

## YOU HAVE TO ASK FOR IT!

They were discussing very seriously which scene from the play *Kanyasulkam* would be suitable for presentation during the forthcoming centenary celebrations of Gurajada Appa Rao. All of them were members of the *Mitra Samiti*.

The topic turned to the actress who was to play the role of Madhuravani; she was rejected for being too plump for the character; the alternative too was disappointing because she was too thin. The members went on considering all their choices but couldn't decide on any one – either for want of an attractive face or her poor delivery.

Sadhana who has been, from time to time, serving the members snacks and tea, casually listened to their conversation; she wished they would also invite her into their conversation. But they seemed to have expected nothing from her - other than tea and snacks. She patiently listened to their talk but didn't openly say anything in their presence.

That night, when she was with her husband, she raised the subject of Madhuravani.

“What was the final decision?” she asked him. “Who will be performing the Madhuravani role?”

“Well, we could not settle on anyone,” Satyamurthy told her. “We have decided to dispense with that scene and selected instead the one that takes place in a toddy shop – where Madhuravani makes no appearance.”

“Good heavens, how could you think of that awful scene?” Sadhana was bewildered by his explanation. “Why should the *Samiti* members parade their bad habits in public?”

“Stop it, what do you know about that scene, anyway? Do you realize that scene reveals great sense of humor and also carries a profound truth? It has a universal message. I wonder if you have ever read the play with the care it deserves.” Satya Murthy dismissed her opinion out of hand.

Sadhana was not cowed down by his assertion.

“Couldn't you find any other interesting scenes in the play?” she asked, again. “In fact how do you expect any scene in *Kanyasulkam* to be meaningful without Girisam and Madhuravani in it?”

Satyamurthy answered her in a mocking tone. “Maybe you had stopped reading the play with the scene between Girisam and Madhuravani or seen the movie with Girisam in the main role.”

Sadhana didn't know how to counter his argument, and she didn't immediately answer him. Satyamurthy used her silence in

his favor, and declared, "That's the difference between the intellectuals and the common people!"

"I see, I was unaware there's an inseparable bond between intellectuals and toddy shops!" Sadhana blurted out, obviously mad and upset by his reference to brainy people. Myriad thoughts now crowded her mind.

She despised the very idea of presenting that appalling scene showing the toddy shop affairs; granted everybody knew the fame and recognition of the play, how could one tolerate such an outrage? Sadhana never understood why men resort to drinking. Whether they are happy or unhappy they reach for a cigarette or bottle, but why? What about the women? Don't they face problems too? How many they are facing and still carrying on with their daily obligations? Why can't the men learn from women? Then again, what are men actually getting from their smoking and drinking? They are spoiling their health and also squandering their money. The government ought to enforce total prohibition and also censor those plays and movies that explicitly depict such scenes. Nowadays it has become fashionable for men to casually light a cigarette, let the smoke out and, then fill up a glass. As a matter of fact could any of these men actually act their roles when they are sober - without a cigarette in one hand and a bottle in the other? What else can one expect them to do with bare hands? They are the intellectuals; what more can you expect from them?

She thought for a moment and asked her husband:

"Are you telling me there's no other scene in the play suitable for intellectuals?"

"Why don't you read the play and come out with a suggestion?" Satyamurthy answered and, as if he wanted to put an end to their conversation, he rolled over to the other side of the bed and wanted to sleep.

But Sadhana wouldn't let him off the hook.

"Well, I am not sure if you will have time to talk about this subject tomorrow," she said. "Please tell me the truth: you haven't found anyone for the Madhuravani role?"

"That's the truth; otherwise why won't we consider somebody suitable?"

"Well, what do you think of me? Can I do that role?"

Satyamurthy let out a shriek - as a sign of nausea. He could only mutter, "Forget it!" without even looking at her.

"Well, what's wrong if I act?" She repeated the question and Satyamurthy, touched by the majesty in her voice, now turned around and asked in a coarse voice: 'Are you crazy? What would people think of us?'"

Sadhana's eyes turned teary but she turned away from him without making her feelings public; he too rolled over and went back to sleep.

Sadhana could sleep no more. Her mind was in turmoil wrestling with too many thoughts: 'What makes her decision to take on the Madhuravani role so disgusting to her husband? Does he think this was yet another clever mistake on her part?' Before Sadhana was married she was well admired for her histrionics; what's so terrible about her doing the Madhuravani role, now? 'Men are free to act in any role they chose,' she thought. They have their own standards: they can be seen patronizing the toddy shops and getting drunk on the stage'. It is totally perfect for her husband to be the play's director while his friends – men in esteemed positions – might choose any role they liked; he wouldn't mind if another man's wife acted in Madhuravani role but he would never allow his wife – because it would soil his reputation! He finds the very idea obnoxious. Now, scholars consider Madhuravani as one of the best dramatic creations of Appa Rao; does one become a prostitute if she acts the role of a prostitute? What if a family man acts as her patron in a play? Would that be acceptable? How can one fight this injustice and double standard?' Distraught, Sadhana faced utter confusion: how could she assert her convictions and realize her objective? She vacillated late into that night and dozed off only after midnight.

The next morning, she carried out her usual chores; she prepared and served lunch to her husband and saw him off to work. Then she put aside all remaining errands, grabbed a copy of *Kanyasulkam* and immersed herself into it. She didn't stop reading

it until the servant maid showed up at five in the evening. By the time her husband returned from work she had already prepared the dinner; she served him snacks and coffee as soon as he returned home.

An hour after his arrival Satya Murthy's friends showed up to discuss the play. Sadhana served them tea and light food and then, instead of retreating to the kitchen, she drew a chair and sat a few feet away to her husband on his left. The men turned pale and, after a few moments of silence, they continued their discussion. Finally they settled on the toddy shop scene and began working on the cast list.

Then, Sadhana intruded into their conversation and spoke her piece: "Why didn't you select either the last scene from the Sixth Act or the first scene from the Fourth Act?"

Satya Murthy held his breath and averted his face away from her; he preferred not to lend support to her proposal and left it to his friends.

"Mrs. Murthy," replied Rama Raju, one among the group, "It is true the scenes you are referring to will make good choices, but our problem is we are unable to find somebody to act as Madhuravani in those scenes. That's the reason we chose a scene without her."

"Do you want me to play that role?" Sadhana asked softly, smiling. "I have no objection."

Everyone began giggling; Satya Murthy alone was tight-lipped.

“I am serious, and it is true,” Sadhana said, her voice exuding charm and passion. “I always won the first prize for my acting during the college days. Wasn’t that the main reason my husband married me?”

“Is that so? What else do we need? Mr. Murthy, why didn’t you ever bring up the talent right here at home?” said Joga Rao. He was the eldest among the members present and had recently retired after serving as a headmaster.

Satya Murthy felt awkward but smiled; he couldn’t offer any comment on the recommendation coming from an elder Samiti member.

Sadhana couldn’t help laughing to herself: ‘How easy it is to get rid of one’s fear of criticism from the society and others!’ she thought. ‘It is the thought that matters! Where’s that society? It’s right there within you!’

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(Original title: *Dhairya Vani*)