

# THE LOWLAND

## The Landscape

In the monsoon season, the marsh floods and ponds combine; in summer, the floodwater evaporates. Our story begins with the marshy stretch of land, hence the title.

## The Scenery

All low-lying areas do not automatically become lowlands. To be lowlands, they must be sufficiently rich in clay, lie at an elevation lower than their surroundings, and have access to a steady source of water like a pond, river or a lake.

The locals of *Azakiyanallur* call the lowland *Paduvappattu*.

Its persistently damp and petrified soil favors the growth of natural plants, like - *avaarai*, *manjanatti*, *pungu*, *vaakai*, *poovarasu*, *pandrivaakai*, *nocci*, *ucilai*, *erukkali*, *pinari*, *kozunchi*, *vempu*. Whatever the mix, they can be easily yanked out and replanted. The muck can subsist with any fertilizer of the farmer's choice.

## The People

The *Azakiyanallur* lowland is surrounded by ponds: *Panikkan* and *Vaanian* in the west, *Velan* in the north-west, *Kammalam* in the south-west, *Samban* in the north, and *Sanaan* in the south. To the east lies a plot of land with a string of burial grounds put up on caste basis and, to its west, is the *Pazaiyaru Lake*, a perennial source of water to the region. On its shore sits a slum of the *Sambavar* community. The village displays temples dedicated to the *Vadivamman*, *Mutharamman*, and *Lord Ganessa*. The streets have shrines dedicated to four *Sudalaimadan* and *Isakkiyappan* deities. .

The members of the *Nadar*, *Sambavar* and *Saanar* communities are prohibited from walking on the streets frequented by *Brahmins* and *Vellalars* and they are also not allowed on streets where the chariot goes procession during the village festival. Sartorial restrictions are also strictly enforced. No low-caste member can put on headwear; rather, he must tie it around his waist. Folding of the *veshti* is a taboo, as is chewing betel leaves and spitting the juice on the street. The low-caste members must avoid entering the street on the day a flag has been hoisted on the temple premises.

Yet, the men who perform chores in the *Brahmin* and *Vellaalar* houses are essentially from the *Sambavar* caste. Removal of the night soil is by the *Sakkiliyars*. A wide pathway runs around the streets and the back part of every house ends in that pathway. Access from the alleyway is provided to the wells and for manual scavenging. Stray dogs, roosters, pigs and rats forage the garbage piles.

*Paduvappattu* is locked away between the east of *Azakiyanallur* and west of the burial ground. It is ill suited for raising crops. Plowing is hard because the buffaloes must struggle in the quagmire. The hapless buffalos nudge forward jaggedly through the slush. Imagine for a moment the plight of the farmer tending that soil. If he can barely move around, what is one to say of his plough?

Only after the sowing and transplanting have been completed in other lowlands will the farmers with livestock - their only possession- think of plowing *Paduvappattu*. The same cattle will be used even though they may suffer from poor health: sores, sole abscesses, warts and inflamed skin lesions. Many suffer cuts and open wounds that are constantly poked by crows and are treated with castor oil, peanut oil and boric acid solution. The farmers boldly take these extreme maneuvers to plough *Paduvappattu* with fully aware of the risks.

### *Destiny*

Unlike the other lowlands, sowing in *Paduvappattu* is less demanding. One can plant the seeds in wider rows and the crops will rise tall and dense. This is true whether one is raising *Samba* or any other variety of wheat. Normally the yield on *Paduvappattu* is twice the harvest from other lowlands unless the rats have damaged the crops.

*Paduvappattu* is small. It includes lands belonging to most of the Brahmins and shops selling rice, utensils and other household items. The village market looks ever busy; customers walk in and out, all the time, and goods are weighed, packed in gunny bags and loaded on carts. Some landowners - fondly addressed as *Sami* - make their way to their farms holding an umbrella in the hot sun. In *Iraccakulam*, *Taazakkudi*, *Boothapandi*, you can notice some Brahmins walking behind hired hands with their bellies thrust forward. Even the experienced farmers understand working on *Paduvappattu* is a challenge.

Sankara Subbier, who lived up in the North Street, owns three-fourths of the sowed land he had inherited from his aunt. His house is on a stretch of land and runs a hundred and twenty feet long along the main road and ten feet wide - an area of two cents. He got this large house with



windows at the front and back as a dowry. The front door opens to a courtyard sunlit and breezy, and has a well. The backyard has two palm trees and four plantain trees.

Like his landlord, Paraman Samban, the hired hand, finds himself in his golden years. His buffalo's teeth too are fast deteriorating. The sowing on *Paduvappattu* will start only after September-October, when planting will have already been completed in other lowlands. He can harness the cattle early in the morning and let them free by noon. Once he bathes the buffalos in the *Pazaiyaru* Lake, his task for the day is done and he can rest. He can help himself to midday gruel and, later, some arrack or cheap liquor.

Plowing the soil in *Paduvappattu* is arduous and debilitating. You need four plows to work on much of the arable land. Paraman has been toiling for the last four days. Today the work will be finished.

Today, *Sami* stayed in the field until ten, had a bath in the lake, and was gone home for lunch. After work, Paraman has to go to the landlord and obtain the seedlings.

He was almost finished with his plowing when the buffalos, already dead-tired, refused to move any further. No use in whipping them, he knew. Now and then a hard object - perhaps a metal pot used to drink the tender coconut water or even liquor, or a human skull - would get in the way of the plough - and the cattle would struggle to advance. Then, the plough would have to be shaken cautiously and pulled out slowly. It was important to take care that its metal frame didn't hurt one's feet that were wedged in the slush.

But today even moving the plough proved difficult. When Paraman pulled up the plow, he noticed a sheet of metal shining in the hot sun. 'Could be a grain measure someone discarded because of a crack,' he thought and picked it up. Its roundness suggested a big pot and, when he noticed the artwork, it looked like a crown.

He cleansed it with the muddy water. Yes, it was a silver crown.

He remembered the villagers gossiping that last month a silver crown from the *Muttaramman Temple* on the *Chetty Street* had been stolen. Paraman was terrified. Had the thief stashed it away in some secret place and then thrown it away because he was afraid he would be caught?

He became anxious. What if he was accused of the theft? Nobody could help him if he were thrown into jail. He felt the mud around his feet loosening. If he kept standing there any longer, he might have to pay additional wages to Irulandi, the agent in the next plot of land. What should he do?

He had to think things through before taking the next step. He marked a spot in the northeast direction where he put the silver crown, hidden from view. That brought the day's task to end.

Then, as usual, he bathed the buffalos in the lake, tied them up in the shed, cleansed the ploughs, and rested on the steps before he taking out a cheroot, breaking it into two, and lighting one of the halves and tucking the other above his ear.

He had not eaten anything after ten that morning and he was hungry. He decided to go to his landlord's house where he would be offered some leftovers. That would be lunch for him and his wife Muppudati. She would prepare supper only after the street lights went on.

"Should I prepare the gruel?" asked his wife.

"No . . . I am going out. I have some information for *Sami*."

"You are getting the seedlings? . . ."

"No . . . This is something different . . ."

A ray of uneasiness ran over her face as Paraman walked out.

## **Fate**

Events have their own way of turning out, whatever the circumstances or what one expects. The reader is free to make his own judgment how this story will end. I will not disagree with the reader's conclusion or take offense at it. I concede there could be many different endings to the story because no story ever conforms to our expectations. The human mind can never be pigeonholed into a set formula.

## **Phase I**

After a while, collecting her thoughts, Muppudati asked her husband, in a tense, low voice.

"What are you going to do? . . . I am afraid the deity is testing us . . . Why don't you simply go back and leave it where you found it? Why do we need someone's wealth?"

"What if somebody notices me when I go back?" Paraman answered her. "We end up doing all dirty work - cleaning latrines and sweeping gutters . . . Why should I care if someone calls me a thief?"

"We can simply return it to *Sami*. You found it on his land. Let him do what he wants with it."

Paraman took out the crown and cleansed it in water removing its bad odor. Then he put it away safely inside his headwear.

He knocked on the landlord's door.

## **Phase II**

Muppudati approached Paraman and whispered into his ear.

“Please listen to me . . . How long can we expect to get along with these buffalos? They are older than both of us . . . Where can you get another pair of buffalos? Do you think *Sami* will help? Who’s going to loan us any money?”

Paraman stared at her.

“What this has got to anything with our situation?”

“Please go to *Kammalam* tomorrow and buy some *Navaccaaram*. We can break the crown into two or three pieces and melt it . . . We can sell it later at our convenience . . .”

“You want to cheat god?”

“What cheating? Did you ever see her? Do you know how she looks? As far as she is concerned, we and the buffalos are the same.”

“What are you saying? Won’t *Isakkiyappan* be angry with us? I know what he will do.”

“Then imagine that he is offering us this help. He’s showing a way to our poverty . . . Does the deity worry she doesn’t wear the silver crown? They have probably bought another crown for her, who knows?”

“Still . . .”

“Have no fear . . . This is the way the deity forgives sinners . . . “

Paraman let out a deep sigh, extinguished the cheroot and tucked it above his ear.

### **Phase III**

Paraman, who had let the curls of smoke from his blue cheroot drifting in the air, emerged from his reverie and spoke:

“I will hand over the crown to *Sami* tomorrow morning . . .”

“What if he keeps it to himself?”

“He won’t. Don’t you think he is god-fearing?”

“You better go now before anybody finds about it.”

*Sami* heard him patiently.

“Perema! Haven’t you heard people say that god’s wealth only brings disaster to a family? Why do we need this crown? Tomorrow, when the evening worship is over, take the crown, clean it and hide it in your headwear. Don’t tell anyone. Does your wife know? Let her . . . She won’t tell anyone . . . If somebody asks you, just tell them it is a cup to drink gruel . . .”

That night Paraman went down to the field, cleaned the crown in running water and smelled it. There was still a musky odor coming out of the crown, which glistened in dark. Paraman thought it would look even better once it was dabbed with *vibhuti*. Well, *Sami* will take care of it.



He walked along the main road on which the temple chariot went in a procession on festive occasions. He noticed that every lamp in a glass case on the pillar in front of porch of each house glowed while, inside the house, the residents relied on scattered light from hurricane lanterns. The alley surrounding the street was pitch dark. The stench from the open latrines was nauseating. In the shadows he noticed a cat with menacing eyes.

He knocked lightly on the front door. *Sami* himself came and opened it.

“Did anyone see you?”

“No *Sami* . . . “

“That’s good . . . Leave it over there . . . Here is some change, have a *beedi* . . . Say nothing to others . . . Otherwise they will pin the theft on you . . . Let your wife know . . . Leave worrying to us . . . .”

He closed the front door, locked it and turned around when he noticed his wife standing with a small vessel in her hand.

“This could be close to three rattals<sup>1</sup>”, he told her, showing the crown. “Quite heavy and good workmanship too. We can melt it and easily get a *kumba*, *cimiz*, dinner plate and a couple of tumblers . . . .”

“Won’t anyone suspect us?”

He dismissed her concern outright as foolish. “Tomorrow I will go to *Kammalam* and get some *Navaccaaram*. First, we should melt the thing down, then do what is necessary . . . .”

His wife was pleased to take the crown from his hand.

#### **Phase IV**

When *Sami* took the crown from *Paraman*, it scorched his hands. He shuddered as if he was sheltering the very goddess in his house. The crown was delivered by a *Sudra*, still a god remained god, who can dispute that? ‘This is a blessing accruing from some virtuous deed in my previous birth,’ he told himself. Whenever he tried to sleep, he imagined two eyes peering at him but found comfort with the thought that his poverty would end soon and his family would prosper in the years to come.

In the beginning, some priests were wary and questioned the decision to ornament a deity with a crown found in the mud. The last Tuesday of September-October was considered an auspicious day for the crowning. The attendant rituals included consecration of the crown, a purification bath for the deity, and offerings of sesame oil, coconut, honey, sandalwood paste, milk, curd, and tender coconut milk. At midnight *Muttaramman* once again sparkled with the

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<sup>1</sup> A rattal is 13 tolas or close to 152 grams

crown. People crowded the inside and outside of the temple. Residents from the *Vellalur Street*, *Chettiar Street* and *Aaacharimar Street* mobbed the premises.

“Can anyone lay their hands on the Goddess? She’s back just as she suddenly vanished!”

“Well, she’s a very powerful goddess . . . To think of anything evil about her will only end in destruction . . .”

People shared temple offerings and were dispersing . . . .

Sankara Subbier took off the garland from his neck and held it in his left hand, gathered the temple offerings in a banana leaf in the right and marched off with the face beaming with pride. He was relieved that Paraman hadn’t spilled the beans.

#### **Phase IV**

Paraman was thrilled about the special honor bestowed upon him. Didn’t Sami present the crown for the deity to the priests in his presence? Of late, his popularity among the *Sambavar* and *Brahmin* communities had gone up.

His wife Muppudati accompanied him to the temple to witness the crowning ceremony.

After the ceremony the devotees were returning to their homes - with *vermillion*, *kumkumam* and *vibhuti* on their foreheads, and with the temple offerings - *vadai*, *pongal* and *chundal* - carefully put away in their headwear and the folds of their *veshti* . . .

In front of the temple, beyond the sacrificial altar and further away, members of the *Sambavar* community were standing. They were the ones who had earlier brought for worship the wads of basil leaves, arcea nuts and pineapple fruits. Paraman and his wife were among them. After the ceremony, the officiating priest was to emerge from the temple and give them the temple offerings without touching them.

Paraman closed his eyes tight and looked. No, he couldn’t see anything! The deity stood far away. He noticed garlands lying at her feet, but her face was invisible. How could he see the crown when the deity’s face is hidden? Suddenly, Paraman saw a lamp near the altar flicker. He felt it was beckoning to him . . .

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