

CHALAM

By

Chalam

Translated from Telugu

By

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Dedicated to

‘Nartaki’

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Foreword

I detest autobiographies. Writing an autobiography presupposes that the writer thinks that he is someone important to the world, he did a great service to people, if he didn't tell about it, his greatness would not be revealed to the world, and if it is not known it would be a great loss to the world.

If someone like me who thinks "Why was I ever born? Once I was, why didn't I instantly die? Why did I pollute my environs for so long?" writes his story shamelessly, it can never be forgiven. If the writing still happens, it means that things are not in our hands. Besides, I can't see well. My thoughts won't speak except through my fingers. What I think does not come through in words. Still, this book is getting written. The immediate cause of this is Viswam. He applied for leave in his job, stayed here and encouraged Sowris; then he instigated the innocent Bharati who came here to visit Nartaki, to work on this; and Bharati finished the job as if she was born to do it - I cannot think of it in any other way than as her karma.

Arunachalam
12-30-1972

A Fantasy

When the first movement of this beginningless creation vibrated in the void, I too was born, unmanifest, along with the five elements. Together with five billion other lives I gradually vibrated to light, sound and touch and assumed my individuality.

As tiny waves in the endless stream of love we strolled about with enthusiasm and passion for some eons, in the ever-fresh light, overwhelmed by joy, in the midst of the stars dancing around in the edifice of the new creation.

From that day, among the oceans and hurricanes, in the rays lit by the intense sun, I sported for eons, lay down, slept and formed this 'I'. I was a fish aspiring for the sky; I was a bird floating away in far off skies on wings carried by winds vibrating with sunlight and rocked in the swings of treetops. I had grown enormous arrogance eating the flesh of game in the jungles and roaming around in the orbits of birth and death, dreamed with hope and finally became a man. On the ladders of those lives, I grew weary of the struggle restlessly to reach higher worlds out of hope and, drowned in slumber, and wandering in old memories, slid into a bodily form.

I was a woman, a man, a pauper and a rich man. I used to desire, "I want this, I want to achieve that in my next life," and I bargained with death. I was addicted to life's pleasures. So many times I was weighed down with ever-fresh impressions of pleasures and pains, groaning each time. I got addicted to bodily experiences, yet was disgusted with them. Unable to lift myself out of them, I collapsed. Drawing from the strength of the dreams dreamt far away sometime between birth and death, I relentlessly searched for some unknown beauty and got weary. This occurred once between each lifetime and the next.

It was a spotless place without boundaries, heights or depths. A pure expanse. At a distance, around me were brilliant worlds. Unblemished forms arising from the white light rays that spilled from the edges of the worlds, forms appearing as though reflected somewhere; men forming rows at a distance from one end to the other were nearing these divine forms. I too was among them. A form attracted me and approached. I walked mechanically, I prostrated and stood up. (There are no man-woman relationships here.) I said with tears in my eyes, "I am leaving." She nodded in sympathy.

"You will come, won't you?" I said. She heard something and signed, looking back over her shoulder, "Yes," reluctantly and lovingly. I turned around to leave. The light of a shadow looking different from the others was walking ahead of me on the same path at some distance. Everyone was looking at that form with devotion and amazement. Everyone knew their way without a specified path. I knew I had to walk behind him.

So we walked for a long time. There, at the edge of that world (if there is such a thing as an edge), someone was standing. She saw the form walking in front of me and at once prostrated. The divine form in front of me didn't look around, but floated away in the void. A huge dazzling light formed behind him along the whole path on which he walked away. I was looking in that

direction, thinking of following it at once. Someone came and sat by my side. Standing, she said, "You are leaving?"

I turned to her and looked.

"Don't be sad. You will come too, soon after I leave, won't you?" I said. "You remember how many years you had spent in those worlds? How our momentary partings looked as if they would last for eons and eons?"

"Yes, dear, we must. In this vast universe, what a great boon it is to us to be born and be together again at the same time, in the same world and in the same place," I said. "But, in this filth, in this narrow space...?" she said, crying.

"How can I return without you?" the form asked again.

The god who was listening to all this placed his hand on my shoulder, indicating that the time to leave had arrived.

"Don't forget your duty. You are going with the hope that you can wipe out the tears of those wretched people consumed with sorrow and cast out. But don't slip from the smoothness of those tears into the attachment to pretty cheeks. Remember your goal," he said nudging me forward. I slipped and emerged here. Suffocated, I tried to fly. What is this, air is leaking slowly from my inside? I opened my eyes. Why is the light dark? I screamed. How disgusting it sounded. A long wail came out of me. Two soft arms lifted me. How sweet. But when I wanted to move, I felt as if I was held tight in a box. Some one was comforting me. "Mother! Mother! You?"

Then I lost consciousness. "You said you would come. You are already here! So soon?" So I thought and fell unconscious.

In my dream, a *Sannayi* [oboe] band from a distance. I was in the lap of Kapaleswara. I held the garland of skulls hung on his neck and, being hungry, I placed one of the skulls in my mouth. A few drops of water fell in my mouth. He said smiling in compassion, "Yes, that's it for this life!"

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# 1

Tenali, 10:00 am. I was lying on my back on the floor under a double-spring cot, very comfortably. No one knew I was there. No one cared. Precious marble floor under my back. I could hear them speak from time to time. I was ten years old. What I heard of the adults' chat became the stuff of my dreams. Golden light filled the room. If I had a bit of tamarind chutney or a washed piece of pickled mango, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with the world for a while. I was mostly consoled by the fact that my father wouldn't come into my room. He would always prowl around to see where I was hiding. He would see me anyway under the cot from a distance. He would shake his head and leave. I think he even ground his teeth. The very thought of getting him mad would fill me with happy mirth and satisfaction. If someone like my father didn't exist...? It wouldn't be such a bad world, after all!

My first memory was of my father beating me when I was five. My second memory was of him beating me. My third memory was again him beating me. He would only stop when he feared that this poor fellow might die if he beat him any more. If he prayed to God to grant him a wish, it would be that he could beat me all the time. Sometime before that, he made me quit school; he said he would himself teach me to read. If I asked him to teach me a lesson, he would ask me questions and then beat me. I hated my father. I used to go around avoiding him. I used to hide around the house. That hatred remained with me for the rest of my life. To this day I never addressed him as "Daddy" or use other such terms. I had such disgust. No matter how much he beat me, I never said, "Stop beating me," or "I won't do it again." I just cried when I couldn't bear the pain. He used to beat me deliberately just to see how long I would go on crying. We had a lifelong enmity.

He never earned a penny. He didn't work. He, his wife and children lived with the in-laws (my grandfather and grandmother). The in-laws were nice people. What a mean fellow, what a lowly character, this man. When they thought I was going to die from his beatings, his mother-in-law and father-in-law would come and stand in the room, hoping at least then he would cease his beating. They never spoke with him.

The cot I was lying under was my grandmother's [*mother's mother*]. She was fond of me and was sorry for me. She was the sole monarch of the household. My mother was her lone darling daughter. She put up with her son-in-law fearing that if she asked him to leave, he might take her away with him. Because of her physical ailments my mother spent all 24 hours of the day in her bed. She used to stack pillows on the bed and be very clean and comfortable. Only she and I had the right to sit on it. No one else did, not even my grandfather. A fan ran all the time in that room. They hired servants to pull the fan in shifts. It was only stopped in the final moments when her dead body was removed from the bed.

They had workmen from Madras come over and build the bungalow in which we lived. It was modern and fashionable. There was a garden in the front of the house. On the side were cows and calves. I was a weakling from the start. I was born with a nervous defect. The allopathic doctors called it migraine. Dr. Achanta Lakshmipathi diagnosed it as a weakness in the sympathetic nervous system. I always felt sluggish. My whole life was spent lying down, with little

strength to stand and walk. My guess is that something happened to me during my father's beatings. I didn't have the energy to study the lessons at school well or listen to what the teachers said. I would fall sick at the time of the examinations, flunk them and surprise my teachers.

My mother had a litter of children, became a weakling and spent her life lying in the bed. A couple of times she came close to dying. Yet, her 'kindly' husband never left her alone. My little brothers and sisters would cry in the middle of the night. Every night, my mother, in all her weakness, would rock the crib and sing lullabies with tired and sleepy eyes.

*Don't cry, baby, don't cry darling  
They sent word to Nellore  
For black sugarcane.*

We didn't know then when we lived in Tenali what those black sugarcanes were. I thought that they were superior quality canes to beat children with. My mother sang and sang, but the poor child would keep crying. When she said in a sorry voice, "What more can I do, you won't fall asleep yet," I would listen to her voice and cry silently. Just like mothers of her time, my mother never beat small children.

How sad I was! Every night I used to vow:

1. I would never marry.
2. Even if the elders forced me to marry, I would never have children.
3. Even if I had children, I would never make them cry.
4. Even if they cried, no matter what, I would never beat them.

The first and the second were not in my hands. But I kept the other vows. All my childhood was spent in ill health, my father's beatings and fear. That's why I never understand anyone who says how great a time childhood is. I don't know a thing about mother's love or father's love. My mother never caressed me. I never had the strength to walk to school. On my pleading some bigger friends used to drag me there.

"Milk is a food that can be easily digested," said my teacher.

"I can't digest it," I replied.

Everyone laughed. So many cows in my house! They said, "You must have drunk too much milk. That's why you probably have indigestion."

That morning I was lying under my grandmother's cot and daydreaming.

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When I was even younger we lived in Thotlavalluru. My grandfather was a 'receiver' to the Jamindar. We lived like princes in the town. We had horses, elephants and servants. There was the Krishna River with groves on its banks. And in the river there were sand islands and forests on those islands. The castle of the Jamindar was across the street from our house. There was a



beautiful garden behind it. The castle had many floors. The upper floors were always closed. Sitting in those unoccupied rooms how many dreams did I dream about life in the harems, based on the stories passed on by the adults! Just as she told the other kids, my mother would tell us the stories of Ramayana. I used to cringe at the injustice when I heard that Sita lamented ceaselessly and entered the Mother Earth. To this day my anger at the thought of Sri Rama has not abated.

My heart burned when I learned that the Pandavas were burnt alive in hell at the end of the story of Mahabharata and the Kauravas sat on a throne in heaven – I asked my mother, “How come?” How would she know? My innocent mother would answer that Bhima at the end merged with the god of Wind ~ as if that was a fair compensation in some fashion.

“He merged, so?

“That’s all.”

“That’s all!”

My heart rebelled complaining what kind of justice is this. It still does. If a pot-bellied Brahman eats a full dinner comfortably and talks of Vedanta self-righteously: “We will merge in the Parabrahman as water in water and oil in oil,” I feel like striking him on his head with a stick. That’s why I detest Vedanta. When I was weary, crushed and cringing, unable to bear my suffering, wondering when my mind would stop its torture, when I think of my state at that time and those days of poverty, I cannot tolerate this Vedanta. This in spite of Mr. Dikshitulu’s admonishing, “That’s the way of the Bhagavan. You are rebelling against your guru.” “Mr. Dikshitulu! Have you too merged without a trace in that essence of Parabrahman?”

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In Tenali, in my childhood, my grandmother read Bharatam every afternoon to the neighbors. Whenever I could, I would skip school, skip the schooling my father was trying to give me, and sit behind my grandmother. I knew he wasn’t allowed to come there. After the reading, when I was at play or before dinner, whenever he could find me, he would beat me, saying, “Why, you don’t need to study? Will you make a living reading the myths to people?” “Will I really not be educated and will I really make a living reading the myths? Will I be so lucky?” How happy I was at the thought! I could even forget the pain of his beatings. At school, my friends had an unexplained, genuine, liking for me. Some would leave me to my devices. Others, however, would try to scold me or beat me whenever they could. To this day I think that there must be either in my face or in my stars something to make me a target of people’s hatred.

I had a cousin who hailed from Kakinada. We fought at our very first meeting. He was older and stronger. Even when I returned home, my defeat would kindle inside me. Unable to avenge him, I thought I would create a character out of him in a story. That was the start of my writing. I translated an English novel I had read and gave the villain his name. I was a bit grown up by then. I wrote part of the novel and asked the people at Andhra Pracharini Granthamala Series to publish it. They asked me to mail them a few pages as a sample. I did. They thought it was some great writer who sent it and replied, “It’s very good, send us the whole book.” How could I finish such a book at such a playful age? I didn’t answer. Perhaps my impotent anger at

my cousin spoke through my stories! I was unable to do much about the society, so I spilled all my anger in my stories.

My grandmother was fond of relatives. She had all her nephews and nieces living in her house; she educated them and got them jobs. Among them, her brother's son called Nayikam was living with us. We were always pissed off at him. We would harass him. When he bought a new umbrella and placed it in a corner, we broke up its spokes and left the pieces there. We buried in a sewer his diary in which he wrote the details of all the monies he had lent to people. One evening, he came home late for dinner when it was dark. We got hold of his clean silk *dhoti* he was used to wearing for dinner, tore it in the middle and left in the dark. Not noticing that it was in rags, he wore it and came to dinner. We burst out in laughter and ran out. When he went to the lavatory, we would steal his tumbler and run away.

There were numerous *purana*-reading sessions in the house. Also, in the afternoons, a pundit came, read the Sanskrit original of the *puranas* and Vedanta books and explained them to us. With such a background, I formed a great devotion to God. I was very fond of Vishnu and the stories of Vishnu. I would think of them constantly and tell them to other children. I worshipped Vishnu in various ways. I figured there ought to be a temple for him. I collected some bricks and built something like a temple. I collected some coins, bought camphor and dates and hid them away in the temple. The worship gave me such happiness. Even when I sat in a classroom, the thought of the temple and the God in it filled my mind with joy. Even today, when I think of this I feel happy.

They initiated me early in my life. I learned the prayers carefully and worshipped three times a day. A fellow called Sree Ramulu was initiated before me. He told me – whether it was true or false, I didn't know – that when he recited the Gayatri *mantram* devoutly for some time, the goddess Gayatri appeared to him. He even described her. Since then, I wanted to make the goddess appear to me. I not only did the worship, but also recited the Gayatri intensely. I became an orthodox Brahmin in my attire and habits. I tied up my hair in a tiny knot. I got the rest of my head shaved. I would draw the water from the well, bathe in it and wear clean clothes. I would sit in front of my temple and worship and meditate on the Gayatri. All my time was spent that way. Not only did this practice become my life's aim, but whenever I thought of Vishnu and my temple, the thought filled my mind with indescribable joy. At dinner, if I saw anyone who wasn't a Brahmin, I would walk out leaving my dinner. Whenever I had the leisure, I read the *puranas*. That was my life in Tenali.

Ours was a huge house, a terraced house, and a huge garden. So, several girls in town came to play with my sisters. My leisure time was taken up with my friendship with them. I never had male friends. I never went out to play in the evenings. I spent my time playing with the young girls, joking around and staging plays. Ever since my childhood I yearned for girlfriends who lived far away. I would lie down alone on the terrace and looking at the floating clouds, call out loudly: "You are going north. Could you please convey my yearning, my longing, and my feeling of separation to my love?" I was at such a tender age that when I met a beautiful girl, I would be lost, not knowing what to do with the beauty that I held in my hands. My childhood friends would look at me innocently as if asking me, "So, what will you say?" I was the same when I grew up. I

made friends with a great effort. And my mature friends used to look at me as if to say, “What else do you want? What are you looking for?”

## 2

The marriage of Ammanni was fixed. The bridegroom arrived on a horseback to the wedding lodge. Everyone was standing at the windows looking out. Ammanni started crying. Not knowing why, I asked her anxiously what the matter was. We had been friends for a long time. Our friendship was greater than the bond of affection between siblings. I tried to console her, not knowing why she was crying.

The next day, the moment I saw the bridegroom it became clear. My grandfather who normally didn't blame anyone wrote in his diary: "He seems like an educated ass." I began to understand the atrocity that was committed. How could the delicate Ammanni spend her whole life with someone whose sight we couldn't stand even from a distance? I started being hurt subconsciously. "Whom shall I complain to? How many girls are going through untold suffering this way!" Such a rascal, even my father couldn't say a word to his own prospective son-in-law. All through the days of the wedding, Ammanni was crying continually. All of us children were cringing at her sorrow. We couldn't get comfortable. The groom and we had different upbringing. If we had a choice, we would 'feed him his own grass' so he couldn't take it and would run away. But we were too little for that.

Meanwhile, my own wedding date was getting closer. Without any specific reason I had a disdain for marriage. Besides, by that time I was already in love with three little girls. But I couldn't marry them because of the taboos against inter-caste marriage. I was not allowed to live with them. And I was in pain. I struggled. I wasn't even 16 at that time. I wrote to the Sringeri Pitham begging them to give me an exemption to marry my cousin [*father's elder brother's daughter*] Ramana [*paternal cousins were not allowed to be married*]. How rebellious I felt against religion, scriptures and taboos of kinships!

I made a big fuss saying that I didn't want the marriage. I thought of running away. But I had never moved out of the house. I was just a weakling child. Moreover, my health was poor. Where could I go? Thanks to this marriage, however, I acquired two loving sisters-in-law. After I met them I contented myself. They both remained close friends for life. I spent my time studying.

Once, when I came home for a vacation, I learned that a date had been set for Ammanni's nuptials and my brother-in-law was coming for the occasion. Ammanni was crying. I at once wrote to my brother-in-law: "Nuptials are supposed to be between you and my sister. Then did you ever find out if my sister liked it?" He replied: "I knew that such ideas are getting into your head. That's why I'm rushing there to take her away." Ammanni said that she wouldn't agree to the nuptials at any cost. I, Bucchi and Chitti got together and decided that we shouldn't let these nuptials happen. "No matter what, these nuptials cannot take place. Our Ammanni doesn't even like the looks of that bridegroom," we shouted so loudly that the family of the groom would hear us. My father was furious. He too disliked the bridegroom intensely. He learned that all of us children banded together. The relatives who were visiting and our family all gathered around Ammanni and blocked her from our view. They were stifling her. We, on our part, tried to

reassure Ammanni. We tried to disrupt the nuptials up till the moment she was sent into the nuptial room. But Ammanni yielded. We couldn't help it. We kept watch through the night to see if she would make any clamor in the room. We didn't know what we could do. Noticing our efforts, my father got mad. He came to beat me. I rebelled. He pushed me out of the house. I left. That was how we got through the night.

The next morning, Ammanni came into my room and walked through it as if she didn't even know me. That was the end of our friendship. In all these years of our lives we never talked to each other again. Although it was a shock at first to see how girls are transformed in the nuptials room, I finally understood.

After I went to Madras to go to school, Ammanni started writing letters to me, complaining how her mother-in-law and husband were insulting and harassing her. I replied expressing my sympathy. And soon her troubles intensified. I wrote to her, "They are evil people. Forgive them."

She said that they were opening my letters to her. Then I wrote to her rebuking them, "Those who open others' letters are mean." They then made sure that Ammanni had no access to a pen, paper or money for postal stamps. I was just a kid. But they became quite scared of me; they thought I presented a huge danger. Ammanni's husband was signing for her and taking delivery of the letters. I reported the matter to the postal service. He would then make her sign the letters and snatch them from her. Having no other recourse, Ammanni gathered scraps of paper from the street and wrote where there was space on them and mailed them without a stamp. Then her husband got his lawyer serve me notice, warning that he would prosecute me if I kept writing letters to his wife. I redoubled my abuse in my letters. Apparently he beat her whenever she got a letter from me. Ammanni wrote a series of letters saying that she couldn't take it any more, and that if I didn't help her, she would commit suicide.

Meanwhile, I wrote letters to my mother asking her to get Ammanni back. She didn't have much to say in reply. Then I gave her an ultimatum: if they didn't bring her back within 15 days, I would bring her myself and put her in a Christian boarding school. If it were just me, my family wouldn't have responded; they would have thought, "Foolish fellow, what can he do?" But they were afraid that I had the support of Kandukuri Veeresalingam, Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu and the Maharajah of Pithapuram. In the meantime, I got a letter from Ammanni saying that her situation had changed, that they were treating her well and she didn't need my help after all.

Around that time, terrible news to the effect that Veeresalingam was kidnapping widows and marrying them off was causing uproar in the region. My aunt [*father's younger sister*], who was a widow, ran away and married again. My aunt's widow marriage was an important event in the life story of Veeresalingam. My family got terrified with the event. My mother instantly ran to my brother-in-law's house, showed them my letter and warned them to be careful.

That same night my brother-in-law went into his room, fell on Ammanni's feet and pleaded with her not leave him and not to ruin the reputation of his family. Ammanni laid down all the conditions she wanted. He accepted them. Apparently Ammanni alleged later that I tried to break up her beautiful family and that she got wise to it and extricated herself from my snares. From that

time on, I understood how a woman suffers in her in-laws' place, and how the in-laws' operate on her brain. That was the start of my movement to rescue women. I learned what reforming women meant. I learned what names women would call those who try to help them.

My grandfather must have resented a great deal finding that the boy whom he had adopted and expected to perform his funeral rites and memorial rituals would turn out to be like this. I too was sorry that I was hurting his feelings. The pressure on him not to bequeath me property or money was mounting. Meanwhile, another issue came up. I insisted on educating 'T'. I am not sure how I got that idea. I was adamant that a wife fit for me ought to have school education. Right after the marriage, I started agitating that as soon as I got to Madras 'T' too should stay in a hostel there and go to school. I made all the necessary arrangements. All I needed was 20 rupees. 'T' parents turned down my request for that money and confiscated all her jewelry.

It was outrageous in our family's view that a girl lived in a hostel in Madras and went to school. "Why haven't you cast him out of the house yet?" people were prodding my grandfather. I pleaded with my grandfather and tried to persuade him that even if 'T' couldn't stay in a hostel, we two could live together in a separate house. 'T' was happy and studying enthusiastically in Madras. My grandfather died before the end of that year. Just as I promised him, I performed all the rites and funeral prescribed by scriptures. That was the last of my religion.

I was never so keen on money or property. Maybe I was born that way. I relinquished my property and looked for a job. My parents used my property as they pleased. My father-in-law, who had no male offspring, watched my outrageous behavior, was irate and bequeathed his enormous property to outsiders. Thus, I escaped two great dangers in my life.

### 3

It was 9:00 p.m. My father tied my two younger brothers, Bucchi and Chitti, each to a big black wooden post and started beating them alternately. They screamed loudly at every blow, unable to bear their pain. My sister Ammanni sat there crying helplessly. My mother was encouraging him to beat some more. The remaining sundry relatives were watching this spectacle and nodding their heads in agreement. My grandmother died sometime ago. In his grief my grandfather was lying on the bed passively watching everything.

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Around 1910. My grandfather's house. I turned sixteen. I was studying in Kakinada College. As soon as I went to Kakinada I made friends with the members of the Brahmo Samaj. I read their books and joined in their prayers. The influence of Brahmo Samaj in my life became stronger. I had great devotion, affection and reverence for the principal of the College, Mr. Raghupathi Venkataratnam Naidu. My life was influenced by him enormously, morally and spiritually. How I detested the Hindu religious customs and caste divisions! Now I was strongly resolved to uproot them. I felt that, no matter how great they were, if people didn't belong to the Brahmo Samaj, they were worthless.

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In Tenali too I got together with a few friends; we worshipped God and planned to propagate these reforms. I would visit them at their houses and invite them to mine - this was my daily routine. My brothers and sisters were my counselors in this movement. We were always friends. Thinking that this was going to extremes my father beat them severely that night. I went and hugged my brothers and sat there watching helplessly, without taking the beating myself, bemoaning the fact that there was nothing more horrible than that. To this day I am ashamed to think that I was sitting there watching passively.

My grandfather thought that I or my brothers wouldn't be able to perform funeral, memorial or other death-related rituals, as we were the offspring of our father [*his son-in-law*]. He deluded himself watching my religious discipline, separated me from my siblings and adopted me. When I became opposed to religion, I used to feel sad that I was causing troubles for him. Various relatives would visit and teach me the excellence of the Hindu Religion. Those who never did their daily prayers gave me lectures on prayer. How many months had I prayed, with such sincerity, and three times a day! Unaware of how many thousands of times I had meditated on Gayatri, they gave me lectures on the excellence of the Gayatri *mantra*. These 'honorable' men couldn't aim at anything higher than being educated, working at high-paying jobs, making a lot of money and preserving family prestige. How shallow were these religious lecturers! How low had their religion fallen! Although he was hurt, my grandfather didn't say a word.

My goals at that time were:

1. I shouldn't worship images.

2. I shouldn't enter temples.
3. I shouldn't respect caste differences.

No one taught me these. Most of all, my respect for women. I don't know where I got it from. I must have been born with it. I feel sad when I think of why I caused so much grief for my grandfather for such trifles. But that's how I was born. There is no doubt about it.

Our whole household ran with the help of servants, particularly cooks. Right in front of me....

They would say, "The daughter-in-law is coming, right? She will do all these chores." When Mrs. Ranganayakamma ['T'] came to set up house, on the very first night I saw her in the kitchen holding a broom. When she saw me, she would run away. So, I forced her to face me by sending my brothers or sisters to fetch her. I said:

"You tell them, 'Do your own chores, you bitches!'" and made her agree with me. I sent my brothers to spy on her to see if she would indeed say that. 'T' said it and then ran to me. After that, no one ordered her to do menial chores.

Our grove was not far from our house. We set up a badminton court there. I, my brothers and sisters and 'T' would go there every afternoon and play. We were all young. The town folk were mad at us. Our house was prominent in the town for some years past. While we all walked in the afternoons on the street with rackets in our hands, people would stand at their doorsteps and stare at us. They got increasingly braver and started to abuse us. They would spit outside their doorsteps. We bore all that as we read that in times past members of the Brahma Samaj had endured similar things. My movement for women's independence started in this fashion.

\* \* \*

As soon as I joined the Kakinada College and witnessed the prayers of Brahma Samaj, I felt that I arrived at a very natural place. The feeling, "This is what is meant by God, and this is what worshipping Him means," was implanted in me. The sacrifices which the members of Brahma Samaj made, their oath of speaking truth and their brotherly love attracted me without my knowing. Hindus' falsity, deception, cruelty, child marriages and forced widowhood - all disturbed me deeply. I felt that it was lowly to regard lumps of turmeric, stones or pictures as gods and worship them. I realized how my relatives and acquaintances were evil, mendacious and roguish. Instead of practicing dishonest morals, I resolved to learn honest ones and put them into practice. It was because of my strong attachment to truth that, when I went to back to Tenali, I rebelled against my family and suffered hardships. For publicly announcing my ideas my parents and relatives got together with my grandfather and started harassing him to cast me out of the house.

\* \* \*

When I insisted on educating 'T', their hostility toward me climaxed. The College was going to open two days later. I had to leave that night. My grandfather warned me that he won't



fund my wife's education. It was midnight. The buggy was waiting outside our house. I had no money. I didn't know where I was going to go or what I would do. Everyone in the house was asleep. I went into my grandfather's room to say goodbye. He appeared to be sleeping in that large room on my grandmother's big cot. "Mr. Kaka [*endearing form of addressing his grandfather*], we are leaving town." He quietly pulled me toward him, pressed me hard to his chest and hugged me. Without saying a word, he shed tears. I understand today how much he had loved me, how broadminded he was and how big a heart he had. How tolerant he was! When he let me go I stood up. He pressed a wad of currency bills into my hand and without a word he went back to bed. With choked voice I said goodbye and left.

~

## 4

“Kamala, what’s the matter? Why are you looking like that this morning?” I said as soon as I went in. She was sitting alone on the floor. She put her head between her knees; with head bent she wore a sad crying face. When I asked again, “What’s the matter, Kamala?” she wouldn’t answer. I was just a boy. I didn’t know what to say to her or how to comfort her. “Kamala, Kamala!” I tried to get her to talk. After about 10 minutes, with tears running from her eyes, she said, “What shall I say, cousin, my life has come to this. What do I have left in this world? Why do you bother about me? You can leave. Everyone, please leave me alone. How do I know what I want?”

“Yesterday, you were running around laughing and jumping all around the house. Now you say, ‘Go away, my life has come to this.’ Tell me what has happened,” I asked.

“What more could happen? He cannot be found since morning. I don’t know what happened to him or where he went. He left without saying goodbye to me. Since this morning my hands and legs have been trembling.”

“You are crying because you cannot find him, as if the world has fallen apart!”

I am beginning to understand the matter with these women slowly. It was to her sister Ramana that I had sent all those ‘cloud messages’. This woman is not even 18 years of age. For no specific reason, she ran away to her in-laws’ place without telling anyone in her house. Since then she had been living with her husband. No matter how much they tried to persuade her, she wouldn’t go back to her folks. Then this little fellow, no bigger than my finger, walked in. She suddenly stood up. I looked around to see why she did that. What was the reason? She wouldn’t say anything. She stood sticking close to the wall, very humbly. I looked around to see if anyone else came. No one did, except this little kid.

“What Kamala, what happened? Why did you stand up?”

“My Brother-in-law [*husband’s younger brother*],” she said with great awe. That brother-in-law was none else than this 7 year-old kid. She stood up seeing him come in. When I went in, she didn’t even talk, but was sitting silently with her head between her legs. But now she stood at attention when her brother-in-law walked in. Even if she did have respect for him, why should she stand?

“Hey, Raja, what’s the matter? What do you need here?”

“Mr. Brother-in-law, Mr. Brother-in-law. If you address Mr. Brother-in-law like that, what might happen?”

“Get lost, you and your brother-in-law. Hey you, get out of here!” I said.

He understood neither the expression “Mr. Brother-in-law” nor my shooing him away; he went out playing.

Kamala got married when I was about to go to Kakinada. I got out of my Krishna’s aunt’s house, unable to suffer their filthy backyard and lavatory and got into the hostel. A few days later, my elder brother came to Kakinada. He was living in Kapileswarapuram. He had now moved to Kakinada. A few days later, Kamala ran away to her in-law’s place without telling anyone. She didn’t need to do that. Things would have worked out fine if she had told them that she wanted to live with her husband. The in-laws wouldn’t have minded, nor would my uncle. But I think there is something romantic about running away. She left without notice and settled herself in her in-laws’ place. I don’t know many details of this affair. But I visited Kamala every day, just to check and see how she was doing in her new place.

Not so long ago, she was going around playing and hopping, looking like, “Hey cousin, look at me, no one is luckier than me in this world!” Later, when I went to visit her, she was cutting vegetables under the stairs, sitting with her mother-in-law. While she was cutting vegetables, she would suddenly stand up when her father-in-law passed by, straighten her sari folds and stretch her legs and greet him in reverence with folded hands. I was wondering whatever the matter with her was. Just recently she was joining me in making faces at this ‘uncle’ Brahmanandam. Now she was acting so different.

What kind of a man is this uncle Brahmanandam? There was a sweetmeat shop on their front porch. He wouldn’t give his children a penny, even half a penny, or any kind of money to buy a sweet. They weren’t allowed to buy anything in that shop. He, on the other hand, would go there in the evening and get three pounds of *pakodis* or three pounds of hot fried parched rice, or *laddus* on another day, to his house. He would close the doors and windows of his room and eat all the goodies in the package. When the children looked around for him, knocked at the door, and begged, “Daddy, give us some!” he would shoo them away, calling them rats, and clean up the stuff. We couldn’t care less for that sort of a fellow. This same Kamala who would scoff at him just the other day, now stood at attention for this father-in-law. If I say, “What’s the matter, Kamala,” she would answer, “Hush, hush, Mr. Father-in-law, Mr. Father-in-law is here.”

Some days later I went again to visit. She locked her doors and lay sobbing in her bed. When I asked, “What’s the matter, Kamala?” she would reply, “He went away.” When I asked, “Where has he gone,” she said, “I don’t know what happened to him. I can’t find him.” I said, “What’s the matter with this fellow, to disappear like that?” I asked the neighbors what happened to him. Apparently, he started a new stunt of late. He placed a stove on the back of his bicycle and pack of coffee behind it. And he put a kettle on the stove to boil water. He got on the bicycle and rode away. He would say he made his own coffee on the way and drank it. This he did for two or three days. It looked as if he was truly turned off by his family life. I thought of beating him up saying, “Hey you, why are you treating our Kamala this way?” but was afraid he might beat me back. Kamala had been crying without stop, “Cousin, what will happen to me?” as if her worlds all fell apart, just because he went away on his bicycle with his coffee for four days!

I was just a fellow opening his eyes to this world. Now I was opening my eyes to the world of women. As I was observing Kamala’s behavior, I was learning what women are like, what they

think like, and how their hearts are different from men's. She was younger than me. I was unable to comprehend her behavior in any fashion and in any matter. She wouldn't answer when I asked her, "What Kamala, what shall we do?" She wouldn't eat for three days. She would do nothing. She wouldn't respond to the pleadings of her mother-in-law or father-in-law. She would only wail, "Oh, my husband!" "Shall I go and plead with him when he comes back to town?" "He wouldn't respond to pleadings, oh, oh, my cousin!" "Then what do you want me to do? Shall I prostrate before him? Or shall get a hold of him and tell him that my Kamala has been pining for him?"

"Try it."

I simply detested that fellow ever since I was a child. He always tried to beat me up whenever he ran into me. He was stronger than me and had an inexplicable hatred for me. And I had tremendous love for Kamala. That was the sort of relationship we had. "Now I have to go and plead with him, begging him on my knees, for the sake of my cousin! How?" I wondered. Meanwhile, he came. I was looking for him with the idea of falling on his feet to plead. When I saw him on the street the next day, I thought of asking him, "What will it take for you not to harass my cousin?" I went to their house. When I went in, Kamala was going around as if she didn't even know me. She was going here and there. She would say hello to this person or that person. She would jump around and run upstairs. She would go around as if she never saw me there. When I went and said hello, "Hi, Kamala, I am here," she replied, "Wait, cousin, he has come."

After I had worried so much all night long and went there, after all that, "Wait, cousin, I am now...."

I thought I should never see her face again and left. But I liked her. What could I do? So, I went there the next afternoon. When I got there, she was splitting sugarcanes and palmyra roots. She was carefully peeling them and putting them away. She was cutting the sugarcanes into the same size pieces as the palmyra roots and making them smooth without any fiber.

"Why Kamala? What are doing all this for?"

"I should serve Mr. Father-in-law all these when he finishes his lunch."

"Why, doesn't your father-in-law have teeth? He chews *pakodis* and eats *laddus*. He eats everything without giving any of it to anyone. Why do you have to dress them all like that? O.K. Give me some."

"Oh, no. What will happen? These are meant for Mr. Father-in-law. Don't you know?"

I thought there was no use talking to this girl. "So, dear, I am leaving," I said and left. The next day she sent a man for me with the request for "my cousin to come." When I went to see her, she was sobbing.

"What Kamala?"

“He left again.”

Why wouldn't he harass a woman like this? Who wouldn't do that to such a girl? “All right, what shall I do?” I asked.

“What, my cousin? If the world abandons me, will you abandon me too?”

“All right, I won't. What shall I do?”

“Go and find out where he is, cousin, and whatever happened to him.”

I was just a student. Apparently, he wasn't in town. Apparently, he had left Kakinada. Apparently, he would ride on his bicycle, hopping around, on the bank of the canal, making coffee and drinking it every now and then. Apparently, I must get a hold of him and bring him back. Why am I narrating all this? Because Kamala and her mother-in-law were the first to attract my attention.

Meanwhile, my father came. There were feasts arranged in his relatives' houses. What the uncles and aunts couldn't grasp was that he had just returned from my spendthrift father-in-law's house. Sreedevudu, Kamala's mother-in-law, also invited my father for lunch. The best item they could prepare for the feast was potato curry. The children and the youth – all of us were served at the same time. They served the potato curry just to the man of the house, my father and me and stopped there. I didn't notice what was going on. The youngest of all the children, Kamala [*his aunt's daughter*] asked, “Mom! Why don't you give me the same thing which you served dad and uncle,” and then started crying. Each time she asked, they gave her a piece of mango pickle. She kept crying, “Not this, that!” They hit her on her back a couple of times and kept her quiet. Then I knew: “They serve vegetable to the man who earns the bread, and to the rest they give crumbs mixed with chutney.” Apparently, things haven't changed much in rich people's houses to this day.

## 5

While I was trying to find a job soon after I passed my B.A, Mr. Venkataratnam Naidu sent me a wire asking me to come and work as a tutor in the College. I was his favorite pupil. He was great in many ways. He was my first spiritual teacher. I don't know how he came to have a liking for the Maharajah of Pithapuram. That liking put him at fault. Except for that, I couldn't find a single fault in his life.

As soon as I got back to Kakinada I joined the Brahmo Samaj. Brahmo Samaj became my breath, food and life. 'T' followed me. There were two parts to the Brahmo Samaj program:

1. Devotion to God.
2. Human brotherhood.

I got into both pretty deeply: always to be alone, to hold my mind on God, to pray, to try to eliminate any defects in myself. I tried all my life to remove my shortcomings. To this day there has been an intense struggle going on in me. Human brotherhood ~ all the above-mentioned reforms were intended for this. All my activities and writings were not really to reform people. They were to reform me.

1. To remove caste signs on myself.
2. Dining without caste differences.
3. Women's liberation.
4. Not worshipping images.

I took up many such things. If anyone asked what my caste was, I used to say I had no caste. That reply got me into many troubles. I had a remote thought in my mind that if the caste differences were removed in myself and if I agitate for their removal, my efforts would result in their being removed one day from the whole world. I never asked anyone since then, "What's your caste?" Even when I knew what someone's caste was, I never held it in my mind.

With my entry into Brahmo religion, the Samaj seemed to gain a new life. I, Rama Murti, and other friends became extremists. We thus spent two years with great enthusiasm and joy. I always had an intense struggle in me. My nature was to reach heights, improve my detachment and gain communion with God. During that time, I got into Tagore's *Gitanjali*. Ever since that time, Tagore's devotional songs have influenced the depths of my life. I felt as if the God whom he sang about came and sat by my side. I felt that He entered my life and entwined Himself with my innermost thoughts.

Meanwhile, I became friends with Ratnamma. According to tradition, even the thought of making love with another woman other than your wife, let alone actual intercourse with her, is sinful. But romance was in my blood and born with me. Not matter how much I tried, I was never able to conquer sex. What good is it to live without it? After I was friends with a lady for a while, our sex would become stale and stop interesting me. Then I would yearn for another

relationship. It was not great love. Nor was it mere lust. I have had desires of this sort all my life. I always longed for women. My dreams were all about them.

I always fantasized of a flawless lady who lived beyond these earthly limitations. That was my dream woman. I knew that someone like her was unobtainable on this earth. So, I tried to strive to become more deserving of such a woman. I hoped to find in her the light and space I yearned for. This quest occupied much of my time. But all this romance at the same time seemed sinful to me on account of its being tied up with sex. I felt that it would be the occasion for the wrath of God who shone on me. How much I tried to conquer my sexual desires! How I prayed to God! Moreover, my activities caused grief to 'T'. But without them I didn't feel alive. Nothing else made me happier or gave more meaning.

"Is this sinful? Such a blissful thing, is it a sin? Why is it a sin? If it isn't a sin to have sex with your wife, how could it be sinful to have it with another woman? Did God really say that sex is sinful? Or, have these frigid people who don't know a thing about sex say that and created such bogus taboos? Isn't this all due to having a wife! It's a sin to think of another woman, they say. But if you marry the same woman, from that moment on you can do anything to her body, not just in your thought, and that would be sacred. They call this marriage." Such serious doubts stormed my mind. Gradually, with such doubts, my mind started rebelling against the rules of the Brahma Samaj.

According to Brahma Samaj, there is no heaven or hell. After they die all men strive to reach heights which have not been possible for them here. That means there is a moral and spiritual evolution in those worlds. But there are virtue and vice. Virtuous deeds take us closer to God and sinful ones take us away. God is a blissful experience beyond understanding. There is no rebirth. I had no questions about this world as long as I stayed in Brahma Samaj. Even the question of why in this world created by a benevolent God there is disorder never occurred to my mind. Now, as moral questions arose, questions about God also began. "The God who has been my companion, my lover of all these months, the God who has moved so close to me in my love, does this God really exist, or doesn't He?" As soon as I started asking this question, a great sorrow struck me. Is it God who created all this? Is He not able to make this world any better? Why did He make some people so ugly or cruel even at birth? Why does He torture some all their lives with suffering?

How could He be compassionate to these so-called moral people and devotees?! It wasn't that I didn't know then of the karma doctrine of the Hindu religion. But I never believed in it either. Not just then. Even today, I don't believe it. My heart and my mind always looked to be filled with the devotion to and love of God. But when I looked at these horrors, I had to wonder if there is a God. How could I love a non-existent God? I never remained indifferent, like others, thinking, "Who cares what the truth is, what is it to me?" This question, "What is all this? What is it?" burned me. Especially the fact that those whom I loved so much and those who loved me so much would die and vanish disturbed me. To this day, after so many years of pursuing and inquiring with the hope that I will know something, after so much reading and debating, the problem has never been resolved. I always wondered how men could live happily surrounded by such horrors.

## 6

“You have an aunt, Venkatachalam,” asked Principal Venkataratnam.

“I have several, Sir,” I answered.

I was working in his college. In those days his affection for me was unwavering.

“Not those; I mean the ‘Aunt’ with a capital ‘A’.”

“I have heard of her and had vague glimpses of her. Where is she?”

“You will be interested to know that she is living the middle of the Vindhya forest. She desires to be rescued with her unmarried daughter. You seem to be interested in rescue work. Will you rescue her?”

He laughed and looked at me mischievously. I hung down my head. After which he continued musingly:

“I wondered if you knew her well by any chance. Everyone is against her. How long would it take for any woman to squander two estates? Now she is in the clutches of a powerful land-owner. He is so enamored with her that he has built a fortress for her in the middle of a jungle. I do not know how she has managed to write to me from that fortress, as if I were a Sir Gallahad of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Will you rescue her? ... She has to lie on the bed she has made.”

“So far as I know, generally women do not make their own beds; anyhow, they don’t admit it.”

“I would not touch her with a 10-foot pole. The pity of it is she has a young daughter...”

“Yes, I know, a very sweet girl.”

“She says that sweet girl is in danger of losing her sweetness. The mother admits for herself that she is beyond redemption. But her innocent helpless daughter...”

I started to reminisce....

I was a very young boy then, studying in high school in the junior year. My elders took me to Madras on a fun trip. We lodged in the house where I was born, in the Kapaleswara Temple Street. The street was half-filled with jack fruit oozing golden nectar, and in the rest of it there were chunks of meat roasting on live red charcoals.

If it were today, I would say, “What a good fortune to run into such delightful fragrances!” They were selling jack fruit at my very feet. Yet, those were fruit beyond my reach. My folks wouldn’t let me buy them. The thought of buying them wouldn’t even occur to them. They



forgot their youth. I was just standing there staring at the banana leaves with the jackfruit pieces on them. I felt a tender hand in mine:

“Cousin!” [*‘Annayya’ – ‘Elder brother’ in Telugu*]

None of my brothers accompanied me on the trip. She was a small girl. She was looking at me pleadingly, as if she had no one to care for her except me. I felt as if some kitten was brushing against my feet to feel secure. She tugged at my hand with a finger on her lips, as if warning me. I followed her at once without saying a word. That intolerable word, “Annayya” coming from a woman, a word which would sound so intolerable and dirty today, how sweet it sounded that day! I didn’t ask where we were going. There was no question of where. It was a room on the floor behind the verandah. And there were some gentlemen who were sleeping like logs so late in the morning. They were young, handsome and seemingly cultured. Above their heads, there was a room with closed doors. The girl left me, ran into the room quickly and said, “Mom, Annayya is here.”

“Why Annayya, he is “*bava*” [*in Telugu, ‘cousin on the maternal side’*] to you,” a voice said laughing joyfully.

In a minute a phantom of love emerged. If I were a painter and was commissioned to paint her form, I couldn’t have.

After some years....

“You say, ‘Love, Love,’ but what is love, my dear?” she asked sincerely. True. What is love? How would she know? That day she came abruptly close to me, pulled me into her lap and looked at me intently saying, “You have come, you have come to see your aunt,” laughing, with tears in her eyes. She was gazing into my face crazily and pressing my head against herself. Is this love?

“You are Sambam’s son, aren’t you?”

Those youth got up one by one and were leaving, rubbing their eyes. Later, years later, I got to know that one of them ruled the whole country from Madras; another made the British government tremble; and the other two or three became high government officials.

“How long are you staying in town?”

“I am leaving this evening.”

“You are leaving so soon? .....O.K. You go home now. But I will find out.... Go ahead; they will be looking for you... But don’t tell them that you came here, o.k.?”

“Kamala, take your cousin home,” she said to her daughter.

I turned my eyes and mind away from her and looked at the world, men and vehicles. I sleepwalked home with those little fingers in my hand.

“Cousin, when will you be back?”

What could I say? What did I know?

“Go ahead, cousin, this is your house,” she said and quickly disappeared.

I wanted to enquire about her. But she me told not to ask anyone. Aunt... aunt... aunt. She was my aunt. That aunt I got to know became highly valuable in my eyes.

The city of Madras became so attractive since that day.... my aunt's town! From that day I dreamed of her day and night. I and my aunt. I was in my aunt's town. My hands on her fingers. Kamala's fingers entwined with mine ....

Years passed. I was studying in Kakinada College and was going back home for a vacation. In the middle of the night, forcing myself to be awake, I got into a dark, crowded compartment of a train, unable to bear the smoke of cigars in another compartment. I found a small space there, squatted down in it and was nodding off and on into sleep. A man was sitting by me and staring at me.

“I was sitting there before and left for a moment,” he said. “I see,” I said, preparing to get up. He somehow made a little space and squeezed himself into it.

After a while he said:

“Your aunt is in this train.”

“Who?”

“What do you mean, who? Your aunt, your father's sister.”

“Who is that aunt,” I was wondering.

The stranger was looking at me as though he was thinking, “Having once heard that his aunt was in the train, why is he still sitting here and not jumping off the train and running to her?” As soon as the train stopped....

“Let's go and see her,” he held my hand and led me to the lady's compartment. In those days, neither the train stations nor the train compartments were properly lit. She was sitting at a window in that dim light.

“Look who is here,” he said.

She was carefully trying to discern my face in the dark.

“Your nephew.”

“It’s you!” she said, and placed her hands on my shoulders. My body melted with her touch.

“Babu, I found you again!” she said.

As if she was naturally expecting to find me in that dark train, she held both my cheeks with her hands and said, “Goodbye.” If my friend didn’t pull me away, the train would have left me there taking her hands with it.

“That woman is devastating,” remarked Mr. Naidu on some occasion. His moral discipline was beyond the reach of any beauties.

“If only I had a pair of dove’s wings!” I was dreaming on my way home.



## 7

Mr. Veeresalingam had passed away. The Brahmo heroes in Rajahmundry were glad that such a warrior and a disciplined man, 'Chalam,' was coming from Kakinada to live in Rajahmundry. But they didn't yet know that 'Chalam' fell off from those peaks into mud and was wallowing in it. They gave me a small bungalow in his garden for my residence. Before we even opened our bed rolls, some Kakinada folks said to them, "Why did you get this tiger into our flock of sheep?" The authorities at once asked us to vacate the house.

"Where is a place where you can settle, Chalam?" I was wondering. I felt a cool hand on my shoulder. I lifted my head and looked into those extraordinary eyes. Memories of my aunt were haunting me in the dark.

"Have you forgotten me, my dear," she said with compassion.

My mind lightened with a strange gladness. I felt, "What do I lack now!" But her undressed hair was flying on her face and neck. Her eyes which normally bubbled with joy were looking at me sorrowfully and hazily. She stood in her saffron-colored sari, without any jewelry, in her own natural beauty.

"I heard it all. You don't need to tell me a thing. They blame the Hindu society, but among them someone has a soft heart. But none of these reformist moralists do." She took me into the house in the garden where she was living. It was an abandoned cattle stall. "They ....., Babu, they...."

Meanwhile Kamala came behind me in tears and hugged me, calling, "Cousin!" How she had changed! What happened to all her tenderness? My Kamala that day was a wrestler that my aunt raised to hurl at this moralist world.

"How come you have ended up here, aunt?"

"Have your lunch first. I'll tell you later."

She related her story after lunch. Her husband died when she was young. Unable to bear her possibly life-long widowhood, my uncle left the unknowing girl in Mr. Veeresalingam's Widow Rescue Home. It was already well-known how Mr. Veeresalingam treated these widows who joined the Home. Who would come forward to marry these women who ran away from homes clamoring for husbands? Only those who had no place else to go, couldn't find wives or were worthless came ready to be bridegrooms. Then Mr. Veerasalingam would arrange a bride-choosing session: only those girls whom the men liked, whether the girls liked them or not, were given to them in marriage and sent off. Yes, true. Or else, how could the reform movement go on? What girl would look at such a groom's face and freely agree to marry him? On the other hand, how could so many women who had joined the shelter be supported, regardless of how compassionate the reformer is? What meaning does such a reform have? The rest of the story is well-known to the

public. My aunt was lucky ~ a high official, Nyapati Seshagiri Rao, came to visit the Home. He saw her and chose her. (You can read the rest of the story in Mr. Veeresalingam's autobiography.)

Mr. Nyapati Subbarao had been an important supporter of Mr. Veeresalingam's movement. He couldn't tolerate his own brother marrying a widow and so became an arch enemy of Mr. Veeresalingam. "Look, my dear! It's one thing to start a movement. If a teacher opposed the whole society and started a movement like this, how great must his compassion and courage be! But, if he lost his only supporter for the sake of his principles at the time when the movement was just taking roots, think of how magnanimous his soul is," said my aunt.

Her married life rode on great chariots on the clouds of bliss. Being enamored by her riches, her brothers and relatives started to get intimate with her. She traveled the whole of South India with her husband in his capacity as an official, receiving the compliments of many high officials. Many high-society people desired her husband's acquaintance, being fascinated with her beauty. When she traveled in trains, passengers would flock around her, stunned by her beauty. When the train stopped, the train guard would stand around her with the excuse of dispersing the crowd. It was just Veeresalingam who didn't recognize her beauty but regarded her merely as a widow among widows.

Meanwhile, her husband had passed away, leaving her his huge property. Her first husband's property was already big. Now it's coupled with this. She was intolerably beautiful. Her relatives would never let her come to their homes. They didn't have the guts to. Those were the days when people were afraid of not just the wrath of men, but also the wrath of God. She came to Madras. In that city, lover men who were Andhras, men who were highly educated and reformers ~ all gathered around her. Everyone had one eye on her and the other on her property.

"What was I doing then, aunt?" I asked with emotion.

"Your own father, who had grown a great mustache, was afraid too. Would he let his sons see me? Don't you remember? I sent Kamala secretly to get you to see me," she said.

"These heroes, my boy, no matter how noble they are, they wouldn't stop coveting women and gold. Don't you ever become like them. All those moralists who gathered around me, what great moralists and thieves they were! And how many of them became famous later! There is no point in mentioning their names. If I did, not only you, but everyone in town would recognize them. They were vying and fighting with each other. None of them would leave anyone else alone with me. Dogs in heat which bark on the streets are better, dear," she said.

"Unless they got rid of me somehow, they couldn't have inner peace. At last, they sold me to a foreign Jamindar [*landlord*] who used to go on trips with them."

"We do not even know if she was married to that Jamindar, Venkatachalam," my teacher talked to me in a rather harsh tone. Apparently, sometimes she would admit that she was married and some other times she would deny it. If one pressed her, she would say, "I was so young. How should I know? They took me to some office. We exchanged garlands of flowers. They asked me to sign some paper. And that was it. That same evening they put me on the train to Calcutta."

Sometimes she would say that Kamala was her own daughter. At other times she would say, “What nonsense, I adopted her. ... Those great men who sold me have been after me. To keep me out of their reach, that third husband of mine hid me in the middle of a forest in a building remodeled for me.” It seems that it was not possible to write letters from that jungle. But she somehow managed.

“He imprisoned me here, and now and then he brought some papers and got me to sign on them. How would I know that he was robbing me slowly of my two estates! Meanwhile, Kamala had matured. Then he started going after her. I pounced on him like a tiger and snatched at him. I wrote to all those great men who had married me to him to come and rescue me. No one responded. As a last resort I complained to Mr. Veeresalingam himself. But who cares for me? In everybody’s view I am a sinner. My beauty is my sin. What was my fault? I didn’t ask my first husband to die. I didn’t kill my second husband. I didn’t then say I wanted to marry again. Everyone is spitting at the very mention of my name, calling me a bitch who had married a third time. Among all these relatives, no one except you would even say hello. I finally remembered the great soul, Mr. Naidu who wouldn’t despise me as a sinner and wrote to him a few letters.

“I don’t know what happened, but one night the District Superintendent of Police came with his force and put me on a train. They dropped me off here, my dear, in this house! You call this a house! How they could take advantage of a helpless lady!” said my aunt.

After taking naps, we all had a meeting. My aunt’s name was now Abbatta. We all called her Abbatta from then on. Her third husband we called Jamindar. Fearing that she would squander all her gold and silver, Mr. Venkataratnam Naidu took possession of them. As I didn’t have a place to stay, she invited me to stay with her temporarily.

\* \* \*

That was a huge garden. Mr. Veeresalingam showed more interest in that garden than he did in the widows of the Rescue Home. He got many rare plants planted and grew them carefully. There were pepper and *kadamba* trees; clove, cardamom and nutmeg bushes; sandalwood; *kamini* and many other unknown attractive flower plants. How grieved must he have been to leave all those and go to the other world! He left documents making all possible arrangements to make sure that the Rescue Home was run smoothly after he had died, but he didn’t arrange to care for these flowers plants.

The custodian of the guardian was a gentle man, a good person. Either fearing Abbatta’s complaints, or out of pity for me, he never bothered me. Abbatta knew some secrets regarding the Rescue Home. I think that was why he was afraid of moving her. If someone [*besides her*] was heir to enjoy the income from the garden, I was the one; I was there to enjoy its beauty. Those days when I spent time, like a child, in the lap of Abbatta were great. As soon as I woke up from sleep, I would run into the garden and wouldn’t return until lunch time. Even if I had left God, He wouldn’t leave me. Huge trees and fragrant plants would pull my heart to the blue of the sky. I sang on my *ektar* [*single-stringed instrument*] and danced in that solitary place. If I didn’t have that College and the homework I was skipping, how blissful the time would have been!

## 8

A young man and woman were sitting on the beach in Madras watching the sunrise and the streak of light the sun was rolling down from within itself to the shore from a distance. They were both poor. They were innocent youth who didn't know the ways of the world and were looking for someone to teach them.

"Let's go," she said.

"Must we?" he answered.

Trying to get up, he collapsed in the sand closer to her. Her fingers crawled into his hand. They felt as if the world was begging them to be rescued. They sat there for some more time.

"You are leaving?" She hung her head with tears in eyes.

He held his arm around her waist and pressed her to him. Her shoulder was cajoling him. The easterly wind was tickling his neck sweetly with her hair. He bent over her face, avoided the sun's rays and kissed her softly. Her lips moved under his delicately. He trembled fearing that he might crush her mind (not body) with his desire to rescue her. He said resolutely, "Let's go." With hand in hand, they walked toward the city.

"Don't ever let these fingers go," he said. The tree tops on the side of Elliot Street laughed sadly. On the lonely street of the city of Madras of those times the couple roamed about and embraced each other. Since that day, Chalam's love stories were carried on under trees, in the shadows of mountain peaks and under the trees bending down toward the waterways.

"Will your family marry you off?"

"No, they won't. Why will they? How can they?"

"What will you do at home?"

She was in pain. "You don't know?" she asked.

She was thinking. She walked some distance looking at him in stages. Wave-like shadows were cast on his face and then they receded. How was he going to pass his time, if she parts with him?

"Will you help me go to school, Venkatachalam, if I come?"

"I certainly will. Better yet, I will teach you myself."

“Aha!”

What was this? I was promising all this to her who didn't know a word of English. I, who didn't know how to make a living, would make her a doctor?!

But I had no lack of daring when it came to women and children. God has been helping me to that day.

“I will help you go to school.”

Why did she believe him (*Chalam*)? Why do people believe him even today? She hugged him tight. How many helpless women, women in danger, women in sorrow, people who were seeking to be comforted, people who were crying for some unknown mothers, destitutes who had no one in the world to care for them, people who were cast out by the society, how many women, how many children who left their mothers and ran away, and how many babies stretching out their arms even when they were in the wombs ~ how all of them were content in their happiness as though their lives were immensely fulfilled through her small hands!

\* \* \*

In the morning, while I was sitting contemplating in the garden under the pomegranate tree in blossom, once again I felt a small hand crawling into my hand. I opened my eyes and looked. With new eyes, a dirty sari, disheveled hair, lips trembling with a smile and innocent looks:

“Who is it? Who?”

“I am here!”

“You have come? You are truly here!” I said. Still, the brain which hadn't yet come out of its contemplation started thinking some rough thoughts. She was beginning to understand. I stood up. She too stood at a distance, as Shankuntala did in the court of Dushyanta. We were walking without speaking a word. She was feigning an enthusiasm she didn't have:

“When I left, they sent me off with just the clothes I was wearing. They said they would send me money later. Will they?”

She looked around.

“You live here? ... It's a great house! But who is she? She lives with you here?”

I wasn't listening.

How am I going to manage with her? Here?

“Who lives here, Venkatachalam?”



“Isn’t this your house? .... Why don’t you answer?” she said apprehensively, “You know how difficult it was to find you when I came to this town? I asked that lady: ‘Is Venkatachalam here?’ ‘Venkatachalam, Venkatachlam?’ she repeated and asked me: ‘Who are you?’ I answered, ‘I am Voyyi.’ ‘Oh,” she said. ‘Where is he?’ I asked. ‘Where is he?’ she repeated my question and said, ‘How do I know where he is. Go that way and look for him in that forest,’ she replied without caring. I felt like crying!”

We were both walking through the morning sun, which was just crawling onto the trees. It looked like we were continuing the story we had left off in Madras. I, holding the *ektar* and wondering about the future, and Voyyi, holding my hand with implicit trust and looking at me now and then questioningly – we were two miserable and lost people. We were cast out by the world. Little did we know that from that day on we were going to walk on a brilliant path in our lives!

“So you live here?”

I said “Yes,” paying no attention. A couple of minutes later, she said, “Where are Chitti and Ravi?”

“They left for Tenali.”

“Why?”

“No one will rent us a house in this town. This lady is my aunt. The owners of the garden gave her shelter here. And she gave me shelter.”

I was thinking.

“Is my coming here causing you a problem?”

“By coming here, you have illuminated my life and this garden.”

We returned home without saying a word. Abbatta was standing in the doorway.

“This is my Voyyi,” I told her.

Abbatta put her arm around her.

“Come, dear, come in! My nephew told me about you.” The next day I started giving lessons to Voyyi.

\* \* \*

The most brilliant time of my life started that day. If I want to remember, there isn’t much. What exactly is bliss? Bliss is not having anything. If we say our bliss is due to something,

then there is something lacking in that bliss. Little children spend their time happily. Especially poor children. They spend hours together playing with leaves, sticks and stones with no other business. Adam and Eve must have spent their time that way after eating the forbidden apple.

I can't remember what Abbatta cooked for us to eat, or where we slept, or what we talked about. All I can remember is flowers, fruits, birds and snakes in a great garden occupying several acres, the sky that could be seen through the branches, the clouds, the sun shining on the clouds and the stars saying goodbye to the rising sun. We never had any possessions or property except for the couple of pairs of clothes we were wearing. Even when I was going to College, it didn't feel like I was going somewhere. My mind was hidden all that time in the folds of her sari. As soon as got out of College, I would crawl into her arms waiting for me sitting on some tree branches. My heart was filled with gratitude that they dreamed and built such a huge garden just for us. "Is this real? Or is this a dream? Is there really such happiness in this world? Is it possible to remain this way? First of all, am I alive?" I would have hints of such thoughts. We had no consciousness of what we were eating or wearing.

One day the Principal called me in. Until he said, "What sort of clothes are you wearing? How can I send you into the classroom?" I didn't quite understand why he had called me in.

"Do I have to change them? Why? How should I change them?" I asked.

He was a gentleman. He was always kind to me. "I don't know all that. You must change," he said and left.

One day, when I went to College, they announced that it was a holiday. I immediately came home without a thought. I heard Abbatta crying. I stopped and listened. This was her wailing. In the middle of it she was blaming someone. She cried like this before, but I and Voyyi would go to her and make her laugh in happiness. Voyyi used to report to me that when I wasn't home she cried at times. I felt quite ashamed, "We may forget the whole world. But we are forgetting the people with whom we live here, Abbatta and Kamala." I ran quickly and hugged her around the neck.

"What's the matter, Abbatta, whatever happened?"

"Nothing, my dear," she wiped off her tears.

"Why were you crying? Tell me."

I, who was living in such an exuberant bliss, was unable to be responsible for another's hardship. The whole world seemed blissful. If on a single day Abbatta couldn't cook and feed me or Kamala didn't heat water for my bath, I would have realized the extent of my bliss! This wind, the sun, night and day, the trees and the moonlight - we experience all these without a question; but if something is lacking, we start blaming Fate or the Creator. Romance may be a great thing, but this is the problem with it. As they merge in each other, lovers tend to forget the world. If they don't, it isn't much of a romance.

I wondered why Abbatta was crying on such a blissful morning. I was shocked at seeing her cringing now and then – for losing all her property, for no one caring for her, and for not knowing what would happen to her future or what she would do with her growing-up Kamala. Did I ever even glance at Kamala who would hold the doorway and eagerly look forward to a look or a kind word from me? Did I ever respond to this honest compassion my aunt showed to us? Nonetheless, that was a great time in my life.

We started again. The light of the falling stars. All our time floated in the nectar of love as though it melted away without a trace in the moonlight. But how long could it go on? I and Voyyi had to leave as soon as the examinations were over. There was no thought of what then would happen to Abbatta. But that morning I had to think of that. I and Voyyi were having our lunch. Kamala was serving with a smile, as if she was turning our happiness into hers. We weren't aware of what we were eating. The whole time we were consumed with looking at how the drops of the previous night's rain in the garden surrounding us were shining through the sun and sliding smoothly from the leaves moving with the wind. The birds seemed to shout, "Why aren't you here yet?"

"That thin soup and buttermilk – that's all for lunch today," Kamala said sadly.

I lifted my head and looked at her. She was saying something.

"I didn't make a curry."

"Curry? Who cares if we don't have it?" said Voyyi.

We washed our hands off the traces of buttermilk and rice and ran into the garden.

"They don't have money to buy vegetables," commented Voyyi.

How blind of me! Why is Abbatta feeding us both? Why should she? She doesn't receive even a word of thanks or a smile from us, let alone money! Suddenly I remembered something and ran to Abbatta in repentance. When we got there, she was crying silently with a plate of half-consumed rice and soup in front of her. That plate was nothing but a clay bowl. Plead as I would, she wouldn't stop crying. As much as she tried, she couldn't contain her crying. At last she said, "Look at this, my dear. He deprived me of everything, even the ability to feed my only nephew who took shelter in my house."

"He" meant the third husband who embezzled all her property. No one knows how he robbed her of all her property without her permission.

I relaxed and look around.

"So you don't have any money, Abbatta?"

"Why do you bother about it? Don't you worry," she said. I became terribly suspicious and learned the following by asking Kamala and the servant maid: Abbatta was slowly selling off

the metal cooking pots and replacing them with clay ones. She was giving us two decent meals and she and Kamala were only eating thin soup and gruel. Mr. Naidu had set aside her jewelry toward dowry for the bridegroom and wedding expenses. Apparently he would give her every month just enough money to buy rice for two. Mr. Veeresalingam had arranged to be given to her, before he had passed away, a quarter of a rupee of allowance per day. Presumably that was all the moral value she, who had married thrice, had in his view! My stipend was 15 rupees a month. I was about to give some of it to her. "What do I need this for, my dear. That bastard made me so poor that I can't feed even my own nephew. I will extract all this from him. Why should you pay? You don't have that much," as she said this she put her head on my shoulder and broke down crying. Since then, she used to cry every day at some time or other. Each time she cried on till I caressed, comforted and consoled her.

"Don't cry Abbatta! As soon as this training is over, you come and stay with me. And we will be quite happy."

"Do you really mean it?" she would ask.

Not that all her problems were solved or that she was going to enjoy a great future with me. Many things which I wanted to do for myself, and many things I wanted to do for others, were mostly unaccomplished. But it's a surprise that in Abbatta's case, I and Voyyi were soon able to help many times more.

\* \* \*

Winter was nearing. Koils had already left for warmer climates. Early in the morning the *parijata* flowers were spreading white under the tree. *Kuntala kaumudi* had blossomed. Far away in the town the sound of firecrackers could be heard. The *sitaphala* fruit were just opening on the trees. Again in our joy we forgot everything. When we lay down on tree branches and looked above, we would wonder, "Is all that brilliant blue only an illusion created by the eyes? Is nothing really there?"

Meanwhile, Abbatta said one day suddenly, "That's enough. You can leave now, dear." I collapsed as if thunderstruck. I didn't think of why she had said that. "Where will we go now? Who will give us a place? Who will feed us?" I went into the garden and told Voyyi.

"Is that all? We will live in some hut," she said.

"She was probably afraid that Ravi is coming." Yes, I did receive a letter saying that Ravi was arriving. I thought she gave the right explanation, went out in half-an-hour and arranged for a lodging which was lying vacant among the Harijans' huts in the Lakshminvarappeta. We didn't have any luggage or other belongings, just a couple of pieces of clothing and a couple of books. Holding them in our hands we said smiling, "Goodbye, Abbatta!" and left.

With tears in her eyes, Kamala kept staring at us. There was a restaurant next to our house. Early in the morning, we could buy a rice cake for quarter of an *anna*. We ate four of them for one *anna*. Again, before I went to my College and Voyyi to her school, we would eat a couple

of pieces of *urad* pancakes sold on the roadside near the Godavary station and give a couple more to Ravi. He stayed home playing with other children. Every afternoon we got a meal from the restaurant. That was the only meal for us for the whole day. We did the bathing in the Godavari river. To add to it, on Saturdays we would go on a pleasure trip on the Dorothy Steamer. We would go on a small boat to the bank of Kovvur and return. We would cross the Godavari River on the Railway Bridge and visit Prakasam in Kovvuru. Those were our luxurious entertainments. Those were the days of poverty when we counted pennies. But were we ever happier in our lives? Ravi, do you remember those days? Now, I can't even earn those 15 rupees. I was sad to leave Rajahmundry. Every evening and on every holiday, all three of us continued to go to our garden. The mango trees began to blossom. The koils returned. The *kadambam* had also blossomed. The whole garden was filled with the fragrance of mango blossom which later turned into tender mangoes. We would request Abbatta for some salt and chili powder and eat the mangoes non-stop. Kamala joined us too in the fun.

People were already asking for Kamala's hand in marriage. Abbatta would send whoever came for her to Mr. Naidu for his permission. Due to his misfortune one of those prospective grooms came to me. He was a Tamil doctor. He had a good practice in Ranchi. But Mr. Naidu did not approve of him. He had a big physique matching that of Kamala. Just looking at his face was enough to tell that he was sincere, courteous and kind. I can't forget how much he loved Kamala.

He talked to me as if to say, "You are Kamala's cousin. You are her guardian. Why should Mr. Naidu interfere?" He was forgetting the great principle that whoever has money is the real guardian. Meanwhile, there was another offer. That man was an advocate. Just looking at his face reminded one of a foolish jackal. However much one got out of old ideas, some habits won't leave men. They won't quit the belief that an educated suitor is worthier than an uneducated suitor. Kamala could easily split her thigh, insert this new suitor in it and sew it back up. If Kamala gave him one pounding with her fist, you would have to look for him in another world. When he talked I felt as if my whole body has been dirtied. Mr. Naidu didn't seem to notice any of these. Alas, that poor Ranchi fellow got on the train crying. I too cried with him.

That afternoon all three of us were lying, each on a different cashew nut tree branch in the garden, eating fruit and dropping the cashew seeds in the lap of Kamala who was sitting on the ground.

"Kamala! We are leaving."

"You are leaving, cousin? I am leaving too. Mother will remain here alone. When I asked to come with me, she said she won't."

"That's o.k. If we come to Madras, we will visit you."

Ravi jumped down from the tree, hugged Kamala on the neck and started stomping around. I was sitting on the branch and looked around. If I had spent another ten years there, I would have sung, "This garden, our castle. Won't we forget it?" What if we didn't go? But it was becoming clear: this life here had ended. A leaf in the book of our lives was being turned over.

Another chapter was beginning. Then, the lying on the trees and the roaming in the skies, the bathing in the Godavari River mornings and evenings, the sleeping in the cool air among the huts, this joy of moving around among men and yet not being aware of it – will all these end here? Would they never return? Men suppose that they decide something and act according to that. But we are not the ones to decide.

We only needed ten rupees a month. We could somehow earn that money and continue living there. But the ambition of becoming a doctor, that destiny, was driving Voyyi forward. ‘T’ was my responsibility. ‘T’ would like to have a house and a steady income. How long could we live in such happiness, which we could not be sure of, without a second thought? Was that all there was to Ravi’s future? Such thoughts were subconsciously pushing me. And the children not yet born to me were clamoring from that world, “What about us?” If we moved from there, that meant we slipped into the hands of our enemies. Yet, even knowing this, we couldn’t cancel our departure. So we left. We went back into clean clothes, disciplines, wraths, respectabilities, into being isolated when in period, into the minds which hated our very sights. We jumped as freely roaming birds jump into a net hoping to catch their prey. Still, our love protected us. All that time we spent together seemed like a bad dream to us, as we lived with no other desire than being with each other. “Just these few days, and then we will find work” – we were riding on the wave of faith and playing with it. Meanwhile, my family asked us to get out. The house they lived in was my house. But without complaining, we went into the Travelers’ Bungalow.

## 9

The Tungabhadra canal passes through Hospet. Sitting on the bank of the canal I was telling Ravi, who lay in my lap, the story in the Mahabharata of the Pandavas going incognito. In a short while a student came, said, "That's my Head Master," and left. The stranger came closer to me smiling.

"Who? Prakasam? How come he is here?" I thought and said, "Come, sit."

"How nice it is here. Ravi, do you remember me?"

"Have you had your dinner yet?"

I asked hesitantly as I didn't know what I would have done if he had answered, no. If I told Mrs. Ranganayakamma that it was for him, she wouldn't get up that late in the night to cook for him. He couldn't eat in the restaurants in this Kannada region. It was strange that Prakasham had traveled so far. You could say that he was some sort of a disciple to Rama Murty. He left his rich father-in-law, starved in poverty along with Satyavati, and came and met Rama Murty in Kakinada.

"Rama Murty sent me here to talk to you. I have come here with Satyavati. She is at your house. I left her there."

I resumed my storytelling to Ravi.

"Keep yourself awake for a while, Ravi, I have a long story to tell you," said Prakasam.

"Go ahead," said Ravi.

"Let's go home."

"You don't like it here?" I asked.

"Satyavati would be alone at home."

"But 'T' is with her."

"Mrs. Ranganayakamma doesn't know Satyavati."

"By now, they would be close friends."

Prakasam slowed down and said, "Have you heard any news after you had left Kakinada?"

"What news?"

“The affair of Rama Murty and Ratnamma.”

“How do Rama Murty and Ratnamma’s stories concern me? Why do you need to travel hundreds of miles to come here and tell me all those things? I have no interest in them.”

“You are surprised, aren’t you? I didn’t know about this story I am about relate to you until Rama Murty told it to me repentantly and asked me to tell it you with tears in his eyes.”

“Rama Murty was repentant and had tears in his eyes?” My curiosity was roused.

“Listen, then. After you had left ....”

“Let’s go, dad,” said Ravi.

The father obedient to his son’s commands got up, saying, “Ravi wants to go.”

Prakasam ran into my house like a cow which had just parted with its calf. Ravi went in. I just sat in the verandah and waited.

\* \* \*

Rama Murty, Mrs. Ranganayakamma, Ravi, Nagayya, Chandramati and Veerabhadra Rao – all of us lived in the same house. The poet Krishna Sastri spent a good part of each day with us. In those days, that house was a stronghold of the Brahma Samaj. That was a glorious time. Rama Murty’s in-laws’ house was close to ours. His sister-in-law [*wife’s younger sister*] Ratna was studying in the College. She often used to run to me in the nights asking me to explain to her things in her books she didn’t understand.

Rama Murty and Chandramati went to Calcutta to live there for a length of time. They had a little daughter then. They left her in the in-laws’ place in Kakinada. One night I was tutoring Ratnamma in my house. It was getting late. In the middle of it Ratnamma said she wanted to leave. I asked her to wait a little.

“It’s getting late. The baby must be crying,” she said.

I too got up saying, “I will come with you and explain to them, let’s go. You have your folks there, don’t you?”

“No, they went out of town.”

“What? They left you and the baby alone?”

She nodded silently and kept walking. I lifted my head and noticed tears rolling down her eyes.

“What’s the matter Ratnam, why are you crying?”



She kept crying hiding her head in my chest. She went home, comforted the crying baby as much as she could and returned. Without answering my questions she picked her book and started reading. Tears, however, kept rolling down her cheeks. What else could I ask? I was only human. All the beauty that lighted every romantic, loving heart that walked in my path for the last ten, twelve years suddenly started blossoming in her. I drew her close and caressed her. She lay down in my lap and hugged me. What was this? What was it I was doing? It was sinful. Our eyes were trembling with the dread that it was sinful. Our hearts were warning us to avoid this sin. Cupid was breaking down our principles as though they were mere blades of grass. I asked before I left:

“Why did you cry earlier, Ratnam?”

“She (*Indu*) was crying all night. Some nights she wouldn’t sleep at all.”

“They dumped her on you. Don’t cry. I am with you. I will watch her.”

.....

My loving wife didn’t take long to figure it out. “The lessons must have been getting harder. You didn’t come back until late,” said she. I too was laughing with her at her humor. Suddenly Ranganayakamma cried. I too cried sitting on the cot, unable to bear her sadness. My torment started the next day. They used to call Ranganayakamma ‘Chitti’. Out of sheer laziness, I used to call her ‘T’. Until Ratnamma entered our lives, our love life was great. ‘T’ was very fond of Ratnamma. As a matter of fact, there was rarely anyone who wasn’t. Suddenly my life was filled with Ratnamma. How peaceful and happy my life was until then! A terrible torment began in me. I was searching for some unreachable thing.

Before Rama Murty left for Calcutta, he and I had a talk once.

“Rama Murty, I have often had this doubt: I am attracted to any and every beautiful woman I come across. Would you call that sinful?”

“I would say it is,” he answered.

“I abhor sinful deeds. If I ever lied, I would suffer a lot from it. I would hate myself. I would be ashamed of myself. I would feel repentant. I would feel that way no matter what sinful deed it is. But in the attraction I feel toward a woman, I only feel joy and no pain at all.”

“That’s right. If it ends with that attraction, if you don’t have any other desire except the appreciation of that beauty, what’s wrong with it?”

“But it doesn’t end with it. I would have a great desire to embrace her and kiss her. If by some chance she too consents, then there are no bounds to my joy. I can’t believe that an act which gives me so much joy is wrong or sinful. You think there is so much attraction in sin?”

“Surely there is”

“Yes, I know. The myths, scriptures, elders, and teachers of the Brahmo Samaj – all condemn it vehemently. What they say may be true. But it doesn’t seem like that to me. We have transcended castes, image worship and memorial rites. Why should we conform to these morals then? Did God ever say that these acts are all evil?”

“But whatever happened to your conscience?”

“My conscience is telling me there is nothing wrong in this.”

“I don’t know anymore,” said Rama Murty.

I didn’t have quite the awareness to realize the implications of the statements I was making. Until life hit me hard and taught me, the problem had not become clear to me.

.....

What I have learned to date is that each person is born with a strong inclination unique to him or her. They try to verify in many ways that it is right. But sometimes a person can’t let go of a desire no matter how much he or she tries. It feels as if the person had carried it into this life from many previous lifetimes. In that intensity he or she might be burned and turn into ashes. Even then the desire may not end.

Poor ‘T’ had been suffering so much. I used to go to Ratna’s house to give her lessons. But there were no lessons anything. We spent our time in kissing and hugging. Just before I left, we both would pray to God to please somehow sanctify our relationship, to rescue us from this infatuation. But to no avail. We couldn’t leave each other alone even for a bit. According to the religion I had belonged to, this was immoral. In this infatuation I was even neglecting Ravi. It looked as if Ravi got a hint that his father got into some sort of trouble. He left his father to his sweet craziness, made friends with some kids and played with them. If ‘T’ pressed me to explain, I would say that I couldn’t and start crying. At last, being fed up, ‘T’ said that she would leave. But where? She didn’t have any relatives to go to. Finally, we both thought it would be better if she went to my folks in Tenali. Ravi stayed back with me.

Then, since ‘T’ was not in the way, the two lovers got much closer. The maid servant cooked some food and left it there for us, and we had no thought as to what we were eating. Sitting on the cot we used to eat together in the same plate and finish in just a couple of minutes. On the same cot we ate, we chatted, gazed at each other and forgot everything else. Ravi played and played, would return home and go to sleep right there without even saying hello. The weight of sin, namely, that I was becoming impotent and a foe of God, was growing heavier in me. I wrote a note to Ratna expressing my wish that we should part ways. How could I escape the whole thing by just writing a note? How could I leave my job? She saw my note and didn’t come to see me. I was afraid she would come and make a big raucous. I went to see whatever happened to her. She was lying on a cot. Indu was crying without taking a breath. It didn’t seem as if Ratna could

hear me. I went in, shook her hard and called her by name. She opened her eyes and looked crazy.

“Peony,” she said and slid on to me. But, lacking strength to sit up, she fell on her back. To comfort the crying Indu she put the nipple of an empty bottle in her mouth.

“What’s the matter, Ratnam?” I asked anxiously. She was crying without saying a word. I hugged and cajoled her, “Won’t you tell me?” She answered in a weak voice:

“Your Ratnam is no more. I am going to die.”

“What nonsense! Why should you die? Tell me, Ratnam?”

“I drank some poison.”

“You drank poison? Why?”

“What good is it to live without seeing you? I am dying. I am afraid. Don’t leave me.”

“I won’t let you die. I won’t leave you. Don’t cry. Please live for my sake.”

I made her drink some salt water, the only first aid I ever knew. I ran to the doctor.

The next day I wrote to Rama Murty telling him that Ratna drank poison and that now she had out of danger. Rama Murty returned at once from Calcutta. He came to see me everyday and gave me lectures on morality. Rama Murty said, “You seduced this girl; you tarnished this innocent virgin, Ratna. That’s an inexcusable sin.” He said that I was her guardian and responsible for her conduct. He visited the homes of all the Brahmo friends and lectured on the horrible sin I had committed and incited their wrath on me. Prakasam said, “Of course, you felt guilty and hid your face, didn’t you?”

“And unable to bear it, I went and pleaded with Rama Murty to let me see Ratnam just one last time.”

Hearing this Prakasam laughed loudly. “Poor Mr. Venkatachalam,” he said.

“Now hear about Rama Murti’s confusion. He was Ratnamma’s lover for some months before he had left for Calcutta, before you had ever known her. When you wrote to him telling him that she drank poison, he was afraid that she became pregnant with his child and so he rushed back. As soon as he came, you told him innocently of your love for Ratnamma. Just think of what happened to him. To protect his reputation, he started that perfidious propaganda against you. No matter how much she begged, he didn’t let her see you. All the moralistic lectures that he gave you, he also gave her. How he cried confessing all this to me and saying that his was an unforgivable guilt! He also related to me all those things he had discussed with you in the past. Do you remember them?” he asked.

“Never mind all that. I do remember. Just tell me what happened after I left Kakinada.”

“Suspicions about Rama Murty’s relationship with Ratnam gradually spread through the whole community. Unable to bear the conduct of her husband, Chandramati went from home to home and complained in order to elicit people’s sympathy.”

“Is Ratnam happy then?” I asked, unable to contain myself.

“Who knows? Rama Murty didn’t let her go out of their home very much. Once Ratnam fell in the tank across the street from the Marvadi Temple. Someone noticed and pulled her out. With that the reputation of Brahma Samaj was tarnished. Unable to take it any more, Chandramati left to her parents’ home. She vowed never return to Rama Murty. Her parents started a huge quarrel with him. They asked Ratnam to come back to their place, but she refused. They then filed a police complaint claiming that he had seduced their minor daughter. That went to the courts. The police treated Ratnam pretty meanly. At the end they withdrew the case against her since she was already a major. Rama Murty became bankrupt. He and his family became outcasts in the city of Kakinada. The owners of the house evicted them. People don’t rent houses to Brahma Samaj members any more. They are both starving.”

“And what about you?” I asked Prakasam.

“I don’t have any money either. Nevertheless, would I let my innocent Satyavati be involved in such things?”

“Then, either he thought that you were the only solace or he wanted to express his repentance to you, he asked me to go and report to you. He asked me to ask you if he and Ratnam could come here.”

“What happened, then, to Chandramati and the children?”

“They are at her father’s place. They have no problem. Everyone sympathizes with her and the children.”

“So we will send a wire tomorrow asking them to come.”

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10

That June, we were both roaming along the streets of Madras. The sun was burning. As I was employed now, I had money in my pocket, but not so much as to go around in *Jatkas* [*horse buggies*]. There were no hostels then in the Telugu country except in the city of Madras. We were going around looking for a hostel where Voyyi can be put up inexpensively. We were ignorant of the prices, formalities and grades in the education system. No one would take us seriously looking at our dust-covered faces and old clothes. Noticing our sad faces, a Christian gentleman stopped by and asked, "Can I be of any help?" Maybe that was my luck; as a matter of fact, the only ones who ever came to help me without a specific reason were Christians. I would be ashamed of thinking of the God created by the Hindus as God. Apparently it was the Jews who first mentioned the name of God. The only ones who came to me smiling and wanting my friendship were Moslems. And all those who cast a stone on my face without knowing who I was, thinking they didn't have much to lose, were none other than the Hindus, especially Brahmins.

We presented our problem to our new friend. He asked us a couple of questions. He learned about our poverty and that we had no caste. At that moment we didn't realize how close God was to us.

"Did you try in Royapuram Girls High School? That's the very place for you," he said.

As we were about to leave he said, "God bless you."

I told him I would go to that school and see the principal. Without being asked any questions we were taken into a large room upstairs. There was an old English lady sitting at the office table and writing. She looked at us questioningly.

"Could you admit her?" I asked her.

"Of course," she said.

I placed Voyyi's records and papers in front of her. Meanwhile, turning the pages over, she called Voyyi and asked her to sit by her side. She was writing again. After a minute or two she said to me raising her head:

"All right, you can go now."

I didn't quite understand. I went there the next day taking with me Voyyi's suitcase of clothes. As soon as the lady saw me, she asked me to sit. Voyyi ran in hopping and skipping.

"It's very nice here. Only the food is a problem. But I don't want to be bothered by that issue. If you send me seventeen rupees a month, it will do."

I hadn't overcome my amazement yet. "If they want me to be converted to Christianity, shall I? They are all Christians here," she asked.

“I will follow your example and be converted as well. Then we can be rid of this Hindu pestilence.”

I recalled people’s pride and their questions in the Hindu schools and Government schools.

That night I was going on the train, at the speed of 60 miles an hour, to my battlefield, that is, to the school where I was working. In that endless darkness, this white streak of a train was rushing forth profoundly, firmly and fearlessly, without any doubt. Why couldn’t my life go on like that? There were about 20 people sitting by my side. I was thinking the following while I was watching their faces:

“You are sitting there fearlessly without a worry. How content and happy your faces look! You have such confidence that this machine moving so fast in darkness will take you home safely. And you have confidence in your lives, whether you are aware of it or not, confidence that God will lead you safely, protecting you. Now, tell me the truth. Does He exist? Do you *know* that? Don’t you have the same doubts that I have? You can give some assurance to this miserable fellow?”

I remembered the Christian gentleman who helped us that afternoon. Even after he had learned what kind of people we were, he said, God bless you. Does God truly bless? If I could place my entire burden on such an all-protecting, benevolent Being and live, then I could have done that while I was still in Brahma Samaj. Why should I get the doubts of whether He exists or not? Isn’t this all due to my infatuation with women? Yet, what’s the point of living if I can’t have romance with women? The God who is everything, couldn’t He also be in this romance with women? Why is he opposed to such things? As I thought of these things, I remembered Voyyi who was studying in that dirty school, the sweetness of the last few minutes when I was leaving her, unable to let her fingers go, unable to leave, and unable to even kiss her goodbye; Ravi who would be looking forward to seeing his father, wondering when he would return; and the affection of my students who would be looking forward to seeing their teacher’s face, wondering when they were going to see it again. Remembering all these, my heart was filled with gratitude. Gratitude to whom? He doesn’t even exist. How unfair He was to me! He made me trust Him, He received my love, and He told me that he existed and that’s all I needed....

I fell asleep.

* * *

There everyone – the students and the teachers – was Christian except me. They didn’t treat me as an outsider. No one asked me to be converted to Christianity. How nice they all were! But the food was horrible. Once in a week they give two tumblers full of water for bathing. I and Ravi had been dreaming for her arrival all these months. My life always seemed to be hollow. We had been dreaming thinking that if only Voyyi came and lived with us all our time would be filled with joy.

I launched a big battle with the authorities. My time was totally consumed by it. It was during that time that Prakasam came to visit me. As they had no place else to go, Rama Murty, Ratnamma, Prakasam and Satyavati were living with us. As soon as they came seeking shelter, 'T' forgot her old resentments and treated them cordially. She was pregnant. None of them came to her help. 'T' cooked for all of them. We all got together, told stories sang songs and laughed constantly. We had a great time. The only lack was Voyyi's not being with us. I got Rama Murty and Prakasaam jobs in my school.

As soon as they started living with us, Satyavati and Ratnam clung to me. The mere thought of Voyyi, who was living in Madras, would send me into ecstasy. As long as I wanted God, He was the most desirable to me. But as I began having doubts about Him, woman became my God. I sought my fulfillment through her. Nothing was more desirable in the world. Nothing would satisfy me more. Only she could be the answer to my sorrow, to my aspirations, hopes and all. He who could receive her love was blessed.... But my mind was fickle. While my mind and heart were set on someone, if someone else reached out to me with her arm or attracted me with her look, I would run after her impulsively. I hate this fickleness. I fought this trait of mine all my life. I still do. But this defect has never left me. How many troubles I got into because of it! I got caught in some pretty intolerable situations.

Ever since I was young, woman was my ideal; she occupied my thoughts. If I fell in love with any woman, I compared her with my ideal woman. I and Ravi used to sit, tell stories and dream about how great we were going to live after Voyyi returned from school. No matter how much joy I was experiencing, I always felt a lack, a yearning for some unknown something. All my hopes were centered around Voyyi. Ravi and I took to reading Tagore's books, which just became accessible in English, and dreamed.

I didn't have faith in God, but I was a constant fellow-traveller and companion of Tagore. How close he was to us in our sweet ideas and how I and Ravi worshipped him! Observing the darkness and narrowness in men, from early on I had the idea that that I was superior to them in some fashion. I felt that I was living above common meanness and selfishness. They just weren't part of my nature. I couldn't open myself up completely and mingle with men in friendship. The fact of being an outcaste, the jeering, and the hostilities of men made me that way. No matter how much I suffered, I suffered inside myself. I could not blossom in friendship except in love. That was true then and it is true now. That's why, whether I was among many or was alone, I was a loner. I could not speak people's common tongue. I could not behave the way they normally did. Ravi, however, was a great friend in my life.

* * *

My fights with the authorities intensified. They were making a marathon effort to get rid of me. But they weren't able to do much because the students were adamant and stood by my side. Unable to do anything worse, they asked us to vacate our house. For starters, it was a house on the outskirts of the town. Just about then, Sowris was born. Taking pity on me, the agricultural officer of that town, Patro, asked me if I would like to live in a bungalow three miles away from town, constructed and left vacant by the government. We moved there right away. It was a desolate wilderness. Except for the mail man who delivered letters everyday, we had no

contact with the town. The snakes going around were my companions. The canal coming off the Tungabhadra River ran by our house. Creeks coming off the canal rolled down the mountain rocks and into the fields. On a big canal there was a wire bridge. Taking turns, we would swing on it and jump into the water. I and Voyyi or I and Ravi would bathe in the canal all day long.

Tagore's books, Lawrence Hope's Mogul Poetry, Jebunnisa Diwan - we read all these sitting under the trees. We sat under the trees watching the white clouds sailing in the sky. Shau used to lie on the hammock and laugh a tinkling laugh whenever whiffs of wind touched her face. As we had no one then who could bring us vegetables, we lived on onion chutney, thin soup and buttermilk. To this day, I can't understand why we weren't scared of robbers in that desolate jungle. How immensely happy were those days!

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# 11

That evening, Shau, a two-year old girl wearing a white frock, was going round and round on the Godavari Railway platform. Shaw was always subject to moods. If she was in a dancing mood, wherever she was, she would dance as she pleased as if there was no one around. The passengers were standing around and watching, without noticing that the Mail train from Madras was arriving. Akramali approached us and said, "She is a fairy." The Mail came into the station and stopped. Shau came to me and held my hand. In that evening sun we two were watching the passengers in the train. I was looking at each one, and, forgetting the little girl walking with me, I fell into a reverie. That was my only portal of escape from the bonds, hurts and snares of this world.

There was a white [Western] girl sitting near the window in the first-class compartment. The glance of her stunned scanning blue eyes landed between the two of us. I stopped motionless. Using her as a prop I faded into another world. The train whistle woke me up. There were still some carriages we didn't check. So I moved quickly. A lady was struggling to open the door of a women's carriage by turning the handle hard. I turned the handle hard. The door opened. She jumped out of the moving train to thank me. She stopped, looking at me surprised. The train left. Shau started to dance again. I was searching from within my dream, wondering where and when I had known her. Seeing me, she started fumbling. She recognized me. "I am here for Rama Murty," she said. With those words I understood everything. For some time she had been writing letters to Rama Murty, addressing him as "My darling [lit. 'cute' in Telugu] Murali [lit. 'flute-holder' referring to Krishna]." I looked at her again. She, she would address someone as "Cute Murali Krishna".... She ... she... Rama Murty might have been anything else, but a Cute Murali Krishna he was not. Such a long nose didn't fit the image of Krishna.

All the passengers had left.

"Let's go," she said.

"Where?"

"Yes, but where?"

She was talking as though she came for me. How could I ask, where? We were both walking along with Shau. She didn't have any baggage. We walked under the train bridge; I was dashing forth as a man walking to his own home. But my legs were refusing to move forward.

"You want to go to Rama Murty's?" I asked suspiciously, "Isn't that a bit far?" I vaguely remembered that Rama Murty said he was going out of town.

I stopped at the tamarind tree in front of my house. Shau ran into the house. I turned around toward the Godavari River. Tiny waves were transporting the colors shining in the middle of the river on to the rocks and spurting on them. They were hesitant to come forward any further, and so they receded and hid in the lap of the river, like a kitten startled by strangers.

Reluctant to bid him goodbye, Godavari was hiding the sun's forms in her womb, rocking them in her waves and caressing them. I let out a sigh and minding the woman behind me turned back toward the house. I went in.

Noticing the woman with me, Mrs. Ranganayakamma's joy at seeing her husband coming home, and her happiness in seeing Shau, evaporated.

"She ... she ... ," (I didn't know her name.)

"You remember her? She came for Rama Murty."

"O.K., you can ask her to leave now."

"Will you go?"

Reluctantly we walked out. We walked back on the same path that we came by. Should I send her on a trip of two or three miles on a vehicle, in this darkness, alone? If Rama Murty was not home and Ratnam was, would she let her in? She might have to come back here. If I took her to the 'hut of yellow snakes' ...?

What about dinner?

Suppose I took her to a restaurant?

Then I would have had to spend the whole night with her in a hut of four square yards.

If, meanwhile, Ratna showed up ...?

I must do something. I just couldn't let her stand there.

I put her on a vehicle. Everyone knows Rama Murty's house ~ the officers' quarters of the Central Jail.

Did she have the fare for the vehicle? How could I ask?

What if she said she didn't? As if I had it.... If Rama Murty wasn't in town, then? Would she come back?

Suppose she did...?

Would Prakasam give her a place?

Unfortunately, this Prakasam would only shoo you away if you complained of a fly landing on the food, saying, "You came here to live off of the hard work of Satyavati?"

Not having the courage to return home, I sat on the river bank in the dark. My little boat was swaying in water under my feet, pulling the chain holding it to the bank. I was reminded of the song in Gitanjali: "The boat was pulling the chain, wanting to go." I couldn't see Kovvuru on the opposite bank of the river. The river was flowing rapidly in the receding flood.

Tiny fingers touched me softly on my shoulder. I didn't have to turn around and look. She was leaning on my shoulder. We were both silent in that profound darkness. There was no need for words. Shau didn't speak; she was used to my daydreaming. No boats were parked that night in the Godavari. The shape of a lamp was visible in a house on top of the steps. Suddenly I was enveloped by loneliness.

No matter how angry she was at me, Mrs. Ranganayakamma always stood by me in my life, trusting me. Even with a child moving in the womb, she would do all the chores. Our outcaste family didn't have a servantmaid. Nor did we have a maid to wash our clothes. Sometimes, when we weren't fighting a lot, both of us would wash dishes smiling, and wash clothes too. We were living amicably, without even a hello or an understanding look. Throughout the year no one came to say hello to us. No one visited us. She was alone. She had no one among her relatives to go to, even if she wanted to leave me. She trusted me and became an outcaste along with me. I didn't have any of other company myself.

I didn't even have God.

Ravi came running and sat in my lap. On the horizon in the West there was still a streak of light in the sky, like the memory of a dear one who had just left.

I was hungry. But there was no call for dinner yet. A crescent moon was shining in the sky. Shau seemed to be lost in her own dreams. There was no movement behind my back. All three of us sat bound in love to each other. No one else was there to share our affection. My love for these children sometimes choked me. That night I was filled with great compassion. What would happen to these two babes who had been growing up with me trustingly in this confusion? How much would they have to suffer in this world? How much hatred, disgust and humility would they be subjected to! Why should children be born at all? But if I didn't have them - what meaning would my life have that night? Is there no other meaning to this life? Is it just an emotion arising in the brain? Is it just a chemical reaction? It felt like there was someone nearby who was binding us together firmly. Many times it felt like there was someone watching us loving each other, and loving and being glad. Someone was with us and was content in our love. No, that was all false. If it were true, would that force snatch away a crying child from her mother's arms? This is not all a mere chemical reaction, this love? Until a couple of years ago, I never had any such doubts. If I sat like this, God would sit by me until I fell asleep. Waking up from sleep felt like opening my eyes into the hands which were waking me up. Why didn't I have any doubts then?

"Daddy," said Ravi quietly.

"Yes!"

“I forgot to tell you. Mommy called us for dinner.”

I got up. The two kids each held a hand of mine, with such trust. It was dark all around us. The lamp could still be seen in the house on the land. There were stars in the sky. There was a clinking call from the river. The four of us were eating our dinner with a hurricane lamp in front of us. Shau was nodding off to sleep.

“Has she left?” asked Mrs. Ranganayakamma.

“Who?” I asked, but I just remembered.

“That Varalakshmi.”

Yes, her name was Varalakshmi.

“She left. Poor thing, I wonder what happened to her. Rama Murty might not have left town. I wonder what Ratnam’s response was.”

The big world washed away the three of us – me, Rama Murty and Prakasam – to these shores as useless people. Those two didn’t come along with us. Ranganayakamma and they two didn’t get along with each other. So the three of us lived in different corners of the town, about two miles apart from each other. In the evenings, three of us, I, Shaw and Ravi, would go out for a walk to their houses. First, we went to Prakasam’s house. From there we went, along with Satyavati and her children, to the Government quarters where Rama Murty lived. Beauty, there was beauty all around us, all meadows. We would start late afternoon and stayed with them till night fall and turn around reluctantly, worrying that it was going to get dark. On our way back, Prakasham, Satyavati and their children would drop off at their cottage.

The cottage stood on a mound. It was built by some misfit teacher a long time ago in a forest which belonged to no one. His talented daughter died three days after she was married forcibly, thanks to the harassment of her elders. Unable to bear the grief, her mother had jumped off into the Godavari and died. And the father turned insane, unable to bear the grief, and roamed about aimlessly and died. Because of the forced reform marriages such horrors did happen. As no one gave him a house anywhere, and as he was broke, Prakasam cleaned up the place and started living in it. He planted flower plants between the rocks. He used to carry water from a distance and water the plants. And he had blind love for Satyavati. We would drop him off at his cottage and, I and his children would come to my house. Some evenings, when Rama Murty left Ratnamma and came with us, after a bit, she would follow us quietly keeping a distance of a hundred yards. Rama Murty would stand like a statue in the precinct of the bungalow and watch. It was scary to watch him. I was worried wondering when the pent up passions in him would explode.

If anyone she didn’t like came with me, Mrs. Ranganayakamma served us meals early in the verandah. It was a treat for us (children including) to eat dinner watching the Godavari in that dim light. We played in front of the house and told stories. Then, after the children went in, I would go with the ‘new lady’ into the ‘yellow snake’ shed. The ‘yellow snake’ cottage belonged to

Amma [T], and it was rented to me for four annas (it was probably a pig pen originally). There was nothing but small partitions to cover its entrance overlooking the Godavari. A yellow snake ran about on its roof. I had only disgust for it, not fear. I didn't believe in God, but I always had an irrational belief that some great unknown force or wisdom was watching and protecting me. I guess I believed it subconsciously. All my activities in the cottage, the cot which was laid in the narrow space in the cottage of four square yards between the four walls, and the rocking chair, were all guarded by the snake.

My College had plenty of holidays. Whenever it was a holiday, right at dawn, we would get up on a boat and row to the middle of the Godavari along with the children. I would dip the children one after the other in the blue waters which were as yet untouched by the sun, take them back up into the boat, and follow the boat that was sailing on water, swimming behind it. Sometimes, the children would float on water wings, and at other times, they floated on water with the help of the rope hanging from the boat and followed it. We would row far off, and go to the sand dunes which were just bared by the water. On some dune on those islands we would sit on the sand shining under the cool sun, without a thought of going back home. We would tell stories of our dreams about how we could live until the time of the floods.

'Amma' gave birth to Vasant, got sick and left for Tenali to get medical treatment. For no special reason Ravi went along with her. I and Shau stayed in the house alone. We would drink the milk supplied to us from the islands and go for a ride on the boat. When I went to the College after we ate at the restaurant, Shau would go the neighboring Big Sahib's. She had a baby antelope, a donkey, a puppy and a kitten as pets. After she played with them and went to bed, I would sit in the doorway, gaze deeply into the sky and seek to solve the problems of birth and death. If things end with death, does that mean that that's all there is to those who tortured others without a second thought or to those who are compassionate? This morality, this conscience ~ is nothing but lies made up of fear? I was afraid I would die in pain if I didn't solve those problems. There is some meaning not known to us. My mind would not accept a world of void with nothing in it.

I would become furious thinking of the greasy words of the pundits who read verses and explained them as if they knew the meaning of such problems. Their mystery is hidden somewhere beyond the reaches of the mind, beyond the time-honored verities. My thinking got help from the writings of Bertrand Russell, Maeterlinck, Havelock Ellis and others. These pundits are nothing compared to those brilliant people. Compared to their subtle intellects, what are their dead teachings? How could the world tolerate for ages this big lie called God? Night after night, thoughts of this sort floated in the sky, like vaporous shapes not fully formed even in my sleep. But come dawn, the sun would come up tickling the river with his rays, lighting the clouds with his light and peeping at me, and the waves of wind would float on water just for me. To doubt this beauty, that is, the compassion in this beauty, would be plain foolishness. I felt that the softness of the light, love and the gladness in the wind couldn't all be meaningless.

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12

“Chitra! I don’t have the arms to embrace you with,” I was saying in my mind and sobbing, unable to write any more and laying down the pen on the table under the dim light of the lamp. The flame was flickering with the wind blowing in the dark from the Godavari. On the other side of the door, Ravi and a little further away from him, Shau, were sleeping. If they had been awake, I would have read to them the play I had just finished. The sky was overcast for the last three days. All these days I had been writing my play. I just finished it that Sunday night.

Our house was nextdoor to the two-storied house of Chitrangi. Anyway, they used to call her house, “Chitrangi Palace.” It stood on a small rock. The waves of the Godavari were sweeping the rock. Overlooking were the great currents of the Godavari. If the site of the building was indeed chosen by Chitrangi, her taste was impeccable. How could she bear being the younger wife of Rajaraja Narendra [*a king of some centuries ago in that area*]?

I couldn’t wait to read my play to someone that night. Holding the manuscript in my hand, I left my house on the mound in that dark night and walked in high winds into the town. As soon as everyone went to bed, I sometimes used to close the door ajar and go out into town, walking a couple of miles. I knocked at Mr. Dikshitulu’s door. He came out and looked at me in surprise. I asked him to leave the lamp right there, read the play to him without further ado and returned home. Mr. Dikshitulu always encouraged Chalam’s writings. Even while I was still a student, I wrote articles consistent with the ideas of Brahmo Samaj for a Brahmo journal called “Dharma Sadhani.” I also wrote some short stories and plays. When Mr. Dikshitulu appreciated a play like Chitrangi, Chalam thought why he couldn’t write stories too and started writing them. Mr. Dikshitulu took it upon himself to send them to a magazine called *Sahiti*. The publishers of the magazine had been continuously publishing those stories without succumbing to scandals or threats.

Because everyone blamed him, Chalam became famous overnight. Whatever I wrote, my first appreciation and encouragement came from my six-year old son, Ravi. Who knows what she understood, but Shau used to listen to them, too.

The Telugu reading public was knocked out by the shocks I gave them through my stories. But I could hear their laments. The sound of the irrational wailing of my readership gave me tremendous encouragement. Soon those readers gathered around me. Everyone tried to imitate my style saying how great it was. To this day no one could. But the youth who made my friendship, unable to withstand my practice of the romantic and revolutionary ideas I expressed in my writing and the attack of the intimidating people, finally deserted me. Rama Murty always admired my writings. And Prakasam played second fiddle to him. If a publisher of a magazine from some corner of the state had the audacity to publish my writings, poets and writers would go there on a pilgrimage at their own expense to persuade, convince, beg or threaten and silence the publisher’s voice. As soon as a magazine started publishing my writings, its circulation would multiply. With the exception of Krishna Sastry, Nanduri and Mr. Dikshitulu, all the writers became my enemies without any special reason.

Normally writers carried on their writing for the vanity of seeing their name in print and for the fame they might gather through it. But Chalam was never interested in writing. My writing skill helped my movement of attacking those who tortured helpless women using their authority. The distress calls of the critics crying about my style helped as well. Many Shastries, Sharmas and Avadhanis [*orthodox Brahmins*] would have gathered around me if my life and writings were accepted by the society. But I made my residence in the Harijan localities, *valukulu(?)*, poor Moslem areas and low class Christian quarters. They were afraid even to step into those areas. I tried to write in such a manner that my stories and plays all reflected my dreams. My search for beauty and my ideals, all spoke through my writings.

The main principle of my life was the meaningless unrest, the burning dissatisfaction, an intense yearning to reach out for something. To add to these was my ill health, my migraine, which no one could cure. I wouldn't know what, of all the things I wanted, I could find in a given situation. I used to read, imagine and dream about them. I felt that in the next turn I would find my joy. "What's the meaning of all this?" This question would scorch through me in the middle of nights. Ever since my childhood I had a great interest in books and stories. I not only read the myths, but also many poetic works, whether I understood them or not. I would particularly look for romantic sequences in them. In those days it was important to men that their women were cultured housewives. They sat around their houses and discussed the rights and wrongs and the goods and evils of things. In my family they ordered any new book that was just published. Among them, *Pratapa Rudriyam* [*a play*] of Venkataraya Sastry and *Kanyasulkam* [*another play*] of Gurajada Apparao attracted me. I felt that the theme of *Kanyasulkam* was very natural. That kind of writing along with its dialect made an imprint on my subconscious.

When I continued to write, I wrote in the spoken dialect without a second thought. At the time I didn't know that a language movement [*movement to write in the spoken dialect*] ever existed. I learned of Gidugu Rama Murty's name through Mr. Dikshitulu. His disciples used to write in a balanced style after carefully considering how much one could change the [*orthodox bookish*] language. I detested even reading about those attempts and "wearing clean clothes" [*idiomatic expression for keeping oneself pure*]. I felt that they were dictating to me as to how language should change. But this Chalam flashed through the land like a flood. How they used to fear the attacks of my language! To add to it, that language fell in the hands of a fearless, unwavering, extremist masterstylist who would break down old barriers. Very soon their artificial language crumbled to pieces. That intensity, inevitability and awesome attraction remained in Chalam's style and writings. One after another, writers tried to resist but were vanquished; they helplessly imitated my style, because no one would read them if they wrote any other way. No matter how many of them complained that such style and ideas were not feasible, people couldn't wait to read my writings. Writers and magazines started imitating Chalam without mentioning his name. The knees of the guardians of language and the swaying walls of old mores had crumbled. Yes, the joints of the 'language' had been broken.

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# 13

That afternoon, I and Mr. Dikshitulu were doing invigilation [*watching the students taking their examinations*] work in the examination hall. I thought I should write a play spoofing contemporary plays. I went to Mr. Dikshitulu's table and told him of my plan.

"That's a great idea. Let's start," he said. And right away, he took a paper and started writing.

The lady Madana Sayika enters the stage cooking. The fire in the stove doesn't catch on. Then, her husband Kartavirya enters.

"It's already ten o'clock, if you notice.

You foolish woman!

I can't smell the frying of the spices yet.

How am I going to make it to my office, my lady!" [*All written in a stilted old-fashioned style.*]

Then he starts being kind to her. "Sulking clothes and a bed of swan-down to you, oh, young lady!" Then he wails saying: "Dirty dishes and servant maids, to you, my lady! The back stove is the throne for you, oh, my queen!" She then prays to the gods to kindle the fire in her stove.

And she wails, "Oh, you trees, oh, you thieves, oh, you hills, oh you rooms, come and help me in my travails of making fire with moist firewood." The couple starts fighting.

When he says, "I will break your ribs, watch out, my dame," she replies, "The lady **[Surali]** will appreciate that. But I will pull your hair out."

So the play goes on. We would write a line at a time and then burst into peels of laughter in that examination hall. We sure were making a raucous. We were worried that the principal might drop in, so we put a stop to our composing and decided to meet in our house that night. That night Rama Murty and the poet Vedula Satyanarayana joined us. Till midnight we were laughing, screaming, reading poems and prose ~ what a raucous!

Starting with "Let Shiva [*lit. 'One with the eye in the forehead'*] come to war as he will," Kartavirya boasts saying "I will make her quit the cooking." A publisher printed the play right away. About that time I wrote my first story. Mr. Dikshitulu sent it for me to the *Sahiti* magazine. People were happy that a new storyteller began his career, and some writers became my friends even though they had doubts about why I was writing in such a style. But with my second story they ran away without a trace. With my third story they became my arch enemies. Those were the days. Ratnamma and Rama Murty were living in the jail quarters. Slowly and cautiously all the poets of the town would flock around the outskirts of the town, I wouldn't know if it was for Ratnamma's friendship or for her smile.



Meanwhile, Mr. Dikshitulu was transferred in his service and left town. We became close friends regardless of these stories. Watching my ways, the Telugu public withdrew its support. Not so Mr. Dikshitulu. In my stories and plays I was soon attacking the morals of the society. All those who were acquainted with me knew that my very life was a revolutionary movement. Besides, reading literature helped my conduct and ideas. The Telugu folks tried in many ways to shut me up. The scandals they spread against me were limited only by their imagination. They attributed all kinds of sins to me. The more they complained the more revolutionary became the literature I produced.

Yet, there wasn't anything that was so revolutionary in what I said. I threw new light on their own old morals. I spotlighted their deception, unfairness and selfishness. I tried to see if I could open their hearts even a little. But they twisted the little they understood, blamed me and boasted their moral superiority. Mr. Dikshitulu was an honest and innocent man. He didn't, however, have the courage or bravery to defend Chalam. He became friends with everyone in our house. My violations or excesses didn't bother him. He had a strong love and trust for me. We continued to correspond until his death.

For some reason he came and visited Bhagavan. From his very first visit it became clear to him that Bhagavan was God who had descended on earth assuming human form to save mankind. From that day he had been inviting his friends to go and visit Bhagavan. Once he got me there too in the same way. I had been immensely grateful to him ever since for being responsible for my seeing Bhagavan. After that I, he and Shau all used to come here to visit Bhagavan.

After we had settled in Arunachala, Shau had the vision of God. Ever since he had heard that news, Mr. Dikshitulu became distant to us. In his final days he underwent some change. Or was it due to some change in us? But he did become more unfavorable to us. Among the Telugu writers, I had no other good friends except Mr. Dikshitulu, Krishna Sastry and Nanduri Subbarao. Everyone else was an enemy. Except Sri Sri. Excepting Sri Sri's poetry, I never read any Telugu writings. I didn't go to any of the poets' meetings, or honoring ceremonies, and so on. When they set up some academies and distributed prizes among themselves, I didn't involve myself in the affairs. I became their enemy. These poets held public meetings and requested the University [*Andhra University*] to harm me. They petitioned to the government to dismiss me from my job. No harm was done to me because it was a foreign government which wasn't interested in any such affairs. What would have happened if it were a government of this day which would yield to popular vote!

Mr. Dikshitulu, however, would agree with whatever I wrote. He would remain silent no matter what I did. He said he was a literary cosmopolitan. Not just that, he accepted everything about Chalam.

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Mr. Dikshitulu tried to turn my mind in the direction of the truths I had missed in my condemnation of the Hindu religion.

“I will remove your headaches. Will you do as I say?” he asked while we were living in Guntur. I agreed. He asked me to fast on Mondays in the month of Kartika. But I laid a condition that if my headaches were not gone after that month, he should do as I say. We appointed Mr. Tenali Subbarao as a moderator. I followed Mr. Dikshitulu’s instructions and fasted faithfully in the orthodox fashion on Mondays in Kartika. But my headaches didn’t go away at all.

“Now, do as I say,” I said.

He stood there dreading.

“Come, let’s go to the Moslem restaurant. We shall eat *pilaf* there,” I said.

We all laughed. Still, he didn’t give up on me.

“Do ‘salutations to the Sun’ [*Yoga exercises*]; your headaches will go away,” he said.

“Teach me,” I requested.

Besides him and me, Souris [*Shau’s real name*] was also recruited into this routine. We would wake up at 3 am that winter and bathe, wetting our hair in cold water stored in clay pots (we didn’t have metal pots then). Poor Shau used to complain. But I persisted. We continued to do these ‘sun salutations’ till I and Shau came to Arunachala. That means, till 1950.

That was when Mr. Dikshitulu introduced me to astrology.

I heard about it ever since I was a child. But I never thought of it much. How could I, who had believed in man’s complete psychological freedom, believe in it? A Tamil man brought out Shukra Nadi. The horoscopes he possessed were written a long time ago. They were written on ancient palm leaves. Mr. Dikshitulu claimed that he had a reading done with their help and they were accurate about his entire life. He said I should have a reading done too. I had to pay the astrologer some money. As soon as I gave it, he pulled out palm leaves for my specific horoscope. All my life was described on them wonderfully. Though it was written so, I still had my questions. There was no mention of my sex life in it. Nor any mention that I wrote books. It was written that I would earn a lot of money, that I would have much golden jewelry made, and that I would make a lot of money lending it for interest. There was no talk at all about my job. I knew clearly that my earning so much money would never happen in my life. I never had enough money to lend to others. I would suffer any hardship, but would never try to borrow money either. If I ever loaned a little money, I would never do it for interest. I would never even ask the money to be returned. I had great confidence in myself that this would never happen.

I had great disgust for gold. If anyone wore gold jewelry, the good impression I had of him or her before would be gone. How could I wear jewelry? But, otherwise, the astrologer told correctly all that happened to me till the day of the reading. He predicted that because of the sins I had committed in my previous life, none of my children would survive.

“You don’t believe in any propitiation rites. You won’t perform them. And your children won’t survive,” it was written.

Ravi died before that time. With this reading I developed the dread that my children would die one after another. But I renounced these propitiations, gods and worships a long time ago. How could I do them now without believing in them? For many months I thought about this issue.

At last I decided that I would perform those propitiation rites as I didn’t have any right over their lives. One of rites involved bathing in the sea at the Rameswaram Bridge. We all went to the Bridge and did the propitiation rites prescribed by the horoscope. For that purpose I re-decked myself with the sacred thread [*which initiated Brahmins are supposed to wear on their body all the time*] which I had thrown away a long time ago. I worshipped. I made holy fires. I bathed. When the propitiation rite was finished I removed the sacred thread again. None of my children did die. Instead, a lot of children gathered around me. I used to go and sit in the astrologer’s house wanting to find out the truth about the horoscope, thinking that there might be some deception in it. Some secrets no one ever knew came out. The readings were accurate without a doubt. Although not all of them were accurate, those that were, were amazing. My violation of rules and my rebellion – all were mentioned in them. When I asked the reader any questions, he would say:

“I don’t know anything, I just read what’s in the leaves.”

At the end of every horoscope, the configuration of the planets pertaining to the subject is furnished by the writer. I remembered that they had my horoscope done when I was born. I wrote to my mother and got it sent to me. The horoscope I received tallied exactly with the one in the reading of the astrologer, with the exception of the rising time [*lagnam*] of one of the planets. From that time on for some years I tried to reconcile the accuracy of the horoscope with the truth of my opinions. If the horoscopes were true, then man’s freedom, distinctions of sin and merit, all his effort to become virtuous, would all be false, illusory. Everything would happen by itself, even if one sits idle.

Even though I didn’t have a belief in God, I used to believe in this world and in man. This is not a meaningless world. Starting with darkness and ignorance, man has been growing gradually into light, goodness and broadness of the heart. My belief then was that sometime in future, the darkness, injustice and falseness in man will disappear due to his effort and the earth will become a heaven. That was why I used to believe that no matter how many hardships I would undergo, if I lived honestly and removed these defects and narrowness in myself, I would be contributing to the general welfare of mankind. Now these horoscopes are proving that nothing lies in man’s hands, and that everything has already been determined. If these horoscopes are true, then there are virtue and sin. And their list is kept in Yama’s [*the god of death*] ledger. But does God exist? If He did, would the world be like this? This doubt, this problem, tormented me for a long time.

Even today, I can only justify this problem with my belief but am unable to reconcile it completely. I have asked about this all those I have known. I have read all the books I could find. I couldn’t find any answers anywhere. What I learned was that those who claimed to know didn’t know. In the books and ancient scriptures they wrote everything except what is important. How

could the world accumulate so much falsity with so much ignorance for so many centuries! Most peculiar of all is the fact that today's great intelligentsia, admitted atheists and heroes who have left God and who desire human welfare, all adhere to their beliefs, but do not examine other factors with the fear that, if they try to reconcile their beliefs with the rest of knowledge, the seat on which they have been sitting and become so famous may lose its support, or that their reputation might die out. They do not step out of the boundary they have drawn around themselves. They would never confess their ignorance. We don't even have to mention the devotees of God. Their brains close down at the very onset of their devotion. If you ask them to think a bit, they get furious. They call you names.

The upshot of all this is, whatever else may be the case, some men have the ability to know the future. That means that somehow some important events or affairs in human life have already been determined. Even if we make allowance for the possibility there may be many errors in the horoscope readings, the important fact remains that those ancient astrologers were able to tell at least some events accurately. Some thousands of years ago, someone was able to foresee the particulars of a person who was not yet born. And they were able to describe them and preserve them on palm leaves.

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A little while later, a yogi came to visit Guntur. He put up camp in the Theosophical Society building and was teaching yoga *asanas* to anyone interested in them. When any new medication or technique came into the marketplace, my hopes that my migraine headaches might go away would be raised. Soon I became his principal disciple. Besides *asanas*, I also learned a few minor *kriyas* [cleansing or purifying exercises] and practiced them. But alas, my headaches didn't go away. My lifelong buddies, those headaches, hadn't left me until after we arrived in Arunachala and 'God' taught through Souris and made me do intense practices for a long time. At the time, I became so adept at the *asanas* that the yogi used me to perform them in yoga demonstrations. He also taught me some minor *pranayamas* [breathing exercises] before he left town.

The yogi came from the Yoga Ashram in Lonavla. They had a major college there for Yoga practice. They publish a journal of Yoga practice from there. I started to subscribe to it and read it. I learned some subtle *pranayama* techniques also by reading it. There are some rules of discipline for practicing yoga. One shouldn't eat anything but thin soup of cooked *mung dahl*, rice and buttermilk. One shouldn't think of a woman. And I followed all those rules and practiced with the hope that I would get rid of my headaches. But I only became skinny and emaciated. Although they warned me that it is dangerous, and I knew it too, I was able to perform a couple of those practices. But I couldn't stay in a crowd. The air there seemed dirty and I got dizzy. I got fed up with the practice of yoga and left it because I couldn't become free of my headaches, after all. However, for many years I have been practicing some easy *asanas* as routine exercise.

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Morning 10:00 am. It was intensely hot in that town. It used to be pleasant, although hot, until the Andhra people went in and made it dirty. The climate of Hyderabad used to be exhilarating. There were strange fragrances in the very air of that city. The sun shone in a dazzling flash. I was standing there on a mound without caring about the heat of the sun. Voyyi had duty that day in the hospital across the street. I was waiting for her to come out any time. In a little while she got out smiling. As soon as I saw her from a distance I went into ecstasy.

I felt that she had borrowed her beauty from the Cosmos' flower garden in front of the hospital and was walking toward me. We held each others' hands and stood there gazing at each other. Was it us who were standing there then? Or was it some souls who had great love for each other long ago sharing our happiness through our hands and through our eyes?

We needed to move from there and go to some tea shop. There we would each have a bun and some tea. We didn't have money for anything more. We had relatives in town. My sister lived there. Voyyi's sister also was there. But they wouldn't recognize us even from a distance.

"Let's go," I said.

"Wait a minute," Voyyi said, looking down the mound as if she was expecting some one.

Voyyi was studying medicine in Hyderabad. The college didn't have a hostel in those days. They gave her a stipend. Because she said she didn't have a caste, no one rented her a place. She used to come to Rajahmundry for vacations. We ate the food given us by 'T' in the verandah and lived in the 'yellow snake' hut, playing with Ravi and Souris and going on a boat ride whenever possible. Whenever I had vacations in my college and had money on me, I would go to Hyderabad. I was sorry to leave the two children and go to Hyderabad alone; I felt ashamed. It wasn't often possible to live at the same place where Voyyi lived. We would walk on the streets all day long, whenever Voyyi could get out of her college. We would go here and there on the local trains. We would stand in front of rich folks' fancy residences and dream. We chatted. We might never become so rich, but we could have a small garden and a small house; we could sit in the verandah of the house and have a quiet conversation - we imagined all these would happen some day.

As we stood there that afternoon, someone was approaching us from the bottom of the mound. Her hair was folded in a fashionable knot; she wore a pair of expensive goggles, a low-cut silk jacket, a sari with gold-embroidered border, and high-heeled shoes.

"You don't recognize her?" said Voyyi. She came close, smiling.

Abbatta! She had a silk parasol over her head. She came near us and said, "Let's go."

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Since we returned to Rajamundry again, we resumed our friendship with Abbatta. As before, she was living in the Rescue Home in Mr. Veeresalingam's garden. Now Abbatta was completely alone. She was deeper in trouble and poorer. She wouldn't cook sometimes in a day and wouldn't cook some days at all. I, 'T' and Ravi, the three of us would request her often to come out of that cow-stall and live with us. But she didn't agree. When she visited us, I would go back with her to drop her off. Whenever I went, she would cry, looking at the house and the earthen bowls. I would draw her close to me, cheer her and comfort her, "I am here with you, don't cry." When she had to come to our house in the hot sun, she would bind her feet with rags so her feet won't be scorched. Being fascinated with her beauty, Akramali who lived near our house would ask, "Who is that queen in rags visiting you?"

At that time in our house a lady called Akkayya was living. Mr. Veeresalingam performed a widow marriage for her. Her husband gave her as much grief as he could and cast her out. Her own folks wouldn't take her in as she was outcast. She started fasting unto death in front of the Widow Rescue Home bemoaning her fate. They said that the Rescue Home was meant for the people who were yet to be married and not for those whom they had already married. We heard of it and we went there and got her to our house. Moreover, she had a five-year old daughter. Rama Murty got hold of some people he knew, got some sort of certificate and arranged for the District Board to send her for nurse's training.

Once, when Voyyi came, we talked about this Akkayya.

I asked her, "Poor lady, couldn't we give some such help to Abbatta, too?"

Voyyi said, "Not quite, Venkatachalam. I will look around in Hyderabad. She would have better chances there.

We asked Abbatta and she gladly agreed. After Voyyi went back to Hyderabad, she wrote asking to send Abbatta there. Abbatta went away to Hyderabad. I felt left out in Rajamundry. I was alone with just the River Godavari to keep me company. After six months, I saw Abbatta in this ultra modern garb.

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# 15

“Please, Mr. Venkatachalam, help me. I am very frightened. I am going to fall. If you don’t quickly pull me to the shore I will drown. I can’t even swim well. I am terrified looking at these waves,” Mr. Basavaraju was shouting.

I assured him many times, “Don’t worry. You just stay still in the boat. I will take you ashore.” But he kept worrying.

After I set out to go on a boatripe that evening to the middle of the Godavari River, Rama Murty, Prakasham and a stranger came. They shouted and asked me to take the boat ashore. Being far away, I couldn’t hear them at first. Some sailors told me that someone was calling for me. I turned the boat around and put the three of them on board.

Basavaraju’s was looking strange as soon as he got on the boat. I noticed that he was trembling. He was afraid of going on water on a boat. The other two told me about it. I assured him, “You won’t have any problem in the boat.” We went to Kovvuru which was on the other side of the river. We all played a long time in the sand and a bit after the sunset we started to return in the boat. It took us a while to get started. The wind picked up. The waves were rising in the river. The boat was rocking from side to side. When it was swaying, Basavaraju said, “I am not going. I will not get on the boat. I will go by the train.” “How come you’re so afraid? You are a grown up man and yet afraid of the Godavari? Look at Ravi, he is just a child. Look at how he sits there in the boat.”

Mr. Basavaraju continued to be frightened. He was screaming, “I will fall in the river; I will die!” Finally, I asked Rama Murty and Prakasham to hold him tight. “The boat will surely capsize. You must force him to sit.” They scolded him and held him tight. How could they scold an adult like that? Anyway, we somehow got him ashore. That was how I started my friendship with Mr. Basavaraju.

Mr. Basavaraju was a sub-registrar. He was a disciple of Mr. Venkata Ratnam Naidu. Every now and then he used to make a trip to Kakinada to visit him. Mr. Basavaraju had a great affection for him. The Brahmo Samaj was having difficulties in Kakinada. When they looked into them, they alleged that the problems were all caused by Venkatachalam and Rama Murty. Having heard this scandal, Mr. Basavaraju found out all about us. The sub-registrar became curious to see who we were, as we seemed to be peculiar sort of men. He learned that we lived in Rajahmundry; so he came there. He came to my house as well as Rama Murty’s and Prakasham’s. He met us all and went back.

Soon after he had returned, he didn’t feel any more like working at the sub-registrar’s job. “Why should I work at this horrible job? There is no freedom or anything. I must be like them (meaning us). It’s foolish to sit here day in and day out registering these legal documents.” But if

he quit it, what would he do? He had some property. He thought perhaps he could do something useful for people, and he consulted us too about what sort of work might be useful for people?

All of us were chatting one night in the Omar Khayyam Cottage. We thought that of all things a doctor's job would be the best. He could give free medical treatment. But how would he learn medicine at this age? How could he give free medical treatment? So what did he do? He first resigned his job and sent his wife to her folks' place. Then he came to see us.

"I will join you. I don't want that job any more. I will do as I please."

"But what will you do coming here? We may go somewhere else if we are transferred. We won't stay in the same place. What will you do coming here?" we asked. He replied, "Rama Murty probably won't be transferred. Even if he is, I will follow him. Most of all, I like my friendship with him." He then started living in Rama Murty's bungalow. At that time, just Rama Murty and Ratnamma were living alone in that house. Occasionally Chandramati and the children, Indu and Usha, would stay with them for a while and leave. Basavaraju was disturbed by this, wondering why they should come there.

While he was living there, he once asked Rama Murty and Ratnamma, "I want freedom. How would I get freedom?"

"Why, you are free now."

"Not quite. What do you do in the mornings?"

"We drink tea."

"I drink coffee. And I am not free unless I drink tea." From then on, even though he didn't like tea, he would force himself to drink it.

Every morning Ratnamma drank a raw egg for her health.

"Mam, I will drink eggs from now on," he said.

He belonged to the Vaisya caste. He was disgusted even at the mention of an egg. But he sat there, and made the two of them open his mouth so it wouldn't close, and got a third person to drop the egg in his mouth. You should watch him - he had the face of a dying man; yet, he chewed the raw egg to get used to the taste of it.

"What sort of a life is this? What use is such a life to anyone? I want to become a doctor," said Mr. Basavaraju after some time.

"O.K., what are you going to do about it then?" I asked.

So, he went to Madras and tried to get admitted into the Medical College. He got admission, and studied there for a while. But he left the studies and returned to Rama Murty's



house, complaining, “Oh, boy, I couldn’t manage those studies. I didn’t have a head for them. They weren’t teaching there about illnesses or treatments. They asked me to memorize some Latin names. Why do I need to learn all those?” He couldn’t live away from Rama Murty and Ratnamma. If Rama Murty’s wife Chandramati came to the house for a visit, he used to look at her as if asking, why did this Chandramati come here? He would ask her, “Mam, what business do you have here? Why don’t you go back home?” He had the idea that only Rama Murty and Ratnamma must live there, and he too must live there. So he remained there. Meanwhile, his wife had died. He cried constantly unable to bear the grief of the loss of his wife. “How long should I grieve?” he asked us.

“Your grief depends on your love,” I said.

“What do you mean? I did love her too. I can’t live without her,” he said.

We all joined the Omar Khayyam Club again. There was a tamarind tree in the middle of the Godavari River. We got a hold of that site, thanks to Akramali. We somehow built four walls and laid a beautiful shed on them. We parked our donkey outside it. We called the shed Omar Khayyam. Whenever we met, I would supply coffee and Elephant brand cigarettes. Except in those meetings, we never smoked. I never had the habit. We used to have a Japanese push cart. When we had to go some distance, I used to place the kids in it and go around pushing it. If we spent the night somewhere with the two children, we would hang on the cart a tiffin carrier with snacks in it and a lantern as well. When she was in town, Voyyi came with us too. When she was not in town, Ratnam accompanied us. We called the cart, “Caravan”. Thinking it would be swell if we tied it to a donkey, I bought a donkey. But the donkey wasn’t quite obedient.

“I can’t do anything. I am useful for nothing. What should people who are useless to the world, people who are disillusioned about the world, do?” Mr. Basavaraju asked us again.

“We don’t believe in your becoming a monk. Even monks have to do something, right?”

“I think it would be better to die,” I said, smiling.

“Yes, if you die, you would be happier than not having anything to do or not being able to think about anything,” said Rama Murty.

“O.K., I will die, then,” said Mr. Basavaraju.

And he asked, “What’s an easy way to commit suicide?”

Then we all sat down and discussed the matter. Lying on train tracks, jumping into water, and so on.

“I won’t jump into water. I know how to swim. I could easily get out,” said Mr. Basavaraju.

What? That means he learned to swim in the meantime. The same man who was so afraid that day asked himself why he was so afraid, went to the Godavari River every day, learned swimming and had now become a swimmer.

“Jump from the top of a hill,” I suggested. “There is no hill of much height in Rajahmundry. I won’t go on a hill,” he replied. Whatever we suggested, he ruled it out as not a good way to commit suicide.

“Take cyanide. You will die in a minute.”

“What if I drink and won’t die?” he asked.

“We will think about it then.”

“No sir, I must die in a heroic fashion. I won’t die like these old women. I must die heroically shooting myself with a revolver. How can I find a revolver?” he asked.

“I will get it somehow,” he said and left. He got hold of a relative or someone he knew, got him to recommend him and obtained a license in a couple of months. He showed the gun to us, saying, “Here is a revolver. I found one. Look.”

“Then shoot yourself with it. But there is just one thing. Don’t do it in our house. We will get into trouble. Go somewhere and shoot yourself without involving us,” I said laughing.

“If I miss my aim?”

“I will give you an idea. You put the gun’s barrel in your mouth and shoot. You don’t have to fear!”

He answered, “That’s nonsense. I must aim at my heart and shoot, not shoot in my mouth. That’s the act of a weakling woman. Not so great an idea. I will aim at my heart and shoot myself.

“Go do it.”

“If I miss?” he asked.

“Why would you miss? Aim at your heart and shoot.”

“No, I will start now to learn to aim and shoot.”

He then started practicing shooting with his revolver every day, aiming at our tamarind tree. We set up many targets before he shot. We spent our time setting up these targets. He said, “O.K. I have learned to aim reasonably well. It’s somewhat of a fun. I won’t die now. I feel like living. Just this family and property – these are a burden for living. I must somehow get rid of my property.” He prepared a list of his relatives and distributed all his property. He stayed in Rama

Murty's house for some time longer. Meanwhile, I got transferred. Apparently, he obtained a recommendation from someone and got his old job back.

We didn't hear about him for quite a while after that. Then suddenly he came to our house in Bezwada [*now Vijayawada*] with his niece Malayavati. They stayed with us. Two Christian sisters were living with us then. All day long Mr. Basavaraju would debate with them about religious matters.

One day he said he would marry the elder of the two sisters. The girl consented on condition that he was converted to Christianity. He agreed. They both left announcing they would get married. Then we heard further news. In a village in Kurnool District, a registrar apparently registered only one legal document in a month. Learning about it, Mr. Basavaraju got himself transferred there. No one there would want to work at that job, because there wasn't much to do. As they didn't have much to do, the husband and wife spent time propagating Christianity, singing songs along the streets.

After some months, Mr. Basavaraju returned bankrupt. He was taking small amounts of money from me. He got transferred to Nidadavolu. He was doing his religious propaganda there too. His whole attire had changed. There was religious fanaticism in his eyes. He did not utter a single word other than 'Christ'. Soon after, he went to a village on some case and died in an accident when a bus overturned. That was the end of the story of Mr. Basavaraju.

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16

Morning 8:00 am. At the Military Hospital in Hyderabad. I was pacing up and down in front of the hospital. A big open field reaching out to the hills. The wonderful Hyderabad was illuminating the air heated by the sun, the sky and the earth. The sun was shining in the sky, as if saying, “As long as I am here, how could there be dirt, sorrow and ignorance on this earth?” But even such light was unable to remove the filth and sorrow in human hearts.

The sun in the sky [*the word for sun used in Telugu is ‘Ravi’ which is also the name of his ailing son*] touches the disease in the heart of Ravi lying on a bench behind the wall in the hospital, but is unable to do anything about it. “Couldn’t you just burn away [*cauterize*] that little piece of meat coming in the way of the blood circulating in his heart? Doesn’t our grief we have been suffering for so many months reach you, Bhaskara! [*Another name for the Sun*]”

I knew. I am going to say here what I said elsewhere. No one knew why he got this disease. “Is God the cause of all this? But even if I want to fall on his feet and beg, I can’t find Him!”

Even Potana [*the author of Andhra Mahabagavatam in Telugu, lived about the 15th Century a.d. In it the story of Hiranyakashipu, the demon king, Narasimha, the man-lion incarnation of Vishnu, and Prahlada, his son, who was stubbornly devoted to Vishnu, disobeying his father’s admonitions, is told*] didn’t describe the sorrow of Hiranyakashipu adequately. The conqueror of worlds [*referring to Hiranyakashipu*], he couldn’t save his brother whom he grew up with and had great affection and friendship for. Taking advantage of a moment of his absence, Vishnu slew him. Out of sheer revenge Hiranyakashipu wanted to crush Vishnu, but he couldn’t find him, no matter how much he searched or where he looked.

The Sun wouldn’t answer calls of prayer or tears. He who abides in all hearts got into Ravi’s heart and scorched it. “What did this little Ravi do to you? Oh, Lord! We are helpless people, cast out by men. How did you find us? Do you exist? Is this a punishment for trying to find where you are?”

“Do you exist? You are so cruel, so hard-hearted. Is it you, you, that I worshipped, loved and prayed to for so many years? Look, how this world is shining, how all these lives are leaping! Look, how the grass is swaying in joy! In the treebranch on my side, birds are hopping from branch to branch, unable to contain their joy! Before he contracted this disease, didn’t My Ravi hop and run all over the fields?”

“He collapsed with shocked eyes like a sparrow which was shot down, crying, ‘What happened? Why did I become like this?’ Why did you send us into this world? Just to play games with us as you please? You are cruel, you are a demon, and you are evil. Will you answer me? Whom should I ask? You commit such a murder and are still smiling? How can I bear such outrage?” As I was thinking this way, Voyyi and Ravi walked out of the hospital. Their eyes indicated that there was no hope.

Once again, my eyes were filled with tears. My lip was quivering. Following them came Major Naidu. I didn't notice him. He looked at me and said, "So sorry, I cannot make a new heart for your son." None of the doctors who spoke this way realized that Ravi knew enough English although he was so young.

In that open space we three stood helplessly. "Oh, God, trusting that you were with us we defied the world bravely to defend truth and stood alone. Have you abandoned us? You don't exist. If you did, you wouldn't abandon us this way. This is all plain deception. I will never stretch my arms out to plead you once again. My tears are not for me. They are for that innocent Ravi who has committed no sin. And for Voyyi who has been bearing all this sorrow. I will never seek your refuge again. I will not hope for anything from you. You do what you will. What more will you do? If your heart doesn't melt with the suffering of such a small child, what will move you?" So thinking, without knowing which way we should go, I walked with them toward the town.

From that day on there was no God for me. I replaced God with woman and worshipped her. "Dear, if we could take into our hands the reins of world which has gone astray in conspiracy with fate, wouldn't we break the world into pieces and rebuild it to suit our heart's desires?"

* * *

Dr. Ahobila Rao came into the dining room to drink some water before he started on his daily rounds. We were sitting at the table opposite Peddammayi [*a young lady who kept Rao's house*]. Sick and tired, Ravi was singing. She was looking at him with pity and compassion.

When he was singing, "What's my crime ..." the doctor came and sat in a chair next to him and listened attentively. When he finished, he asked him to sing the song again.

He sang with a laboured breath.

The doctor was looking elsewhere and said, "Listen, could you sing it once more?"

Unable to take it any more I said, "He is tired, doctor."

"No problem. Just once more," he requested.

He sang. Without a word, the doctor turned his head in the other direction and walked away.

Doctor Ahobila Rao's appearance was harsh. His words paralleled it. If he liked a child he would squeeze and smother it till it cried. Perhaps he was the same with the women he loved. You would wonder if there was a soft spot anywhere in his nature. But his heart was filled with compassion. He loved music. Even in music, he only liked *ragas* which expressed courage, not the ones with a sharp 'ma' note. On the other hand, I only liked the latter.

Till morning 10:00 or 11:00 am he would see patients who came to his residence. He would then drink his second cup of coffee and go on his medical rounds. He had a high dogcart. He drove that cart with the big horse himself. He got up before dawn and did exercises such as sit-ups and pushups. By that time there were already a couple of wrestlers present there. He would wrestle with them. He didn't have a wife or children. Peddammayi looked after his house. His house was filled with friends. If he heard of any injustice or cruelty in town, he would go there personally and beat up the bad guys. When he returned from his rounds, he would spend a long time eating lunch with his friends. He never saw patients after lunch.

The townspeople used to send all kinds of foodstuffs to his table. Fish and meat – all cooked. Not only his Brahmin friends, but also the Sastrys [*orthodox Brahmins*] and Swamis [*monks*] would also eat with him at his table, calling it the 'holy place of Puri'. After lunch, he would converse a little with his friends in his drawing room and then start his games. He would crack some practical jokes at some of those present, have tea around 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. and then sit down to play cards. When evening approached, they would go to the club to play tennis. At dinner time he would come home, eat his dinner and chat with friends who came to visit him from town. Sometimes he discussed serious matters. Officers and other gentlemen from town gathered in his house. Finally, he fell ill. He suffered vertigo; he had high blood pressure. They said he wouldn't live unless he changed his lifestyle. He refused. They all complained, moaning, "How can we live in this town without you?"

At first, being under the influence of Brahma Samaj, I wondered why such a great man would waste so many hours each day. But as I thought further, I wondered if he could do differently. "Couldn't he help the poor and helpless people?" I wondered. I knew that he was in fact helping. When I think about it now, I feel that it wasn't real help. The heart must instantly melt. The man must collapse without being able to stand. We could see something like this rarely in Christian people of service. Nowadays Mother Theresa and her followers seem to be doing such a service. Whatever he might have been, Dr. Ahobila Rao was truly one of the ideal persons I had ever come across.

The doctor examined Ravi as often as I requested him. But he never said a word after the examination. And I never asked. We both knew.

"You can't do anything? You can't give us any hope?" He probably heard [*saw*] a desperate cry like this in my eyes.

The terrible news that Ravi had at most six years to live scorched my brain whenever I looked at him. Every now and then he went into a crisis in his illness. His heart would be ready to go into arrest. Voyyi would revive him with a shot of digitalis. "Why prolong his life this way? What happens if we did nothing? Who wants this suffering? Who is happy watching him deteriorate this way day by day, knowing full well that there is no hope, and crying 'What did I do wrong?'"

"Is it such a burden for You to save me?" [*A line in a devotional song.*]

I knew that there was no one who would listen to me. Even if there was, he wouldn't speak up. I, for my part, used to keep quiet with the selfish idea of what did I have in this world if I couldn't hear in his voice or see in his eyes his love for me? I never allowed the question "What would I do after the six years?" to enter my mind. The day it was decided that Ravi's illness was incurable, that day I bid goodbye to my happiness. My hope, my contentment, my life-aim was vested in Voyyi and Ravi. As soon as Ravi fell ill that way, all the diseases, fears, heartaches, sorrows ~ all surrounded me. Such a suffering was not just mine. How many unfortunate people, animals, birds and worms are crying like me? As I kept thinking in this fashion, my anger grew. Because of such incurable illness of Ravi, I was relinquishing not just my Ravi, but the cause of it all, the infinitely compassionate Lord. I tried to content myself thinking He didn't exist, after all. No matter how I fought the idea, it didn't seem like He didn't exist. He does exist. This is all due to his cruelty. I once saw the universe as beautiful; I was full of hope and dreamed my dreams. My mind which once saw divine wisdom and compassion everywhere and was overjoyed by it had now turned into bitter poison.

Ravi and I had been great friends ever since 'T' was admitted into the hospital when she fell ill giving birth to Ravi. Until the moment I had to go to school, we would sit at the same place talking. I would translate into Telugu and read to him Tagore and some major English novels. Soon he could himself read them in English and would ask me the meaning of the parts he didn't understand. When I got back from school, we went on boat rides. If my students came, we all played together. Later, Souris, Vasant and others became adults and they too joined us. How grand was the time we spent together, with no resentments, boredom or sadness! As we were outcastes, and lived alone on the outskirts of the town, we came close together in unison.

I would make up many stories and tell them for many days. We would sing many songs. Or put on plays. I would write my stories and plays after they went to bed. And I would read them to them the next day. Such small children, they understood and listened. If anyone invited me anywhere, I would always take the children with me. If they said I couldn't bring children, I would decline the invitation. I tried to save my children from all the tribulations that I had gone through in my childhood. My hope was that if I could, I should make sure that they didn't have any hardships or suffering. I never pressed them to study. I never told them to go to school, if they didn't want to, even though I did at that time have faith in school education. God was going to take such a friend of mine away from me. My dear friend was struggling right in front of my eyes helplessly, being caught in the clutches of this big demon called illness. He was going through the agony of death, like an insect caught in the mouth of a lizard. He lay in bed and watched listlessly the light, the children playing and the birds flying and hopping.

I gave six years of my life to Ravi in this manner. It was, however, Voyyi's love that sustained us both.

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# 17

When I was living in Anantapur, Krishna Sastry came there on a poetry reading tour. He told me about how he met a friend called Janakiram, Janakiram's sister and her friend in Bellari and spent some happy days with them and also invited me to go to Bangalore to meet Harin [*Harindranath Chatopadhyaya, a Bengali writer in English who later became a friend to Chalam*]. I went there as a fun trip. I couldn't leave Ravi alone for any length of time. In Bangalore Harin told me about Arudha Swami in Hubli and said if he blessed Ravi his illness would go away. I didn't believe it. I had no faith in Swamis and blessings. But he insisted on my taking him. So we two went there. The swami blessed him and said his illness would go away. But it didn't. Mrs. Ranganayakamma blamed me saying it didn't go away because I lacked faith. Some time after I took him there, while I was in Eluru, a gentleman called Sadhu Kondayya came. Apparently illnesses of many people were cured by him before. As soon as he touched Ravi, Ravi got up and started walking. But by the afternoon he lay down as usual with his sickness. Mr. Kondayya said that it wasn't due to the old illness, but that this was something new.

Ravi's illness got worse. All my time was spent in going from hospital to hospital, from doctor to doctor. When he had trouble breathing, I too would be short of breath.

I used to cry, singing, "There is no one that I could bow to, to listen to my helpless pleas ..." Not just then, even now I cry that way. The reason is that whether then or now, I haven't completely lost my belief that someone exists who would listen to my pleas. In addition to his own pain, Ravi used to feel miserable worrying about how much I would cry if he died. I didn't want to show him my love and my grief openly and make his suffering worse; so I used to suppress them. I never liked school work. I always wanted to spend my time with my children. I never went to a club, nor did I have friends. I had no entertainment. I rested only when all my children went to sleep.

If I had a book in my hands, I could forget the whole world. It was the same whether I read or wrote. I would wonder when the school would be over and when I could rush back to the children. I felt like I was living for them. Besides them, I used to get all my happiness from women. I never got along with authorities. Currently Voyyi was also living with us. So, I didn't have any other problem except Ravi's illness. I used to write stories as if someone was compelling me to write them. If anyone published them, I only got rebuke and nothing else from them. No one could counter what I wrote. Being helpless, they abused me in anger. It was Mrs. Ranganayakamma who had experienced great loss because of my writings. I never had relationships with anyone. I wouldn't visit anyone's home nor go to any meetings. No one had the brains to confront and argue with me. The Telugus have a great sense of humor. If someone is abused, even if it is their own kind, they find it funny. Youth in Andhra used to feel good at the beatings Chalam gave to the society, although they didn't have the guts to stand by him and endorse his ideas.

'T' suffered a loss all her life from my ways of living and rebellion. When I joined Brahmo Samaj, she left her parents, relatives and their huge property, trusted me and followed me. Soon, when I got involved in the love affair with Ratnamma, having no other resort, she succumbed.



But when I rebelled morally against society, rejected even God and fell on a desert path, having no other choice, she turned against me. She became hostile not just to me but to all my friends. She stood alone and waged a moral battle against me. As she still lived with me, she could gain no one's sympathy. But it wasn't in her nature to stand alone. She was a gregarious person. I respected her, her life, her opinions and her practices, and left her alone. The whole house was her domain. She had total authority in the house.

Deities, worships, old ladies and Brahmins roamed about freely in our house. But none of them should come in the way of my life. She started social work. She played an important part in women's movements. Unable to bear her wisdom, intelligence and honesty, the bogus ultramodern fashionable ladies started heckling her for Chalam's sins, as they couldn't get a hold of him. She knew English pretty well. When she lived with Chalam in Madras, she learned it at school. She also studied Hindi. Thanks to her cohabitating with Chalam, her outlook was broad. She had innate moral strength. Still, since the ladies were all united, she couldn't help battling them. But she forgot that it was Chalam who gave her the ability to stand that way and blamed him for all her trials and tribulations.

The important factor that pulled down Mrs. Ranganayakamma was her children. Ever since they became conscious, they turned to me and loved me. They went around with me. They would only listen to what I had to say. I had huge quarrels with her regarding the raising of children. I would not let them be beaten no matter what they did. Even when she gave them a small hit, I would hold her hands and make them hit her. If she abused them, I made them abuse her with the same words. I never scolded them. I myself, of course, would never beat them. We had opposing opinions regarding their freedom to cut their hair or wear coarse clothes. As they could escape baths, oil baths, tight clothes and so on, the children were on my side. If any relatives visiting us didn't say hello in a nice way, they used to abuse them. They didn't obey her in any matter even when they were grown up. She was ashamed to admit to her friends and relatives that they were her children. If I didn't fight so hard for their freedom, they would have had to submit to her authority, religious discipline and respectability. I sacrificed Mrs. Ranganayakamma for the sake of the children.

After they grew up some, she tried to persuade them and get them to be on her side. 'Che' was the only one who would be on her side as well as mine, depending on her convenience. Soon, the children quit their studies. But, 'Che' slowly got into studies, in spite of my protests. The children refused to marry no matter how good the offers were. I and Vasant used to make fun of the people who came to offer their daughter in marriage and send them off. 'T' almost went mad, having been defeated in every way. I was so sorry for her. I felt that poor woman, she would have been much happier with a more respectable husband. She couldn't stand us any more, so she went away to Ramanashram. That was a big blow to Voyyi. She tried to support and please her in every possible way. But Ranganayakamma didn't change me. Nor could Voyyi change her. She got crushed and sadly she ceased her efforts. Everyone used to think how big a problem these children had become to us. They wouldn't go to school. They wouldn't marry. We didn't have any property. We had no money. Moreover, we had no caste. We were not respectable. Close friends would often ask me about them affectionately. Even the doctor [Voyyi] was worried:

They would ask, "What would happen to them when they grow up?"

I would retort, “What would happen to *your* children when *they* grow up?”

“The boys will find some jobs or become lawyers, just like you and me. I don’t care at all about my own life. Tell me truly. Do you get any satisfaction or contentment inside you except that you are earning money and accumulating property? Is that all there is to life? You search everywhere and find some fellow and marry your daughter off to him. Marriage is some kind of a lottery. Then they give birth to children. And then you send the children to school and marry them off. Doesn’t it occur to you that man can live a greater life than this? I am trying to save my children from that life of a mill.

“I don’t need anything from them. I am trying to see that they don’t need anything from themselves either. I won’t strangle their necks forcing them to marry. I won’t let them submit themselves to anyone. I will stand in their way if they try to and I will give them confidence. As long as I live, they will grow without knowing hardships. You say they will suffer hardship later. Aren’t your children suffering now because of education and because of their husbands? My children too will suffer as much if necessary. If life becomes unbearable, they already know how to leave from this world effortlessly. You imparted so many fears regarding living: ‘What will happen to you if you are not educated? What will happen to you if you are not considered a good person by everyone? What will happen to you if you can’t find a job? What will happen to you if you can’t marry? What will happen to you if you don’t have money?’ How you suck the life out of them and turn them into corpses with so many fears and burdens!”

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18

That evening I was traveling from Bandar [*now Masulipatam*] to Bezwada. Karredla Narasimham was also in the train. During conversation he asked, smiling at me, “Are your writing anything nowadays?”

All those who get off the tourist bus and squat being short of breath and those who don’t make the effort to open a book to see what is in it, although there are bundles of my printed books lying around them with open covers, ask me the same question even today.

I was then still a writer of ill-repute.

I wasn’t quite so popular so that people would say, “Hey, there goes Chalam. We want to break his face, but this terrible government forbids us to torture even people of this sort.”

The meaning of the question of my dear friend is, “What atrocities are you contemplating *now*?” He looked as if he was threatening me that way with his larger eye while closing his smaller one.

Narasimham was very fond of me. But this “Tandra Paparayudu” [*a hero in Andhra in 18th century mentioned in a classic, Bobbili Yuddham*] was afraid to own me as his friend that day.

“I? I am currently writing a book called *Raising Children* [*Biddala Sikshana*, in Telugu].

“What does it mean?”

“It means the way to bring up children.”

“The way to raise children? Why do you need a book for that? Who doesn’t know about it?”

“Because people don’t know.”

“What does that mean?”

Helplessly I was looking into the darkness enveloping the fields of Dosapadu, at the burning coal sparks from the train’s chimney falling at a place where the fire flies play in between the creeper stems. The sun can remove effortlessly that darkness in ten more hours, but in my dear friend Narasimham’s head we cannot easily insert even a light as small as that glowing particle of charcoal.

Looking at me dumbfounded, he asked, “Tell me what the main point in it is.”

“That you shouldn’t beat children.”

I got a hold of this rogue of a man. I didn’t have the strength to beat him. I wanted to give him a verbal banging, but I didn’t realize that a lean fellow was looking out for him in the train compartment. It was easy for Narasimham to hate me. When I run into him on the road, my bicycle would automatically turn a corner to avoid him.

From the other corner of the compartment, “Don’t hit him,” the man shouted suddenly, to startle even the smaller eye of Narasimham.

I waited a little and then said, “You should raise them with compassion, love and affection,” I said lamely.

“Why?”

“Aren’t they our children?”

So we argued. I was fed up. From that day till today I never argued with anyone. I argued once or twice with Ms. Leela who believed every sentence I wrote as “Chalam’s Veda [*scripture*].” With that I stopped arguing even with the ones closer to me. Gradually I completely stopped talking by now.

Ms. Leela remarked, “People might agree with what you wrote in *Stri* [Woman, another book of Chalam in *Telugu*] as true, they might think about them, but no one will agree with your *Biddala Sikshana* [Raising of Children]. You have ruined yourself by trying to live according to it to the point that if we try to find any remnants of Chalam we won’t find any.”

Unless the thing called the ‘I’ is gone, wisdom won’t arise, says Bhagavan [*Sri Ramana Maharshi*].

Yes, the ‘I’ didn’t go away. It exists plentifully in [*the issues of*] women and children in Chalam’s mind. That’s how Chalam’s *Biddala Sikshana* started.

.....

Why did I ever think of writing *Biddala Sikshana*? No reason. That pain arose from my birth, from my nature which cannot endure the suffering that children go through.

How can not only man but even the sky, the wind and the Sun who touches the leaves and blades of grass with love, watch passively, when the same loving mother who when an ant bit the daughter would say, “the bad ant, why didn’t it bite me?” takes a tamarind stick and beats the girl, and when a mother who says, “shut up, you, shut up,” to the daughter who cries in pain saying, “I’ll never do it again, mom, please don’t hit me, I’ll never do it again, I’ll pray at your feet”?

Even if my guru says, “All this is maya [*illusion*], the maya you have fabricated.”

Isn't because of Ravi's illness that my faith in God has not returned till today?

Does the rabbit in a cage with a broken back waiting to die and crying helplessly know that soon its suffering would end in the hands of the goddess of death? Does a child have any inkling that the anger of the mother who was beating her on top of a swelling on the back would abate soon? Did the girl who was laughing while picking flowers in the afternoon sun acting as though she had no pain know that her mother's anger would soon subside?

Mother of Worlds, is this your love? Don't you know such a thing as forbearance? Even if you arranged for an end to pain and suffering, how can I be grateful to you, O Goddess? Can the happiness yet to come wipe out the present torture? Regardless of all explanations, can I be passive to such torment? "If you won't, what would you do?" you might ask. I will write it on paper to spite you.

Are these torments a retribution for the sins they had committed in their previously lives? Punish them as you will. But must you do that when they are so little? Must you start their punishment in their mother's womb?

You still want faith?
You are benevolent
And compassionate.

Bhagavan is asking, "What happened to your child's torment when you slept?" True, neither the children nor their torment. All right. O.K., I'm gone. But will the torment go away, if I'm gone? When I went to sleep did Ravi's pain go away? How I blamed myself for having slept like a log while he was suffering in his pain!

All right, why didn't you let me sleep like that? Why did you wake me up from my sleep again?

You say there is no pain if 'I' am gone. Must I go unable to bear the sight of the pain created by the Lord? Would I remain passive while I am awake and the child is suffering pain, no matter how impotent I am? Would I watch passively without a tear in my eye, saying "O, you compassionate, omnipotent and sleepless one!"?

Who will solve this problem of mine?
O God! Do you really exist?

Do these pains and sufferings really exist?
I am not able to say.

I am a humble, impotent and helpless man. You gave me a pen to write with, to make these letters resonate the pain in my heart, to move hearts and melt them. The result of that is *Biddala Sikshana* which people and grown up children so condemn.

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# 19

Voyyi finished her studies and came to live with us. How happy I was! She wouldn't leave us again each time she comes home. We wouldn't have to feel lonesome in her absence. After her arrival, we were feeling great. How many dreams we dreamed, how we dreamt of living happily, feeling great! We contemplated spending time beautifully. But it didn't happen that way. We felt all dark around us due to Ravi's illness. But Voyyi's arrival made me feel pretty strong. We wouldn't have to feel so anxious about Ravi's illness any longer. A doctor who knew about Ravi's body and his illness was going to live in our house.

We were spending our time more or less happily. Mr. Tenali Subbarao, 'T', and friends such as Rama Murty gathered around us. We weren't cooking. Our meals came from a restaurant. We were reading, singing, going on outings, and so on. But only Ravi couldn't go out with us. That's how it worked out. What good was our being happy, if Ravi couldn't go with us? Our only consolation was Shau. We never knew on what day or at what hour or at what minute Ravi would die. The Damocles' sword was always hanging on our heads by the thread. In the midst of our happiness there was always the sadness that Ravi's was not joining us. He just watched us from a distance wanting to join us.

Voyyi was always preoccupied with the question of where she should open her clinic. I was too. We were already happy. Why couldn't we stay that way? Why should we move? Couldn't we stop time just where it was? But the wheel of time which was driving our lives forward was turning in our heads inexorably, pushing us into the mouth of the serpent of time devouring all of us.

Voyyi wanted to set up a clinic somewhere and start practicing. We too thought that if she started her practice and earned a lot of money and fame, we could live in luxury. That's the mistake everyone makes. I didn't know it then. Even if I didn't make that mistake, time wouldn't have stopped. We used to think subconsciously that while we all still lived together, Voyyi could set up her practice, and we would be happy with it, and the happiness which we then had would be with us for ever, that it was in our hands, and that we could control it. But if we had even a bit of wisdom, we would have known that that wasn't going to happen. Even if it were not possible, we could not stay that way. Voyyi would anyhow have set up her practice. The point of her studies was to practice medicine.

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Ravi had passed away. I wasn't with him when he died. If anyone watched him suffering, they would think that there was no use in his living, that it was better that he had died. Where would he go after he died? What would I do here without him? Would I ever regain that happiness? I became lonely. Such was his personality. He would conquer us as well as time.

What became of him? There is no God. There are no other worlds. There is just void and nothing else. That Ravi who was with us in our happiness, misery and hardships is nowhere today.

How unbearable it had been to think that he was nowhere! And, as he was nowhere, it would be a waste to grieve thinking of him. That would be of no use to him and no use to us. What good is it to grieve for someone who doesn't exist? We tried to forget our grief as though it never existed with the idea that the sooner we forgot him the happier we would all be. We gave away all his things. We made sure we didn't have any of his photographs or shirts. "We never had Ravi with us. That was just a dream. Why think about it? We have to live for some time. Why bother thinking about the dead Ravi?" With this thought in mind, we invited all our friends, went to different places and tried somehow to get rid of all our memories of him.

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Ever since Voyyi started her practice in Bezwada, our lives became grander. Money, status and respectability—all multiplied. But something got snapped in me with the death of Ravi. The very nerve through which I would derive my happiness in life was severed. I did have superficial pleasures, but inside, I was no longer the same person. On the surface I didn't have a worry. I pushed aside everything. I got rid of everything. But I presumed that the grief was just on the surface. I didn't know it at all then that it was rooted somewhere. So, whatever I wanted to glorify and enjoy, I did on the surface, but I had no joy deep inside. That was it for this life. I was never totally happy after that, because everything in my life—the joy of watching the beauty of trees, the beauty of the sky, of listening to the chirping of birds, of water – all perished with him.

We two together used to blame society and people, mock and laugh – we experienced all these inside us as though we two were one. We believed we would be that way for ever, like babes in the wood. He joined me without a care. We were united with the feeling that no matter what we had or didn't have, we were together. And Voyyi too joined us. But now she got into her practice, her job and her new life in a serious way. Although I too had a job, I felt it was just a show. It never touched me till the very end of my career. I had no connection with my job. Just to occupy myself, I would go there and do that work. And I would come back home laughing. But now, how burdensome my life feels! I could not sustain myself in any joy. Voyyi plunged into her work. Ravi died. And I was left alone.

Until Shau grew up a little and dreamed with me and shared her happiness with me, I was alone. Shau used to live in her dreams ever since she was a child. I used to join her in her dreams to an extent. With Ravi's presence gone, my heydays were gone. I didn't realize it until later. I haven't yet realized it in my life. I thought he too would grow up like me. Not that he would go somewhere to school or for a job. That issue never entered his mind or mine. How we laughed together! How lofty we used to dream! With nothing else, us three, me, Ravi and Voyyi, we were together in the world. If Ravi were alive, Voyyi too wouldn't have moved apart from us. Be that as it may, I lost my childlike quality and fell into status and respectability.

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We considered what might be the best place for her practice and chose Bezwada, thinking that no matter where I got transferred it would be a central place for me to come back to. Voyyi started earning income right away. 'T' got me transferred soon to Bezwada. 'T' became a municipal councilor. From the worldly point of view, that was a grand time for us. The children were going to the convent school and were looked upon highly as "the doctor's kids." We were

gaining greater influence everywhere. Our house became an establishment. Several actors and dancers who didn't get public recognition became our friends and lived in our house. More than that, the doctor has been giving shelter indiscriminately to helpless women, to the unfortunate mothers who gave birth to children without husbands, to parents, and to women who rebelled against their husbands. Moreover, people read my books and magazine articles and were stricken with fear. They wouldn't agree with the ideas in them as they believed that if people read them their families would collapse.

Many women used to warn, "If you persecute us and come in the way of our freedom, we will go to Chalam."

Parents and husbands would come to our house in search of their run-away women. If the women refused to return to their homes, they would get angry and contemplate harm to us. They even tried to bring up court cases against us. They conducted, and they still do, propaganda against us saying that we were running a house of ill-repute and teaching loose morals. Even my close friends became enemies in this matter and objected to the women whom they knew to even come and say hello to us. It's the same even now. The children who were born without fathers became a problem. The doctor gave away those children to whoever asked for them, without regard to distinctions of caste or religion. As much as they could, people even tried to boycott our clinic by not letting others come there for medicines.

The doctor participated in the Congress Party activities. There was always a scare about when she might get arrested. By 9:00 am in the morning we would all go out our ways. No one stayed home. We returned only in the evening. That was why the night meal became so important to us. Our old friends living in Bezwada and our new friends were scared to even set their foot in our house. Around that time, I and my students put on many plays. Mr. Kasinadhuni Nageswara Rao allowed us to use his Hall gratis. All the money I and the doctor earned was spent that way. The doctor saved many lives and gave them independent means of living.

We looked so great on the outside, but the joy in my heart disappeared. From that day to this, the natural joy in me never returned. Recalling our days in Bezwada, Souris too says that all those years I lived in grief. With the move to Bezwada my entire life had changed. Although we didn't care about it, respectability crept into our household. Small items of gold and silver entered the house to make us 'beggars' more respectable. Being aware of all this, we started eating meat and fish. Still, people didn't leave us alone. They would get with us in a nice way, and start scandals behind our backs, claiming this was a house of ill-repute. Many such would join us under cover, and not finding anything objectionable, they would grow more angry and spiteful, and then would turn hostile without any particular reason.

The doctor didn't have a moment's rest. If she did, her mind was always on her job of healing. Besides, my infatuation with women never left me. In between my affairs with them, the sex between us slowly died away. My life became impoverished. To add to it, my health was poor. Due to the many conflicts occurring in revolutionary politics of that time, my mind started thinking in various directions. First, I thought of Mr. Gandhi's ideas and then of the Communist



doctrines. The reviews of my books that appeared in the papers would strongly agitate me. In the midst of all these, the two problems of God and woman bothered me constantly.

Many people would come and ask me what I would advise regarding their restlessness and their doubts. In matters of sex, I became famous as some sort of expert. I got letters with requests to solve people's problems. Those who were hurt in their lives came to me for consolation. But I couldn't do much for them except asking them to stay with me. I came to the conclusion that there was no meaning to this life; that I wouldn't find any even if I searched for it; and that it was wise to enjoy what I had. But my mind kept searching. If a man didn't have loftiness and depth, no matter how great the experiences were that came to him from above, they couldn't give him much. They would slide off from the surface of the mind. They would say, "Oh, you unfortunate fellow," smile and move away. This is particularly true with regard to women. If we say we want her, we must enjoy her, in that very desire our nobility is killed. So, there is no meaning in telling myself to experience. At that time I couldn't understand any of this and I wondered about it.

My mind tormented me with the thought that the infinite blue sky, the stars which appeared to tell me something, the inviting soft breeze, the taunting beauty of a woman beyond my grasp - all these won't end with this; and that there is some unknown something. It was from that time that I had acquired a great disgust for death. When I looked at the children putting their arms around me endearingly, when I look at the beauty shining around me every minute, I felt: "Is there a murderer who created such a thing as death? Is it some empty void which gave me all these experiences? When every minute is overflowing with the nectar of love, sex and mutual happiness, is this all a mere meaningless movement?"

"But can the Giver of Love bear all this cruelty of the grass which dries and withers away, and of the insects and animals which die writhing in pain? Is it a loving heart which devours an innocent child which sits in my lap with arms around me endearingly? Will all this end with death?" Such a doubt would cut through me as if with a knife and poison all my joyful life. "Unless I kill a life, I can't satisfy my hunger pangs; unless I cause incessant torment for another heart, I cannot make my life ever-new and illumined. Is He playing with my life making me helpless by creating such ideas and emotions in me? What a rascal!" I tormented myself with such thoughts.

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That was a hospital which Dr. Rangachari got newly built. I and Abbatta were sitting in the waiting room. In an officious tone of voice she asked the hospital staff person to see Dr. Rangachari. The man was dumbfounded looking at her as if he was wondering whether he really heard those words.

“Dr. Rangachari? How can you see him? What’s your business with him?”

“What business is that of yours? Tell him that Nurse Mahalakshmi is here.”

As soon as he went in, a doctor emerged wiping his hands with a towel. “Dr. Rangachari is in the middle of a major surgery. He will be out in five minutes. Please wait a bit,” he said and left.

I was amazed. Except when he was operating on patients in an emergency, it was difficult to see Dr. Rangachari. Apparently, even his wife only saw him once in a couple of months. He traveled in his own airplane visiting one patient after another. His fees ran into thousands of rupees. A doctor of that status would come running when a Nurse sent word! Just as I was thinking this, he came in. He was handsome. He had a broad smile on his face. Just looking at him was enough to be healed.

“Sorry, I was in the middle of a big surgery. How are you?” he said and sat down relaxing, as though he didn’t have any other business to take care of.

“This is my nephew,” Abbatta was saying. But he wasn’t paying attention. He was saying something in Tamil. How humble he was in his speech! Although he was talking, he doted on her with his eyes. Whatever Abbatta told me just before we got there was indeed true. We stayed for an hour or hour-and-a-half. All that time doctors wanted him back in surgery. He was shaking his hand shooing them away. Finally, Abbatta got tired and stood up, “After all, I haven’t accomplished what I came for.”

“What have you come for?” he asked eagerly.

“I told you that this is my nephew. He has headaches.”

He examined me for half an hour, while talking to her all along. He ignored me and kept talking to her. Abbatta stood up again and asked, “What about him?” The doctor turned to me and said:

“Why are you so mad at your teeth? Don’t grind them so much. Take a soft cloth and wipe them,” he was going on.

Meanwhile, a doctor came running to him and said, “You must come right away. It’s urgent.”

Abbatta said, "I am leaving then."

He said to his chauffer, "Take them in my car and drop them off at their place."

After we got into the car, Abbatta said chatting away, "This is how it goes. They don't let me go easily." She was saying how these doctors were pestering her. When we got to her place, there were three other cars waiting for her. She got into one of them.

"When will you come back, Abbatta?"

"How can I say? You said you would eat at 10 am. The meal will come in a carrier. You eat and take care of your business."

Her house was filled with silverware and she was decked with gold jewelry. Rich patients would stay in bed just for her, with the excuse that they hadn't recovered yet.

"What do you say, my boy? Would you say this is all real?"

Major Naidu was one of the reputable doctors in Hyderabad. He was the husband of [*the famous writer*] Sarojini Naidu and was a lecturer in the medical college. That was how Voyyi knew him. When she was still new to Hyderabad, Voyyi introduced her to him. He enrolled her in a nursing program. Apparently he remarked to her, "If you only knew English a bit, I would have enrolled you into a doctor's program."

Pretty soon, he got to a point where he had to see her at least twice or thrice a week.

Dr. Koorlawala was a great surgeon and superintendent of a hospital. When he had to perform surgery, the students and the patient on the table had to wait until Nurse Mahalakshmi arrived to help him. Abbatta [*Mahalakshmi*] couldn't take all this, so she came to Madras prematurely without finishing the program. Mr. Venkata Ratnam Naidu was then the Vice-Chancellor of Madras University. She sought his shelter. I don't know what story she told him, but he sent her nursing certificate to Hyderabad and got them to certify that she had finished the nursing course there. Since then Abbatta's practice took off and she became very successful.

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# 21

We lived in Bezwada for 20 years. I used to get transferred in my job. But I traveled back and forth to Bezwada. All of 'T's children settled down with Voyyi. Voyyi used to support all of them and took care of their needs. She raised them all those years without me or 'T' lacking anything. I had seen many women in my life. But I never saw someone like her. She would never reveal how great her soul was or how much she had loved me. I can't even imagine how much suffering she had gone through because of me. Once my aunt asked me on whose account Voyyi died, I told her that among all the people she loved and took care of, everyone, except Shau, killed her, particularly I. There is no possible excuse for all the torment I caused her. But what's peculiar was that I was a puppet in someone's hands. I had no control over myself and no one could control me. I was still rebelling, but Sri Krishna's words in the Bhagavad Gita, "I am making them play like puppets," and Bhagavan's words, "No one can escape fate," came true. All those years I was struggling in the dark, with no help or strength.

The light in me was turned off as soon as I came to Bezwada. The inner source of my happiness dried up. I don't even have a memory of it. Money, status and friends, all multiplied around me. But I had no peace. We put on plays, went on excursions, arranged dinners, and helped many women and men; but there was no satisfaction in any of them, no happiness. I used to go on my search with the assumption that something was in my hands, that I was missing some happiness, and that some turn of events or some person or change in circumstance from outside would brighten my days. I would always look forward to the future, but could get no happiness from the present. I wanted to relate my problem to Voyyi, but even she, what could she do? My ideal of love was burning away the fire of my sex. But I was never free from the belief that some woman would open the doors of heaven to me. No woman was in fact giving me any satisfaction. Any enjoyment was only on the surface and nothing moved me inside.

Souris was clamoring for a baby for herself. So, we gave her to raise a baby born in our hospital without a father. That girl was our Chitra. When she grew up she got married and as time went on she gave birth to children. She and her children have been living with us.

Meanwhile, Mr. Dikshitulu visited and asked me to go to Arunachala. I told him I wouldn't, that I had no business there. He said I could go as a fun trip to keep him company. He begged. We arrived in Arunachalam in the afternoon. Mr. Dikshitulu said we ought to buy some fruit on the way.

"Why should I buy? I won't..." I said. He bought them for me. We arrived at the Ashram. The Ashram didn't attract me. He took me to a hall. There on a sofa was Bhagavan sitting. There were many people who sat around him. Mr. Dikshitulu prostrated himself before Bhagavan. Bhagavan didn't show a single movement; he didn't turn his far off look toward him. Mr. Dikshitulu stood up and pulled me in as I was standing outside the hall. He asked me to prostrate myself.

“What do I care? I won’t,” I said.

“Do it just because I am asking you to,” he pressed me and made me lie on the floor. I squeezed myself in the space between people in the hall along with him. In two minutes Mr. Dikshtulu was crying, unable to contain his joy. No one there noticed him. Bhagavan didn’t even look at him. That afternoon, and for many afternoons to come, I merely sat there in the hall. I never felt good there even once. The atmosphere was stifling. I was bored. I always felt like getting out of there. They all claimed that by sitting there they felt peaceful. I hoped I too would gain some peace and sat there. I never felt that peace even once. And when I saw their faces, they didn’t look like they gained any peace after all.

That first night we sat down for dinner in the Ashram. I had never eaten before such tasty vegetables or vegetarian food. The next day there was a celebration. There were thousands of people. Then or now, the coffee they gave in the Ashram in the mornings was no coffee. It looked like the Ashram people never heard of the word ‘tea’. They served lunch around 11:00 am. But if I ate after 9:30 am I would get a headache. On the day of the celebration, thanks to the throngs, the way to the dining stall was blocked. So I dragged Mr. Dikshitulu, who was hoping for *prasadam* [consecrated food] from Bhagavan, out of the Ashram.

We ate our lunch in town. Soon after I ate, I had a terrible headache and knocked myself off to sleep under a brush-like fence. Since that time, everyday I would clamor: “When are we getting out of here.” I did that whenever we visited in the Ashram. I never liked it there. I was bored. I couldn’t bear Bhagavan sitting in the hall. I didn’t feel like talking to anyone. Anyone who had noticed me would move away. All the devotees would say, “Aha, how peaceful we feel when we come here.” But I never found that peace. And I never saw any peace on the faces of the devotees; nor did I see any restlessness. Mr. Dikshitulu kept putting me off saying, “We’ll go, we’ll go.” I would clamor for “My tea, cigarettes and eggs.”

As for him, he would eat those *idlis* and drink that coffee, join those hypocritical devotees and have a jolly conversation, strolling along with them. Bhagavan, however, appeared great to me. I felt that “He was beyond this world.” But I became more and more restless staying in the Ashram. I was surprised how a great man like Bhagavan got mixed up with these people.

“Mr. Dikshitulu, you said that some of these people have been living in Bhagavan’s presence for some years. Home come those faces look so long-drawn then? We too will be the same if stay here. Let’s get out soon,” I said.

He replied, “When the rain drops keep falling on a rock, one day it has to break.”

At last, we got ready to leave. I went to Bhagavan and said, “I am leaving.”

He then cast a smile in my direction. My legs didn’t move. My mouth didn’t open. I had a great worry about how I was going to be able to leave him. We quickly went to the train station. There was a Spencer Room in those days in the train station. As soon as we went in, I ordered a pot of tea, two pieces of toast, two half-boiled eggs and a pack of cigarettes. I got into the train discussing Bhagavan’s Vedanta with Mr. Dikshitulu.

Bhagavan says that the 'I' is the first thing in man. From the 'I' all other thoughts arise. It is from this 'I' that all our knowledge, sin, atrocities and attachments arise and grow. Just as I thought before, he too says that the 'I' forms gradually in small children.

There are many moral differences and changes [lit. transformations, *parinamalu*] in human conduct. If we think that this life ends with death, and if such atrocities go on in the world, is there no retribution or justice in this world? Are there heaven and hell in this world? Is there another world? Are there heaven and hell in that world? And who would mete out punishment to these people? I had endless questions of this sort. Unless one answered these questions, I wouldn't believe anyone's Vedanta. Although I didn't ask Bhagavan any questions myself, I heard the answers he gave to similar questions others had asked.

"Who has these questions? Find out who that 'I' is." He was giving some such answers. How many would know this 'I'? Apparently, if one trusted a guru and did the practice he prescribed, then one would realize after some years or some lifetimes. Suffering so long like this without being able to understand the source of it didn't seem fair to me. I wasn't convinced of Bhagavan's Vedanta at all.

When I returned to Bezwada, everyone asked about the Ashram, particularly Shau.

"Bhagavan attracted me powerfully, deeply and firmly. But I was irritated with the Ashram. Nor did I agree with any of Bhagavan's Vedanta. His looks didn't attract me at all. But I felt some majesty coming out of him."

Shau was quite impressed listening to all I had to say. We thought we would try out the practice of 'Who am I?' taught by him.

So far, in my view, the whole of man's personality is in his mind. The seat of the mind is the brain. What remains after a man dies? People used to talk vaguely of an Atman. But sciences laugh at any of idea of something which remains after the brain is destroyed. According to the Vedanta taught by Bhagavan, the mind is man's personality; and the personality mostly disappears as soon as the mind is gone. We would think of what remains after that. But what Bhagavan says is: "The mind is the ego. That is your 'I'. The ego is the 'I'. That 'I' is your personality. It is that which is fancying the whole world and showing it to you. If your 'I' is gone, then you will realize the truth. That is the barrier between you and the truth. With the help of the inquiry called 'Who am I?' one could destroy the mind. As one succeeds in that, one obtains peace," says Bhagavan.

This led to a new hope in Shau and me.

I didn't know then, but I do now: there are many planes in the human mind. I thought Bhagavan didn't impress me at all. But he linked me to him strongly on some mental or spiritual plane. That was why, for no apparent reason, I would run back to him. As soon as I arrived, I would make arrangements for my next trip. I had a strong faith that Bhagavan could give total

peace to my mind which was tormented with unexplained restlessness. This is just as true today as it was then.

Souris's desire to see Bhagavan grew stronger; so she traveled with me there once. At the very moment of her arrival, she saw Bhagavan and fell into *Samadhi*. She kept coming back here dragging me with her. In those days this was all a jungle. There was no shelter here except the Ashram. They would not let women stay during the nights here. In fact, Shau and I used to have great trouble as we couldn't find a place to spend the nights. Shau felt like staying here all the time. I was always hurrying to get back home any minute.

I was transferred to Visakhapatnam. Since then Bhagavan used to keep me in unwavering and effortless meditation for as long as an hour or two. As if it was all due to my doing, I used to think that if I could continue like this, soon my mind would become pure and I would be on the path to peace. With that all my previous pleasures had disappeared. Movies, books, friends and even the ocean were not giving me pleasure any more. My troubles, however, remained unchanged. My headaches, the eternal, incessant turmoil in my mind, and my insatiable desire for women, they all continued to torment me. Souris, however, was sustained in great progress and had been reassuring me.

As Bhagavan was helping me sit in meditation every day without my effort, I learned that he had power over my mind. But I didn't want to believe any of the Vedanta he taught unless I experienced it. If he says that the mind creates all these pleasures, I didn't want believe in that doctrine at all. I couldn't meditate by myself. Nor did I find any use from meditation. I just believed that he had total control over my happiness and misery. Why did I believe that? I believed it because it was my experience.

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If I, who dedicated my life to Brahma Samaj, had only led my life according to its philosophy, I would have had a very peaceful time. I was born with a million questions, problems and threats. They started sprouting in me one after another. Those were the ones which severed me from the traditional worships and disciplines and prompted me to join the Brahma Samaj. Now the desire for and infatuation with women raised their heads in me and connected me with Ratnam. With the notion that my friendship with her was sinful raised a big storm in me. But looked at from any point of view our friendship was noble. I was filled with joy and overwhelmed by it.

I started wondering what made this relationship sinful. I couldn't figure out why. I was convinced in myself that there was nothing sinful about it. Moreover, I had growing doubts about the precepts of the Brahma Samaj. Why wouldn't the Brahma women remove the beauty marks [the *bindi* on their foreheads] and the auspicious strings [*mangala sutram* - worn when a woman gets married]? Why would they adorn them, in the first place, at wedding time? As for their marriages, there didn't seem to be any relationship between their marriages and love. Due to their respectability they seemed to be attached inseparably to the idea of marriage. Be that as it may, I thought I couldn't get along with them any longer and resigned my membership.

The woman problem was continuing to haunt me. Gradually I got hold of books on sex psychology. As I read them, I realized how the moral taboos regarding women were artificial and narrow. I was shocked at how the moralists, followers of religions, moral preachers, and religious missionaries deceived people. There was no coherence in their teaching. I would read each sentence in the new books, be awake all night and debate with myself. When Rama Murty and Prakasam visited, we all three would discuss them, be anguished and condemn the moralists vehemently. As I learned that this morality was social and not God-created, my faith in God was shaken and I started to have doubts. We began to doubt whether God, if He existed, could tolerate inequalities among people, deception, hypocrisy, disease, suffering, floods, earthquakes, and hopeless lives full of sorrow.

When I was still part of Brahma Samaj, I carried on with my thoughts and my life without questioning, without hesitation, on the basis of the belief that God existed. I never questioned the ignorance and cruelty in creation and the ignorance and immorality in people. We used to justify all that without question, thinking it was all God's wisdom, His own power, His creation, and His way of morality. The founders of Brahma Samaj, intellectuals such as Tagore, Keshava Chandra Sen, too, never raised this question. It never occurred to Ramakrishna Paramahansa or Dayananda and such others either. If they ever talked about it they would say that it was all due to karma or the will of God. Why would a just God allow such injustice in the world? Why would a benevolent God tolerate such cruelty? Questions such as these troubled us deeply.

That God exists is a mere belief and at best a subjective feeling, but not something that could stand rational scrutiny. Once I started to doubt, everything became suspect. I wondered how I could have believed in God all these years. But in my conscience somewhere, I felt that even if there were no God, there was some great Truth that I couldn't fathom, because I was afraid that

the 'I' wouldn't end with death, and that if it did, then whatever I strongly believed in would become false. Although I questioned the contemporary morals, I never doubted morality as such. Can only the state preserve morality with sanctions of courts and police?

Is the pity which stops one from stealing the gold after wringing the neck of a small child a mere mental habit? Are the friendship, love and sympathy between one human being and another all mere illusions created by the mind? Are the order, symmetry, arrangement, interdependence visible in the universe and creation itself mere accidents? Many such questions arose in my mind. I spent many a restless night unable to understand any of them. They weren't all mere intellectual speculation, but based on my mental findings, on my moral conduct, my peace and the path of my life. So, they presented a vital problem for me. I spent some years this way searching, groping in the dark and debating with myself.

If I looked at the universe removing God from it, it appeared frightening, without any meaning, beauty, taste or life in it. If I thought there was God, I had so many doubts. If I thought there wasn't one, I still had so many doubts. Still, if I regarded this whole world without a doubt that God existed, there were the injustice, inequality, senselessness and cruelty. The authors who wrote books concerning these matters are of two kinds: 1) second class intellects lacking brains; and 2) those that speak lies and fabrications to earn their livelihood. All of them pacified the mind and lulled the intellect to sleep so that it won't be troubled. The more I saw the world, the more impossible it became to erect a God from the injustice, foolishness, cruelty, self-deception and deception of others. The more I opened my eyes, the more God disappeared without a trace.

There is no one who has seen God, nor at least anyone who claimed to have seen God. And there is no one who claimed he didn't see God. Did anyone, as Hiranyakashipu [*the demon king in a myth from the Mahabagavatam*] did, search all the fourteen worlds, let alone in the pillar in front of him [*the demon broke a pillar looking for God within it*]? These people didn't search even in a single atom. What's the calibre of their intelligence and experience? Unable to solve this problem, I spent many years, until at last I came to Bhagavan. If God were a loving God, why wouldn't he save these animals, men and all lives from suffering and pain? Why wouldn't he show his mercy no matter how much one prayed or moaned? The more one looked the more one found that the deception, thievery, cruelty and selfishness found in the devotees of God can be seen nowhere else. As soon as we suspected that maybe He didn't exist, that maybe we were deceived all this time, it became clear that rebirth, heaven and hell, other worlds, deities, worship, prayers and meditation, all became false.

I abandoned God because of the moral problems that had arisen after I had left the Brahmo Samaj. I concluded that believing that He would listen to my prayers and help me was all a mere illusion. But at times I suspected that even though I had abandoned Him He might not have left me. Before that time the wisdom that Brahmo Samaj taught regarding this world, the other world and God appeared to be the ultimate truth. As there was no God in my mind any more, all that teaching became false to me. As my sense of inquiry shifted its ground, everything became suspect.

For the most part I tried not to be dragged into female darkness, stealthy beds and lies due to the fear of Him or to the pretense of respectability. Not that I ever thought that God would

give me heaven, release or save me from dangers, but I had hoped that He would make me radiant and pure and make me fit for light and vastness. As far as I know, the only persons who ever looked upon woman as noble was Mr. Raghupati Venkata Ratnam Naidu and Krishna Sastry in his poetry. Now woman was my God. Since there was no God to show me mercy and make me resplendent, I thought woman was my only refuge. There was nothing more joyful and nothing sweeter in the world than love.

Peace was what I wanted all my life. But my mind was always tormented with thoughts and problems. Whether I was in bed at nights or I awake in the morning, the big problem of “What’s all this?” haunted me. But I could never maintain peace. The thought that if I wanted peace, I should live minding my own business, hoarding money, eating food, and not bothering about other people, never entered my head. I did everything that would shatter my peace. If I didn’t create problems for myself, I would never have needed to live without peace at all. I needed a relief from the emotions that swelled up in me. All the problems – the problem of women, the problem of children, the problem of animals, and the problem of the world – ruined my peace.

Those who wish to be happy never bother with these. They don’t include them in their thoughts or in their lives. If someone comes to them with a complaint, they would say, “Oh, I see,” and send them off, but don’t take them in and ask what their problem is. But all my life was filled with the pain of someone or other. I would often say to myself that I couldn’t take this burden any more. But there would always be other things. But then, why did I seek those things which would only give me turbulence? Why? I now know. If the things which caused me turbulence didn’t come into my life, I felt like a log. What would I have to do except going to school, coming back home, eat, sit and read books? All that is peace. If I think about it now, it’s clear that the peace I wanted was not ordinary peace.

There has always been a battle between my life and myself. Ever since I was conscious, I had the conviction that this world must be a playground for every living being, a playground devoid of any fear, pain or suffering. But as I looked more and more, the world appeared not as a playground but as a ground of battles and wounds, a suffering-ground of sick people who are beaten down every day, every minute. This is why my struggle is not only with my own pain, but with all the pain in the world, with all darkness. That’s why history is filled with pain, it’s an ocean of sorrow.

“Take life as it is. Do not quarrel with it. We have not made the world. Let it be... excuseless, useless, hopeless, stupid. That’s why you have this suffering,” said people who knew the world. But I cannot reconcile myself that way. As I was going in the Chitturi’s car to the Satunur Dam, I had a flash: Couldn’t there be a universe which was not based on money, power and bodily or mental strength? Couldn’t there be a world where values such as knowledge, quest for beauty, affection, attachment and love ruled? They say there are higher worlds. Would they have light, peace, goodwill, happiness and love as their foundations? But then if we see the darkness of the dying creatures, the question of “What about these?” would come up.

All right. I was thinking like an Assistant to the Creator. Who would help me? What was going to become of me? In this infinite universe, I created a corner for myself, and to protect myself from the sun and rain I built these walls and this roof as if they were my own, and I had

been filling my belly from day to day, buying rice and fish with these pieces of paper called currency bills which someone gave me in pity. Drinking this water, eating this food and breathing this air, all of which have I have been freely provided, I gave myself a name and went on living. If I were thrown up with just a kick into the outer space, into the endless infinite darkness, who would help me? Even then I would not desist from this battle with darkness. I could not compromise with a God who has created such injustice, ineptness, and darkness. It was in such a state of mind that I came to Bhagavan.

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## 23

The children were growing up. To begin with, Shau [*Souris*] never bothered with the affairs of the world or of the house. She used to say that she came into this world just for my sake. She was connected only to me. With the others she acted playful. Even when she became an adult she remained unworldly. Even that connection broke off after she came to Bhagawan [*Sri Ramana Maharshi*]. She would spend long hours in meditation. From the start, her health and mine weren't very good. Apparently, since she was 10 Shau also got the same migraine I had been suffering from. She always liked music. She would spend all her time singing songs.

We were great friends. We spent all our lives dreaming. While eating fish we would imagine how we were going to live, how we would change, and how we two would be roaming on the streets with nothing on us other than our clothes. All our lives we dreamed, dreamed that our health would get better some day; that we would go on canals and rivers; and that we would go on a boat or a car on the road from town to town. Since we had no money anyway, we thought we would go on a single-bullock cart. We would go from village to village or town to town, we would sing songs there, teach them something, and eat the food they give us. We couldn't bear this world. We always wondered how we could leave this world and go far away from these men. We never could adjust ourselves to them.

Vasant grew up and quit school. He turned out to be a problem. There was never enough room in the house for his activities. So he caused mischief in town. Otherwise, he would get together with rich kids and spent time in their homes. He could somehow adjust himself to such company. The rules we set for him were too constricting to his mind. I wasn't always in town, as I would go away wherever I was transferred. Shau would come with me. But Vasant, however, became a problem for Voyyi. She would complain: "How can I manage with him?" He used to bully other kids. And he didn't obey Voyyi.

Finally, we talked to him and arranged for him to go to Madras and live there as he pleased and we would send him some money each month. He went to Madras and first joined the Adyar school as a student. They suggested that it would be better if he went into an arts program instead of the regular school. When I was returning home from Arunachala, the principal sent for me, asking to see him once. I went to the Theosophical Garden. The Principal said to me:

"I got him out of the regular program and enrolled him in the arts program. That's not a problem for you, is it?"

"It's no problem, whatever you do is fine with me," I said.

"I am very much interested in Vasant. He hasn't grown up like normal children. Because he is so special, I felt like talking to his father; so I sent for you. That's all," he said. "Not just his rearing, his nature is different. He is a born artist. A single stroke from his hand looks like a work

of art. I don't know what to do with him or how to get him into some shape. But I will take good care of him. Don't worry," he added.

I left.

The school officials were raising every month the fees that we had to pay for him. We couldn't afford it. No one knows why, but Vasant didn't like it there after some time and left the school.

He wasn't required to tell us where he was going or what he would do. "Your life is yours. Do what you like with it. You don't have to worry about us," I told Vasant long ago.

He left school, and roamed around in Madras with his friends for a while, and joined a movie production company as an assistant cameraman. Everyone loved him there. They hoped that he would prosper there. But he quit that too.

When someone asked him, "Why did you quit the movie work?" he said, "I didn't like it there at all."

"But didn't they say that you had a great future there?"

"What does 'great future' mean? Suppose I behaved for some time so that no one was upset with me; worked hard days and nights; and then became a director. But I don't care about money and fame. What would they give me? It's not worth my while. Besides, I don't care for the people there."

"What will you do there, then?" I asked.

"Whatever. I will work as a laborer."

I was very pleased to hear that. Whether it is a boy or a girl, if they didn't marry, they can live happily. But they must be prepared to do any kind of work without hesitation. There should, however, be no investment in it. "You figure out if you can withstand such a hardship or not. Or find something here. Look for some work here first and then go there," I said.

"Go without any money to Kashmir by foot," I suggested.

Just as I said, he came to Bezwada from Madras begging for food on the way. He then went to Hyderabad. On the way he contracted dysentery after eating a meal of millet and red chili paste. He stayed in Peddakkayya's house for some months. She made a big fuss, cried, and sent him back to Bezwada.

As soon as he came back, he fell in love with Ms. Leela's daughter Vimala. He didn't have a job or any property to his name.

"How are you going to support your wife?" they asked.

“No such thing. I won’t,” he said, “I am not going to do any such thing. I am not going to get caught in those snares for the sake of my love.”

“Do something and earn some money,” they said again.

“I won’t do any such thing.”

“How are you going to eat?”

“How am I eating now? The same way,” he answered.

“How would your wife eat?”

“Isn’t she managing now? The same way,” he replied. With no clothes except the shorts he was wearing, he would lie on the floor between the people there lazily. After that they gave up every hope of his marrying Vimala.

Some time passed this way. But his love seemed to have taken a big beating. Then apparently he lost his interest in life. “Why should I strive for anything? Why should I live? Why should I do anything?” He was constantly haunted by such questions. I couldn’t answer any of those questions. He was spending his time idling away. Unless he is involved in some work, a normal man, particularly a young person, would lose happiness and enthusiasm in life. Man cannot live in the world without doing something. It’s not that he should do it just to support himself. Man is born with an interest, an impulse that he should work or do something. If he didn’t do any work, then time would turn against him and devour him. But what could I say to him who was saying nothing was worthwhile? I couldn’t. It wasn’t good enough to say that he ought to be doing something. I must tell him to do such and such. But I didn’t know what.

My father’s life was wasted that way. I was worried that Vasan’t life too would run into the same fate, but I couldn’t help him any more than that. If I asked him to take a clerk’s job and work in it, he wouldn’t listen to me anyhow. I couldn’t tell him that. If I proposed to get him into some trade, he would say, “Why should I work? I am somehow managing my food. What else do I need?”

It was good that he said he didn’t need anything. But his excess energy wouldn’t let him sit still. At the age at which I ought to have helped him, I came under the hold of Ms. Leela, and struggled without strength or wisdom. I didn’t have either the interest or perseverance to show him a way. When I was ashamed of my own life, how could I give him any guidance? I didn’t have the moral courage.

It would have been nice if he had some principles in life. But he didn’t. He didn’t have a principle that he ought to do something or he ought not to do something. But one must have principles. How could I tell him that he ought to do this or ought not to do that? Why? I had some principles firmly planted in my life. How could I say that he ought to have the same principles? A man ought to have principles. But I didn’t know any more what principles one

ought to have. He could do as he liked. I was foolishly passive, thinking he could live the way he liked. But he was suffering day after day. What he had was a great love for us. What did he want to do? Whatever he tried to do, it didn't agree with him. He was whiling away his time merely reading, suffering, brooding and thinking what it was all about.

In course of time, he had made a great number of friends in that town. All my friends were opposed to my ways. They used to complain to Vasant, "What's the matter with your father? Why did he do this way? It's contrary to convention. What a rascal!" They used to say such things to him.

He would at first rebel against them challenging them about what they knew about his father. But he got the message that if he wanted to lead a happy life, he too must change; even if he didn't change, he must appear to change.

"Yes, my father is like that," he used to tell the others. He wanted many friends. He wanted to chat with them a lot, laugh with them, or do something. But I was in the way. So what could he do to me? He was putting me down in front of them. Once he came to me and said:

"I know I am doing this to you. If I didn't, I cannot get on in this world. Or else, I must be alone without any relationship with anyone. Since I don't like that, even though I know you are a great man, and the principles you have adopted are great, I must discredit you."

"You surely go ahead and discredit me, as you like. Go on, proceed," I said.

He did discredit me, but he had no peace in that either.

He was too noble and sincere for it.

His life became very confused. He used to join some movie people and go on hunting. And he got into drinking. I knew he was getting addicted. I didn't feel that I had the authority to tell him that he shouldn't drink. But then neither could I think of another way of getting him off of his suffering. It wasn't that he didn't know what alcohol would do to a person or how it would enslave him and make him miserable. There was nothing new I could tell him.

"What else can I do in this world," he fell into that sort of thinking.

I too felt the same way. So what if his life was lost that way? Wouldn't it be better than imposing restrictions on him which were not congenial to him but were only torturing him? Let him go. I didn't like that sort of living. But what did he care about what I liked? And what authority did I have over his life?

I still suspect that even if I could influence him and put his life on track, it would have become routine and he would have been in a rut. The very life I wanted to rescue him from would have become his lot. So it was o.k. if he was destroyed. Leading a life on his own, steering it with his own hands, would be much nobler than these horrible meaningless lives of people.

Finally, his drinking was getting much worse just as I was watching. I used to suffer wondering why he was turning out to be like that. If I had a principle or a ground, I could perhaps try. But I had no ground. I was living groping in the dark. Even if I wanted do some good, I was helpless. What could I do? He would say, "I don't care. I would live my own life," and he would leave. He would not have any connection with us. With that sort of thinking I remained passive. Voyyi was also in great pain then. She loved him a great deal. Vasant's life was destroyed. But what does destruction mean? In my view, destruction meant not having any pleasure or happiness in life; it meant to depend on other things for that pleasure or happiness.

'Che' was very smart. She knew well how to lead her own life. She went to school. I and 'Che' never had a heart-to-heart relationship. She too, like other girls of her age, went to school while she lived with her parents and advanced in life. Later, she quit school and started to assist Voyyi in her clinic. Even when she did, her ways were different; her nature was different; her independence was different; her ideas were different; her principles were different. She never got along with us. While she was with us, she lived a conventional, fair and undisturbed life. That was her nature. She knew how to get ahead in life.

Meanwhile, 'Che' and my Ramana's son fell in love with each other. But in the middle of it, 'Che' said, "I no longer like him. I won't marry him." That gave a big blow to 'T'. She was very much hurt. The boy was in every way a suitable fellow. Anyone would gladly take him for a son-in-law. Besides, our Ramana was very keen on this match. Because of the liking they had of me, they wanted 'Che' as their daughter-in-law.

Finally, everyone at home, including 'T' pleaded, "It's not right for you to leave him. He is crazy about you. He loves you so much. You do too. How come you have the whim of saying, no?"

'Che' said, "No matter what, I don't have so much love for him to want him as a husband. I do like him. He would be all right as a companion. But I cannot take him as a husband. As a matter of fact, I cannot submit myself to any man to the point of being his wife."

He came and cried.

"Uncle, what should I do? Tell me," he moaned.

I said to 'Che', "If you don't like it, don't marry."

If she kept driving away men because she didn't like them, the question remained, what would happen to her? What would she do?

Chitra was growing up with us. She was hopping and screaming and making all kinds of mischief. She would beat everyone she saw and poured on them whatever abuses came her way. It was most amusing. In the meantime, Nartaki also joined us.

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I wasn't in Bezwada all the time. Whenever I got transferred, Shau would go to the new place with me and live with me. And I would run back to Bezwada whenever I got holidays. I would often suspect that this sort of life couldn't go on for a long time; that it all had to break down sometime. We all felt that whenever living in this manner was no longer pleasant, we would all commit suicide together. As I observed old people in the world, I noticed their helplessness, their silliness, and how their lives turned out to be disgusting, ugly and mutually exploiting. Whatever happened, I resolved that I shouldn't live in this world any longer after I completed my fiftieth year. I regret it when I think about how many troubles I got into for not keeping that resolve.

I was always walking on the edge of life. All the scriptures denounce suicide as a great sin. But I didn't believe in those scriptures in the first place. Didn't I have a right over my own body and my life? Could I not escape this pain? In that case, isn't it also sinful to take medicine for sickness and try to get better?

Since the year 1936, happiness within me failed totally. I had an immense unrest. I fell into an unprecedented horrible mental state. I became a terrible fellow in my own eyes. If I lived like this much longer, I didn't know what I would have become. When I was in that state, Ms. Leela came. Meanwhile, they put in mountainous effort to send Chitra and Pakapaka [*Champaka, Chalam's third daughter*] to school; but they failed, to my delight.

## 24

“Do not come in. If you put one step inside the door, I will shoot you. I have a revolver in my hand,” shouted someone. I couldn’t see anyone. I stopped right at the door. When she was returning from Guntur, she said, “If you come to Bezwada, you must definitely come to our house.” She made me promise and gave me her address before she left. I was looking for that house using her directions, and when I was just going through an open door at the entrance, I heard this shouting.

I was shocked and stood there not knowing what to do. I thought of calling “Ammanna,” but I didn’t know her name. I was going to leave telling myself, “Never mind.” Just before I turned the corner of the lane, she came behind me and placed her hand on my shoulder. “You were scared for just that?” she asked. “All that anger was not directed at you. It was directed at Mr. Naidu in the building across the street.”

“Who was shouting?”

“Who else?” she laughed without taking a breath and said, “None other than Mr. Rao.”

“He really shoots?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t so far, but he did threaten several times.”

“Why does he threaten?”

“They come for me; that’s why.”

I was going to ask, “Why do they come?”

But looking at her face under the street lamp at nightfall, I answered myself, “Why wouldn’t they?”

On that crowded bridge, people going in either direction were stretching out their necks and staring at us.

“Who is she? And why are they staring at us?” I was walking thinking. I didn’t yet have a house in Bezwada. Where were we going? Meanwhile, raindrops fell and solved our problem.

“Run,” she said.

We held each other’s hands and ran. She took me inside a house. There in the house a lady was sitting in a chair.

“So, at last, the rain brought you to our home,” she said.

“I don’t need to tell you who he is,” Ammanna mentioned my name.

Indifferently she asked us both to sit. Then they chatted with each other for half an hour. Equally indifferently I sat there not saying a word. The rain stopped. Ammanna got up to say goodbye. I followed her into the street.

“How come, you didn’t say a word? She belongs to your department. She is the inspector of girls’ schools. Why didn’t you speak? Did you see her arrogance? The Masulipatnam school headmaster presented her a kitten. He comes here in the nights to check and see how the kitten is doing. Noticing this, the inspector from Nujividu presented her a puppy. So, he too comes here in the nights. The man has fancied setting up a fight between the puppy and the kitten. Look, how she sits looking so innocent,” she was laughing.

Chatting, we arrived at Ammanna’s house.

“You think he has calmed down by now?” I asked.

“It doesn’t take so long,” she laughed.

“Does he really have a revolver?” I asked.

“He does, but you shouldn’t worry,” she said and went into the house. The revolver man was sitting right there in the hall. Ammanna led me in with her arm around my shoulders, affectionately, “Hi, don’t you know this man? I told you many times about him, that I have a mischievous cousin.”

Being glad that his wife had returned home, Mr. Rao stood up abruptly and almost hugged us both.

“Welcome! Welcome! Treat our house as yours. Ammadu, [*another name for Ammanna*], first give your cousin an omelet and some tea,” he said.

Ammanna went inside. He looked thin like a skeleton. But he had a loud, deep voice and a big mustache. He chatted away very pleasantly. I ate three omelets and drank two cups of tea. And thinking that I wouldn’t need any dinner after that, I got ready to leave.

“What, you are not going to stay here tomorrow? You are leaving today? You will come tomorrow, anyway, right?” he said, and walked me out, reluctant to let me go.

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At that time, in that town we used to have what were called “fools’ dinners”. I was their convener. Ammanna came to one of those dinners as my guest. “Fools” used to make a lot of raucous after dinner. In that raucous, somehow Ammanna got to sit next to the Collector. When he left he would take her along with him in his car, seat her next to him in it, and drop her off at her house. People got to know the next day that she went to his bungalow. The collector was not yet married. Some time passed. And it was time for another round of “fools’ dinners.” Neither

the Collector nor Ammanna were present at the dinner. The next day I got a note from the Collector.

“You pushed this glue into my lap. Please get her off of me anyhow,” the note said.

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The following day was a Sunday. I went to Ammanna’s house. Mr. Rao met me right at the entrance.

“Hush. Don’t make any noise. She is sleeping. She has fever,” he said. He led me into the hall and made me sit on a bench.

I sat there silently for about a quarter of an hour politely. He sat there still with a long-drawn face, without saying a word.

“Poor woman, she must be very sick. I will go and get a doctor,” I whispered. The ‘fever patient’ must have heard my whisper, she moved in the bed.

“She must have woken up. Go in and check,” he said.

I went into her room and sat next to her iron cot.

“You have come?” she said, still in bed. She didn’t look like she had any fever.

Saying, “Why are you standing staring like that?” she pulled me toward herself and sat me in her lap and put her arm around me.

“You don’t have fever?” I said mockingly in a low voice.

She placed her head in the pillow and kept laughing without making a sound. Her back looked beautiful with her laughter. I kissed her under the neck.

She stopped laughing.

“Never mind all that. He promised to send you a note, did he?”

“That’s why I am here.”

“You wouldn’t have come otherwise?” she pinched me. I didn’t scream fearing that Mr. Rao would get angry.

“He told me not to come to his bungalow any more,” I said.

“He told you not to come?” she let out a couple of authentic fowl words addressed to him. Quickly she started crying.

“Cousin, you too belong to the male race, don’t you?”

“Do you have any doubt about that?” I thought.

“Aren’t you ashamed of your race?” she asked.

“We are all in the same boat,” I said.

“Never mind, I just love you,” she half-stood up and putting her arm around my neck, pulled me down and kissed me.

My attention was always partly on the open door.

“You have fever, don’t you?” I said.

She lay back on the pillow and was still crying. I couldn’t very well fall on her and stop the sobbing in her chest. Meanwhile, Mr. Rao was standing at the door with his black mustache.

“Does he have a revolver in his hand?” I wondered. To be on the safe side, I stood up and said I was leaving.

He came quickly and grabbed my hand.

“Where are you going so soon when poor Ammanna is burning with fever?”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Just check carefully if she has fever or not,” he pushed me and made me sit in Ammanna’s lap.

“What’s the matter? Why are you just sitting like that? Feel her,” he demanded.

Out of politeness, I placed my hand on her forehead and cheeks.

“She doesn’t have much fever,” I said.

“What do you mean she has no fever? Check carefully,” he said grabbing my hand and making me feel all over her stomach. “Yes, she seems to have a little,” I said, and without another word I got out of there.

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In the afternoon, the sun was trying to convince people that it was still winter. I came out of “Jerry”’s house.

“This is why you got me here!” I said and was walking toward my home annoyed. Mr. Rao was walking toward me fast, with pajamas and a shirt on him, making sounds like castanets. It was rare to find Mr. Rao anywhere else than in his office and at his home. His office and home were far away from each other. At 10:30 am he would eat his morning meal. At 11:00 am he would sit in his office with papers on the table in front, giving orders to the peons and scolding the petty revenue officer. No one ever saw him in any other clothes than a full suit in his office and an old coat at home. No one knew how he went from home to office or from office to home. He didn’t walk. He didn’t ride a bicycle. It didn’t look like he rode on a horse buggy either. And he didn’t have a car. Nor were there any taxies in those days. Now, he grabbed my hand without saying anything and led me toward his house. After five minutes, he said,

“I tell you, never marry,” and twisted his right mustache up toward the sky. “Tell this to everyone. Tell this to your daughters, to your sons, to your grandsons and granddaughters, to your sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, your aunts, and grandmothers. Tell them never to make such a mistake. They will be very sorry, if they ever did,” he kept walking without talking further.

But he never let go of my hand. I could have pulled my hand out of his and leave, but I was afraid his hand would be severed and come off into mine. Perhaps he forgot to let go of my hand, but he stopped at the beginning of the road as we were approaching his house and said, “But if you are married, give her a severe thrashing first thing in the morning and a thrashing last thing before bed time. That will work wonders.”

His manner changed completely as he climbed the steps to the verandah of his house. He looked like a starving dog with its stomach sticking to the back sneaking into a house. He pushed the door in gently and listened carefully. All was quiet. A lady as huge as a bed roll lay on her stomach on the bench in the hall. As we went in, he murmured rather loudly,

“Bandicoot in the shelves  
*Chori kare.* [*“has stolen” in Hindi*]

Mr. Setti said “good afternoon.” I didn’t know if she could hear that loud voice, but Ammanna just shot herself at us like an arrow from inside. With that shock we collapsed on the bench behind us. When we settled down and I looked around I saw Mr. Rao on my one side and Ammanna on the other. Ammanna said right away,

“You sneaky bastard! Where are you coming from?”

“Why in the hell is she abusing me like that?” I thought, and looked around. It wasn’t me she was addressing; it was the gentleman sitting next to me.

“See, see! How she abuses me? What did I do? After living such a great life, finally, I had to ....” he stood up abruptly in anger.

“You sinful bitch, you are so arrogant. I will break your bones. Watch out....”

“Let me go, let me go, please. What I am going to do....”

As he was saying, he struggled back and forth, as if someone was holding him. I was in shock and was looking around to find a way out of this. Even while all this was happening, the 'bed roll' didn't get up from the bench. She didn't move. Instead, she began to snore.

"Look cousin! This fellow snatched an envelope with three thousand rupees from under my pillow and deposited the money in the bank in his name. He looks so innocent."

"I? I?" said Rao and gasped silently.

"Who else? ... Get out of my way, cousin. I will take care of this fellow." I too was thinking the same thing, how to get out of the way and out of there. Each time I tried to get up, they both pressed me back to the wall. So I couldn't move. "Get up, cousin," she said and held me so I couldn't move.

"Will you get that three thousand back right now, or shall I...." she said and started pulling both sides of his mustache with her two hands bending over me. How could I describe his plight? He was afraid that people from the street would come in if he shouted.

He said quietly, still in pain, "How did you get that money in the first place?"

"You ask how I got it? Aren't ashamed of yourself? You bastard, you pimp! [Tel. *tadpulla mundakodaka*]"

"Come, cousin, let's snatch the bank check book from him." She got up, wrestled with him and snatched the book. The fat 'bed roll,' who had been snoring till now, opened the door suddenly and ran out into the street. Thinking that it was the right moment, I too ran after her.

\* \* \*

One night at 10:00 pm, Ammanna rushed in, dragged me out of my bed and said, "It's urgent, you must come with me."

"Now? I am sleepy now. I can't come," I said.

Ammanna went to Voyyi and said, "Sister, there is an emergency at home. You should ask my cousin to go with me."

"All right, why don't you go? Poor thing, she needs you for some reason," said Voyyi.

I followed Ammanna with dropped head. As we got out, I asked, "What's the matter?"

"What cousin, you ask me, what's the matter? What kind of a town is this? And what kind of people are these. They don't care if they are young or old. You know, that municipal engineer. He shaves his head smoothly, but he has not a single black hair on him, inside or out, look as

much as you will. Apparently he loves me. If he loves me what should I do? Everyone in town wants me,” she cried.

I found a place on the road between the lights and consoled her. Soon we got to her house. There were no lights inside. Things in the house were all scattered. All the chests were open. Seeing me come in, Mr. Rao stood up instantly.

“I am glad you are here. Take her away from me. I can’t stand her for another minute. She is just like a demon in my life. Please save me from her.”

Ammanna shouted, “What did I do to you? You wanted me to go to him and I did. How could you have both money and your wife?” Then she let out a couple of abusive words. As Mr. Rao was saying, “I admit I asked you to go; but who asked you to spend the whole night there?”

“Don’t listen to him, cousin, listen to this...” I couldn’t hear anything after that. They were shouting at each other.

“I am sleepy, I must go,” I said. They both stopped then. Mr. Rao lowered his voice and pleaded, “Please take her with you....”

“Speak politely, I am going, am I not?” she said and went out with me.

We both walked out into the street. She woke up a buggy driver about four houses away from hers. We stopped at the entrance of her house and put the things which Mr. Rao was throwing out, one after another, in the buggy and started to go. Then all the people in the street came out of their houses and watched this spectacle. When we turned the corner of the street, I asked, “Now where shall we go,” I asked.

My question was where I shall take her in the middle of the night with all these things.

“Don’t worry, cousin. I already fixed a house,” and she gave the buggy driver directions to it.

There were electric lights in the house.

“Goodbye, Ammanna,” I said.

“Or else, do you think I would ask you to stay here? My sister [*chinnakkayya* – younger elder sister—she is referring to Voyyi] will strangle me,” she said, sending me off.

.....

Early in the morning, my friend Pattabhiramayya came. I came downstairs rubbing my eyes. It was already getting bright.



“You are here. I thought you might not be. Whatever did you do? There is a scandal in town that you eloped with Mr. Rao’s wife. He was crying on the streets, ‘Chalam ran away with my wife.’ Is she here now?” he asked.

\* \* \*

To be on the safe side, I didn’t go in the direction of Ammanna’s house for a month. That morning I had to. The reason was that morning a young man got off a buggy. But he didn’t merely get off. The buggy driver literally dropped him at the entrance of our house. Voyyi thought that he was perhaps a patient of hers. He couldn’t stand up.

“It’s me, cousin, I am Ammanna’s younger brother. Don’t you recognize me?”

“All right. But what have you come here for?”

“Is my cousin at home?”

“Venkatachalam! He says he has come for you,” she said, brushing him off, and left. I stood there dumbfounded.

“So, what have you come for?” I asked.

“He would not let me come to his house.”

I called back the buggy driver and I set off for Ammanna’s house in the buggy taking him along with me. As we arrived there, Mr. Rao came to meet us with his mustache.

“What are you here for?” he asked aggressively.

“How come you are here?” I asked even more aggressively.

Ammanna came right after.

“What does he mean? He claims that this is his house. What does he mean?” I asked her.

Rao is silently furious. Ammanna went on laughing.

“Don’t bother about him. Come in, cousin!” she asked me in.

“How come he is here?” I asked.

She laughed loudly again. Mr. Rao was watching all this furiously from a distance.

“He sent me away that day, right? Before the week ended, I settled down in this house of the Registrar of Poluru, right? Then this Rao brought one piece of luggage after another, shoved it inside my door and went to his office. I could only see the luggage but not any person behind it.

When I recognized my stuff, what could I do except bring it in? After a couple of weeks, he came and asked if all the stuff had arrived. That was it; then he too came and started living here.”

“That’s o.k. Your younger brother is here. What should I do now?”

As soon as I said that, Rao, who was sitting lifelessly until then, suddenly sprang up and jumped inside in a flash, and said, “No, No, he can’t come here.”

“Where else would he go, if not here?” I said. When I was saying this, Ammanna went in and closed the door as if this didn’t concern her. I knocked at her door calling, “Ammanna!”

“What business do you have with Ammanna?” asked Mr. Rao.

I heard a loud laugh from behind the door.

“This is nonsense,” I thought. I thought I shouldn’t stay there any longer and left.

\* \* \*

“Sir, I want to get married. I am not particular about caste. And I don’t care about good looks or education. I don’t want a dowry. Whomever you will find, I will marry her.”

I never met him before. He never wrote to me either. Why did he trust me so much? I said, “All right, I will try,” and sent him off for then. I remembered that afternoon that there were two or three girls who had gathered around Ammanna. She even told me once that they needed to be married.

The groom looked pleasant and clean, wearing *Khadi* clothes. He was a follower of Gandhi. With a mustache and all that, he looked grand. Just looking at his face, you would know he was honest and well-versed.

Later that same afternoon I proposed him to Ammanna. She said, “Ask him to come and pick whomever he wants,” she said gladly.

I told the young man to go and look for himself. He came by in the evening.

“They all looked good. I liked them all. But among all of them, the one who is the eldest, I want her,” he said.

I got suspicious. I couldn’t contain my laughter. We two went together to Ammanna’s house. We talked with Ammanna and the girls for a little while and came out.

He said he was a Hindi teacher in a school. Everyone in town respected him, calling him ‘Punditji.’ He even owned his own house.

“So, of all those girls, whom do you want?”

“Look Sir, I am not so young. I am over thirty. These girls are all much younger than me. See that girl wearing the rose-colored sari with a gold necklace around her neck, I would be happy to have her.”

Just as he was saying, I ran into the street, unable to contain my laughter. I held that man's shoulders and laughed without a stop. He was dumbfounded. Ammanna was the lady she picked!

“Come with me, I will tell you,” I said and holding his hand took him to my house and explained to him that Ammanna was already married and that she had children ...

We finally married him to a girl called Savitri and sent them off. After he was seated in the train I asked him, “Are you satisfied now?”

“Why not? I could come here for my vacations and stay in my mother-in-law's place, right?” I was terrified.

“No, no. There is no relationship between Ammanna and that girl. If you stay with her, her husband has a big revolver.” Just as I was saying this, luckily for me, the train took off....

Within ten days I had a long letter from him with a complaint.

“One day I came home from school and saw that Savitri was smoking a *beedi* sitting on the threshold leading into the backyard. When I asked her what she was doing, she said, ‘I always do this. You don't have good *beedies* in your town. Why don't you get me some good ones?’ ‘All right. Get inside, close the door and smoke inside the house,’ I admonished her. Whatever I say to her, she jumps on me and pours all kinds of abuse on me. All this happened in two days. What can I do now,” he wrote crying.

That evening I went to Ammanna's house with the letter. The street entrance was closed. It didn't look like there was anyone in the house. But you could hear sounds of someone talking in the back of the house. I went there and saw Savitri sitting at the well and scolding. Listening to these sounds, even the Chandrakanta plants were trying to move away. When she saw me, Savitri threw away the *beedi* and prepared to stand. But unable to get up she collapsed on the edge of the basin of the well.

“Did he beat you so much?” I asked.

“My God, he may look thin, but he is a brute, the bastard....”

I was worried I might hear a lot worse, so I ran into the street.

The buggy drivers stopped their buggies, and, showing her to their customers, said, “Poor girl, I wonder what that skinny fellow did to her.” I hung my head and came home. When I got home the groom was sitting on the bench outside huffing and puffing.

“You have come too?” I said.

“Look, Mr. Harischandra, you wanted to be married and I have married you. Please leave me alone now,” I said in a harsh voice.

Tears were rolling down from his eyes.

“What would happen to me if you abandon me? I heard of your fame; so I came to you trusting. You should make me a householder and then send me off. If you abandon me instead, what would happen to me?”

I felt pity for him.

“Lakshmi, take his bags inside,” I said.

The next day Ammanna came.

“What’s the matter, cousin? You set him on me.”

“I put up your son-in-law in my house. You should be happy about that,” I replied.

“O.K., what does he say now?”

“What does he say? ‘I don’t like that Savitri whom you gave me. I want a girl in that house called Ammanna,’” I said and laughed.

Ammanna dropped all her anger and laughed loudly with me.

“Ammanna, Ammanna, Ammanna. Every ass wants Ammanna.”

“What’s Mr. Rao saying?”

“Come and find out for yourself.”

“I don’t want to see that mustache fellow’s face any more.”

“You say that. But he likes you very much, cousin!”

“O.K. He wants you to give him a wife and send him off.”

“Wives, wives. Wives are not available *gratis*. His entire life is not worth ten thousand rupees. Isn’t Savitri enough for him?” she said and rushed out.

He thus stayed with us with his sad face for more than ten days. When I heard his talk, I felt as if he was going to strangle Mr. Rao’s neck any day. One fine morning, I looked for Mr.

Harischandra, and he was gone and so were his bags. Also gone was the lady called Rajamma who had been taking shelter in our house.

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25

Once, I and my sister's husband 'the Fly Guy' (he didn't acquire that title yet) were waiting on the railway platform in Bezwada. Someone wearing a very expensive suit came to us and addressing the Fly Guy said, "Hello, brother, lend me five rupees." He talked to him as if he knew him intimately. The Fly Guy put on a stern face and said, "Sorry, no," brushed him off and walked away.

"That was Appa Rao."

I then remembered who it was.

"Poor fellow. Why don't you lend him?"

"What's the use? He will drink it away." Hearing the answer, I kept quiet. I did not yet have the liberal outlook that the drunkard is also a human being like us, and that he desires drinking as we desire other things. If I asked the Fly Guy for a loan of five rupees, he wouldn't give me either. So, I didn't ask him. I didn't yet have the privilege of owning five rupees and carrying them in my pocket. I was standing there watching the train tracks, waiting for the never-arriving Tenali train.

That afternoon when I was watching the shining train tracks, I remembered the story of Appa Rao. He was a poor orphan. He used to study under the lamps in his class-mates' rooms. There was a 'League of Helping Hands.' Four annas was the amount you could contribute to it. Appa Rao canvassed for the contributions. His kindly friends claimed that he embezzled all that money.

If a poor man did anything wrong, there wouldn't be a question about. Everyone would say, "He is that type."

The Fly Guy's parents were poor, but were decent people. Both their faces would exude sweetness any time. Appa Rao spent a lot of time in their house. I only heard, but didn't see, what happened later. Gathering enough money somehow, he went to Madras and joined as a servant in a barber salon in the evening bazaar. In a short time, he ended up buying the salon. He hired several assistants. There were some Marwadi buildings across the street from the shop. He fell in love with a Marwadi girl who had just moved into one of them. It wasn't known if she had given him any encouragement.

One evening he saw her going out with her folks. It was clear to him that she was leaving town. He couldn't bear that. He didn't hesitate for a second. He put whatever ready cash he had in his pocket and set off to the Central Station. Her relatives bought her a second class ticket. He bought a third class ticket and got on the train. They arrived in Calcutta. He didn't bother to learn about what happened to the salon after he had left. When he got off the train in Calcutta, he learned that she and her relatives were leaving for Banaras. He didn't have any more money in his pocket. The train officials stopped him when he tried to get on the train. With no other

resource left, he was stranded in Calcutta. He rented a room in a hotel. But he ran out of money. He avoided payments and moved from one hotel to another, and if anyone pressed him for money, he would threaten them with violence. He thus became notorious in the Andhra community in Calcutta.

He looked for a job and could get one in a Japanese company agency office. Very soon he became an agent with some thousands of rupees salary plus commission. The company had great confidence in him. One day when the Fly Guy who had run out of his resources was wandering on the streets of Calcutta wondering where he would find his meal that night, a big car stopped next to him. From inside it someone called him:

“Hey *pantulu* [*a way of addressing a Brahmin*]! What the hell are you doing here?”

He noticed it was Appa Rao. And he was going to say, “I....” But Appa Rao pulled him into the car saying, “First get into the car.”

The car stopped at a big flat. Appa Rao took him inside, ignoring his worn out hat and jacket filled with holes.

“Hey, Appa Rao, whose flat is this?”

“It’s mine. Treat it as yours. I have some business to attend to. I will be back soon,” said Appa Rao and left.

The Fly Guy looked around. The place didn’t feel like it belonged to this world. The next afternoon, Appa Rao got the Fly Guy a job. He continued to let him stay in his flat. What did the Fly Guy lack, after all? If he wanted, he could even get a supply of girls. It wasn’t clear what happened, but the Fly Guy moved out of the flat and was living off of the income from his own job. Learning that he didn’t return home and unable to bear my sister’s grief, my parents sent him a fake telegram and got him home. He then continued to stay at home.

In days when the Fly Guy got lucky and lived in luxury, he heard that Appa Rao had lost that job, lost his all, became a drunkard and roamed the streets of Calcutta. We heard rumors that he had died later. It was about that time we saw him in Bezwada at the train station. Saying, “With the unkindest cut of all,” the Fly Guy brushed off Appa Rao, the man who had given him so much. No one knew what happened to him later after that shock, but he did die soon after.

When I witnessed such incidents, how sad I was!

“Can you straighten this tangle,” how I used to pray Fate, begging. As if he did some great meritorious deed, the Fly Guy got huge promotions. He went to England twice with his family. Each time his heart became a bit more hardened.

Now, if both Appa Rao and the Fly Guy stand before God, according to scriptures, Appa Rao would be considered a great sinner. On the one side would be Appa Rao, the boy who once collected contributions when he was little, embezzled and reached Madras, the boy who got a crush

at a Marwadi girl when he saw her from a distance, the youth who had left everything and got into a train following her, the businessman who, in a very short time, had earned hundreds of thousands of rupees and spent, the generous-hearted man who recognized his boyhood friend and had rewarded and honored him as an equal, and the wretch who had become a drunkard. On the other side would be the Fly Guy. He didn't commit any of those sins. He never knew what gratitude meant. Gradually and carefully, he hoarded a whole lot of money for his children without wasting a penny. He could only move a woman's body but not her heart. Each day he worshipped every kind of god without spending a penny.

O, God, whom will you consider dearer to you? Where are your values? Where are the effects of these deeds recorded? Or is it all something that happens without any meaning? Hitler, who, at midnight, with one stroke, killed 50 thousand Jews and the Pakistan's dictator Yahyakhan, who massacred thousands of unarmed innocent people – are they going to suffer the consequences of their actions? O, God, are you smiling looking at my struggles to understand these problems with such a small and feeble mind? Won't some god show mercy on this fool who takes these problems so personally? "Why? What for?" Where is peace for me who keeps struggling, saying, "What is all this about? How come things are like this? What is their meaning?"

All my life I had this meaningless restlessness. Always the search which says the meaning is not here. It tormented me without letting me be. If I didn't have this meaningless yearning ever since my birth, I would not have involved myself in this search.

As soon as I was done with my school, I would come home and go out with children until nightfall. I would drag Mrs. 'T' too with me whenever I could. It wasn't an outing of the high society people. We avoided those who would wear an upper cloth with gold-embroidered border fixed on their shoulder, with a walking cane in their hand, shouting, "Come, children!" and showing themselves off, and ran as a bunch, along with the children, far away into the ditches, narrow lanes and dust. But I always wanted something behind all of them, something transcending them. I felt, however, that was all there was to my happiness.

After Ravi fell ill, we couldn't get out very much. Since then I got stifled in a narrow space. Tagore calls it the 'Call of the Road'. How it beckoned me days and nights!

"O, God, You gave me this ill-health, made Ravi sick, and kept me away from forests, rivers, the sky, from the mere dust on the roads and are still smiling?" How I would cry that way!

I tried to break down the walls in my head. How I struggled to break down the barriers of caste, education, knowledge, respectability, relationships and intelligence which separated people! I made a serious effort to break them not merely in my ideas, but in my day-to-day life. That's why I became an enemy of the society. If I gave a strong expression to these ideas in my writings, people read them and then set them aside. If anyone tried to put them into practice, he or she would become a public enemy. What I finally found was that removing these differences from one's mind is unattainable, that it would only happen effortlessly to those spiritual heroes and yogis who attained equanimity.

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Kalyani [*a lady who was corresponding with Chalam at that time*] was writing. “I started reading about what Mr. Gurajada Apparao, the guru of these poets and stories, wrote. How many revolutionary ideas did he have even in those days! And these people made him their guru. But then why do they hate *you* so much?” she asked.

No matter what a man writes, how much he scolds, and how many revolutionary ideas he writes about, all that doesn't penetrate people's minds. But if someone with sincerity does something which they don't like, how their anger is roused! They might detest people of other castes in their minds, but outwardly they appear to get along with them. If those people are honored through poems written about them, they would not get angry because the words in them or the deeds reported in the words do not seem sincere. If they loved the people of other castes from their hearts, if they removed their feeling of superiority from their minds, then the world would know that there had begun a revolution.

Similarly, men approve and praise you if you pardon a woman's wrongdoings, and tell her in a condescending fashion, “No matter, I shall show you the way. If you change your ways and behave well, I will teach you a handicraft and make you a respectable woman.”

But if you are sorry for those women, if your heart melts for those who have done such deeds, and you say, “What you have done is no great sin. These respectable people do more atrocious things. They have the cleverness and cunningness to hide their meanness and sins under their expensive saris and lipsticks and justify them in English. And they have the money to go to doctors and get shots. You don't have any of them. You, poor thing, on the other hand, became exposed,” and treat her as an equal, how horrible a person you would become in the eyes of the society! I don't have to say anything nor write anything. If you just stand before the leper who is standing at your front door and tell him, “I too am like you,” you will become a public enemy. That was why Jesus was crucified.

A man might survive after pulling out a sheep from the mouth of a tiger about to devour it, but who can save you from the violence of the society if you give shelter to a wife who is abused each day?

For ages, society handed woman over to man in the form of a husband, a father or society. If the woman walks out her front door, she has no help. The world doesn't forgive you if you help such a woman, give your heart to her or pity her. This is the hatred men have toward Chalam.

No matter how many books you write exposing such injustices, and no matter how many laws are made against them, people do not react. But if you show any kindness or say, “I am here, don't worry,” just imagine how their hatred for you would redouble!

In some context, my guru Mr. Venkataratnam said once:

“In Madras, in front of a whorehouse, a Salvation Army soldier would stand and plead with the prostitute girl standing behind the bamboo screen: ‘Why do you do such a thing, my dear! Why would you want to sell your sacred body for money? Look at the faces of the people

who visit you. You surrender your modesty to them? This is a great sin. It's a lowly deed.' The patrons as well as the prostitutes behind the screen abuse the soldier. They spit on his face. Yet, the soldier wipes the spit off his face very slowly and still pleads with them standing before them."

That's how love or pity should be.

Did your heart melt? Have your eyes become moist? Did your arm vibrate around their shoulders? It won't go to waste. It will generate so many outcries from people who would feel as though the importance of their position is crumbling, as though they have been enduring many cruelties and intolerances.

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## 26

The palmist Dakshinamurti was sitting across the table from me and pondering my palm. He said: "It looks like I have seen this sort of line somewhere before. I think it was in Bellari. There was a lady there. I told her that I saw a line in her palm which showed an influence from someone. Now I know from your hand that it was from you. She must have been influenced by you."

I said, "I don't know anyone in Bellari. Reading my books must have influenced her.... So, you write books. I was wondering what you did in this world to go through so much suffering. I don't know who you are; but all your life you confronted blame, hatred and scandal. I was wondering what you did that caused them. You just told me that."

I got curious as to who the lady was. My aunt returned from Bellari a few days later. I didn't know that she was coming from Bellari. I didn't even know that she had gone there in the first place. As soon as she came she sent for Dakshinamurti.

"It was about her I was talking to you the other day," he said.

I love my [younger] brother. I not only loved him, he was also a good man and an innocent man. But the world treated him cruelly. His wife is my 'aunt'. It was his good fortune that my aunt became his wife. It was also his great misfortune. When he was cooking like a *pakodi* being fried in a pan, I told him several times:

"Why bother with her, let her go," as if it were an easy thing to do. Didn't I know how easy it would be! He used to sit hanging his head.

Since she was also my sister-in-law, I used live in their house. But I never stayed in the house much. Once when I went to Tenali....

It was a moonlit night. I and Voyyi were watching the moon, standing against the parapet wall on the steps. On my other side, my aunt came and stood next to me leaning on my shoulder. I alerted Voyyi and showed her this strange happening. Voyyi nodded her head as if it was something routine. That was the beginning of it. The next day I went to Eluru. But the memory of my aunt's touch continued to haunt me. Soon she wrote me a 'half-love' letter. I wrote a 'full-love' letter in reply. In those days one of the ladies who ruled the Telugu country was my aunt. The second was Ratnam.

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I was transferred to Guntur. At that time we were living in Tenali. My brother lived in the apartment next to us. That means my 'aunt' was also there. At that time they and we were not on speaking terms. There was no special reason. All 'magic' created by a woman. It's not in my nature to blame someone and tell about her to someone else, particularly to a husband against his wife. That was my aunt's heyday.

Later the great poet Krishna Sastry was living with them. No matter what town he lived in, he gathered around him all the poets, artists and theater people in town. When we went in I saw my old friends, theater people, poets, and members of the literary society, all sitting around her feet and worshipping her. She was taken to the theater performances. And poets dedicated their books to her.

One night, Krishna Sastry came and read to me his work of poetry called *Urvashi* which he had just finished writing. The work had no soul. It read as though the truth was suppressed with the fear that it might get out. I remarked to him, “I wondered whether the hero and heroine in the book were human beings or souls?”

“What do you mean? I wrote that work while I was under great emotional stress. Those songs forced themselves out of me when I was in a state of deprivation of food and sleep, and was unconscious,” he said.

“All that may be true. But they were not ringing true in my ears. I saw more poetic craft and less art in them,” I said.

He left very disappointed. Soon I moved out of Tenali. Later, my aunt, my brother and Krishna Sastry toured all over the Telugu country to participate in events arranged for them. As soon as that was over, my aunt started acting on the stage as a heroine with the famous Raghavachari [*Bellari Raghavachari – famous stage personality of that time*]. No one in the Telugu country approved his bringing women onto the stage. But with his histrionic talent he was able to break down popular prejudice and he achieved great success. My aunt toured the whole of Andhra with him. That was the heyday of my aunt. Raghavachari was a great actor. On top of it, he was friendly. Everyone in the region was friends with him. He introduced them all to her. Thus she acquired not only the skills of acting but also culture.

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Andhras tried to preserve their own reputation by extolling Mr. Raghavachari. We may also see some biographies of his. But no one had that intimacy with him that my aunt had. And Mr. Raghavachari had no choice except to make friends with me, thanks to her. In her tour of the country back and forth, she used to stop in Bezwada and stay with us a couple of days. Her arrival always marked a festive occasion, as she always brought with her lots of chatting, songs and jokes.

In the middle of the night she would lie in my lap, cry and tell me all her travails and family troubles. Her husband is my dear brother. He would wail that she was playing around using me as a pretext. But I couldn't send away a woman who stretched out her arm to me. Mrs. Ranganayakamma forbade my aunt's staying in our house. Some nights we had trouble because we didn't have a place to stay. These 'noble' poets would be scared of even mentioning my aunt's name, as she was such an important part of the alter-life of Mr. Raghavachari.

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Her children were becoming adults. And Mr. Raghavachari was getting old. I would admire highly my brother's nobility in achieving so easily such generosity and broadmindedness to

take her in again even though she had left him and wandered around for a length of time. Maybe it was natural to him. At a certain age, people, particularly women who had led the life of libertines, try all they can to regain their respectability. Those women, who couldn't fit in wedlock and who roamed about freely, try to squeeze themselves into it as much as possible.

Her son was beginning to earn. Thanks to my brother's good nature and her attractiveness, poets and others started to gather around her again. She was the daughter of a woman who was the first to marry as a widow. Her lifestory was famous. Moreover, people thought that Chalam had some influence on that family. So it was difficult for her daughter to be married. Moreover, being under the control of Ms. Leela, Chalam wasn't much of a man. My aunt knew that he wouldn't approve of the 'respectable' deeds of hers. So she gradually moved away from me. The daughter got married. The son-in-law didn't care for Chalam's influence. He always wanted to remove them from his influence and make them respectable. He stayed in the same house along with them. He ordered that no one should even mention Chalam's name in that house.

My aunt's name became disrespectful in that house. The family tried to make the Telugu society somehow forget her. Her own children wouldn't admit to being her children. She was alienated from Chalam. The family turned against her. Her son was earning a livelihood. Thus she fell in great danger. They would hush her when she tried to speak out, especially her son-in-law. Meanwhile, a scandal spread connecting her son to a movie star. With that shock, that family became free for some time from bogus respectability and the influence of the son-in-law.

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By the time she lifted her head from out of the net of respectability and looked around for Chalam, Chalam already came away to Arunachala. Maybe it was her stars, all her life she could not desist from searching for Chalam wondering where he was. When she finally came to see me, our house had turned into an Ashram. I quit all my superficial fun activities and looked like a monk. By that time Ishwara [God] appeared to Souris. We all submitted ourselves to the voice of God heard through Souris. My aunt instantly became totally opposed to us. She turned against us. She went to Madras and started a propaganda that we had all gone crazy.

But soon, with the fear that some harm might befall to her son who was in the midst of the scandal with the movie star, she turned to Chalam again. She became a scapegoat of the sons-in-law, sons, daughters ~ everyone. We were the only ones who forgave her and loved her as a longstanding friend, as an artist, as a loving heart, without any fear of scandals or dirt. By that time she grew older and her body became susceptible to illnesses. She didn't have much money. Nor did she have respect within her own household. If she came here, all her connections with the world would be severed. That she couldn't bear.

She tried hard to join one of the old age homes established by the Government for old artists. Her children, particularly her son, didn't like her visiting Chalam frequently at all. If she was having fun outside home, her son was worried that people would recognize her as his mother. He was even more worried that if she came to see me, the seeds of independence would sprout in

her. Thus she was crushed in every way, being oppressed to the point that she couldn't even see Chalam, and she died grieving.

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27

After I returned from a visit to Bhagawan, my world all became topsy-turvy. I don't understand this world. Not just I, many great intellectuals in the world can't. That's how man's mind is. It's petty. It's not capable of understanding the infinite time and world. We don't know what will happen to a person when he dies. What's the use of thinking about something we cannot know for certain? It's best to be quiet leaving the questions alone.

Some great power is turning us into characters on a stage and pushes us into this [world] asking us to act as we please. There are some sensible people who would say, let's have fun for the little time we are here and then we will go our way; and we will act the way that power makes us act. Those are blessed. There are, on the other hand, some obstinate people like me who break their heads futilely, trying to see the ins and outs [of existence]. I thought about it all these years; I searched; I read; and I enquired. It was clear to me that no one knew anything. I came to the conclusion a long time ago that no matter how much I searched, there is nothing more desirable in this world than a woman's love. But I had no peace, no sleep. I went through some unknown agony.

There are many considerations even in a woman's love. There is little happiness in enjoying a woman in a selfish, narrow manner. As you worship the woman who surrendered herself to you, your love becomes more radiant. I had dreamed for a long time that a woman would come into my life who would love me, sympathize with my suffering, cajole me and give me sleep. Now that hope too had receded. My dream had disappeared. I thought that there was nothing left except to suffer this pain for the rest of my life. It was in this state that I went to Bhagawan. I felt some hope in his words. But he seemed as though he wouldn't help me attain anything unless I practiced for some lifetimes. After I returned from visiting him, my untold suffering multiplied.

With the experience I had on the beach in Visakhapatnam, my hopes revived. Bhagawan didn't just teach a theory. He helped people in the practice. But could he remove my restlessness and suffering? Whenever I had a vacation, I was visiting the Ashram along with Shau. With each trip, whenever I returned, my meditation would intensify. But even after a long time I didn't find it much useful. I didn't find any joy or happiness. My pleasures were all gone. Women, books, movies, none of them gave me pleasure or happiness. If I thought that perhaps pain and pleasure would both go away, so there wouldn't be any problem, I still had my headaches, my ill-health, unreasonable agony in my mind, and my insomnia.

During that time Shau was involved in deep practice. She was encouraging me strongly, saying that I should persist no matter what happens and that I knew that. But I brushed off her experience as hypnotism, auto-suggestion or intoxication. Out of sheer spite I remained in my own misery and turmoil.

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That was the third story in our house. I was lying on a bed in a veranda open on the three sides. Whenever I was in Bezwada I would lie there. It was 4:00 am early in the morning. Vimala, Ms. Leela's daughter, was lying next to me, with her arm on me, talking in my ear.

"You don't know who we really are."

"I don't care who you are. Whoever you are I love you. That's all I care."

"Still, my mother asked me to tell you these things:

My mother said:

We belong to the Vontari caste [cooks?]. We used to live in the area governed by the Maharaja of Pithapuram. My father was a cousin of the Maharaja. He was very fond of music. As soon as I got to be 8 years old, they left me for music training with my music teacher, Sangameswara Sastry. Mr. Venkata Rao, whom I now call my husband, fell in love with me and wanted to marry me. But he didn't. He was never married. Apparently, it was written in his horoscope that he would die if he got married.

He was a rich man. And he had property. My folks gave me away to him. He built a nice house for me, put me there, and would come and visit me. I bore three children for him. I planted a beautiful garden around my house. I had a great time in that house and the garden, playing the veena. When I played the veena and sang, many acquaintances would come to listen. I read all the newly published novels and poetry.

I had a boyhood friend called Venkata Rao [same name as above?]. He was a close friend of Krishna Sastry. Krishna Sastry was already famous by then. Venkata Rao heard your name through him. He used to bring me one after another all the books you had written. We would sit alone and read them. I didn't know any outside world except through these books. I lived in *purdah*. I didn't know any people except the ones in the books. Whenever I read your books, it felt like you were dictating them to us from another world unknown to us. What stunned me was the respect you showed in your books toward women. I couldn't find that in other books. You explained to women what ideas lie hidden in a woman's mind, what turmoil she secretly suffers even in fortunate circumstances, and how man unknowingly subdues her to him. You gave self-respect and self-confidence to oppressed women.

That day Venkata Rao brought the manuscript of your Sashanka. He said that he had just that one copy, that you had given it to Krishna Sastry, and that it was invaluable to Krishna Sastry. We started reading it right away, sitting in our garden. Every sentence in it sounded as if it came not from those pages, but from the sky. I felt that someone was announcing it to us. It didn't feel that a person wrote those books. I used to feel that the books just dropped down from the sky. If he found anything of yours printed in a magazine, Venkata Rao would bring that too.

"Where, indeed, does he live?" I asked. "I don't quite know," he said. "You said he was a great friend of Krishna Sastry. Doesn't he ever come to this town?" I asked. "He doesn't move among these poets. No matter who invites him, he doesn't move out of his home town." "Invite him here, bring him here. When he comes, make friends with him..." "You want me to bring him here?" "My God, no, not here! You take him for a walk on the road. I will look at him throw the crack in the door." "If he ever comes this way..." he said and left.

"Thus, enquiring about you, learning about you, we had spent 18 years. Mom told me to tell you all this.

“Recently my father has passed away. Soon after he passed away, mother asked me to send someone for you.”

* * *

I couldn't believe parts of the story that Vimala related. Some time ago, Ms. Leela wrote a letter to me confessing that all her heart was mine. After that she sent someone for me. But I didn't move, as I didn't have any interest. I told the person that she could come here if she wished. Finally, she herself came. After she arrived, as soon as she saw me, she said:

“I dreamed about you all my life. I have no one but you. You take me as yours for ever,” she urged. We became friends since then.

She played the veena beautifully. She sang accompanying herself with the instrument. Her singing with the accompaniment of veena was beautiful. I never heard anyone else who sang that way. She had a very musical voice. Besides, she was a beautiful woman. Her speech, her gait, her posture were all beautiful. She seemed as if she cultivated beauty all her life. If I said anything, her eyes responded as if there was a great significance in my words, as if they were searching me. If she didn't get a letter from me, or didn't hear a word from me, she became very anxious. I too became the same in regard to her.

Before she arrived, Bhagawan appeared to me in my dream and indicated that a very beautiful woman was going to come desiring me, and she would contain within herself an aspect of him. So, I hoped that the romance I was looking for all my life might be found in this lady. I believed that whatever ideal or fulfillment I was hoping for Bhagawan would give to me, and that I would attain through her the peace and light I had hoped for. Some time passed in this fashion. With Ms. Leela's arrival my turmoil had subsided and my void had disappeared.

I used to go to her town and she would come here to visit me. But soon differences of opinion started to occur between us. The one important thing she couldn't tolerate was my being interested in someone other than her. My children and my Voyyi, all of us were very close to me. She felt, “No matter what I did, and how much I love him, this man would not be mine. He belongs to them. His children are more important to him. His family is more important to him. I am a mere tool for him.”

She used to scold me, “If a woman like me came desiring him, any man would be in the Seventh Heaven. You are never content. You never have peace. You are never grateful.”

She desired all of me, without any other thought. She wanted everything. Moreover, a person's mind may be involved in a job or something, but when it came to the question of love, she wished that his mind must be totally immersed in her. I could never be like that, no matter what I did. She was separate from me. No matter how much I tried, I could never become one with her. I had many goals in my mind, many undertakings. More importantly, I had love for Shau and others. With all these in my life, I could not dedicate myself to her. That was how hostilities grew between us. Not that we actually quarreled, but there were differences.

If I had any sense, I should have said goodbye to her and left her as soon as the differences surfaced. But I didn't know what kind of karma I had. I couldn't leave her. Yet I had no relationship with her. We didn't even look at each other lovingly. Nevertheless, I could not let her go even when she was separated from me physically. She couldn't let me go either. I didn't know if it was a boon or a curse. I cannot say now why I became that way then. We lived together for two or three years. That was the most horrible time of my life.

I was causing a lot of pain to the doctor and her folks at home. But then I wasn't much of a man. My thinking powers were diminished. My rules, my nature, my ways of living were all different in the past. Now if I think of what I had become ~ I had become a damn fool, with nothing anywhere. I was totally crushed; I was troubled. I thought of shaking myself off it, but I couldn't. I wanted to leave, but I couldn't. I wanted to quit all this and run away somewhere. But where could I go? I had neither the money nor the health to do that.

I thought of going to Bezwada, but for some reason, I had trouble going there. I couldn't stay in Bezwada for a single day. I wanted children and everybody around me. Not that the place of Bezwada or Voyyi constantly going around on her medical rounds, etc., were any great reason, but I couldn't stay there for some reason. I always felt like getting out of there as soon as possible. But Ms. Leela used to take such good care of my food and body comforts and provide all conveniences. She made my body comfortable in every way. But my soul always was agonizing in sadness and restlessness. I thought of going to Bhagawan. But where did I have the health? How could I support myself there? Moreover, as soon as I went there, I would have great anxiety. There was no use in going to Bhagawan carrying so many doubts in my mind. If I went there I would have to surrender myself at his feet. There would be no alternative. But I did not have so much faith in him. Ms. Leela was very intelligent. She was highly educated. And she had a great discriminating knowledge of worldly affairs.

Every since our quarrels started, Bhagawan often used to appear in her dreams.

"Don't give him a hard time. Be friendly and loving to him," he was exhorting her. "He is someone dear to me. Be careful," he would warn her.

Nevertheless, she couldn't change her attitude at all. As long as I lived with Ms. Leela I was worshipping Bhagawan everyday in my mind. As my relationship with her became more miserable, I would continually appeal to him: "Bhagawan, take us to new heights from this relationship. I am helpless. I am unable to let her go. Or, you break this up and give me freedom."

But I didn't get any help from any side. Each day my situation deteriorated. I pleaded with Ms. Leela many times to come with me to Arunachala. She had an unreasonable hostility to Bhagawan. She somehow knew that I belonged to him; that if I escaped her, I would end up with Bhagawan; and that he was the only one who had the power to help me escape from her. Once she said to me: "Yours is the life of a monk. Yet, I don't understand how you had this weakness for women." She couldn't move. And I couldn't move without her. Bhagawan pressed me down with his thumb into mud and kept me there.

I lost my ability to bear the brunt of my problems. I merely lay on the bed peacefully, reading something. During that time, Ms. Leela would make sure that I was not disturbed or bothered in any way. At every meal she would serve me my favorite fish curry. But something was burning inside me, particularly, my moving away from children and Voyyi. She knew that. She couldn't bear it either. Ms. Leela was a good woman. She was prudent and intelligent, with a hankering for higher values. She could see from a distance that there is a plane higher than the mundane matters. She could even appreciate it. But she couldn't tolerate it if it came into her life. She felt inferior to it in comparison. Her ego would rise high to match it. She couldn't leave us and she couldn't take us in. I became like one half-buried in a quagmire and trying to get out of it.

Ms. Leela had an only son. He came close to dying due to an illness. She was crying constantly, distraught that he might die. I then asked her, "I will pray to Bhagawan to let him live. If he lives, would you come to see Bhagawan?"

That's when I learned how much she disliked coming to Bhagawan. She knew that the part in me which was elusive to her was linked to Bhagawan. Consciously or subconsciously she hesitated and didn't quite accept my offer. Right in front of her very eyes, the boy was sinking minute by minute. She had no way out except to say yes. I immediately sent a telegram to Bhagawan praying to him to save the boy. The boy instantly came out of the crisis.

In the following days she tried to escape from her promise. But I was stubborn. Having no other resort, she set out along with the children. By that time 'T' had already settled there. Ms. Leela and her daughter shuddered when they saw Bhagawan even from a distance. How many lowly people and sinners could come before him! Yet, these two could not. Finally, when I went to take leave of Bhagawan, they didn't come with me. How evil, sinful they were, I thought. When I told him I was leaving, Bhagawan was inexplicably furious with me when he talked to me. I still didn't learn my lesson. I didn't open my eyes. Finally, out of fear for Ms. Leela I left without taking his leave. How many hardships did I encounter since then! In a few days, Ms. Lella got very ill. Each doctor who examined her said that the illness was all psychological. And she was frightened that she was going to die.

As time passed this way, Voyyi died. I stayed with the children. I told Ms. Leela I wouldn't go with her to her place. She tried very hard to come and live with us in Bezwada. As an alternative, she asked all of us to come with her. She promised to take care of us. We thought that wouldn't be practical either. So she was forced to leave us and go to her town. Besides, we were leaving Bezwada for Arunachala.

With the affair with Mrs. Leela I was liberated from my craze for an ideal woman. Unless the man himself is ideal, how could he find an ideal woman?

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## 28

It was in Bezwada, in Dr. Ranganayakamma's hospital [*Voyyi, not to be confused with 'T', also Ranganayakamma, Chalam's wife*]. That old building had three stories. The bedrooms were on the third floor. Half of the floor wasn't enclosed. You could always have a view of the sky, the clouds and the coconut trees. In the mornings you could always face the sunrise. Just nearby, across the street, was Ms. Peddi Sarada's house. In the verandah of that house you could watch Sarada, her brother, sister-in-law and her mother. At times we could also sight Janakiram and Rajani.

That day it was 9:00 am.

"Hello!

.....

"Hello, I am talking to you."

.....

"I am talking to you, you wretch!

"Uh, uh,..."

"Why don't you answer?"

"What"

"You and your miserable writings, what do you write them for? Do you get any merit or achieve any spiritual goal by writing them? Do you make a lot of money? You know what Ms. Suri Nagamma said the other day in the meeting?

"What do I care what she says!

This was the style of the conversation between me and 'T'. This sort of conversations went on at least three times a day.

There might have been many husbands like me, but she was a special wife. You know what happens in what we call successful marriages: the man is quite normal. He finds a job and somehow progresses step by step, gains high status and keeps crawling up. The wife stays home and keeps house. She is not concerned with what he does, where he is or how he treats her, so on. All she needs from him is comfort, money, a bit of fame, jewelry and saris. Such a wife, as a matter of fact, doesn't have any personality. These are what we call successful marriages. These are the ones we extol. If she acquires any individuality, a bit of ego and some intelligence – all together, then the marriage collapses. Or it's going to collapse soon.

If she mingles well, accepting his earning money or fame, and shuts her mouth, then they call it a good marriage. She doesn't concern herself with what he does outside home, how he behaves there, how he behaves at home, or how he treats the children. He just shouldn't spend his money elsewhere. He must give it all to her. She needs everyone to admire her and say, "Aha, what a fortunate woman you are!" If I had belonged to the above category of husbands, we would have been happy, anonymous and smug.

But she had individuality. She had a unique personality. With that we soon developed differences. She wouldn't have minded my infatuation with other women, if there were no consequences such as bad reputation or loss of respect. As long as we lived in Madras, opposing my family and her family, and going to school there, we were quite loving to each other, even after we had a son, till I became wantonly. I tried. I tried to be a monogamist, going by the Brahmo Samaj tradition. I set myself a rule to dedicate all my mind and heart to her; I bent my head, beat myself on my head and gagged myself. I trampled under my foot everything that my nature would clamor for. I tried to be a good husband.

But when I deflected from her and was involved in an affair, she got hurt very much. When I turned this way, for my sake she had let go of all her property and her relatives. She lost her social respectability. After she abandoned all of them and followed me, I betrayed her. I did such a horrible thing. She was crushed. When I said I did a horrible thing, I meant I couldn't not do it. That was my blood, my nature. I had been fighting it all these years, but I couldn't subdue it. That's what Chalam is. I thought there was some virtue by cutting off my own nature. Suppose, by some chance, I was able to subtract my own nature from myself. Suppose my mind was steady and fixed on my family. If it did, I would have become a zombie. Aren't there already any number of men and women who remain at home, gain enormous fame, and live like loveless corpses? I won't become one like that. That wouldn't be Chalam. It would be someone else. This is what Chalam is. Even if you kill me, put me in prison or throw me in boiling oil, that trait is not going to go out of me.

If she were a wife who could adjust herself to things thinking that, after all, he was her husband, if she were a woman who said she must remain like this, even if the husband was turning out that way, if she didn't raise her voice and didn't cause any trouble, if she thought she could live in comfort, with her husband earning something, she would have been one among the 1,500 million faithful wives whom you now see and she would have become famous. She would have even been renowned, people saying, "Aha! What a faithful wife she is. She has been able to pull her family through even with a husband like that. What a great housewife!" But she was a human being. I never tried to deprive her of food or oppress her. I helped her personality to blossom in every way.

I used to exhort her: "Do whatever you like. You live as you like. You can do what your mind tells you to do, how heart makes you feel, and what your good sense tells you to do. Don't listen to what I say. Don't listen to what anyone says."

She appeared as if she didn't quite accept my advice. But she did. She took it and stood as a human being. That's why all these years, till she died, we had been quarrelling every day. The reason why we did was that neither of us backed out. I would say, "This is my nature. This is my

life,” and she would say, “This is my nature. This is my life.” I would never interfere in her affairs. But she couldn’t but interfere in my life, because she incurred a great loss thanks to either my books, or my women, or my rebellion, or my life, or my children or my ideas. Whichever way she turned, she couldn’t escape me. She wanted to escape all this and live her own life, but she couldn’t leave us. She vowed she would maintain her individuality while still living among us.

To protect herself from us and to establish herself she needed to grow her ego. She had to earn her own fame. She must stand as a distinct person called Ranganayakamma. She would want to say, “Just forget that he is my husband; take me for myself,” but the evil world didn’t leave her alone. To oppress her they had only one weapon, namely, Chalam. The modern female society could not accept a woman of a definite personality. The women of the society which she belonged to, the women who would petition the government for their individual independence, were puppets erected by their husbands for their own ulterior ends; they had no ability to think independently. Their husbands devoured them long ago. It was their husbands and their friends in society who told them how to live their lives. But Mrs. Ranganayakamma lived her own life. She behaved the way she pleased. Her opinions were her own.

When it comes to children, a woman tries to fulfill herself, if not in herself, at least through her children. When ‘T’ couldn’t do that, it was a big blow to her. Her good fortune was that her elder sister stood behind her in every way and gave her all the support she needed. She gave her money. She gave her health. She gave her freedom. Yet, she couldn’t stand as her own self. The woman who in times past, while we were still in the Brahma Samaj, rebelled seriously against religion, worship, so on, and showed how a woman should live, that same woman, as soon as I became distant from her, as soon as I came out of the family, when she realized that the person whom she relied on and who she had hoped would help her prosper in life had failed her this way, was grievously hurt and became a reactionary. Ever since then, she brought in worship, *japa*, *mantras*, superstitions and all those things she never believed in before; that was just to assert her independence. And I, for my part, left her alone.

I didn’t have any authority over this household. If she allowed a person to stay in the house, I would let him stay. If she said a certain friend couldn’t stay in our house, I would tell him to go elsewhere. The same was true with women. None of those whom she didn’t like could stay in the house. I used to make other arrangements for them. I would never interfere in any way in her pujas, *bhajans*, wearing ritually clean clothes [*madi* - that’s one of the orthodox Hindu customs], religious disciplines, in matters of her relatives, or in anything else she did.

But if she ever interfered with the kids, I would never tolerate it. If they conducted themselves on their own according to her wishes, I had no objection. I had no objection for their going out with her. But they didn’t obey her. I would not agree with her for one minute if she imposed her authority on them against their will. As we all rebelled against her this way, she remained alone. Poor woman, she must have suffered a lot. But if I wanted to please her, then I had to kill my individuality; and I must kill the individuality of the children. And she wouldn’t rest unless we killed it and got caught in her clutches. Would she have been happy then?

In the meantime, while we were struggling this way, the children grew up to be adults. I became more daring then. She figured that in my private life she would never be able to battle me.

She thought so and suffered a mental shock. She would roam about somewhere, without staying home. She couldn't stand our presence. So she left home. In those circumstances, Dr. Ranganayakamma also couldn't be of much help, except being sorry for her. At a young age, with Dr. Ahobila Rao's encouragement, 'T' became an agent in the Andhra Insurance Company. But as women who procured more policies by offering their bodies became more numerous, she wasn't very successful. Her children wouldn't marry and they wouldn't go to school. Her son didn't grow up to become anything useful, that is, according to the norms of the society. Finally, her *pujas* and devotion multiplied and she went to Sri Ramanashram alone.

At that time, Ramanashram was all a jungle and a desert. No one lived there. No one except the inmates of the Ashram, the devotees of the Ashram, and those who were dependent on the temple, could live there. In those circumstances, she lived here alone in this jungle, in a small hut, with a couple of clay pots, sometimes eating and sometimes starving, and sometimes cooking and sometimes not cooking. Even when she was living in this fashion, the Telugu women who hated us didn't leave her alone. That might have been because they were angry at me. They found her there. They claimed they knew her in Bezwada and talked loosely as they pleased, claiming she was of this or that sort. They turned everyone against her and contrived things so she couldn't walk upright in the Ashram any more. And the men played second fiddle to the women. A couple of them gained close proximity to Bhagavan. Exploiting that proximity, the mischief they made and the insults they poured on her were untold. Here in the Ashram they prejudiced the authorities and the Tamil people. They scandalized her. They tried to prevent her from entering the Ashram. Then the doctor received a telegram saying:

“Your sister's has become mentally ill. Please and come and take her.”

That was a telegram which Bhagavan personally dictated and got sent by the Ashram staff. I and Shau came together. When we came, she was half in this world and half in the other. What we learned after we came was that the women that got close to Bhagavan, particularly Telugu women, told malicious lies, turned people against her, persecuted her, threatened her and made her lose her mind. Her home life ended up this way. In all this, she didn't harm anyone. Such were the hatred and malice of the Telugu folks!

Finally, we pleaded with her and took her with us to Bezwada. After we had taken her to Bezwada I left that town. Then she became even crazier. Our 'Che' went through great hardships with her, served her and looked after her very well. How I admire the service she did to her mother in those days!

One day, Mrs. Ranganayakamma somehow slipped out of her room without telling anyone or being noticed by anyone and went to Madras. She then went straight to see the private secretary of the Governor. She told him that she was going to Ramanashram and that her life there might be in danger, and requested him to arrange some help for her from the government. Then she left for Tiruvannamalai. Ever since she arrived there, periodic messages came from the governor:

“How is Mrs. Ranganayakamma? Please inform us about her condition.”

That frightened the Telugu devotees who were spiteful to her and determined to get her out of Tiruvannamalai. All that calmed down. But they decided somehow not to allow her into the Ashram. The apparent reason was that she would make a nuisance of herself in the Ashram. So she went to Madras, retained a lawyer there and brought him to Sri Ramanashram. She made the lawyer ask some questions as follows:

“Why don’t you allow her to come into the Ashram? What worse nuisance could she cause than what others do?” When he asked such questions, they couldn’t answer, but said she could certainly come in from that time on. ‘T’ did all that while she was still crazy.

She later settled down here. Voyyi was reassured by the letters she got from her. It was a shock to her life that her sister became like this. Since then Mrs. Ranganayakamma started to write bundles and bundles of letters. If you opened and read them, they were pure nonsense. You couldn’t understand a thing in them. We didn’t know it then. We disregarded them as part of her insanity, but today what we learned was that many things unknown to us came to her; that is, she was getting messages from a plane that is not commonly known to men. But she mixed them up with her own desires and imagination and passed on them to us. As we didn’t understand them, we discounted them as crazy.

In the meantime, Voyyi died. Mrs. Ranganayakamma returned to Bezwada right away. It was becoming clear to us then that we had to leave Bezwada. I decided that we shouldn’t live anywhere in the Andhra region. Since she was living in Ramanashram, ‘T’ earnestly asked us too to come to Ramanashram. Since she asked so earnestly, and as we didn’t have any other place or anyone whom we could call friends, we decided to go to Ramanashram. Soon we sold everything in Bezwada and came away to Ramanashram. She had been staying with us since then.

Ever since she started living with us, she would think of things that were going to happen, some dangers, she would be frightened of them and then go away leaving us. Then she would return to us sometime later. She thus spent some months living with us and some months away. Then she left us completely and went to Andhra. She thought of living independently. So she set up a school and lived there teaching little kids. After some time her health failed again and she returned to Tiruvannamalai. One day suddenly she had a heart attack and soon after that she died.

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For a long time Voyyi's health had been deteriorating. She had high blood pressure, mostly due to her worries. I felt ashamed, strange and horrible thinking of how lowly I had behaved during the four years before her death. I always wondered why I became like that; I couldn't think of why I didn't have enough sense.

I couldn't believe that in old mythologies Nala and Harischandra committed such atrocious deeds by the force of fate. I used to condemn them saying, "How can sensible people change like that?" But when I notice the changes that took place in me at that time, men's extreme conduct doesn't surprise me at all. I used to be so proud of myself thinking, "I am not like that; I wouldn't do such a thing." I am not so proud any more. Why did I turn out to be like that? I don't know. I felt I was either asleep or in the middle of a nightmare. In all those years, I didn't have a single heart-to-heart talk with Voyyi. I didn't get together with her and think with her about "How I fell into such an infatuation and what should we do?" Even after I had noticed how much in pain she was, I remained hard-hearted. Before, I wouldn't have endured if anyone was in pain. But I was suffering some deep intense pain within myself. Voyyi too didn't confide in me. Maybe I didn't allow the space for it to happen!

Even though I learned that Voyyi's health was deteriorating and that she was going to die soon, I didn't take it seriously. When I think of it now, I feel as though some evil power covered my eyes and hardened my heart. I and Ms. Leela weren't even having any sex or attraction for each other, after all. I wasn't infatuated with her. I didn't discuss these matters even with Shau. I spent time living like a log with no life left in me. Children, Voyyi and everyone left me to Ms. Leela. They probably felt that I could have all the sex I wanted and that they shouldn't have any objection to it. Voyyi was so worried about what would happen to the children, whom she so loved, after she had died. With these worries, her heart suffered a blow. By then I was already living blindly with Ms. Leela. Whenever I came to Bezwada I was bored. Voyyi needed rest. And no one knew how to give it to her.

One night Voyyi died while she was lying down and talking to all of us gathered around her. I never met such a great woman. I couldn't imagine another like her. That same night, when the children were crying, I promised to them that I wouldn't go near Ms. Leela again, that I would stay with them. We resolved even before this that when Voyyi died we should all die. The drugs were in our hands. Their mother [T] was in Arunachala. A question arose in our minds: If we were gone, who would send her money? But something strange happened. An unreasonable joy arose in all of us. There was no reason for it. Voyyi who was protecting and supporting us was no longer. She never saved any money. I quit my job long ago. We didn't have any resource left for the days to come. We didn't have any money. Yet, we didn't know why we were so joyful. I thought then it was due to the blessings of Bhagavan. It must have been.

There is something that I have learned more recently: the souls of the departed, of those who have been living high in this world, and those who were born great to begin with, after they are dead, help those surviving them. I believe that that night Voyyi gave us that enthusiasm.

Similarly, when Ravi died too, none of us had a serious grief. Instead, for many days we were all quite jubilant except for Amma who tortured him all his life.

Shau and Che wanted to stay in Bezwada and run our house as a nursing home. Ms. Leela came. She tried to somehow not to be separated from us. She asked us all to come to stay with her saying that she would support us. But we didn't accept the offer thinking that they and we wouldn't get along with each other and I will be crushed in between the two sides. She tried very hard not to leave me. Finally she left helplessly. A few days later, 'Che' left for Madras unable to stand me. Shau couldn't run the hospital by herself. Meanwhile, Amma came from Arunachala. She had been pressing us to come to Arunachala. Chalam, Souris, Chitra, Nartaki, Pakapaka, Dolly, [Chitra's daughter] and Amma - all of us decided to move to Arunachala. There were five thousand rupees with us, which was all we had saved. It would last us for a year. What we would do after that we didn't know. I didn't have the faith that Bhagavan was there for us for everything.

I always dreaded traveling. If had to go on a trip to some town ten days later, I would start worrying about it now. Going on buggies and getting into trains, all of it was a big hassle to me, unless someone took care of me, carried all my stuff and took me with him. But till then, all the travels were those I had to make, not those that I made willingly. I didn't know if that would ever happen again! But how happy I was thinking of traveling to Arunachala! I was anxious, wondering when we would go, when we would leave this miserable place. We couldn't get some of the money until we sold off all the things in the doctor's hospital; so we couldn't go right away. And we were getting delayed. No one would buy from us as they knew that we would be leaving anyway. Out of spite toward me, even if they needed to, they wouldn't come near our house. And they didn't talk to us. How much animosity did the people of the Telugu region have against me without their knowing and without my knowing! Why just the Telugu region? Even when we moved to this Tamil region, people didn't let us live here. They got so aggressive. If, for instance, we asked them, "For what reason....," they would simply answer, "No, we don't have any problem." They too didn't know the reason.

"Hate" was a word written either in the air around me or in my horoscope. I resolved: "At last, we are leaving this Telugu country; if we leave it, we would never come back as long as I am alive; and my now-alive but dead-then soul wouldn't return there either." Just as I wished, due to God's grace, I never had the need to step on the dust of Andhra to this day. Since I cannot move now anyway [Chalam was in a wheelchair in the last few years of his life], it means that I will never go there in future either. You might think that this is a better country than that, but this is similar. No one knows me here, except the staff of Ramanashram. They heard about me and my character traits from the Telugu people and turned hostile to me.

Finally, we all got on the train. From the time we got on it, and even before that, that is, while we were still preparing for the trip, Bhagavan made our travel quite easy. Those were the days of the War. They wouldn't let any luggage into the compartments. It was difficult even for passengers to get in. Besides, we were traveling in third class on an express train. Nevertheless, we could find very nice accommodations. We were able to get our entire luggage in. No one else came in later to occupy our places where we were travelling. It was nightfall by the time we arrived in Arunachala. Amma still had the thatched hut she was living in before. We lodged there.

Chitra and Pakapaka had been constantly complaining ever since we proposed this trip, saying, “O My God, you are going to take us to that (horrible) place?” I told them, “You try the place and if you don’t like it you can go back; or do something else.” But where else could they go? For Chitra it was better to go with us to this Tamil country than to go back to her husband. Chitra’s daughter was jumping with joy at the idea of getting on a train. So we all came here gladly. We put up in a small cottage in a field far away across the street from Ramanasram. Poor Chitra and Pakapaka, they showed the next day the photos of the three-storied building we used to live in to everyone and started crying, “We used to live in such a house. And now we live here.” But the rest of us were quite happy.

Bhagawan’s cancer became life-threatening. It was certain that unless he performed some miracle on himself he was going to die in a few days. People from many countries were coming here for a last look, fearing that Bhagawan would leave us soon. All those devotees living here who had placed their trust in him were packing up so they could run away as soon as he breathed his last.

Everyone laughed at us as if we had gone mad when we moved here permanently with all our things, with our children and a small dog. We didn’t come here to live; we came here to die. We only had a little money with us. O.K. It would last us a little while. Then what would we do? We had no clue. I thought:

“What are we going to do? One of those days, we will only have a little rice, and nothing else. We will cook a little rice for that little girl. The rest of us will go to bed without eating. Till the very end, we will be cooking rice for her and feed her so she wouldn’t cry. When we all die, she too will die.” I had already envisioned our future in this fashion.

If we couldn’t manage that way, we had our weapon, namely, suicide. We would all have to die. Bhagawan, however, said “Suicide is a great sin.” But I didn’t have faith in Bhagawan. I didn’t believe in Bhagawan’s Vedanta. But if he did say that something was sinful, in my opinion too it would be sinful. There will indeed be superior worlds after we die. I mean by superior worlds, not heaven or hell. I did have an intimation of some bright worlds, intelligent worlds. Somewhere beyond this world, beyond the world which we seek from within this body this way, if we get out of this darkness, maybe there are new worlds. Maybe there would be more light in them. Will there be nothing else after this life? Then won’t there be any more happiness? If we commit suicide, maybe those worlds will be closed to us. I was afraid that by committing suicide I might be entering into some darkness. Or else, why would Bhagawan say such things? He said there was no use in doing it, that we won’t gain anything from it. We would lie down here at the doorway comfortably. We would lie down and die. If we died like that, how could it be considered suicide? It would be God killing us! It would be God killing us and not we killing ourselves.” At least, so we thought. “The world doesn’t want us. We will go.”

When I came and first saluted him, Bhagawan said, as if he was expecting me, “Here, this is Mr. Gudipati Venkatachalam.”

Why should he mention me pointedly like that? Maybe there was some meaning in his words, I thought. There were some old friends of mine like Harin who were not Telugu. I was

spending a pleasant time with them. What Bhagawan did, however, was that he made sure that the thought of what might happen to us the next day would not enter our minds. In the meantime, Shau and others went to visit Pasumalaiswami. Just when they were gone, Bhagawan passed away suddenly. It was good that Amma and Shau were not present here at that time. I wouldn't know how they could have endured the sight of Bhagawan leaving his body.

I never had any love for his body. But I did have for him. Where? Where, I don't know. I didn't know on what plane I got connected to him. But there was a strong connection. Not with his body. He relinquished his body that night at 8:45 pm. When he left his body, I too was in the Ashram standing in the Verandah. A brilliant light came down from the sky and fell on the verandah. I too saw it. From the next day on, everyone was engaging buggies and leaving from here. Some cried. Some fainted. Some said this or that. But I was not a bit sorry when his life left him. He protected us from our grief when our Ravi had died and when our Voyyi had died. He protected me when Vasant had left home. Would he cause me grief now when he was leaving? I didn't feel sad. I felt normal.

“Why are we here? Why did we come here?” “We came here to stay. That's why we are here. Even if we want to go elsewhere, we don't have the energy to do it. Where will we go? What other town will we go to?” When someone, while he was leaving, asked us, “You are going to stay here, are you?” I answered, “Yes, where else could we go?” It wasn't just this, this town or some other town. In all the three worlds, there was no place left for us except this town. Even if we wanted to go, there was no other town we could go to. I often felt that in this world I would like to go to a place where they had never heard of Chalam's name, where they had not heard the language called Telugu, and where there were no Telugu faces. I wonder if such a town ever existed. I wanted to run away somewhere because I was unable to bear the scandals that these Telugu people and the Ashram people raised and harm they had contemplated against me. But Bhagawan tied me down to this place. He made me unable to go, even if I wanted to.

I often felt that instead of staying next to the Ashram it would be better if I went somewhere else. I thought that the others too would feel how they came to be stuck with people like us. A few days after Bhagawan's demise, all the elders in the Ashram had a meeting. They apparently discussed the issue of these Telugu strangers who came to town who were evil and immoral and talked about how our stay there would ruin the reputation of the Ashram; and they considered whether to let us stay here or not. The outcome of the meeting was that soon one after another they themselves started leaving this town and the Ashram.

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# 30

Anyone who knew anything about Chalam would know that he is opposed to school learning and marriages. I have been opposed to them all my life. My loathing for them has not abated till today. I know that they won't go. They will never go. In some form or other they will always be there. They have grown up together with people in this civilization like influenza, like mosquitoes, like hatred among human beings. They have come into this world to stay with us. If anyone undertakes to uproot them, if anyone in the world has the ability, it means that they would be uprooting civilization itself.

Imagine a world in which none of the children went to school. Then there wouldn't be any doctors, engineers, offices, roads, bridges or buildings. There wouldn't be hospitals or medicines for anyone who falls ill. There wouldn't be any factories or the goods produced in them. That means civilization would disappear from this world. There wouldn't be much of it left. When Mr. Gandhi said that we shouldn't have these railways, telegraphs, engines and factories, people didn't take him seriously. They will distort what I say even more. Since what I am talking about will never happen, since it will not come to pass, those who have witnessed the damage they have caused, the atrocities they have committed, must tell about it. That way, if a lot of them talk about it, the evil in [school learning and marriages] would be greatly diminished. On the whole, I am probably the only one who has been saying we should have neither of them. I have been saying this all along, and I say it now, that we should have neither of them. That's the foremost among the things I say.

I speak very strongly about these two things – school learning and marriage, the two plagues afflicting man. First, there must be 'culture' [samskaram]. There must be interest in reading. One must enjoy reading. Both reading and writing must be like that. Writing is an experience. If a person tells about something that develops the mind, that makes the mind glad; it must become great literature. People who read what you write must say, "Boy, I must read this book today." It must not be like, "Oh my God, do I have to read this every day early in the morning?" Reading must be something you enjoy, just like other things you enjoy in this world.

There must be propensity, culture [samskaram]. It's hard to define 'culture'. Enlightenment in men, friendship, compassion, the feeling that unites people – all these are culture. That's culture. The school learning which kids need is not culture. In fact, you can't get culture through school learning. Children acquire this culture by living among people, especially their parents. If there is culture in a society, then all the people in it have culture. That's what we lack today. There is no enlightenment at all in the learned people of today, only their constant recitation and repetition of books. They are unable to look at things with a broad mind. There is no enlightenment in the books they read in the first place! Education should not be used for something else. Learning must be for its own sake. Just like eating a meal. There is a natural vital need for our body to eat. We eat to satisfy our hunger. Similarly, there is hunger for the mind as well.

The purpose of eating food is to give nourishment to the body and to satisfy hunger. When we eat, the food we eat gives us great pleasure. Creation is arranged that way. From that we

can learn how compassionate and loving God is. We can live by eating anything. We can boil a few wheat grains and live on them. We can eat raw horse beans and live. We can eat berries and live. We can eat some kinds of grass and live. But if we prepare and cook and then eat them, we derive great enjoyment from the food. What a pleasure we get from those tastes! Similarly, the mind has the hunger that it should know, it should learn. Education must satisfy that hunger. On the other hand, to go to school to get jobs, to make money, to give lectures, that's poisonous. It's the big poison, the big flaw which has polluted this civilization. This sort of education deprives people of enjoyment; it provokes evil qualities in them; and it causes pain in men and women, who should be leading happy and trouble-free lives, by stifling them in narrowmindedness.

At the present time, a child is born to go to school. And why does it go to school? To get big jobs. Why do they get big jobs? To go to America. Now, America is heaven for people of India. Men are not qualified even for low jobs unless they have high degrees. There is no connection between that college education and the work they do. It's just a mere belief. It is not necessary. Just a show. Those degrees make a man look puffed up and fat. When I say we don't need this education, I mean all education except medicine. If we don't have medical education, at first we may have some difficulty, but people will be happier later. They ask what people will do if they don't go to school. What you do with your free time is culture. To teach what to do should be the business of education.

We could have schools. But there need be no lessons in them. Schools should be useful to read storybooks, novels, travel stories etc. They must be used to learn about great poetry. They should show us how we should appreciate the beauty in it. On the other hand, currently our interest is how to pass this class to go the next higher class. On top of it, he or she must get a high rank, it doesn't matter by what means. Just imagine how many years of people's lives are consumed in this effort. Ever since the child is born, parents can't wait till it is two or three years old, till they shove it into a school. From that time on, they pound into the child's head, "Read, study!" It has to read all day long and all night long. Reading is the only job children have to do. What a waste of a whole lifetime! How these people, who should be enjoying fresh air, beautiful scenery, music and tastes, are wasting their lives in the name of education! How they demean themselves in front of others for favors! How they lose their self-respect! They lose even their ability to think!

Just as they criticize other ways, sensible people should sit together and discuss what areas in these curricula are necessary, what would really enlighten people's lives. They should keep only those curricula and eliminate the rest. Kids should not be forced to go to school. Imagine an eatery where delicious food is served free of cost. Do people have to be forced to go there? Schools should be open to everyone, just as this world is open. Whatever sort of learning a person wants, whatever things will give great enjoyment and enlightenment to people, we should give those to them; we should invite people, saying: "Come and get them. Just sit and listen and we will present things." It's similar to music. Just as singers say, "We are singing, just please listen," teachers should say, "We are teaching. Just come and listen to what we have to say." Education must be so free and free of cost. Now, in temples and public inns, pundits read mythological classics. Don't people go there to listen voluntarily? School education must be like that. Anyone can come and learn. Anyone can receive it and make it meaningful to themselves.

We have a school near our house. There are only two teachers for all the kids. A little while after the school has started, one teacher would leave. After another little while, the other teacher looks around to make sure no one is watching and he too would leave. The rest of the time, the children would run the school. There is not much more to the school except the thatched roof on top. There is another school. Its name is "Convent." A Western school. No one knows why this new school is called "Convent." Its life has begun with a bogus name. Kids come to that school in cars, rickshaws and horse buggies. They all wear uniforms. The school has specially trained teachers. The teachers 'love' the children as American Christian missionaries 'loved' the Indians. To 'show love' to children is one of their duties. They don't have any love for those children who haven't paid their fees, only to those who have. Leave alone other matters—in recess time (which lasts two hours), all the children should lie in rows and go to sleep. Since the teachers have no authority over sleep, the children are made to lie in a row next to one another. Teachers keep watch with canes in their hands. Children shouldn't raise their heads or talk.

Similarly, I read about the Russian school system in a book written by an English lady. The whole system is based on regimentation. Now gradually education in this country is going to turn into regimentation from start to finish. The present education system is dedicated to politics. There is an insistence now that schools should recruit more native teachers with higher education than teachers from other nations. There is now more confidence that the youth who are educated in colleges will become more efficient. The curricula in the colleges and universities are designed with other countries in view. So, unless the political system changes the education system won't change. Since politicians dictate methods of education; the connection between the two won't go away.

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[The following is about Chalam's own interests. It's not necessary for his lifestory. Read it if you wish to.]

I don't have many desires and tastes for things in this world. That's why I have never needed money so much. Whatever little I had I made do with it. My desires have been few. Besides food and clothing, I had few other big needs in all my life. Mrs. Ranganayakamma and children were of the same mind. We spent more of our time in the dream world than in the real world. Our dreams weren't about big things. You could say the dreams were our necessities: we should roam about happily; we should love one another; and those whom we love should be near us. Such were our desires. That's how it was all my life.

My goal was, if I had the good health to do it, to roam about from town to town with nothing on but the clothes I wear. The women I loved and the women who came into my life happened to be of the same sort. Whatever they might have been before, as soon as they came near me, they became that way. First, they would complain, saying: "Why don't you let us stay home? Why do you drag us along the roads and canals?" I sometimes think: "Although because of my ill-health I wasn't so fortunate, at least in the next world, even if we don't have bodies, we should hold each others' (non-existent) hands, and float away laughing, holding each others' (non-existent) waists, without needing anything, without needing anything from outside." I know for certain that besides this world, there are other worlds, and that everyone will be graced with the world they long for.

If we observe this world, God may appear to be very cruel, but I do believe in other worlds, in infinite and compassionate worlds in which the deity whom we love will surely grant our wishes, happiness, beauty and aspirations. Even in those worlds there isn't much that I would wish for. Just love. If I had mutually loving friends going around with me, by my side, that's all I would want. Only because I had such an aspiration, I didn't want this or that. Even now I don't want anything. I know they wouldn't give me satisfaction. That's why you won't find in my stories and plays people who are ambitious to make money or rich people. In my writings you will only find people who want to be rid of what they had, not those who would say, "I want this and I'll go and get that." All the time they would sever their relationships and relatives for the sake of love, they would go out of these bonds into a vaster love. They would want nothing more than that.

Any joy must come to me; it's rare that I go seeking it. I never had any desire to watch movies or plays or listen to music concerts. I never had a desire to visit people either, except my friends. I wouldn't go on purpose to places to watch natural scenery either. Moreover, I was always particular about one thing: wherever I went, or whatever I enjoyed, everyone in the household must go with me. All those who came to visit us and the children, everyone must go. We never had a lot of money either.

Mr. Tagore [*Rabindranath Tagore*] whom I dreamt about so often, whom I read, and about whom I had wondered if I would ever be able to see, at last came and stayed nextdoor to us. He must come to me. He must become my own. Mr. Tagore must come, call me saying, 'Chalam',

and take me into himself. Or else, if he sits over there and I sit here and watch him, I wouldn't be happy. He must embrace me and take me in. You and I should become one. Once, Mr. Gandhi too lodged near our house. I didn't go to visit him. I must go and live in his Ashram, and at least for those few days he and I must become one. I don't get anything from merely seeing people. It's the same with the women I loved. They must come and unite with me. They must remain with me. I didn't know what it is to desire for a half-hour or an hour, as a man desires a woman. I don't care for such things. I didn't know what it is to give gifts or bribes. If I had any joy or happiness, it should come from within me; and there has been very little happiness that came from outside.

My interest has always been for books, particularly English books. I have not seen any Telugu book yet which attracted me strongly and would make me stop and read it. Novels, stories and travelogues are the things I wanted to read. I wanted books which would take me away from myself and take me around here or there. If I had a book in my hands, I could forget everything else. That's why, when I have lost sight recently, although I could see the whole world, I missed reading a book. In case I don't read a book, if I just roam about, that would make me feel good. But now I don't have the energy to walk around. That's why, I sometimes feel increasingly sad. I keep wondering how much longer do I have to live like this.

I like music very much. However, if someone played movie music, I would struggle hard till I could escape it. Some who could sing very well, who were dear to me, went to sing in the movies to make money. Because children play the radio, I can't avoid listening to the movie songs. Music must be such that it must take me somewhere inside me to a pure, profound place which would make me forget myself. Or else, that music has no meaning. No matter how well it is sung, I wouldn't like that music. The music must stand before me, lift me, cajole me and carry me away. I don't care about all those ornaments in music. They don't touch me. I would appreciate it if a person had a great heart and his or her voice resonated with great beauty.

What they call painting, I don't know anything about it. I would look at a great painting and I don't understand a thing about it; so I keep quiet. I ask foolishly those who say some painting is great what was great about it and where it was great. But then, indeed, how could they tell me where it is so good? If I were to say some such thing, how I could I tell myself? It's something to be experienced. It's different with the beauty which I watch and enjoy in nature. I can't say where it lies. But it is not anything like the outdoor scenes that men watch and say, Aha!

The main theme of my life is suffering. I call it agony. I had the same pains everyone else has. But they didn't bother me. The torment which thrashed and bruised me all my life, some dissatisfaction which never left me, which would haunt me for something which I could never reach, which kept me restless every step of the way in my life, that was my greatest torment. First, I thought it was my headaches. Later, I thought it was the women who couldn't satisfy me. After I came here, I thought it was my karma. In any case, it was destined that my life should run this way in the pathways of the universe. This is how it should go on. Whatever I do, I cannot escape it. I suspect that it may be some kind of mental illness I have. Sometimes I have hope again because of the flashing fashions, hope that maybe some light will shine in my life. It is for that I suffer all this turmoil. Maybe God is sending fire and burning all the impurities in me. Whenever I see the filth in me, I wonder when it would diminish, when it would burn away and when I will have peace.

“Will I become pure after I die? Will the impurities be burnt? Will I gain peace even after that?” Those were my dreams.

When I first started writing, I never thought I would become a writer. I heard of the injustices that happened, my heart burned, and what I wrote disturbed some sham moralists. And that encouraged me. Right when I started writing, friends such as Krishna Sastry and Dikshitulu gave me strong encouragement. They accepted me as a writer and as one among them. When I heard the lamentations of readers in all parts of the state who had frequently read my writings, then it became clear to me that I had a place in Telugu literature. Toward the end, it was clear that some wonderful writings which no one had ever written in literature came from me. To become a writer was neither my desire nor aspiration. I never gained much satisfaction from it. It was merely a byproduct of my living.

At that time my attention was also focused on the woman who could give me satisfaction. After my friendship with Ms. Leela cooled down, it became clear to me that the only reason why the ideal woman did not appear in my life was that I didn't deserve her. I must destroy the inferior self in me. In other words, I must be sublimated. I must rise above women. It became clear to me after I had left the Telugu country that it was foolish to look outside; that until, out of my sheer good fortune, Ishavara forgave me and took me into his embrace, I wouldn't have, either in this world or in the other, any kind satisfaction or happiness; and that I wouldn't be one of those fortunate people who desired whatever they could find on earth and become content striving for and obtaining it.

My life always rocked between the extremes of happiness and sorrow. Now and then a lightning of joy flashed on the peaks. Mostly it was unbearable sorrow that encompassed me. However, it was the time without either of them that was most intolerable to me. Thinking, “What am I living for?” I would cringe. I never cared to mingle with crowds. On my own, I wouldn't go to a person and say hello. Because of my revolutionary ideas and anti-social activities, I was noted to be an enemy of everyone. If they talked a few words with me, my difference from them would become apparent. I was incapable of hiding my thoughts as ordinary men would and being 'friendly' to everyone. I would quickly expose a person's selfishness, meanness or falsity. That's why I would never talk with anyone. I can't tolerate the filth in myself or the filth in others. It would bother me.

This world has been set up this way; society works along these lines. There is no sense in trying to fight with those ways and that plan. I must adjust myself to them. But I couldn't. Even if the weather was overcast for a few days, there would be a huge revolt, a wrath from within me complaining, why this weather should be overcast, why it should torment me like this. It's the same even now. Why should there be so much suffering for human beings in this world? Why should there be so much stupidity in them? Why should there be so much intolerance, sorrow, attachment and lowliness in me? I always had such disgust for myself. By nature I am an aristocrat. I felt superior in some way to everyone I met. It seems like this superiority is in my blood. I can't tolerate any evil trait in myself. What the world calls evil is my passion. This filth always hurt me from inside and outside of me. That's why I couldn't stand any lowliness in others or in myself.

Some new friend comes to see me and very nicely tries to make friends with me. I like him. But he doesn't come again the next day. If I run into him any time later, he pretends not to notice me. What happened in between? The genteel world paints some dirt on me and threatens him. That's why I don't easily give my heart even to those whom I like. Whether in person or in my letters I talk and write as though I love them, but thinking, "How long this will last," I cringe. The Andhra public bit me this way all my life. Be that as it may, Ishwara graced me all my life with wonderful young men and women as friends.

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I worry about trifles. I worry that there might be no box of matches available that night. I don't know why, but I don't have any worry about what might happen to me if I don't have money tomorrow. No big worries in my life. I have no fear of death. But I am afraid of pain. I didn't worry about what might happen to the children. I didn't worry about their not being educated or getting married. But I have annoyances such as, "There are no cucumbers here; we can't boil *dahl* with this water here; or, in this part of the country the onions to be used for soup don't have much flavor." But I have never experienced big worries. I don't know if they call them worries or something else.

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## Second Part

Wanting no further connection with the Telugu country, I burned away all my papers, letters and books. I didn't want to answer any letters either. I was fed up. A friend of mine, who had loved me so much and helped me, reminded me that I owed him a story. So, I wrote a long story for him and sent it off. That was the story called "A Ratri" [*That Night*], the last story I had ever written. I resolved not to write any more, no matter what. And I didn't.

If Ishwara is making me do *sadhana*, that means He is taking me into a different world. There is no connection between this world and that. Some people come here and ask me, "What have you been doing all these years?" Some criticize me saying that I ran away from the world and have been hiding here. My reply to them is that you won't understand me if I told you what has been happening here. You won't believe it.

When we left the Telugu country and came here, except for one or two, we didn't leave there a single friend or a person who loved us. Even they said that it was good that we had left. We don't have connections with that part of the country any more. Soon after we arrived here, Bhagavan left his body. Didn't he say that even if we can't see his body, "I am here?" I have great faith in those words. I and Nartaki would always walk on the roads and around the hill. That was my great joy. Dolly also went with us. Dolly turned out to be a delight to us. She had a strange luster in her face. Going to the bazaar, buying all the things, going around all over town, and watching the strangers - all that was entertaining.

But the fire burning in me, how painful it was! I would always have this huge question: If he loved me, why wouldn't Bhagavan help me out of this? Why would he leave me alone in this pain? But, alas, he couldn't do better. The more I thought about us the stronger became my belief in *prarabdha* [*karma from the past which is still affecting us now*]. How could it be diminished? Only by suffering this pain. So, I thought, we are supposed to go through this suffering. In that miserable state, I would design some small pleasures and pass time.

Whenever I could, mornings and evenings I used to sit at the *Samadhi* of Bhagavan, closing my eyes to the devotees of Ramanashram. I still didn't believe in God. I only believed in Bhagavan. It was clear that he had love for us. I thought it wasn't within his power to help us any more than that. My future was bleak. I was just dragging the days. Dolly and Nartaki are my joy. As a relief from this sorrow-filled life, life graced me with such delights as Nartaki and Dolly. I have no reconciliation with this life. This world, these people and this weather are all my enemies.

It is now clear to me that the reason for my restlessness and grief is my greed. The things that I couldn't reach, that I could fantasize and dream about, many beauties, riches, experiences transcending the mind - I knew they truly existed somewhere. But I can't attain them. That's why I have this suffering. The scriptures are telling us that if we want them we must do penance, we must sacrifice. I had no faith in the scriptures. I never believed in those pleasures which I could get only by becoming a Sadhu or a renunciate. I don't believe that unless I suppress things in this

body, become passionless like a log, joys won't sprout in my life. I believe that I must slowly blossom, but I don't believe that unless I become ashes I won't be reborn.

I used to believe that life is a cul-de-sac because we don't have the ability to move it forward. When I was in that state of mind, I felt that Bhagavan opened the door and said to me, "Walk this way and all your dreams would be fulfilled." But my ill-health became a huge obstacle. Even when Bhagavan, looking at Nartaki and Dolly who were walking with me, hugging my necks, questioned me why I had these burdens, I couldn't let them go. I would rather go to hell with them, but do not want a release without them. I used to hope that we all could die together without a single one of us remaining. Then there won't be anyone left to suffer, even if we don't have anything. We wouldn't be faulted if we died out of starvation. If there are travails there in the other world, they would only be a continuation of these!

It was almost a year since we had come here. I didn't have any worry that the money we had brought with us was running out.

Ever since I got up from bed in the mornings, I would have no other thoughts except where I could find some good meat curry. I would go into the Moslem restaurants looking for good meat. Mrs. Ranganayakamma wouldn't let us eat meat or fish in the house. We knew that she would yell at us, so we would steal chunks of meat to our lunch place, put them under our seats and would eat them with eggplant pieces even as she was watching us. Only the bones gave us a problem. We would hide them under the seat and then throw them away later. That was all fun.

As soon as we came into this house, Shau went into great meditation, meditation in which she wasn't even conscious of the world. Even watching her, I wasn't very hopeful. Shau had less *prarabdha*; that was why she acquired such awareness, quietness, such luster and joy. Since I was carrying a huge *prarabdha* on my head, I couldn't get any of those - I thought.

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In the meantime, in 1951, August 15 came. Someone told us that it was a good day for us. That same day in the evening Shau came to me and told me that she had a *darshan* of God. I wasn't surprised. Shau used to have many visions: visions of Gandhi, myself, sages, rishis, Indra, Buddha, and so on. So what if all those appeared before her? What if the whole universe shone with the light of a thousand suns? What if gold showered? I must be free of my internal turmoil. I must have inward joy. That was my yearning, then and now.

When Shau told me this, I said, "Oh, I see." I wasn't much surprised. I wasn't overjoyed. The next day Shau came to me and said:

"Not only did Ishwara appear to me and talk to me, but He also told me to tell you some things: 'I know the torment you have been going through. I also know the torment your father has been going through all these years wondering if God existed or not. You trusted Bhagawan and you came here with no other help or money, because of your faith in Bhagawan.'"

Did I have faith in Bhagawan? What exactly is faith? I didn't know on what plane that faith existed, but I couldn't find it anywhere in me.

Shau continued, "Bhagawan has not abandoned you. He has been watching you. That's why he told me to go and find out how we are doing, poor things, who are suffering helplessly."

We ran out of our money. My health was poor. I would have died very soon. And I wouldn't know what would have happened to all these people, but at that moment Ishwara came into our lives and said: "From now on I am going to look after you. I will be watching you. You leave everything to me. Don't worry about money or your health. I will heal you. If your father will obey me, and if you will obey me, I will make sure that you will lack nothing." Shau reported this and asked me: "Are you going to obey Him?"

I replied: "What other business do I have? If someone says he will rescue me, what else can I want?"

"I will obey him, but I won't believe He is God. If someone says He will help me, I will accept that help. But if you ask me to believe that there is God, I can't. I have been waiting for many years to see when I would find that God and when I would fight with Him. Let Him make me believe, have faith. Then I will believe. Anyway, let Him do what He has offered to do. I will be glad," I said.

"O. K., first your health must be restored. You must do certain things He will ask you to do."

"How many things did I do before in my life in order to get better? Wouldn't I do them now? So, let Him tell what I should do?" I said.

"You must quit eating meat and fish from today," she said.

"Of course, I would. If my health gets better, what do I need those for," I said.

"You must also quit tea, cigarettes, etc.," she said.

"Here. I am throwing away my last cigarette. I won't smoke again," I said.

"And I am going to teach you a regimen. You must practice it,"

"Yes, I will do it."

But at my age how could my body be flexible? What kind of practice could I do?

After I started the regimen, I was quite surprised. While I was complaining, "How could I perform those *sadhanas*? What should I do, tell me?" Shau would say, "Never mind. You just go and sit there and He will help you do them." When I would go and sit there, He did help me do those *sadhanas*. I felt as if some person was literally holding my body and making me do those,

without anyone actually making me do them, or myself doing them. I knew none of those before. I had to get up early in the morning in winter and take a cold water bath. This I was used to before. As I continued in my practice, gradually my body couldn't take it and I got fevers. I would complain, "Hot, hot!" all day long. Be that as it may. Ishwara was promising to make my health better, I should endure any amount of heat, I would tell myself. "Since you have so much heat, you must diet," He said. I quit meat and fish quite some time ago. Now I wasn't allowed to eat stew, curries, etc. He said I could only eat yogurt. "You must leave your bed and bed clothes and sleep on a reed mat without a pillow," He said. I slept that way. I followed every instruction. I felt that some change was occurring in my body and felt that it was being cleansed.

First, He made me do *asanas*. If He placed His hand on me, I could do even seemingly impossible *asanas*. I mean, my body would automatically go into that posture. It was a wonder how my body and my bones would bend that way. Later, He would make my body bend into different shapes, as He pleased. My body became iron putty in His hands. Later He made me do some wonderful yoga *kriyas*. Outside of the practice, if I tried to bend my body, it wouldn't move at all. I marvelled at it, thinking it must be something wonderful. Shau would call and show me with the words of Iswara what I should do and how to do it. Even when I was lying with pain, or groaning with fever, I was permitted to eat only yogurt and rice. I imagined that I would perhaps gain great powers. My headaches, however, were gone. Ever since He took me into his hands and make me do the *sadhana*, ever since that day, I never had my headaches.

Instead of her talking to Him, and then telling me what He told her, Shau started to speak his words directly. Since that day I have been regarding Shau as Ishwara. I never do anything without asking Shau. Now, over these 20 years, that has become routine. Whether I moved, talked, breathed or did anything else, I had to ask her first. Whatever Shau said that was Bible to me. However, right the day after He appeared, I started my argument:

"Why did you create the universe in the first place? Don't you have any other business; can't you rest in leisure, instead of doing such a terrible deed?" I asked.

"I didn't create it," He said.

"What do you mean you didn't create? What's all this then?"

How could I argue with Him if He says He didn't create it? "I don't believe it. Is it all an illusion of mine that it exists? Then why did you create that illusion? Why should I exist in the first place? Why should I be deluded? Must I pray to you to escape from the illusion, conquer it and then serve you?" I argued a lot this way. I asked every kind of question. "What is this *prarabdha*? What is the meaning of this evaluation? What is this love? You make people love each other, and then create hostilities between them. If it is not hostilities, someone else is wailing. You created all these deaths and are tormenting us in all possible ways." I quarreled with Him this way. After such prolonged quarreling what I came to know was this:

"What you have in you is your mind. Things appear to be horrible as long as you see them with your mind. The more you try to destroy your mind, make it lighter, and the more the mind becomes purer, the more the world too will appear to you lighter. So you give it a try," He said.

“I can’t do such a thing. If I could, I would have done it long ago,” I said.

“I will help you do it,” He said.

He said and has been helping me do it, and is still helping me, even now.

Regardless of whether light has or has not dawned on me, Ishwara is real. His compassion and love are all real. All of that is somewhat clear to me. How all that works I can’t talk about it here. I have understood this creation and all. I mean I understand it in my head intellectually. But I haven’t realized it in my experience. Unless the mind is destroyed and this experiencing through the mind goes, He said that I can’t grasp that truth. “If this mind and its experience are gone, on whom will that truth dawn? If I myself don’t exist, on whom will that truth dawn,” I asked. “Not so; you don’t know that state. The state in which Bhagawan was, that state you wouldn’t understand. You won’t understand until your mind is gone,” He replied.

I am beginning to learn that it is something unknown to us. What we don’t know, that’s something great. It’s great beyond measure. Some things which cannot be measured by my mind or by my eyes, or by anything, are all happening now. So, I can’t speak lightly. I don’t know. I may be in darkness. But due to Ishwara’s mercy wisdom will dawn. I will get out of the darkness. From all this I learned clearly that there is such a thing as release. I have concluded that whatever Bhagawan said was literally true. But what’s the use of knowing it is true? I remain the same as I was before. If anyone asks me, “What have you achieved? How are you now?” I am unable to give a positive answer. I am in the same state as I was before. They constantly talk about change. I don’t know of any change in me or what happened to me. But I have great faith. Ishwara is there. Bhagawan is there. What does it matter what happens to me? I remain this way in my ignorance.

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“Brother! My daughter is pregnant. See, what she has done? What shall I do now? You tell me,” He said in English.

“You worry so much just for this! You will have a grandson or granddaughter in five or six months. What’s the problem?”

When I said that, he pulled a sad face. Who was it? Mangaram.

Mangaram was our neighbor. That is, his house was nextdoor to ours. He was a Hindi-speaking money-lender in this town. He didn’t know anyone else except us, at least as far as we knew. At times he would go to Bombay to visit his relatives there. He once told me he did have a daughter. Just as a cat would deposit its kittens in different places, he would place his daughter now in this house and now in another, in Bombay for some time, in Calcutta for some time, and in Hong Kong for some other time. He would report that she was in one of those places and then tell us how she was doing there. But he didn’t seem to be happy with the fact that she was living in those places. So we suggested that maybe she should be living with him.



That morning the girl came down along with a couple of Sindhi people. She was 14 or 16 years of age. She was very beautiful. She had a lot of goodness showing in her face. They all went into Mangaram's house. There was some whispered talk for a while and then Mangaram called me in. Mangaram didn't have much of a friendship with us. He always remained aloof. All his friends were devotees of the Ramanshram. So we wouldn't be their friends anyway. But these people looked innocent. When I saw him, his manner looked like he was thinking of duping them somehow. Be that as it may, the girl had grown up. And this *was*, after all, his daughter. He had been letting her grow up in this town or that. Now she had come to him. It was getting clear from her words why she had come here.

I said, "You don't worry at all, Managaram." But his worry was obvious: that all these devotees of Ramanashram would get together and ruin his reputation by announcing that he was going to have a grandson or granddaughter without a son-in-law.

"Don't fear. Without one word more, just send your daughter to our house. The neighboring foxes wouldn't even know that your daughter has come here. Let her stay with us. None of them come to our house. You know that. As we are outcasts in the eyes of the devotees of Ramanashram, your daughter would be safe in our house. Now you can rest in peace. We will take care of the rest," I said.

When I said that, he didn't like it.

"How can I keep her in your house? How could we keep it a secret?"

"O.K. they might know. But they wouldn't know it's your daughter. In our house we do get people of this sort. You have noticed it yourself! They would think that she is one of those. Why do you worry?" When I said that, he went on agonizing.

"O.K. Managarm! That's all I can say. You figure it out. If you need any help at any time, just ask," I said and left.

No one knew how, but all the genteel ladies of the Ramanashram got hint of the fact that this husbandless girl is pregnant. They all came to our house.

"They say that Mangaram's daughter is pregnant?"

"Yes," I said.

"O. K., where is she?"

"Savitri!"

She came and sat with us.

With flaring eyes and red faces they started scolding her in Hindi. They asked her all sorts of questions.

The girl didn't say anything but sat crying.

They looked at me. They had already known before that there would be no use in talking to me. Now they learned that again. They glanced this way and that, got up and left. No one even peeked after that as long as Savitri lived with us.

Mangaram came again after waiting for a few more days. He asked me to come with him to his house. When I went there...

"Just send my daughter away somehow from this town. You know people in various places. If you send her to one of them, she can deliver the baby there. You can let someone in the same place adopt the baby. After she gives the baby for adoption, she will come back here," he said.

"O, that's not a big problem to me," I said and quickly wrote a few letters saying, "Here we have a girl, keep her with you discretely." I had replies from them. I had replies from everyone, except the respectable people, asking me to send her.

Then what did Mangaram do?

"What if I go along with my daughter?" he asked.

"What? You will stay, without working, in someone's house all those four months while your daughter is waiting for her delivery?" I asked.

"Please make such an arrangement. I too will leave this place," said Mangaram.

"Will you then pay them, where you are going to be? If it is just your daughter, I can somehow justify her stay whether she has money or not. But if you go too, how about the money?"

"O, there is no problem with money. I will give them whatever they demand," he said.

"O.K.," I said and wrote letters again. I had replies again saying that, just because I was requesting, he too could come.

"O.K., you and your daughter both can go," I told him.

"O.K., I will," he said.

The deal was finished. Time passed. Months passed. Her belly was growing.

"What Mangaram! Why don't you go? The time for delivery is nearing."

"I am going, I am going," he said.

Finally, one evening, he packed all his suitcases and was vacating his house.

When I asked him, “What’s the matter, Mangaram, you are vacating your house? Aren’t you coming back?” he said, “We will see when I come back. But for now, I am vacating.”

He sent for four *jatkas*. He loaded his entire luggage into them, and got himself and his daughter into one of them and left. I gave him the address and directions to the place he should go. And I wrote to them informing them that he was arriving. I thought that everything was settled.

A while later, all the four *jatkas* returned. I was wondering what was going on. All the trunks were moved back into his house. He took his daughter with him into the house. The *jatka* drivers came to my house and demanded the fare. I said, “This is funny. He went to the train station and returned. Why should I pay the money for it?” They said that he told them to ask me for the fare. I said, “Just leave. It doesn’t make sense to ask me for the fare.”

I wanted to ask him, “Why, Mangaram, why did you come back?” but he wouldn’t talk to me. He didn’t say anything. He just sat there. I didn’t know how he managed the fare for the *jatka* drivers, but they went their way. It became clear to us in course of time that this big money-lender had no money. He needed cigarettes, *idli* and meals – he needed them. He and his daughter were living there, but they had no money. She used to come to us, who were living next door, to ask for food. When we gave her food, she would say, “My father hasn’t eaten, I need food for him too.” Some time passed this way.

We asked, “Savitri, how long can you go on like this?” She answered, “My father asked me to go and get it. Not just food. He asked me to get money too from you. Not just to your house, I should go to the tea stalls, to the Setti’s store and ask them for cigarettes, *idli*, and some snacks such as balls made of chana dahl, and bring them to him. I am not cooking at home. I cook very well. If I have only rice or wheat I can make very good dishes and serve my father. I don’t know why, but he won’t give them to me.”

When I went to his place and asked, “Why, Managaram, why don’t you have any rice?” he quietly went to his bed without answering and lay down on it.

One day, the girl suddenly came to my house and lay on my bed. I was wondering why she was lying on my bed. She appeared to be in pain. Nartaki looked at her and said, “Oh, no, the girl is in labor.”

I was worried that the girl might deliver on my bed; so I said, “Nartaki, what shall we do?”

“No problem, we will take her to the hospital,” she answered, “but the father may not approve if his daughter is taken to the hospital.”

“So, what? Let’s take her to the hospital first.” We brought a buggy, took her to the hospital and admitted her there. The father made no remark. The girl delivered a baby girl there.

I asked, “What shall we do with the mother and child now?”

“What else? Let’s keep them in our house in a bed,” said Nartaki.

“We will. But Managaram, your daughter has delivered in the hospital. You have no response?”

“Did she? That’s fine,” he said.

We wondered how we were going to raise the child. So we thought of the possibility of giving her to someone to adopt. But then we worried that perhaps he would come and pick up a quarrel asking for his granddaughter? The mother had no milk. We must buy some.

“Hey Mangaram, give us some money for the milk of your granddaughter.”

“Milk?” he asks.

What could we do with him? He was in no position to take care of them if we take the mother and child to his place. So Nartaki looked around everywhere, found someone and weaned the baby from the mother and gave it to her. The mother then went to the father.

Ever since then, they didn’t have anything to eat. They always had to beg Nartaki. It was midsummer. The girl had just delivered a baby. Yet, he would ask her to go out and beg for cigarettes and money. It was getting very clear that he had gone crazy. But he didn’t sit still. He wouldn’t admit that he was mentally ill. Nor would he give us a free hand. He drove away his daughter saying, “What did you do to your daughter? You sold her off to someone, didn’t you? Go and get some money from them.” The girl didn’t speak any other language than Hindi.

If she protested saying, “How can I go in this hot sun,” apparently, he would beat her up. What should we do with these two? There were no others in the precinct except us.

Trying to avoid this nuisance, I asked Savitri, when she once came to our house, “Stay with us and don’t go back to your house.” And she did. Then Mangaram packed all her stuff in a trunk and brought the trunk to us. He said, “Take it,” and threw it here as though we kidnapped his daughter. He used to spend time somewhere else. In the middle of the night, around 12:00 or 1:00 am, he would stand on the far side of the reed screen and ask,

“Chalam, where is my daughter?”

“Your daughter is here.”

“Oh, then, why did you keep her there? Send her away?” he would say.

Where should I send her? She had no home to send her to. He sold everything. And we had nothing. If we sent away, where would she find food? She, on her part, was begging us, “Please don’t send me to my father’s.” He would come here and boss around. One day he too stayed over in our house. We were worried that the crazy fellow might cause some nuisance; we

talked him out of staying and sent him off. The girl would cry, tremble, and writhe like a bird fallen from a tree in a storm.

“Don’t worry, Savitri, we will take care of you. We will keep you with us. We won’t send you back there. You won’t have any problem,” Nartaki would reassure her every day.

Savitri was such a nice girl. She was so good-natured that when we looked at her, we wondered how we could bear her suffering any tragedy or hardship. But the girl had never really grown up. She was about 16 years old, but her brain was that of an 8-year old. Everything was strange to her – if you brought an 8-year old and left her in our house, she would ask questions about what everything is – she was like that. Naturally her body grew very beautifully. What would happen to her if she went out into the world? Her father became crazy. We asked her whom else could she go to? She mentioned some uncles. But it didn’t seem like anyone would care for her. They probably also got wind that Managaram had gone crazy. No matter, none of her relatives even peeked in this direction.

The girl couldn’t eat without meat or fish, poor thing! When we served her food, she would look at it as if worrying if she must eat it. “These people don’t know that there are such things as fish. If they did, they would certainly eat them. I must tell them about them,” she thought. But, alas, she didn’t have the words to say it.

“Father! Look at the fish in the market. Very nice. It would be quite tasty. If you get them, I would make an excellent curry with them for you. It will be quite tasty,” she would talk about meat and fish that way. She would talk about those and tempt me more, me who was already dying with desire for them.

“It would be great. But let it go,” I would say, and she would become sad, wondering why these people won’t eat them. Again, when she saw the vegetables and all, she would come to me and start again, “Father!...” I felt that at least for her I should get some meat and fish and at least in her name we both, she and I, could eat some.

In the meantime, Mangaram bundled together all the IOUs his debtors in town gave him, wrote “To the mother,” on each of them, and strewed them all around the *Samadhi* of Bhagawan. That whole bundle fell in the hands of the Ashram inmates while they were cleaning the place. They got worried, thinking, “This fellow strewed all these papers away. What should we do with them? If we do anything, and if they owe him more, they would grab all that. But if we give back the papers to him, he may tear them up, which would be a waste.” So, not knowing what to do, they sent word to let me know how he threw away his IOUs. That convinced me that he became insane.

Once some merchants came behind our house on some business. We called them in, showed them Savitri, told them the whole story, and said: “You wrote all those IOUs in his name. He gave them all to the Ashram. But look at the poor girl, what state she is in. Give us some of that money and with that we will do something for her.” They said, “O, yes, we will do that certainly. We must give, no doubt. No doubt we must give.” But they never showed their faces again. That meant that they would never pay back any of the money they had owed him.

From then on he didn't have money for cigarettes and had no food either. The girl, on the other hand, was happy here. At times, he would come and ask to be given food. We gave him. When we did, he demanded money for cigarettes. We didn't have money to give him for cigarettes and food. Besides, we didn't see why we had to keep a crazy man with us and feed him. Then suddenly he lay down in his room closing the doors and wouldn't answer if anyone knocked at his door. He probably decided to die that way. For a moment I thought it might be better to let the crazy fellow die. But I got into the great sentimentality of thinking "How can we watch indifferently when a man is dying?"

We all talked together and decided that it was only fair to rescue him. We knocked at his door. Knocked as we would, he wouldn't open the door. And there was a doctor in those days in the Ashram. I knew all along that if we told him about his craziness, it would only get worse. When the doctor told him, "Take the right medicine or else your health will get worse," he didn't listen. He didn't take any medicine. The doctor assured us that he was indeed crazy. Apparently, if we decided to admit him in the mental hospital in Madras, two or three doctors had to certify that he was crazy. Which doctors should we go to and bribe to certify that he was mad? How could we take him to Madras and leave him there in the mental hospital? And then we would have to return. Where would we get the money for all that? As we were thinking about this, I had an idea:

I wrote a report to the police saying that this man locked himself in his room and might commit suicide and die if they didn't come and check him out. The police didn't respond. I wrote a note to the magistrate. The next day all of them descended, although none of them ever saw him before. They enquired, "Where is he, Where is he?" We showed them his house. The police called him out. He didn't answer. Finally, they broke the door and entered the room. After they entered, they said to me that they would take care of the rest and that I could leave. They dragged him out, got him into a buggy and took him to the police station. From there they took him to Madras. They did it all at their own expense. They admitted him in the mental hospital in Madras.

I had letters from there reporting that he was coming out of his insanity. They said that I could take him out. I found the addresses of his relatives and wrote to them saying that Mangaram's mental illness was getting better, and asking them to go and get him. No one answered. Meanwhile, Savitri's pressure for meat and fish was getting worse. She was like a little child crying for a treat. Meanwhile, I had an idea. I wrote to the relatives saying that he threw away all the IOUs his debtors wrote for him in the Ashram and that they would all be expiring due to time limitations. With that letter they came running in a hurry from Calcutta, stayed in our house, collected all those debts and left with Savitri.

Soon Mangaram too came. He asked with a sad face, "Why did you admit me in the mental hospital, Venkatachalam?" I couldn't give him an answer; I hung my head in shame. Now he didn't have either his house or his money. Since he didn't have money, all his friends avoided him. He didn't have his daughter either. Why did I let him live? Was it a good deed or was it an evil deed? Soon he died without having anything to latch on to.

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God did not create this whole universe. This is all His manifestation, just as light emanates from a lamp. The relationship between Him and His creation is the same as that between the sun and its light. But He is a living God and all-powerful. I asked Him about virtue and vice. All the things that happen in this world are relative to man. These are all modifications of the mind. It is those that create births, happiness and misery. God underlies all these. He is not roaming somewhere else.

“All these are things you wrote. Why do you doubt them again,” asked Ishwara.

The one obstacle I had in my understanding of God’s creation was rebirth. What’s the connection between this lifetime and another? We don’t remember the reason for which we suffer in this life, do we? By torturing a newly born child, would there be retribution for the sins it committed as an adult in a previous life? Is this revenge or punishment? I quarreled a lot with Him this way. He gave many answers to my questions. I learned all I needed to learn. The rest I understood somewhere in the remote recesses of the mind. I was never tired of questioning. He was never tired of answering every question of mine. Whenever I had a grave doubt, He would say, “This is not something I did, I am just explaining it to you.”

When I asked, “But you are loving and kind, how could you tolerate all this suffering?” his reply was: “You won’t understand how my kindness and love work. The beauty you see and the happiness you find in the world are all part of my kindness.”

“All right, but I don’t understand your unkindness. If we observe the turmoil we suffer in this world, anyone’s heart would melt, except yours.”

“Your questions are like the question of someone who walks in the middle of a play and asks, ‘What’s all this about?’”

I pleaded, “Couldn’t you stop all this? Couldn’t you turn off the lights on the stage?”

His answer: “This is not the only world. There are hundreds of millions of worlds. But suffering and hatred exist only in this world. There are worlds in which the things you had dreamed about are manifested even better. You are going to be cleansed here, become fit for those worlds, and experience infinite joys there. But you don’t have to hurry.” Then He mentioned Bhagawan’s words to the effect that if you want to know the truth of what is really happening, your mind must disappear. “Unless you transcend the *maya* that I have created, unless the curtain in your mind tears open, you won’t have a vision of Truth. If you do the *sadhanas* I have prescribed.... Anyhow, you are caught in my clutches. You can’t escape anyway. You *will* have the vision of Truth.”

“What about others?” I asked.

How could I be happy while millions and millions of people are suffering?

“Try and ask them. They don’t care. They like to play around. Ask your friends if any of them want release,” He said pleading.

“I am telling all this because you deserve. Hold your faith in me. Surrender to me,” He said. He defeated me to the point that I couldn’t answer him.

Whenever I observe any intense suffering, or death separating people, my faith would go into some corner and ask, “What will Ishwara say about this? What answer will He give?” and gnaw at me. If I could remember, I could report a lot more things on this matter. But, on the whole, what my mind retained was that some people are born with complete wisdom. Those happen one in many thousands of years. The rest must do *sadhana*, very harsh *sadhana*, until all this ignorance is destroyed.

All these years I searched with all the faculties that God has given me and the little knowledge I had. I consulted. I reasoned. But I couldn’t see the complete picture of anything. I couldn’t find answers that would satisfy me. That’s why this intellectual quest of a person doesn’t take him or her anywhere. I read the books of great intellectuals. They too admitted that nothing could be found. This intellect “is something which separates you and me. Unless the intellect goes away, truth won’t dawn on you. If you hold on to it and want to go somewhere, it will only land you in a ditch. Abandon it and trust in faith. Whatever the intellect says, just tell it to ‘shut its mouth.’ I am telling you in person, believe me.” He didn’t tell me all these things and then suddenly disappear somewhere. He says He will remain with us. He says He will be talking through Souris. That’s why I thought of surrendering myself to Him completely.

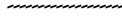
But friends are still writing to me. Since that time, if anyone questions me, “Why did you do this? Why didn’t you do that?” I had to answer, “For no reason; Ishwara asked me to do it, or Ishwara didn’t want me to do it.” From that day on, gradually, this whole place has turned into an *ashram*. People come and peep in to see what this is all about. This place is removed from world’s turmoils. There is peace here. And there are people who come here to rest. There is nothing else. There are some who have come here wanting to become part of us. Many of them would leave without their knowing why, either because they can’t stand the hot weather, or on some pretext or desire.

When Ishwara said that this is a true *ashram*, I thought it would become like the other *ashrams* I had read about. I was worried that there would be money, buildings, meetings, notoriety in the papers, and such others things in this *ashram* too. But when I look at it now, it appears to me to be more like an ancient *ashram* of a *rishi*. Those who deserve this sort of destiny, those to whom development of the self is important, and those who try to absolve themselves of their past *prarabdha* through penance, only those few remain here. Chatting without tiring them, playing, cajoling, showing affection, scolding, Ishwara in the form of Souris removes the ignorance and expiates the *prarabdha* of those that have remained in the *ashram*, protects them and takes them with Him.

What have I been doing here all these 25 years? “I have been learning not to be anything,” is my answer to those who ask me. We all do one thing here. That is, live. Those who don’t like that go away. As the ferment of the mind subsides, and as past desires and inclinations become



distant, pure and permanent peace slowly dawns on us without our knowing it. As the world fades away into a distance, unable to bear it, we struggle and tug and writhe in the lap of Ishwara. Nothing has happened in these 20 years. With the idea that these people cannot bear it if nothing happens, Ishwara makes mysterious and special things happen. I am writing this because so many ask me so often. I gain nothing from this. Nor will you. As a matter of fact, there is nothing to gain or lose. This is the truth. This is silence. This is peace.



## Appendix

Helping me to gain the faith that if I surrendered to the voice of Ishwara speaking through Souris He would enable me to have a vision of Truth, Iswara got rid of my headaches in the process. My health in general got better. I had more enthusiasm. My life that was closed before has now opened to a brilliant future. Money came from unknown sources and we have been able to manage the household. Getting to know that I have settled down in Arunachala, those friends of mine who had faith in me came to see me, recognized Ishwara in Souris and became disciples.

During our conversations, friends reported to us of the goings on in the world, and how immorality and vice have been on the rise. We asked in our chats why Ishwara was remaining indifferent when the world is degrading so much. We felt: why couldn't Ishwara wash it all up with one deluge? In my *sadhana* my body and mind have always been tormenting me. The same restlessness and ill-health that had plagued me all my life are also tormenting me now. When I have complained about them to Ishwara, He says that they are unavoidable and are all part of *sadhana*. Unable to bear all this suffering, I would many times plead with him: "I don't want either this vision of truth or release. Please just give me some peace and let me live happily for the little time that I have left. I have been burned all my life with problems and ill-health. Before I die, let me live these few days happily and then die."

Ishwara replies to this as follows: "Of course, I can give you good health. But will your mind rest with that? It will keep raising problems. It will keep suffering. Your ego must be suppressed. Only then you can have peace. The illness of your mind must also be cured along with the illness of your body. The pain is unavoidable."

As my *sadhana* went on, it has become clear to me how many impurities, how many despicable things have existed in my mind that I ought to hang my head about and be ashamed of. My bodily *sadhana* has also intensified. For hours together I would sit in a corner in *sadhana*. In the meantime, there were announcements in the papers that there was going to be a world deluge in February 1962. I and Mr. Sastry [*Jalasutram Rikmininadha Sastry, a friend of Chalam who was a performing artist in All India Radio*] were glad. I asked Ishwara if it was truly going to happen.

"Yes, it will," He answered.

"We, our friends and your devotees will all be washed away, then," I said.

"No, I am going to rescue you all. Write to all your friends that there will be a deluge. If they take precautions the way I prescribe, I will protect them," He said.

Although it appeared to be impossible and impractical, I wrote to everyone at His behest. I knew that I would appear like a fanatical dupe to all those who weren't my friends. But trusting Ishwara's voice, I worked for all those months. But there was no deluge or anything. Ishwara said that he had stopped the deluge from occurring. I then lost all my faith in Ishwara's words.

One day, Ishwara asked sadly whether I had abandoned him. As soon as He asked, I became his devotee again. Since then I have been continuing to do all the *sadhanas* prescribed by him. And He has been reassuring me. And I have been hanging by the thread of that reassurance. My health has again been deteriorating. I have become unable to walk.



# Ishwara

“Arunachala!  
Granite wave of bliss!  
Light in the midst of darkness!” sang Chalam.

When Bhagavan, the *jnani* who is a witness the one and only truth, is asked arrogantly, “Have you seen God?” what could he say in reply?

What could the *jnani*, who is clearly aware that the questioning person, the world around him, everything, and himself, are nothing but God, say?

“Solidified waves of bliss” ~ if waves of bliss solidified into rocks, the one who slipped on the rocks of Arunachala would wonder if that is indeed bliss!

If a person, who doesn't know anything about water, slips on a block of ice, would he accept the idea that the block of ice is a solidified cloud?

Similarly, what could a *jnani*, who witnesses the visible creation as the light of Ishwara solidified so that it is perceptible to the senses, say?

If he has thoughts, perhaps he would think, “What else could I be looking at except Ishwara? What else is there to see or experience?”

That's why “the form of dark light” sounds like a sheer paradox. But it's true even scientifically. As the frequency of light increases, the naked eye cannot see that light. That light becomes darkness.

That's why Ishwara transcends duality. For example, He is beyond truth and falsehood. If we think about it, how much truth is really there in what we think as truth? And isn't there some truth in falsehood? Isn't it because it has less of truth that we call falsehood untruth?

We say He is full of auspicious qualities. And we also say He is without any qualities. Only because He gradually acquires qualities and descends into the range of human mental perception, very solid emotional perception, that we are able to become aware of Him.

“Ocean of Compassion,  
You who help the helpless,  
You who protect those who take shelter in you”

When someone prays to Ishwara in this fashion, I feel like laughing; I feel sorry for the person. If the devotee addresses Him as, “Personified Compassion, Golden Companion, [kanchana chela]”, I even get angry.

Who am I angry at? I am angry at myself for succumbing to the ignorant smoke of anger. But if you cry “O, Form of Compassion,” He will answer your call. If you call him “Dear” he will come close to you, closer than the loving lady pressing against you, and answer you, “Dear,” with a deep sound, deeper than sound itself. Just like a lover removes his clothes to feel even closer to the touch of the limbs of his love (forgive me, Ms. Leela!), if you want to feel the touch of Ishwara ever closer, you must try to escape the five *koshas* [body, mind, intellect, ego, experience of bliss – mentioned in the *Upanishads*].

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They say there are fourteen worlds above the earth and fourteen below. This is the meaning of that: the fourteen worlds are the stages through which Ishwara descends to reach our grossness, that is, to assume this gross form.

One world is clearer to our simple minds than another world. Just to explain this there is the mention of the “Manifest” and the “Unmanifest” in the Bhagavad Gita. “The Unmanifest became another Unmanifest,” I joked with my friend Satyam who was reading the Gita to me who has no eyes, and made him laugh.

Just as they say that as you rise above the earth you get into a more rarefied atmosphere, the same way, as we rise above the impurities such as ignorance and sin, our minds become pure and touch Ishwara. There is no time there. That’s how the soul or mind lives in each world for thousands of years. But that time is not really time. Similarly, look at how the mind which has become heavy with darkness, ignorance and sin falls into the lower worlds (or thinks it has fallen) and struggles in pain!

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I am writing this because people ask why Chalam didn’t talk in his autobiography about Ishwara whom he went all the way to know about. There is nothing to write. There is a lot more. It must come to my mind. I must have the right mood. Anand is hurrying me saying that Mr. Hanumantha Rao is already sewing the books for binding. After all, the thing I thought I knew, I don’t know totally. I have written about what I think I know.

Since this is not a work about women, I hope you will read it without prejudice. On the other hand, this is about women. It was written in the Bhagavad that there had to be man-woman division for creation to begin.

Ishwara became a woman and got imprisoned in the heart of man. Unless that bond is broken there is no release for man or even for woman (U.G., forgive me!).

Satyam  
Inscribed in words  
the ideas of Chalam  
Who tried to give shape to the wisdom  
Transmitted by  
Souris

## **Chronology of Events in Chalam's Life**

Born 1894 in Madras.

At 16 he did an unfinished translation of Henry Wood's novel.

1910 – Married Ranganayakamma (nickname 'T' – sometimes also referred to as 'Amma').

At 16 (that would be about 1910) He joined college in Kakinada (Pithapuram Raja's College) and came under the influence of Raghupati Venkataratnam Naidu, the then principal of the college and a well-known intellectual leader of Brahma Samaj.

**Note on Brahma Samaj:** Brahma Samaj, a socio-religious movement, was founded in India in 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Under the influence of Christianity and the West, it denounced image worship, advocated a benevolent, monotheistic God, and espoused social reform aimed at eradicating divisions of caste, race, sex, and religion, including liberation of women and remarriage of widows. It avowed a life of love, truthfulness, morality, and devotion to and striving for God.

1916 – Ravi, the elder son of Chalam was born.

Mid years (1920-1950) Worked as a teacher, head master of a training school and deputy schools inspector in all the major towns and cities of Andhra.

1921 – Sauris (Shau) was born.

1926 – Transferred to Anantapur.

1930 - His first-born child, Ravi, died at the age of 14.

1936 - First Visited Ramana Maharshi.

1950- He retired in Tiruvannamalai near Ramana Maharshi's Ashram.

### **Persons Connected with Chalam:**

‘Abbatta’ - Mahalakshmi, was Chalam’s aunt, his father's sister.

Ahobila Rao, Dr. – A doctor who attended Ravi in his illness.

Akramali – brother of Pedda Sahib, a neighbor of Chalam in Rajamundry.

‘Ammanna’ - Eldest cousin of Chalam. Her real name is Dulla Venkata Ramanamma. A staunch Gandhian and well known social worker in Krishna District. Inspired many housewives to take up social work. Mata Sarada Priyananda, first lady disciple of Swami Chinmayananda, is her eldest daughter. All part of the story of Ammanna and her husband or lover, whoever.

‘Ammanni’ – Chalam’s sister whom he tried to rescue from her marriage.

“Aunt” in Chap 26 - "Pinni" (means 'aunt'. She was not really Chalam's aunt) was really Chalam's younger brother's wife. She was mad after the famous dramatist Bellari Raghava. She was even living with him for some time. Chalam's children addressed her as "*Pinni*" and Chalam followed suit. Her name was Kommuri Padmavati, wife of Kommuri Venkatramayya [Buchhi]. Their son is the famous detective writer Kommuri Sambasiva Rao.

Basavaraju - An associate of Chalam in Brahma Samaj, a subregistrar of records. Mentioned in Chapter 15.

‘Bucchi’ – One of Chalam’s younger brothers.

Chandramati - Rama Murty’s wife.

‘Che’ – Nirmala, second daughter of Chalam.

Chitra - Sauris’s adopted daughter who moved with the Chalam family to Tiruvannamalai.

‘Chitti’ – Another of Chalam’s younger brothers.

Dikshitulu, Chinta - he was a colleague and a friend who was responsible for his visiting Ramana Maharshi.

‘Dolly’ - Chitra’s daughter who also lived with the Chalam family in Tiruvannamalai.

‘Harin’ – Harindranath Chatopadhyaya. A well-known Indian writer in English and a friend of Chalam.

Kalyani - A post-graduate student in Telugu literature and admirer of Chalam; she called on Chalam once or twice. No relationship with Chalam. It was Chalam's habit to drop his admirers' names.

Kamala - Abbatta’s daughter.

Kamala - also a cousin of Chalam, daughter-in-law of Brahmananda, one of Chalam’s uncles. She was mentioned in Chapter 4.

Krishna Sastry – Devulapalli. A famous Telugu poet and friend of Chalam.

Leela - One of Chalam's lady friends. Chalam had an affair with her for some years later in his life.

Mangaram - Chalam's neighbor in Tiruvannamali (where Sri Ramanashram is located); a moneylender and father of Savitri.

Nanduri – Nanduri Subba Rao, writer of *Enki Patalu*. Classmate of Chalam in College and later a friend.

Nartaki - A lady who came once to live with the Chalam family and became a member of the family. She too moved with them to Tiruvannamalai.

'Pakapaka' – (Champaka). Chalam's third daughter. Married Vajir Rahman who subsequently died of cancer.

'Peddakkayya' – Chalam's wife's elder sister; another Ms. Ranganayakamma.

'Peddammayi' – A young lady housekeeper of Dr. Ahobila Rao who was fond of Souris and wanted to adopt her.

Pedda Sahib: Neighbor of Chalam in Rajamundry.

Prakasam - Another of Chalam's friends, also an associate in Brahma Samaj.

Raghupati Venkata Ratnam Naidu - Principal of Pithapuram College, Kakinada, where Chalam worked and also Chalam's mentor.

Rama Murty (Mokkapati was his last name) - One of Chalam's close friends and an associate in Brahma Samaj.

Ramana – Cousin of Chalam (father's brother's daughter) whom Chalam wanted to marry but couldn't.

Ratna - (also called Ratnam and Ratnamma), was the sister-in-law (wife's younger sister) of Rama Murty. She had an affair with Chalam, but also with Rama Murty and started living with the latter while his wife, Chandramati, went away to her folks.

'Sastry': Jalsutram Rukmininatha Sastry – a writer and a radio artiste in All India Radio, Madras. A frequent visitor of Chalam in Tiruvannamalai.

Savitri - Mangaram's daughter.

Souris - also called Shau, is Chalam's first daughter. She is still alive and is a mystic. She is the one who had the vision of God and through whom God was believed to be speaking.

'T' - Ranganayakamma, his wife, also referred to as 'Amma'.

'The Fly Guy' - Chalam's sister's husband.



U.G. – (U.G. Krishnamurti), the well-known spiritual teacher and a distant relative of Chalam. Chalam met him toward the end of his life.

Vasant - Second son of Chalam.

Venkata Rao - Also the name of her daughter Vimala's boyfriend.

Venkata Rao - Ms. Leela's boyfriend.

'Voyyi' - is Chalam's wife's (Ranganayakamma's) elder sister and has the same name, Dr.Ranganayakamma. Her elder half-sister, also called by the same name, had the nick name of Peddakkayya. All the three sisters had different pet names. Peddakkayya was the eldest one. Chalam used to refer his wife as 'T'- the second Ranganayakamma. The last one was the doctor. She was called 'Voyyi' because Chalam's younger brother couldn't pronounce the name 'Vodine' ('sister-in-law'), but instead called her 'Voyyi.'

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