's cowshed. "Work over?" Annamalai Mudaliar asked her entering the cowshed. Karuppayi was shocked to see him enter the shed for he very rarely did so. Karuppayi fell a prey to Mudaliar's lust.

Days rolled by. In her life of bitterness she tasted a drop of honey. Blessed are a few who can be in the good books of the boss. Karuppayi became pregnant. She was shy of showing herself before the public. Mudaliar had already cautioned her to run for her life. It was an emergency situation. Poor Harijan woman... her heart went heavy. And Karuppayi was ordered to disappear from

the place.

The very same man, who entered the cowshed with lusty intentions, had by now told his beloved: "Disappear into some unknown place." The boss's affection, his broadmindedness, his indifference to caste, his love for the poor - all these made her very happy and she was really proud of her well-structured body. She actually dreamt of a new life, courtesy Mudaliar and thought of bringing up her child. But she was destined to go away from her place. And the result was that she was standing in pain at the entrance of Vinay Theerthavoor Charity Hospital.

It was morning. Elaborate preparations were being made for the Harijan entry into the temple. Dr. Pitchamurty donning a kadam cap was found moving about with the temple trustee.

A crowd had collected around the temple pond.

"Lift... slowly... lift... gently."

"Yes! That's the way."

"Hi! Give a hand."

"Take care. The steps in the pond are slippery. Gently bring it up."

These were words of caution uttered by the crowd that stood around the pond to a few men who went into the pond.

"Even the God didn't like these wretched people enter the temple. It is shown by this bad omen." One lectured.

Two others involved in a conversation said, "Never were they allowed inside the temple for generations. Can God ever tolerate such an atrocity now?" she has spoilt the sanctity of the temple pond.

"Pshaw! What a day she has chosen to die? What a pity!" said a compassionate one.

"Huh! A pregnant woman!" an old lady said with real empathy.

"Two souls! Goddess Ganga had swallowed today," said some spiritualist.

The dead body of Karuppayi who had drowned herself in the temple pond was brought to the bank. The police scrutinized the corpse. Preparations were made for inquest. The Harijan's body was taken to the very same hospital that refused to admit the Harijan when she was alive the night before. Pitchamurty began his work to help the inquest. He and his compounder knew very well the cause of Karuppayi's death. But the crowd said: "This is all God's play." The doctor pretended to find the cause for the death. But the world is unaware of the fact that it was the drawback in the social setup and the state of affairs that was responsible for the death of Karuppayi. Who knows? Only when this is made public then can the inquest be declared successful.

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# 20 Doves of a Banyan Tree

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**T**he swishing sound of the brook, the koels' song in tune with that music and the peacocks dancing to that tune made the forest a heaven on earth.

At the centre of the forest stood a huge banyan tree. Doves had made their homes in the several hollows of the tree. From their homes the spotted doves peeped out to enjoy the ambience of the inspiring forest.

"Did you watch the peacock's dance?" a dove would ask. "Listen to the koel's song", another dove would divert the attention. "Are you aware of the stupid turkey that tried to imitate the peacock's dance and failing miserably declared that there should be no dance in the forest?", yet another dove would lecture. "Fine... Fine... today my family and I couldn't find any food," so would complain a lean and haggard looking dove. "An eagle flicked away my food," a dove would remark in a pitiable tone. "Thank God! You escaped from becoming food to the eagle," a dove would say joyously.

As such a conversation was in progress, a falcon whirled through the air and perched on the banyan tree. Its very sight sent the doves fly helter-skelter into the forest. And as they became tense and rammed into each other in a hurry, the falcon simply gorged on them and burped. Its burp would only amount to saying in pride "I came... I conquered." This had become a very common incident in the banyan tree, yes, in the kingdom of doves.

The doves began to think seriously: "For us there is absolutely no peace of mind. And it has become the order of the day. What would be the remedy for this?" Their tone was a mixture of sorrow and anxiety.

Two doves came forward to put an end to their stress. One was black. The other was white. They put their heads together and came out with a couple of plans to fight against the falcon. Though the two birds had difference of opinion in matters of profit and loss, they buried all their hatchets and joined hands to do away with the falcon. And all the other doves in the banyan tree, hearing of this, began to sing songs of joy. They became so jubilant that they awaited the commands of the black and white doves.

When the plans were in progress, a coloured dove rushed to the banyan tree in a great hurry. A hunter aimed at it and that was the reason. The hunter was after the dove, not for its flesh but to make money by selling this colorful and hence beautiful dove. As he saw the coloured dove taking refuge in the banyan tree, he decided to trap it alive. He began to go round the tree. The coloured dove became panicky. It sought refuge with the inmates of the tree. But those doves invariably said: "We can't fight against the hunter." But the coloured dove continued to pour forth its grief and was able to lure a few doves who finally favoured it. The black and the white doves came to know of it. "Huh! Now fighting the falcon aside, we have to fight against the hunter too. It is all because of the coloured dove. Had it not come to our tree this new problem would not have crept up," said the white dove in a grieved tone.

Meanwhile, the coloured dove took the black dove aside and had a tête-à-tête. Together they planned all of a sudden to drive away the hunter. The coloured dove then flew to the white dove and said: "Please join us in our attempt to drive away the hunter."

"Well then! I will lend you my support to drive away the hunter. But after that, will you join us to drive away the falcon and make this banyan tree a peaceful kingdom?" asked the white dove. But the coloured dove refused outright to satisfy the condition.

The hunter waiting under the tree heard the conversation of the doves. He thought that he would seek the help of the other doves to capture the coloured dove. And so he looked at the other doves and shouted, "Come on, drive out the coloured dove... drive out."

Finally deciding to climb up the tree and catch the coloured dove, he began to climb up the tree. But the coloured dove afraid of getting killed by the hunter's arrow, planned to attack him with the connivance of the black dove. And even at the last moment it invited the white dove to join the fray.



"You can't get only your things done. What about helping us?" asked the white dove.

"Whatever has happened has happened. The hunter if not attacked now will kill all of us sooner or later," thus lectured the black dove to the white.

The white dove proudly replied: "I know how to vanquish the hunter. And to do it, I do not need the help of the coloured dove."

The black dove became angry with the white. It called the white names. But the white didn't budge.

The hunter climbed up the tree. The black dove and the coloured dove holding little sticks in their wee-beaks prepared to attack the hunter. At the same time, the white dove attacked the hunter from behind and plunged its beak into his leg. And the covey of doves that sided with the white began to peck at the hunter's leg and it began to bleed profusely. It was so painful to the hunter that he lost his balance, fell down with a thud, broke his head and died.

The moment the hunter died the black dove and the coloured dove laughed victoriously. The white dove too was happy about performing its duty at the right moment.

On the morning of the next day the falcon killed ten doves for its dinner. That aside, the falcon painted on the tree: "Falcon's Tree."

The black and the white doves got ready to erase the letters painted on the tree. The black dove invited the coloured dove to join them. But the coloured dove gave several lame excuses and expressed its inability to join them.

The white dove went ahead to drive away the falcon from the banyan tree.

The black dove too made its own attempts. It called the coloured dove once again.

"No doubt the falcon is a bird of prey. But if we can adjust with it we can all live happily with it in this same tree as one family." The coloured dove began to explicate its stand.

Those words only angered the black dove. It was in disgrace for it feared the mischievous laughter of the white dove. "The white dove told me... but I didn't heed to it," the black dove lamented.

"I helped you... And now why do you refuse to help me?" so saying the black dove pecked at the coloured dove and also butted it with its head. The coloured dove too mustered up all its strength and attacked the black dove. And both of them fought such a battle that chaos and confusion began to rule the tree.

The falcon went ahead with its mission. The white dove was not sure whether it should cry or weep, but it went ahead in gathering strength to attack its

enemy.

The coloured dove used to approach the white dove for some help like taking medicine or balm when it was sick. The white dove too ungrudgingly obliged. But the black dove now refused even such small help to the coloured dove.

This story made the birds of the forest to laugh. They seemed to be wonderstruck. Yet they applauded the white dove for its sharpness of intellect. But the white dove found no time to listen to eulogies. Its main aim was to make the falcon fly away from the tree once and for all.

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# 21 Birds of Passage

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On that day Annamalai didn't like the exhibition at all. It was because beautiful girls didn't turn up on that day. Annamalai went groggy over the smiling lips of beautiful girls. He strongly believed that women without beauty are unfit to live on this earth. He used to say often that when Lord Brahma was wallowing in joy with his consort, he became duty conscious and in a fit of hatred for his job created ugly women. And those are the women who are the real troublemakers in this world. For him life is a Garden of Eden and beautiful women are birds who flit in it.

"Shit! What a nasty exhibition is this! An exhibition without beauties is akin to that of Juliet infected with leprosy. And Romeos too wouldn't bother to touch her. Oh! I can't see even one Tamil girl here," he murmured. Annamalai scrutinized every bangle and ribbon shop. He spread his wide net for a big fish and all that he got was only fingerlings. And the girls he found there seemed to be unaware of their ugliness. But they joyfully selected bangles. This is the way of the world. Imagine the koel that refuses to sing on the pretext of not being beautiful... Imagine the peacock proud of its beauty beginning to warble songs... Oh, won't Nature go topsy-turvy!

Disheartened, Annamalai was roaming about till he heard someone clear the throat. He turned. He saw quite a beautiful girl. He was amazed by her lovely wandering eyes. He lost himself at her very looks. Her pomegranate flower-like

red lips kindled a storm in his heart. She could easily charm anyone. And Annamalai could be no exception.

Her smile was more than a weapon to keep any man mesmerized. Annamalai looked at her from different angles all the time ogling at her beauty. But that flower soft girl didn't budge from that bangle shop. What if she is a beauty or a college student or even Surpanaka of the *Ramayana*? These women are easily attracted by sellers of garments, bangles and ribbons. There may be a difference only in the design of the bangles they choose. But they go for glass bangles and imitation gold.

Women are easily carried away by imitative things. Vimala too lost her heart to Annamalai unaware that he himself is 'imitation' and a glittering polished glass. Like these women, some men too measure women by their painted and beautified faces and not by the beauty of their mind and character. Some make it a practice to love; some are forced to do so. And how many get sacrificed at the altar of love?

Alas! Poor Vimala fell into Annamalai's deep gorge mistaking it for a warm stream. She is not to be blamed for that. What can she do? She is a lovely jasmine flower emanating its scent. She is a young widow, of course. But her intelligent parents are really bold people. That's why they have sent Vimala to a college for her higher studies.

Annamalai trapped her only in the college. Vimala fell a prey to his aesthetic sense. But the trouble with Annamalai was that he aspired for a distant rose even when he had in hand a jasmine. That's where he committed a mistake. He crumpled the flower.

He ruined poor Vimala's life. In another nine months she would be mother to his child.

Annamalai doesn't even think of Vimala these days. He has several Vimalas easily available.

Vimala wept uncontrollably. But that was of no use. Annamalai never even looked in her direction. As soon as the class was over he went away in a different direction.

Doesn't the parrot fly from tree to tree? The parrot would naturally fly to greener trees with more fruit. Annamalai too was like that. He hops from one beauty to another. He is a bird of passage. It is up to the tree to find out. Vimala failed to find out whether the bird would stay forever with her. And now, she has no way but to suffer.

It was only by a slow process Vimala understood the character of Annamalai. She metamorphosed herself into a tigress. For a time she began to sweat profusely and then she felt cold in her groins. Her heart began to pump blood with a renewed vigour.

"It is because he is handsome I fell a prey to him. And now I suffer for that. It is because he is handsome many women fall for him. And he ruins their life. If I make his face ugly...?" Vimala's thoughts went like this as she entered the college.

Practicals were going on in the chemistry laboratory. She saw a professor questioning a boy student who had broken a beaker. Vimala continued with her practical moaning all the time. She complained of stomach ache to all those who asked for reason. But she only knew what had happened and what was going to happen.

In one corner of the laboratory she found Annamalai going ahead with the experiments. He didn't even look in her direction. Vimala began to move slowly from her place. A dying lamp is bound to burn bright, it is said. So too her face brightened up and a sense of joy pervaded her face. She had a bottle in her hand. No other student had noticed Vimala.

Vimala opened the bottle gently. At first she hesitated. When you decide to jump into fire should you fear the heat? When you decide to jump into the sea should you fear the roaring waves? She splashed the contents of the bottle on Annamalai's face. Annamalai squealed and fell down. His face was getting roasted. Vimala too fell to the floor. She splashed nitric acid on Annamalai's face to distort it. She drank a large quantity of the same acid good enough to eat away her intestines.

In the chemistry laboratory one girl was freeing herself from this world. And the other who had enjoyed many women with the help of his charming face was on the floor with a completely distorted face. Never could he show his face to any woman. And the womankind would kick him aside.

Inside the laboratory the students stood shocked and confused. Only Annamalai, the bird of passage, knew why it had happened.

Before his minds' eye stood Bharathidasan, the revolutionary poet of Puducherry, smiling. His lips moved: "O darling child! The women of today are no more asleep; they are wide awake. You took them for your toys! O you wretch! Go and hide yourself behind your conscience. Go." The poet disappeared. Annamalai closed his eyes tightly. The irritation was quite unbearable.

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# 22 Love Letter

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**W**e can't be sure of where we are. We can never say where our camp would be shifted next. We can't be certain of our life or our death. It is difficult for us to say anything about our enemy's strength and weakness. Minute after minute we hear news of conquests made by fanatics like Hitler and Mussolini. Go on the sea, we get trapped. Go in the air, we are shot down dead. Go on foot, we are surrounded by destroyers. Under this situation if we move out of our tents we have to tie plants and creepers to our heads and walk... no... no... not walk but move. That's the way to cheat our enemies' war planes. Our enemies would mistake us for plants and creepers nodding in the wind. If they come to know that we are men and that too helmet-worn soldiers they would drop bombs from planes. We would be torn to shreds. Every minute is infested with danger. And during such times too, I didn't forget to write letters to her. After the training hours in the battle camp, I spent much of my leisure hours in writing letters to my lady love. That day too I was writing.

I didn't notice my friend, Balan standing behind me and reading the letter I was writing. Balan hails from Tanjore District of Tamilnadu. He is a close friend of mine in the army. To cap it all I should say he was the one who taught me Tamil. He learnt Hindi from me. We are not only mutual teachers but also mutual friends. I completed my letter and posted it. Balan gave me a mischievous look. "What is it, Bala?" I asked. Balan began:

"My dear darling Sudesh,

Sunderbabu's affectionate kisses. Day and night I crave to see your face. Whenever our enemy planes circled our camp or whenever the siren warned us of the impending disaster, I murmured "Sudesh... Sudesh", as people used to yell "Arjuna... Arjuna..." when thunder rolled in the sky. It is that love mantra that

keeps me alive. I do not know when this bloody war will come to a close. I very much love to rush to you, my love, and hold you in my arms. Sudesh, dear! I write to you a letter a day. And why don't you do the same? Perhaps you think that would be excess. Honey! You wrote to me a letter a day and that was in the beginning. And you commanded me to write a letter a day. And that command of yours is sitting on my head and makes me write everyday. But you are keeping silent for a whole month. I do not know why. Sudesh! It makes me sad. Your presence in my dream brings tears to my eyes. What makes you become angry with me, my dear, especially when I carved a niche for you in my heart and keep you there? My Love! My Life! Reply to this letter at least and bring me back to life. I am not at fault except that I have not rushed to marry you. Tell me if I am to be blamed for any other reason. I will meet you soon as a conqueror. Reply... Reply...

Yours in love,  
Sundar Babu.

Balan got by heart what I wrote in my letter and repeated it verbatim. Only then I understood that he had read the whole letter from behind.

When you involve yourself in love, or when you write a love letter or when you exchange looks with your beloved, you never bother about others. This is the way of the world. Not in vain it is said that love is blind. It is very true in my case. I am referring not only to my friend reading my letter. The very fundamental of my love proved to be a fake basement built by a blind mason. Balan warned me long ago, not to write love letters quite often for it will cloy my lady love's appetite for love. But I didn't heed his advice. I broke my fingers in writing letters everyday, believing that she would read them with delight. But my belief proved futile. The war that shook the world came to a close. But the war that shook my mind has not yet come to any close.

One thousand letters... But no reply at all. Balan's words of excuse didn't get into my ears at all. "Whoever gets proper information about the ongoing war? Who knows what had happened to your beloved and her family members who live in some corner of India? Don't be angry with Sudesh. You'll have to go in person and find out the truth of the matter." Balan told me quite often. His consoling words kept me alive.

As if what he said was true, all my recent letters bounced back. I believed that the war had very much affected my beloved and her family. I felt bad for underestimating Sudesh's love for me.

The war came to an end. We were happily sent home. I invited Balan to go with me to find what had happened to Sudesh. We went together only to find that Sudesh's house remained locked. We inquired with the neighbours. They said she got married and left the place.

I was very much disheartened. I felt dizzy. I fell down. When I came back to my senses, I saw Balan seated by my side. I asked him if he had inquired with anyone to find who Sudesh's husband was.

"Yes!" He said, "I found out, Sundar. You only found a suitable boy for your beloved."

"Who? Me?"

"Not you... the letters you wrote."

"Letters?"

"Yes! Sudesh asked you to write her a letter a day, you know."

"Yes."

"Do you know why?"

"Why?"

"It's all to melt before the postman who brought your letters to her."

"What?"

"Yes, Sundar. This is what I heard from Sudesh's neighbours. Sudesh had the opportunity of seeing the young and handsome postman who delivered your letters. She forgot herself. You only told me of the Hindu woman's culture... She has fallen off that... that's all. The postman and Sudesh got married."

After listening to Balan, I felt that the world war had not yet come to an end. I feel it now too. Balan stayed with me for a couple of days. Then he left for his home. He gave me the excuse that his would-be had sent an urgent message. I became helpless. I who wrote those letters was not as lucky as the one who delivered the letters. Somehow I didn't know that such a disaster awaited those who frequently wrote letters. Oh! How I wish the German bomb dropped on my head that day itself!



"We are lucky guys. It is our duty to activate the dawn of Dravidianism. A dark cloud called suppression shrouds the wide blue sky. Look over there! The future generations of dragonflies are waiting for their turn to drink honey. O Silver Moon! O Dravidian multitude! Rise... And tomorrow will see the dawn of

Dravidianism." In such poetic words Kandaiah would keep his audience spell-bound. And whenever he stood on the stage, learned pundits feared that his words would ring a death knell to puranic ideas.

Kandaiah is not the lonely crusader. He has with him an army of like-minded students. Kannaiyan takes the last seat in the last bench. Kandaiah has honoured him with a title: "The Eldest in Bharathidasan Parampara."

The one seated next to him is Ramu. He is very well versed in Einstein's theory. A scholarship is waiting for him. And his dream is to study in England and become a professor.

The next fellow is a singer. He would always complain of modernizing the South Indian music.

Kandaiah gave all these would-be geniuses a title and publicity, as if he had plans of giving everyone of them a portfolio in the future Dravida land. The principal of the college believed that this Kandaiah's team would bring an eternal fame to the college. The professors were not very affectionate towards them but showed respect for their future plans.

And their future looked bright with luring titles like political genius renowned all over the globe, scientist par excellence, expert artist, a maestro in music and so on.

Alas! Their student days didn't teach them that their future would be only bleak unlike their happy and dreamy days in the college.

Opportunity is a seasoned witch. Youth may be bubbling with gaiety; it may have the strength to quell any enemy - But she would brush them all aside and garland the stinking corpse of the rich. What can poor Kandaiah do in the chill hands of opportunity?

Years rolled by. I was moving in a running train uttering the words: "Ticket please" and checking the passengers. One of the passengers was absorbed in his own thoughts. I thought that I would be registering a case soon, but I shook him up. He turned towards me and said: "Sir! Do you remember me? I am your college mate Kandaiah."

I couldn't believe my ears. I thought that Kandaiah would have gone abroad for his higher studies and by this time would have become a genius appreciated all over the world. And I could not believe my eyes when I saw him in rags.

"Is it Kandaiah? What are your comrades doing? I know Ramu got through in first class. Did he get the scholarship to go to America? What about Poet Kannaiyan? He used to boast around that he would be doing research in Tamil!" I went on shooting questions out of curiosity.

"Hm! You thought of me as a very good public speaker. No wonder you expected to see me as a politician... Ramu was a mathematical genius. Kannaiyan was a poet. Sundaram a music maestro. And Gopalan even when he was a kid made his toy plane fly... but today they have all become clerks," so saying he broke into tears.

"Take a look at this," he continued and showed me a photograph printed in a newspaper.

"Hi! This is Pitchumani. He used to blink at all your questions whenever he was on the stage. What has happened to him?" I asked.

"He is no ordinary Pitchumani now. Pitchumani's father is a retired collector. His brother-in-law works in the Secretariat at Delhi. His son-in-law is related to the minister. Now Pitchumani is going to the U.N.O. to represent India." He went on speaking in a frenzy.

The train pulled up at the station. "Okay, then, see you," I said and got down from the train.

"Sir! Just read that," Kandaiah said pointing at a poster pasted to a wall. I read:

"We the people of Independent Republic of India solemnly pledge that apart from giving freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of religious rites and freedom of expression, we give every citizen an equal status."

I finished reading it. The Indian penal code that promises to give every citizen an equal status was mischievously smiling at me.

While in college Kandaiah was an extraordinary public speaker; Ramu a mathematical genius; Kannaiyan a poet to the core; Sundaram a top class musician; and Gopalan without attending his classes a good engineer... But today they are all clerks.

Pitchumani who was always scared of Kandaiah's questions and stood before him like a touch-me-not plant touched is today in America moving about with a puffed up chest. But Kandaiah who defeated him in the battle of wits now travels in train without a ticket.

Breeze carries with it the scent of the rose. Its pollen dust would make the black beetle too turn into golden beetle. The rose that is expected to emanate an excellent scent in its own decayed and stinking land is now shrivelling up in a distant desert away from human sight. The steel rod to be shaped into an enemy-destroying sword today rusts because of the moisture from hunger and poverty. But, Pitchumani with no talent to note goes up in life with the help of favouritism and nepotism. The roses are crushed and the extracted juice is used to paint red the colourless flowers.

When I was a student I didn't like the ideal of Kandaiah. But when I saw him in the present condition, I wept from my heart.

"Weep! O Polluted Dravidians, weep! The cloud that goes murky; the heart that goes heavy with sorrow — the only solution for these is a shower of tears. And only in that stream of tears should the boat of freedom set sail creating a new society," Kandaiah said laughing loudly. He wept as he said. The train moved listening to his loud cry.



# 24 The Last Phase



“My Lord! I am charged with murder and am made to stand in this witness box. I accept that I murdered and am ready for the punishment. You are not going to free me if I refuse to accept, are you? A piece of rope to strangle my throat and a small ditch by the side of the prison to bury my mortal remains are ready... I am not unaware of it. The public will brand me a murderer... and that too one who has murdered his beloved... the man who brutally killed the woman who ignored her husband to live with her paramour. The kith and kin will curse me. They may not be able to see my dead body which will be covered with earth but they may spit on my name board – Dr. Babu. I know. I want people to learn from my mean past and that is why I want to narrate in this court the causes for the murder.

To give you reasons and thereby get my freedom is not on my mind. For the reasons I will be giving you do not have the power to prove me not guilty. I killed my paramour, Manjula.

I didn't do it in a frenzied state. I killed her when I was not myself. I am a physician. I had my residence at Gopalapuram and I was a practising physician. The house I lived in was a double storeyed one. My family and my clinic were in the first floor. And the ground floor was occupied by Manjula and her father. My wife *Kokila* became friendly with Manjula and within a few days of my shifting to that house they became thick friends. My wife *Kokila* is on a par with the chaste women of yore. She never left the bedroom in the morning without

touching my feet. Be it day or night she would wait and eat only after I finished eating. She would simply refuse to utter any word that begins with the syllable 'ba' for my name is Babu. She had a lot of love, affection and respect for me. She was an ancient type of woman, of course, but since she treated me as her God, I too had love beyond measure for her.

Manjula of the ground floor was a married woman. Her husband was in Delhi. She and her husband had some difference of opinion, which then was blown bigger and she left her husband to live with her father. Manjula was quite a beauty, a modern-looking woman; and her lovely blue eyes would easily mesmerize anyone. Whenever I returned home I had to pass by the ground floor. That gave me an opportunity to meet Manjula quite often. We don't have to ask any woman, "Do you love me?" We can understand by her very looks. And Manjula's looks shook the very root of my heart. One day I was returning home at nine in the evening. Manjula sat at the entrance to the ground floor. Most of the time Manjula and Kokila would be chit-chatting. But at that time Kokila was missing from the scene. "Daddy is not at home?" I asked Manjula. "No! He is travelling," she said. "Kokila didn't give you company?" I asked still standing. "She was with me... but she complained of headache and has gone to sleep," she replied, giving a coy smile. I reached home and found my wife fast asleep. I tiptoed down the stairs and reached the verandah of the ground floor. As she turned to go back into her house she saw me. She didn't show any sign of shock. She stood with her eyes glued to the floor. I moved towards her. She stood still. I touched her. "Kokila is sleeping?" she asked. Her questions expressed her consent. And then whenever we found an opportunity we made love. Somehow my wife came to know of our relationship. She pleaded with me, she appealed to me in all possible ways. But I ignored all her pleadings for I was deeply in love with Manjula. Kokila advised me in several ways and tried to put an end to my illicit love.

Kokila and Manjula started looking daggers at each other. But my love for Manjula was on the increase. My relationship with my wife became strained. I was always thinking of Manjula. She occupied my dreams too. Her father's presence was a real hurdle to our meetings. Yet we ventured and it was a real thrill.

One day my wife threatened me by saying, "I plan to commit suicide." I coolly replied: "Go ahead. I have no objection." Kokila had made it a habit to mourn and express her grievances before the family deity. I saw her falling at its feet and crying, "It's all your will, O Lord!"

One day Manjula's husband, Gopal, came from Delhi. His mission was to pacify his wife and take her back. Gopal as per the advice of his father-in-law

decided to stay there for a month. It became very difficult for me to meet Manjula. And when we met, I requested her not to go away to Delhi. And she too had decided in my favour. Kokila, who was all along with her husband, had the shock of her life when she came to know of Manjula's decision. But Gopal with the great determination of going with his wife to Delhi, continued to stay back.

Gopal and I became friends. He was not aware of my relationship with his wife. Three months had passed since the arrival of Gopal. And at last, I got the news of Manjula going with Gopal to Delhi. At the next opportunity, I asked Manjula. She nodded her head, meaning 'yes', and disappeared. I didn't know that she was teasing me a bit. I became very furious. Should I allow Manjula to live in Delhi? Should I wallow in pain all the time thinking of her in Chennai? I heaved a great sigh.

I decided to finish her off so that she would be useful to none. That day I went out and returned home with a 'revolver.' My intention was to kill Manjula and thereby stop her union with her husband. As I entered the house, I saw a girl servant standing at the entrance of the ground floor.

"Where is Gopal?" I asked her. "He has left for Delhi," so saying she disappeared into the house. My eyes searched for Manjula. I couldn't find her. Disappointed I went up thinking that she too had left with her husband. In my house, my wife Kokila was missing. I found a letter lying on the table. I unfolded it and read: "Dear Babu! I am freeing myself from your clutches. Please excuse me for that. Should I commit a mistake because you have committed one? I asked myself. This is not right, the world will say; the intelligentsia would say. But let my decision be a lesson to people like you to have a turning point. I am leaving for you the best thing you loved. My life with continue in Delhi with Gopal. Goodbye."

Yours,  
Kokila

What? Is it Kokila? Did my wife Kokila write this letter? Did she elope with Gopal? I forgot myself. I lost my balance. I was in a daze. My vision began to blur. At that time I saw Kokila coming towards me. In a jiffy I took my revolver and pulled the trigger. I fired... I fired... I continued till the last bullet made its way out. The animal passion in me began to wilt. Then only I realized that I killed only Manjula.

I was arrested. And now I am in this witness box.

The accused finished telling his story. The judge asked: "So you accept that you are a murderer?"

"Yes! I am a murderer... I am a murderer," so saying Dr. Babu slapped his face several times. His moustache came off. Dr. Babu picked it up and stuck it to his upper lip. The common people who were witnessing the court scene broke into a guffaw. The lawyers too found it difficult to control their laughter. But the judge got down from his chair and moved towards the accused. He then howled at him: "I am passing my judgement on you, now. You are careless and you didn't even bother to stick your moustache properly. But foolishly you have come to act before thousands of people. And for this reason I say you are unfit to be in our drama troupe. And I dismiss you immediately from my company. Clear off your make-up and get lost."

The curtains went down. The actor who acted as Dr. Babu cringed before the judge. The judge who was actually the boss of the drama troupe didn't forgive him.



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# 25 Sweet is Venom

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**M**y son Jagaveera! I do not like the ways of Satyavathi."

"What are you saying, mother?"

"Yes, my son. Satyavathi is quite young, bubbling with youth. But she is a queen. She can't speak to other men of her choice. It is a shame on the entire dynasty of Rajputs who plunged into fire when their honour was at stake."

"Ma! What are you talking about? What did Satyavathi do? With whom did she flirt? Tell me."

"Cool down, my child. I know that she is to you as precious as your eyes. But..."

"What is that 'but' for, ma?"

"I do not like your wife to have any private conversation with your brother. If you pull her up, I think she will listen to you."

"No, ma! Please do not speak ill of my younger brother, Artol. He is like pure gold... a glowing lamp."

"Jagaveera! You are getting ready to go to Delhi. It may take a long time for your return. Let me warn you. Don't ever think that I am finding fault with your wife. My only wish is that she should not get into the wrong path."

"Fine, Ma! You take care of everything. Let me take leave of you."

Jagaveera Simhan was once upon a time the heart throb of the people of Orissa. In the seventeenth century the coronation of Emperor Shah Jahan took place in Delhi and Jagaveeran was invited. When he was about to start for Delhi with his retinue of one thousand soldiers, his mother Amirtha Rani complained of Satyavathi. The king who met his mother to take leave of her was hurt by her words. To safeguard the spotted deer he had killed innumerable tigers. And when he jumped into the battlefield he would kill innumerable soldiers in the twinkling of an eye with just a swish of his sword. But such a great warrior was greatly wounded by the words of his mother. He thought that his mother had come out with such a warning for she had seen a stain in his happy life. He felt very bad. With a sorrow-laden face, he started his journey to Delhi.

Satyavathi, his beloved queen, then became a canker gnawing at his heart. She was so pious a woman that she was known as the New Meerabai of Orissa. She had lots of love for her husband Jagaveera and respect for her kingdom. But she had a grievance too. Satyavathi was waiting for the right opportunity to get her grievance redressed. Her father-in-law King Veera Simha was once mauled by a tiger and when he was about to breathe his last he entrusted his youngest son Artol to the care of Jagaveera and Satyavathi. He also requested them to build a temple for Rama in his memory. Jagaveera promised to fulfil his father's death wish. But a temple in memory of his father should be something very special. And for that he needed plenty of gold. At a time when the position of the treasury was not quite satisfactory, he was reluctant to start the work. But Satyavathi wanted to fulfil her father's last wish by all means. As the dead king advised, she took the utmost care for Artol. As a result, Artol treated her as his mother. She quite often told him that the construction work of the temple should begin and that too quickly.

"Artol! It will take a long time for the king to return, won't it?"

"Yes! Ma! I think a minimum of four months."

"And we should by all means construct the temple for Rama. And thereby we will make the king jump for joy when he reaches home."

"You are right, ma! We'll start the work by tomorrow. But there is not much gold in the royal treasury."

"But you told me of a diamond quarry somewhere. What had happened to it, Artol...?"

"It's very much there. I thought we could make use of them to lessen the tax burden of the common people."

"First you unburden my problem that is weighing heavily on me. Once the temple for Rama comes up, our kingdom will be at peace. All the evil forces will fade away. And so you give top priority to the temple."

"We should collect all the diamonds and store them in an extremely secret place. Once Delhi comes to know of the quarry, it will rush in a cyclonic speed and with its mouth wide open ask, "Where are the diamonds?"

"Fine, Artol! Delhi now is putting on a festive mood. We should make use of this opportunity to keep the diamonds under cover of darkness and with that we should finish constructing the temple for Rama.

"As you say, ma."

Artol began to make preparations to obey the commands of Satyavathi.

King Jagaveera though he went to Delhi well in advance as per the invitation couldn't rest in peace there. He tortured himself with questions like – Is Satyavathi really a flirt? Or is his mother falsely accusing his wife? Or is his brother Artol involved in an affair with Satyavathi? To crown them all, a letter from Orissa reached him. He unfolded it and read. His eyes widened for the letter was from his mother:

"Dear son,

I told you to stop it... before the flood could become uncontrollable. You said you would do the needful. But now the situation is beyond control. Every midnight Satyavathi meets Artol in his chamber. I can prove it. When I inquired, she told me that they met to plan for the construction of the temple. And so before the stigma could destroy our dynasty, come back.

Yours affectionate mother,  
Amirtha Rani.

As Jagaveera finished reading, his head reeled. It was all lovely music in the coronation hall of Delhi. But in the recess of his heart only turbulence ruled. The next minute he started for his kingdom.

It was night. A casket full of diamonds that was going to give shape to the temple of Rama found a place before the statue of Rama. Before the construction work could start the statue to be kept in the sanctum sanctorum of the temple was ready. Satyavathi stood before the statue of Rama and was singing songs in praise of the Lord. Her father-in-law's death wish is going to be fulfilled. Her husband, when he comes back, will be delighted to see the temple. And to give the kingdom peace and prosperity Lord Rama himself will find an excellent

abode there. With such thoughts in mind she was jubilantly performing the pooja.

The pooja over, Satyavathi called Artol to keep the casket of diamonds in safe custody.

"Artol!... Artol!"

"Here I am, you bitch!" so howling Jagaveera made his presence. Satyavathi shocked to the core, turned only to see her husband in a fury.

"My lord!"

"Don't ever come anywhere near me. You are a poisonous fruit beautiful. You have brought disgrace to my kingdom. Move away from me."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Where is your paramour Artol?"

"Don't ever say like that, my Lord. Artol is a son to me. He is my pet child."

"Is it the son you meet quite often at dead of night?"

"Yes! What's wrong with that? I met to discuss with him the plans for the construction of the temple. We finalized the plan. And now we have started the work."

"Stop it... you woman in heat."

"Take a look at the diamonds here. These are saved for the construction of the temple. Can you believe me, now?"

"These diamonds are not for the temple. These are gifts from Artol to you for your night services. I know all about it."

"My lord! My lord!"

"Why are you plugging your ears? You blindly fell into the sea of lust and now pretend to worship Rama. Dissembling courtesies!"

"My lord! I am innocent and virtuous. Don't ever doubt my chastity. And don't ever fall a prey to my heart's curse."

"No crocodile tears here... If you do not have any illicit relationship with Artol, then administer this venom to him with your hands."

"No... Not to him... I myself will drink it."

"No... No... Artol should drink this venom from your hand."

"As you wish..." so saying Satyavathi took the venom from her husband's hand and rushed toward Artol.

Artol after finalizing the plans for the temple was fast asleep. Satyavathi entered his chamber with the cup of venom.

"Artol!" She woke him up.

"What is it, ma?"

"Come on... Drink this milk."

"Milk? At this hour?"

"Yes! To prove that I am chaste you are expected to drink this poisoned milk."

"What? You are...!"

"The king has accused me of being your paramour. If I have to prove that I am not, I am asked to give you this venom."

"Huh! Painful, ma! Who has set such a rumour afloat? Did the king really believe it? Has my brother stooped to stain my character? Brother! Why did you hurt me with such words?

Ah! Ma! It's very painful."

"There is no time to talk about all these things. My dear son! You can save the honour of Rajput dynasty only by drinking this venom."

"I'll drink... O Venom! It's a pity that you're chosen to save my mother from ignominy. We have started the construction work of the temple for Rama. We have carved a beautiful statue for Rama. But neither Rama nor his retinue comes forward to tell my brother of the immaculate nature of my mother. But Venom! At least you have come forward to wash off the disgrace that ignoramuses brought on my mother. I thank you. Venom is sweet. Sweet is Venom... Sweeter than God himself. Venom is definitely sweeter than Rama who abandons all those who believe in him." Artol finished pouring out his heart, and then took the cup from Satyavathi's hand and gulped it down. He fell down dead.

Satyavathi bathed him with her tears. Jagaveera realized his fault and his heart went heavy. Amirtha Rani too wept. And when all the funeral rites were over, every one in the kingdom wept and mourned. Had Lord Rama come to inform King Jagaveera of the chastity of Satyavathi this mourning and weeping could have been averted. And if Rama had come to say so, then Artol would not have said: Venom is sweeter than God himself.

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# About the Project Makers

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**Bharathiar University**, Coimbatore - named after the nationalist Tamil poet Subramanya Bharathi, who exhorted the Tamils to identify things worthy in their language, and give them unto the world for enjoyment and edification - conceived this Project viz., *Kalaigñar in English Translation* by which to make available in English the extraordinarily rich and varied literary works of Kalaigñar M. Karunanidhi, who, by the sheer volume and weight of his output, makes a compulsive demand on us that he be studied and given his due.

**Prof. G. Thiruvagasam**, Chairman of the Project Committee and Vice Chancellor of the University. The genesis of this Project owes to his academic vision. His initiative and leadership as much as his passionate and studied interest in the excellence of Kalaigñar's creativity has seen this Project through within a short span of ten months.

**Kavippperarasu Vairamuthu**, Vice-Chairman of the Project Committee. An intellectual poet in Tamil endowed with an astonishingly fecund poetic energy and representing a rare blend of ratiocinative powers and aesthetic sensibility, Vairamuthu has brought a sense of direction and significance to bear on the dynamics of the Project.

**Dr P. Marudanayagam** and **Dr V. Murugan** comprising the editorial team - the former a ripe Professor of English and a comparatist of towering erudition, and the latter a bilingual lexicographer and a distinguished translator with the translations of *Tolkappiyam*, *Kalittokai*, *Tirukkural* and *Narrinai*, and *Oxford English-English-Tamil Dictionary* to his credit.

**Dr C. Sivashanmugam**, Professor of Linguistics, **Dr R. Palanivel**, Professor of English and **Dr S. M. Ravichandran**, Professor of Tamil, Bharathiar University, the coordinators of the Project, who kept the Project on track.

The late **Dr S. Agasthialingom**, a renowned linguist and former Vice Chancellor, Tamil University, **Sirpi Balasubramanian**, a highly decorated poet in Tamil, **Prof. Tamizhachi Thangapandian**, **Poet Kayalvizhi Venkatesh** and **Dr N. Ramani**, members of the Expert Committee, whose learned counsel, suggestions and views have added to the strength and credibility of the translations as a whole.

**Macmillan Publishers India Limited**, who have done an excellent job through their passionate commitment to the project, their legendary technical expertise and their unflinching feel for accuracy and perfection.

A towering political personality and a man of the masses of more than seven decade standing, Kalaingar has acquired a keen sense of understanding of the Tamil people at large, their passions and beliefs and their customs and manners. It is this understanding that has handed him a wide variety of themes and characters, which he chooses from, at will, to make a tale. Therefore, we have no stereotypes of events and characters in his fiction, nor is there room for monotony to the reader.

A literary practitioner of more than half a century, Kalaingar has ripened into a master craftsman who knows perfectly well how to transmute the chosen social reality into art, and what techniques of art would best suit to the making of a genre of his choice. And, a poet at heart that he is, he is gifted with a language that flows like a charming summer brook, and that would also turn into a wild jungle stream where the context warrants.

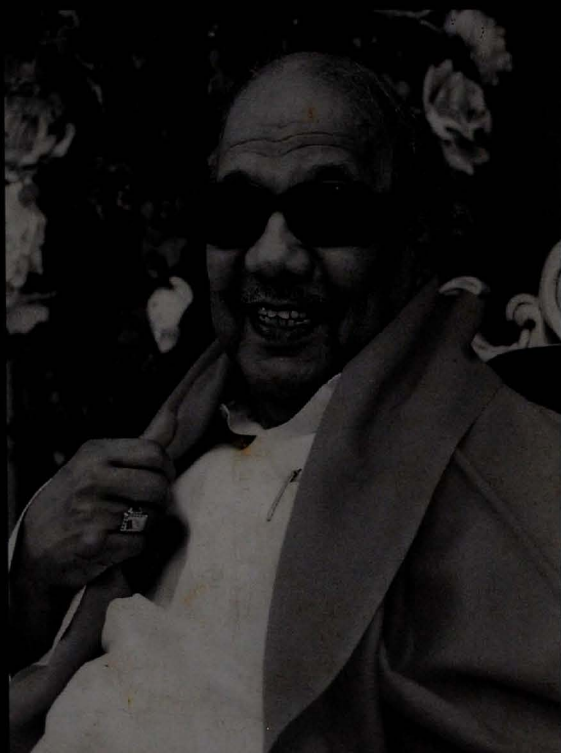
In all these respects, Kalaingar has hardly any rivals in the Tamil literary milieu of the day, nor does he have one in the sprawling Indian sub-continent as well.

Kalaignar M Karunanidhi, one among the select 'who is who' of contemporary India, is a ripe political personality of more than seven decade standing, a statesman and a proven administrator, with the rare distinction of being the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for five terms, besides being a relentless crusader for rationalist revival and an undaunted, missionary-like fighter for social and political causes.

Notwithstanding, it is the title 'Kalaignar' meaning 'an artist par excellence' by which he is identified and characterized, so much so that it is no longer a title but a proform designation of Dr M Karunanidhi, in the same way as 'the Bard' is used to refer to Shakespeare.

For Karunanidhi, whose formal education did not extend beyond the secondary school, is a multifaceted, prolific writer with an amazingly large volume of literary output to his credit. He is a poet, a playwright, a novelist and short story writer, a letter writer, an elegist, a journalist and a columnist, a script-writer, a political satirist, an essayist, a translator, an autobiographer and a social and literary critic, besides being an extraordinarily eloquent and powerful speaker. His creative and critical works have been published in 59 volumes, memoirs and autobiography in another 8 volumes, and other writings in 115 more volumes, large and small.

What astounds one is the fact that he has been writing on all these genres contemporaneously, putting the same amount of interest and energy in each kind, that too in the midst of his most exacting administrative and political activities.



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