

BRAHMOPADESAM:

Receiving the sacred thread (*yajnopavita*). The ritual of initiation into the status of the ‘Twice-born’ (*dvija*) is the most important of all the Hindu rites of passage. The initiate is instructed in the recitation of *Gayatri Mantra* and the basic elements of the *samdhya* rituals, the obligatory offerings of water accompanied by *mantra* recitation that are to be performed twice or thrice daily from then on, at the junctures of *samdhya*, namely, dawn, dusk and optionally midday.

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BRAHMOPADESAM

1

Sankara Sarma wasn't a household name in Madras; even many from the middle class families mightn't have heard his name. Still, most of the prominent citizens, invariably from all walks of life – the government officials, ministers, judges, merchants, film stars and other elites familiar to ordinary citizens – easily recognized that name.

For some the name would bring to memory not his face but his latest invention *Tomato Badushah* – a mouthwatering dessert that was recently served in a state dinner at the governor's mansion.

Yes, it was called *Tomato Badushah*: it was a beautiful, bright reddish whole tomato, stuffed with almond, sugar, cumin, saffron and fried in pure ghee; only Sarma could describe its ingredients and the intricate process how it was prepared. Since its introduction it became mandatory in every social event. Even as its fame continued to spread far and

wide Sarma would introduce to his patrons yet another dessert or savory which would soon become popular. Thus he became a renowned chef among the elite circles. He charged considerably higher fees for his services; at the same time he paid high wages to the ten assistants who worked for him. Still, he worked only fewer days. That was because not only did he have fewer clients, he turned down many prospective engagements with no explanation. Why? There was only one reason: he was not just a cook, he was a connoisseur.

Sarma was an ideal Brahmin who ought to have been born in the *Vedic* days of strict orthodoxy. His scholarship and lifestyle were totally out of place in his hometown – a remote village on the banks of river *Cauvery* of the present-day Tamil Nadu, where superstition was order of the day – the bane of *Kali Yuga*.

Some seventeen years ago, after his wife's death, Sarma with his two-year old daughter Mythreyi on his shoulders and the traditional *madi sanji* in his hands, set out to tour the country. He was appalled by a world caught in ignorance, foolishness and atheism.

What he saw in people around him only exacerbated his pride and envy.

‘This is *Kali Yuga*. Irreligious sentiments and atheism are becoming more dominant. How will this end if devoted and wise Brahmins abandon morality and give up their time-honored duties and succumb to the *Kali*, like others? What if the Brahmin, who is the guardian of knowledge, ends up stupid and ignorant? No. . . Never, a Brahmin has no right to become ignorant! What are these so-called Brahmins, anyway? They are Brahmins only in name; none of them seems to possess the aura of wisdom and enlightenment!’ Sarma despised such Brahmins more than any other members of the society; he condemned them to his heart’s content; still, he was forced to live among them.

He lived in *Triplicane* – a suburb of *Chennai* – in an alley that reeked with stench; buffalos freely roamed the streets; carts and vehicles inched their way and men routinely committed public nuisance. There was a time when the residents of that neighborhood claimed a long line of distinguished ancestors but now it has been reduced to a proletarian

wing of *Rayars*, the *Madhwa* Brahmins. Presently, Sarma and his daughter are forced to preserve their orthodox living within the confines of a small, gloomy house. So be it, what is wrong with that?

Fate and circumstances often condemn people to eke out their livelihood in an oppressive, decaying atmosphere. Yet it is the human mind imbued with clarity of vision and dogged determination that erects a spiritual fence and shields its integrity and uniqueness. In fact, such a compulsion seems inevitable for a model citizen of the society he lives in. It is how those ramparts built and nourished by the individuality of the best and the brightest among the citizens go a long way in shaping the future generations. The philosophy that fosters such a growth becomes a creed and rules the community. Any philosophy that is unable to rescue humanity from decay is hardly worth preserving; on the other hand an individual who is part of the society but lives apart from it and shapes it with his lofty ideals, is wise, holy, and blessed. Such individuals and noble men have a right to feel proud about themselves — just as the society which created such individuals and

noble men in the first place.

It was such a conviction that shaped Sankara Sarma's outlook. Even as he saw himself as a 'pure, unalloyed Brahmin' well versed in scriptures and scholarship, he could act humble and stick out like a flame amidst the foulness that surrounded him.

The first and the only friend Sarma found in the city was the Gundurayar couple; it was their hard work which convinced Sarma that a Brahmin, while epitomizing intellect, may also engage in gainful employment rather than whiling away his time. And rather than spending his days in reciting scriptures and performing rituals, Sarma opted the vocation of a cook, and with pots and pans in hand, he launched his own career..

Still, he never wavered from the obligations prescribed for a Brahmin and he scrupulously followed them: he performed *sandhi* thrice a day, carried out the prescribed rituals for his ancestors and proudly donned the traditional *panchakacham* and the nine-string sacred thread; he saw himself as the true example of the orthodox Brahmin community upholding its traditional values as laid out in the

scriptures.

As far as he was concerned those who called themselves Brahmins and sported the sacred thread were Brahmins in name only and not in the real sense of the term; they had simply strayed away from the prescribed path and got lost in the darkness of *Kali Yuga* hovering over them. Thus Sarma couldn't accept even his own assistants as Brahmins; their cropped hairstyle and occasional forays into what he often called 'improper' conduct was something he never stopped criticizing. The upshot was Sarma had never tasted even the food his own associates had prepared; they were prepared, according to him, by 'unclean' hands and let 'unclean hands' enjoy them! For Sarma, these are not just trivial matters!

Sarma's friend Gundurayar – whom Sarma saw as his right hand man – lived with his wife Gangabai for over many years in the rear portion of their house. Gundurayar, a long-term hotel employee, recently left that position and joined Sarma's catering business. Gundurayar was ten years older than Sarma but with his gray hair he looked much older. Sarma wouldn't even touch the food prepared by Gundurayar; should

that ever happen he would first have a bath – a purifying ritual – and only then enter the house. Gundurayar would observe all this and simply laugh to himself, and say nothing; his attitude towards Sarma was one of fear but also high regard for Sarma’s knowledge and faith in the scriptures.

2

It was the marriage season.

“*Swami*, I know money is not important to you. I know that and the world knows it too. Still, you are not just alone. You are a big man, please forgive me, and don’t think I am giving you advice. Your daughter Mythreyi is no more a child; she must get married as soon as possible. I am fully aware that you can offer her nothing – except your love and affection. But that’s not enough for the outside world. The other day I heard my wife say with concern that there is hardly a tack or ornament on Mythreyi’s nose or ears! So, I beg you to consider the matter with all the seriousness it deserves.” Raryar spoke haltingly to impress upon Sarma to get involved in the ways of the world and Sarma opened up to him:

“*Rayar*, get this! We are living in a corrupt society and we too are affected by it. How can one tolerate that a nineteen-year old Brahmin girl has not been properly married off? *Manu* has clearly stated in our *Shastras* that a father who hasn’t found a proper groom for his daughter before she has attained puberty faces outright condemnation. Remember the operative word – a proper groom! I have been searching for a proper groom for the last eight years! What am I supposed to do? All my ancestors lived in the best tradition of Brahmin ideals; but my father veered away from that path and I took upon myself to uphold the Brahmin ethos. What happens after I am gone? I longed for an heir but my wife entrusted me with a daughter and is gone. I am squandering my years looking for a real, genuine Brahmin. I don’t care if he is someone who ekes out a living – collecting alms – but he must be someone who honors our scriptures and is faithful to our tradition, a scholar capable of ruling the world. I am still hunting for him, and haven’t found him. I would rather let my daughter remain a spinster than marry someone who has no right to call himself a Brahmin. Let me tell

you something: I am sure somewhere in this world there are authentic Brahmins and the world is better because of them. Do you understand what I am saying?” Sarma went on and on. Meanwhile, *Rayar* briefed him on new business clients and got Sarma’s approval for new hires.

The calendar for the upcoming months – March, April, June and July – was dotted with several auspicious marriage dates. Sarma’s schedule was packed full on everyone of those days in some house in some part of the city.

That’s when Gundurayar - desperately trying to get extra help to manage the crisis at hand- brought Seshadri to meet with Sarma.

One morning while Sarma was seated on the veranda Gundurayar approached him with Seshadri: “*Swami*, this is Seshadri I had mentioned to you the other day – a good boy. Till recently he was employed in a hotel; because he belonged to a union, the employer sent him away. Otherwise, he is a good worker.”

Seshadri folded both his palms together in a reverential gesture.

Sarma stared at the young man – shifting his eyes up and down. He was not really tall but because he was standing next to *Rayar*, he seemed taller than he really was. He was dark medium in complexion and had cropped hair. He wore a white shirt over a four-piece *veshti*. His forehead was bare and below his long nose one could see traces of a mustache.

Gundurayar, who now approached Sarma after spitting out the tobacco on the ground, spoke: “I knew his father for many years; a very good fellow, he passed away last year.” Sarma never bothered to look in the direction of *Rayar* and had all this time locked his eyes on Seshadri. Then he asked him, abruptly:

“You say you are a Brahmin; how come you don’t have any *vibhuti* on your forehead?”

“I don’t believe in that kind of stuff,” Seshadri replied.

“What kind of stuff? That you are a Brahmin?”

Seshadri gave an apt reply.

“No, I don’t believe I am a Brahmin only when I apply *vibhuti* to my forehead.”

“Oh, I see . . .” Sarma was playing with his beard,

raised his head and stared into the sky.

Gundurayar was feeling a little uneasy. ‘What’s this boy up to? He’s here asking for a job and why is he arguing – that too with Sarma himself?’ he wondered.

“What’s that book?” Sarma noticed a book and extended his hand toward Seshadri who, silently, handed it over to him. Sarma turned a few pages of the book and then began reading it all with interest. Seshadri and Gundurayar sat – silently – before him. Five minutes went by; then five more and Sarma was still deeply engrossed in the book. His inquiring mind seemed to be coming up with answers – as could be discerned from the signs of apathy followed by smiles on his face – in response to some of the points raised in the book.

Gundurayar, meanwhile, helped himself with a *paan*; he casually smeared the lime paste on his finger to the nearby wall, opened a small packet, took out a handful of tobacco leaves on the left hand and began crushing them while watching with great amusement Sarma’s deep interest in the book. Seshadri was in trance; he was totally mesmerized by

the curiosity and interest of a conservative Brahmin in that book; what began as awe slowly turned into deep respect.

Suddenly, Gangabai, Rayar's wife, called out for her husband from inside the kitchen and said something in *Kannada*. Gundurayar immediately popped in the tobacco into his mouth and rushed inside – but only after hinting to Seshadri with a hand sign that he would be back in a moment.

Mythreyi, Sarma's daughter, who was all this time holed up in the kitchen, now finished her chores and came out to the front foyer to see her father; having failed to spot him there she thought he might be on the veranda. So she entered an adjacent room and approached a window. Just as she leaned forward on the window which opened to Sarma's back, Seshadri, who had been patiently sitting in front of Sarma busily engrossed in the book, happened to raise his head and notice her. Her beautiful face shown bright against the hazy mist collecting on the window; she reacted as if awakened from a dream when her large eyes directly met his. She was just about to call out her father, but was suddenly overcome by shyness

and clapped her lips with a hand. Seshadri also noticed her face as well as those beautiful fingers painted with *henna*. He was still savoring her beauty when Sarma suddenly shifted his eyes away from the book, and spoke: “I agree the book does a good job in exploring the glory of India. But I notice a streak of atheism in its approach. I haven’t fully read the book, but so far that’s the impression I am getting.” The sudden sound interrupted Seshadri’s sensation of seeing Mythreyi and his face instantaneously broke into sweat.

“Yes, you may be right – the book might be expounding an atheist’s point of view,” Seshadri replied. “The author of that book belongs to the Communist Party.”

“Do you belong to that party too?” Sarma asked, smiling.

Seshadri hesitated for a few seconds before answering.

“I asked because I merely wanted to engage you in some chitchat,” Sarma told him. “Usually I never question Gundurayar’s hiring decisions. So you are surely getting this position,” Sarma explained,

laughing a little more intensely.

His gaze seemed to hurt Seshadri's eyes. He bowed his head down as if he hesitated to admit he was a Communist. Then he raised his head, bit his lip and said: "Yes, I belong to that party."

"So, you say you are a communist? But communists are atheists, aren't they?"

"Yes, I am also an atheist." Sarma heard his reply and seemed lost in some thought. Then he stroked his beard and let out a mild laugh.

Then the words popped out deep from his heart as the laughing ended. "I really admire your frank admission that you are an atheist. It's much more honest than someone masquerading as a Brahmin – while not following any of the Brahmin principles."

"Why, you don't think a Brahmin could be an atheist?"

Sarma narrowed his eye brows and let out a loud 'Aha' as if relishing the question, but he soon turned stern and serious, and pointing his index finger at Seshadri, spoke: "Though you are an atheist you seem to know things a little better than these so-called Brahmins. Listen. I can understand why you

are challenging my premise that a Brahmin can't be an atheist; you obviously have someone in mind - and here's my answer: it is not a question why a Brahmin couldn't be an atheist, it would be just *impossible* for a Brahmin to be an atheist. The atheist denies the existence of god, the traditional rites and obligations prescribed in our scriptures to his ancestors. Now, one doesn't automatically become a Brahmin because he is born to a male Brahmin and a female Brahmin. A Brahmin undergoes two births in his lifetime; like all humans he is also born as a beast and only after fulfilling the prescribed duties and obligations does he become a human being. It is only when he undergoes *Brahmopadesam*, the rite of passage, that he's invested with the sacred thread – which transforms him from one with no caste into a Brahmin. It is through *Brahmopadesam* that he is revealed the nature of *Brahman*, the Ultimate Reality. And it is what he does *afterwards* that's critical to sustain the appellation 'Brahmin' till he breathes his last; he wears the sacred thread for the rest of his life and fulfills all the prescribed duties and responsibilities as a hereditary creator, preserver and

propagator of the Brahmin ethos. The Brahmin's ultimate goal is to spread that spiritual and intellectual message across humanity. Atheism would simply undermine all these efforts . .

I don't want to leave you with an impression that I hate atheists. There have been quite a few great atheists in Hindu religion but I wouldn't call them Brahmins. You may call yourself a Brahmin; for your livelihood you sport a sacred thread and work in the Brahmin kitchens and their inner circles. But you must never try to convince me that you are a Brahmin. The entire world might accept your Brahmin credentials but my conscience will not." Sarma saluted him with folded hands.

Mythreyi, hiding behind the window, was watching Seshadri while paying full attention to her father's lecture.

"You are much older to me, so please forgive me for arguing with you," Seshadri began in a humble, halting voice. "If I express my personal opinion, will you be offended?" Sarma seemed horrified at the very question.

"Good heavens! What are you saying? Why

should you feel sorry to express your opinion? Should I ever deny someone to argue his case with intellectual honesty that would only mean I am lacking faith in my own principles. Only the weak-minded clinging to flimsy principles believe others shouldn't speak. You may feel free to speak your mind." Sarma pulled the towel tightly around his torso, folded his arms around the chest, straightened up, and got ready to listen.

Seshadri began: "I know you don't consider me a Brahmin, and I am not here to claim such a title. Still, I believe this changing world needs a new philosophy and I embrace such a one. As you have mentioned the present day Brahmins look upon the traditional rites as shackles; they perform them as a matter of routine, forced obligations. Yet, the ones willing to embrace this new ethos feel a new purpose and commitment in it to enhance their morality and intellect. Most importantly, just as you were saying, they are fully involved in propagating their spiritual and intellectual values across the humanity. Would it be wrong if I claim to belong to such a community of new Brahmins?"

“Are you suggesting the basis for this new community of Brahmins is atheism - just like theism was the basis for the old?” Sarma wanted to know. “Let me make one thing clear: whatever may be your claim to this ‘modern atheism’, you must understand it is as old as your atheism. What’s now bandied about as new culture and outlook is nothing new - it has been advocated before and fostered by our old theism. Even then only a few individuals were advocating these views and nobody bought them. That’s how the society has fully evolved. Should humanity ever accept atheism, the whole world will go down in drain. So it becomes everybody’s sacred duty to rescue this world from the scourge of atheism.” As Sarma declared with a raised voice Gundurayar emerged out of the house.

“*Swami*, what’s this? Your daughter is waiting for you – the lunch is ready! Are you still arguing with one another?”

“This is an argument that will never end,” Sarma answered, arose and went inside.

After Sarma left, Gundurayar inquired Seshadri.

“*Ambi*, what is Sarma saying? Why do you have

to unload your Communist stuff in his face?”

“No, nothing like that ever happened. He’s a great man! An intellectual giant!” Seshadri was full of praise for Sarma.

“No, no, I am not talking about that; I was wondering if you blew your job prospects.”

“He’s beyond such narrow-mindedness.”

“That’s good. Why are you still staying in that hotel? Didn’t you complain you were getting rough treatment there? Pack up all your stuff this evening and come over here! The other day *Mami* (he was referring to his wife Gangabai) was asking me: ‘He’s an orphan – both his parents are dead, why can’t he stay with us?’ Do you know something? She has no children of her own to pamper, so she wants you right here – in this house!” Sarma winked mischievously prompting Seshadri to ask, a little nervously, “You mean – in your home?”

“Why talk about ‘your home’ and ‘my home’? Remember, this is our home! Let’s go inside – *Mami* is waiting for us.” Gundurayar put his shoulders on Seshadri and led him into the house.

3

It is now more than three months since Seshadri had become part of the *Rayar* household as well an employee of Sarma's catering business.

The marriage season has now ended, so of late, there has been a slack in the demand for Sarma's catering services. Still, Seshadri enjoyed no rest. He was deeply involved in his lifelong passion: party and union activities, day and night. He was always busy reading some book or the other. At night, he slept on the veranda and his bed was across from the window in Sarma's house. Often, late into night, he could be seen reading a book in the light from the street lamp; he often made notes in a small binder, which Sarma noticed often; Mythreyi noticed it all the time.

Mythreyi's life in the city was exactly like the one she would have led if she lived in a village on the banks of river *Cauvery*; other than visiting the temple in the evenings in the company of Gangabai she hardly knew anything about the outside world. She had understood life partly through books and her intellect. Gangabai often brought her books and magazines. It was only Gangabai who shopped alone

for the household items like vegetables and groceries.

Mythreyi would get up in the morning – well before Sarma did – and with the same intensity of religiosity – make all the necessary arrangements for daily worship, including setting up water and *vibhuti* in a small, metal casket. Aware of her father’s eating habits, even before he asked if lunch was ready, she would approach him and warmly invite him for meals. It was hard to know if Mythreyi fully grasped her father’s ideals and intellectual depth; but she highly regarded his discipline and religious orthodoxy. She believed her father represented something lofty and noble in their community and she led the life of an exemplary daughter deserving of such a father. As the years went by – especially in recent months – she had come to see her father in a different light; she often heard Gangabai speak of her father in frustration: “This man is so naïve! How’s he going to survive in this world? God has bestowed upon him such a wonderful gift – a beautiful daughter – but he knows nothing about the ways of the world!” Mythreyi also noticed that those who heard her father’s unshakable opinions in his presence with fear

and respect and admired him, often ridiculed him behind his back - invariably dismissing him as someone woefully unfit for modern times. And as she noticed other girls of her age in Brahmin community, she was slowly losing faith in her own father; she was even scared to think if her own future faced ruin because of her father's strong religious convictions.

It was around this time that she happened to witness Seshadri arguing with her father; here was someone who dared to confront her father and express his opinions with utmost respect and decency; she was easily taken by the young man's demeanor. Still she was pained by Seshadri's open admission that he's an atheist and Sarma's declaration that as an atheist, he could never be a Brahmin.

As a child and adolescent Mythreyi had the fondest memories of her father; but now she saw him as a father aloof and disinterested in his obligations to a grown-up daughter. Deep inside she felt a little disappointment in him. Her mind was a world by itself, its upheavals barely visible outside. A girl's sensations and her ever-growing dreams blossom into

new flowers and crave for attention failing which they only fester inside; as they wither and die they weigh down the heart even as hundred more dreams emerge, grow and add to their numbers. Thus they get caught up in a desperate need to find an outlet – but are trapped inside and soon morph into dread and agony: “Will this agony ever end?” Mythreyi wondered – everyday - about her predicament and only those who noticed her eyes could fathom her heart. Adolescent girls are, in a sense, brought up with a sense of propriety to guard their innermost feelings; it is hard for an outsider to cut into a girl’s innate bewilderment and coyness to know what lies deep in her heart. But - call it luck or accident – the other day when Seshadri saw those eyes against a window he could easily recognize the dark etchings deep in her heart; he could easily surmise how Sarma, a stern and rigid man, would have brought up his own daughter; on a few occasions Seshadri even wondered how he might alleviate Mythreyi’s forced loneliness. Still, he was busy with his own job and politics in general; as a nationalist, his mind was devoted to analyzing the problems of the ordinary

citizens and the working class, in particular. He had hardly any time to think of the problems of an individual young woman . . .

What could he have done to help her anyway?

Still. Mythreyi seemed to feel a new sensation when she came under Seshadri's gaze or he under hers. And sometimes when both their eyes met – accidentally - in a flash of hypnotic fire, her whole body would shiver and feel the sensation of swooning and throwing herself at his feet begging for a favor.

And Seshadri understood it too, and she knew he certainly did. That's how things pretty much advanced in the last three months – and they both realized that their hearts have been inextricably caught in a net. They knew they were bound together by their dreams about one another – even as they lived far from one another and thus far haven't exchanged even a single word with one another.

One day, having failed to notice Seshadri the whole day, Mythreyi waited long into the night hoping to see him return and spread his bed on the veranda opposite her window. Disappointed, she fell asleep.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, she woke up after seeing Seshadri in a dream and sat up on the bed. As her eyes scanned the darkness beyond Sarma's room and traveled beyond her own room window, she locked them on Seshadri sitting on the veranda – busily scribbling something in a note book.

“What could he be doing, this late?” she grumbled to herself. “What is the time – two or three?” She adjusted the faint blue bedroom lamp in the room corner and brightened the surroundings. Then she got up and as she sipped some cold water from the pot, her eyes casually peered through the window. Seshadri, having heard the small movement in her room, stopped writing and with his raised head was also watching the scene through the window.

Mythreyi returned to her bed but was in no mood neither to lower the light nor go back to sleep. She lay on the bed on her stomach, opened a book, drew the lamp closer to the book below her eyes and simply stared back at the window.

“What eyes! How big are they!” Seshadri imagined those eyes fused into a single beam, filling the whole window, flying across and caressing his

whole body,

“Those lips! How beautiful they look when they move!” Seshadri let out a deep sigh.

After a while Mythreyi, who began thinking about herself and Seshadri, turned her thoughts to her father.

“Am I deceiving myself with hopeless feelings – because I haven’t paused to think if my dreams would ever come true?” She closed her eyes and lowered her head lest Seshadri should notice her. She realized the futility of such a move, toned down the light and buried her face on a pillow - giving in to sobs. Then she noticed something – throwing her into utter shock. Seshadri pulled out a cigarette from his pocket, lit it and resumed his writing. “Does he smoke – because he needs to keep awake? “ she wondered. “What’s he writing, anyway?”

The next morning . . .

Seshadri was seated on a stool in the backyard; Gangabai had just then served him coffee in a tumbler – and left it on a windowsill to cool. Mythreyi, who had just then come to the backyard on some errand, noticed Seshadri afar. She saw

Gundurayar rushing out with a pot of water in hand to attend to call of nature; he had tucked the corner of his *veshti* against his waist and had his sacred thread hooked on to his ear. While hastening past Seshadri he extended his hand toward him, and Mythreyi watched Seshadri pull out a cigarette and a matchbox from his pocket and pass them on to *Rayar*.

Seshadri, who now raised his head noticed Mythreyi's face and its swollen blood-shot eyes. "Looks like you didn't sleep well last night," he spoke to her for the first time ever. The fact that he looked straight into her eyes and spoke, quite unexpectedly, shocked Mythreyi and she blushed. She locked her eyes on Gangabai who had just then come to the backyard, and spoke: "Am I like some people – working for others, day and night, without sleep and spoiling my health? No . . . In fact, I did have a sound sleep!" Gangabai now looked both at Mythreyi and Seshadri, back and forth, and spoke with a mild laugh: "Well, he has no family, no responsibilities. Until he is tied down he would be spending all his days and nights in union activities and party meetings!" She began ranting, as usual,

with her hand gestures.

“*Mami*, does *Rayar Mama* also belong to that party?” Mythreyi asked with a wink in her eyes.

“Good heavens . . . as if that’s the only thing missing in his life!” Gangabai replied, picked up the water- filled vessel under the tap, swung it to her waist and walked back to the kitchen.

“Well, I asked only because he’s also into smoking . . .” Mythreyi let the cat out of the bag.

“Why? Do you really think smoking is a serious crime?” Seshadri asked softly, in a whispering tone.

“Is smoking mandatory for membership in your party?” Mythreyi countered him.

He laughed before he answered her. “No, neither is non-smoking a pre-condition for the party membership.”

“I noticed smoke coming out of the veranda last night; why should one be awake till two in the morning?”

“Well, last night there was a general body session in the hotel-employees meeting. I had to copy all the resolutions passed at the session, and I smoked because I didn’t want to sleep . . .”

Now Gangabai whispered to Seshadri – as if gently chiding him - knowing fully well the mutual interest between Seshadri and Mythreyi: “How do you expect her father to let you marry his daughter if you don’t act like a pure Brahmin?”

“*Mami*, please stop teasing me!” Mythreyi protested feigning anger and turned around. Then she heard Seshadri speak out: “*Mami*, what are you saying? Her father would be surely marrying her off only to someone – who is vigilant and has religious convictions like himself!” As she turned around, Seshadri noticed Mythreyi’s eyes turn teary.

Horrified, he tried to pacify her, and called out, “Mythreyi!” his lips hardly making any sound. She simply fled the scene.

“I know what you mean! Her father’s good for nothing! It is her poor, unfortunate mother who had a premature death and left this girl in his hands, and one can see what a great job the father is doing in taking care of her! One can easily imagine the consequences should she ever get married to someone like himself!” Gangabai’s words, uttered in a tone of frustration as well as irritation, reached Mythreyi’s

ears as she entered her own room.

Tears flowed as if the floodgates of her heart were now wide open.

4

One day Sarma was at a wealthy householder in *Mylapore* – where he and his assistants were hired to provide catering services for a wedding. By the time they were done with their duties and Sarma finished paying the men their wages, the time was approaching for the evening *sandhi*; so Sarma went to the *Kapaleeswar* temple tank, had a dip, performed *sandhi* and entered the temple premises.

Once he had the *darshan* of the presiding deity, he walked to the temple court and rested for a while, meditating.

Suddenly, he heard a heavenly, human voice – the recital of *Thevaram* echoing through the temple corridor and floating into his ears. He felt overwhelmed by its intensity and delivery, and opened his eyes.

Walking in the direction of the voice along the arcade surrounding the temple and taking a right turn

he finally arrived at a spot where a young man of about twenty with a tuft, his face aglow in splendor, the forehead smeared with sacred ash, eyes closed and both arms across his bosom, was engaged in prayer. Sarma approached the young man, sat opposite to him and closed his eyes.

As the young man continued singing – as he recited each and every word with the right accent and pitch - Sarma, his eyes closed, could see etched before them the images of the gods, one after another, as the young devotee sang of their praise and adoration.

Sarma forgot himself, his surroundings and even the prime source of his divine inspiration; all he could do was to savor the sound of that music – which seemed to submerge him deeper into the world of worship.

The young man, when he opened his eyes, saw Sarma in deep meditation. He arose, prostrated himself before Sarma, saying, ‘*Swami*, please bless me.’ Sarma opened his eyes, told the young man: “I always knew there are Brahmins who scrupulously follow their tradition; it is in that spirit I am offering

you my blessings. Please rise!” And as the young man rose from the floor Sarma was a little shocked to notice that the young man wore no sacred thread.

“You have to forgive me, I am not a Brahmin. I am the son of Chokkainga *Othuvar*, who until a few years ago ran a music school in *Mada* Street to teach *Thevaram*. My name is Sadanandan,” the young man introduced himself.

“Say Sadananda *Othuvar*,” Sarma corrected him – confessing to his presumption.

“What is your profession?”

“Profession? I sing the glory of *Shaivam* and let others do the same. I very much wanted to run the music school after my father, but couldn’t; students were not forthcoming; neither did the patrons, who originally helped the school grow, want to support my efforts. My father often told me our first duty in life must be to help Tamil and *Shaivam* flourish in the world. Well, should fate ever condemn me to poverty and starvation because I keep singing the glory of *Shiva* and Tamil, I would accept it as divine blessing.” The young *othuvar* spoke perfect grammar and his words made Sarma uneasy. “Ah, these words

aren't to be uttered by a Brahmin. Why, why should he starve himself to death?" he asked himself.

The young man spoke while kneading the *rudraksha* beads in a red string hanging from his neck: "When it comes to my food habits I strictly follow my father's regimen; so I am not flexible enough to satisfy my hunger with whatever food that's available. I cook my own food with what I get or manage with the temple *prasadam*."

"Well, today you are going to share your dinner with me – at my home. I am so happy just to have met you. Why don't you join me?" Sadanandan accepted Sarma's warm invitation and accompanied him.

As they came out of the temple premises, Sarma noticed Gundurayar and Seshadri standing in front of a *pawn* shop opposite to the temple; shock and anger came over Sarma as he noticed both men smoking and chatting.

He accepted, albeit with some irritation, that Seshadri was an atheist, but thought, "Oh, This *Rayar* too?" Then he conceded that Gundurayar was after all someone easily confused and he wouldn't be able to

know the right from wrong.

Along the way Sarma spoke with Sadanandan the glory of Brahmins, their tradition and how, of late, their followers have fallen into irreverence and ignominy.

As soon as they reached home, Sarma asked Sadanandan to wash his feet and hands in the inner yard of the house. Then he spoke with his daughter: "I have a guest who is not a Brahmin; still, I am struck by his piety and devotion. While I was walking home with him I saw our Seshadri and *Rayar* - both born to Brahmin parents - puffing smoke and chatting with one another! Shame! Shame!" As Sarma was smiting his forehead while speaking, Mythreyi's face darkened.

Once Sadanandan was done with washing, Sarma seated him in the front foyer - instead of the kitchen - and asked his daughter to serve him dinner.

"What about you? Aren't you eating?" inquired Sadanandan.

"I don't eat much at night - just fruits and milk," Sarma answered. He sat on a stool in a corner a few feet away and watched the young man with warmth

and affection.

“*Othumar*, please get married soon; only then can you lead a virtuous life,” Sarma said, smiling. “You are now a good *brahmachari*; only a good *brahmachari* can become a good *grihastha*. Our *Shastras* describe a *brahmachari* not only as someone who’s not married; he’s someone who evokes *Brahman* and fulfills the obligations to his ancestors. Otherwise, can’t you and I go to some hotel or restaurant to eat? I can’t help laughing when people praise my cooking! Cooking is such a divine enterprise! When my daughter starts preparing rice at home, the first thing she does is to begin her task with utmost reverence; that’s the reason why her food nourishes me! Everything else - the food prepared by others – is just horrible! Get this, I am including the food I myself prepare out there! What do I actually do? I toil like an industrial worker in a steel mill or a cook sweating in a smithy - with one hand constantly wiping off the sweat. I feel terrible! I feel totally out of place! I prefer tasting my daughter’s preparations at home: to me, it is so divine!” As he went on and on praising his daughter, she cut him off with her own

terse comment: “Please stop it! Why do you keep talking without letting our guest say anything? Looks like you are forcing him not to say anything bad about my preparations! If only you had told me a little earlier that we will have a guest, I would have actually prepared something special for him.”

“How does it matter, my dear child?” Sarma comforted her. “A guest normally partakes what we eat at home. Now, *Othuvar*, tell me: is food really that bad? My daughter has just issued a long whimper!” Sadanandan had only a brief comment.

“*Swami*, the food is simple and heavenly!”

5

It has been fifteen years since Sankara Sarma had befriended Gundurayar after his arrival in the city; now he was very happy to have a new friend - someone much younger and from a different caste. Within a few days of their meeting both men were able to establish a proper and right understanding with one another.

Whenever Sadanandan remembered Sarma he bowed down his head in reverence; he saw him not just as an ordinary Brahmin but a great soul fully

committed to upholding his religious convictions. He considered Sarma his mentor. Both men often met, it became a common practice; whenever time permitted, either Sadanandan would visit Sarma or Sarma would call on the young man. Sadanandan was well versed only in Tamil hymns; he had absolutely no knowledge in Sanskrit. Sarma was proficient in both and he was an authority on Sanskrit texts. He often taught Sadanandan the Sanskrit *slokas* and the stories from *Upanishads*. Sarma always acted like a friend imparting his knowledge to the young man - but Sadanandan always saw himself as a disciple learning at the feet of a master..

Since their first meeting Sarma invited Sadanandan to his house many a time; this gave him peace of mind as well as a lot of satisfaction.

Seshadri had been out of town for a week. He informed Sarma he wanted to attend some conference and had personally sought Sarma's permission to stay away from work. Still Gangabai didn't like the idea of Seshadri spending a lot of his time on matters of public concern. For some reason she strongly believed it was her duty to make him settle down to a

life of a responsible householder.

So, that morning, as soon as Seshadri returned home, Gangabai accosted him and started advising him. When he was in the backyard sitting on a stool and reading the newspaper, she served him coffee, let it cool, and spoke her piece:

“*Ambi*, listen to me! You must be lucky to get a girl like Mythreyi! She’s such a wonderful girl! If you feel shy and reluctant to talk about this alliance, I can certainly speak with Sarma and settle the matter. I don’t know if you have any such thoughts or not. You are always busy with this committee or that meeting and traveling frequently and that’s why you don’t have any such thoughts. As years go by, you are certainly going to regret all of this! Why do you have to spoil your health like this?” She accused Seshadri of inattention and negligence about his personal life.

‘She’s hardly able to know my mind,’ Seshadri thought of Gangabai. ‘How could she ever know what Mythreyi is actually thinking?’ Seshadri now told her: “*Mami*, I agree with you. Is it enough if I give my consent? I wonder what Mythreyi’s feelings are.”

“You are so naïve,” Gangabai replied, laughing. “Would you believe only if I offered her mind on a platter? Forget it! Do you realize how much she missed you when you were gone last week? Whenever she visited me she was always talking about you - how much you argued with her father, spent your time at night reading and writing, and so on. I have certainly understood her mind, but can hardly know yours! Otherwise, I would have taken up this matter directly with her father – even before you returned home.”

Seshadri was thrilled to learn how Mythreyi openly expressed to Gangabai her love for him. He asked Gangabai:

“*Mami*, I understand what you are saying. You may talk to Sarma about this alliance. Still, I want to make one thing clear to you: once I have made up my mind, I will never give up till I achieved my goal. Even if her father is against this alliance, stands up on roof top and proclaims “No Way!” this marriage will certainly take place. I expect you won’t let me down.”

“Well said, I too thought about it. This crazy

Brahmin is ruining his daughter's future; I think once we start our plans he would, finally, come around. As far as we are concerned, we must strictly follow our tradition so that no one would accuse us of doing anything out of the way. Now, do you have your horoscope?"

"What horoscope? I have nothing of that kind."

"Don't say such a thing. We should never let her father cite it as an excuse. Look, jot down your date and time of birth and give it to me. I will have our next door *Sastri Mama* cast your horoscope and check if it matches against Mythreyi's." Despite himself, Seshadri finally acceded to her demand.

That afternoon Gangabai visited Sarma when he was in the front room researching some philosophical texts. "I am here to discuss an important matter with you," she informed him and sat near the door step.

Unlike her husband Gangabai was neither scared of Sarma nor awed by his intellect or erudition. Sarma was much younger to her and from the good old days she was accustomed to address him in first person singular.

“Well, well, Gangabai, what’s going on? How come you simply deserted all the womenfolk in the neighborhood and come down this way? I have heard your friends say that once you began a topic it would soon turn into a subject for litigation! I hope we are not getting into that kind of subject! Are we?” he said closing the book in hand.

“I am here to discuss an important matter with you; only you can make it a reality. I had asked the next door *Sastri Mama* to study your daughter’s horoscope with Seshadri’s. He tells me their union is ordained by *Brahma*. Do I need to tell you anything about the boy? With this marriage you too will be freed of a burden and can relax without any more worries! Your daughter wouldn’t be leaving you, she will be right here with you at your old age.” Gangabai broke the news with no dillydallying or hesitation and went on and on without ever noticing the rage boiling on Sarma’s face; he exploded and raved:

“Shut up! Stop this nonsense! Which Sastri are you referring to? A genuine Sastri is the one who studies planets in the sky, not this man who reads an

almanac and lectures to the illiterates! So you trust him about this alliance and want to talk to me? Now, let me ask you something: why did you take upon yourself the trouble to find a groom for Mythreyi?" Sarma began speaking in angry mood but soon toned down.

"Why? What's wrong with that boy? He comes from a decent family and with proper e credentials - you will not find anything wrong with him! You are acting stubborn and ruining your daughter's life! Even the gods you pray would never condone your cruelty to her! I am aware this is your personal matter, still because I got to know Mythreyi ever since you brought her here as a two- year old mother-less child and seen her grow, I ventured to meet with you over this - knowing fully well that you will resent my interference and yell at my face." Gangabai's eyes turned teary.

"Please . . . Please forgive me! I have no objection to give my daughter to a good Brahmin. But this boy himself declares that he's no Brahmin! You were talking about caste and creed, so how can I give my daughter to an atheist – it's a treason against my

caste and I would be betraying my daughter. This marriage can never take place! Let's not talk about it anymore!" Sarma concluded, decisively.

"Well, I just wanted to get this out of my chest," Gangabai told him and moved away but not before with a warning: "I was only concerned that sometime in the future you mustn't be blamed - lest something should happen to your daughter."

"Remember Mythreyi is born in a decent, Brahmin family; she's not going to elope with someone; have no fear!" Sarma said sternly and returned to his book.

"That's yet to be seen," Gangabai mumbled to herself and briskly walked out of the house.

6

Seshadri, who came to know of Gangabai's conversation with Sarma, grew concerned over Mythreyi's reaction to her father's decision. He discussed the matter with his friends who were even more radical than he was and suggested that he should get on with the idea of marrying Mythreyi as a way to 'teach a lesson' to the orthodox, recalcitrant, Sarma. They reminded him that he

would succeed in his plans only if Mythreyi was strong-willed enough to go through with it.

Seshadri pondered further course of action. Should he win Mythreyi's consent - he told himself - he could care less for Sarma or even the outside world and go ahead with his plans. He even started imagining how Mythreyi - once she was married to him - would be an ideal partner for his future life and ideals. So, one day, when Sarma wasn't home, he entered her house to probe her mind.

Mythreyi was in a corner in front of a brass lamp with her head bowed, praying for a spark to illuminate her dark and gloomy spirit. As she raised her head she saw Seshadri standing before her - as if a ready answer to her prayers. Her heart and spirits suddenly aroused, she approached him, and he held her hands. His words never reached her ears; she was savoring his very touch and all her pain seemed momentarily gone. Her whole body shook; in that very sensation she felt like fainting and Mythreyi withered.

At around the same time, Sarma was returning home with Sadanandan. After seating the *othuvar* on

the veranda, Sarma entered the house. Then he closed his eyes - as if blinded by a scene unfolding before him. He felt his heart crushed by Mythreyi's words addressed to Seshadri:

“Hereafter, you alone are my savior. I am ready to go with you right now. I can't tolerate my father's cruelty. Enough is enough,” she said, sobbing.

Sarma cupped both his ears with hands and rushed back to the veranda.

“Mythreyi, don't feel bad . . . I will talk to Gangabai *Mami* and make all the arrangements. Next Sunday, we can get married in a civilian ceremony.”

“No, . . . In a temple . . .” She was struggling for words.

“Sure, we can do that too - as you please . . . Anyway, I am going to discuss this marriage with your father before making all the arrangements. Maybe he will change his mind at the last hour, who knows?” Mythreyi's heart seemed to weigh down with even more pain as she recalled his memory.

“Father, father . . .” she went on sobbing like a child as she ran into the kitchen - seeking refuge in loneliness.

Seshadri was moved by her plight; his mind was made up. When he came to the veranda he was shocked to see Sarma sitting there. He stood there, watching silently for a while, and then returned to the backyard.

“Swami, what’s wrong, you look different?” Sadanandan inquired Sarma.

“I am just fine,” Sarma replied. “I am getting on my years and feel as if my head is reeling. Come on, let’s go in.” As Sarma entered the house followed by Sadanandan, Mythreyi emerged from the kitchen after wiping tears off her face.

After noticing her father has been silent for a long time, Mythreyi approached Sarma and inquired in a low voice: “Shall I make preparations to serve dinner to *Othuvar* also?”

Sarma raised his head, looked at the ceiling, and spoke: “Neither the *othuvar* nor I – who share religious convictions - can partake in food prepared by you any longer. So you may go back to the kitchen and attend to your needs,” he declared calmly, yet in a shaky, heart-wrenching voice. Then he got up and took some bananas from a basket and a

small pot of milk.

“*Othuvar*, why don’t you go and wash your feet? Today you too can fast!” Sarma asked the young man in a voice that betrayed no emotion. Then he noticed *Rayar* walk by and called out for him.

“*Rayar*, after a while come to the beach this evening with that atheist boy of yours; I have to settle a few important things with him.” Sarma sounded a little authoritarian.

“Sure, I will,” answered Gundurayar and ran out - his whole body shaking with excitement over the upcoming trip to the beach.

Mythreyi recalled her father’s words: “When my daughter starts preparing rice in a pot, the first thing she does is to begin her task with utmost reverence, and that’s the reason why her food nourishes me! I would say everything else - the food prepared anybody else – is just horrible!” Suddenly, she was scared to think if she was becoming selfish and committing a sin against her own father. Distressed and confused she went on crying in the kitchen and her sobs, now and then, reached Sarma’s ears but he paid no attention.

After nine at night Sarma escorted Sadanandan to his home in *Mylapore* and proceeded to *Marina Beach*. Seshadri, who was seated on a bench with *Rayar*, stood up and greeted him. Sarma, who has been silently watching the sky, suddenly exploded like a thunder and started addressing Seshadri:

“This matter concerns my daughter. Still, I didn’t want her to join a discussion among males. That’s the reason I insisted you come to the beach.” He began so abruptly that *Rayar* seemed totally confused.

“What are you saying? I don’t understand!” His naiveté made Sarma angrier.

“How can you understand? And you call yourself a man? Go and ask your wife.” Sarma’s ire hushed *Rayar* into silence.

After some silence, Sarma, again, addressed Seshadri:

“I always thought you were a gentleman - even if you are an atheist. You know about me, you also know the kind of person who deserves my daughter to be his wife. How can you justify your action - in manipulating her mind and snatching her furtively

from me?”

Seshadri hesitated. He rubbed his nose and chin and then slowly began - trying to settle the matter between them amicably.

“You have misunderstood me; it was never my intention to do anything behind your back. I know you totally disapprove of my action. Mythreyi and I want to get married and we are going through this with the sanction of law granted to us as adults. So, in the company of Gangabai and friends, we are getting married next Sunday in *Tiruneermalai*. As I was coming over to inform you of this *Rayar* Mama told me you wanted to meet with me, in person.”

“How dare he!” Sarma grew furious, but then realized it was his own daughter’s encouragement that was behind Seshadri’s boldness, and he became quiet. He was close to breaking down with tears but quickly comforted himself: “Why should I cry? What’s my loss, anyway?” He wiped his forehead with a towel, cleared his throat, and spoke:

“Yes, what’s my loss?” he grumbled. “I enjoyed her meals - she served me food with warmth and affection; still, I am sorry she lost her mind . . .”

“You should never think I have stolen your daughter from you; she will, always, remain your daughter.”

“No, never . . . Never.” Sarma shook his head in dismay. “She’s no longer my daughter . . . I raised her so fondly . . .” He turned teary when he recalled carrying her on his shoulders and traveling all over the country. He clenched his teeth saying, “Sinner . . . Sinner . . .”

“We never intended to commit any sin whatsoever,” said Seshadri. “Please relax your stubbornness and bless our union. It is not right for you to get angry at people who don’t accept your principles - imposed against their will.”

“My God! I can’t help grieving that my daughter, born in an orthodox Brahmin family, has violated the norms of her caste and creed!” Sarma tried to wipe the tears off his face with a towel.

They remained silent for a long time. Seshadri was feeling uneasy watching Sarma’s predicament. Still, he understood that Sarma was denying him the right to call himself a Brahmin, and he didn’t want to let go unmentioned Sarma’s intransigence - which

was essentially ruining his daughter's future.

“From whatever angle you may look at this issue, we are doing the right thing,” Seshadri told Sarma. “You have yourself said several times that it was your *Manu* who has declared: “ If a man fails to find a groom for his daughter within three years of her attaining puberty, she has the right to find her own suitor.” Hearing this, Sarma was now in total shock: he could never deny the truth of what he just heard; Seshadri had silenced him with a commandment from a text Sarma always revered and respected, so Sarma must be held responsible for Seshadri's charge against him. There's no way getting around it.

Sarma steadied himself, and spoke:

“Everything happens as ordained by fate. You have revealed to me a truth as well as the sin I had committed in the past but had forgotten since. Mythreyi did the right thing and I have no right to act against her wish. Still, *Manu* didn't say I must accept her decision. By her own action she has given up her right to be my daughter. Let's leave it there! So you have my blessings for this alliance - a kind of blessing for an anonymous couple.” Sarma felt his

voice choke because he couldn't easily let go his fondest memories of Mythreyi.

“We would very much like you to grace the function . . . ” Seshadri began, haltingly.

“Where?”.

“At *Tiruneermalai* . . . ”

“No, that won't happen. Well, why do you care, anyway? You don't really believe in any of those rituals, do you? Why don't you simply elope with her?” Sarma teased him.

“But she does.” Seshadri gave a curt reply and moved away.

7

It was a Sunday morning and Sarma was seated in the front room of his house, all alone. His mind was quiet and at peace.

Earlier, that morning witnessed a heart-wrenching scene. Despite Gangabai's support and Seshadri's encouraging words Mythreyi could hardly bring herself to part company with her father, who stood in the front room barely speaking a word to her; she looked at him with nervous, tearful eyes, fell on his

feet and then walked past him.

Gundurayar refused to accompany his wife and others to the wedding and stayed home with Sarma.

Gundurayar looked a picture of pity; he was even scared to look at Sarma's face and resting on the veranda. Sarma noticed his back through the window and called him out.

"*Rayar*, you didn't go to the wedding?" he asked. *Rayar* wiped both eyes swelling with tears and shook his head; his lips quivered with a faint, whisper: "No, I didn't."

Sarma was saddened to see *Rayar* grieving. "Why don't you come in?" He invited *Rayar* into his room. *Rayar* was desperately longing for such an inquiry and invitation; he managed to contain his mounting grief and walked into the room - like a child disciplined by a stern mother - returning to her warm hands.

"*Swami*, I am unaware of all this! It's all the work of Gangabai! What could I do when she's so stubborn? I admit I am responsible for all this mess; after all it was I who brought Seshadri to this household! Please forgive me. I am not at all happy that this is

happening against your wish. I never realized things would turn out this way.” He went on and on, amidst sobs.

”Forget it!” Sarma consoled him. “What is there to worry about? We are talking about a woman; sooner or later, she would be leaving this household, any way, to live with another man. And he’s not a bad fellow either! If I had a son and if he ruined his life in the company of atheists, I would have certainly felt terrible about it! We are now talking about a daughter - let it go! A woman is like a plot of land; the *Shastras* tell us the quality of a crop depends only on the seed that’s planted on the land. You know something? At the same time this marriage is to take place - at the same auspicious hour - I will be performing another divine ceremony, right here in this house! I am going to make Sadanandan *Othuvar* a Brahmin!” Sarma remained calm as he spoke these words. Then he took out a bag from a bench nearby, pulled out of it the items for an upcoming ritual: silver and golden sacred threads and other paraphernalia to perform a *homam*.

“*Swami*, what’s this? I have often heard you

speaking of the bane of *Kali Yuga*. Are you now caught in its grip? What is this crazy business - making an *othuvar* a Brahmin?" *Rayar* let out a cry.

"Shh . . . Stop yelling! I have come to this decision only after thoroughly examining our Hindu tradition and religious texts. When I informed *Sadananda Othuvar* about my decision, he too asked me the same question. I may have to tell the outside world what I told the *Othuvar*. Listen: this is a noble task I have now undertaken; it will revitalize the Brahmin ethos. The world is yet to realize that one can not claim to be a Brahmin just because he's born into that caste.

What does that mean? It means that if one were to follow the proper duties and responsibilities prescribed in our *Shastras*, then his birth would never be an obstacle to his salvation! This is not something I am saying. Do you know the sage *Viswamitra* who was hailed by sage *Vashishta* as *Brahma Rishi* wasn't originally a Brahmin? Even the sage *Kanwa* wasn't born a Brahmin! They rigorously followed the scriptures and the Brahmin traditions and were then initiated into the Brahmin creed.

Unfortunately, we have forgotten and hidden all this in *Kali Yuga*. So my efforts to make Sadanandan a Brahmin are noble and right. You should have no concern!” Just as Sarma concluded, Sadanandan was entering the room after a bath.

Sarma instructed the young man to don silk clothes and then set up a fire and conducted the ceremony with the *othuvar* standing in front of the consecrated fire and uttering the *mantras*. *Rayar* watched the proceedings with awe - as he stood a little farther away.

Sadanandan repeated the *mantras* recited by Sarma and stoked the flames of the *homam*.

Then Sarma invested Sadanandan with the gold and silver sacred threads in three strings and shrouding the young man under a canopy of a silk shawl, he whispered *Gayatri Mantra* into his ears. Thus did Sadanandan undergo *Brahmopadesam*.

One could see in Sarma’s eyes the fulfillment of his life-long ideal and a means to foster its growth. His eyes shone brightly with pride and turned teary with joy.

“I was saddened to think my family tradition

would end after I breathed my last. No, this is a creed that will never perish; this is the way it has always been preserved. Realizing this, I have found redemption!” He went on prattling in a joyful mood.

When Sadanandan prostrated before him and arose, Sarma warmly embraced the young man and said:

“You came to my house as a guest; now this house belongs to both of us. Now that my daughter is gone, I was wondering if I should myself prepare meals. Now you are a Brahmin, so you may prepare meals and I will happily enjoy them. Of course, I am fully aware that the world outside wouldn’t accept our doctrine; that’s fine with me because I too don’t accept their doctrine.” He put his hands on Sadanandan and stared at the world with a touch of brashness.

That’s when Gundurayar asked Sarma a question – revealing his usual naiveté.

“If Othuvar could become a Brahmin, why not let him marry Mythreyi?”

“*Rayar*, you call yourself a Brahmin? Then, how can you utter such nonsense? Don’t you know only a

father can perform Brahmopadesam? Sadanandan is now my son!” Sarma answered proudly - while trying to overcome the deprivation of his own daughter.
