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OF A FEW WOMEN

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In our land of Peruvannur, to the west resides KarakkalBhagavathi and to the east, Melekkattil Amma. Like in any other region, the worship of these mother goddesses was closely connected with the agricultural fields and rural life. Kanaram Shiva Temple and Peruvannur Kunnu Vishnu Temple exerted a profound influence on the mythical and cultural traditions of the village.

In our region, where the Muslim population was very small, the number of Christians was also limited. Apart from a few government employees and a few Gulf migrants, most of the people depended on local occupations for their livelihood.

While men generally married in their late twenties, women were usually married off in their early twenties. Except in a few rare cases, this was the prevailing custom. If, for any reason, anybody's marriage was delayed or did not take place at all, it became a matter of concern and anxiety for the entire village.

We, the most ordinary among ordinary people, gathered at the tea shops of Dasettan and Gopiyettan nearby, where politics and gossip were brewed and served in equal measure. Between one festival season and the next, lives quietly unfolded — births, deaths, and marriages passing by like the changing monsoon winds.

And so, from Peruvannur, some women left after marriage to distant lands, while others arrived here as brides from elsewhere. During Onam, Vishu, and temple festivals, those who had once gone away would return to Peruvannur, and the women who had married into the village would welcome them with warmth and celebration.

Like in every other village, morality and ethics were greatly valued in our village too. The lives of women who endured their husbands' blows, rage, and cruelties were considered painfully ordinary — and, more often than not, socially acceptable.

Yet, despite all this, there were many lives that strayed beyond the prescribed path. Stories of such women were never absent from our village. They surfaced now and then in stray remarks, half-whispered conversations, and careless references made at the right and wrong places alike — briefly flashing across the surface of village life before fading once more into silence.

One such story belonged to Sindhu.

Fair-skinned, soft, and round-faced, she was a beautiful woman. When she spoke, her voice carried such gentleness and innocence. It was Aravindan — whom everyone fondly called Undappan — who had brought Sindhu to Peruvannur as his bride. She was someone who treated both family and neighbours with affection, never hesitating to help whenever she could.

Sindhu first entered my memory through a scene of tears.

She was sobbing uncontrollably, aching for just one glimpse of her husband who was away in Dubai. "If only he would come and I could see him once…" she kept saying between her tears. It was the kind of sorrow that could melt any heart. Those were days before phones became

common; aerogrammes were the only lifeline across distances. Sindhu had grown weary of writing letters to Undappan. Desperate enough, she even sought the help of a somewhat famous local sorcerer. She had only one wish — to see her husband once again.

Whether it was the magic or the letters, no one knows, but Undappan eventually returned home.

Eight months after his arrival, Sindhu gave birth to Amrutha — Amrutha, who from then until now has faithfully carried Hari's unmistakable smile, Hari being Undappan's younger brother.

In many kitchens and beneath many banana groves in the village, suspicions and certainties wandered quietly from tongue to tongue. Yet Sindhu continued to live among us with the very same warmth and affection as before. Later, when she gave birth to Adhunika, though Undappan had been home for barely six months, neither Sindhu nor the villagers seemed greatly disturbed by it.

A story not very different from this was that of Raghavan, whom the village later came to call Mad Raghavan.

He had once lived an ordinary life: a government employee, a wife, and a son — a quiet household moving along the familiar rhythms of village life. Then one day, Madhavan, his younger brother who had long ago left the village to join the military, returned home. What followed shattered everything. Raghavan's wife bore Madhavan's child and gradually became, in every sense, the younger brother's wife instead.

The blow broke something deep within Raghavan. From then on, the village knew him only as *Mad Raghavan*. Perhaps because they all continued to live under the same roof, the man never truly regained his balance. Muttering to himself, the broad-shouldered figure wandered through the roads of Peruvannur till the end of his days.

Raghavan's wife, meanwhile, became a woman withdrawn from the world, keeping mostly to the house. One would never see her at weddings or festivals. Of her two sons, the elder one, Ashok, spent many years in Bombay. Restless and always drifting in and out of the village, Ashok eventually found himself cast as the villain in another story altogether.

It was Ashok who brought about a decisive turning point in the life of Ambalath Sridevi.

There was hardly anyone in the village who did not know Sridevi Edathi. A retired schoolteacher, she was also a well-known political activist in the locality. She lived with her husband, son, and daughter-in-law in a two-storied house at Mavilanthara Centre, where three roads met. Dark-complexioned, of medium height and slightly heavyset, Sridevi Edathi was always seen draped in a *settumundu-a traditional wear*. Her greying hair tied back, she carried herself with dignity, speaking in a full, resonant voice that commanded attention.

To children like us, going to school, she showed a special affection. She encouraged everyone around her and was always at the forefront during election campaigns. A gifted organiser, she stood apart from many women whose worlds ended at the kitchen door.

As I said, her house stood at the junction where the three roads met at Mavilanthara Centre.

It was on the third day after her husband had been admitted to Kamalagiri Hospital following a heart attack that the young men from the Prayaga Arts Club, gathered at the junction, caught Sridevi Edathi and Ashok together — red-handed.

The news spread through the village like fire.

The kitchens fell silent in shock. Conversations broke apart in disbelief. People stood stunned, clutching at their chests in helpless amazement.

By the second half of that very day, Sridevi Edathi had consumed poison and taken her own life.

The day before her death, she had sat for a long time on the front veranda of her house, her head bowed low. Perhaps that was the first and last time anyone had ever seen Sridevi Edathi with her head lowered.

And from then on, Ashok became, in the eyes of the village, the boy who arrived like a bomb to destroy Sridevi.

Though we villagers have never truly forgotten any of it, when people later came to inquire about Ashok during his marriage negotiations, none of us said a word.

Why reopen old wounds for no reason?

Years have passed since then. Ashok is now married, living quietly with his family somewhere within the flow of ordinary life once again.

But Meenakshi's story was nothing like theirs.

Meenakshi was the youngest in a large family of four or five brothers and a few elder sisters. She was known for her thick, jet-black hair that fell all the way to her knees. In the village, she was someone deeply invested in the affairs of every household — eager to know every story, interfere in every matter, and carry news to those who had not yet heard it.

Middle-aged and unmarried, Meenakshi remained in the ancestral home, caring for her ageing father. She owned two or three fine milch cows and, in a village forever troubled by water scarcity, one of the rare wells that never ran dry. To the families who depended on her for milk and water, Meenakshi generously supplied gossip and scandal as a bonus.

At times she would advise and moralize; if necessary, she could even unleash a fierce tongue upon anyone. People feared her sharp words enough to avoid crossing her path directly.

And then came the turning point.

Meenakshi's brother, who had been living in Madras, passed away. After his death, his wife, Leelamma, returned to the village with her two grown sons and her daughter. It was Leelamma who finally brought Meenakshi to the ground before the eyes of Peruvannur.

As the sisters-in-law sparred in words — Meenakshi confident in the verbal battles she had mastered all her life, and Leelamma seasoned by the roughness of Tamil Nadu — the unexpected happened. In the heat of their quarrel, Leelamma dragged out a past that the village had nearly forgotten.

Rumours once buried rose again into the air. That Meenakshi had once had an illicit relationship with a man who came to the house as a finance company's agent. That she had taken medicines to abort the pregnancy. That in the end, she had delivered a stillborn child.

The story flew through the village like ash carried by the wind.

Never, even in her dreams, had Meenakshi imagined that her own family would one day shout these things aloud before others.

After that, she lived more quietly, without much uproar around her. Over time, the questions faded, the opinions softened, and the village moved on.

Yet even at seventy, one thing about Meenakshi had not changed — that long, dark hair, still untouched by grey, still reaching down to her knees like a stubborn memory refusing to disappear.

Directly opposite Meenakshi's house stood the home of Janaki Amma.

Janaki Amma was the woman who had once eloped with Velayudhan, a man who already had a wife and two children. Leaving behind his first family, Velayudhan chose to live with Janaki Amma instead. From that union blossomed five daughters and a single son.

Though Velayudhan was a man of little use in earning or responsibility, he was more than capable when it came to causing pain. The family survived only through the sheer strength of

Janaki Amma's spirit. She and her daughters moved life forward by tending cattle and doing daily wage labour.

Among the five daughters, all born close in age, it was the second one, Sunitha, who first found herself chosen for marriage. Sunitha was lively, beautiful, and gentle-natured. The family perhaps believed that marrying off at least one daughter would lighten their burdens a little, and so the wedding was hastily arranged.

Amid all the worries and hardships of the household, no one truly saw Sunitha's heart.

She had silently and one-sidedly loved Anil, the village auto-rickshaw driver. It seemed her heart could never surrender itself to the marriage that had been forced upon her.

On the very next day after the wedding, Sunitha was found hanging from the beam of the house. Only because her younger sister saw her in time was she saved from death. Through the same wedding pandal that had barely been dismantled, villagers rushed carrying Sunitha to the hospital.

The groom — a man said to have slight hearing difficulties — was apparently willing to forgive and forget. But Sunitha could not bring herself to endure another trial.

And so, the marriage, which lasted only a single day, came to an end.

The failed suicide attempt left behind long-lasting health complications that shadowed the rest of Sunitha's life. Years later, as each of her siblings married and moved away, Sunitha remained confined within the dim interiors of that house, living alongside her fragile health and fading dreams.

Anil, meanwhile, had never loved Sunitha either. Before long, he became someone else's husband, someone else's father, and moved on with the ordinary flow of life.

Sunitha, who died young as a silent martyr to her own unfulfilled love, eventually became a page the village no longer wished to turn back to.

Yet, no one in the village would disagree that the most legendary love story belonged to Vinodini.

Vinodini was the only sister among four brothers — men feared in the locality, rough-handed fellows ready for anything. But even amidst such watchful brothers, love found its way to her heart.

Vinodini fell in love.

And one night, surrendering herself completely to that love, she fled the village with the man she loved.

Years passed, yet neither family accepted their union.

For the man Vinodini loved was her own father's brother's son.

Though the village had learned to tolerate many kinds of love and many kinds of scandal, this was one bond it could never forgive. To them, Vinodini remained forever the woman who had married her own cousin-brother.

And so, even though the passing of years, Vinodini continued to live at the edges of the village memory — loved perhaps by one man, but quietly cast aside by an entire world.

Among the six daughters of Divakaran from Kanda Parambu, it was the fourth one, Sreeja, whose love story became known to all of us in the village.

Sreeja worked at a small book-binding and printing establishment. As far as marriage was concerned, the circumstances of her home offered little promise. Her family consisted of an ageing father, a chronically ill mother, a brother who wandered the village without steady work, and three younger sisters still waiting to be married. It was a household where the kitchen fire survived only because the daughters laboured.

Sreeja's life, which until then had passed quietly without drawing much attention, changed when Prakashan entered it — a young man from one of the village's prominent families who had come to the same establishment to learn the trade before starting a binding business of his own. He was five or six years younger than Sreeja.

At first, neither the villagers nor even the people at the workplace paid much attention to them. But soon all our eyes turned toward the two of them, for the news spread that Sreeja was pregnant.

And if one were to ask who revealed it, the answer was simple — Sreeja herself.

After that, Prakashan stopped coming to the binding shop altogether.

Armed with nothing but her courage and determination, Sreeja walked straight into Prakashan's house. But life, unlike the cinema, rarely bends toward mercy. Prakashan's mother shut the door behind Sreeja, beat her, and drove her out of the house.

Perhaps because Sreeja understood the influence and standing of that family, and perhaps because she had finally understood what truly lay within Prakashan's heart, she did not continue the fight.

The next thing we heard was that Sreeja had undergone an abortion and was staying at the home of her elder sister, who had long ago been married away.

Years later, Sreeja returned to the village for a while. And then, through a marriage that arrived very late in her life, she quietly left the village once again.

By then, Prakashan had already established a large binding business of his own and settled comfortably into the life that awaited him.

Long before the word *feminism* ever found its way into our village conversations, Ambika — the wife of AyinikkattilGangadhran — lived as a woman who believed fiercely in her own freedom.

Both she and her husband were central government employees. Gangadharan was a man who carried arrogance like an ornament, offering opinions on every matter in the village as though nothing could happen without his judgment. Yet inside his own house, before his wife, he became soft and yielding.

Their two children spent most of their lives away in hostels. Ambika, meanwhile, lived untouched by the endless gaze of the village. She never cared much for what people said or thought. The kitchen belonged to Gangadharan; it was he who cooked and managed the household. Ambika entered the kitchen only occasionally, almost like a visitor.

Some evenings, returning from work, she would be slightly drunk. If she became too intoxicated, Gangadharan would quietly drive out to bring her home.

In Peruvannur, it was not an unusual sight to see Gangadharan gently supporting Ambika — gathering up both her and the loose folds of her sari — and leading her back through the night.

Then, one day, for several days in a row, Ambika did not return home at all.

When people began asking questions, the answer slowly surfaced: she had gone away to live with a man she loved.

We all assumed that chapter of their life had ended there.

But a week later, what we witnessed instead was Gangadharan returning with his wife beside him, saying openly that he could not live without her.

After that, for many days, the house echoed with storms — loud quarrels, wounded silences, the sounds of a marriage tearing and stitching itself back together.

Years have passed since then. Their children are now married, living elsewhere with families of their own. Yet Ambika and Gangadharan continue together much as before — unchanged, inseparable in their own strange and weather-beaten way.

Among the few women of Peruvannur, one name that can never be left unspoken is that of Sathi. She was the third daughter in her family. Raised amidst poverty and hardship, Sathi had become strong-willed from a very young age. She feared no one. In matters concerning her parents and sisters, she often became the one who made the crucial decisions. Her mother suffered from mental illness, and her father was a daily wage labourer. The lives of the three daughters existed far outside the polished boundaries of what society called beauty, grace, or propriety.

There was nothing ornamental about their lives.

It was Sathi who took the initiative in arranging the marriages of her two elder sisters. Later, carried along by circumstance and survival, she herself became the life partner of a man belonging to a Protestant Christian community. Before long, she gave birth to a son.

Life moved on without much distinction or celebration — until the day her husband was arrested in a fraud case and eventually imprisoned.

The village, too, grieved for Sathi then.

After that, she remained in her own house, caring alone for her ageing parents and her little boy, carrying life forward with whatever strength she could gather.

Then came the morning that shook Peruvannur.

From an almost abandoned public well, the body of a newborn child was recovered.

The village froze at the news.

And not long afterward, Sathi was seen walking through the village in handcuffs beside policemen. Even Amminiyamma, her neighbour, came to know only then that Sathi had been pregnant.

Sathi confessed that sometime before dawn, without anyone's help, she had given birth alone — and that she herself had ended the life of the baby.

While she spoke those words, her aged parents and her young son sat inside that small house, unable even to fully understand what had happened to their world.

Sathi sat inside the police jeep with a face emptied by exhaustion and conflict. At that moment, neither the village nor its people seemed to touch her anymore.

The child was a baby girl.

Perhaps unwilling to bring her daughter into a life where she had nothing beautiful left to offer, the mother finally chose to withdraw her from the world of Peruvannur altogether.

Thus, Sathi's baby girl became yet another silent link in the long chain of women in Peruvannur — lying there, eyes closed forever, unclaimed by anyone.