

## BEHIND EVERY SUCCESSFUL MAN .....

Sitamma had just entered the backyard to get some curry leaves when her husband Venkataramaiah asked her, “Is the lunch ready?”

“Yes, why do you ask?” she asked, a little surprised.

He would scarcely mention about lunch till noon; now the time was only ten-thirty; what’s going on?

“I am expecting a visitor around eleven-thirty,” her husband said. “By the time I am done with him it will be too late for lunch. I will have the lunch before he shows up.”

“I see. I will have it ready in ten minutes.”

Sitamma complied but inwardly she felt resentment; she recalled that on the days when she felt hungry – because she’s fasted the previous day – her husband would never stir out of his chair when she invited him for an early lunch.

“Stop harassing me,” he would scream at her. “Why don’t you go ahead and have your lunch?” Sitamma could only grumble to herself: ‘He knows pretty well that I would never have my lunch before he did. We have been married for sixty years; don’t we actually understand one another? The problem is I feel like resting for a while after my lunch, so I would feel lazy to serve him lunch afterward; and he is never accustomed to serving himself.’

Even as she mulled over her husband’s attitude she began wondering who might be coming to see her husband for a long conversation. Well, will he tell her if she asked him? He would dismiss her saying, ‘Men have to worry about so many things; why do you need to know about them?’ and keep her in the dark. But, when he needed her, Sitamma recalled with a smile, he would become relaxed and tell her calmly everything.

Her husband ate his lunch but never said anything about the impending visitor; Sitamma too didn’t want to ask.

Around eleven-thirty someone pressed the calling bell. Venkataramaiah went and opened the door. There were two visitors, not one – one of them carrying a camera on his shoulder. Sitamma watched the men while standing next to a door of the middle room.

The hot sun had made the men thirsty and they asked for drinking water. Venkataramaiah came to the kitchen and asked his wife to bring two glasses of potable water for the visitors.

Sitamma set up two glasses on a tray and went to the front hall when she heard one of the visitors – the one without camera – talking to Venkataramaiah about his role in the Indian Independence movement. The visitor was ruminating on how Venkataramaiah was honored with a prestigious award for his excellent book, ‘*Andhra Pradesh in the Fight for Indian Independence*,’ and now, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee Celebrations of the country’s freedom, he wanted to interview him

for an article in their magazine about his experiences during the freedom movement.

Now Sitamma clearly understood what brought the visitors to this house: one of them was from a local magazine and the other its staff photographer.

Her husband was excited and began regaling the visitors with the stories from his childhood when Sitamma gathered the empty glasses and tray and returned to the rear portion of the house. She was already done with all the household chores, so she eased herself on an easy chair in the middle room. She could hear clearly Venakataramaih's speaking to one of the visitors who was, now and then, asking questions and she also heard the detailed answers from her husband.

Sitamma could easily recall those days on her mental screen: two children were born within four years after the couple had set up their residence, the elder being barely two years old. She was three months pregnant with the second child when Venkataramaiah threw himself into the freedom movement.

He was now describing the visitors of those days: he had been studying in the college even as he taught his sons about the political movement; he used to address the crowds gathering at the local park and lecture them on politics; there were the inevitable police *lathi-charges* and bodily injuries; he went to jail where the conditions, horrible as they were, he was now describing in all their vividness.

Following his release from the prison, Venkataramaiah asked his father for permission to sell the son his portion of the property, but the father refused. The elder was concerned that the grandsons were still young and what a sell off now might portend for the family's future; he also suspected – not without reason - that his son might not only give up his job for the freedom fight but also lose his property as well. Sitamma agonized over her husband's predicament and volunteered to give away her gold bangles and necklace for his national cause.

She now pricked her ears hard to listen if Venkataramaiah, along with other episodes, would mention about his wife's sacrificing her jewelry for his sake; it seemed he didn't. Suddenly, Sitamma rose from her seat and walked to the front porch. The two visitors looked at her. Venkataramaiah noticed the visitors' eyes swaying away from him, so he too turned around and saw his wife standing on the porch, and sneered, "What is it you want?" The harsh tone showed his disapproval of his wife intruding into his privacy; Sitamma felt her voice choke and became speechless.

However, she composed herself and said: "I thought maybe you wanted me bring some coffee for the gentlemen," Now that she made her point her husband was in no mood to counter her. "Well, you may. Why do you need to ask me?" he said in a haughty voice. Sitamma returned to the interior of the house.

Sitamma's mother had rebuked her daughter for giving away her bangles and necklace; she also hated the idea of her son-law ill-using his wife's gold.

Then, once again, her husband begged his father to sell the property and the father acquiesced; the son's passion and involvement in the freedom movement grew even stronger landing him twice in prison. During his absence Sitamma took care of the children and lived partly with her in-laws and partly with her parents. She endured all the epithets hurled at her from the people around. She recalled how she struggled to bring up the children and educate them while feeling shame when her husband returned from prison and she missed her period.

There were days when some women too got involved in the freedom struggle; they carried the national flag and participated in processions with Durga Bhai. That's when Sitamma too was caught by the national fervor.

"I would like to join the other women in a national campaign," she told her husband.

"What happens if you get arrested? Who will take care of the children?" he asked.

"What will you do if I were to die suddenly?" she asked him containing her rising anger.

"What will I do? Well, I will marry again!" was his sarcastic reply. It sounded as if there's some germ of truth behind that statement, so she kept quiet.

In passing, she set aside her past memories, prepared coffee and went back to the visitor's hall.

The man with the camera was taking a series of photos from different angles while Venkataramaiah was still talking. "Why do they need so many photos?" Sitamma wondered. She just stood there with the tray in her hand.

"Mr. Venkataramaiah, we hear people say that behind every successful man there's a woman: can you think of one in your case?" The question came from the magazine man.

That's an odd question, Sitamma thought but she was eager to listen to her husband's answer. For a few seconds, the sudden query confused Venkataramaiah; then he composed himself and said, smiling, "There's no other woman in my life," and stared at his wife.

When Sitamma set the coffee cups on a table and was about to leave, the camera man told her, "Madam, please come back. I want to take a photo of both of you."

"No, no, why do you need me?" she asked in bewilderment and retraced two steps. "Why do we need her with us?" said Venkataramaiah as if they were discussing a trivial matter. The magazine man looked at his colleague gesturing no more photos need be taken.

Sitamma returned to her middle room and eased herself on the easy chair. Her mind was in turmoil: "Why did I hesitate when I was asked to pose for a picture?" Then she comforted herself: "No,

I did the right thing; I didn't demean myself." With her husband involved in freedom struggle it became her mission to stay home, take care of the children and run the family; what would have happened to the children if she too had participated in that national struggle? Yes, her husband was right. Still, think about it: had she dared to go to prison and taken part in the political turmoil, today she too would be honored with photos and profiles in the press. The camera man would have taken a special photo of hers. Sitamma ruefully admitted that she had indeed let an opportunity slip by.

She rose from the easy chair with a sense of resignation muttering to herself, "Well, they are celebrating the golden jubilee of the nation's independence. I don't know who are enjoying that freedom. Certainly, I don't!

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(Original title: *Ayana Keeri Venuka*)