

GENESIS

Tamil Short Stories
of
A. MALARANPAN

Translated into English
by
PANNAMATHUK KAVIRAYAR



Genesis

Collection of Short Stories

by M. M. Mohamed Ali,
with kind regards from
A. Madhavadas,
20/1/20

Other Books Of The Author

- * Kodichchelai
- * මහවැලියේ මහ නදියේ
- * Pillairsuli

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In Tamil

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Introduction

By

M.B. Mathmaluwe.

All the Short Stories in this Collection, now in English, had originally been written in Tamil to various journals from time to time one, at least, as far back as 1967. The Translator, (Pannamathu Kavirayar) apparently, has been equal to his task and, as his language and style show, has done a commendable job; they flow untrammelled, as original writing, with little to show that this is, in fact, a translation. However, such scrutiny of and comments on literary niceties or the lack of them, which properly, should find a place in a review, do not fall within the purview of this note written only as an Introduction.

A perceptive reader would notice that the entire Collection of these Stories is a careful and authentic portrayal of and a commentary on the life, customs, manners and values and add to them, their joys and sorrows of the Tamil labouring community on the tea and rubber estates in the country, more often, in the kandyan hill country, collectively called the "Plantation Raj" . Tracing the story of the establishment and running of the " Plantation Raj" is an interesting and rewarding exercise for, it forms a revealing chapter in the economic history of this country in a bygone era, its genesis running far back into the early years of its British conquest in the final years of the 18th Century, more

so, after the subjugation of the Kandyan Provinces in 1815: since then, for more than a hundred years, until the country gained Independence in 1948, when the white masters of the Plantation decided to sell up and go back, the Plantation Raj, in its original form existed as a microcosm peopled with a community maintained by their owners and masters, the British planters who came here as agents of Company owners in England.

It has often been said, the British are a nation of merchants and entrepreneurs and even the conquest of lands they made in the 18th and 19th Centuries were, in fact a part of that feature to produce and market. On capturing the Kandyan Provinces, they found that it was ideal, with its salubrious climate, for the plantation - industry and for healthy living. Precisely, with these factors in mind, the rich entrepreneurs in England, at the time, formed Companies to open up plantations in these newly conquered lands. The crop they had in mind first, was Coffee which was the raging market commodity and, it was with that, they started; but before long, a blight struck the plantations causing much distress and disappointment, and it was tea that took over and, of course, flourished and, soon rubber too was introduced.

The experiences, particularly, the hardships, of the early planting community in a strange land, form an altogether fascinating saga of adventure as all such pioneering enterprises would necessarily entail, they found themselves cut off and lonely, almost abandoned in unknown territory without contact with their own homelands and families; this applied to both the white masters as well as to the imported darker labour forces. The white planters particularly, used to a totally different kind of environment and conditions of life and human contact, found the situation, at times, irreconcilable and some of them gave themselves up to

despair, more so, when the coffee plantations were ruined; some of them took to drink and other excesses and even committed suicide. So too, perhaps, would have been the labouring community, uprooted from their homelands, herded into strange circumstances; the early years were very difficult and trying; more so, with the daily grind of hard work which was to be their permanent lot hereafter! Confined to their estates, both the masters and the servants, the Planting community spawned a totally new culture in fact, a sub-culture which was the microcosm within the microcosm, while it lasted, and, it did last in the first stage, until Ceylon (then) gained Independence in 1948, when the white Planters decided to sell the estates and go home. True, the tea and rubber estates still continue under the native entrepreneurs who bought them, but the pristine conditions have changed! As they exist today, the ragged looking aspects themselves is perhaps, only the thin veneer that covers the totally different conditions existing in the tea and rubber estates today! The formerly primly maintained plantation have greatly deteriorated on account of poor maintenance; many of the South Indian labourers too, who could do so, have gone back; those that remain are certainly not well looked after and, do not have enough or regular work; their Income being insufficient, are sunk in distressing poverty.

When the British planting Companies bought their vast acres of prime jungle and from the Govt, they no doubt, thought that the idling kandyan villagers could be employed to work on them; to clear the jungles and thereafter, to plant them and to run them; if they thought so, they were in for great disappointment for, the idling Kandyan villagers were unwilling to work on the newly opened estates for two reasons; they were a habitually indolent, lazy lot who would starve for a cent rather than work for rupee and also, they

thought, it was below their dignity to work as coolies for pay! Indeed, this system of working for wages, never existed among these conservative Kandyan villagers at the time. If they worked for another, it was on the understanding that the other would come and work for him in turn, at some later time; that was the system that existed at the time ... That is how the need arose for the British Planters to import South Indian labour gangs to work their estates. The advent of these labour gangs to Ceylon (then) forms another amazing saga of suffering, privation, starvation and fatigue, disease and death on the roads; of the thousands indentured by agents in south India, a few hundreds trickled into the estates; scores of them perished on their way, of diarrhoea, malaria or of sheer exhaustion. Indeed, the fortunes and the times of the Ceylon estate labouring community is a fertile field for research for any student so inclined... Once these unsuspecting innocents were brought here and settled on these estates, in their tiny, congested 'Lines', the grind of work was back-breaking, long and highly regimented. Their working day began with the beat of a 'Thappu' - a drum (in absence of clocks), any time around 4.30 in the morning, when they would get up from their mats, make their ablutions, cook for the day and, take their working implements and trudge to the 'muster' grounds, where the Conductor would mark their names and hand them over to the 'Kangany' (Overseer) for the day's toil, until once again, the 'Thappu' would, beat to announce the end of the day's toil, and the tired labourers would limp back to their Lines. These estate coolies, living as they were, amidst the Kanyan Villages, one would think, that they would have established some sort of rapport with villagers around their lines or estates: No, never Seldom did they even visit the villagers unless an interloper, labourer stepped into a villager's garden to cut a stick or collect some firewood and that, always with the villager's knowledge, In their turn, the

villagers would sometimes, venture into the Lines to perhaps, sell some garden-produce of theirs like arecanut, betel leaves, some vegetable or some yams, The contact would end there, In truth, the two communities seemed to live in two water-tight compartments, as if it were: the microcosm never seemed to link with the macrocosm at any level. In their customs, manners, ways of life, in the languages they spoke and in their beliefs, their cultures never met.

It seems necessary at this stage, to say a word about the contribution the so-called 'Plantation Raj' had made to the country's culture and social order while it lasted, apart from the readily accepted and significant contribution it made to its economy, the British companies that owned the estates here, saw to it that their agents they sent here, the planters, knew their jobs very well; one would do well to realise that, to a stranger to the country, who had absolutely had no earlier awareness, either of the country, its people or its ways of life, the responsibilities, duties or its lurking dangers, that confronted him, were enormous: just as he was master of all he surveyed, he was also responsible for the healthy survival, smooth working and the maintenance of law and order within his domain, with its denizens, thousands of them, generating their share of problems, as all closely living human communities are bound to do, As said earlier, the Plantation Raj was a little world by itself: a cast-iron system of administration was necessary and the authorities saw to it that every provision was made to meet every possible contingent: Law and order were maintained with an iron hand and at a time when today's Trade Unions and Labor leaders were non-existent, that was easy. Roads, transport, communication were seen to, and the estates had their own Dispensaries and Staff to look after the health requirements of its people, As regards transport, it is little realized that today's existing network of well laid roads

traced on very difficult terrain, were all done by Companies that owned the estates, no doubt with the co-operation and may be, even with the assistance of a supportive British Govt, but one can hardly refrain from lending a cheer for the magnificent network of the hill country roads they left for the country when they quit, which the present authorities find difficult even to maintain!

Finally, to wind up: as said before, the estate South Indian labouring community, men and women, lived In their little world, a life severely circumscribed by the needs and demands of their white masters; In their little social cul-de-sac they had their little problems, no doubt, as well as the many pressures and dilemmas and of course, their loves, hates and joys and sorrows: it is precisely how they responded to them, that forms warp and weft of these little stories. It has to be reiterated that the author has marvelously captured it all in these stories. I cannot refrain from making reference to at least one story typical of the general trend I refer to the last in the collection titled 'Parvati' named after the heroine of the story. It is typical of the little incidents that occur within close-living communities where human passions transcend social conventions and man-made taboos. Parvati an attractive young woman with amply gifted physical attributes, is the devoted wife of a labourer; She comes under the relentless lascivious advances of the Estate's 'Conductor Aiyah when Parvati's husband is away. Conductor Aiyah pays court to her and visits her line-room, at night. For four successive nights, Parvati with desperate effort resists the onslaught of efforts to ravish her, and she preserves her chastity. On the fourth night too he comes, entering her room, opening the unlatched door. As the night wears away with Parvati's struggle to preserve her chastity, she hears a knock on the door and, opening the door, whom does she see at the door? ... her husband! The 'Conductor Aiyah' is still in her

room. As this story proceeds in this manner, in another part of the Lines, a 'Reader', as was the custom of these estate denizens, was reading the " Ramayana" to a crowded audience raptly listening to the story of how Ravana struck by Sita's beauty, abducts her and takes her to Lanka and tries his best to violate her but, Sita resists and preserves her chastity. The author cleverly narrates the two stories as it were, in tandem, in an altogether new venture of story- telling, letting us know that Parvati preserved her chastity just as Sita preserved hers!

GENESIS

A prologue to the innumerable tales of the plantation workers who being uprooted from their native soil in South India about 175 years ago and made to cross a few miles of sea and walk a hundred miles or so to the central hills engaged as labour gangs to clear the beast infested jungles and fashion the tea gardens of Sri Lanka then called Ceylon.

‘Pillaiyar Suli’
VIRAKESARI
16. 06. 1991

Wide expanses of burning hot sand broiled and roasted ones feet. The river that once flooded its banks has ceased to flow. Dried up. Water welled in some places if you dug six feet deep. Digging the hole in the evening one could fill a pot the following morning.

Palani was in a knee-deep hole, shovelling out the sand with a mamoti.

“*Anna*¹, do you find water?”

Palani looked up.

His younger brother Ramu was driving the cattle back from the hills where he had driven them for grazing. He was wearing only a loin -cloth. Drawing nearer Ramu asks again:

“Do you need any help?”

“No, you’d better drive the cattle safely to Aiyer’s shed and tie them first”

Palani tells Ramu without raising his head this time.

With a twig, Ramu whips a bull that was honing its horns on a rock. The rest of the herd begin to run shoving their tails between their legs.

Protruding ribs thigh bones jutting out like the bottoms of coconut boughs The cattle were mere skeletons. They fed on withered dry leaves in the hills

1. Anna - Elder brother

where the Malai Kuravars² set fire to the thicket to hunt animals. Even that fodder was not forthcoming these days.

Ramu runs behind another bull to make it fall in line with the herd. His loosened loin-cloth drops to the ground. Picking it up he continues his chase.

Ramu doesn't look a boy of sixteen. His ribs too protrude like that of the cattle. His matted hair filled with dirt remained unshaven since his birth.

A vow made to shave his head at *Aiyandar Sannithy*³ remains unfulfilled to this day. His dark body was sun-burnt. He did have a vetty. What would he wear to the Kovil on special occasions, if he wore it for cattle grazing?

“Get some grains of rice from Aiyar when you return. We can make a porridge for dinner. Also tell him that I would see him in the evening” - Palani shouted.

Ramu runs away nodding.

Palani wonders whether Aiyar would give some grains of rice at all. No sign yet of water gushing out.

Having dug deep to a man's height he climbs out of the hole disappointedly and looks up.

White clouds afloat in the sky like laundered bales of cotton. The parched earth was thirsting for water. The rains had failed. Five years of drought followed by famine – poverty and pestilence. The village had never seen a famine as this before. Half the villagers had fled to Poona and Mysore six months ago.

Famine and cholera that followed in its train had claimed the lives of three or four members from each family.

2. Malai Kuravar - gypsies who camped in the hills
3. Aiyandar Sannithy - In the presence of Aiyandar (The Guardian Deity)

Palani leaves the mamoti in the back yard and comes and sits on the veranda.

His *Aaya*⁴ stretches her legs in a corner and runs her fingers through her tresses.

“Aya, has *thamby*⁵ returned from Aiyer’s house yet? I told him to get some grains of rice from the Aiyer.”

“Aiyer was not at home, he said. He seems to have gone to town in his bullockcart to fetch his daughter who studies there”

“Where is *thamby* then?”

“Periya Kanganiyar the son of upper road Karuppaiah Devar has come from *Kandy Seemai*⁶ to engage labour gangs for his plantation. Ramu has gone to find out about it”

Sonamuthu the son of Palani’s maternal uncle who lived in the other end of the road calls on them. He sits beside Palani on the veranda, taking the shawl from his shoulder and fanning himself with it, addresses Palani’s mother:

“*Periyaayi* its useless remaining in the village anymore. We’ve decided to go to *Kandy seemai* with the family. We’re going to take Palani and Ramu with us. Periya Kangany will pay you an advance. You can manage for some times with that money. Once we get to Kandy we’ll be sending you money regularly. You can look after our house and land as well.”

“I don’t understand these things. Half the houses in the village are deserted. A good number of people have left already. If *Mariyaatha* opened her eye and showered her

4. Aaya - Mother

5. *thamby* - Younger brother

6. Seemai - Country. Ceylon then was known to these folks as Kandy Seemai

blessings on us we wouldn't have to abandon our houses to go to some unknown land”

“When are the rains going to come down? When are we going to plough our land and reap our harvest? When are we going to have a square meal?

“You talk of going to an unknown land crossing the sea? Will you come back at all?”

“Pereyaayi, it's this famine that is pushing us by the neck from here. Once the rains come and the land turns verdant and fertile again we are sure to return. After all India is also under the whiteman. So we can come back any time. Kanganiyar told us. Palani come. We'll go to Kanganiyar and give your name...”

Palani looks at his mother. Tears well up in her eyes.

Kangany's old house was pulled down and a posh new one was under construction.

Periya Kangany was seated on a stone slab under a tree.

He wore a white vetty and a black coat. The fob from his time piece hung out from his pocket. His massive moustache pointed and upturned resembled the horns of a goat. His long black hair was tied behind in a knot. Redstones sparkled in his ear studs. His lofty stature inspired awe and respect.

People clustered round him as if they were at a Panchayat meeting. Palani joined the crowd and stood in a corner. Sonamuthu found a place beside Ramu who was looking at Kangany without batting an eyelid.

There were men and women of varying age – men with Kudumi - tufts of hair – on shaven heads. Elderly women with their bored earlobes that hung loose, almost touching

their shoulders. Young girls wearing some tight springy substance to keep their pierced earholes intact. Then there were the middle-aged women. None of them wore jackets. Their sarees draped over their left shoulders covered their bulging breasts.

An attendant folds a tender betel leaf with sliced arecanut deftly and hands it over to Kangany. Kangany shoving it into his mouth takes a little chunnam with his index finger, applies it on his tongue and lower jaw. Chewing the betel he commences his speech:

“Whiteman is Whiteman. There’s no one like him He’s going to lay railway lines to the plantations. He’s going to build roads and tar them. He’s going to construct brick houses for the plantations people. Verdant Kandy Seemai is flourishing in wealth. Kandy Seemai is the blessed land of Lakshmi - the Goddess of bounty and plenty”

Kangany presses his lips with his index and middle fingers and spurts out the betel spittle plitch..... plitch...

Then he mops the beads of perspiration from his face with his shawl.

“The damn arecanut I feel giddy ... sweating all over, Eyi ... there, get me some water at once....”

He yells looking towards the door. A servant comes running with water in a small brass pot.

Kangany applies the water to his face and rinses his mouth. He then resumes his speech:

“Kandy is the land for icy cool water. No water can beat Kandy water. It’s like molten silver.....”

“Do you get paddy fields there? Do people cultivate paddy?”

“What a silly question to ask. Rice, dhal, flour, sugar, gram .. what not? The whiteman provides you with shiploads of them. Except father and mother you are provided with every thing there. All you have to do is to work in his tea gardens. The whiteman showers silver on you. You understand?”

Spurting out the betel spittle between his index and middle fingers Kangani shoves another chew of betel in to his mouth.

“If we cross the sea to go to a foreign soil can we return at all ?”

“Both our India and Ceylon belong to the white man. The two countries are part and parcel of the British Raj. Who said we are going to settle down there for ever? Any time we feel like we can return home See even to get good are canuts one has to get to Kandy seemai

Plitch Plitch he spits again.

“Going to a far away country how are we to comeback?” -asks another person.

“No one is going to keep you there for ever, work ... earn ... and return. Haven't our people gone to far away Malaya, Burma and South Africa – crossing the seven seas? Kandy isn't that far. With one leap you can be right there. Ceylon is our neighbour you know”

Plitch Plitch ...

“What work are we supposed do in the plantation?

“Come and see for yourselves. Work is simple. You don't have to toil hard. Even coconuts and Maldive fish are found beneath the tea bushes. What more do you want?

Kangany gargles his throat taking in a mouthful of water.

Palani too feels like chewing a betel, But he refrains from doing so fearing that it would displease the Kangany

“There comes *Vaathy*⁷...”

All turn towards the new comer.

“Where the hell did you go? You’ve kept us waiting so long”

Kangany pretends to be angry. Then he calms down.

“All right - *Vaathy*. Take down the names now.”

Vaathy was a lean, emaciated man. His hair graying, his face unshaven . Clad in a discolored vetty. He sits cross legged on the ground.

“Hm now tell your names. *Vaathy*, write them down” -orders Kangany.

The enlistment begins.

“My name’s *Suppaiah* ...” Removing the shawl from his bare shoulder and tucking it under his armpit and bowing respectfully, a man gives his name.

“What *Varunasalam*⁸ are you” - asks Kangany twisting his moustache with his fingers.

“*Parathapulla*”⁹

“You must be 35 or 36, I think. How many of you are coming?”

“Myself my wife and the two boys *Ramu* and *Laxmanan*”

7. *Vaathy* - School Master

8. *Varunasalam* (Colloquial) - Caste

9. *Parathapulla* - Pariah

“Vaathy, Don’t write Suppaiah. Write the name as Suppu. It’d be easy to call. But the caste must be written correctly. That’s important. Age of course is immaterial. The height should be measured and entered accurately. Suppa, here is the five rupee loan for your family. Put your signature in the paper.

“I’m illiterate Aiyah. How can I write my name. I’ll put my thumb mark.”

“Ok. next person now. Your name?”

“Sandanam”

“Varunasalam?”

“Pallan”

Family after family, their names entered, thumb marks taken in the papers, recruitment goes on full swing.

“Eyi Sinnan why are you standing behind? Come here”

Sinnan goes forward followed by his wife and daughter. Sinnan having a pretty daughter. Kangany was astounded to see such a beauty in his suburban village. Wearing only a saree without an upper garment, her youngness dazzles Kangany. The bulges heaving beneath the saree draped over her shoulder disturbs him.

“Hm” sighs Kangani, his eyes filled with lust. He had three wives at home

“Sinnan, you can wash clothes for the white sire. I’ll get a separate home for you. Your younger brother’s family can wash the labourers clothes.” -Kangany briefs Sinnan without taking his eyes off his daughter.

“Ah ... *Terukkoothu*¹⁰ Sola malai ... come, come this way please”

10. *Terukkoothu* - Street performer

Kangany's enthusiasm bubbles up

Solamalai is a folk artist. A good performer and singer.

"Solamalai you must entertain us. The song you used to sing at *Yama Dharma Rajah's*¹¹ court. I'm reminded of it. Please sing that song for us.

Kangany makes a request looking at Sinnan's daughter.

Solamalai bares his teeth and wriggles uncomfortably. A louse on his head hearing the request stings him instantly.

"Hey! stop scratching your head and start singing"

It's more than a request now. An order. Solamalai couldn't turn it down.

"Between the heavens above

And the earth below

I wield my power supreme

I'll send to Kailas

The pious and the virtuous"

Solamalai sings in his sonorous voice

Kanganiyar carried away to a world of fantasy. He's now a petty king in his petty kingdom. He was on a *thik vijaya*¹² to find out the wants of his subjects. They had gathered to pay him obeisance.

"Mutilated bodies of sinners

thrown to the winds

To feed the hawks"

11. Yamadharman - The messenger of death

12. Thik Vijaya - A royal procession

Solamalai continues singing.

Ramu after attesting his thumb mark on the paper feels as if he was already clad in a silk shirt and vetty. He would buy a time piece with a silver chain in course of time.

Palani and Ramu fall asleep after a hearty dinner of rice and dhal curry. Their mother spent the night sleeplessly in tears.

Invoking the gods and making a vow to their deity and after embracing one another in farewell biddings they commence their journey carrying their bag and baggage like gypsies withdrawn to their fate.

Palani's mother prostrates herself before Kangany almost touching his feet.

"Samy, I'm leaving my children in your custody. Look after them well and bring them back to me."

"Don't worry. They are like my own children. I'll look after them. I promise."

Having walked up to the end of the village folks keep back parting company with the gang.

The gang moves on.

At every few steps Ramu turns back to have a glimpse at his wailing aayah.

These people who had never seen the sea before, having walked a long way and crossing a few miles of water, when they reach the shore of Talai Mannar they feel that they have had enough. Ramu was sick during sea travel and vomiting throughout.

During the sojourn at Tali Mannar Ramu couldn't partake the first meal on Thattapparai - the slab rock.

Exhaustion forced him to fall asleep as he dropped on the shore. Palani lay beside his brother worried about his illness and his aayah whom he had left behind in the village.

The following day at dawn after invoking *Pannamaththu Mariyamma*¹³ to guide them begins their long march from Mannar to the central hills.

Ramu lags behind finding it difficult to keep pace with others. They walked past some villages. Now they had to pass through thick jungles. Kangany had arranged two thappus for this arduous journey. He beckons to the *thappu*¹⁴ beaters. They kindle a fire to heat their thappu. Then they start beating them with the sticks. The thappu beaters now lead the march. The sound of thappu penetrates through the jungle.

Pachamuthu Kizavan sings a folk song to cheer the gang in its onward march. The song narrates the story of Thesingu Raja.

Suddenly they halt in fear on seeing the foot prints of a herd of wild elephants. Kangany prods them to proceed, reassuring them a safe journey.

“The thappu will scare away not only elephants. Even leopards and bears would flee in fear. Don’t be chicken-hearted. Eyi beat the thappu harder than ever. Take long strides and march on

They come across some giant trees standing by a river like *Munis*¹⁵ in meditation. Kangany decides to camp the night under one of those trees. The river roared and flowed in fury. They begin to cook their dinner under the tree. They could

13. Pannamaththu Mariyamma - Goddess Mariyamman of Pannamam
(an old name for Matale)

14. Thappu-tomtom

15. munis - sages

hear the distant cries of wild beasts and the varied sounds of myriad insects in the nearby bushes.

They make a fire with fallen twigs and dry leaves.

Palani carrying his dinner goes and sit beside Ramu who was lying down. His body burns with fever. He speaks incoherently:

“Anna, where is aayah?”

“Aaya will be at home in the village”

“What do you call this tree?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you sit up? Here, have some rice will you?”

I don’t want any thing to eat. Go and give it to aayah.”
- He turns his back to him.

The journey resumes before dawn the following day. Palani carries Ramu on his shoulders. The gang stops every now and then for Palani to catch up with them.

When they sit under a tree for lunch two more men drop down with fever. The march was held up. Ramu’s fever worsens. A few more fall ill. The march was put off for two more days.

Three nights were spent in the jungle. Kangany becomes disconsolate. At day break the following day the sick feel little better except Pachamuttu and Ramu. Kangany tells every one to get ready to continue the journey. Ramu’s aunt *Sinnayi*¹⁶ seeing his bad condition begins to weep. Others were perturbed. No body felt like moving.

“Eyi woman stop wailing. Do you think you are in your father’s land?”

They could see Kangany metamorphosing into a tyrant now.

16. Sinnayi - maternal aunt

Palani was seated beside Ramu who was speechless and motionless. Tears wet palani's cheeks. There's no one beside Pachamuttu Kizavan whose condition was still worse.

Kangani brings some rice in a leaf and water in a clay pot and places them before Ramu and Pachamuttu

"Look here Palani. Once Pachamuthu Kizavan and Ramu feel better, they'll have their meal and hurry to join us. Mean while we shall keep moving. Please get up.

"I'll carry my brother"

"If you are to carry him and walk, every one would drop dead before the gang reaches Kandy. We can't afford to die for your sake"

"Then let me remain with them. Once they come round I'll bring them myself and join you"

"What nonsense are you talking. Do you want to be trampled by elephant and maimed by bears ... eaten up by leopards? Some other Kangany coming with his gang would fetch us your brother and Pachmuuthu. Come on we'll get going.

"How can I leave my brother in the lurch?"

"You don't seem to understand. I'll have to show a head count for the *Coast Advances*¹⁷ I'm given by the whiteman. Already we are short of two. Don't know how many more would be dropped by the way side before we reach Kandy. No point in staring at me like that. Hm Get up. Start moving."

There seemed no response.

"What the hell are you all up to in this wild forest?" yelled Kangany, "Have you forgotten that I have loaned you

17. Coast Advances - A sum of money Kangani received from the planter with which to engage gangs of coolies from the Indian Villages and to pay for their transport.

money. You want all of us to fall a prey to the wild beasts for the sake of one or two men?"

"Famine has driven us to seek a new pasture. We have come all the way not to be mauled, maimed and eaten up by wolves and tigers. Don't be fools. Come along, let's move from here .." intervenes the brother of Kangani's second wife. He's bent on getting a posh new stone house built in the village for his sister.

"Hm.... start moving. Hurry up" – orders Kangany in a commanding voice.

The servile gang begins to move submitting itself to its fate.

"Palani ... get to your feet, we can't leave you behind. What is to happen will happen. We have to take everything on our stride. What's written on ones head cannot be obliterated. Don't worry about your brother. He will follow and catch up with us. He has old Pachamuthu to accompany him, hasn't he?"

Kangani grabs Palani by the arm and pulls him. Kangany's brother- in -la w holds Palani by the scruff of his neck and pushes him forward from behind.

DRIVEN TO THE WOODS

Vanavaasam
PRAVAGHAM - 8
2002

Two strong - limbed men gripped his shoulders and held him tight. Two others from behind twisted his arms and tied them with a rope.

Suppan unable to bear the pain sank on his knees to the ground.

Two men ample to handle a tough guy. Here there were twenty men with cudgels to deal with the meek and weak Suppan.

“Sex crazy rascal He wants to sleep with the neighbour’s wife. Look at the bloody bastard... He wants a woman ... Thu... u... uu...”

Periya Kangany spat on Suppan’s face. Pulling out the time-piece from the inner pocket of his black coat, he looked at the time.

“Hmm ... it’s four thirty now.”

A little away from the front yard of the line, was a cement pedestal, in the middle of which was installed a triangular stone – *Aiyana Saami* – their guardian deity. Three finger- lines of Viputhi drawn across with *sandanam*¹⁸ and *kungumam*¹⁹ pottu over them in the centre. The *trisulam*²⁰ planted behind the pedestal too was smeared with sandanam and kungumam. A discoloured saffron cloth tied to the sulam fluttered in the wind. Three limes pierced on the prongs, their juice mixing with the vermilion kungumam had drawn a bloody trail down the trident.

18. sandanam - Sandal wood paste

19. kungumam - a Vermilian paste

20. trisulam - a trident

The pedestal was their shrine – Aiyandar Kovil.

Aiyandar Saami quite used to sun and rain – drying and soaking wet with the inclement weather like the plantation community itself.

Now and then a coconut is dashed in front of Aiyandar. Even a pooja is performed to him on a festival day. Burning *Sudalai*²¹ during Karthigai night is an annual event observed with devotion and piety by the line-people.

Beyond the pedestal, beside a rock stood a tree branching out to the east providing shade. The rock formed a comfortable seat to sit in majesty and grandeur.

“Another half and hour more.”

-Repeated Periya Kangany rising up, to be heard by Seerangam who was heating his thappu on a fire kindled for the purpose.

The thappu beat was anathema to Mrs. White, the wife of Duncan White, the white superintendent. Only the morning beat of thappu to summon labour gang to the muster ground was allowed in the estate. At all other times thappu was a taboo. But on this occasion White had given special permission on condition, though with reluctance. The thappu should be played only after five in the evening and stopped before 7.00 p.m. – during the time when Mr. Duncan and Mrs. White would be away at the club.

A man pours icy water collected in a clay pot over Suppan’s head and gives him a dig in the rib. “O great man, you are shivering eh ... Shall I get you a *cumbly*²² to drape over?”

Suppan had nothing on his body except the vetty he wore. The cold chilled him to the bone. He shuddered with cold and dread.

21. sudalai - a bonfire

22. cumbly - a blanket or covering of coarse sacking

Aavudaiyappan Pariyari unwrapped his shaving knife which he usually kept rolled up in a piece of old rag and honing it on his left palm, began to give Suppan's head a clean shave.

His full shaven head now shone in the yellow sun.

"*Adidda Thappa!*²³" roared Kangany, swinging his silver-rimmed ebony stick.

Dandanak Dandanak – Thappu beat rent the air.

The men forced Suppan to his feet.

The crowd was trickling in, forming a circle around them.

"Eyi women! Come and pour your urine into this bastard's mouth. Make him drink your piss. That should be the punishment meted out to such sex crazy shits. Bloody scoundrel he needs other men's wives Thu u u....."- Kangany harangued and spat on his face again.

A garland woven with erukkalam flowers was ready to be put round Suppan's neck. A man puts it on Suppan and gives him a pinch on his cheek and looks at the kangany.

Kangany beckons to Seerangan. Thuppu beat suspended for a while. Pressing the thappu hanging from his shoulder to his chest with one hand and raising the other in a gesture to draw attention, Seerangan proclaims:

"O people of the estate. Attention please. Do you know what this fellow has done? This fellow who is dumb as a stone has forcibly had sex with Muniappan's wife. Finding her alone in her line-room this sex maniac had pounced on her and molested the lady he has disgraced womanhood. So according to our age-old custom we have shaven his head"

23. Adidda Thappa - Beat the thappu (tomtom)

The announcement left unfinished, Seerangan resumed playing his thappu, striking it with the too sticks at full blast.

“Dandanak Dandanak Dandanak



Is Suppan capable of doing such a thing?

Would he have ever done this?

The questions boggled the minds of many who had gathered there. Yet, they were silent, the servile lot.

“If it was in my village, I would have pierced him with black and red dots and mounted him on a donkey and taken him on procession for the entire village to see mm ... walk you bugger...”

Kangany stripped Suppan’s vetty off his waist. He was left only with his loin cloth. Ashamed and mortified.

“O God, what have I done ? see, what they are doing me? I’m being punished for a sin I never committed”-mumbled Suppan.

“Mm Move on !” – A tough hand pushed him from behind.

Suppan started moving – hanging his head down.

There were about twenty five men including Kangany and the thappu player – The procession was on.

Dandanak Dandanak ... Dandanak



There was a letter for Suppaiah alias Suppan, from Selam Jillah, Aathur Taluga, Kengavalli Village, Aiyampatty Post. The sender was mother Mariyayi.

Suppan was utterly thrilled and exited. Anxious to know the contents of the letter he hurries with it to Periya Kangany’s house.

Three fourth the people in the estate plantation were illiterate who couldn't read or write even their own names.

Thamaravalli Estate Karungavel Kangany was seated on a stone-slab in the front yard with one leg crossed over the other. He was running his fingers through the loosen lock of his long wet hair that parted on either side of his back reaching upto his waist and looked like the out stretched wings of a large black bird about to take to the air.

A hot water bath and basking in the evening sun were Karungavel Kangany's daily pleasures.

Smoke rose from the damp fire- logs in the burning hearth in which was a cauldren, wafting through the air and filling the yard.

Eyi..... Panchavarnam, tell Sellayi to sprinkle some water and put out the fire. The smoke irritates my eyes.

"Sellayi is pounding rice for thosai." Passing this piece of information , Panchavarnam attends to the hearth herself. Her silver bangles and anklets jingled as she was sprinkling water on the burning logs.

Water dripping from Panchavarnam's loosened tress had drawn wet lines on her saree- end that- covered her back. A sweet, smell of frankinsence permeated the yard as she came and receded as she withdrew.

Panchavarnam's nose - stud sparkled in the sun. Her entire ears were covered with various ornaments – *koppu* and *onnapu* on the upper ears and *thandatti*²⁴ on the lobes. She didn't wear any upper garment. The saree- end drawn over one shoulder covered the upper part of her body. Panchavarnam looked at least ten years younger than Karunagavel Kangany. She was his second wife. His first wife and their two children were in India.

24. *koppu*, *onnapu*, *thandatti* - ear - ornaments

Here he had Pachavarnam to look after him.

Karungavel Kangany twisting his upturned goat-horn moustache with his fingers turned towards Suppan

Suppan held out the letter to him reverently with both hands and pleaded “Aiyah should read this letter for me”

“A letter from the village, I suppose... Hm.... Pass the spittoon this way.”

Its was a known secret that all letters to the estate workers were first read on the sly by Karunugavel Kangani to spy on his potential enemies. Then he pasted them back with grains of cooked rice. Once they were delivered to the addressees they brought them back to him again to be read out for them.

Kangani opens Suppan’s letter and reads out struggling with the characters:

“To Maharayaraya siri Suppaiah my beloved son, The apple of my eye,

My self and our kith and kin are keeping fine here. I pray to our guardian deities Pechiyamman and Marutha Veeran day and night for your health and wellbeing.

I have made a vow to sacrifice a goat to Marutha Veeran when you come here....”

Clearing his throat and spitting into the spittoon Kangany makes a passing remark:

“Indian education is real education. with what a flourish they write.”

“As it was his second reading he struggles less with the characters this time. He continues:

“I’m in receipt of the amount of rupees ten you sent me through Maruthamuthu. Your *athai*s²⁵ daughter Ponni has

25. athai - father's sister

attained. You should have been here to put up the *Kutchu*²⁶ as *murai maman* as it was our custom. Anyway I got your Sinnayi's son to do it on your behalf. I prepared a special feast and gave them which was my part of the duty. *Sadangu*²⁷ is fixed for 10th of *Panguni*²⁸

“Tell Kanganiyar and come home on leave to marry Ponni and take her with you to Kandy Seemai. I'm also very anxious to see you. You always remain in my eye.

“Then about other matters. We are informed that your *sithappa*²⁹ *Rangan* who went to join the army was killed in the war. Rangan's wife has eloped with her brother- in- law Palaniyappan to Poonachimalai

“We have had no rain for a long time. We are unable to cultivate the land. To make things worse, the only cow we had, had bloated and died after eating some poisonous plant.

“The roof of our house has to be thatched again. The walls need white washing ...”

The letter goes on.

Athai's daughter Ponni was a honey - skinned girl. She used to join Suppan when he went cattle - grazing. The grown up Ponni ought to be attractive now in *pavaadai*³⁰ and *thavani*³¹.

Ponni often came in Suppan's dreams. The letter had kindled his love for her all the more. He wanted to go home to see aayah, to marry Ponni and bring her with him.

26. *Kutchu* - a temporary hut put up to keep the girl in seclusion for a period of time when she attains puberty.

27. *sadangu* - a ceremony held to celebrate a girl's attainment of puberty

28.. *Panguni* - twelfth month of the Tamil calendar

29. *sithappa* - father's younger brother

30. *pavaadai* - a long skirt

31. *thavani* - a shawl

Fortunately Suppan had put by some money.

Every month when he collected his wages, he gave ten rupees to Kangany. This had been going on for four years. Apart from what he had withdrawn to send home now and then, a handsome amount ought to be remaining – at least three hundred rupees.

He should buy a saree for aayah, a saree and jacket-piece or two for Ponni. A vetty for himself. He could manage the wedding expenses with the balance.

“Why are you blinking? Be out with it, what do you want?” asks Kangany in his usual authoritative tone

“I must pay a visit home” says Suppan.

“So you want to get married?”

“Aayah has written me to come home, hasn’t she?”

“Suppa, why do you want to squander your money? You know I’m going to India for Aadi Festival. I’ll bring athai’s daughter for you. We can have your wedding here. Last time when I went didn’t I bring Sekappi and wed her to Muniyandi? This also can be arranged the same way.”

“Aiyah, please pardon me. I’m longing to see aayah. She’s coming in my dream all the time.”

“You’re longing to see aayah or athai’s daughter?”

“Aiyah, please kindly speak to *periya dorai*³² and buy me a ticket to go to India and return. I also need the money I have been giving you.

“Ey! What rubbish are you talking. What money of yours I have? Wait... wait.... we’ll go into your accounts and check up?”

Kangany’s assistant sinna kangany Muniyandi carrying the toddy brimming with white foam enters the house .

32. Periya dorai - Super intendent

It had been Muniyadi's daily routine to fetch toddy for Karungavel Kangani from the bordering Sinhalese village.

The three pictures on the wall caught Suppan's eyes - Mahatma Gandhi, Subas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru. Beside the pictures, on a deer horn embedded to the wall, hung a whip and a black coat.

The whip - *Nagasthiram*³³ with which Periya Kangany made workers to fall into line. An *asthiram*³⁴ with which he disciplined those who dared to challenge him.

Kanganियar came out with the account book and sat on a stool. Thumbing the pages he started reading in a mellifluous tone.

Karuppan Muthan Sevanaandy ... Palani
Veeraiyee Vellachi ... Odayaan, Kuppachi ... Suppan ..
Suppan - There it is. Suppan. Listen. There's a balance of sixty rupees left on your account. That's all your money I'm left with.

Suppan felt as if he was struck with a club on his head.



Dandanak Dandanak

Thappu beat throbbed and vibrated in the air.

Men, woman and children in the lower division came out of their hovels to watch the passing procession.

The blasting sound drove fear and terror into them.

The procession passes them.



Kangany flares up "Ey! You think I'm a swindler? You think I'm showing you false account? You think it's with your money I'm building a mansion in the village."

33. Nagasthiram - a mythical weapon

34. asthiram - a weapon

Then he calms darts. "Suppa do you remember when I went to your village to engage labour gang for the estate there was an out break of cholera. It claimed the lives of your father and elder brother one after the other. I gave your aayah twenty rupees then. Here take this spittoon. Go wash it and bring. You find water there in the cauldron."

Kangany's look dart between Suppan and the whip hanging on the deer horn embedded to the wall.

"Have you washed the spittoon? Bring and leave it here. Listen carefully now. I gave your aayi ten rupees when I was engaging you. Then it totals up to thirty rupees. Deducting the interest on that money from whatever you've been giving me I've kept the balance. If I hadn't brought you to the estate you'd be collecting goat- droppings in the village, you understand"

Sellayi who usually came to do house work there was taking her leave of him: "Aiyah , I'm going."

As she passes him he glances at her bulging back and heaves a sigh.



The procession now nears the hill where new tea seeds were being planted.

"I should have remained in the village without coming here. It had been my fate written on my head." Suppan mumbles to himself.

This very spot had been an animal infested jungle three months ago. Clearing it, constructing bunds to stop soil erosions they had toiled and fashioned it with the sweat of their brow.

"Ey ... bore the hole in a straight line ... " going round inspecting the work Muniyandy Kangany approaches Suppan.

“Suppa, run home and bring my pot of porridge from my wife.”

“Ok, aiyah”

“Don’t go along the cart-road. Periya dorai might be coming that way. Take the short cut.”

Suppan was panting when he reached Muniyandy’s house. He had run the whole distance. “Sekappi akka!” he calls, pushing the unlatched door to get in.

*Kadavule*³⁵

Sekappy Akka naked on the floor with out- stretched legs and Periya Kangany over her. his black coat and vetty lay in a corner. Kangany turned back. His reddened eyes were emitting fire. Suppan shuddered with fear. In place of Karungavel Kangany, Suppan saw Madasamy his guardian god. Fear ran down his spine.

Suppan turned back and took to his heels. He sees Periya dorai, the white superintendent trotting along the cart- road on horse back with a pipe in his mouth. Selambaram the horse man was holding the bridle-strap and leading it towards the hill.

Suppan climbs down the drain and hides himself. This could be a good excuse to give Sinna Kangany. “I saw Periya dorai coming. So I couldn’t make it to the lines to bring the porridge.”

But Sekappi akka was there before him.

With hair dishevelled ... sobbing and screaming ... beating her breast and performing her theatrics.

In the evening Karungavel Kanganaay was present before the superintendent. Folding his arms after giving the white superintendent a salute, he makes his complaint:

“Sir, Suppan sneaked in when Sekappi was alone in her line room ands sexually molested her.”

35. Kadavule - O God!

“Does Suppan owe any money to the estate ?” the superintendent asks turning towards the head clerk.

“No, Sir”

Head clerk was an adept at answering such questions without referring to the check roll.

“Kangany, you are the man who brought him to the estate. You are free to deal with him.”

The white superintendent never minced his words. He was a task master who always meant business.



The procession halts as it reaches the end of the estate. Bordering the dense forest stretching for two miles beyond which was the sinhala village.

Bending down by the side of the cross road Kangany scoops up some earth in his palm and burns a Karppuram on it. Then he calls his men to pledge their allegiance to him.

“We all belong to the same caste, but Suppan from a different caste betrayed me. But I know for certain that you wouldn’t do such a thing. Even so you should promise that you wouldn’t go against me.”

One by one the men pledge their loyalty to Karungavel Kangany. Karppuram burns out.

He turns to Suppan now.

Ey Suppa! Didn’t you tell the line people that I have robbed you of your money.

“No, Aiyah.”

“You told the people that in the upper division half the workers had withdrawn from my check roll and had enlisted themselves in the white Dorais check roll. And you instigated others to follow suit, didn’t you? You told them that if they did

so they don't need to pay me the 'pence money'³⁶ I collected from each labourer, didn't you? You conspired against me with a few others to rob me of my 'pence money' didn't you?"

"No, Aiyah! I never said any such things I never conspired against you.

"Don't lie you bugger. Let this be a lesson to any one who dares to go against me."

Karungavel Kangany calls for the whip and flogs Suppan giving vent to all his venom and violent anger.

Suppan was screaming and writhing in pain. The whip lashes draw lines on his back with trails of blood. He falls at Kangany's feet begging for mercy.

"Untie him!" Orders Karunagavel Kangany, having exhausted himself.

Dusk was falling and there were signs of rain.

"Can anything happen in my estate without my knowledge? Will any one dare to stop my 'pence money'? If you set foot on the estate again I'll have your alternate limbs dismembered as it was done to Marutha Veeran and bury you under my feet. You understand? If you value your life vanish from here. Go. Run for you life. Get lost."

-Periya Kangany Karungavel raises his whip again.

36. pence money-a commission collected by the kangamy from the monthly wages of each labourer whose name was in his check roll.

KINSHIP

Uravugal
Anjali - Malaiyaha Malar 1971.

Aayah never imagined that her son would ever speak to her like that.

Her own husband wouldn't speak to her in that manner when he lived. True, they had frictions between them, But they were forgotten the very next moment. Those trifles left no traces. Even when there had been exchange of strong words between them they never overstepped their limit.

What her son spoke that morning were not words to be dismissed or forgotten easily:

"Kizattu Mundam³⁷, eat what is given and huddle yourself in a corner without being a nuisance. If you can't do that go and beg in the street or give your neck to a passing vehicle at Bo tree junction. At least the government will be spared of its free measure of rice ..."

What had she done after all, for her son to howl and throw such abusive words at her so early in the morning.

Kizavi³⁸ lay curled up in a corner by the wall of that four foot verandah. The verandah itself wouldn't bear that January cold. How could her worn out cumbly or her withering body bear it? She knew very well that there's no room inside that line-kambra where her son, his wife and their six children lay huddled together.

She never blamed any body. She didn't want to be a burden to her son. Whether it was wet or cold she slept in the verandah. A stray dog that sought shelter on that verandah was her only companion during the night.

37. Kizattu Mundam - old hag

38. Kizavi - old woman

At dawn her daughter-in-law as usual in a hurry to get to the parade was trying to collect the tea basket that hung on the wall in the verandah happened to step on her. If she had been thoughtful enough that there was a soul lying there curled up in the cold this accident could have been averted. But it was her indifference. The Kizavi didn't matter to her at all.

“What daughter, Don't you see me lying on the verandah? You trample me as if I'm a dog” - Kizavi grumbled in annoyance, being disturbed from her sleep.

That was enough for her daughter-in-law.

“What? You said I'm blind? How happy you would be if I went blind ... and you call me a bitch” Daughter-in-law bared her fangs for a fight.

“What daughter What have I said after all.... Why are you trying to pick a quarrel?”

“So you call me a quarrelsome womanand I'm the one who quarrels and makes the neighbourhood laugh at usrunning between the lower line and the upper line from this son's house to that son's” the biting sarcasm of the daughter-in-law. It was then that her son entered the melee and uttered those unbearable words taking his wife's side.

Her son was so liberal with his words because he was feeding her. She understood him well. Enough was enough.

Her eldest son also had chased her from his home for the same reason.

Mother-Son relationship too are woven by economic strands in our social fabric?

How could she stay there any more? She folded up an old selai which was her only possession and climbed down the steps.

Her son didn't bother to ask where she was going. Only her five year old grand son seemed to have some feeling for her.

“*Appayee*³⁹ Where are you going?” -he asked

“Somewhere to drop dead” -Kizavi walked away.

“Kizavi is so proud and sensitive. She can’t sand us now..... going to her eldest son again forgetting the treatment she received from them. We’ll see how long it lasts this time.” Jabbering away the daughter-in-law walks to the muster ground with her tea basket hanging behind from a rope resting on her head.

The short cut to the upper lines lay before Kizavi like a creeper winding between the tea bushes. The stray dog that followed her all this while, stopped and started running in the opposite direction.

Kizavi was not out of her senses to go back again to her elder son who lived in the upper division. It was only six months since he had chased her away in similar fashion.

Having lost her husband Kizavi was on the road within six months. She never expected such shabby treatment from her two sons. Her husband had left enough Jewellery on her neck, ears and limbs. That alone would suffice for her survival.

In fact it was by pawning a piece of that jewellery that her two sons met the funereal expenses of their father

Although they had two sons, one living in the upper division and the other in the lower division, Kizavi and her old man lived alone.

Once father’s burial was over the youngest son said,

“Aaya, how can you live here alone. Now that appa is gone, you need some one to took after you. I have no heart to leave you and go. Why don’t you come and stay with us?”

No sooner had he finished the eldest son started,

39. Appayee - grandmother

“Thamby, you have a big family. With your wife and six children you have seven mouths to feed. Let Aaya come and stay with me. I can look after her.

*Sinnavan*⁴⁰ didn't like anna's tone.

“*Anna*,⁴¹ why do you say that? We are not going to light a separate hearth. We can manage to share our meals with her. You don't have to worry.

Aayah was greatly moved by the affection and love showered on her by her two sons. Kizavi told Sinnavan:

“I'll stay with periyavan. You have children to look after. Don't get disappointed. I'll visit you now and then. I'm not going to live long. If I spent ten days there and ten days here, my days would be over.....”

Any way aayah, don't forget that you have a son who cares for you. That's all I have to say” finished her younger son abruptly.

So she went to live with periyavan first, in the upper division. Hardly a month had passed when there was a proposal for the elder son's one and only daughter. Every thing was finalised. He had to find money to order jewellery for his daughter. He didn't know what to do. One evening he broached the subject with aayah.

“Aayah, you know that your grand daughter's wedding is coming up next month. I don't have a red cent with me. I tapped a number of chaps, but people have their own difficulties...”

“You can't have a grown up girl too long in the house. You have to wed her to some one. Times are bad.”

*Periyavan*⁴² was very much pleased.

40. Sinnavan - Younager fellow

41. Anna - elder brother

42. periyavan - elder fellow

“What aayah says is correct. That’s why I want to hurry up with the wedding, But money is the problem. If I have an ‘At Home’ I am sure to get about five or six hundred. I have been to umpteen number of ‘At Home’ houses. I also must get my due in return. This is the first time I’m going to have a function at my place.”

“Yes son, she is your only daughter. You should have a grand function.... There shouldn’t be any short comings.

“Aayah don’t misunderstand me. If you can give me your jewellery I’ll pawn them and spend on the wedding. The very next day after the wedding I can redeem it with the ‘At Home’ money and promptly return it to you.”

Kizavi removed all her jewellery and gave him without another word.

The wedding was a grand one, but the ‘At Home’ collection was not up to his expectation. Further he had expenses even after the wedding for days.

Not only was his ‘At Home’ money exhausted, but he had run in to debts. Kizavi didn’t bother him about her jewellery. She knew his difficulties. He too comfortably forgot about it.

Months passed. Those who lent him money were at his door now. He began to worry. He got irritated and upset over the slightest thing. He started grumbling:

“Keeping some one at home and feeding her for life is not so simple. Do money grow on trees? Where do I go for money?” -That was the beginning.

Passing indirect hints turned in to hurling invectives directly at her.

He was under the influence of liquor one day. His wife hadn’t gone to work due to her illness. That was quite an excuse for him to pick a quarrel.

“With one man’s earning I have to feed every one in this house.”

His wife didn’t appreciate the remark.

“If you have anything, tell me directly. Don’t pass hints at people. I kept away from work because I was ill Why should it hurt you?”

“You keep your bloody mouth shut. I don’t mean you. I’m referring to the one who is eating out of me and taking my life away.”

Aayha understood. The shaft was shot at Kizavi.

“Why do you say that? I came to stay with you because you persuaded me. If I’m a burden to you, tell me. I’ll be off. If I had the jewellery at least I could sell it and spend the rest of my days without being burden to anyone.

“Ey..... what big jewellery you are talking of.... as if it costs tens of thousand of rupees. A pauper’s jewellery. You won’t get anything more than five or six hundred for it...”

“You don’t worry about it’s value. You get me back my jewellery. I can look after my self.”

“Oh..h...h Kizattu Maharani needs jewellery to adorn herself. You need jewellery at your age.....”

“It’s not fair to talk like this”

“Fairness My foot. You’re lecturing on fairness to me” -He got the devil in him.

“You’ve grown fat on the food I was giving you. You won’t get your jewellery from me. Gogo and tell the courts. File a case against me if you can. Tell ’em I’ve taken your jewellery and not returned. We’ll see what happens.”

In his drunkenness he grabbed her by the arm, dragged her and pushed her out of the house and banged the door on her.

That's how Kizavi ended up at the lower division.

Thamby was indignant when he heard the story. He wanted to go immediately and settle scores with Anna, but it was Aayi who stopped him.

"Don't go and quarrel with Periyavan. After all he's your elder brother"

Her younger son fumed, "Damn that beggar: Aayi I'll look after you. You are my *deivam*⁴³"

A week passed. Sinnavan asked. "Aayi, how much money do you have on your provident fund. Where are the chits given you by the head clerk?"

"There should be some six hundred odd rupees. I have all the chits with me."

"You'll have to withdraw that money Aayah, or you'll have problems later on.

"Then tell the head clerk and get it withdrawn" Aayi's words were as sweet as honey to her son.

The next day dawned and Sinnavan went and stood before the head clerk. Agreeing to give the clerk what was 'his due' he took Aayah to put her signature in relevant forms and waited eagerly to receive the provident fund.

He was really fortunate. As some workers were leaving to India their accounts were being worked out to settle payments. Along came Kizavi's provident fund in a month's time.

With that money Sinnavan bought his wife a necklace for four hundred rupees. Then came Deepavali. Should anything be said about the balance money?

Deepavali was over. Kizavi's provident fund was gone.

43. *deivam* - goddess

Kizavi was left with only her two saree to boast of as her possession. She was now a burden to sinnavan as well.

A burden was something to be rid of, wasn't it? That's what he did exactly to Aayi.

Kizavi went to the upperline to meet the union *Thalaivar*.⁴⁴ Thalaivar knew her problems. He didn't know what action he should take. Only thing he could do was to speak to the estate superintendent and find her accommodation in the creche. Some one or other out of pity gave her a roti or some rice. She had a meal or two a day. On her fourth day she was down with fever. Estate doctor said she had Malaria. He informed the superintendent and got her sent to the town hospital in the estate lorry.

Thalaivar informed both her sons that their aayi was in hospital. That didn't bother any of them.

Two days later there was a telegram from the General Hospital informing the estate administration that the old woman had passed away.

Thalaivar, after ordering a coffin on estate account, went to the hospital with ten or fifteen chaps.

Kizavi's kith and kin-her eldest son and his wife, his younger son, his wife and their children – were there at the gate.

Seeing the Thalaivar, the eldest son rushed to him. Embracing him he broke down and said,

“Thalaivaraiyah, my Aayi loved me so much. I was dearer than her own life to her. Now she has died and gone to *Kailas*⁴⁵. It's my duty to perform the rites and give her a befitting funeral. She must have *thamukku*⁴⁶ and Clarinet to

44. Thalaivar - leader

45. Kailas - The abode of lord Siva

46. thamukku - a drum

play the funeral music. She must be given a decent burial. I must take the body home. Please explain it to sinnavan. You only can convince him.”

Before he could finish, the younger fellow got worked up, “Thalaivaraiyah, I’m not going to listen to anyone. She was living with me till a week ago. She’s my deivam. I must have her funeral at my house.

Thalaivar didn’t know what to say. Neither sinnavam no periyavam seem to give in.

Time was running out.

The younger fellow’s wife took her husband to a side and whispered, “Why are you making a fuss? Let annan take the body home. Why do you want to quarrel over a dead body?”

His face reddened with fury.

“You keep quiet..... Foolish woman..... You don’t seem to understand. The coffin and transport are freely provided by the estate.

“We don’t need to spend anything more than ten or twenty rupees. How long have I been living in the estate? How many weddings, sadangus and funerals have I attended? How am I going to recover the money I have spent on them. If I take the body home the ‘At Home’ money pouring in from our three divisions alone would exceed three hundred. Besides think of the number of *Kodichchelai*⁴⁷ that would fall on Kizavi’s body?”

His wife had no reply.

47. Kodichchelai - A new sari spread over a coffin as a pall

CURRY LEAVES

Curry Veppilaigal
TAMILAMUDU 1970.

“Conductor Aiyah sent me to fetch you at once.”

-Pachamuthu had just returned from the hill which stood on the edge of the plantation where he had been after work, to cut ‘gilricidia’ leaves, and was tying them in to bunches and hanging them from the cross beam to feed his goats when he heard the call.

Coming out of the cattle-shed he sees conductor Aiyah’s servant boy waiting for him.

“Ok, boy, let’s go” said Pachamuthu and made only three or four steps forward when his wife emerged from their line- room facing the shed.

“Are you going then? Amma also reminded me in the noon to send you there. Don’t know why?” -she said

Not only Pachamuthu but his wife as well was delighted that conductor Aiyah had sent for him.

Pachamuthu walking to Aiyah’s bungalow, quickened his steps in the descending darkness wondering why Aiyah wanted to see him.

Aiyah awaited him at the door.

Pachamuthu removed the piece of cloth he wore round his head as a turban, tucked it under his armpit in salutation and stood at a distance in obeisance, bending in two.

“Why do you stand there Pachamuthu? Do come in.”

Aiyah only didn’t hold him by the hand and drag him; but his tone was intimate and pally with a pressing need.

“It’s Ok *Aiyah*⁴⁸, I’ll remain here” said Pachamuthu with folded arms in a servile attitude.

Conductor Aiyah walked up to him and holding him by the hand led him through the front door of the bungalow straight to the kitchen.

Pachamuthu knew very well that Aiyah never entertained labourers or coolies into his bungalow. If at all he had any dealings with them he made them stand outside the door at a distance and dispensed with them.

Pachmuthu wondered whether it was all a dream.

Why do you feel so uncomfortable Pachamuthu? Take your seat. No... no.... not on the floor. There ... sit on that plank.

However much Aiyah persuaded him to sit on a plank he could n’t do it in the presence of conductor Aiyah. Wouldn’t it be disrespectful? - he thought.

What a nice man Aiyah is - with a heart full of human kindness.

They’re very hospitable too. Conductor Aiyah’s wife served him with plain tea in a coconut shell and a bit of sugar in a tiny piece of paper.

Pouring the sugar in to the hollow of his right palm he licked it with his tongue and had a sip from the coconut shell he held in his right palm while Conductor Aiyah broached the subject.

“You know, my eldest daughter is getting married next week. It has come up all of a sudden. We finalised matters only yesterday. We have barely a week for everything. The bridegroom is from a big family. So we have to have a grand wedding.”

48. Aiyah - A respectable way of addressing someone considered superior in rank

Pachamuthu blowing into the hot plain tea and sipping it quietly was all ears.

“Yes, the function has to be a grand one in keeping with our status. A big pandal has to be put up to welcome the guests.”

The word pandal aroused Pachamuthu’s interest.

“Pachamuthu, you are the right person to do it. I am pinning my hope on you. You are skilled in the art of paper decorations too, Aren’t you?”

Pachamuthu’s bubbling enthusiasm loosened his tongue.

“Pandal with the image of a parrot ... or makara thorna with two yalis or one in the shape of a horse chariot... which one you prefer, tell me Sir? I’ll do a tip top job.”

Pachamuthu really enjoyed erecting pandols with elaborate designs and figures. He’s an adept in it.

Conductor Aiyah had seen pandols put up by Pachamuthu at a number of weddings and celebrations in and around the estate on several occasions. He appreciated his skill and workmanship.

“Pachamuthu, didn’t I tell you I relied on you? You can have two more chaps to assist you. You don’t have to sacrifice your work hours. You can come in the evenings and do the pandol. That would do.

“Don’t worry Sir. I’ll do as you please. I can finish it in record time”

“Good, that’s what I want. You needn’t sacrifice your plantation work. Besides, you are a familied man. I’ll not allow anyone to ruin himself.”

“I know you are very concerned of me. But you don’t have to worry so much, Sir. Leave it to me. I’ll do a thorough job.”

“Yes I know you’re very capable. But I should remind you that we have to fight against time. So start work tomorrow evening itself without fail. If you want a chew of betel for the way Amma will help you with it” Aiyah gave Pachamuthu a friendly pat on his back.

What a magnanimous man our conductor Aiyah is. Pachamuthu felt as if he was on top of the world.

He borrowed a piece of burning log to light his way and walked home swinging it in the air.

There may be those who didn’t know conductor Selvarajah, but every one knew his bungalow-the conductor’s bungalow. It was the first bungalow to come up in that village. Selvarajah did not work in the same estate. He worked elsewhere in an estate near Matale. He bought his piece of land near here because he fell for the rural surrounding and have built this bungalow.

Pachamuthu was a labourer who worked in the estate bordering on Conductor Selvarajah’s land. He had exchanged smiles with conductor Selvarajah once or twice. That’s all. He had no dealings with him.

“What a remarkable man conductor Aiyah is.” thought Pachamuthu. In spite of his fabulous wealth he’s very humble. “He held my hand and took me in to his bungalow. He offered me a seat in the kitchen. His wife entertained me with tea. He even gave a pat on my back. What nice people they are”

Pachamuthu walked swiftly swaying the burning log in the air.

Pachamuthu’s wife was elated when he told her why Aiyah had summoned him.

“We must put aside all other work and help Aiyah.” Both husband and wife decided unanimously.

Pachamuthu found four more chaps to assist him and started work on the pandol the very next day.

He went every evening to conductor Aiyah's premises after work and returned home only late in the night.

"The pandol is certainly going to be a great attraction. Every body is sure to talk about it. Aiya had even said that he would install a generator to illuminate it with coloured serial bulbs. I am using new patterns and designs to catch the eye" He bragged about it to his wife when he returned home every night. He was proud of his craftsmanship.

Only two days more for the wedding.

Two lion figures on either side of the entrance with their raised fore legs and bouquets of flowers sticking out of their mouths would be marvelous – he thought.

He had seen such two yalis on the big chariot in which Mariyamman went round the streets of Matale during Theru Festival. He went to Alagan who lived in the next estate to borrow the mould. Bringing it home he spread his bed cloth on the verandah, placed the cardboard on it, fixed the mould to it and started cutting the figures using his deft fingers with great dexterity.

Pachamuthu was surprised when his wife told him that Banda Mudalali had refused to give them a loaf of bread on tick for dinner. Pachamuthu wouldn't believe his ears. Banda Mudalali had never refused him anything before. He stopped his work to go and verify himself.

Pachamuthu regularly supplied firewood to Banda Mudalali's boutique for which Mudalali daily deducted five rupees from his account.

A couple of weeks ago when Banda Mudalali's goat bloated and died after eating withered seetha rubber leaves he gifted the dead body to Pachamuthu. The goat weighed

thirty pounds. Any one else in Banda Mudalali's position would have made good money by selling its flesh hiding the fact that it was carrion. That's what Pachamuthu exactly did later with the carcass was altogether a different story.

Pachamuthu held Banda Mudalali in good regard.

Pachamuthu had now reached Banda Mudalali's boutique

"What Mudalali, you have not given my wife bread on credit.

Banda Mudalali stared at Pachamuthu who stood before his counter.

"Didn't you promise to supply fire wood to my boutique daily? For the last five days you've not brought firewood. I have no firewood for my hearth"

Pachamuthu now understood the reason for Banda Mudalali's anger.

"I am terribly sorry Mudalali. Just bear with me for two more days. After that you'll have your regular supply"

"I need firewood tomorrow."

"Not tomorrow. I've got work at the wedding house"

Banda Mudalali's patience wore out. He yelled at him to vanish from there.

Pachamuthu returned home in disappointment.

Banda Mudalali was really angry with him. He couldn't get things from him on credit anymore. Besides, his part time job of supplying firewood to his boutique was gone.

But Pachamuthu wasn't bothered much. His mind was preoccupied with the pandal that was to be completed for conductor Aiyah's daughter's wedding. It's more important to him than supplying firewood to Banda Mudalali's boutique. How could he let down conductor Aiyah?

“Aiyah came to see how the work was progressing. He was highly taken up. He asked me how much I would require for my work. How to talk business with him? I didn’t ask for anything. Else where I could have demanded fifty or sixty. He gave me a five rupee note and said that I’ll be well looked after once my work is completed.”

Pachamuthu told his wife and held out the five rupee note to her.

“What? you received only this paltry sum for toiling night after night?” she asked disappointedly.

“Don’t be disheartened. Money is not everything. It’s people that matter. Aiyah won’t let me down. He’ll really give me a handsome amount. Wait and see how Aiyah is going to treat us at the wedding”

- He consoled his wife.

Not that he didn’t know his work on the pandol should have brought him at least forty rupees by now.

“All the big people would be present at the wedding. We must go well dressed.”

When he was telling his wife he suddenly realized he didn’t have a good vetty and shirt to wear for the occasion. He made a bee-line to the upperline where Sannasi lived. Sannasi always had a stock of four or five shirts and vettys. Whenever Pachamuthu needed something special to wear to go on an urgent journey or so it is to Sannasi that he went.

Having arranged for a shirt and vetty with Sannasi he proceeded to conductor Aiyah’s house.

The place was lit up with petromax. The pandal which was almost complete shone in the light. The decoration with tender coconut leaves remained to be done. He intended to cut down leaves that afternoon, But he couldn’t find the time for it. He can’t put it off till the next day. It would be rather late.

He climbed a coconut tree in the pitch dark getting some one to flash a torch for him. He had felled the leaves and was climbing down. Only another five feet or so to reach the ground. His grip slackened and he fell. Although he wasn't hurt badly a stone lying on the ground cut his knee and it was bleeding profusely. Everyone got scared.

“Don't make a fuss. It's only a cut,” he said. He chewed a betel leaf with arecanut and chunnam and applied the pulp on the wound. Bandaging it with a piece of rag cloth he resumed his work on the pandal.

When he returned home it was past midnight.

It was the wedding day. Mukoortham was at noon. The wedding was to take place at Matale Amman Kovil. The reception would be at the residence in the evening. All had already left to Matale in the morning itself. But Pachamuthu couldn't go to the temple. The pandal had to be given its finishing touch. Other decorations too had to be attended to. All work had to be completed before the bride and the bride groom returned from the kovil. So Pachamuthu remained back starting his final round early morning itself. By the time he finished everything it was 3.00 p. m. He returned home and went for a bath.

When Pachamuthu set out to the wedding house, clad in his borrowed vetty and shirt, with his wife it was past six six o'clock.

The massive Pandal – Pachamuthu's master piece - was sure to attract every body's attention. He would be received with encomiums and applauses. Conductor Aiyah would greet him with a warm welcome and reward him for his grand work. It's going to be the happiest moments of his life – thought Pachamuthu.

The Pandal with Pachamuthu's art work and elaborate designs adorned with multi-colored serial bulbs shone bright,

colorful and brilliant. It was like an entrance to a fairy land. Guests clad in nylon, nylex, terrelina, tweed – coat, suit-what not. They were roaring with laughter, rollicking in fun and revelry.

The loudspeaker blaring at full blast.

Pachamuthu couple halted before the Pandol to have a good look at it before they passed under it. Looking around, outside the pandol to the west in a corner they saw some dogs feasting on the remnants thrown away with used Plantain leaves. The curry leaves sticking in the plantain leaves gleamed in the dazzling light.

Poor curry leaves that added flavour and taste to the sumptuous feast!

Pachamuthu and his wife passed through the pandol and stopped outside the reception hall.

Conductor Aiyah emerging from within saw the couple and rushed towards them.

Oh! Was he coming to receive them?

Grabbing Pachamuthu by the arm Aiyah dragged him to a side and whispered to him in suppressed anger and disgust.

“What Pachamuthu, you have come at the wrong time. The reception is only for the V. I . P’s and staff members. I haven’t extended invitation to any labourers. Please go from here without causing any unpleasantness. If you come tomorrow evening you can have something from the left overs”

Conductor Aiyah moved away from him to welcome some very important person who had just arrived.

Pachamuthu was shocked. He stood there staring at the pandol he had put up for Aiyahs daughter’s wedding.

The automatic bulbs were winking at him.

KODICHCHELAI

VIRAKESARI
20. 01. 1977

He struggled hard to guard himself against the shafts of cold that pierced him. Folding himself into three he drew his entire body into his sarong using it as an armour. All this attempts in vain he shivered still.

A quiet night. The moonlight creeping through the window fell on his daughter Anjalai and his grand son. Both were huddled together in sleep. In the gleaming moonlight she looked a slide on a moviscreen. And her son whose shorts slid down his knee – naked – A tiny curved piece torn from the moon.

The sunlight leaking through the holes of the tin roof dotted the walls with light. On the clothline by the wall hung two tomtoms and a rolled up goat skin.

Nadesan couldn't sleep. His heart was heavy with grief, thinking of his daughter and his grand son.



He spent his entire earnings on his daughter's wedding – buying her jewellery and getting up a glamorous function with loudspeaker and all. His son-in-law was all right. Nothing to complain about him until they had a child.

When his daughter came home a month after child birth, with her child and without her husband, Nadesan was puzzled. He took her back to her husband's house to seek justice. Only then he knew the true nature of his son-in-law. He was not the one to be coaxed and cajoled. So he brought his daughter and child back. Later when it reached their ears that her husband had taken another woman and runaway to Vavuniya, the news didn't bother them much.

This happened ten years ago.

Anjalai and her child were never a burden to her father. She had the guts to face life. She had a tapping knife to eke out a living. Although she didn't earn enough she managed to have her name entered in the check roll to get her wages.

She went to tap rubber regularly till she fell ill one day.

She was bed-ridden for a month. She recovered from her illness, but she couldn't work like before. When she climbed the hill to tap rubber again her limbs and face swelled. She tried the hand medicine at home, then she went to native physicians and finally to the Government Dispensary for English medicine.

When her swelling subsided a little Nadesan brought a *Kodangi* home who boasted he could communicate with spirits and cure mysterious and deadly diseases. His mantras, yantras and spirit-healing bore no results on her. Anjali wasn't bed-ridden any more, but she had no strength to work.

In spite of her ailments she managed go to work four or five days a month. But for the last three months she couldn't go to work at all. So her father went to the hill to tap rubber besides the weeding he did on contract.

The talk spread that the Government was going to take over the estate. Nadesan didn't know what to do. One day a loudspeaker tied to a vehicle went round blaring out the announcement that the Honourable Minister himself was coming in person to take over the estate. Posters were displayed everywhere heralding the minister's arrival.

The Honourable Minister came on a motorcade led by police Jeeps and motorbikes. Many big guys disembarked from luxury vehicles. Nadesan looked for the Minister. He was surprised when some one pointed to him a person dressed in national. He was totally disappointed because he had a

different picture of a Minister in his mind with all the regalia of a Rajapart Character in a drama, with a crown on his head.

The estate was now state owned. The superintendent and his staff that worked under the estate owner were all sent home.

A new superintendent. A new staff. The labourers had even received their wages for six months under the new administration.

What the superintendent said yesterday, summoning him to the office, loomed before him like a monster that threatened him.

“Your daughter has not reported for work for more than two months. Ours is not a charity organization to provide shelter and provisions to those who didn’t work. If she doesn’t report for work immediately she’ll have to face the consequences.”

The superintendent said sternly. This was his second warning. Nadesan knew very well that he wouldn’t stop with his words.

The cock crew in the front yard. Anjalai turned in her sleep. The piece of cloth covering her body slid from her waist. She was prepared to go to work again. But she didn’t have proper clothes to wear to work. She couldn’t even go before people in her torn worn out rag. How could she go to work, Nadesan didn’t have any money left with him to buy her a saree.

Nadesan opened the door and came out. The mute silent moon shone. A few scattered stars were visible like faded flowers on a laundered fabric. Between the rows of rubber trees that stood in parade were patches of moonlight. Sweet smell of coffee flowers filled the chilling air.

A few moments left for day break. Nadesan was lighting a fire on the verandah to warm himself when he heard the dogs bark. He turned round to see. It was Kandan coming from the upper line. Kandan normally joined Nadesan to beat the tomtom on occasions of weddings, sadangu and funerals.

“What Kanda! A this time ? What’s the matter ?.

“It’s bad news ? Saami Kizavi of the upper line has passed away.”

“Poor old woman she’s gone then ... when did it happen ?

“At four in the morning.”

Kandan sat beside Nadesan near the fire to warm himself up a little.

Saami Kizavi was a lonely soul. She had no one to look after her. When she could work she tapped rubber. The latex she brought from the rubber hills was enough to enter two names in the check roll. Later she was allowed to tap only in the old hills. It transpired that she was sent to the old hills to make room for Suppiah who supplied fodder for conductor Aiya’s cattle to tap the bud rubber trees.

If this issue was raised with the administration it would only stretch like rubber providing no solution.

Then -

Old Kizavi became unfit to tap rubber. The stomach she had while she worked still remained with her when she had no work. She had to make a living. Suddenly the Kizavi appeared at every door-step. Viputhy and Sandanam smeared on her forehead with a big kumkumam pottu. She held a viputhy tray in one hand and peacock plumes in the other. Only a few words escaped her lips.

“Arohara Saami ...Arohara ...charity for the Gods give a handful of rice”

For children it was fun to cluster around her. She took viputhy from the tray and smeared on their foreheads. She visited every estate. When she returned in the evening the coarse sack cloth that hung from her shoulder would be at least half full.

When the new superintendent came Kizavi's line-kambra was snatched from her. The only consolation was that she was allowed to stay in the creche.

Kizavi's livelihood wasn't affected till the estate ration was reduced to one and half pound of flour and a pound of rice. Kizavi was shaken. Getting a meal or even half a meal a day became an ordeal. She thinned and paled beyond recognition. Emaciated, she couldn't even stand or walk.

"The Kizavi was jabbering away in delirium. She had not eaten for days. She died of starvation. Poor wretched creature Had no one to look after her. She had no brother or any one ... It's our duty to arrange for her burial" Said Kandan.

"We must inform the Superintendent first. Otherwise there can be problems later on. .." Said Nadesan.

"Yes , Yes" – Kandan nodded his head.

The Superintendent gave only permission to bury the corpse. No other help was forthcoming from him. Earlier, when someone died in the estate the expenses for the coffin and grave - digging were met by the administration. But under the new set up no one was expected to broach that subject.

"Saami Kizavi has died. She has to be given a decent burial. Please help."

Nadesan and Kandan started a fund drive. They went to all the hovels, staff bungalows and even to the boutiques and shops that were near. By evening they had collected a substantial amount.

After buying the miscellaneous items for the funeral and borrowing a petromax lamp from conductor Aiya's house and lighting it when they reached home it was very dark.

While they were attending to the corpse that was lying in a dark corner ten or twelve people gathered there. Four or five women for their part started wailing, beating their breast to mourn Kizavi's loss. The card game commenced in another corner. Nadesan and Kanden after heating their tomtom in a fire, started playing their funeral-beat. The creche now looked a real funeral house. The petromax glimmered spewing fire and smoke at intervals.

When morning dawned Nadesan took Kandan to a boutique. They were very hungry. Having eaten to their fullest satisfaction each lit a beedi. Then they bought some betels, arecanuts, tobacco and a few candles.

"We must buy a saree now," said Nadesan, "to spread over the coffin. We can buy one within thirty or thirty five rupees."

"We don't need a sari. A yard of white cloth would do" – said Kandan.

"Cheechi – we must buy a *selai*⁴⁹. We have money, isn't it? we'll buy one."

"If we run through the money what are we going to do for other expenses"?

"Don't worry. There'll be a good collection at '*Katta Moi*'⁵⁰

Nadesan didn't wait for Kandan's consent. He bought a red saree with a black border.

Kizavi's body was carried on a *paadai*⁵¹. The black bordered red sari was spread over the body as a pall. The six or seven who joined the procession were carrying the paadi.

49. selai - sari

50. Katta Moi - 'At Home' held in a funeral house.

51. Paadai - a bed to carry the corpse

Drunken Kandan led the funeral march, playing the familiar funeral beat on his thappu. He was dancing all the way to the rhythmic funeral beat.

No one made any claims as kinsmen to perform the funeral rites.

Nadesan placing the corpse on an elevated spot performed the rites himself. His grand-son had carried a small chatty with some cooked rice and beet root curry in it.

“What is this for?” asked Kandan.

“The spirit should not depart without any wishes fulfilled. The Kizavi had starved for three days, longing for food. So, we must provide the spirit with what she had longed for?”

“Right O, what you say is correct” - Kandan’s reddened eyes bulging out and his legs unsteady.

Nadeson placed the rice and curry on both hands of the corpse.

“Why don’t you hurry up? It’s getting late.”

Kandan staggered towards a rubber tree that was near by and squatted down under it.

After burying Kizavi’s body Kandan had to be carried home.



The following morning, the parade overflowed with labourers who were regular and the one who had joined them after a lapse of time.

Amidst the squalid and clumsy labourers in their dirty rags was Nadesan’s daughter Anjali. Her black bordered red selai was the cynosure of every eye.

AUTUMNAL TREES

**ILAYUTHIR KAALATHU MARANGAL
KOZHUNDU
May 1989**

Vairamuthu Thalaivar didn't like smoking beedi very much. He preferred cigar. He could even manage without a meal if he had a cigar. He put his hand under his pillow. There were two or three beedis left, but no cigar.

Rising and sitting up in bed he lit a beedi, took a deep pull and drew in the smoke. Then he coughed and spat the phlegm and saliva with the beedi stain into a coconut shell that lay beside.

He lit another beedi to get over his depression

The kerosene lamp burned dimly.

The moonlight creeping through the back window fell on his wife who lay a little away from him. He fancied his grand daughter lying beside her like a crescent moon.

Vairamuthu Thalaivar had no proper sleep for the last one month. Some thing worried him deeply.

True, his grand daughter made ripples in his thoughts

Vairamuthu had one daughter. Rani was his daughter's only daughter. An *Amman Vikraham*⁵², A shrimp with a sharp pointed nose that seemed to peck at anyone looking at her. Rani was in her budding youth with dreams of rainbow colours. She was sent to a town school away from the estate. She had been a promising student till she became a grown up girl.

52. Amman Vikraham - an idol of Goddess Mariyamman.

A curly haired chap working in a bakery started making passes at Rani. Exchanging smiles ... then letters. Bus travelling..... feeling the warmth of each other's body with fingers frisking about them.

One day he took her to the movie to see a film and else where from there to see her fully. The news reached home first and then the school. This ended her schooling.

Her grandma took her to some one in Matale and spending good money her virginity was restored. Subsequently the girl ended her life by taking insecticide.

If his grand daughter's suicide did tell on him, he didn't show it out.

“*Saniyan is gone*⁵³! Forget about her,” he told his wife and daughter, merely to pacify them.

But what worried him deeply today was something else.

The workers in the estate was out of work for one whole month. The administration wouldn't give them work. The issue remained unsolved. It was weighing heavily on him.

Vairamuthu. The name befitted him well. He was as hard as diamond. Tall and strong he looked young for his age. Although he was in his fifties he looked a young man in his thirties. He commanded every body's respect in the estate. Except the staff officers no one called him by his name. To every one he was *Thalaivar*⁵⁴.

Wedding, Sadangu, ear piercing ceremony, Kavadi, theru - on all social and public events people sought his counsel.

53. Saniyan is gone - Good riddance!

54. Thalaivar - chief

In black coat and white vetty, forehead smeared with thiru neeru and a minute - book in hand - there was an air of importance about him, when he called at the office on labour - day. Even the Superintendent received him cordially. He appreciated the manner in which Thalaivar represented union matters with gentleness.

Twentieth of last month the Superintendent sent him a letter summoning him to the office.

“The estate is to be partitioned. Six Mudalali’s are to be given fifty acres each from the estate land. The remaining one hundred and fifty will require only a limited number of work hands.”

Thalaivar was shocked to hear it.

“It’s very unfair. Why are they doing it?”

“When the former government implemented the ‘50acre - ceiling’ on land, those mudalali’s were not given their due. It appears the present Government is trying to rectify it by giving them land now.”

If so they could be given land from what they owned. Why should they divide up this estate.

“Government has the power to do anything. These things are not in our hands.”

Superintendent couldn’t be blamed. He was only doing his duty. He showed a green light too.

“Perhaps if you go to Colombo and meet big people and talk to them you may be able to stop it. But you shouldn’t divulge my name.”

The Superintendent had only two or three years to go on retirement. A mile away from the estate he had bought a piece of land in which he was building a guest house for

foreign tourists. He wouldn't want to be transferred to Badulla or some other distant place at this juncture.

The news that the estate was going to be divided was tom tom - beaten in the lines. So, they were going to make a pickle of the estate.

In estates which had less than fifty acres the wages for the workers would be very low. No wages or advance would be paid on time. That was what exactly happening in Nona Thottam. The workers knew it very well. Hiring the village thugs Mudalali had broken the bones of workers and kept them servile to him.

Earlier of course they could at least run away to Vavuniya or Kilinochchi.

If you joined a union, stones would rain on your roofs in the night.

It shouldn't happen here.

Thalaivar ran to the *Jilla*⁵⁵ committee. Letters were sent. Union spokesman issued statements to the press.

Thalaivar made a number of trips to Colombo.

Not a stone was left unturned. But nothing bore fruit.

Surveyors alighted from a jeep one day to demarcate and partition the land.

The Estate staff also alerted themselves. They feared losing their jobs or being sent on transfers. Besides they may have to beg for employment from the mudalalis.

The Superintendent and the staff backed the strike, giving the workers indirect support.

55. Jilla - District

The workers had no work, but each had a stomach to live with. A few found work in a hena a few miles away from the estate. In the hena they had work only two or three days a week.

“Come what may we’ll return to work.”

Disparaging voices were raised by the disgruntled ones.

Some how they have held on for a month.

Pieces of jewellery the women carried on their person were changing hands.

Things had worsened during the last few days.

Hearths did not burn in the workers hovels.

If they had cattle or poultry it would help them in their dire needs. But they were already gone from them in the '83 riots.

The very thought of '83 sent shivers down ones spine.

The mayhem in Matale town - thugs alighting from lorries smashing the Tamil shops in the bazaar and setting buildings aflame. Thalivar's family also was among those who ran into the thicket to save their lives. Like all others, Thalaivar too thought of India for the first time.

The eight foot Aiyandar statue under the spreading tamarind tree on the village boundary by the sandy stream kept vigil, with a sword raised in one hand and the other hand on his hip, with his trusty steed beside him. Aiyandar their god kept guard. “If you come here I’ll destroy you,” he seems to warn his enemies in his valiant posture.

Maidens wending their way through the paddy fields with pots – one in hand and one on the head – on which the smiling sun was journeying home. Paddy crops dancing in the wind bending with ears of golden grains, whispering secrets to each other.

Tamil faces; Tamil voices. Tamil, Tamil, Tamil everywhere.

Thoughts of India evoked sweet memories in him. Yet, he had never been to India. He had not seen the colour of it. He doesn't know whether it's black or red. The India that he knew was the India that featured in his grand father's tales.

But whenever there was an ethnic disturbance here, he thought of India as others did.

The crows on the jak tree in the yard cawed and cocks crowed in the distant colony

Vairamuthu getting up from his bed came out.

The sky looked bright and clear having washed it's face applying saffron.

The dogs were barking. He saw someone coming towards him. It was Gopal who lived in one of the lower line rooms. What urgent business brings him at daybreak? Thalaivar looks at him questioningly.

Gopal sobs out the story:

“Lower line room Karuppaiah's family have been starving. His two children having nothing to eat for two days had strayed in to the woods and picked some poisons berries and eaten. They had been vomiting and purging since then. They had treated them with some hand - medicines which didn't answer. They were to be taken to the hospital in the morning. But one of the girl had died at midnight and the other girl's condition critical.

Thalaivar was perturbed on hearing the news.

Karuppaiah's wailing wife sees Vairamuthu Thalaivar and falls at his feet. Karuppaiah too, burst out crying embracing Thalaivar. Vairamuthu who was as hard as diamond too was moved to tears.

Karuppaiya's family will now need money to spend on the funeral. Vairamuthu Thalaivar had no money with him. But he'll have to do something to help them. Where can he get money from? The Superintendent was away. Others said they had no money to spare. He tried a few boutique keepers. They refused to give him anything.

Thalaivar returned home in the evening with great disappointment. People on their way to the funeral house called him to join them. He asked them to proceed telling them he would go later. He sat thinking the whole day not knowing what he could do.

He didn't feel the time. It was past 10 o'clock. He grew quite desperate now. His wife had already gone to bed. Closing the door he stepped out into the dark of the night.

Three months ago when Vairamuthu Thalaivar proposed that their temple should be renovated the workers agreed unanimously. On every pay-day they were to drop a coin into a till - the wooden box that was buried at the foot of Amman statue and covered with cement plastering leaving only a hole for the coin to be dropped in. Vairamuthu Thalaivar raised his hands with joined palms and worshipped Amman. Then with the crowbar he had brought with him he dug out the till. He was getting out of the temple with the wooden till in hand when four or five men coming that way saw him. Thalaivar was caught red handed.

"The old man would have similarly laid hand on our union money too" said one.

“Kizavan has been cheating us throughout” said another.

“We must beat him and hand him over to the police” suggested the third one.

They were punks returning home from the colony after squandering their day’s earning on Kassippu. Their voices too were staggering.

“I broke the Kovil - till because Karuppaiah’s family needed money for the funeral. Had I asked you each one of you would have dragged in different directions giving lame excuses. So I did what I thought was right. Amman will forgive me because my intentions are pure.”

- Vairamuthu Thalaivar felt like telling those punks. But he didn’t open his mouth to utter a word.

***PERIYA THAMBY'S SPOTTED
GOAT***

PERIYATHAMBYIN PULLI AADU
MALLIKAI
October 1999

The spotted goat was missing.

Sinnarasu looked for it every where in the bud rubber hill and in the cocoa hill.

The goat went grazing with the flock. Periyathamby pointing with his index finger counted the goats twice. There were only twenty two instead of twenty three. It was quite clear. The spotted goat was missing.

Sinnarasu who took the goats out for grazing these three days was bewildered and frightened. His shorts worn out and soiled in the back with gravel exposed his rump. Sinnarasu might have gone looking for mushrooms neglecting his flock.

His mother was able to make a curry for dinner last night with sembu he pulled out from the water drain yesterday. Ammayi made *kuzambu*⁵⁶ with it to share the rice Sinnarasu brought from Kanakkapillai's house.

The whole area had been raked, looking for the spotted goat except the drain near the spout at Kanguwetti hill. The drain was over-run with sembu and sunflowers grown wild and it was too dark to continue the search.

“Amma, I was looking after the goats all the time. I didn't take my eye away from them for a moment.” explained the frightened Sinnarasu.

56. kuzambu - gravy

The wives of staff members were respectfully addressed as 'amma' irrespective of age differences.

Tears welled up in Periyathamby's eyes. The spotted-goat was his favourite one. He used to carry it on his shoulders when it was a kid.

Amma also was worried. This wouldn't have happened if Alagan was there. Alagan was away in Ratwatta Estate. He had gone to Akka's house because her daughter had attained.

Normally it was Alagan who tended Kanakapillai aiyah's goats. He cut giliciria leaves to feed them. He drove them for grazing and back to the shed.

Alagan was a rubber tapper. Tapping would be over by one thirty in the afternoon. Rubber milk had to be measured mixed with sodium acid, foams removed from the surface and stacked in dishes. No sooner this was finished Alagan would be at Kanakapillai's house. He was given his lunch there. He would set out to the rubber hill again with the coffee knife. Leaving the goats to graze on their own, he would cut some branches from a jak tree, carry them to the shed and return. If he found the time he would cut some dry branches from the rubber trees for fire wood for Kanakapillai's house. When a new film was released in any of the movies in Matale, the faggot he collected would serve him for the ticket. Before it was dark he would drive the goats back to the shed and shut the gate. A cup of plain tea would be ready for him.

Alagan was away for three days and the flock was short of a goat. Amma was worried indeed. She didn't know what Aiyah would say when he returned from work and came to know of their loss.

Although the owner of the estate which was hundred acres in extent and had the epithet 'Hundred Acres' for its

name, reside in the estate itself, the entire work-load was on Kanakkapillai. Amma grumbled now and then that he had to work late hours, she jolly well knew that he had to do so to provide his wife and children a comfortable living.

“Appa, our spotted goat was missing,” - Periyathamby who was at his homework broke the news to his father almost crying, when he saw him.

Kanakkapillai threw a stern look at Sinnarasu as if to say that it would be the end of his goats if they were entrusted to such fellows. Fearing that he was going to get a few blows, Sinnarasu shrank leaning against the wall.

Amma sent word for Pujari Mutthan. Mutthan was a vagrant who carried an udukku. Sooth-saying and carrying news were his vocation. His silver hair, twisted ‘Kiruda’ moustache and kumkumam pottu gave him an awful look. He could communicate with spirits and predict the future or unravel the past hidden in mystery. News he carried to the estate had in it his own imagination featuring prominently.

Pujari Mutthan sat on a kambalam spread over a mat, with crossed legs. “Om Muruga!”- he prayed raising his palms clasped together. Then he opened his cloth bag and took out the ‘cholies’⁵⁷. Before him was a ten rupee note on a sheaf of betel leaves left by Amma.

Rattling the ‘cholies’ in his closed right fist, he cast them on the kambalam.

“Muruga.....” he said and counted the upturned ones. “One, two, three, four, five ...”

He collected them and rattled his closed fist again and cast them second and third time. Repeatedly there were five upturned ones.

57. Cholies - A kind of sea - shells used by sooth - sayers. kambalam - a carpet

“Choli” has shown five thrice. That means there’s nothing to fear. Tell me now, what’s your problem?

“_____”

“Speak, why are you silent, what’s worrying you. Is it something about the house or your husband? What’s worrying you? Tell me”

Something we’ve been rearing in the house is missing.”

“Is it a quadruped or something else?”

“The goat Perythamby was very fond of”

Peryathamby instantly goes and sits facing the Pujari
Cholies roll on the kambalam again.

“One ... two ... three There you are. The third house shows the lost object.

Cholies cast again. This time four.

“Oh four ... the fourth house. It’s not far away. Only a walking distance. Nothing to worry. The lost goat will come back home alive.

Amma looks at Pujari’s face with anxiety.

“I’m not conjecturing anything. The ‘cholies’ speak. Don’t worry. You must make a vow to Alagumalayan, to sacrifice a cock once the goat returns. You can send for me again. I’ll come and perform the sacrificial rites without any short comings.

A cock feeding in the yard was caught and a piece of cloth soaked in saffron water was tied on one of its feet and a little saffron water sprinkled on its head. The cock shook its head and fluttered its wings.

“There you are. The cock has nodded. Alagumalayan has accepted your vow..... I’m then taking my leave of you”

Taking a few steps to go and having reached the doorsteps he turns back and asks.

“Amma, can you spare me some tea dust. I’ve not had tea for two days”

“I’m a fool to trouble her when she’s worried about the goat” -he said when she went in, to be heard by others.

He was gladdened when amma reappeared with some tea in a wrapper.



Dogs bark. Amma looks out of the kitchen window.

Store-line Sellaiah was hobbling towards the house with the help of a walking stick dragging his lame foot. Leaving the walking stick against the wall he stands at the back door.

“Sellaiya, our spotted goat is lost”

“Aiyaiyo! How could it happen? What the hell was the little fellow doing?”

“Poor fellow, what could he do? See... three days since Alagan went. He hasn’t returned yet.”

“You devil. Standing there like a stone. You can only eat and grow fat. You can’t look after the goats? You good for nothing – you come home I’ll skin you.”

“No, no ... Don’t hit him. He’s only a little fellow. Wait. I’ll get you some plain tea. The water is boiling.”

Amma always sympathized with Sellaiah since his one leg was broken. While felling a tree for the rubber store hearth, the tree fell on one of his legs. He couldn’t walk without a stick now. Aiya feeling sorry for him gave his little fellow sinnarasu work in his house. He had to sweep the bungalow and the compound, look after their home garden - weeding the

garden and watering the plants. He was given a food parcel to take home in the evening

Compensation for workers who met with accidents while at work was unheard of in some estates. Getting compensation from the estate owner was like tapping rubber from a sick tree.

The estate had two unions. When one union went on strike, workers of the other union went to work. That much for workers unity which the estate owner knows damn too well!

Sellaiah's issue was dragging on conference after conference for three month, stretching like rubber. Not only was his leg broken but his heart too!

Sellaiah's family was having a lean time. It was end of the month. Borrowing money or rice from his line people was out of the question. His wife had managed to get her name entered in the check roll for sixteen day's only.

They had not had proper meal for the last two days. They had been only sharing the rice Sinnarasu was taking home from Kanakkapillai's house.

The following day when Periyathamby returned from school, Alagan was back home. Alagan was sad and furious when he heard the news, But Amma didn't allow him to lay hand on Sinnarasu.

Alagan went with Sinnarasu and Periyathamby looking for the goat. Sellaiah also joined them. They wanted to search in the drain overrun with sembu and sunflowers grown wild near the spout. Periyathamby and Sinnarasu were standing on a hillock. Asking sellaiiah to wait near the drain, Alagan cleared the wild growth and climbed down.

On days when Periyathamby joined Alagan to the spout he would get Periyathamby to wait for him on the hillock till he returned and climb down the drain saying that he was looking for a mynah or a parrot. He took more than half an hour to get back. A few moments later Meiyān's daughter would emerge from the drain tying her lock of hair. Meiyān's daughter usually came there to block the drain and divert the water towards the nursery where cocoa and pepper were planted. She assisted Meiyān to draw water to the plants. Alagan never caught a parrot or mynah he promised Periyathamby. One day when he joined Alagan to the spout for a bath, Alagan seeing Meiyān's daughter went near her and touched her breasts. She didn't protest. She went away smiling. Periyathamby was baffled.

Periyathamby since his childhood knew Alagan whose ways were beyond his understanding. He hadn't reached school going age yet. His amma would bathe, dress, powder him and send him to the shop with Alagan. He would open Periyathamby's fly and pointing at it, he would wink at the shopkeeper and say "Mudalali, you said your shop key was missing and you were looking for it. Here's the key." Periyathamby only blushed in embarrassment.

"So you have taken away my key. I've been looking for it every where." – The shopkeeper would say in all seriousness without a smile. Periyathamby would make up his mind never to go to the shop again, But the very next day ammayi sent him to the shop with Alagan again.

Perythamby didn't want to be cross with Alagan, because he didn't want to miss the interesting stories Alagan told him. Vikrmathithan Kathai, Nallathangal Kathai and stories from Ramayana. Then ghost stories. The story of Amarawathy who hanged herself on a tree near the junction where the five roads met and whose spirit haunted the area.

And stories about Rodha Muni. Alagan was supposed to have seen those spirits with his own eyes. After listening to them Periyathamby feared to step out of the house after sunset.

Ammayi had given Periyathamby a small bucket to be used as bed-pan. Alagan's first duty in the morning was to empty its contents and wash the bucket. If he fell out with Alagn he would let this cat out of the bag.



Ten or fifteen minutes later Alagan was climbing up the drain carrying the spotted goat on his shoulder.

The bloated body of the goat with a broken neck and blood stain was laid on the ground. The goat must have fallen in to the drain and broken its neck. Its eyes were wide open. Pus oozing out from its nose. The body was stinking. Flies swarming on the corpse. Alagan was holding his nose with his thumb and fore finger. The foul smell kept Periyathamby away from the goat. Alagan carried the goat to Kanakkapillai's house. Periyathamby ran ahead announcing that the spotted goat had been found.

Alagan laid the goat on the ground some distance away from the house. More flies had settled on the corpse by now.

Amma couldn't bear the foul smell. She held her nose with her saree end. She felt sick.

Aiya didn't go near the goat at all. He held out a twenty rupee note to Sellaiah telling him to remove the goat immediately to a faraway place and bury it deep.

"I'll do it Aiyah" – said Sellaiah .

With Alagan's assistance Sellaiah lifted the corpse to his shoulder and moved from there with the help of his stick.

The mucous dripping from the nose leaving a trail behind. Sinnarasu followed him.

Alagan hurried to the spout for a bath.

Periyathamby seated by the window couldn't concentrate on his studies. He could see the lamps burning in Sinnarasu's line Kambara.

Sinnarasu didn't come to fetch their dinner that night. The following morning too he didn't turn up for work. So Periyathamby went to see him in the afternoon. Sinnarasu was very lively and cheerful, rolling a cycle rim and Playing about in the yard.

The goat skin strewn with ash lay drying in the sun.

SARAVANAN

THAMARAI
November 2004

Saroja would rise long before the morning sun and wend her way through the dark with a pot and her son Saravanan following her with a plastic bucket to the spout shrouded in a thick veil of mist. There would be pots, chatties, buckets and plastic cans already forming a long line indistinctly visible as she nears the spout. The common spout by the junction where roads from the four divisions met would be already bustling with life. The water pipe at the spout which had stood the trials tribulations of time being turned, twisted and mended several times, has been still serving the dwellers of those squalid hovels for well over five generations.

Saroja having waited in the queue to fetch four rounds of water would perform her ablutions, offer pujas to the gods and light the hearth. Saravanan squatting on the floor would prepare his school lessons using a plank as a writing table in the dim light of a bottle - lamp.

He would get a full cup of plain tea with a little bit of sugar, which would exhaust before he had sipped half a cup. The remaining half would go down his throat leaving its bitterness on his tongue.

Saroja would be gone to the rubber hills in haste with the knife, bucket and sack before the sun was up shedding its first rays on the estate. Only trees that were tapped before the sun was up yielded more milk. Only if she collected sixteen litres of milk her name could find entry in the check roll. Hence her haste.

A roti covered in a clay - chatty with sambol would be cold and withered by now. After awaking his little brother Saravanan would set out to school.

Today -

Saravanan has not got up from bed yet. There was no earthly hurry for him to do so because he can't go to school.

"Don't step into my class without the mathematical set and the box of colours" Easwary teacher had drawn her dead line. The frustrated teacher wouldn't rely on the children's assurances any more. Their "tomorrow" never came, Saravanan and four or five other boys were the victims. They were all from the estate.

"I'll buy you those things when I am paid" was mother's constant excuse to soothe Saravanan.

He was in year eight. Two months since the new term for the year had begun. of course Saroja was worried that she couldn't meet her son's needs and requirements.

"If only the man she married had cared for them. Why should they suffer like this. What wife and children for a good for nothing bum....."

She burned with anger when she thought of her husband Thangarasu. Her aged father would croak any time. Her entire earnings had to be spent to feed four mouths in the family. She had no money to buy what her son needed. Was she a ganja or kassippu vendor to have money to spend? How could she make ends meet?

She wouldn't allow her children to follow in the foot step of their father. She detested him.

Thangarasu was a modern Vikramadithya who spent six months at home and six months in jail. While his Kassippu

Mudalali made mints of money and wallowed in luxury, it was Thangarasu the vendor who was apprehended by the police and sent behind bars every time.

Thangarasu had a tacit understanding with his Mudalali which he kept up unflinchingly.

This was a season when jailbird Thangaraju languished in prison.

Saroja said that her husband would never change. Listening to her, Saravanan too had developed a hatred for his father.

His classmates had new school uniforms. New pairs of shoes. They had fathers who fulfilled their needs and were concerned of their children. To Saravanan they were only day dreams.

The rays of the morning sun crept through the gaps on the wooden walls and made visuals on the inner wall.

Saravanan rose from his bed lazily.

"Aren't you going to school?" shouts his grandfather, coughing and wheezing, seated out on a stone slab.

"Lord Muruga ... why don't you take me away... I can't bear this pain" groans the old man holding his chest.

Saravanan comes out

Behind the lines on the yard of watcher Rambanda's quarters his wife Leelavathy's back was visible above the crotens. She was very thrifty with her dress. Her black skirt and brassieres were on the cloth line. Saravanan lowers his head.

If she saw him she would be reminded of sending him to Sanmugam Aiyah's boutique to buy a bread-loaf or a lux soap.

He goes to the spout to wash himself and returns with a bucket of water. His little brother had the half eaten roti in his hand. The little fellow was wondering whether he should leave the remaining half to his brother or not, with a feeling of guilt and fear.

“You eat the whole thing” tells Sarvanan looking at his little brother who was happily gobbling down the pieces.

“Get me some plain tea, will you?” asks the old man. Bouts of cough that had waited till he opened his mouth again was taking the very life out of him. His whole body jerked.

The old man lay curled up on a piece of sack cloth. A small mortar to pound betel and a coconut shell with spit, phlegm and betel saliva lay beside him, flies swarming on them. Saravanan gives him a cup of plain tea and comes out.

Tamil period would be over by now and maths period will be on. Easwary teacher liked him because he was a bright student. You can't blame her for pulling him up. How could one learn without a mathematical set

The more he thought of it the more he was worried and depressed.

He felt hungry. He needed something to fill his stomach.

To the north of the line-room about twenty five yards away was the barbed wire fence of Shanmugam Mudalali's land. The garden was full of jak, coconut and coffee plants. The squirrels were nibbling at a ripe jak fruit on a tree. The smell enters his nostrils and his mouth begins to water.

If he gets the fruit he can satisfy his hunger. He can give his little brother a piece and keep a portion of it for mother.

Saravanan creeps through the fence and climbs the tree. Plucks the fruit and drops it to the ground and climbs down.

Shanmugam Aiya has sharp ears. Hearing the sound of jak falling to the ground he comes running. Seeing Saravanan from a distance he hides behind a tree and catches him red handed.

“Ey... you how long this has been going on?” Twisting Saravanan’s arm gives him a hard knock on his head.

“No, Ayyah ... it has happened only today... I have been so hungry”

If you are hungry should you steal from other people’s gardens?

He twists Saravanan’s arm still harder. He screams in pain.

“If I see you again in my garden I’ll shoot you below the knee ... Rascal ... be careful..?”

“I’ll never do it again. I swear. I beg you. Please leave me.

“I’m sparing you this time because you are a small boy. If I see you again in my garden, I don’t know what I’ll do ...”

“Upon my mother. I’ll never enter your garden again.”

“Hmm ... lift the jack fruit. Carry it to my shop.”

Saravanan carries the jack fruit on his head. Sanmugam mudalali follows him.

A matured ripe fruit. It’ll fetch at least fifty rupees. Can given it to the lorry man.

They reach the shop.

“Slowly ... slowly ... bring it down carefully.

If you drop it, it'll be crushed." – Mudalali gives a hand to bring the fruit down.

Saravanan's eyes were fixed on the mathematical set and the box of colours displayed on the show case.

"Boy, can you climb a few coconut trees and pluck some nuts. I'll pay you.

"Ok Aiyah"

Sanmugam Mudalali brings the cloth ring used on a climbers feet and a small knife.

"Aiyah, can you give me a mathematical set and a box of colours? I'll pay for them when amma gets her wages.

"Ok, I'll give you. First you pluck the nuts"

"Sanmugam Mudalali was surprised at the swiftness with which Saravanan climbed the tree like an experienced climber.

... must convince the boy's mother to keep him at my shop. He'll be very helpful to climb trees and do other odd jobs. Can give him three meals a day and five or ten rupees a month. What damn education for these wretched creatures...

-Thought Sanmugam Mudalali counting the coconuts plucked from the first tree into a urea bag. As Saravanan keep plucking from each tree Sanmugam fills the bags, carries the nuts to the shop hurriedly.

Having climbed and plucked from three trees, Saravanan asks again; "Aiyah, will you definitely give a mathematical set and a box of colours.

"Yes, certainly. The mathematical set and the box of colours are there. They won't run away... But you have to pluck from ten more trees. You'll have to speed up.

After plucking from the next tree Saravanan asks
 “Aiyah, I’m thirsty shall I pluck a young coconut?”

“Ok, pluck two. I also need one.”

Shanmugam drops two young coconut from the tree. One nut cracks and its water spills out. Shanmugam Mudalali picks up the other one and slivering its upper part, makes hole on it and enjoys his drink. Then he opens the fruit with a big knife and eats the fleshy part with relish. He strokes his belly and sends out a belch.

“Aiyah please get me that knife. I will drink my young coconut and then continue,” Saravanan says as he climbs down from the tree.

“Look here boy, if your stomach is full, you won’t be able to climb any more. Once the sun becomes hot it will be all the more difficult. Finish up plucking the nuts first. Then you can enjoy your drink leisurely. No body will disturb you then.

Saravanan disappointed, looks up at the next tree standing at the foot. A tall tree really. It would be better to have a drink of water at least before climbing.

I must get the mathematical set and the box of colours and some how make it to school tomorrow.....

He climbs half the height. Rests awhile. Then he continues to climb. The rest of the trees are all tall ones.

He cuts the first cluster of nuts and moves to cut the next cluster. He loses his hold.

“A mm Mm... ma” – The voice dissolves in the air. He falls with a thud.

Saravanan lay on the ground in a pool of blood.

No sign of life. The body was bleeding in the nose and the mouth. The broken neck was inclined to a side.

Shanmugam stands frozen with terror. Then he regains his balance and looking around begins to act quickly.

The Grama Sevaka's house was only two bus halts away from the shop. Both Gramasevaka and Mudalali are thick chums. Drinking partners. The Garamasevaka was fortunately at home.

Garama Sevaka comes for investigation.

If only he had asked me wouldn't I have given him a jack fruit. He had fallen from the tree and lost his precious life. How pathetic... What a tragedy...." Shanmugam Mudalali wipes his tears with his shawl.

Saravanan's body lay at the root of a jack tree. The jack fruit lay beside him.

THE TAMIL RACE

THAMILACHCHATHY
THINAKARAN - 1998

Tell me, O fate!. What you intend doing
the Tamil race?

-Maha Kavi Subramaniya Bharathi

Whether it is Matale or Vavuniya, the blazing hot sun is all the same - Intense heat scorching blistering ... burning you from head to heel. Splitting your skull ... like a fire-pan placed upon your head. A boiling hot day.

A low roofing of the temporary shed put up by the entrance. Smouldered. The closely packed chairs were all occupied. Out side the shed under the shade of the a mango tree too there were people in bunches.

A solitary crow perched on a branch of the mango tree, lowering its head looked for something. Having found nothing it suddenly flew away.

The betel-tray on the table was filled with a fresh supply of betels, arecanuts and beedis.

A row of crotens adorned the gravel-yard like a saree border. The flower beds looked trampled.

A fire lit on the way side the previous night lay dormant beneath a layer of ash.

Beads of perspiration. How long could one keep mopping his face? The shirt stuck to the banian with the clammy sweat.

Shoving his wet handkerchief into his trouser pocket Muthulingham looked at Ravi.

Waiting at the entrance with raised hands and clasped palms, receiving and seeing off people calling at the funeral house, Ravi's face was stiff.

Ravi's appa lay perfectly groomed in a new dress and white pairs of gloves and socks in the satin-lined cushioned coffin, in his last sleep.

Relatives, friends and neighbors were clustering around. The burning wicks of a brass oil-lamp shone bright. Joss sticks wafted the air with a death scent. The mourning women with tears streaming down their cheeks were blowing their noses and wailing-extolling the virtue of the deceased. Ravi's akka got to her feet when some close kith and kin showed up. "Appu is gone." Her lamentation and brief cry ended with a whimper.

"Appa's condition critical. It will console us if you can pay a visit" – Ravi had written.

Ravi and Muthulingam have been friends since childhood. Growing up together. Muthulingam came the very next day with his wife and child to see Ravi's ailing father. The old man had been lingering in bed and breathed his last a few days after their arrival.

A dog was sniffing at the footwear left out side the door. A mischief maker aimed a stone at its rump. Screaming with pain it ran with its tail between the legs "There are children around. The stone might strike them" someone cautioned him, But there wasn't any need for a second throw.

There were some empty bottles lying behind the jasmine bushes where the dog had fled. Some people must have drowned their sorrow in pol-arrak the previous night.

Aluvihare junction was only a mile away. If you hopped a bus going towards north you could get there in no time.

Muthulingam's house was only a calling distance from the junction. It was one of the house burnt down in the '83 riots. He joined the exodus to the north by embarking the Vavuniya bus with his mother.

Muthulingam had returned to his home town almost after eight years, with a family - a wife and a child, having buried the mortal remains of his mother in Vavuniya.

The place of course has changed. New houses, big and small, have come up. The barren land now fetched a good price, he was told.

The Wiltshire Hill, where he used to go camping with fellow scouts too has changed. Pine trees rising up to the sky looked like a wig on a bald head.

"Auspicious time is at three for the cortege to leave home. There's ample time. Water has to be collected before hand for the water chain ritual. Get ready with the paraphernalia. Don't pester later on for the missing items"

- Every where there are people bent on projecting themselves.

A squint-eyed man with a week's stubble on his unshaven chin. Clad in a discoloured white vetty and shirt takes a beedi from the betel tray and asks him in gestures if he had a box of matches. He nods in the affirmative and hands him the box.

Muthulingam feels his legs getting benumbed by sitting too long in a place and gets up from his seat to walk about a little.

The gravel walk had pot holes and grooves made by the recent rain. Broken pieces of sharp glassy stone jutting out of the gravel pricked his feet and made him bleed. Painful.

Stopping at the bend under the tamarind tree on the hillock he had a full view of Matale lying in a valley.

Coconut palms swaying in the wind were fanning the kopuram of Muthumariyamman Kovil, The banyan tree in front of it looked like a giant parasol with its life mission to provide shelter and shade. Buildings stretched as far as his eyes could see. The dome of the town mosque was towering high. Beyond it was the Bauddha Mandira. The clock tower junction where the boys tarried to win the glances of fairies clad in white school uniforms and college ties. The streets filled with traffic and pedestrians competing with them.

Lord Buddha in meditation under the old banyan tree. Can a banyan tree speak ? If only it could speak? If the tree that silently bore in its bosom thousands of tales had but a mouth to speak? The banyan tree had been an avowed witness to all that came to pass in broad day light.

“War means war. Peace means peace” The pronounced arrogance of power. The proclamation that triggered off the pogrom of the Tamil people.

Tamil houses, business establishments, factories, cinemas, studios, vehicles, buildings and property to be systematically exterminated. The island turned into a burning inferno.

Mob, everywhere, in abusive slogans affirming its ethnic loyalty - arson, loot and carnage being the order of the day. Panic stricken Tamils in Matale upset by news from Colombo. Violence that erupted in Kanatha was spreading island wide. The Tamil people in the wake of an impending disaster lost their sleep in the night.

A knock on the door. “It’s me. Sarath. Don’t be frightened. Open the door..” Recognising Sarath’s voice,

Muthulingam opens the door. Sarath held a torch in his hand. Muthulingam's mother was still shivering.

"The situation in the country is getting worse. Anything might happen anytime." Sarath too looked shaken.

"There's no time to waste. Do not worry about your belongings, your lives are more important. You are not safe here. I've come to take both of you home. Please hurry."

Their friendship that began when Muthulingam's father was living had continued to this day and remained intact standing the test of time.

Although mother knew very little Sinhala, she could understand what Sarath was telling her son. Sarath understood Muthulingam's hesitation.

"You can think later. There's no time to waste. Come let's go."

The gravel walk washed in the milk of moonlight, winding its way through the dark shadowy jak, coconut and arecanut trees in a picturesque landscape.

Mother and son followed Sarath.

The paddy field and the land were their ancestral property. The paddy crops anointed with moonlight glistened.

The pleasure of sitting in the moon - lit lawn to be caressed by the cold breeze is henceforth a vanished dream; a forgotten tale.

Rending the darkness an oblong white sheet of light spread at their feet through the opened door. Sarath's sister Swarna was waiting to receive them.

The lightning smile that usually flashed across her lips, baring her wet jasmine buds seemed to have vanished. She looked concerned and worried. Her sad looking eyes and

fluttering eye lashes ventured to say something? what could it be?

Clasping Muthu's Mother's hand she leads her into the house. Sarath and Muthu sit in the front room. Sarath's mother shows up from within, covering herself in a kambaya.

"Sons, you have come. We were worried about you. If there's a war in the north what can innocent Tamils living here do about it. Rogues and thugs are having a field day. Oh, I've forgotten to ask. Have you had your meal yet?"

Her words reflected the deep sorrow and anguish written on her face.

"We have already eaten our dinner, Amma"

"Daughter, get some tea prepared for all of us," she tells Swarna.

"Swarna has been very much worried about you since morning. She wanted you both to be brought here at once. But Sarath came only late in the evening. Sarath's father too is away. She hasn't even eaten anything since morning."

Muthulingam's mother could follow only half of what transpired in sinhala, but she listened all ears.

Swarna blushed with a faint smile on the corner of her wet lips. A week old young calf was lying down in the drawing room. Swarna kneeling by its side and stroking its velvety skin with red spots on the back, looks at Muthulingham.

The calf disturbed from its sleep struggles to its legs and butting its head against Swarna's body looks for the udder. "mm baa ..." from the shed at the backyard is heard the mooing of the mother cow.

"Don't bother the calf. It's mother might break loose."

Swarna with a mischievous smile for an answer, gets to her feet.

“Try to have some sleep now, we can talk in the morning.”

“Is it Sarath’s room that always used to be in a mess, with books scattered all over the place?”

Window curtains with printed flowers. A new table cloth. Pillows in beautiful pillowcases. Books magazines and papers neatly arranged and stacked.

“It’s all Swarna’s work” Smiles Sarath.

“Won’t this violence be stopped.”

“You can’t expect it to be over so soon. Those who have the power to stop it, don’t seemed to be bothered” says Sarath with indignation.

“They say it was the killing of the army men in Jaffna that has unleashed this violence”- it was Swarna.

She hadn’t gone to sleep yet. She was listening to them from the inner room. “Swarna, You keep quiet. A girl is not expected to speak so loud in the night” Loku Amma’s apprehension quietens her.

Muthu looks at Sarath as if to ask him, “What is all this about ?”

It’s quiet natural for an oppressed race to fight for its freedom. Only in an egalitarian society where people enjoy equalrights on economics and education there can be peace and freedom.

Sarath had a clear perspective on all political issues. Muthulingham wasn’t interested in politics so much. He had seen Sarath’s friends calling on sarath often to discuss various matters. They talked politics. They discussed art, literature and

films. They talked about foreign films which Muthulingham had not even heard of. Listening to them he soon came to realize that the Tamil films were a big farce which led to the cultural degeneration of the Tamil community". On some days they spent the whole evening reciting poetry. Muthulingham also used to join them in those recitals now and then.

Sarath telling Muthulingham about the history of nations that fought for a better order, fell asleep.

Muthu couldn't sleep. How could he, when his mind was stirred or troubled?

Muthulingham's first meeting with Swarna remains fresh in his memory. Swarna bending a low branch of the tree picking Jumbu, when Sarath introduced his Punchi Amma's daughter to Muthulingham.

Swarna was from Ampitiya and studying in Kandy. She had come to stay with them for the holidays.

"This is a Tamil friend of mine, Muthulingham. He has got through his A/L but failed to get a good job. He's working in a hardware stores. A little shy and timid."

"He doesn't look that at all. A smart guy really." Swarna then turns to Muthulingham and ask, "I wish to learn Tamil. Can you teach me?"

Muthulingham was dazzled by her beauty. What a figure? Who could have moulded her? Typical Sinhala complexion. The colour of Ranthambily. A dark mole below the ear on her left cheek added to her charm.

"If all keep speaking in Sinhala, how are you going to learn Tamil?"

Sarath's house that he normally visited only once or twice a week now became his daily haunt. He went every

evening as if something gravitated him there. During these visits Muthulingham encountered Sarath only at times. On other days Sarath's father or mother would entertain him with a few words before they withdrew to attend their duties. While Muthu spent hours with Swarna, chatting and chatting. What could they have spoken to each other?

"I cannot be without seeing her," he told Ravi one day.

"Have you told her that?"

Every thing was over before Muthu could bare his heart to Swarna.

Turning in his sleep Sarath opened his eyes to see Muthulingham still seated on the chair. The light was still burning.

"You are still up? Try to have some sleep first. We'll think about other things in the morning".

"Even if nothing had happened in the night, it's better to be alert. Being seen in the day time will be calling for trouble."

Sarath's warning was not to be taken lightly.

The early morning calm and quiet did not last.

Rumours spread like fire.

Sarath who went to the town could not enter the bazaar.

Taken aback by what he saw he halted in front of the petrol shed passing Mandandawela on the approach to banyan tree junction. Rising smoke forming into black clouds blot out the azure of the sky.

Matale was burning.

Goons leisurely walking away with the spoils. The Tamil men and women, young and old, boys and girls, little

children fleeing in all directions. The mob taken possession of the Kasino-ABBA bus play havoc in the town. On foot board, on the hood, clinging on to the shutters from outside - armed with swords, iron rods and petrol cans - the bus overflowing with thugs -the juggernaut of racism - roars through the city.

Anarchy let loose.

ABBA bus in all its fury crashed through the gate of Muthumariyamman Kovil. The grand finale now. The Bus along with the five chariots - Pancharadam - of the kovil doused in petrol was set on fire. Vandals causing damage to the deities try to pull down the kovil.

In '77 Amman gave refuge to the victims. In '83 Amman herself a victim - a refuge.

Terror-stricken Sarath hurries back home to tell what he had seen with his own eyes.

The following day in Aluvihare the Tamil houses-including Muthulingham's-were plundered and burnt down. Muthulingham feels that he and mother staying at Sarath's house could spell disaster to Sarath's family. He takes his mother with him to join the Tamil refugees at Zahira College premises in Taralanda, which had access from the backyard of Mariyanman Kovil.

After spending three days in the refugee camp at Zahira, Muthulingham with his mother found his way to Vavuniya.

When he arrived in Vavuniya, he never thought that Sivanu tailor who opened the door would take them under his roof. His mother had told him that he was a distant relative of theirs.

“Thamby, during the '58 violence itself I came to the conclusion that those areas won't suit the Tamil people. You wouldn't have been even in your mother's womb then. I was

working in a coconut estate. The estate owner himself was a Tamil. He bought that estate after winning a Galle Gymkhana sweep. The '58 communal Violence triggered off by Shri campaign set the whole island on fire. His house and the car were burnt down. The culprits were the same people whom he had employed in his estate."

Sivanu tailor recalled his old days, after listening to Muthulingham.

Two months later -

Muthulingham's mother who went to see one of her relatives at Chetty Kulam on Mannar Road was hit by a bomb and died on the spot. The seventy year old woman was a "terrorist" eliminated according to a press release.

Two days since Muthulingham came from Vavuniya "Ravi I'll just go and look up Sarath" he said

Ravi looked at Muthulingham vaguely. After a few moments of silence he lowered his eyes and said, "You can't see Sarath. He's no more."

It happened on one of those dark days when human bodies were strewn on the roadside or made to float in rivers as a deterrent to those who dared to challenge power and authority. Sarath and Swarna were dragged out of their house one night and driven away in a vehicle which had no number plate.

Having searched for them every where after making vows at several temples, having consulted sooth sayers, having gone and fallen at the feet of those who wielded power and influence, all hopes of seeing Sarath and Swarna alive having eroded, one early morning they got news about Sarath. They rushed.

On seeing the dogs feeding on a burnt corpse on the way side, Sarath's mother collapsed. When she came round

she was out of her mind. She couldn't recover from the shock and died after a few months. As for Swarna, there's no news about her.

Listening to Ravi, Muthulingham's body and mind were benumbed with pain.

Every thing was over. The relatives and friends had left the funeral house. Emptiness creeps into Ravi's heart. He stares out of the window vacantly, his eyes fixed on the mirage spreading along the hot gravel walk.

"I must be going tomorrow."

Ravi looks at Mutulingham without betraying any feelings.

Muthulingham's wife having put the child to sleep with great difficulty was fanning it with a piece of cardboard which she had found in the house.

A jeep comes down the road at full speed and stops at the gate with a jerk raising a cloud of dust.

A stray dog sleeping under a tree rises up in fear and runs. Stopping at a distance it barks. The driver getting out of the jeep picks up a stone and hurls at the dog. The dog having escaped his aim runs a further distance and barks again. Other dogs too join him in chorus.

Heads in the neighbourhood pop out of their houses.

The driver was contemplating whether he should hurl another stone or not.

At the same time -

Three cops get out of the jeep and walk towards Ravi's house.

"Why are they coming here?" wondered Ravi.

The hefty one with a tummy enters through the front door.

Adjusting into place his belt that had slid down his tummy, he surveys the front room. Another cop enters through the back door and begins to search the house. The third one stood guard at the front door, the butt of his gun pressed against his shoulder in readiness to fire - to perform his feat of courage in case of an eventuality - A real sight to be seen.

“Who is Ravi ?” asks the hefty one, adjusting his belt.

“I’m, Sir” replies Ravi in bewilderment.

“Is anyone from the North staying with you?”

“Yes, Sir. From Vavuniya.”

Muthulingham stepped forward with his wife. The child had stopped crying in fear.

“Their names should have been entered at the police station - Did you inform the police about their arrival?”

“I’m sorry Sir, I didn’t”

The hefty cop calls for their National Identity Card and scrutinizes them. Muthulingham has Matale address. His wife’s from Vavuniya.

“Why didn’t you report their arrival?” The cop repeats the question.

“They came to see my ailing father. I was so distressed about father’s condition, I forgot all other things. Father has passed away, we had the funeral only yesterday.”

“How long have they been with you?”

“Ten days Sir.”

It’s a grave offence then. An inquiry has to be held. We should get a report from Vavuniya. Untill then you have to be in police custody.

Ravi walks towards the jeep. Muthulingham follows him with his wife who had been shivering all this while. The police escort them to the jeep.

How long would muthu have to languish in remand with his wife? His son clinging on to his sweating neck begins to cry.

Whether it is Matale or Vavuniya the blazing hot sun is all the same.

INITIATION

**SUYAMVARAM
VIRAKESARI
30.07.1989**

The patter of heavy rain and the howling wind awoke her. Her mother having got up much earlier was busy placing bucket, basin and tins under spots where the roof leaked, to prevent rain water from flooding the house.

She couldn't make out whether her elder sister was asleep or floating in a world of dreams. Poor sister. She had no way of marrying though she was thirty two already- A full moon on the wane. Let her dream her coloured dreams till the day dawned. Dreaming was the only pleasure virgins of her age could indulge in.

Her younger brother who came home late in the night after watching a video film at Lalitha Akka's house was sleeping like a log.

The incessant rain pouring outside.

"Please be ready by six in the morning. If you catch the six thirty bus you can reach Colombo by ten. You'll be able to meet whoever you want to in their offices. You can finish your work and return the same evening.

-Ravi had reminded before he left.

Ravi knows many big people in high places.

He had already got teaching appointments for four or five girls. He had even sent girls abroad."

Assured Lalitha Akka.

Lalitha Akka was their neighbour. She had been abroad. Several times she had asked her whether she would

like to go to Middle East. She didn't want to go as a house maid. She had passed her GCE A/L and aspired to become a teacher. Her mother too would be pleased if she got a teaching appointment.

Since they moved into this house, after having to leave the estate unexpectedly, it is Lalitha Akka who helped them in countless ways to this very day.

“Don't know what the time exactly is. It may take another hour or more for the sun to rise.

She rose from her bed and set about getting ready for the journey.

Two more girls chaperoned by their mothers were to join her. So no one from home need accompany her. Moreover it would incur unnecessary expenses. There's nothing to fear. They could attend to their affairs and return the evening itself.

Lalitha Akka had advised them.

For two years she has served as a volunteer teacher with the hope of securing a teaching appointment.

It's Lalitha with a lot of concern for her had arranged this.

Others too had told her that if she went to Colombo with the right people and met the right people she could easily get appointed.

What a nice lady Lalitha Akka is?.

“If you get hold of Ravi you can wangle a teaching appointment.”

-Lalitha Akka said. She didn't stop at that. She invited Ravi for dinner and bought a bottle of old arrack and soda at her own expense to entertain him.

Ravi didn't come alone. He brought an elderly person with him. He – Periyavar - must be around fifty five or sixty and was clad in national dress.

Opening the bottle in style, and pouring the arrack into a glass and while Ravi was sipping his drink with a mix of soda Periyavar filled his glass up to the brim and gulped it down neat and raw. He then wiped his lips picking up the edge of his vetty.

“It's the welfare of the *Malayaha Samuthayam*⁵⁸ that I'm concerned about. My sole aim is to see that the children of *malai naattan*⁵⁹ have a bright future.”

-‘Samuthayam concious’ Periyavar emptied another glass.

Lalitha Akka brought some Pappadams in a tray and placed before them. Then she held out a pappadam to Ravi, her body almost rubbing on him.

It was a treat to see Lalitha Akka wet her lips and smile with the dimples deepening on her cheek. Her long eyes drew every one's attention. She was quite free with everyone. She could talk of any thing without a blush.

Lalitha Akka's husband's whereabouts was not known. It's rumoured that she herself had chased him away. It's difficult to believe that she had a six year old son. Thrice she had been abroad, working as a house maid in the same house. She had brought enough things from abroad to fill her home.

The rumour was that Lalitha Akka was a queer fish.

“Amma look here. she is no more your daughter. She's my daughter. Leave everything to me. It's my responsibility to find her a job. You don't have to worry.

58. Malayaha Samuthayam - The plantation community

59. malainaattan - The Hill-Country labourer

“It’s for our *Samuthayam*⁶⁰ I’m doing all this. Our children should come up in life. That’s my only wish.”

Said Periyavar scrutinizing her certificates.

Old arrack had started working in him.

Amma felt relieved as if her daughter was going to get appointed the very next day.

“In this district alone I’ve found jobs for more than ten people. I didn’t take a red cent from anyone. That wasn’t all. How many have found jobs in the creches in offices ... in the field, in factories, ... in the CTB ... all because .. it’s for my *Samuthayam* I’m doing all this. I want my plantation community to prosper”

Periyavar went on

There was no sign of the rain abating. It was dawn. There was a tap at the door. She opened it. Lalitha Akka stood holding an umbrella under which Ravi took shelter. Lalitha Akka was already after a bath in the morning chill on that wet day. She was scantily dressed. Water dripped from her loosened tresses.

Holding another small umbrella was Periyavar – The Malayaha *Samuthayam*.

“Come come” her Amma called them in.

“What a nasty weather. Aweful and miserable. When it rains it pours, soaking and drenching you to the skin. When the sun comes up it burns you down scorchingly hot. How could one serve his *Samuthayam*.....”

Cursing the elements, Periyavar came inside, raising his vetty above his ankles.

She was getting dressed struggling with her saree. Lalitha Akka gives a helping hand to arrange her pleats and

60. *Samuthayam* - Community

to make the necessary adjustments. During this ritual Akka gives her pinch on her thigh with a playful tease and a wink. Akka's foreign shampoo and perfume wafts through her nostrils and giddies her.

Is Lalitha Akka a queer fish, really?

Tears well up in Ama's eyes.

First time she is sending her daughter on a long journey. There were tears even in the eyes of her elder sister who stood beside the door.

"Why all these tears? This is why our Samuthayam is stagnant. Please cheer up. You should send your educated kids out to face the world with courage. You don't have to fear when I'm there..."

The bus came a little late. There wasn't much of a crowd. There was less traffic on the road.

"What a rain ..." she thought.

Rain has always fascinated her since childhood. It had given her implicit pleasure.

It wasn't a question of merely peering at the down pour. She had an obsession with rain.

What does this rain portend her?

Clouds pouring down in strands amidst the gathering gloom from some gigantic sieve fixed to the sky. She used to sit for hours at her window piercing through the rain - woven veil, looking for something on the horizon.

Peering at the pouring rain

What feeling did it arouse in her?

Happiness? Sadness? Sadness mingled with happiness?

Did the rain bring glad tidings ? Or portend something sinister lurking behind in the distant horizon ?

Torrential rain without thunder or lightning.

Drizzling all day irritating and causing annoyance.

A brief-shower mixed with the gleaming yellow sun in broad daylight.

- Different kinds of rain with its varied motifs.

When she got up in the morning her home garden bathed in night showers fascinated her.

The face washed with saffron, the sun adorning the sky's brow with a red dot. The eastern sky blushing red in the distant ... clouds' loosened tresses dripping with water. Tea hills appavelled in wet clothes.

The lawn mowed with a lawn mower studded with dew drops shining like scattered star-dust. Raising her skirt above her ankles she used to tip-toe and float in fantasy like a winged fairy.

“Time up to go to school”- Amma's voice from inside the house would bring her down to earth.

When she goes into the house her sister would be ready in her school uniform waiting impatiently till she hurries up. Appa returning from the muster would be climbing up the steps followed by the errand boy carrying on his head the box containing the check-roll. She would get ready in double quick time, leaving her breakfast half finished. Hurrying to catch the bus she would stop at the first bend and turn back to have a glimpse at her house and the garden in bloom. It was one of her pleasurable pursuits.

The tea store atop the hill shone like a silver sheet. Adjoining it stood the tea maker's bungalow. Two bends away from it – on a hillock was “sinna bangala” the small bungalow with it's roof painted red.

It was a replica of Periya Dorai's bungalow. Smaller in size. It was constructed for Sinna Dorai and was called Sinna Bangala during the company days. The name has remained unchanged to this day.

Standing in the garden of 'Sinna Bangala' Amma would watch them till her daughters were out of sight.

When "Sinna Bangala" was given to 'Periya Kanakkapillai' the faces of the rest of the staff darkened. This was one of the old episodes Aiyah had told Amma several times.

Amma was lavish with what Aiya brought home in plenty. They wallowed in luxury. Aiya even managed to obtain permission to release a worker from the hill to attend to his household work. With this permission Aiyah regularly sent two men from the parade to attend to his house work. One of them had to mow grass to feed the cow that gave ten bottles of milk per day and its calves. He had to provide them with water to drink. He had to bathe the cow and milk it. The other labourer had to tend their vegetable plot.

Every evening four or five of Aiyah's colleagues gathered at his place to play cards. The card game would commence around seven and go on till ten or twelve in the night. By then they would have polished at least two bottles. This was a daily routine. Each one stood in turn for the bottle.

Aiyah's income was really good. So he was very liberal with his money. He sent his children for schooling to Matala, ten miles away from the estate.

The elder girl failing the GCE O/L, stayed at home narrowing her interest to radio and cinema while she did we'll in her studies for which she was highly regarded by her parents and others.

Aiyah was carried home one day as he had fainted during the parade.

Amma beating her breast and wailing took him to the general hospital. Two days after admitting him Aiyah breathed his last in the ward.

It was a cruel blow to the family.

It took three months for them to get the provident fund.

By then the little savings they had, had eroded. They had to struggle to make ends meet.

Their Aiyah gone. Their bungalow gone. Their affluence and influence gone.

The bereaving family bereft of a male caretaker.

Buying of this house indeed had been an achievement.

The road was flooded. The moving bus splashed water on the passers by. First time she was traveling long distance on a wet day

She recalled what Lalitha Akka told her about her first trip to the middle East.

“That was eight years ago. Including myself there were twenty girls in all -Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. We were made to sit in a row. After some time a man appeared. Coming round looking at us with his scrutinizing eyes he stopped before me, pointing his finger at me he muttered some thing. The agent beckoned me to go with him.”- Lalitha Akka didn't betray any feeling of emotion when she narrated this episode.

She had heard about *suyamvarams* held in the good old days.

“Kings of old when they wanted to give their daughters in marriage, they invited princes from all countries to attend a suyamvaram - a rendezvous - and try their luck as suitors. The princes come from far and wide would sit in rows; the princess would go round with a garland in hand to choose her spouse by garlanding him. Similarly men chose their women today for their various needs and activities I Suppose

Lalitha Akka listened to her with great interest.

“They say scandalous things about women who go abroad ... Are they true, Akka,?”

“People do say all sorts of things. You can’t gag their mouths. You can’t be worried about what people say behind your back. You have to take things easy. Then only you can pull on in the world.”

Lalitha Akka said, wetting her lips and winking her eye.

Is Lalitha Akka a queer fish?

“To be born a woman is a blessing says the poet. What blessing would be there when women

Don’t be high - strung You should take things easy. Remember Kannathasan?

“If you would know to remember, wouldn’t you know to forget as well?”

Gosh ! Lalitha Akka could talk literature too, in a lighter vein. Every thing is “take it easy” for her.

A dozing elderly woman seated next to her in the bus, showed her teeth apologetically every time she fell over her. The woman reminded her of Komala teacher on the staff. The arrogant Komala Teacher who slept in class was a snob. She considered volunteer teaching as a demeaning thing.

She knew that Komala teacher went round making disparaging remarks about her.

“What teaching appointments for these girls... She is not going to get one. Never.”

Komala teacher had studied only upto eight standard. She too was a volunteer teacher once. Thanks to Preiya Dorai she got his approval to work under a head master. When the Government took over estate schools it was a sweep for Komala teacher. Her appointment was confirmed by the Government. She was then able to get round some one and work out a transfer to a town school. Komala teacher knew no end of herself.

One afternoon she was walking home after school when a lancer almost brushed past her and stopped. It was classmate Viji. She got out of the car and hugged her. Viji had married an accountant. She had been to their wedding. After that they were meeting only today.

“I hear you are now a teacher” -Viji shook her hand.

Viji’s husband throwing his cigarette butt away exchanged a smile remaining at the wheel.

“Poor girl. She’s been a volunteer teacher for two years, without a pay. Still she couldn’t get an appointment. Her family is having a tough time. I told her several time it is pointless going on like this. This volunteer service wouldn’t do. If she joined a shop or a hotel as a cashier or someone she could at least ease the suffering of her family. She wouldn’t listen.”

Komala teacher interrupted with her rash comments that were uncalled for. She had hit her on her vulnerable spot.

No one would come with a fiddle in time of sorrow to console you or make you happy. Instead there are malicious people to inflict pain on you without any rhyme or reason.

She learnt this bitter truth at the school where she went to teach. This has only made her all the more desperate to get a teaching appointment at any cost.



She had been to Colombo on a school tour once. But now the city looked anew.

The rain had abated but there was a slight drizzle.

Having taken three hours to attend to his work at foreign employment agencies and putting the others on to a bus and bidding good bye Ravi now turned towards her.

“Have I kept you waiting for long?”

Arranging a few curls that had fallen on his forehead into place he held out his hand for a taxi.

The taxi stopped in front of a storeyed building . Periyavar getting out after him said to her: “Step out carefully daughter. There are pools and puddles all over. You might spoil your saree.”

She had a look at the tall state building.

Is her Saviour inside there?

“Is Mr. in?”

Ravi asked a receptionist who was picking his tooth. “He was here in the morning” He dragged on, “Do you have a box of matches ?”

Ravi dropped a packet of cigarettes on the table.

“Go in, he’s there”

Flinging the tooth pick away he pulled out a box of matches from his trouser pocket and lit a cigarette. Periyavar also pulled out a fag from the packet.

Ravi told her to remain there and went in followed by Periyavar. The employees were trickling out one by one. The receptionist puffing at his cigarette ran his eye over her. She fidgeted in her seat uncomfortably.

Outside the drizzle was turning into a heavy shower again.

Ravi comes out hurriedly.

“You’re lucky. We have come at the right time, you’ve got it.”

Rising from her seat she follows him. Reaching the end of the verandah Ravi begins to speak.

“Your appointment is finalised. Your name must go into the list. Unfortunately the head clerk is on short leave today. The big boss has asked us to come in the morning tomorrow. The whole thing is in his hand now.

“Having come all the way the best thing we could do is to stay and finish everything in the morning and then return home.”

“Yes ... yes we’ll finish our job in the morning and then return home safely. Don’t worry daughter. It’s for the sake of our Samuthayam I’ve this far

Stay the night? No. She wanted to return home immediately. Amma and Akka would be at the door waiting for her. They would be anxious to know what has happened. Must hurry home to tell the good news.

Komala teacher’s face with a malicious smile on her lips appeared before her.

“What’s there to think so much daughter. I too should be back home tonight. But you can’t miss this opportunity. I have to see that somehow you get this appointment. So I’m

prepared to stay back. I'm worried about my Samuthayam-the Plantation People."

"I have a friend in Colombo. We can lodge with him" added Ravi.

It was fairly a big house. There was an annex with a spacious bedroom on the back verandah. Inside the room a huge bed, an almirah attached bathroom.

The room was well kept. Tidy and clean.

In bewilderment she sat on the edge of the bed.

Ravi who went out with Periyavar, returns with food parcels. But Periyavar was missing. Instead there was a decent looking new guy behind Ravi, in trousers and a batik shirt. He must be around forty five. He too had parcels in his hands. Bottles besides.

Coming in to the room Ravi leaves a parcel before her. "Please have your dinner. You haven't eaten anything since morning. We shall have ours a little later. Plates, tumblers and the rest are in the cabinet. There's cool water in the fridge ..."

Ravi goes to the front room.

Sitting in front of the teapoy on the verandah the new guy opens the bottle. Ravi unwraps the parcel containing short eats.

Glasses clink in style. Cheers ! They enjoy their first sip. The glasses get filled and emptied. They were enshrouded in cigarette smoke.

"Machan Ravi, don't think I'm speaking after liquor. Only during your visit I get a chance like this. You are gifted and lucky. You are a swell fellow. The chick is a hot stuff. Quite new and fresh I suppose "

Hush ! Ravi raises his finger to the lips and cautions him not to speak so loud.

TV was on in the adjoining room. The news telecast turned on full blast drowns the noises of their drinking bout. She could here the weather report sound and clear before the news wrap up:

“There will be heavy showers tonight followed by thunder and lightning.”

DEVILS

SAATHTHANGAL

02-06-2002

At last he was able to find a person – having trudged three miles along an estate road, which had no bus service. He was neither young nor old but middle aged.

A Witch doctor must be found to drive out the devil.

Every one was of the same opinion. So Kumaresan gave in.

A devil is easily encountered, not an exorcist. They are a dwindling species to be found anywhere. Even one or two found in each estate, who could play the udukku, had aged and shed their mortal frames to join the realm of the spirits. Kumaresan had almost given up hope when he found this man.

They said that he could cure afflictions and that he was an adept in the art of issuing vipoothi, cutting lime, tying threads and sprinkling charmed water which were normally the part and parcel of a pujari's package deal.

“People are my benefactors” he boasted.

A lean short guy with a Bagavathar hair cut bared his betel- stained teeth in a broad smile and condoned what the quack said.

Shanmugam carried the paraphernalia in a cloth bag and the udukku. No one could guess the exact colour of the cloth bag. Dirt and sweat of ages collected on it gave out a nauseating smell. The bag must have been white when it was bought. Perhaps the pujari didn't know a spell to dry clean it.

Smoking a beedi besides breathing seemed an essential activity that kept Shanmugam alive.

It was heartening to see Singaram a distant relative of Kumaresan whom he called sithappa had turned up already.

Singaravelu was the original name given him by his parents. Since there were two Singaravelus to be entered in the school attendance register, Vaddukottai Kandappu Vathy the teacher split the name in two to differentiate them. So he became Singaram and the other was called Velu. Kandappu Vathy's thoughtful doing with social consciousness was laudable in the context of having avoided any personality conflict that could have cropped up when they paraded in the muster ground to give names to labour in the estate once they left school.

Singaram was single. A happy bachelor bereft of a family burden. He ended up as a middle man whose service was sought after by all and sundry. He could put a deal through in cattle, poultry or land sale. He could find you a house for rent if you are looking for one. Middle East employees bringing home TVs, video decks, VCD players etc., sought his help when they wanted to dispose them. Singaram was a social worker too. He helped people to get their birth certificates. He could obtain a JP's signature when some one was applying for a passport. Of course he got commissions on all his ventures.

Being a resident of Matala, Singaram knew many big people who mattered in society. when Kumaresan was jobless with a newly wedded wife and without a house to live in, it was Singaram who took them both to a mudalali in town and found them employment in his coconut estate.

All items put down in the list were bought already. Singaram had to rake up the lines in a number of estates

around Matale looking for a white cock that never crowed. Singaram knew that at Appuhamy's hovel in the colony one could get good toddy.

"Sithappa has gone for a toddy clout at a time like this" Kumaresan was becoming nervous. The two men were missing. Shanmugam soothed him.

Then he saw a torch. Two figures emerging from the dark.

"Didn't I tell you that they would be here on time. I have been working under the pujari since I was fifteen. I've known him very well. He would never let down his clients. Aiya got upset unnecessarily" Shanmugam told Kumaresan.

Taking the torch from them Shanmugam lit a beedi and rubbed the torch on the ground to put out the fire.

"Kumaresu Thamby, Don't worry about anything, we have been talking about you all the time. I've told Pujariyar about your problems." Singaram staggered as he spoke.

"Thamby Komerasu. The coconut estate mudalali is a real gent, you know. He has told me he would do a lot to make you a man" Then he turned to the Pujari "You must give a full game, and drive out the devil, all right?"

Sitting cross legged on a mat unfurled by the wall Pujari removed his shirt and rolling it left it near his knee. To add to the talisman on his neck he put on the Rudraksha garland he had brought with him. Unwrapping the holy ash -Thiruneeru - from a piece of paper he pressed his three fingers on it and drew three lines respectively on his forehead and above and below his elbows. Then he took a piece of red cloth akin to a shawl and tied it round his waist. He looked a real pujari when Kumaresan brought and placed the lantern before him.

Seven kinds of flowers. Seven limes. Seven kinds of sweet meat. Toddy brimming with white foam beside a bottle

of arrack. Joss sticks burning. Combs of plantains. A couple of hundred rupees over sheaves of betel. Aromatic smoke of frankincense filled the room. A curled up whip lay on pujari's right side.

Kumaresan's wife was brought and made to sit in front of pujari-A brand new brass lamp in gloom-a sad looking, haunting melody.

The sound of udukku dispelled the silence.

Offering his prayers to pillayer first and then invoking the pantheon of devas and rishis whose numbers were astronomical, Pujari invites the deity Madasamy to come over to him and hold court.

The sound of udukku raises in a crescendo and echoes from the roof and the walls, filling the room.

The pujari's whole body begins to jerk, his chanting increased to a feverish pitch. He is possessed. His Saami, Madan has come over him. Placing his udukku down on the mat he grabs the whip and starts flogging himself on his back. The audience were terror stricken. They look at each other benumbed with fear.

"Madasamy is a ferocious one unlike other deities"
-comments pujari's assistant Shanmugam.

Sitting back on the mat he takes the udukku and starts beating again.

Dun dun Dun ... dun ...

Dun dun .. Dun dun

"I am Madasamy", he announces "I've come to your door step. Don't worry about the Maharajan and his maid."

Dun ,, Dun .. Dun Dun

“These two fell in love two years ago. Am I right ?

Answer Yes or No ?” -Pujari asks.

“What Saami says is right” replies Kumaresan.

“The maid's home people were totally against the marriage. Her parents were dead opposed to it. Am I right.”

Kumaresan feels uncomfortable.

“You can't hide any thing from sami ... Sami knows everything.” Says Shanmugam.

“Say ‘yes’ if I'm right. You can protest and argue out if I'm wrong ..”

Kumaresan hesistantly says ‘yes’.

“Maharajan and the maid eloped. They ran away from home.”

Dun dun ... Dundun ... Dundun .. Dundun

“Am I right”

“Yes, saami “

This time Singaram answered looking at Kumaresan to save embarrassment. Kumaresan nods his head in confirmation and looks at those who had gathered to give audience.

How does pujari know all this? No it's not pujari, it's Madasamy ... Saami knows every thing. Kaumaresan looks at Singaram with gratitude.

“The girl has been possessed by a devil for the last three days. She has not taken any food or water since then. In the night she is hysterical and shouts, “Devil coming – Devil coming ”

How accurate the predictions are. The pujari is really a seer .. a God-man !

“Don’t worry son. I can drive out this devil” Pujari now turns to Maheswari seated before him – the brand new brass oil lamp in gloom.

“Ey ... tell me who are you? Why are you troubling this maid? Ask anything you want. We are ready to give you. You must leave this girl and vanish – Go away.”

Pujari’s eyes reddened with fury. He was indignant.

Dundun .. Dundun .. Dundun .. the sound of udukku was terrible. Owe inspiring. It sent fear down ones spine.

Maheswari’s head reeled. She felt giddy and fainted.

Pujari held a lime between a nutcracker and placed it on her forehead and chanted a mantra and cut the lime in two. Then he took the small brass pot and blew a charm into the water contained in it and splashed the water on her face. Next he smeared the viputhi on her forehead.

Maheswari comes round. Kumarasan raises her a little and make her sit leaning against his shoulder. Shanmugam opens the ‘eye’ of one of the thambilies that were kept ready, and pours the Thambili water in a glass and gives her to drink. Emptying the glass Maheswari gestures with her hand to say that she was still thirsty Sanmugam takes another Thambili and gets ready to pour her another glass.

Maheswari feels that there was some strength still left in her.

She sits up.

“Who are you” -shivering Maheswari asked the same question that she asked three nights ago looking at the figure that emerged from the dark and advanced towards her ...

“At one end of the coconut grove bordering the colony coconuts were constantly getting stolen. We must catch the culprits. You must hide some where in wait and catch them.”

-Mudalali had said and given him a torch with a new set of batteries.

“Looking at him and Maheswari, Mudalali had given them not only employment but also a house to live in. How magnanimous he is. They have to be loyal to him.

Here was an opportunity for Kumaresan to prove his mettle. Although reluctant to leave his young wife alone in a lonely house at night, he joined the watcher to do the job he was entrusted with.

It was a dark and quiet night. Even the sound of crickets had ceased.

Maheswari lay wide awake on a mat with her eyes closed.

Click! The sound was distinct.

A key turning in the key hole.

Maheswari heard it. The door creaked opening on its hinges. She started shivering in fear. The chimney lamp flickered in the dark room. Her heart began to pound. She raised her head to see At the opened door was a figure standing in the dark- A spectre really!

“Who are you?”

“

A cold wind crept into the house.

“Who are you? who are you?”

Her voice trembled. There was no answer. She looked intently. Its feet didn't touch the ground. Then it can't be a human. She knew it well. It's definitely a ghost-a devil!

You've come to live in Yaka's Estate. The estate of the devil. No family stayed here too long.

-She remembered what the sinhala women from the colony at the well told her, when she went to fetch water.

“A ghost appears in the night. You should take care of yourself.”

A woman turning to go with a pot of water on her hip warned her with a wink and a mysterious smile.

“Colony people are rogues. Don’t have anything to do with them” -This was one of the conditions laid down by mudalali when he gave them employment.

She had suffered enough during the last six months. Hasn’t she?

There was a strong wind. She could hear its rustle on the coconut leaves. Then came the rain beating on the roof and the window. The flickering lamp threatened to blow out. The night of the ghost! The spectre began to grow big in size. Its head touched the roof. Its shadow covered the entire walls. It was advancing towards her.

“Aiyoo ... Devil! Devil!” With that cry calling for help, she lost her voice. Her entire being was paralysed with fear.

The sound of a gecko on the wall confirmed it was the devil.

The spectre stoops over her. The crackling skeleton pricks her and presses on her body. Its skull rubs on her brow. The skeleton hands bruises her breast. She feels as if her rib-bones were going to break. Menacing – painful. The flames emitting from its eyeholes scorched her. The vampire teeth sank deep into her neck dripping blood. Now it bit and chewed her lips.

From its mouth issued forth the stinking smell of a rotting corpse. When it injected the liquid venom into her she lost all consciousness.

Later when she came round it was withdrawing from her bathed in sweat.

In a flash she remembered having seen this ghost somewhere before. The spectre was back at the door step to leave. She recognised the shirt and the sarong, before it shut the door.

The sound of udukku was at its peak as if the whole sky was crumbling down on her.

“Ey..... devil who are you .. who are you?” pujari kept an prodding her.

Mahaswari gets up firmly on her feet, the whole nightmare shaken off her. Claspig Kumaresan’s palm she tells him in a clear voice:

“This is Yakkawatha - Estate of the devil. The whole place is haunted. We shall not stay here any more. We don’t need this employment; we dont need this house. We are leaving this place at dawn.”

PARVATI

THINAPATHI
08- 04- 1967

“Ravana was air-borne in his flower -chariot, abducting Sita the consort of Sri Ramachandra, with the uprooted abode...”

-Annavi Kangani was reading from his PERIYA EZUTHTHU Ramayanam in a sing-song accent, struggling through the letters in big bold types.

Annavi’s piercing voice assails Parvati’s ears.

Parvathi who lived in one of the lower line-kambaras opens her window and looks in the direction of the upper line -rooms.

A cluster of men sitting around Annavi Kangani on their haunches on his upper line-room verandah were hanging on to his lips in rapt attention. None had dared to stretch out or lie down lest he would be born a snake in his next birth for falling asleep while listening to the purana.

“What a bother These men and their Ramayana session ... They don’t seem to retire to bed and repose after a day’s toil and meal What a din they make ... disturbing all and sundry”

-Irritated Parvathi slammed the window shut in disgust.

“It seems you’re closing the door only now Not gone to bed yet, I suppose”

Her neighbor’s voice queries from the other side of the wall that separated their line-kambaras.

“How could any one sleep with this ear-splitting noise? Screaming like a store - mill it goes on till dawn night after night”

“When is your man returning? Anything heard from him yet?”

“You mean Ramu’s father. He got really upset when he received the telegram. He left immediately. His mother’s condition is critical indeed. It’s four days since he went ... No news from him so far.”

“Ramu’s father” was a reference to her own husband.

“Okay dear, I’m heavy with sleep. I’m going to bed ”

A hush ... after a brief exchange of words. Light goes out next door.

“Ramu and Luxmana who set out in search of Sita Devi, meet Sukriva ...”

Annavi Kangani’s Ramayana reading rends the air.

“Good for nothing fellows. They don’t allow others a wink of sleep”

-Parvati grumbles.

She looks about her. Her son Ramu was folded in sleep on a piece of sack in a corner and Petchi her little one lies curled up in another corner – A withered tender tea leaf. A bottle lamp burns in the room shedding a dim light.

Parvati opens her door and looks towards the upper bend facing the lower line – rooms. Light is still on in Conductor Aiya’s bungalow.

Leaving the door unlatched Parvarthi retires into her line-kambara and drops herself in bed. Restless. Tossing and turning in bed she runs her eyes over her well – built body. Despite two child – birth her figure remains fine. Faultless.

From Periya Dorai onwards down to the ordinary kanganis, every one leered at her with prying eyes – A dainty dish in which Aiyah relishes these nights. A feeling of secret delight mingles with her hideous grief.

Parvati's mind in a whirl ...

The pure virtuous Parvati fallen a prey to base passion.
Unfaithful to her husband.

She is filled with remorse.

Grief - Stricken.

It all began four days ago when conductor Aiyah sent the errand boy as his messenger.

What a pimp he was – the errand boy.

The lousy, lecherous words he poured in to her ears ...
Vulgar. Nauseating.

She wouldn't bear to hear them. She felt like taking her own life.

Parvati the chaste wife of a caring husband to share her bed with a night-prowler?

No ... Never.

It just cannot happen. She will not give in. she isn't a loose woman. She will not succumb to Conductor Aiyah's evil designs.

But then

Conductor Aiya's face appeared before her mind's eye.

Aiya the inescapable monster.

Its no secret that conductor had an influence on Periya Dorai. She recalled how he used it to avenge anyone who displeased him. Four months ago when lower division Muthamma mustered courage and stood him up, the axe fell on her father's Kangani job. That wasn't all. A bag of

fertilizer was thrown in to his vegetable plot and he was caught for stealing it from the store room. The watcher was made to beat him up. Then he was hauled in to a police jeep and driven away while his family were beating their breasts and wailing. Poor Muthamma's father counting the bars in prison cell now. The whole thing was a frame up. The whole line knew it.

True. They had a trade union. Of what use?

Parvati's head reeled as she began to think.

She imagined her own husband being branded a thief ... beaten to pulp ... dumped into a police jeep and driven away. Paravati beating her breast and running behind the jeep with her children.

No ... she wouldn't allow that to happen to her husband. She wouldn't bear to see what befell Muthamma's family happening to her and her two children.

Parvati's chastity at stake. Parvati's mind took a leap. A monkey leap. She slipped. Parvati, now a fallen woman.

Rising from her bed she goes out again to see if Aiya was coming.

"Sita languishes in Asokavanam as a captive of Ravanaeswaran . Sita thinks of her spouse Rama all the time. She is in deep sorrow and anguish. Tears stream down her face and wet her clothes. Yaksinis, her hand maids in attendance try to woo her to become Ravana's wife. Sita wouldn't bear to hear their deceitful words. She raises her hands and covers her ears."

-Annabi's Ramayanaya reading gathering momentum

Parvati peers through the dark. A figure is advancing towards the lower line-room. No doubt. It was Aiya.

A storm has brewed since Aiya entered into her life.

The storm tossed Paravati adrift – caught between the devil and the deep sea.

There comes ayia like a thief in the night.

This liaison has been going on for four successive nights - tonight being the fourth night.

Aiya during the day was clad in shorts and stockings. He wore a hat. He swung his cane as he walked uphill. The lesser mortals were awed as he screeched along in his gum boots

Now wearing a sarong, a black shirt and a mundasu round his head he looked like a labourer who goes in the night to cut gliricidia leaves on the sly for the cattle. During these night prowls its Aiya who feared the lesser mortals.

Aiya must be above forty. As his words carried weight with Periya Dorai every one dreaded him. No one wanted to call for any trouble by displeasing him. Aiya's wife was an ailing sick woman who survived on medicine and mantrams, to whom he paid no attention.

Aiya having had an eye on Parvati for long, made use of the situation to sway her when husband was away.

The nocturnal creature having reached the lower line under cover of darkness, nearing Parvati's line-kambra crawls on all far to escape the eyes of those attending the Ramayana session on Annavi Kangani's upper line room verandah.

Aiya pushes the door slowly and sneaks in.

The door is latched. Bottle lamp blown out.

“Janaki is a flame of chasity. Janaki the chaste wife of Sri Ramamaoorthy, a raging fire when Ravana nears her. It scorches Ravana. Ravana cannot lay a finger on Sita... “

Annavi Cangani's resonant voice rises to a crescendo!....

Time keeps ticking away. It was past midnight.

Suddenly a knock on the door.

Who could it be at this ungodly hour.

The knock continues.

Terrified Parvati disengages herself with a shudder.

Drawn to the door, She opens it.

It was her's husband.

What a cruel blow to her mourning husband who had hurried home to inform her of his mother's death and to take her with him.

In his own line- Kambara his chaste wife Parvati and conductor AiyaIn the dead of night

Their deplorable condition needed no explanation.

Disgraceful. Disastrous. Shocking.

What could Parvati's husband do now?

Walk out on her? Take a pruning knife and finish off this fiend? Start a quarrel? Yell and howl Put the entire neighborhood up?

Parvati's mortified husband swallowed his anger and stood there motionless.

At that moment ...

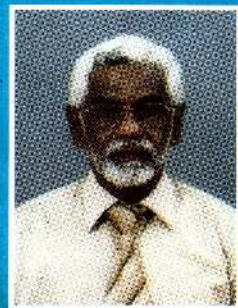
“Janakiraman – Janki's consort – having annihilated his enemy the ten Headed Ravana and rescued his chaste Sita, sets out to Mithilai, with her.”

Annavi kangani was winding up his Ramayanaya recital for the night.



A. Malaranpan

GENESIS



Pannamathuk Kavirayar

..... A. Malaranpan is a well known Tamil fiction Writer and Lyricist who has written many award winning short stories and memorable songs which have been aired on radio and televisions. He has written a Tamil Lyric for a Sinhala film 'Aadara Meena' which was screened in 2008.

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