

*Vindhiya*

**RAJESWARI**  
A Novel



Translated by: Andy Sundaresan

# **RAJESWARI**

(Tamil Novel by *Vindhiya*)

Translated by  
**Andy Sundaresan**

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**OTHER TRANSLATED WORKS BY  
ANDY SUNDARESAN  
FROM  
KURINJI PUBLICATIONS**

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Trial by Fire (2000)\*

Till Death do us Part (2005)

Made in Heaven (2006)

Cupid's Alarms (2007)

Krishna and Gandhari (2008)\*\*

*Ganga Tapassu* (2009) in Telugu

Jayakanthan - Three Tamil Classics (2010)

Autumn Reveries (2013)\*\*\*

\* Published by *Cintanai Vattam*, New Jersey

\*\* Plays and poems by Prof. K.N. Sundaresan

\*\*\* Published by the *Sahitya Akadimi*, New Delhi

**RAJESWARI**

English Translation of *Vindhiya's* Tamil Novel,

**SUTHANTHIRAPPOR**

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The book's story and the characters are fictitious. The setting is India in the early Forties and certain national leaders, men, women and political events are mentioned. But the characters involved in them are imaginary.

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DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF  
**SRI K. THANDAVA KRISHNAYYA**  
(1900-1970)



Photo:  
Courtesy:  
Mr. K.V. Sesha Rao  
Vijayanagaram,  
Andhra Pradesh, India



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## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Between 1947 and 1960, our sister India Devi wrote and published several Tamil short stories in popular Tamil weeklies (*Kalki*, *Ananda Vikatan*, *Sudesamitran*) and monthlies (*Kalaimagal*, *Kaveri*) under the pen name *Vindhiya*. I translated some of them into English and published an anthology in 2007, titled *Cupid's Alarms*. The stories were mostly based on author's life experience and we, her siblings, could identify with the themes as well as the events and characters depicted in them.

India Devi wrote *Rajeswari* (Tamil title is *Suthanthirappor*) in the late Forties and she handed in draft pages to brother Nannu, for typing. What finally remained for posterity were some 200 plus pages of a typed manuscript. Nannu thinks the final draft might have run into many more pages. India Devi, at some point, informed Nannu that she finished the novel. But we do know we had lost a portion of the novel to theft. Nannu is not sure if he had typed the entire manuscript.

The MS was lying around in the Cuttack home where India Devi and her husband Prof. V. Subrahmanyam lived for more than half a century. In 1997, sister Selvi and I were in India to attend India Devi's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations. Selvi stayed longer in Cuttack, and it was then that my brother-in-law handed the MS to Selvi with a suggestion that it be published. He mentioned that the novel had been submitted to the *Annual Kalaimagal Narayaswamy Iyer Competition* but didn't win the prize.

Sometime in late 2009, following the publication of *Cupid's Alarms*, we brought out a collection of our father's poems and plays in an anthology titled *Krishna and Gandhari*. As my next

project Selvi mooted the idea that I translate India Devi's only novel into English.

Frankly, I had not seriously thought about translating *Suthanthirappor* for what seemed to be obvious reasons: it is incomplete, it had been written a long time ago. I put away the idea and did nothing until I was done with my other translation projects. I went back to *Suthanthirappor* in 2010.

Reading a novel written more than sixty years ago stirs your nostalgia and you, slowly, get a feel for the novel's period and setting. Surprisingly, I found a closure that, at first, didn't sit well with me. It took me more than a couple of weeks to realize that the protagonist Rajeswari's decision at the end was indeed the right one and couldn't have been different.

Most of the novel takes place in the nineteen forties when Rajeswari spends most of her time obediently deferring to her husband and his uncompromising opinions. She is caught on the margins of changing cultures and torn between freedom and domesticity, independence and the need to belong.

*Rajeswari* is the story of one happy family and the odd corners and ideas of its characters. It is apolitical. The story takes place during the Indian pre-independence days when middle class families, like other sections of the Indian society, were imbued with Gandhian ideals. It would appear that the author had created the protagonist Rajeswari as her *alter ego* while fictionalizing the events and people that crossed into her life. Once again, the novel is distinguished by its emphasis on ordinary, every-day life, a pervasive theme in all India Devi's fiction.

The conventional wisdom has been that a happy family makes a poor novel. The family is a messy tangle of relationships, the argument goes; so the more the characters are



conflicted, the more interesting the story would be. But this view fails to take into account that the conflicts need not be characterized by good versus evil. Disagreements can and do arise among good people.

I enjoyed translating the novel by revisiting some of the events from childhood and formative years. I was reminded I benefited from living in a town dominated by three ethnic cultures. As it describes the richness of the lives of ordinary people, my sister's novel provides a mirror into a fascinating time and place. I believe many will find it as interesting and intriguing as I did.

Andy Sundaresan  
El Cerrito, California  
August, 2014

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# FOREWORD

(By Bharathi Venkatesan)

India Devi was a prolific writer who published many short stories in popular Tamil magazines under the pen name *Vindhiya*. Her literary life - by her own choice - lasted two decades but within that period she published many prize-winning stories in the prestigious KALAIMAGAL; her story CUPID'S ALARMS won recognition and prize in an international short story competition organized by the New York Herald Tribune in 1950 with the support of UNESCO.

India Devi (*Vindhiya*) lived in Orissa, yet she's a keen observer of the trends and intricacies of Brahmin families in Tamilnadu. It must have taken her immense determination to build a bridge to Tamil Culture through her writings from such remote existence. She wrote with deep insight and clarity about the hierarchical structure and the socially defined roles of the family members marked by their gender. It would seem as if *Vindhiya* had a telescope pointed towards the family members living in South; she also truly mirrored the supercilious attitudes of Tamil Brahmins towards the non-Tamils living in their surroundings.

I had known India Devi for over many years. I keenly remember attending her marriage with Subrahmanian in Coimbatore in 1942. All the young girls were fascinated by her unusual name because many at the time didn't have modern names. As a bride, she's demure, shy and beautiful. Our admiration for her grew when she was asked to play a few songs on her violin, and she complied at once without making any fuss.

Little did I know at the time that she would soon become a popular Tamil short story writer.

Not long after, I lived essentially in the West, so I lost any contact with Tamil and the popular magazines of the day.

I got reconnected with *Vindhiya's* stories when, in 2007 Andy, her younger brother, sent me a copy of CUPID ALARMS - an anthology of her stories that he had translated into English. So, once again, I could imagine and live through savoring the lives and traditions of Tamils through these stories. Vindhiya described the events and characters directly in closely packed sentences often integrating her personal experiences into the plot. She wasted no words; the style was simple as well as direct and often punctuated with excellent metaphors.

I enjoyed RAJESWARI as a supremely good novel of its kind with a family drama carried through by wholly believable characters. Today's readers will understand how the earlier generations of Indian women had no choice of their own to nurture and cherish their talents. I presume Vindhiya was not certain how India - the country, after independence - would evolve and grant women to realize their individual dreams within their married lives.

Now the times have changed. Today, especially in educated, middle class families, women can hone whatever talents they may have in art, science, technology and even politics. This is the true *Suthanthiram* - freedom - Mahatma Gandhi envisioned for the daughters of Mother India. Women enjoy more freedom in selecting their partners as well. This is a radical change in modern India. Mahatma Gandhi's dream has become a reality.

India Devi passed away in 1999.

My special thanks are to Andy Sundaesan for this opportunity to share my thoughts on India Devi and her novel.

With deep collaboration, the surviving members of the KNS family - Naranan, Selvi, Seenu and Andy - are bringing out this Vindhiya's only novel as a special homage to their talented, beloved sister.

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*Bharathi Venkatesan (b.1932) was born in Ernakulam and grew up in Coimbatore. After her marriage in 1951 to Mr. D. Venkatesan, a physicist, she moved to West where she has been living ever since - first in Sweden and then Canada. She served as the assistant director of the Calgary University Academic Computer Services and retired in 1996. She studied Tamil in high school and was an avid reader of Tamil weeklies and magazines. Later, while living abroad, she continued to nurture her interest in Tamil literature and its traditions. She continues to live in Calgary, Canada.*



# INTRODUCTION

(By Dr. S. Naranan)

The novel spans a period January 1942 to August 1948 (about six and half years) – from Rajeswari's marriage at age 15 to age 21, a tumultuous period interrupted by short spells of relative peace. Most of this time was spent with her in-laws or her parents and her jobless husband. There was a stretch of eight months when her husband held a job and they together had set up a household. This was the happiest time of her life.

Rajeswari was zestful about music and she had an enviable reputation in violin and vocal music in her hometown before she was married. Her ambition was to further her musical aspirations; moving from the hometown to the south, where Carnatic music flourished, she had hoped for a quantum leap in opportunities to promote her talents. She was frustrated when the realities of life dashed all her hopes. Her husband Raghupathy showed no interest in encouraging her music although he was an ardent lover of music and spent most of his time listening to the All India Radio music programs. Within the four walls of her home where she lived with her in-laws, there was no space to practice music even if she could make the time. In Madras, the cultural capital of the south, she could not even attend a music concert! Rajeswari's passion for music is a constant thread running all through the fabric of the narrative.

A root cause for her profound dissatisfaction was the fact that her husband could not find a job in the World War II years (1939-



1945). The only job he had was when the war was winding down – for a short time of eight months. Rest of the time, he was constrained to live with his parents. Although the couple never showed their frustration, it was the basic cause of the troubled life.

If the couple had been blessed with a child, life would have been different though they denied that it was a lacuna in their life. They were a very loving couple, with mutual respect, devoted to each other. This is the one enduring fact of their life which sustained their hope for the future.

Rajeswari was a romantic, befitting her teenage, all of 15 years, at the time of her wedding. Her upbringing was imbued with patrimonial mores which dictate that man – father or husband – as the undisputed head of the family. She had unflinching deference for her in-laws who included a domineering and demanding sister-in-law. She showed maturity and an uncommon capacity to place herself in the shoes of others in analyzing their actions and behavior. It is as though, she believed there was a reason behind every action of others, and with compassion and empathy, she could understand them. She would rather fault herself than fault others. But towards the end of the novel, she craves for “freedom, autonomy and a sense of pride in life”. She grew up as a teen “gleaming with myriad aspirations and feelings”; the preceding quotes are from the concluding and opening paragraphs of the novel.

First, I had a feeling that the novel ended rather abruptly and many readers may feel likewise. On second thoughts, it appears to me that the end marks the culmination of the most turbulent phase of her life. Rajeswari realized that even in her hometown she could not “walk with head high” and even her parents disapproved of her abrupt decision to seek them, leaving her

husband. She was shocked into realization that her proper place was with her husband. She writes to Raghupathy "I can't imagine a life without you. My ideals have no place in it. Now, I earnestly seek peace of mind, even if it is only temporary."

*Vindhiya* wrote this novel around 1950 when she was 23. It mirrors closely her real life, although the characters are fictional. I was only three years younger to my sister India Devi and therefore familiar with most of the events in the narrative. She was already a popular and successful author of short stories with her debut story appearing in *Kalaimagal*, a reputed monthly, in August 1947. It was issued on 15 August, India's Independence Day. It is worth recalling that in the one year covered by the novel (August 1947- August 1948), she had become an acclaimed author with 15 published short stories, a fact that does not figure in the novel. The omission was perhaps deliberate, not to take away from the impact of the stunning conclusion of the novel.

In the novel, Rajeswari writes to Raghupathy that her ideals have no place in their life. It was certainly true with regard to her musical aspirations. But actually, India Devi already had struck a new path, giving a new direction to her ideals, and over the next 13 years (till 1960), she became a distinguished short story writer.

Her foray into writing a novel was to compete for the *Narayanaswamy Iyer Prize* novel instituted by *Kalaimagal*. Her novel did not get a prize. But it confirms my belief that the novel is complete. It will be a surprise to readers that there was any doubt in this regard! But it is true that there was some uncertainty and the circumstances are explained in 'Translator's note' by my brother Andy Sundaresan.

My sister and brother-in-law Subrahmanyan had settled in Cuttack in 1950 and lived there for about 50 years. The manuscript of the unpublished novel – the only one she wrote – was lying with them and almost forgotten. India Devi had abruptly ceased writing in 1960 after penning her hundredth short story. Our father had assiduously preserved the original Tamil stories, but only 82 have survived. In 1994, I had gifted India Devi, a xeroxed compilation of the 82 stories in two volumes. It aroused little excitement since she was already mentally detached from her earlier literary phase.

Sometime in early 1990's the Cuttack home was burgled when India Devi and her husband were visiting south. There were two incidents; many valuables – jewelry, silk saris, gold medals (India Devi's and her husband's) and other things – were stolen. With stoicism, an attitude both had adopted in their lives, they were not distressed and said to themselves that perhaps they did not deserve those material possessions. They did not realize that the manuscripts of unpublished works too were stolen, until one day a few pages of RAJESWARI showed up as wrapping of grocery bought from a local shop.

The bulky hand-written manuscript was lost, but by a very fortuitous circumstance, a typed version was untouched and survived. It was about 220 pages of foolscap size, typed by me in the summer of 1952 when I was visiting my parents in Berhampur on a holiday. This is the manuscript that was handed over to my younger sister Selvi when they visited Cuttack in 1997 on India Devi's 70th birthday. As Andy explains in his note, it was another 13 years before he decided to translate it in English.

Tamil typewriters were rare in 1950's, but my father K.N. Sundaresan (KNS) had acquired one in 1937. It was

manufactured in Germany and branded 'Bijou'. The keyboard design was ingenious and innovative accommodating all Tamil characters in a Standard English keyboard. There is an interesting background to its origins and interested readers can access an exhaustive article on it at the 'vindhiya' website' [1].

Music is a central theme, pervading the entire novel RAJESWARI. It was our mother Thailammal (Thaial) who took the initiative to train her daughter in music; fortunately a music teacher, a violinist, was available and he began teaching my sister when she has just eight years young. Vocal music too became a part of the training as an essential adjunct for mastering violin. Tandava Krishnayya had just settled in Berhampur and India Devi was his first student and the only one for a long time. My father evinced no particular interest in music, since he was totally immersed in Tamil literature, especially of the classic Sangam period, and subsequently became a prolific writer in that genre adapted for contemporary life [2]. My mother told us that she started learning violin in her village at age eight in late 1910's at the instance of her paternal cousin, her future husband. My father did not hesitate to spend Rs. 10 per month, a significant part of his salary, as tuition fee for his daughter's music. To our mother goes the credit of persevering to discipline her daughter in regular music practice, keeping company with her in early morning sessions. India Devi became a talented violinist and vocalist and started performing in public in the local *sabhas*, all before age 15 when she got married. Even after her marriage, she took lessons from the teacher whenever she visited Berhampur. Later my sister Selvi too trained under him. Tandava Krishnayya was about the same age as my father and he was like 'family' and my sisters were "not scared" of him.

Like Raghupathy, my brother-in-law had a very poor opinion of the teacher and often spoke with derision in private. This upset India Devi. Like *Sarma Garu* in the novel, Tandava Krishnayya too was humble and realized that the music he taught could never match the quality of music as it was practiced and flourished in the south. But he was proud that his pupils could understand the Telugu '*sahitya*' (text) of the *kritis* and sang with '*bhava*' (feeling), a quality missing among most South Indian singers who did not know Telugu. This distinctive feature was appreciated by many listeners in the south.

At the suggestion of Selvi, Andy decided to dedicate his work to the memory of Tandava Krishnayya (1900-1970). My brother Seenu (Srinivasan) has worked diligently on Andy's penultimate draft, and I applaud the choice. Selvi had continued to write to her teacher even after her marriage in 1967. Recently she learnt from Tandava Krishnayya's son that he had preserved all the correspondence.

Subrahmanyam had a dislike for Andhras and this caused much rancor between the couple, resulting often in rhetorical exchanges. Much of the resentment could be traced to the claim of a section of Andhras to Madras city – or *Chennapattinam* of olden days – as part of a new state for Telugu-speaking people to be carved out of Madras Presidency. As a counter-claim, some Tamils wanted *Tirumala*, the famous temple-city, called *Thiruvenkatam* in classical Tamil, as part of a new state for Tamil-speaking people.

Like his father-in-law, Subrahmanyam too became a professor in a college in Cuttack. After about 30 years he retired and settled in Cuttack. Cuttack, then the capital of Orissa, had a majority of Oriya-speaking population. But Berhampur in southern Orissa, bordering Madras Presidency had a majority of

*Telugu*-speaking people. My family lived among *Telugus* and absorbed their culture. Similarly, Subrahmanyam quickly adapted to *Oriya* culture. When someone spoke disparagingly or in condescending tones about *Oriyas*, Subrahmanyam would respond with pride in “defense”. Just as my parents and sister showed their loyalty to *Andhras*, Subrahmanyam was loyal to *Oriyas*.

As citizens, the couple were loved and respected in the community with a mix of *Oriyas*, *Andhras*, *Gujaratis* and *Tamils*. India Devi’s daily routines were taken up by religion and rituals. She took the bold initiative of building a *Murugan Temple* in Cuttack and was enthusiastically supported by her husband and many leading citizens, who were also influential in Government. In a few years, the temple took shape, entirely financed by donations. She was an admirer of our father’s poetical works in Tamil, mostly love poems and most of them unpublished. She published several anthologies of ‘love poems’ with a lot of help from her husband. The rest of the poems were typed into digital format and stored in computer discs. This was in 1990’s when the technology was not yet in common use. Hard copies – laser prints – about 1000 pages, were also made. Such activities filled her life.

Although India Devi stopped writing stories, she remained an avid diarist and chronicled her daily life in detail till the end. Besides writing diary, other activities before bedtime, usually 1 or 2 A.M, were prayers, some singing, playing violin, letter-writing and reading her father’s poems.

The last entry in her diary was on 6 October 1999, the day before she died at home, in a tragic accident, by electrocution. The diaries are preserved and are a precious resource for a biography when it is written.

Andy had published a translation of some *Vindhiya's* stories in 2007, 60 years after her debut in *Kalaimagal* in 1947. The ten stories in the collection *Cupid's Alarms* are mostly from *Kalaimagal* and include the prize-winning cover story [3]. It won the second prize among four short stories selected for the International Short Story Competition organized by New York Herald Tribune in 1950. Andy dedicated the book to the memory of Professor V. Subrahmanyam (1919-2001) in recognition of his life-long encouragement of *Vindhiya's* literary work of which he was very proud.

This collection drew the attention of Dr. C.S. Lakshmi, Director of 'SPARROW', an organization devoted to the cause of 'Sound and Picture Archives for Research On Women' [4]. Dr. Lakshmi, well known as *Ambai*, an author in Tamil and English, founded SPARROW 25 years ago in 1988. She was familiar with *Vindhiya's* writings and is a close friend of Smt. Rajam Krishnan, an eminent Tamil author and a contemporary of *Vindhiya* who had written a foreword for *Cupid's Alarms*' Dr. Lakshmi wished to see the original magazine publications of *Vindhiya* short stories in my possession. My father, a stickler for order and detail, had individually filed each story with the cover page of the magazine in which it appeared. It was this collection of 82 stories that helped Andy to choose his stories for translation. Dr. Lakshmi was impressed by the collection and wished to archive it for SPARROW. Andy, Selvi, Seenu and I were happy to agree to the suggestion. After 60 years, the original pages were yellowed and became too fragile to handle. The staff at SPARROW was skilled in handling such material. Each page was digitally scanned and laminated. *Vindhiya's* stories have now found a permanent abode in the repository of SPARROW in *Mumbai*; it is available for interested researchers about women authors. Dr.



Lakshmi has given us compact discs of the scanned pages. We are grateful to Dr. Lakshmi for commemorating *Vindhiya's* works in a manner befitting great writers.

India Devi zealously sought privacy, keeping hand-written stories away from public eye. They were read only in print and not in manuscript. But she broke this convention and asked me to type the manuscript of her first novel RAJESWARI. Today, only the typed version exists. But for this fortunate circumstance, the novel would have been lost forever. I feel privileged and proud to have been instrumental in some small measure for its survival.

For nearly three years, Andy has persevered in the difficult task of translation. Sister Selvi and brother Srinivasan have helped him constantly with useful suggestions and comments. Andy made at least three different drafts and sent them to me as hard copies for comments. I am very pleased to read the Foreword by Mrs. Bharathi Venkatesan, a close family friend of more than 50 years. It is an eloquent tribute to India Devi's life and writings. We are thankful to her for her ready consent to Andy's request.

I have read the original in Tamil and the translation three times each. Every time, I felt the same excitement and experienced the same emotional upheaval. One empathizes that no one should be subject to the kind of distress that Rajeswari endured. But without the suffering, there would have been no literary marvel such as *RAJESWARI*.

S. Naranan  
Chennai, India  
November, 2014

[1] [www.vindhiya.com/snaranan](http://www.vindhiya.com/snaranan)

<http://www.madrasmusings.com/Page-4-5.pdf>

[2] 'Krishna and Gandhari' by Prof. K.N. Sundaresan. A collection of his plays and poems published by Kurinji Publications, 2010. Website: [www.kurinjipubs.com](http://www.kurinjipubs.com).

[3] 'Cupid's Alarms' by Vindhiya. Translated by Andy Sundaresan (Kurinji Publications, 2007). Website: [www.kurinjipubs.com](http://www.kurinjipubs.com).

[4] Website: [www.sparrowonline.org](http://www.sparrowonline.org).

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*Dr. S. Naranan (b.1930) was an experimental cosmic-ray physicist and X-ray astronomer based mostly in the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), Bombay (now Mumbai), India. in a career spanning 42 years. He is a firm believer in the interdisciplinary character of science and has diversified his interests in other fields such as mathematics, statistics, computer science, biology, genetics and linguistics.*

*The topics listed above cover the 'main-stream' areas. The papers published, along with a description of his life as a scientist, are given in the first article in the web site: <http://vindhiya.com/snaranan>. The other articles are unpublished and span diverse topics, all with a mathematical flavor.*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book comes out 67 years after Vindhiya made her debut with her short story in Kalaimagal. Many have contributed to make this book possible, and I owe them my heart-full thanks.

Special thanks to sister Selvi for suggesting this book in 2010 and, then, sharing her ideas, enthusiasm and belief till I finally understood what was possible; she also ferreted out the photograph of the author and her husband included as frontispiece.

As always Nannu, Selvi and Seenu were very supportive. Their notes, suggestions, and knowledge vastly contributed to the final results of the book. Seenu revisited the draft, edited the manuscript many a time and made the book shine brighter after it came into his hands.

Additional thanks to:

Nannu for his introduction;

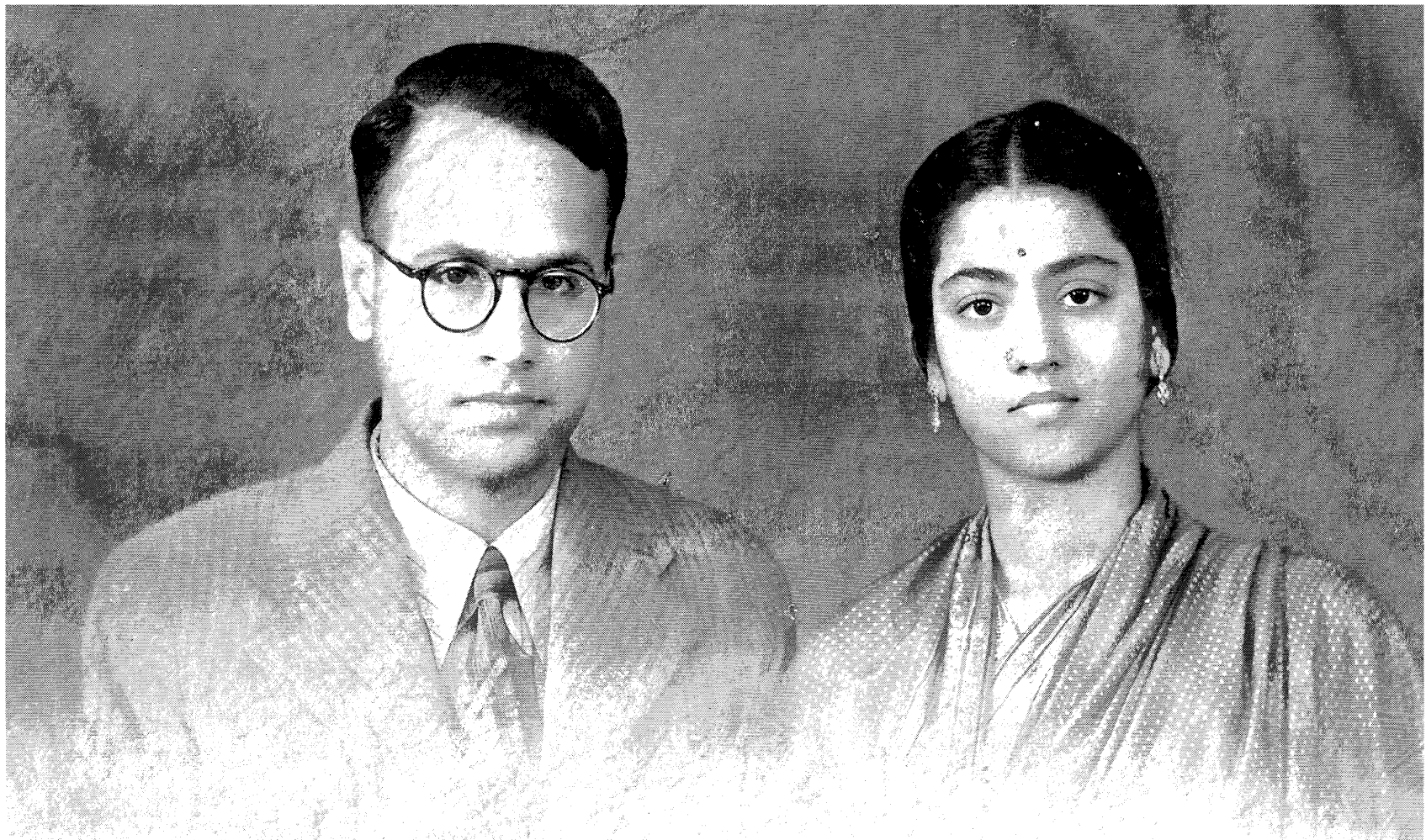
Bharati for her foreword and thoughtful ideas about the story's setting and characters; and

Mr. Sessa Rao of Vijayanagaram, India for sharing his late father Sri Tandavakrishnayya's photograph with us for the dedication page.

To all these people I express my sincere gratitude, but I am alone responsible for any errors that remain.

I believe the spirit of India Devi herself hovered over the book as it was taking shape.

Andy Sundaresan



**India Devi (Vindhiya) with her husband Prof. V.Subrahmaniyan**

*Photo Credits: R. Dassen Studio Coimbatore, India*

# RAJESWARI

1

Rajeswari was bright, buoyant gleaming with myriad aspirations and feelings. Just a few minutes ago she was riding wildly on the swing – its plank roomy and broad enough for three - with her younger brother and sister on board. She exhausted herself with songs delivered in extempore and in every tune she could possibly imagine. And what a transformation in a matter of a few minutes! Now she found herself ensconced on the small cement bench in the front garden; her rollicking activity and singing suddenly came to a standstill, thanks to a book of romantic and love stories in her hand that totally absorbed her.

Cheery and purposeful, Rajeswari stood at the dawn of a new life; she had crossed into adolescence when youth perceives everything around it as full of wonder, beauty and novelty. She would turn fifteen in a few months, and her new physical sensation and blooming mind signaled to her that she's at age when her dreams would soon come to fruition. Like the other women in the neighborhood she wanted to don a *sari* and move around; she would wrap herself in a four-piece *angavastram* and a fancy door curtain and proudly stomp around the house with her chin up.

*"Tring! Tring!"*

The chimes from a cycle bell announced Natarajan's arrival. He beamed with joy as soon as he saw the anticipated face.

*"Rajabai! Raniji!"*

*"Appa, you want me?"*

"No, keep reading." Smiling, his shoes clattering, he walked into the house.

He had gone to the college for a meeting; how eager and enthusiastic he looked on return! There's something juicy he wants to tell us, Rajeswari thought. She walked back into the house as she continued reading the book.

Father is in conversation with Mother; what is she saying?

"You knew her star is *Swathi*? I am impressed! You must have looked at the horoscope in your hand."

"They didn't actually ask for the girl's horoscope; *Swathi* is destined to be a perfect match, the boy's father said. They do believe in horoscopes but he told me no other criteria need be considered! The boy's star is *Anusham*, just like mine! Do you know it is a privilege to be born with *Anusham*?"

"How funny! You are telling me the father and the son-in-law have a good match? I was happy and felt even a little crazy when you got started to find a boy for our daughter."

"This is the match I am talking about; the boy's father said *Swathi* and *Anusham* are agreeable. I am not joking, that's what he really said! Now, where's our *Sandow*?"

'Who's the boy? What does he look like? Are his parents looking for a bride? Let them. What is the name? Is he handsome? Is he a good man?'

The questions flashed in Rajeswari's mind. Noticing her father was heading towards the veranda carrying her baby brother, she stood pretending. The face betrayed her feelings and Father must have understood her state of mind. Without a word, pretending to ignore her, he carried the baby brother playfully, and went directly to the garden.

The *chamanti* blooming from the black flower pot near the cement bench, like the child in Natarajan's arms, giggled, and laughed. If it could only talk, it would have blurted out: "See how fascinated Rajeswari is with love scenes! She keeps reading the same page, over and over!"

'Teasing me? Get lost!' Rajeswari seemed ready to punish it as she now darted toward the flower pot. When she noticed her father with the baby, keenly watching the plants, she wanted to tell him, "How beautiful this *chamanti* is!" She plucked the flower and tucked it into her tresses as if subduing its mischief, and took the child from her father.

"Oh, the baby woke up! Just half an hour ago he had dozed off listening to songs," Rajeswari murmured aside, and came away cuddling the baby saying, "Come, let us rock on the cradle, again."

She might have forgotten or even didn't know: soon after the baby drifted into sleep listening to her lullaby, Rajeswari had kissed it, swayed the cradle and moved away to the veranda to read the book; it was her sudden shove as she got off the cradle that had awakened the baby.

She carefully put down the baby in the cradle, perched on the very edge and pushed the floor; the singing began, at once.

*KaNNaa, Mani VaNNaa Va . . .*

Whom was she addressing – the baby or the groom-in-waiting?

“*Rajabai*, the music teacher!”

Abruptly, she stopped the cradle; 'My god, I was singing a film song,' she thought. Fortunately, it was not a Tamil song dubbed from a Hindi film!

Normally he would be here even before Rajeswari took out the violins and got ready for her lessons.

Her questioning glance at the door entryway changed into a look of surprise

'Does father know about *Upacharamu* and *Nagumomu*? Did mother mention them to him?'

She heard the teacher saying, "I am coming!" Why does he look so elated?

Dusk was afoot when the two violins played in unison. When the pair was into *ata tala varanm* in *Kambodhi*, Natarajan donned his *angavastram* and left. Sarma noticed that Natarajan, on his way out, had cast a glance at his daughter and the surroundings. When the session continued, after the *Kambothi* piece with a prayer to Lord *Ganesha*, Natarajan reentered the house with another elderly man.

Sarma watched the newcomer who, in a familiar mood, folded both palms in a reverential gesture. Rajeswari paused for a moment, and then continued singing. Normally, it was her music-teacher, who, now and then, brought a stranger to their house to witness his student's aptitude as well as to show off his coaching. Why is *Appa* very particular today, Rajeswari wondered. Was he getting interested in music too - having observed others extol his daughter's gift?

Rajeswari fondly sought Father's attention. He nodded his head in a gesture of encouragement, 'Yes, go with it!' Natarajan drew a chair for the guest.

"I prefer sitting on the floor while listening to music," said the visitor. Natarajan spread out a mat for the guest.

Rajeswari realized the visitor was a lover of music. She couldn't help smiling that his association had actually inspired Father who often admitted that he had no ear for Carnatic music.

Soon, her drive and desire to transform that moment into accomplishment were in full display; the violin recital began, and



went on in full swing with Rajeswari's best performance executed with self-assurance, confidence and no interruptions; the pieces she played revealed her dexterity with the bow that produced the rhythmic patterns, as well as her apprenticeship under Sarma.

"She plays effortlessly! How long has she been taking music lessons?" praised the guest with joy and wholehearted appreciation.

"Six years! And he is her first teacher!" Natarajan answered.

Sarma, again, folded his palms, beaming with pride.

"The performance is all the more pleasing because she has learnt from the same teacher," the visitor said in admiration.

Natarajan smiled and remained silent when Sarma enthusiastically broke in: "Well, it also depends on the student's ability too; for the same teacher to continue, he must feel heartened to teach and bring the best out of the student."

"Well said." the elder nodded in assent. "By the way, how come you speak Tamil in this Andhra land?"

"I learnt Carnatic music in the South only," replied Sarma. "What can one say of the glory of the Carnatic music and its patronage over there? It was so venerable and gratifying that I didn't want to leave those surroundings. But, then, what can one do . . . ?"

Natarajan now interrupted. "One can say *Sarmagaru* is half Tamilian. It is our fortune to have him as Rajam's teacher. My wife often used to say that it was a godsend that he moved from the South so that Rajeswari could get excellent coaching in music. Here, in this town, there's no other to surpass *Sarmagaru* as a guru."

Sarma's face brightened. "I must say my share of the contribution is only ten-percent, and Rajeswari's practice is ninety-percent. Her mother's interest in Rajeswari's lessons is ten-fold. She will spare nothing to get the best out of her daughter. Early in the morning at four, even in severe cold weather, she would insist her daughter practice the lessons. The mother too would join her in practicing *sthara staayi!* She now plays violin as well as her daughter! How can one cultivate finger technique without rigorous training?"

Then Sarma paused, smiled to himself, and continued in a whisper. "The father is not terribly interested in music but he fondly recommends the vocal and violin lessons for the daughter. He never interferes or asks any questions or explanations! He

believes music is a worthy calling for women. Her mother's cooperation is the foundation to Rajeswari talent in music."

Rajeswari noticed her mother standing afar. What is this? Mother was wrapped in a nine-yard sari! Wasn't Father saying something earlier that evening? Has that got anything to do with this elder man's visit?

"This is how Goddess Saraswati bestows her grace on the willing," concluded the visitor.

Rajeswari began to sing. The sonorous rendering of the *anupallavi* in *Nagumomu* composition moved even Natarajan.

"Your vocal performance is so good you don't have to be concerned with the dexterity of your fingers," the guest told Rajeswari, directly looking at her. "Your rendering of the composition is letter-perfect, full of meaning, and nuanced – because you are living in the Andhra culture. I think you should concentrate on vocal music and can progressively advance further; if you supplement your voice with the music fundamentals, I am sure, you will surely be able to perform in public concerts."

'Yes, *that's very true*', Rajeswari thought. She has heard many say, 'Rajeswari is missing thorough instruction in Carnatic music because she lives in Andhra region; had the family lived in their native Tamil Nadu, she would have gotten better exposure and more fame.' Yet now, for the first time, here comes an accolade that her music was affecting and significant.

Natarajan returned after bidding farewell to the guest. "He's very happy," he told Sarma.

"Praise the grace of Goddess Saraswati!" extolled Sarma.

"You know how ashamed I am when I see his face," Natarajan lamented, pointing to himself, gesturing with open palms, arched eyebrows, his manner alternating from farce to sadness.

Sarma, Rajeswari and his wife, now looking at him, were totally puzzled.

"You know? The very job he spurned vehemently, I grabbed it so eagerly. Don't you think I should be ashamed?"

Everybody was at their wits end.

"He resigned his position in 1920 when the Mahatma started the non-cooperation movement. I had applied for that position through an ad and I am holding it for the last twenty years! What

a shame!" Natarajan cringed and cupped his mouth as he said this.

The grin on Visalam's face turned into a smile. Rajeswari didn't conceal the smirk. "I feel sorry for *Appa*; I am also a little annoyed because he acts like a clown; Is this how one reveals shame?"

"Where is shame here?" countered Sarma. "After all, your devotion to Gandhian ideals is second to none!" Gingerly the teacher took out the violin.

Did Natarajan think the teacher would end the music session and leave? He moved away saying, "I don't want to interfere with your lessons."

A nine-year-old boy rushed into the house declaring, "I did *harikatha* today."

A five-year-old girl breezed in saying, "Father, I danced today!"

"Well, Mother too had a performance this morning . . . See her nine-yard sari!" Natarajan left the room.

"Let's finish the new composition, that will be all for today," the teacher told Rajeswari. Rajeswari picked the violin and bow and settled for her lesson.

At this time she didn't connect her father's earlier remarks to Mother with the elder's visit.

Was she disappointed? Was she eased? Now she could clearly make out that her father's reverence and high esteem for the guest caused him embarrassment. Does it mean one could conclude Rajeswari was disappointed? Had not her performance a few minutes ago made her just as important? Surely, there are bound to be slips when one tries a new composition . . .

Myriad thoughts flashed in Rajeswari's mind but one, finally, stood out. An admirer once called her a gem; another lauded her talent for music- vocal as well as instrumental. Two people praised her in two ways; what else does she need? What's so special now? Here's a gentleman who admires her music but also mentions her place of birth as a part of her musical acumen.

## 2

Attention, warmth and approval calmed her mind and that night Rajeswari had a sound sleep. The next morning she woke up early, as early as four, even before her mother did. She got ready and sat to practice the music lessons when Visalam too

got up. "What time is it? You are already awake?" she asked. Normally the mother would join Rajeswari in her sessions but today she began gathering and slicing the vegetables from the kitchen.

"Mother, is anything special today?"

"Remember the uncle who came last night to listen to your music? He's coming for lunch."

"Oh, he's the only one coming, isn't he? Then, why are you getting ready so early - as if preparing for a feast or a *sraardham*?"

"Watch your words! Concentrate on your music! Even a single guest warrants a sumptuous meal. Who's going to help me if I need it, later? Would you? That's why I want to start early. See these beans - it will take quite some time to get them ready!" The mother spoke, at first in a stern rebuke and then, in a milder voice. She resented her daughter's use of word for death ceremony.

Several new encounters awaited Rajeswari that day. Father approached her when she was busy with her homework, and said, "If that uncle asks you anything you must answer him steadily, and with confidence. You mustn't get shy and try to flee the scene." His advice startled Rajam.

"He's a Gandhian; we also follow Gandhi but we wear no *khadi*. He's a Gandhian in thought and action. He renounced his position and always wears *khadi*. He is visiting our college to see how things have changed since he was gone many years ago; I got to know him only the day before yesterday; but I feel as if I had known him for a long time," Natarajan told his daughter with deep insight.

Rajeswari noted the expression on his face and thought: *Poor father!*

How many times and how many things had Father told her with passion! When he was young, Natarajan wanted to join the non-cooperation movement to boycott foreign clothes. This angered his parents, so at a time when his friends dared to show their courage by their willful participation, Natarajan stood aside as a coward. That episode left him guilty and emotionally scarred.

Gandhiji had called upon his followers to set afire the foreign clothes. "Why not give them to the poor - who are so numerous all over the country?" asked the Poet Tagore. Roared Gandhi: "Such a gesture would be as sacrilegious as offering the poor

spittle, the tainted food." A question was raised: "Where's the harm? Are not the poor shivering in cold?" Again, Gandhiji: "Let them set a bonfire to all the British clothes and seek warmth in that blaze." How poignant did Father sound when he narrated that episode!

"Rajam! Why do you keep harping about English *voile* and English *chitti* saris?" he would whine. "Buy them if you want, but I am saddened when you bring them up every day in some conversation or the other." How sad he looked that day.

Poor father, why's he so disappointed and ashamed? Wasn't he also an avid devotee of Gandhi? Rajeswari wanted to assuage his feelings: "Well, then, how could that elderly man take part in a feast? Doesn't Gandhi advocate simple diet?"

Natarajan smiled faintly, and said, "Gandhiji never sought neither fame nor praise; but people naturally feel like honoring him and following him."

'Appa, I asked that question just to imply you have nothing to be ashamed of. I do have a lot of respect for him, don't worry, father,' Rajam thought and moved away.

Rajeswari had lunch with her young siblings and went back to the cradle.

Visalam was not piqued because Rajam had left immediately after lunch and cleansing only the kitchen. She was a little disappointed though that Rajeswari didn't even get off the cradle when, later, Natarajan and the guest entered the kitchen.

Doraiswamy, the visitor, spoke to Visalam: "If you are planning to serve *appalam*, you better do it right away; otherwise you will regret if you forget!" He laughed looking at Natarajan.

Visalam hesitated a moment before answering him. "I haven't fried any *appalam* . . . I don't have any at home, and they are not available in the shop, either . . ."

"I don't need *appalam*," Doraiswamy gently explained. "I prefer meals without *appalam*. I was concerned you might feel bad in case you had already fried them or planning to. I notice the dishes here – everything fitting for a traditional feast – *chutney*, *koottu*, *curry*, *payasam*, *vada*, and sweets. I thought you might have already fried the *appalam* but forgotten to serve them." He wanted to reassure her that nothing was amiss.

"Is *appalam* mandatory in a feast?" asked Natarajan. "I am simply asking." Visalam didn't relish his question.

I didn't plan this as a feast . . . "she said, haltingly.

"What do you call this - if not a feast?" the guest wondered. "Everything's here - except *appalam*." Now Visalam felt the absence of *appalam* even keener.

"I say this is indeed a feast. Here we have all the six tastes - sweet, sour, salty, bitter, spicy, and pungent. Don't you agree?" asked Natarajan.

Her husband's argument annoyed Visalam. She chided him mildly saying, "Enough! I was not actually planning any kind of feast . . ."

Doraiswamy now looked at Visalam as he spoke: "One may call my wife the *Lady of Appalam*. Her hobby is rolling out *appalam* at home and she is proud of it. She would argue no meal is complete without it. She would always keep a ready stock of them in the kitchen." He smiled. "That's what I was referring to." His words comforted Visalam who now smiled at her husband.

The feast was in progress.

Visalam was concerned that Rajam was humming a tune from a film song. She darted from the kitchen, marched to Rajeswari and gave her a bit of advice: "How about a different song? No more film songs!" Brusque and feigning anger she hurried back to look after the guest.

'Why all this fuss?' Rajeswari wondered. 'Today *Amma* has donned a nine-yard sari. Does the guest shun movies too, like Gandhiji? Why should I be scared and shy like my parents?' She grew stubborn: 'I will sing only a film song; let it be a *ragamalika*.' She began singing, "*Manam KuLira! KaN KuLira*"

In the movie it was Shakuntala's farewell to her home and surroundings prior to joining her husband. Visalam felt an admixture of pain and pleasure; she was proud of Rajeswari's flawless rendering, Rajeswari was unaware of it.

After lunch Natarajan and Doraiswamy headed to the veranda for banter. Doraiswamy noticed the plants in the front garden.

"Is that a cotton plant?" he asked.

"Yes; we have many around here."

"Did you plant it or did it grow by itself?"

"I think it grew by itself. Rajam, can you come here?"

Rajeswari approached him.

"Did someone plant this cotton? Or did it come up by itself?"

"When we stuffed the pillows with cotton, we dropped some cotton seeds over there . . ."

"Oh, that's what happened! No one planted it and neither did it grow by itself! Those cotton seeds took root!" Natarajan laughed, and glanced at her.

Doraiswamy smiled. "I asked only because cotton plant is usually considered inauspicious in a house; I wanted to know if you had planted it."

"Why, what's inauspicious about it? We have given cotton to many of our relatives to make wicks to light up lamps in their *puja* rooms."

"Cotton seeds burst and tend to scatter over long distances; superstition has it that, like cotton, the owner's wealth too would disperse, and fly away."

Natarajan smiled. "Oh, I see. Maybe. One feels like sharing cotton with others; that's how we gave away a lot of it to many to light their altars. Who knows, maybe the same habit, the habit of sharing without hesitation, will influence in sharing wealth as well."

How well does Father articulate his ideas! Rajeswari was touched by his interpretation. She noticed the guest too nodding his approval.

"Well said; both seem to match up quite well."

Visalam now approached the front porch, but stayed close to the door. Seeing Rajeswari standing still listening to the Father's conversation, she signaled her to come back. As the daughter returned, she said, "I called because you stayed back there."

"What's this?" Perplexed, Rajeswari returned to her mother.

"The word match reminds me. You were saying it is adequate if the stars match and show compatibility. Would you like to have my daughter's horoscope?" asked Natarajan. Visalam had been a little unhappy because Doraiswamy hadn't asked for the horoscope.

"You may give it to me and I will send you Raghupathy's. Your folks might be interested to know how they go with one another."

Rajeswari was baffled. Was this the same gentleman who called her a gem and lauded her music? Oh! Is he the boy's father? *How does the boy look?*

In the ensuing confusion and excitement, bashful, she retreated to the backyard.

Natarajan returned to the hall after seeing the guest off when Visalam asked him, "Why didn't you ask him – discreetly – about the boy? After all you didn't mind asking him a lot of other questions."

"Why should I ask him? To his eyes his son will certainly look handsome; but what about our eyes? We don't know how he would look to our daughter's eyes."

"The boy will be fine if he resembles his father."

Rajam's heart throbbed; she hoped Mother would keep asking more questions. Her parents were discussing about the boy, over and over, and still she was in dark even about his name.

Natarajan asked, perched on the cradle: "Why assume things? We will see the boy face to face before any details are to be worked out."

"Did he say the boy's name is Raghupathy?" asked Visalam, again.

"I believe so. He promised to send us Raghupathy's horoscope."

*Raghupathy! A nice name!*

"The daughter's name is Bhavani? What is his name?"

"Doraiswamy," answered Natarajan with a chuckle. Visalam understood the reason for the giggle. "It's an apt name for someone who hates *dorais!*"

"It doesn't mean one has to hate the *dorais*; what we hate are their policies only. What the Mahatma dislikes is their attitudes toward Indians," Natarajan explained.

Rajeswari was grateful for Father's knowledge on so many things. His heart was awash with Gandhiji's ideals and he instilled those values in his children.

*Raghupathy, his sister is Bhavani. Both good names. Will they think Rajeswari is old-fashioned?*

"I could have asked him to send the boy's photo. Shall I ask when I hand over Rajeswari's?" Natarajan suddenly got out of the cradle.



Rajam was curious which of her photos he would take. Her curiosity slowly turned to unease. Rajam knew her father's sensibility – still she mirrored her mother's trepidation.

### 3

Natarajan, as a husband, also epitomized the roles of a mentor, companion, partner, and master.

When Visalam, a village girl, arrived alone, as a fifteen-year old bride, to take on the tasks of a family, Natarajan granted her all that she needed to persevere and stand out as a housewife, generous and open-minded. Far from cynical she wholeheartedly accepted her husband's quirks and fads. Yet, lately, she had begun worrying about Rajam's marriage. And the sudden change could be easily explained by her relatives and friends living in the far away South urging her, through letters, that a groom must be found for Rajam with no further delay. "You are cut off from your moorings," was the typical warning drilled into her ears: "Even around here, we are struggling to find suitable boys for our girls." In no time those discouraging letters reduced Visalam to a state of relentless anxiety.

Visalam, immersed in desultory thoughts, was pacing around the house and Natarajan sensed that the prospective boy was very much on her mind. Suddenly, she asked. "He was telling us that cotton plant portends a lot of money being wasted. Seems money is very much in his mind. I wonder how much dowry he will demand."

"He will not demand any dowry," Natarajan replied. "He said he offered no dowry for his daughter."

"That's possible. But how can you be sure they won't demand dowry for their son?"

"He volunteered it himself and said he gave no dowry for his daughter. Doesn't it mean he would ask no dowry for the son?"

"Yes, you are right." The thought was comforting to Visalam.

Then, another question propped up.

"Maybe with his interpretation of the cotton plant he probably thought we are not well off, and can't meet their expectations. What do you think?"

"If that was his presumption, he is right. We are certainly lacking in funds and cash. We will try to do our best. They must accept this alliance based only on Rajam. I am sure that's what he's going to do. He's not expecting gifts or dowry."

"You may be right. After all he's a man who renounced his job."

Natarajan noticed the expression on her face, one of relief and satisfaction. He wanted to prolong it.

"Why worry unnecessarily? Hasn't he said that Rajam is their daughter-in-law? What more can we expect? What can we say when he makes no demands? Everything will be fine if the boy is acceptable to us. I am sure they will accept Rajam."

Visalam got some relief – only for a while. That same evening she was caught up with other worries!

"I was raving to our neighbor Sitamma how fortuitous we are that someone came along and is willing to accept our alliance without any dowry whatsoever. Do you know what she said forthwith? 'Beware! Don't commit yourself in a hurry! Maybe there is a catch somewhere!' She said it so promptly; it never occurred to us. Sitamma is much younger to me but she is so worldly! We need to learn many things from others. Only now I realize that we shouldn't get too excited over these overtures, and jump in." Natarajan riveted his eyes on her.

"Are you going to be happy, for a moment, at all, today?" Natarajan demanded. "You keep asking all kinds of troublesome questions. As for me, as soon as I handed over the photo, I forgot everything! You are obsessed with it. What kind of mindset is this? I trust him; I have faith in his conduct; my trust in him is unshakable. Should the boy or the girl object to this alliance, then this marriage will not take place. Don't be scared to death!" He arose and walked to the veranda. There he noticed his five-year-old daughter and told her: "We are going to a movie today! Can you tell your sister? Has she gone to see her friend Padma?"

Rajam was actually in the corner room attached to the veranda leafing through old weeklies. She was wondering if she should stay or come out of the room.

"She's over there," said the girl pointing her finger toward her sister. Rajam didn't move, and she grew a little angry. Let her parents presume she was not privy to their conversation, she thought, so she didn't stir out of the room.

When Natarajan craned his head into that room Rajam spoke: "*Appa*, I see there are some excellent stories in these magazines. When are we going to sorting and binding them?"

"Well, the Christmas vacation will be here soon. We all will look and sort them. Are you done with your studies for the exams?"

"No, I am not done, yet."

"Then, go, study! Now is the time to catch up!"

Rajeswari's naiveté thrilled her at the news that the visitor had already described her as his daughter-in-law. She liked to imagine herself in the multiple roles of a bride, wife and mother. She was pleased with her father's remark, "This marriage wouldn't take place if the girl has any objection." Her young heart was swept away by a myriad of feelings: deference for the guest, gratitude towards Father, warmth and sympathy for Mother and thoughts of that far away and faceless, Raghupathy.

Rajeswari, since that day, turned a good part of her attention to her parents' conversation. She realized her parents, while not directly communicating with her, nevertheless, were 'talking' to her by dropping hints and snippets of information. Still, Rajam tried to act as if she didn't actually understand what they were saying.

Visalam told the music teacher, "For a long time I wanted to ask you to teach *pakkala nilabadi* to Rajam. That elder man also mentioned about it, do you remember? Can you?" In no time Rajeswari learnt that composition. The music teacher, highly pleased, informed Visalam, "I was praying for an alliance with a family showing appreciation for Carnatic music. I kept worrying - even when I knew that people from the South are avid music lovers."

Rajeswari was baffled. They were all talking as if this marriage was a foregone conclusion, didn't they? Was this because her relatives had confirmed that the two horoscopes showed an excellent match? However, she was still in the dark about so many things! What does the boy look like? Of course, nobody said anything against her, but how could Rajeswari be sure Raghupathy was the right man for her?

Doraiswamy Iyer had gone to Calcutta with his wife at the invitation of his daughter, Bhavani. He left his wife at his daughter's house and, while returning home, broke his journey to visit the town where he had worked before. He stayed with his old friend and relative Sambasiva Iyer. He had already begun talking to Natarajan about Raghupathy-Rajeswari alliance; how did he reveal this to his wife? Soon after reaching home he wrote to her: "Daughter Bhavani is married and gone to her in-laws.

Now we do need a daughter-in-law at home, and she is readily available!" His wife, Saradambal, simply assumed her husband was missing his daughter's company. Two months had gone by before she wrote to her husband: "Please send Raghupathy to Calcutta and I will return home with Bhavani. She will be staying with us for at least next eight months, so you don't have to worry about a daughter-in-law now. I also want to confirm happy news about Bhavani: soon, we are going to be grandparents! We are leaving right away because we have to perform *valaikaapu* and *seemantham* at home in the coming months. At this time Bhavani's husband is unable to escort us; if Raghupathy comes, we can be home next week."

She was taken aback by her husband's reply. "I will send Raghupathy," he wrote. "I would like you to break your journey and visit a friend of mine on your way here. If there is a problem I would suggest that Raghupathy alone can stop by on his way to Calcutta. In fact it would be nice if you and Bhavani too can get to know the family. Don't imagine this is an inauspicious three-member visit; there's another soul in Bhavani." Saradambal felt her husband was trying to manipulate her. "Well, he likes the girl; doesn't he want to know what the boy would think of her? Is there a law a son should always obey his father?" she complained to her daughter before penning her reply to him.

"*Amma*, you are mad at *Appa*, yet you addressed him *prana natha*." Bhavani struggled to contain her laughter.

She ran up to her husband. "Please see *Amma's salutation* to *Appa*. She has agreed to his suggestion – despite all her initial protests – that we would break the journey on our way home." She was full of pride for her mother; her husband smiled and offered his compliment: "Bravo mother-in-law!"

"It's not the question of agreeing with *Appa*," Saradambal revealed the truth. "What concerns me now is your health. I have no intention of stopping over on way back." The son-in-law could only add, "Some mother-in-law!"

Soon Raghupathy arrived, and he was on board. "*Amma*, I have already told *Appa* that I would certainly not go as groom, to see the girl. However, we will visit them as friends. *Appa* has confirmed to them we would be arriving there on Wednesday around midnight. I am telling you, there's no need to raise any talk of marriage at this time!" Bhavani's husband Satyamurthy could only murmur, "Poor mother-in-law!"

Doraiswamy Iyer had written, "I am suggesting this arrangement so that your family can get acquainted with mine."

"He doesn't directly say they are coming to see the girl. Nicely put, very clever," admired Natarajan.

"Maybe he didn't say so because he doesn't think we are fit for their alliance," Visalam said, a little suspicious.

"You will never stop worrying," said her husband. "They will not break their journey if they are not really interested. They have seen the girl's photo and decided to make this trip." Visalam was not persuaded.

"Let's not treat them with pomp and extravagance," warned Natarajan. "They are visiting us as friends only. I don't want them to think we are just putting on a show for them! Remember, this is not a typical half-an-hour 'Boy-meets-Girl' event. Only if you act natural and unpretentious will they consider our manners proper and appropriate. You must put to an end to tormenting yourself."

Visalam's face withered. "I can't take it any longer! Am I just pretending? Do I worry for no reason? Would anyone think my hospitality was a mere charade? I am *really* worried. I have nobody to guide me. I am totally ignorant of the customs and mores of our community in South." She went on agonizing, again and again.

Rajam too worried as she continued to watch the ongoing spectacle at home. 'Looks like *Amma* is going to tout this news all over the neighborhood! Why doesn't she simply follow *Appa's* advice? Why does she complain to the neighborhood lady? In no time that woman would start her gossip and the whole town would be talking about it.' Rajam had already faced a question from a neighbor: "I heard your prospective mother-in-law, the boy and his sister are coming?"

'Raghupathy! Raghupathy! The name sounds sweet and novel. Wonder what he *actually* looks like?'

Natarajan started observing Rajam. He smiled as he watched her take down the wall paintings and photos in their house, tidy up and rearrange them in new locations. He felt pity when she, forlornly, implored her mother to keep ready some milk cream as a remedy for her acne. "I notice too many pimples on my cheeks and I am ashamed to go to school!" He empathized with her: "You can also mix a little lemon juice with that cream." He discerned the vagaries of adolescence – her self-conscious

conduct and a little embarrassment even as he delighted in noting her makeover from a girl to adolescence. Now and then, he shared his sentiments with his wife: "We know a person better by watching the eye movement and facial expression rather than the words coming out of the mouth." He tried to assuage Visalam's concern. "Remember the guests are not coming to see you, why are you so upset? They are three well-meaning people. If you act nervous with their arrival, I am telling you, you will never feel peace of mind. Be brave."

"There's a saying that a daughter takes on her mother," Visalam reminded him. "I am sure they will keep an eye on me too." She had almost forgotten her worries, and smiled.

"I am certainly concerned about Rajam on one thing," she kept saying. "What am I supposed to say when they ask about her culinary skills? Rajam has absolutely no interest in cooking and she can hardly bring herself to stand before a stove. She spends all her time singing on the swing. What will they think of her?"

"They are not going to ask you, have no fears," Natarajan assured her, shaking his head. "My god, you are an expert when it comes to worrying; how good you are in imagining things!" That was Natarajan's ultimate weapon.

'Poor mother, poor father,' Rajam bemoaned their trepidation. She pitied the forthcoming trio who seem to have been already trapped between her two parents. 'Is it a problem even when the visitors are decent and well-meaning people?' Rajeswari could only chuckle at her parents arguing with one another. Yet, uneasiness enveloped her too!

Will the guests be staying in her home? Good heavens, then she wouldn't be able to move around freely at her own will! Must she give up playing and singing? Does it mean she would be holed up in the house for two full days? Impossible! Rajam needed to rehearse for an important role in the year-end school drama; it might not be that important, but she had signed up for a class in the Girl Guides Camp. She had to learn some important techniques in bandaging wounds; there would be a competition too. No, she couldn't miss the school!

On the other hand, it mightn't be a bad idea to stay put at home, quiet and disciplined, she thought. Why act as if she had been let loose with no order and control? Especially, when that young man Raghupathy would be at their home . . . "My God, please save me."

The day dawned when the guests would arrive. That's the only thought Rajeswari had as she woke up.

Natarajan approached the music teacher as he walked in. "Are you planning to be here tomorrow and the day after, sir?" he asked in a voice with a touch of humor.

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"Remember the gentleman who visited us some time ago and praised Rajam's music? Tonight, his son, daughter and wife are visiting us. I want them to think highly of *Rajabai's music* - even better than the father." Natarajan paused for a moment before asking with a marked interest: "Tell me, is *atana*, a *raga* or a composition?"

Sarma smiled: "Why, it's a *raga*."

"Rajam can handle it? Please ask her to sing that. Does she know that *raga*?" Natarajan smiled as he made the request, but his tone betrayed his seriousness too.

"Rajam is not skilled enough to elaborate on a *raga*," the teacher explained. "She's only interested in singing film songs. When she has time on her hand, on her own, she never seems to get into the mood to practice any *raga*. Still, she can render *kritis* in *atana* flawlessly and I will make her sing."

Rajeswari heard their conversation standing a little away.

'What is this? Will they ask me to sing in front of them?' she wondered. 'It can't be. They are not coming here for some boy-meets-the girl interview. The boy will not sit facing me. I don't mind others. The boy will hear my voice as if he's listening to a radio! That's good enough and I won't be nervous.'

Now Sarma came up to Rajeswari and fondly addressed his disciple. "I believe, by god's grace, that my hope that you would perform in a concert, has finally arrived. May the distinction you have achieved through brief performances in our local gatherings help you to attain even more honors with wider audience in Tamil Nadu?" He sat down on the mat.

"Come, sit down," he told her. "You may sing *pakkala nilabadi* . . ."

'Why do I have to sing the favorite of the boy's father?' Rajeswari wondered. 'Is it not important that I choose the best song in *atana* I can handle?' She also reflected on the possibility that she might dislike and reject the boy - in which case all her reservations would come to nothing. Reassured, she sat down

when the teacher asked her, "How about *Ela Nee Dayaraadu in atana?*"

Rajeswari, who had been keeping herself cheery and in good spirits, was seized by inexplicable fear as soon as her father left for the railway station to receive the visitors. The children had gone to bed, and she too felt drowsy. She was determined to stay awake: she dusted off her text books and re-shelved them; set up a bouquet of flowers on a table in the living room, and picked up a book to read. She knew reading would actually step up sleepiness; restless, she didn't feel like doing anything else. Her mother, who had finished her errands, emerged out of the kitchen and came up to the hall. How could Rajeswari begin a conversation with her? What would you call a 'normal' conversation? Unable to pretend she was not aware of anything happening, she again sought refuge in the book. The eyelids began to narrow even as she was trying to concentrate on the text. 'Poor girl,' the mother sympathized with her. For a moment Visalam even felt like hugging her daughter and planting a kiss on her forehead. "Do you know some friends are visiting us?" she had asked with a smile. "Yes, I know all about it," Rajam said irritably, and being shy, moved away. Visalam smiled. Slowly the smile on the lips gave way to glazed eyes. Now, watching her sleeping, as she held the book in her hands, Visalam commiserated with the daughter's fondest dreams lurking in those fervent eyes.

She patted Rajeswari's shoulder.

"Dear, go in and sleep on the bed. You have fallen asleep right on the sofa!"

Rajeswari's eyes, weary from lack of sleep, darted intently. Now she forgot everything; the impending visitors as well as the young man among them. She rose and staggered to the bedroom. There were several cots, but she let her body fall on the one her younger sister was already asleep. She lay there, with an arm around her sister, and fell asleep.

Her own bed had already been made, but Rajam didn't want to sleep on it. Her intuition told her she must wake up in a short while. As far as she was concerned, if you slept on your own bed, you ought to get up only the next morning!

When Natarajan returned home with the guests his eyes wandered around the surroundings. Visalam, dressed in the nine-yard sari, unassumingly pulled tightly the free end of the sari, and greeted Saradambal, the elder woman among the



guests. Where's Rajam? Natarajan wondered: was she hiding somewhere?

Even as she was getting busy entertaining the guests, Visalam made up her mind that Raghupathy was indeed a suitable boy for Rajam. His complexion didn't match his father's; still he was fair. He was not as tall as his mother, but no one would consider him short. The rimmed spectacles bolstered his bright face. Visalam was pleased and felt he would appeal to Rajam.

Natarajan, however, didn't indulge in such opinions. He was looking forward to a setting when a crucial decision would be made – when the boy and girl meet the first time.

Raghupathy had gone to the back yard to freshen up when Natarajan went into one of the interior rooms. When Raghupathy returned, Natarajan informed him that he wanted to put away his briefcase, the traveling bag and a basket in another room, and picked up the bag and the basket. Raghupathy took his briefcase and followed him.

They both entered a dimly lit room with beds. Raghupathy, a little hesitant after watching some children sleeping and a girl in a sari on lying on a bed, slowly walked behind Natarajan, and they finally reached a corner. The nearby light was enough to confirm Raghupathy's presumption: the girl with the sari on the bed was indeed 'her'. He grew tense and shy.

Natarajan put away the items and then faced him. "That's Rajeswari," he said directing his attention to the girl, still asleep.

Raghupathy turned with trepidation and saw a very attractive girl asleep, clasping her younger sister, next to her. Her beauty wouldn't let him take his eyes away from her; but how long can he stare? He shifted his look at the other children.

The next instant, Natarajan switched on the room light.

The light and chatter now woke up Rajam, who had gone to bed for a catnap, lifted her head up, noticed her father and the young man, and sprang to her feet. She fled from the scene in panic even as she was patting her tousled hair.

Natarajan noticed the delight and surprise on Raghupathy's face.

"Shall we have dinner?" he asked and Raghupathy nodded his assent.

Visalam, all by herself, undertook the task of serving dinner to the guests; Rajam was not accustomed with such chores.

Visalam talked Saradambal into joining others for dinner and handled the formal feast with flair and grace.

Rajam entered the kitchen only after the guests were done with their dinner. She noticed Saradambal and Bhavani in a corner keenly observing her; she hesitated to approach them. She turned around, picked up the leaves to be discarded and cleaned up the floor.

"You better have your dinner," Saradambal urged Visalam.

"I will, shortly," Visalam told her, and added, "Do you want a few more betel leaves? It's not the best quality – not as good as the stuff from South - do you like it?" "Oh, this is also good," replied the other woman. Satisfied, Visalam sat down for her meals.

It was only when she saw Visalam setting up the small bowls of *rasam* and vegetable dishes beside her that Rajam came up with a bright idea.

Relaxed, she quietly served *chutney* and *appalam* to her mother. Unable to talk to the newcomers, and unable to go to the hall, Rajam found comfort being around her mother!

The mother was delighted to see her daughter now lively and full of zip; she came up with an idea: why not ask Rajam to serve her the full meal? That way, the visitors would be pleased to discern that Rajam didn't hate to do domestic chores. And today, Visalam found out that Rajam didn't seem averse to carry out household errands, either. Visalam could ask her and Rajam won't refuse!

"Would you like to serve me dinner?" she asked her.

"Oh, I will," replied Rajam, excited and assured by her mother's demand. Indeed, she could serve the whole meal, why didn't she think of that in the first place? The dinner progressed with Visalam, now and then, engaging Saradambal in chitchat. Rajam too, occasionally, cast her glance at Bhavani. Bhavani, while not joining the two elder women in conversation, sat, silently knitting a sweater and, sporadically, observing Rajam. That didn't daunt Rajam who responded with a friendly overture.

Visalam was floating in the air. Considerate and warming to the guests, she said, "It's already getting late; looks like you will miss sleep tomorrow night as well. Is it absolutely essential that you have to return home tomorrow by the same train? Why don't you leave the day after tomorrow, with a day's rest here?"

"No, there's no way we can change our plans," began Saradambal, and continued. "Once planned, my husband

doesn't like to change plans. As a matter fact I thought it would be difficult for us to break this journey on our way home because we are actually traveling with a lot of bags and suitcases, but my husband insisted that he had already informed your husband of our arrival, so we couldn't afford any changes. What can we do? Even after many years of a marriage, the wife must always obey her husband." What Saradambal began in a patronizing tone concluded with an excuse of total surrender. Visalam was moved.

'Didn't her husband abruptly resign from his job? How did she feel? Poor thing, it must have been quite tough on her', Visalam thought.

The cue increased her esteem for Saradambal.

## 5

The time was past midnight when all the household members retired to their beds. Still, invariably, everyone felt some thought festering inside and robbing the night's sleep.

Natarajan recollected his dramatic gesture of the day while relishing Rajam's bewilderment and the glow on Raghupathy's face when he first cast his look on Rajam.

There was no need to guess what was on Visalam's mind. 'I am glad they did stop by on their way,' she thought. 'I wish I knew what's on their mind! How long we will have to wait?' Even as anxiety seized her she couldn't help thinking, "Maybe this alliance will take place because of the head of the family; his wife doesn't look that enthusiastic. Still, these alliances just don't depend on human efforts only.' Her overwhelming feeling was one of optimism: 'Thank god, we have only one more day to go with no hitches; was I needlessly worrying that my daughter was not well equipped to handle household errands? Rajam is smart enough to shake off her childish whims and demonstrate active interest. Who knows, by the time she's married and goes to live with her in-laws, I might even train her to be an expert in running a family. Rajam has to set her mind to it. God bless her.'

Having discerned no flaws in the young man, Rajam brooded on her own shortcomings. This wasn't, after all, a case of a boy-meets-girl event; she purged from her mind the fear that, the next day, she needed to sing directly facing the boy and the others. Now the whole scene would simply be like her practicing music lessons taking a cue from her teacher. Now she had a different tack, and steadied herself: 'I shall imagine I am performing in a studio for radio audience – delivering my best with confidence and no fear. I am sure my music will gain more

worth and appreciation in Tamil Nadu in years to come. I may not perform in concerts, but I will, surely and competently, handle the radio recitals. Tomorrow's performance is going to be a rehearsal to my future." Happily preoccupied in far-away thoughts, Rajam slowly drifted into sound sleep.

It was only after his first encounter with Rajam that Raghupathy realized the import of his father's words. Rajam's face had the innocent look of a child, still it evoked deep adoration. Raghupathy, a young man of twenty-three, couldn't shrug off the charm he witnessed on that sleepy, weary face. Until now he had never gone to see and pick a bride; even now he had not entertained such an idea. But, he knew, his marriage was very much on his father's mind.

The girl is indeed a beauty; but what about her music? Does she sing tolerably well? You can't expect much of music from *Andhras*, anyway! But hasn't his father said the girl's singing and playing the violin as very pleasing to the ears?

Raghupathy of *Ramayana* was wedded to monogamy. This Raghupathy too saw monogamy as an ideal; he favored the idea of seeing only one girl, take her as a wife and lead a happy life. He didn't want to see himself in a situation where he would be meeting with many girls before deciding on a bride. He made up his mind; let Rajeswari, as his wife, mold him as an ideal man, like Raghupathy, of *Ramayana*. My Rajeswari is the ideal one!

Instinctively, his mind turned to God, and he affirmed. 'I will have no objection if *Amma* approves this alliance. He remembered Saradambal's words in a letter addressed to him with a tinge of disappointment masked under gentle wit: 'Am I not supposed to introduce that girl as my daughter-in-law? Your assertion alone will not be enough!'

Saradambal too didn't sleep for a long time. Certainly she found nothing to complain about Rajeswari or her mother Visalam. But she was distressed over her husband's handing the situation.

'He had already made up his mind to take Rajeswari as our daughter-in-law; still, he suggested, rather generously, that I go and see the girl!' She rankled in her heart. 'Hasn't he taken me for granted? What happens if I now reject this alliance? He always wants to have his way! I wonder if I have any say in these matters . . .'

Only positive thoughts engender peace of mind; where is freedom from strife when the mind is seized with thoughts born out of disquiet and stubbornness? Exasperating, Saradambal

could hardly get any sleep. She had nothing to complain against the girl her husband had already chosen. Could she find fault just out of spite? She can, but will that be fair? Was this stubbornness really warranted? How does it help if a wife tries to 'punish' her husband for some past lapse his duty? Saradambal had always steadfastly respected his judgment and followed his advice. Why should she now defy him and commit a sinful transgression?

Saradambal could sleep only after her rebellious mind sought and embraced the role of a traditional Indian wife.

'Let me wait and see what the boy says,' she thought before drifting into slumber. 'Why should I stand in his way?'

As for Bhavani, her mind was mostly preoccupied with Calcutta. She thought Raghupathy would consent to marry Rajeswari; if not, she had no intention of persuading him. She was still smarting over missing her husband's company.

Visalam was the first to rise early the next morning. She didn't wake up Rajam to practice her music lessons. Tardy on that day, Rajam sprang from her bed and was horrified to see that other beds were empty. 'What a shame, I woke up after everybody else in the house!' she chided herself. She rolled up the bed, patted and fixed her messy hair before a mirror and walked to the living room. As she cast her glance toward the person sleeping in a corner room facing the street, she was relieved that she did wake up before Raghupathy did, avoiding her any embarrassment.

She was relieved noticing Bhavani in the back yard still brushing her teeth. Rajam gulped her regular, morning dose of cocoa with no concern for its taste and threw herself and got busy to compensate for her sluggishness. She took a quick bath, dragged her younger sister and gave her a wash; then she fed milk to her younger baby brother. When Raghupathy went to the backyard Rajam walked to the front porch. When he went to the front porch, she hung around the rear foyer.

Around nine, Bhavani opened up to Rajam; she noticed and evinced interest in Rajam's school texts and music books. Rajam suggested they go to the terrace.

"Oh, do you have a terrace too? Looks like a palatial house! The rent must be quite high!" Saradambal interrupted with astonishment.

Rajam wanted to reply but chose to remain silent. Visalam didn't want to leave Saradambal with an impression that she has been ignored, so she stopped her chore, and told her: "We have been living in this house the last sixteen years. The rent is inexpensive too. It has been increasing over the years, but now it is only twenty rupees."

When Saradambal said, "You have two taps, and you have electricity too! This is a grand house," Visalam couldn't be happier.

Visalam hesitated if she should enquire Saradambal about their house when Saradambal preempted her. "Our home in the village was huge like a palace, but my husband sold it and bought a smaller house. I was against the idea, but he wouldn't listen. Didn't I tell you? After living in a big house now I find the move hard to adjust."

Visalam tried to ease her feelings. "You are right. When we first moved in we used to think it was a very big house; now, we wish there were two additional rooms. Whether big or small, this is still a rented house; even a small one, if we own it, becomes a status symbol, don't you agree? Our lady neighbor was telling me the other day that, with the rent money we have been paying over the years, we could have actually bought two houses. Sometimes I keep wondering if she was right."

Saradambal was in no mood to climb the stairs, so Rajam and Bhavani made their way to the terrace. Bhavani noticed a soap box there and asked with curiosity: "Rajam, do you use this brand? I use only sandalwood soap. My brother likes to try different brands."

"My father would often experiment with several brands," said Rajam, "but some of them don't work well with me. My god, my acne has turned so bad! Last year my face was not this bad."

Bhavani let out a mild laughter. "I was told *Appa* had never bought any soap at all; my brother, till he was twelve, had never used a soap. Then, one day he cried and finally *Appa* relented and said the soap industry had begun functioning in our own country. That's why my brother is crazy about soaps, and I am used to them since seven."

Rajam joined Bhavani in her laughter. She wanted to say she has been using soap from her childhood but became tongue-tied.

"I have heard people say that using soap is bad for pimples," Rajam continued, then calmly vented her frustration: "Without the soap the face would look even worse!"

Then Bhavani spoke about the sari her husband had recently bought from Delhi. Rajam watched her face keenly, wondering how a young woman could be so open and garrulous while talking about her husband. What if Raghupathy were her husband? 'No, I could never bring myself to talk about him like this!' she thought. She watched with fascination Bhavani taking out her eyeglasses, cleansing and putting them back before her nimble fingers continued knitting a woolen sweater.

"I started this when we left home; I want to finish it before we return home," Bhavani told her. Rajam felt encouraged to ask, "Was that the reason you have been working on it last night, as well as this morning?"

"It is so convenient and you waste no time. I take my work along when I go for any meeting or concerts; often I will be forced to sit for three or four hours. This way, we can hit two mangoes with one stone!"

Rajam's eyes sparked with appreciation, and Bhavani was pleased.

"*Amma* has been asking me to learn sewing, but . . ."

Her words were suddenly interrupted by Natarajan announcing the arrival of the music teacher. Rushing down the stairs, Rajeswari panicked as she noticed Natarajan spreading the mat on the floor. *Does she have to sing in front of everyone?*

Sullen, she asked: "*Appa*, why don't you leave the mat, as usual, in the corner?"

"No, this is more convenient," replied Natarajan. Rajeswari felt very angry. 'Is he doing this in my best interest? How will it be if I mess up, wouldn't that be wonderful? Many have said I have a booming voice that can be heard from our front porch to three houses away. Does this have to be face-to-face? My singing will be a disaster!'

On the verge of bursting into tears, Rajeswari said, "Today I won't have any music lessons."

Natarajan understood her mind; he knew what he should do next.

"Okay, as you wish." Natarajan spread the mat in the usual location. He joined Raghupathy in the porch and told him, "We'll listen to her music from here; she's bashful." Raghupathy's face turned red; he had never been familiar with these boy-meet-girl episodes.

Natarajan noticed Bhavani in the living room standing aloof from others, and told her, smiling, "You may sit close to Rajam; she will not object." Bhavani smiled, and said, "That's fine, it doesn't matter."

Natarajan watched Rajam's face, and asked her, "Why don't you invite her?" "I will," replied Rajam and vigorously nodded her head in assent.

Saradambal preferred to stay in the kitchen. She couldn't bring herself to ask Visalam to come with her to the living room. Visalam had her hands full: lunch was not yet ready; the children had already begun marching into the kitchen.

Sarma took out his bow and violin. The session began slowly and built up the speed and rhythm and pretty soon Rajam finished four songs, all suggested by Bhavani from Rajam's music book. Natarajan, relishing the music with Raghupathy in the front porch, now invited him into the house. Raghupathy demurred: "Why upset her?"

But Natarajan dragged him into the house! Rajeswari was in shock. Should she now get up and leave? Will it be the proper thing to do? Why become nervous and spoil the show? No, she would not stop singing or flee the scene. She must never let the listeners feel that she had known they had come to settle on Rajeswari's qualifications as a bride and their daughter-in-law; she would simply ignore their presence as inconsequential and finish her task. Otherwise, her music will surely fail.

Rajam dared to look at her father who seated Raghupathy directly facing her. She has handled the situation with poise, yet she was also seized by an eerie feeling because Raghupathy had, just then, unfolded a newspaper he had brought with him, held it against his face and began reading it.

Natarajan was baffled, to say the least

When Rajam sang the next song she felt her tongue drying up, and she swallowed her saliva; she knew her elaboration of the *raga* was less than perfect, and glanced at Raghupathy.

Sarma told her, "Don't be afraid! You may continue," and Rajam thanked him. She has often heard her teacher remark that there's a huge difference between music and its delivery. How come I keep forgetting his words? she thought. She grew more edgy when she finished the song. 'It was acceptable but not good enough,' she felt when Sarma was telling Raghupathy, "That composition she sang in *atana* was the one I taught her last week. I understand you like *atana*," and smiled.



"Why, I think even others like *arabi* and *ritigowla* are fine *ragas*," Raghupathy replied, and went back to reading the newspaper.

Rajeswari was surprised at Raghupathy's knowledge in Carnatic music. "Let's now switch to violin," the teacher said and Rajam and Sarma began their joint recital. Just then Bhavani left for her room with her belongings; she returned when Rajam was done with a song.

"She handles violin exceptionally well," Bhavani complimented Rajeswari. "I went out because I didn't want to embarrass her if her performance ended up below my expectations. I must admit I have a hard time listening to music without making my feelings public. To tell the truth, I didn't expect her performance will be so chaste and expressive!" Her accolade, forcefully expressed, delighted Sarma, Natarajan and Rajeswari.

Sarma broke in saying, "The other day she did even better in your father's presence." Their eyes prompted Rajeswari and Raghupathy to stare at one another.

Rajeswari easily handled the next song. Visalam hurriedly came to the living room and requested Saradambal, "*Mami*, will you ask Bhavani to sing a couple of songs?" She turned to the young woman and asked, "Will you?"

Bhavani and her mother exchanged glances. Much to Rajeswari's surprise, Bhavani hesitated only for a moment before starting to sing.

Rajeswari was thrilled that Bhavani had begun even without waiting for her mother's suggestion as to what song she should sing. That was how, Rajeswari recalled, her teacher said she ought to respond when asked. How hesitant and baffled did Rajam become when she accompanied her mother to the *Kolu* during the *Navaratri* and *Dassarah* celebrations in their neighborhood where, invariably in every house, she was asked to sing! Now, frankly, you can't call Bhavani's voice melodious, yet the very spontaneity in her response impressed others. And now Rajam recalled she had learnt that very *kriti* with subtle variations and finer modulations of a phrase or two that rendered them even more pleasing to the ear; but how will it sound if she delivered them with dread and in panic?

Rajeswari looked at Bhavani in awe. When Bhavani finished the song, Sarma told Rajeswari: "See, you must learn from her; you too must learn to sing on the spur-of-the moment." He too was pleased with Bhavani's repertoire. "Please sing one more

*kriti*. Your music is very pleasing to the ears," he invited her. "Rajam would never practice without the *sruti* box or me accompanying her; she ought to follow your example. Let's listen to your singing, again."

Bhavani responded with a smile. Now Raghupathy, who has been silent all this time, propped the newspaper at his back and told his sister: "How about *kaaNa kaN kodi . . . ?*"

Bhavani began that song at once endearing herself to Rajam as an ideal musician. Rajam felt she could, never, muster herself to oblige with such boldness. To be sure, she did sing in her school functions and other public programs to raise funds. But, invariably, every time Rajeswari faced such a situation she had to pull herself together with a long preparation, rely on her teacher to push her and her mother offer her aid and comfort in her effort. Once on the stage, Rajeswari would deliver her best performance with all her strengths on full display, thanks to her long preparation and sweetness of her voice. But who would ever know what she endured before getting on the stage to face the audience?

"How I wish I was like her!" Rajeswari mused. "Then, I would be freed of all the agony." Bhavani finished *kaaNa KaN kodi* and ruefully acknowledged that day her voice was not cooperating with her. That was something Rajam confessed to whenever she had been invited to sing.

Visalam said, "Tamil compositions are so pleasant to the ears; unfortunately, Rajam knows not a single one of them." This revelation must have perturbed Sarma who followed her with an explanation: "Tamil *kritis* were not that widespread when I lived in the South; now they seem to have become quite common."

Raghupathy let down the newspaper and faced Sarma. "Did you say widespread?" He asked. "As a matter of fact, now, the Tamil *kritis* are the only game in the town! As for the Thyagaraja's compositions, they have lost their importance!"

Why does he look so worked up? Rajam wondered. Sarma, calmly, answered him: "Still, one must admit that the Tamil *kritis* generally conform to the format and construction of the Thyagaraja's *kritis*."

"That sounds as though Tamil composers were helpless to come up with their distinct makeup and construction in their works," Raghupathy retorted. "In the future, classical music in Tamil Nadu belongs only to Tamil compositions! As for the *kritis*

of *Thyagaraja's*, it is only a question of time before the *Andhras* end up mutilating them." Sarma was less than pleased with that remark and his face darkened. Rajeswari noticed the signs of triumph on Raghupathy's face, the eyes shining brightly. Was it not true that a young woman is always impressed by a young man's pride and rashness?

Natarajan wanted to defuse the situation at hand. "Sarma *Garu* is well-versed in both languages; he admires Tamil music too. It is natural that Tamils would like to promote Tamil music." He was familiar with the on-going controversy over the Telugu and Tamil *kritis* widely debated in the popular in media and public.

Rajeswari was mostly concerned with her plans for the next day. They would be there the next day too, so also her teacher. She avowed she would handle her singing with no hang-ups.

The rest of the day, newer experiences awaited Rajam. She insisted, with some doggedness, that she too would accompany Saradambal, Bhavani and Raghupathy when they went out for shopping; she couldn't help enjoying the wisecracks that Raghupathy hurled informally all that time. When a shopkeeper carelessly put down Saradambal's name, he joked, "*Amma*, did you notice on the bill he wrote your name as Sraarddambal?" Rajeswari tried to suppress her laughter - to no avail. Raghupathy too couldn't fail noticing the young woman who relished his sense of humor.

When Rajam came up to the porch with rice for a beggar whom Raghupathy was admonishing, he asked her in awe, "So much rice!" Rajam simply looked at him, as if saying, "Did you assume we won't offer alms?", and proudly walked back.

Noticing Raghupathy putting on face powder, she wondered, 'Even men seem to like face powder! I am a woman and I use it only when I don a new sari!' Raghupathy, spotting her, immediately started wiping his chin rapidly, rubbed his chin nervously. Even as they were acting as if ignoring each other, they now settled on following their parents' guidance. Rajeswari grew bashful and wondered if she could sing without being self-conscious in Raghupathy's presence the next day.

## 6

Returning home, after seeing guests off, Natarajan hoped to see his wife in good spirits. He asked, "You are relieved now?" Visalam wasn't so easily reassured.

“How can I stop worrying?” Visalam began. “Women, by and large, belong to one category, but men are quite different! The boy’s mother, till the last moment, was maintaining certain aloofness. Yet, this is interesting! She thought the *appalam* in the store looked too ruddy and told me she would happily send me some through Bhavani on her way back home! But she wouldn’t even hint that our two families are about to begin a new relationship! I was feeling happy that Rajam was acting chic and smart in their presence, but you acquiesced and let her go with them for shopping. I wonder what they were actually thinking; only god will show us the way.”

Rajam desperately wanted her parents to keep talking. Quiet and reserved, she wondered how she could continue to be her former self with them. After all, she had behaved as if she’s fully aware of her parents’ desires and the visitors’ intentions! Didn’t she stop rocking the cradle, singing her favorite film songs, getting mad at her siblings and . . . turning herself into a new, obedient girl? Even Visalam couldn’t help remarking about it!

That awareness seemed to grow stronger in the following days. To come to think of it, it was a little embarrassing to keep listening to her parents. The topic would be always about her and the guests. What if her parents accused her of eavesdropping?

Natarajan, on the other hand, acted on purpose and he deliberately dropped hints and veiled messages for Rajeswari – but she was oblivious to them!

The visitors had left by train around the time they had arrived the previous night. Their visit lasted only a day but, to Rajam, it was a memorable one. If the burgeoning leaves are a sign that a plant had taken deep roots in the soil, so was the quiet smile on Rajam’s face, a revelation that the memory of Raghupathy had inhabited her heart, fully. Rajam was thrilled, the next day, when Sarma confided to Visalam, “I did notice the boy was keenly enjoying Rajam’s music – he was nodding his head behind the newspaper!” Her face aglow, Rajam looked down in obeisance. New and riotous imagination, suddenly, seized her mind.

Barring his mother’s objection, Raghupathy had made up his mind to marry Rajam. Needless to say his elusive posture endeared him to his mother.

When Ammani, the woman from their neighborhood, enquired his mother, "Is it true you had gone to see a bride for your son?" She also directed a question at Raghupathy, "Did you like the girl?" Raghupathy asked in a teasing voice, "What girl are you talking about?" When the question was repeated, he dismissed it with disdain: "I am not sure if there was ever a girl in the house we visited!" His rejoinder brought a smile to his mother much to his satisfaction.

Ammani would not let them off so easily. "*Mama* already told us that you had gone to see a bride," she continued her interrogation, and Raghupathy had a ready answer, "Then why don't you ask him yourself?" Again, Saradambal had an approving look on her face.

"Well, *Mama* can say anything he wants," Saradambal protested. "Did he ever ask me or the boy about this alliance? Does it mean everyone ought to agree with him? Bhavani is a daughter, so she consented to her father's decision and had no objection to marry his choice. Raghupathy is a son; is he a coward who would simply marry the girl of his father's choice? Let the boy say – if he wants – that he is not for this alliance! Where would that leave his father? He shouldn't assume everyone would abide by his decision!"

Raghupathy keenly listened to every word uttered by his mother. He also grasped the anger and frustration lurking behind every sentence.

Saradambal's whole life had been beset with unfulfilled dreams – one might call them unpretentious needs. Many had concluded that she, closely bound to her family with a popular husband, son and daughter, could have no complaints. Nothing could be further from the truth. As a young wife, Saradambal had to struggle with the dreadful days of her husband's unemployment, and those memories scarred her forever. Deep in her heart she nursed a feeling that her husband had turned totally indifferent to her. Over the years she grew bitter and cynical and, when things seemed to go against her wishes, her rage was in full display – like a volcano ready to explode.

She had been hurt that she never attained the status of a typical housewife. What fame and glory had her husband enjoyed in the prime of his life! Doraiswamy gave up his position - submitting his resignation letter with no reservation whatsoever while uttering no word, even privately, of his commitment to the Gandhian ideals. Was there ever a worse indignity a wife had to

endure – more shameful than a husband with no job? Doraiswamy hated working for the British government, so he sought a position in a private college but, pretty soon, gave up that too. What a horror! Later, two children were born and Doraiswamy stopped hurling veiled threats of abandoning the family to pursue a cause dearer to him. Still, deliverance proved elusive to Saradambal. Eventually, she did find peace of mind because the children and the family obligations anchored the father to the family. Otherwise, Doraiswamy would have simply walked out on her to serve the Mahatma at Wardha. Still, unsteady financial situation and lack of a job took a heavy toll on the family.

Fortunately, God was kind enough to guarantee the children would be spared of any hardship. Long before they had fully grown-up, Doraiswamy started enjoying fame and popularity with the public. Saradambal, the plain and simple housewife sporting ornaments, modest and inexpensive, was respected and honored as the wife of a nationalist, thanks to the prevailing fervor for independence propelled by Gandhiji's compassion.

Doraiswamy, even as he crisscrossed the country, remained in constant touch with his family; his wife lived like a flower that stayed with the plant without ever shrinking or wilting. It is a law of nature that a serene mind is a refuge to sunny outlook and buoyant thoughts. Thus, Saradambal put her protests and gripes out of mind; to her, Doraiswamy was an exemplary husband who lived away from his wife - not to indulge in some wayward behavior like some men - but to carry on a sacred mission for the welfare of others; he put his country's interests ahead of his own.

Doraiswamy held fast to his principles when Bhavani was to be married off. He finalized the alliance with a family that found fault with the bride. "They have to find out that she has none of the shortcomings," was his assertion. He didn't worry how lavishly to perform the wedding. "I can surely exceed their expectations. But I will never – never - offer even a *paisa* as dowry" He believed a word, once given, could never be retracted – come what may. So, Doraiswamy didn't go about looking after another groom for Bhavani who was interested in marrying the boy her father selected. That's why Saradambal didn't voice any objection. Luckily, it was not long after the wedding that Satyamurthy had a job transfer and his wife moved away to begin a new life with him in the North – thus precluding any hassles from her in-laws. Though Saradambal missed her dear daughter, she was pleased Bhavani was leading a happy life.

'Now, how different things would be regarding Raghupathy's marriage?' Saradambal started thinking.

That afternoon Doraiswamy asked Raghupathy, "Have you made up your mind? What should I write to them?"

"I am not at all in favor of marriage now; why this hurry?"

"Are you telling me your marriage can wait or that you don't like the girl?"

"You may make both assumptions," Raghupathy said with a chuckle. Saradambal, noting the smile on his face, pleased, smiled to herself.

"Well, let them know that you are presently not for marriage. They can wait for a year. Meanwhile, why don't we confirm our approval?"

"Let them look for a new boy – if they want. I can think of marriage only after finishing my studies and get a job."

Apparently her son's pretext did not sit well with Saradambal. She let out a deep sigh - maybe thinking, 'My son won't be irresponsible like his father. The daughter-in-law would bring prosperity to our house; she will not suffer like I did.'

"Well, give it a good thought and make up your mind," Doraiswamy advised his son. "Once we decide on this alliance, we may wait awhile. The girl is only fifteen years old." Instantly Saradambal changed her mind.

"If this is the alliance we want, the marriage must take place this year," Saradambal told Bhavani. "Should Raghupathy get married only after he found a job, he will move away to set up his family. I will be nobody in the eyes of the girl's parents!"

"That's how people change their mind as times change," Bhavani said, laughing. "Remember what you were saying ten days ago?"

That evening, Doraiswamy, wearing spectacles and a pen poised in one hand, approached the family members, and said, "Today is Friday and I want to let them know our decision. Raghu, what should I tell them?"

The father's question was not unexpected. "Does it sound like asking for someone's opinion?" Saradambal murmured to her daughter, but soon her face beamed with joy.

"I do think I ought to finish my studies first and then get a job." Raghupathy explained. "If they are in rush, let them happily look for another alliance."

"Who is saying they are in a rush?"

"I also want to know what *Amma* thinks. She has sound judgment in these matters."

"If you do not like the girl, say so. Don't shift the responsibility to your mother!"

"The girl is very nice indeed; does it mean I should marry her?"

"Then, why did I ask you to break the journey?"

"That was a friendly gesture, I would say."

"Should that now turn hostile?"

"*Amma* knows everything. She knows my visit to see the girl was abrupt and casual. She's the best to judge and sort out other matters."

Doraiswamy was aware that Saradambal, was in an adjacent room listening to their conversation all this time. "Did you hear him? What do you think?" he asked her.

Saradambal had a ready answer. "I think he has nothing against the girl; I too feel the same way. If he is happy, I am happy too."

Saradambal knew her husband always had the last word. Now, he did it again, and she was a little unhappy about it.

Raghupathy was taken aback. Doraiswamy asked, "Bhavani, what do you think?"

"Shall I dab a little Kunkumam on the letter, *Appa*?" she asked.

"Good, do it right away!"



'She does have a heart of gold,' Raghupathy thought of his mother. 'Whatever maybe her personal opinion, at the end, she respects others' opinions and leaves them to their devices. She's not somebody who talks sweet and then tries to assert her own will. When it comes to conciliation and compromise, even Father does not rise to her level.'

"Raghupathy is willing to take Rajam as his wife, his opinion is total and absolute," Doraiswamy informed Natarajan in a handwritten letter. "Just as our nation is now eagerly looking forward to *Swarajya Lakshmi*, we are also eager to welcome *Rajalakshmi* into our household." He showed the letter to Raghupathy before mailing it, and the son reminded him: "You forgot to ask if the girl gave her consent!"

Doraiswamy smiled. "Do you know Natarajan's letter followed you on your way back home? Apparently, the moment you folks boarded the train, he dropped this letter in the R.M.S. Read this!" He handed him a letter.

Raghupathy was stunned. "I would like to think that the boy and the girl are in mutual accord," the letter read, and went on. "My daughter accompanied your son, wife and daughter for shopping and when she returned home she's full of excitement. When the trio wanted to visit the Sambasiva Iyer family, Rajam too insisted she would escort them. I showed Raghupathy Rajeswari's text books and her progress report. 'Every month, she had scored excellent marks in a different subject,' he was saying. 'So, with a little more interest, she might be able to get the best score in all the subjects.' How true! One month her score in science was noted as rather poor, but the very next month she came on the top of the class in science. Rajam exemplifies the truth that one can achieve success with dedication and hard work - and that was exactly what your son thought of her. Since she met with Raghupathy Rajam's eyes show a new sparkle and her consent - expressed through the eyes - is even more meaningful than a verbal communication. Her expressive eyes always reveal her inner thoughts: if she had misplaced or lost a pen, you will see the guilt in those very eyes; when she gets mad with the younger brother, the eyes will also reveal her sympathy lurking deep in her heart. When she invites someone to play 'carom', she would convey her message with her eyes rather than in words."

The letter concluded with a happy note.

"Our wishes will bear fruit if Raghupathy too is willing for this alliance."

"When did he actually write this?" wondered Raghupathy. "He does everything with a dramatic touch!" Silently, he picked his tennis racket and left the house with Rajam lodged in his mind.

7

Natarajan was thrilled.

"Visalam, the worrywart! Now Rajeswari has turned into *Rajalakshmi!* And also a *Swarajya Lakshmi!* You better relish the news and stay cheerful - at least for a couple of days. Afterward, you may, again, start worrying over the wedding preparations." Shouting and visibly pleased with himself he paced the house, from the front porch to the backyard, spreading the news to the other family members.

The boy, busy sketching the floor with the chalk, told his mother, "I want to tell the good news to the neighborhood lady," and darted out.

"Raghupathy Uncle and Rajam are getting married!" The younger sister Radhai clapped both hands and jumped on the table.

Visalam tried to imagine how things would have looked different if the news had been unfavorable.

Natarajan was thinking, 'Why is there no mention of celebrating the wedding this year?' He wrote back graciously, "Our home is in a festive mood; we are eagerly looking forward to the great event." Natarajan thanked him with his own response.

"Akka, you are getting married to Raghupathy Uncle? Does it mean you will be sitting next to him in the wedding ceremony?" asked the little brother.

"Stop teasing me!" screamed Rajam, and the boy scrambled.

'She might be shy, but why's she acting so rude and irritating? The letter seems to have brought neither smile nor endorsement from Rajam; she keeps fuming at others, even at little Kannan. Is she against this alliance?' Natarajan began to wonder.

But Visalam did find out what Rajam was thinking. But how? Through a brief note! She's after all, a professor's wife, wasn't, she?

"Rajam, there is a note under the soapbox, how about reading it?" was her advice and Rajam, hesitant and a little apprehensive, picked it up. She recalled an earlier incident when her mother handed a letter and moved away while still in tears. "This afternoon you did not come home and went straight to Suryam's house because Father was mad at you," the note read. "Do you realize how anxious and worried know I was?"

And now . . .

"Neither your father nor I have anything against Raghupathy. We respect your sentiment and are not going to force you against your will . . . If you are not for this alliance, you can leave a note here; reply to this note; if consenting, do nothing!"

"What a smart mother!" Rajeswari was in awe. Her heart quivered with delight like a blade of grass.

"Rajam, you are indeed blessed! A fitting husband and in-laws you deserve!" said Sarma.

"Hello Natarajan! What's my reward? Remember, Doraiswamy first came to my home. You got to know him then. Now you have a son –in-law too! I am the reason you got lucky!" That was how Sambasiva Iyer staked his claim.

"Did Sambasiva Iyer really say *that*?" Sarma asked Natarajan. "I believe my music training was actually the reason behind this alliance!"

"I believe my college, the center of my life, has also played a key role in my daughter's destiny," Natarajan said, laughing. "Based on my long association with it, I can hear it speaking to me."

"This is really the god's will and everything worked out fine," concluded Visalam in a philosophical note.

Rajeswari settled on her own premise: the marriage came about only because she and Raghupathy found accord.

Rather than deliberate on Raghupathy's consent it pleased Rajam to reflect that he was indeed the right man for her. It never occurred to her that some suitor, one day, might reject her

- only because she had never known anyone finding fault with her. Yet, the truth must be faced that with her mother's obvious concern and the conspicuous aloofness in Saradambal, Rajeswari had nursed some second thoughts about the final outcome. That's why she felt more comforted rather than surprised when the letter arrived conveying Raghupathy's consent and Doraiswamy's happy wedding news.

It pleased her that she was marrying someone she deserved and that her life will be soon linked with the family of a well known patriot; what was even more welcome, her musical talent and histrionics will find fulfillment in the days to come.

How happy was Sarma that Rajeswari would be married into a family that, traditionally, loved classical music! Rajeswari wished she could learn some Tamil compositions from Bhavani; didn't Raghupathy have a special liking for Tamil masterpieces? She can join Bhavani and perform on radio! Compared to Rajam, Bhavani's voice was low-pitched, but their combination would surely add a pleasant ring to a joint performance. Again, collaboration with Bhavani would mean Rajam could perform in public concerts and without her teacher being present. Sarma, obviously, could not accompany her to all her concerts.

Rajam had also heard that Bhavani's husband was well known as a flutist and a connoisseur of Carnatic music. It was said he could never memorize the actual words in a composition but would render the *ragas* extensively in an innovative style! His voice, they said, lacked charm, but it held the listeners spell bound and set them on their seats for hours! Rajam recalled her teacher's constant refrain: 'How could one ever forget the main details of any composition – its *raga*, the composer's name and its rhythm?' What was more amazing about Bhavani's husband was that he could render even some rare *ragas* without ever knowing the words!

How nice it would be if Raghupathy too could play the *mridangam*? That would be really great, Rajam thought – the entire family would be performing a concert! After the wedding, they all should plan to sit for a group photo: the vocalists at the center, Bhavani's husband, the flutist, on one side and Raghupathy, the percussion artist, at the other! Maybe Raghupathy would be averse to pose for the photo if he's not really proficient in *mridangam*; Of course, he would be right. But why shouldn't he pose with a drone box for company? Rajeswari's imagination was running riot, but beyond hoping for

a life of fame and accomplishment, no other thoughts now concerned her.

For a while, Visalam refrained from voicing any of her usual concerns to her husband lest he should get annoyed with her. But when she began to share the wedding plans with Sitamma and other women in the neighborhood, she went back to her routine of sharing her worries with her husband. Natarajan was, simply, furious.

"Maybe we should have got a letter saying they are *not* for this alliance!" he sneered. "Visalam, you are inventing problems, one after another, to torment yourself! Why don't you write to Saradambal? Ask her what she expects us to do. Remember this marriage takes place because of a very friendly atmosphere between two families; why do you harbor this negative attitude?" Visalam was not upset; she asked, a little hesitant: "Do you think I should write to her?"

"All I am saying is she would be happy to hear from you," said Natarajan riveting his eyes on her.

Visalam noticed the traces of rising anger in his face and played a clever trick. "I am asking because my handwriting is not that good. Haven't you certified my handwriting is awful?"

"Yes, I better write myself." Natarajan went back to his room upstairs.

He returned soon, handed Visalam a letter and asked her to sign it. It was a letter purportedly written by Visalam to Saradambal; Natarajan actually penned it. He was accustomed to put down his thoughts on paper, spontaneously, in big-size letters; now he deliberately made them in small-size letters as if written in a steady, thoughtful mood by a woman.

"I would have sounded a little more respectful," Visalam snapped. "You have used a measured tone. I would never say, 'I will be pleased with your response.' I would probably say 'I would feel comforted with your response.' It sounds more considerate," and laughed

"Foolish!"

"That's fine with me. I will sign it later. Let's wait for *Rahu Kalam* to end."

"Why can't you sign it before *Rahu Kalam*?"

“Once I sign the letter, you will go to the post office and mail it. You will not wait until *Rahu Kalam* lasted.”

Natarajan knew her mind. He came down the stairs after *Rahu Kalam* elapsed and handed her the letter: “Take a look; I have already signed it.”

“Good heavens, you make it sound as if *you* are addressing the lady! Rajam, can you believe what your father has done?”

Alarmed, Rajam rushed to her mother; she was not far from where Visalam was standing.

“You have signed my name, but why make it look so awkward?” Visalam protested. “Had I written myself, I might have twisted a letter, here and there, and it would show. Was it too hard for you to sign my name - straight? Even the last two letters – in a single word- are not lined up properly! Do you want me look like a fool?” Her voice was sullen.

“I don’t know what happened. I tried my best to reproduce your handwriting,” replied Natarajan while hiding his smile.

Rajam could only laugh at her father’s mock confession.

Visalam was overwhelmed with the reply to her letter from Saradambal, but it offered her no relief.

“We have nothing to say in regard to what you may offer as gifts in the wedding,” Saradambal had written. “You may do what you feel is necessary. I can only suggest you do what is fit and appropriate for the occasion. As far as the savories and snacks are concerned, please have them cooked in ghee, not coconut oil.”

“There is no need for you to buy or make *appalam*,” the letter continued. . “I can make them for you. The ones I had prepared for my son’s *upanayanam* were huge; they covered the whole banana leaf – much to the surprise of everyone! I would like to have the same kind of *appalam* for his wedding too. I can offer you two-thousand *appalam*. You may arrange for a traditional wedding feast; the blessings from the Brahmins and the priests will, finally, accrue to our children’s’ goodwill.”

Peace, still, eluded Visalam. “She writes we are the best judge of how the wedding is to be performed; what are we supposed to do? Let us invite my aunt from the village for help; she knows everything.”

Natarajan gave no reply. Perched on the cradle he listened to Visalam grumbling one thing after another. Piqued and a little annoyed, he said, "Looks like we are not going to celebrate the wedding in this house," and angrily walked out.

## 8

Soon Rajeswari's wedding preparations began - but not at Natarajan's house. The venue was to be the house of Jagatpati Iyer - a friend of Natarajan's in the groom's hometown in Tamil Nadu. The decision came about as a consensus among friends and relatives of the bride's and bridegroom's families. .

Jagatpati Iyer offered assistance beyond the venue and his hospitality. Doraiswamy handled most of the responsibilities leaving Natarajan with only a few minor tasks. Soon Visalam's aunt from the village showed up. "It will be a child's play if we dispense with making the *appalam* in a marriage!" she declared. Visalam marveled as she continued watching the aged woman settling herself beside large stoves and frying in ghee the huge *murukkus* in batches. Doraiswamy and Natarajan often met with one another to firm up the wedding plans; Raghupathy was not much in evidence. Bhavani showed up a few times - mostly to talk about the saris and other issues. Rajam too was open and accommodating with others but she was fretting inside. The change of place - new climate, new surroundings - scared her. What if she could not even talk? "I feel stifled, I am not sure if I can sing anymore!" she complained to her aunt. "Can you get me *kashayam* for cough?"

She knew pretty soon her music teacher would show up and insist she sing in the wedding. What a horror! How could she sing? She already feels gagged!

One day Bhavani invited Visalam and Rajeswari to her home for selection of silk saris from among those from a cloth merchant in the city.

Rajeswari went along though a little wary that Raghupathy might show up; she was relieved he was nowhere to be seen when they arrived. The mother and daughter checked out a few items and, finally, Rajeswari settled on a selection and showed Visalam her preference: a deep-blue sari with maroon art border.

Bhavani let out a giggle and ran headlong into the house shrieking, "Brother!" She returned after a few minutes. Dismayed, Visalam wondered what was so funny. Saradambal explained, "This was the sari that Raghupathy too saw some time ago." Rajeswari, bashful, murmured, "He liked it too?" The

merchant smiled back when Bhavani was still relishing the scene.

A few seconds elapsed before the merchant added his own comment: "Raghupathy *Iyaru* saw this sari and asked who would actually like it; now, this lady wants to buy it. So it proves that my choice of saris for the wedding is right on the target!"

The merchant spoke in a manner of praising Rajeswari but she felt ill at ease, and her face darkened. As Bhavani, finally, selected saris acceptable to the tastes of her brother and Rajeswari, and sent the merchant away, the resonance from a *nadaswaram* was heard in the vicinity.

"Bhavani, the guests will be here soon!" Doraiswamy told her. "Please escort them to our home and make sure they are served betel leaves, nuts and fruits,"

Amid resounding musical instruments, accompanied by close and elderly family members, the young couple now entered the house; they had just then finished the ritual of *paaligai*. When Bhavani, carrying the *aarathi* plate, was ready to welcome them, she whispered to Rajeswari, "You may sing now, we can proceed with the *aarathi*." Rajam struggled not to snivel when, suddenly, an elder woman afar, called Bhavani aloud and wanted her immediate presence; so, luckily, Rajam was saved from further embarrassment.

Rajam also didn't sing during the welcoming ceremony that followed; again, the same elder woman, carrying the plate at the other end, did. When Bhavani went out to cast off the plate's contents, Rajeswari heard her grumble, "Raghupathy *Anna* won't keep quiet; he will surely ask me why I sang this particular song! That was the reason why I didn't want to sing at all!"

Rajeswari knew Bhavani was fond of singing and that she always sang with no protest or prompting from others. Yet she dare not face any disapproval from Raghupathy! Rajam took a breath.

The truth of the matter was that Rajeswari had no idea what actually lay behind Bhavani's dithering.

Satyamurthy, Bhavani's husband, was a connoisseur in Carnatic music and Bhavani was very proud of him. At no time ever had her husband disparaged her singing. It was Raghupathy who, often, critiqued her music but Bhavani had never tried to probe his mind. It was only when Bhavani chose to



sing a Telugu *kriti* Raghupathy would ask her in a derisive tone: "Can't you sing some other song?" He was fanatically in love with Tamil songs!

If this eluded even Bhavani, how could one expect Rajam to divine the real reason?

Similar episodes, in so far as her music was concerned, occurred in the days ahead.

One day, Jagatpati Iyer's wife came down and told Rajam she would teach her a *nalangu* song; she began singing it even before being asked; the bride greets the bridegroom at the altar with, what Rajeswari felt, a racy overture.

Rajam murmured that she wasn't sure if she could pronounce the words without feeling embarrassed.

The next was even worse; this, Rajam thought, had to do with the bride indulging in and recalling some of her immodest acts.

When the elder woman persisted, Rajam could only respond with horror, "*Ayyayyo!*" The woman teased her:

"How can a bride in her wedding utter profanities? Why are you scared – to learn any new songs?"

"No aunty, what I meant was I am not going to sing in the *nalangu!*"

"Why not? Then, why did you take the music lessons?"

Rajeswari could think of only one answer, but she remained silent: '*Only because Amma wanted me to learn music.*'

"Why don't you answer me? Why did you learn music if you don't want to sing in the weddings? Do you think people will simply let you off the hook?"

"Why not, how can anyone force me to sing, if I don't want to?"

"Stop arguing! Don't act stubborn and obstinate at the wedding ceremony! Do as you are told - at least for a few days: stop saying, 'I will not have the flowers tucked into my hair,' 'No special nine yards sari wrap for me,' 'I don't want to bow to each and every elder person in attendance, 'I am only interested in a

husband.” The auntie spoke the words in a harsh tone exacerbating Rajeswari’s despair.

A few days later, when another old woman, a close relative of Doraiswamy Iyer, showed up and asked Rajeswari to sing, she protested, “I can’t, I have cold and cough!” and looked at her mother.

“Then, why don’t you sing in lower *sruti*?” asked the visitor stumping Rajeswari. ‘Here is an old woman – who’s interested in music and also knowledgeable,’ Rajeswari thought; she recalled Bhavani suggestion that a change of *sruti* – from *aaram kattai* to *aindam kattai* might be a good strategy if rising to a higher pitch proved difficult. Rajam welcomed the new tactic; she even thought of sharing it with her music teacher at their next get-together. So she now reset the *sruti* and began singing in *aindu kattai*.

Some performance! It was a disaster! Her voice lacked the usual sweetness and it didn’t sound like hers at all! “My voice range didn’t go beyond *aindu kattai*!” Rajam admitted with a teary face, looking at her mother. Visalam asked the woman: “*Mami*, can you suggest some remedy? Rajam dreads every time she is asked to sing; and now it has become worse. Besides, she also has cold! Do you have any house remedy that I can try?” That plea was a smart move on her part – because it comforted Rajam while bolstering the old woman’s reputation.

“I prefer English medicine to any home-remedy,” the old woman replied. “Have you heard of . . . Pepsa? That is what I always take for cough. Let Rajam try it. It tastes like a peppermint – a candy as well as a pill! Why should we recommend *kashayam* to a bride?”

That evening, Natarajan bought a bottle of pills after Visalam gave him a taste of Rajam’s state of mind and the concern over her voice. “I did not buy this just to enable her to sing,” Natarajan told Visalam. “She is a bride and must be able to carry on a normal conversation as well.”

When Sarma wrote that he would not be able to attend the wedding Rajam was relieved and made up her mind: ‘I will not sing in the wedding, come what may!’

The first pole of the marriage *pandal* – the canopy covering the wedding venue - was put in place on an auspicious day – thus blessing the wedding venue and setting off the festivities.

The wedding-eve procession through the city streets with the bridegroom was close to entering the ceremonial venue; Rajam, alone, was seated in a room surrounded by pots of sweets, wads of betel leaves and nuts, bunches and orbs of flowers. She let out a deep sigh as she stared through a window at the pandal decorations and the altar afar. She had never set her eyes before on anything so grand and ostentatious. How Suryam, Chitti and her other Andhra friends would stand in awe if they could only watch all these decorations! Unfortunately, even her music teacher could not make it to the wedding! Rajam recalled the movies she had seen where the bride was always surrounded by numerous friends; how did she end up with nobody around her? She sits alone, all by herself, with no company to share her thoughts! The procession was on its way and she was growing tense as time advanced. For the first time in her life she had sat beside a young man; her body shivered and the face turned blood-red. Just two days ago she was asked to 'rehearse' how to seat herself in a wedding ceremony and perform a chore befitting a housewife. But Rajam erred; she sat cross-legged, placing the wrong foot in front of the other. Her aunt huddled close to Rajam's ear and reminded her of the error. 'Why do I end up doing everything wrong?' Rajam recoiled and, with her body still wincing, she looked around whence the song *vijayambike* could be heard. A young woman, beautiful and with a baby astride her waist, was singing effortlessly.

'She sings so wonderfully even without a *sruti* box!' The melody stunned Rajam and she recalled what Sarma had told her: 'It is true; people in Tamil Nadu are certainly well-versed in Carnatic music'. The thought caused her even more anguish.

'Why doesn't Rajam turn and look around the bride-groom? Natarajan wondered. He had no reason to discern her agony.

One of the aunties said she heard some women wondering why the bride was not decked out in special ornaments.

"Were they concerned they would end up with *alankrita kannikaadaanam*?" Saradambal reportedly asked. "They withheld all that at *kannikaa daanam*; why not do it now?"

'All my concerns were not without basis,' Visalam thought. 'We continue to hear complaints from here and there.' Confused, she spent a sleepless night.

Rajeswari, though tired, was in good spirits and had a sound sleep. She knew a new world would be dawning upon her within the next few hours.

'You think you are the only one scared? What about me? I too began to sweat when you sat beside me! I have never been this close to a young woman!' Rajam conjured a scene where Raghupathy was sharing his first moments with his wife. The wedding day would be a special event in her life – to be followed by several in the days to come: her ideal husband would be soon employed and he would treat his wife with love, trust, dignity and understanding.

Other rituals followed the next day: *laali*, *Oonjal*, *kannikaadaanam*, and *saptapadhi*. As the newlyweds followed their obligations demanded of them from the officiating priests and elders at the ceremony, their minds were radiant like sparkling moon.

The *nalangu* was scheduled for the afternoon.

Rajeswari had already thought of a scenario at her *nalangu*: she would protest that she didn't know what the bride was supposed to do. To be sure, that would invite chuckles from others with Raghupathy, smiling and thinking, 'How could a new bride actually say such a thing?'

But what actually happened turned out to be entirely different.

Rajeswari had heard *nalangu* was a joyful ritual and a lot of fun for the bride and bridegroom; she had seen cartoons and caricatures making fun of the scenes at the ritual.

The fumes from the altar struck Rajam fully in the face, and made her physically and mentally weary; she felt hot and feverish.

She took the garland off her neck and secured it on a nail on the nearby wall, changed her sari, and sat on a chair, totally losing her mind.

"*Amma*, I feel feverish and I want to rest for a while," she said.

Visalam watched her face keenly and realized it didn't have the cheerfulness of a new bride. Concerned, she asked Rajam to lie down on a mat at the corner of the room.

Rajam remembered her aunt's refrain that a bride should never act stubborn in any ritual, a part of the wedding ceremony. She was only worried about her musical performance in *nalangu*; she let herself be decked out in garish ornaments, her tresses tightened, even as they seemed to diminish Rajam's beauty. Wasn't she made unhappy by her obligation to wear a nine-yard sari and sit facing the fumes from the ceremonial fire? It's one thing to keep quiet in full compliance of what your elders' demand of you; it's entirely a different situation when you find yourself in an awkward posture with your voice failing and trying to sing before the bridegroom without humiliating yourself.

The guests were interested in Rajam – surveying her from head to toe. Rajam, scared to rest, Rajam sat up. All were strangers to her, she felt shy and ill at ease to look at any of them. But, there were so many of them who wanted to see her.

Her hunger was not satiated when she had her very first festive meal with her husband. A few pranksters around the couple shoved a *laddu* from Raghupathy's leaf to hers. If she had felt anything it was a sense of satisfaction that she shared her husband's spittle.

As was the custom, Rajam was to formally invite the bridegroom for *nalangu* when she felt her emotions freeze. What a ruckus did his friends make when Rajam held Raghupathy's hand and led him to the ceremony!

A friend suggested Raghupathy sing a few lines from a limerick imploring his beloved to cast a glance at him: "You have been practicing those lines for some time now, let's hear them!" Yet another wanted the bridegroom to sing an invocation on Goddess Rajarajeswari as an apt address to the bride. Rajam wondered. 'Do these friends – every one of them – have a keen sense of appreciation for music?' "I wonder how many among these are real music lovers?" The very thought was frightening. "Maybe even flies and crows in Tamilnadu have an ear for music!" she thought.

She recalled Doraiswamy's favorable response to her father's suggestion that the marriage be celebrated in the South. "I come to believe that Raghupathy too would like the company of his friends, so I welcome your idea."

Now, Raghupathy might easily dismiss Rajam's reservations as of no consequence; after all, he had been privy to her musical talents four months ago. Still, what about his friends? Won't he

feel himself disgraced in their presence? And Rajam too would be sharing his humiliation.

Rajam settled on her seat, raised her head and looked around. The venue was fully occupied; there's a harmonium on one corner, a veena and violin at the other as a young woman was seated ready to play the veena. She saw mostly young men and women. Rajam got cold feet, felt her forehead burning, her body withering and her heart grow heavier. The headache was too much to bear.

"Let the bride sing first," someone said. "We will sing when the nalangu is under way."

Rajam, tears slowly seeping into her eyes, noticed Visalam nod her head as if signaling her to sing. Rajam promptly replied, 'No,' with a mild shake of her head.

Visalam approached her daughter and whispered into her ear: "If you are scared to sing vocal, I will bring your violin, and play just one song. Sounds fair?"

Again, Rajam's response was a deliberate no.

"You always play the violin without fear, with your head bowed," Visalam reminded her. "You can *play ninu vina naa madendu* - just one is enough."

Rajam stared at the violin; no, she wouldn't touch it; her hands would surely fail her, the cacophony too harsh to one's ears. Hasn't Rajam been praised for the deftness of her fingers? How could she now risk utter humiliation?

She refused to budge.

"The boy's friends and relatives are all eager to watch you perform; how can you be so stubborn?"

Her mother was desperately entreating her on the right ear; her husband was on her left, the audience in front. The burden was on her as the eyes desperately roamed around.

"I feel feverish," she said as a tear drop rolled down her cheek.

"Aren't you comfortable, sitting? Want to lie down for a while?"

"Yes."

"You can't wait till the *nalangu* is over?"

"No!"

Raghupathy got up, so did Rajam, immediately, her teary eyes looking around.

The audience reacted with an uproar; crowds started dispersing.

"Did you hear? The bride actually refused to sing in the *nalangu*?" was the charge hurled at Rajam who, unsurprisingly, reacted with horror and sought refuge in repeated sobs as she hurled herself on a bench nearby.

Hasn't she brought disgrace on herself? The fact was she was shy and too scared to sing in public, yet no one among those present seemed to have grasped her wariness. Was it fair to accuse a new bride who found herself simply bashful? They are already blaming for scuttling the *nalangu* ceremony!

"I can't believe this!" screamed an elderly woman from the bridegroom's side of the family. "Raghupathy agreed to take part in *nalangu* only because he wanted to honor my word; we assumed her to be a naive girl from Andhra region, but whoever thought she would be so dogged and persistent?" Wasn't this ignominy enough?

Rajam thought she had exercised restraint and discipline but now she found herself at fault.

"What horror! You have ruined everything! How dare I face the bridegroom's family members?" Visalam yelled at the daughter. "I will get a knife and you can chop off my head!"

"I am getting married now, with all the pain in the neck," Rajam sneered. She had read the expression *pain in the neck* and now it came handy.

"She has a big mouth," scoffed Rajam's aunt who's nearby.

## 9

'Everyone is blaming me,' Rajeswari could not help thinking, and she let out a sob; she went on sobbing . . .

"Your father-in-law is coming over; please rise and offer respects when he arrives," said Visalam patiently.

Why do *namaskaram*? What's her fault, really?

Rajam responded with yet another sob when Doraiswamy and Natarajan drew nearer and stood at the door. There was nothing impolite or coarse in what she conveyed, it was a plea deep from her heart.

Before coming over, Doraiswamy Iyer sternly warned his own household members, in no unmistakable terms. "Let bygones be bygones; no one need to rehash what has already happened," said Doraiswamy in a stern, authoritarian voice. "I want to reaffirm that no air of being the bridegroom side shall be displayed."

"I heard you were ailing," he told Rajeswari. "That's why I came to see you. I assure you neither my wife nor Raghupathy have anything against you. I want you to be happy and cheerful." He comforted her and left.

"How noble!" Visalam, Rajam and others were amazed. Natarajan did not seem surprised; he never acknowledged the premise that Rajeswari was wrong when she refused to sing in the *nalangu*.

To Natarajan, it was the bridegroom's party that misjudged the situation; he felt it was for them to apologize. Why didn't any one realize that Rajeswari was unwilling to sing only because she was coy and nervous? Rajam, certainly, did nothing wrong.

Natarajan told his *shadagar*: "It is one thing to have a fifteen-year-old bride sit at the altar, and it is quite a different matter when she's twenty-five. A twenty-five-year old bride will not feel bashful or be nervous. Haven't the folks in our town ever seen brides of Rajeswari's age at the altar? Why can't they accept her behavior simply as quiet and reserved?"

"Natarajan, please tone down!" warned the relative. "They will accuse you of acting brash because the wedding is now over!" That didn't unnerve Natarajan who reacted with a laugh. "When my son-in-law first came to see Rajeswari I had him sit facing her; but he unwrapped a newspaper, and began reading it! I was shocked, but I also realized he was young and acting reserved." Only now, after a long time, did Natarajan recall his earlier disappointment, and now he felt it was inconsequential.



That night, at *aupasana*, when the bride walks behind the groom holding his hand, the normally shy and reticent Rajeswari, dared to look at her husband. By then Raghupathy's friends had ended their teasing of the new groom. Visalam urged Rajam to join Raghupathy who was waiting for her. Rubbing her left eye with the back of her left hand, Rajam extended her right hand and grasped Raghupathy's outstretched hand. Her reticence didn't displease Raghupathy and he walked on steadily with a sense of his prerogative. Before she retired to bed Rajeswari said to herself, 'He's a good man,' and toyed with the idea of penning a note to him asking for his forgiveness: 'I am sorry I hurt your feelings.' Why not cry in desperation? Should she address him, 'My Dearest?' She dismissed the idea. Wouldn't he think she was acting brash by *actually* writing to him? Can she send the note through someone? No, she can't. By the way, hasn't he already forgiven her?

Raghupathy didn't seem as excited as he was the previous night, mulling over what had happened: 'Why did Rajeswari cry? What lay behind that display?' Granted she didn't want to sing, that's fine with him. But then, why did she give into incessant sobs? Why such anguish? Wasn't she for this marriage? Raghupathy recalled Bhavani's wedding: 'How she handled herself in the ceremonies! Wasn't Bhavani happy that Satyam was her ideal husband?

After the wedding Rajeswari was comforted by the comments she heard: 'During the procession Rajeswari shone like an idol!' She did nothing foolish as she did in *Nalangu*; the pair looked a wonderful match. She didn't laugh or joke with the bridegroom, in all, it's a dignified procession! But Natarajan was sad. 'Why did she seem so cold and dispassionate after *Nalangu*?' he wondered. Raghupathy too pondered: 'How come she was looking only at children riding with us? Not even once, even by mistake, did she turn the head to her right!'

A few days after the wedding, the newlyweds were taken for a photo session at a local studio. The couple made their way to the studio without ever directly looking at one another, and they demonstrated the same aloofness when they returned home. Still, their faces exuded a glow barely visible to others but bonding the pair together; their lips broke into simple smiles and Rajeswari was heartened by the crush of appreciation in Raghupathy's eyes. She acknowledged his expressions with gratitude by glancing at him several times. Instantly, their sense of alienation vanished. The veil imposed by customs and tradition lifted, binding them with a feeling, "We too are one."

Only four more days remained before Natarajan and the family members were to leave Jagatpati Iyer's haven and depart for their home. Rajeswari held her toddler brother astride her waist and was watching the plants and flowers in the front garden. She was thinking of getting some seeds and saplings to take back home.

"Look, look at her, that's the girl who refused to sing in the *nalangu*".

Thrown off by the remark, suddenly, Rajeswari turned around and noticed two women beyond the Iron Gate strolling away on a sidewalk, laughing to themselves.

It didn't take long for Rajeswari to realize some women – total strangers – were mocking her.

'Dear mother! Didn't you tell me I should strive for a good name at my in-laws? Why in-laws? The entire town is now bent on finding fault with me! I have to cope with this situation!' Rajeswari stood there with teary eyes when she noticed Raghupathy coming along and standing behind the Iron Gate.

'Should she flee the scene? No, she must open the gate and let him in.'

As she was opening the door, Raghupathy asked, "Is *mama* here?"

"Yes, he's taking a shower," Rajeswari answered, and soon disappeared inside the house. Raghupathy noticed her face; was she crying? Why?

Rajeswari caught some snippets from the conversation between Raghupathy, her father and Jagatpati Iyer. She could make some sense out of what she was listening, on and off; being shy, she didn't relish the idea of standing in a corner and prying.

"I want to return the cash left out after I purchased the dresses for *janavasam*," Raghupathy was saying. It pleased Rajeswari that, much against the objection from Natarajan, Raghupathy insisted on returning the unspent amount.

Noticing her mother was also standing near Raghupathy after serving him coffee, Rajeswari walked past them.

"I see both of you talk highly of my father's generosity," Raghupathy was telling her parents, "but I would say my mother's is ten times greater! I will say ten Doraiswamis will make one Saradambal! It's like you wipe out ten gold nuggets to produce a single, grand ornament! There can't be anyone as genial as my mother!"

"That's exactly what I too feel, and it is a marvelous thing. Our daughter is very fortunate!" Rajeswari was unaware what her mother said next.

'Why does he use the word *wipe out*? Can't he come up with a better, pleasing word? Is he so devoted to his mother he can hardly pause for a right word?' Rajeswari wondered.

The thought also soothed her. If the mother-in-law were even more generous than her father-in-law, she would surely forgive Rajam's wrongdoing, beyond showing her warmth and understanding.

'Being married to a son devoted to his mother makes it easy for me to be a good daughter-in-law,' Rajeswari assured herself. 'I have heard people say that a husband who is not even-handed is at the root of disruptive families and recurring problems between the wife and his mother. By god's grace I am married to one who is my best companion and savior.' She warmly praised her husband.

She heard Natarajan telling Raghupathy, "If you want to tell Rajam something, you may," and Raghupathy replying, "No, no, I have nothing to say at present; after all you will be seeing my parents before your departure, and they will talk to you." Rajam wondered, 'What a modest and respectful man! Is he the same man who, the other day, in the procession, made a big show in a suit and boots? Didn't he also look at me, affectionately, in the photo studio? What a decent man he must be!'

She felt the same joy and pride when she took leave of her in-laws before returning home.

Natarajan visited Doraiswamy with his family.

"Would you like me to send Rajam to help during Bhavani's delivery?" asked Visalam.

"No, no, that won't be necessary," replied Saradambal. "We are not used to such a custom."

Doraiswamy told Natarajan, "Why don't you send Rajam to school? Why should she waste one year doing nothing?" Natarajan looked at Raghupathy while Saradambal spoke her piece: "That's what men always say! You may train Rajam in cooking and other family matters. What good is it if a girl ends up preparing meals for her husband without learning any culinary skills? We really don't know where they will settle down eventually." Her words were directed at Visalam but were audible to others present.

Natarajan gratefully acknowledged her advice. "I too felt the same way," he said. "Why go to school? Rajam might as well learn things at home. Learning cooking, sewing and typewriting can help her become a good housewife. Anyway I had no intention of sending her to college - even if this marriage were to take place only next year. When it comes to girls studying in a college, I know exactly what goes on there - day after day. They are always on guard; they remain withdrawn and reserved; they dare not come out and always stay indoors even during the recess; they consider any extracurricular activity as hell! I think girls ought to study in educational facilities exclusively meant for girls. Then, they can feel free and independent, move with others freely and no airs or posturing and enjoy outdoor activities like tennis or badminton. We don't have a women's college there, so our goal is to educate Rajam without sending her to a college." Natarajan's words, keenly listened to in rapt attention by the others only confirmed his professional flair as a teacher.

Doraiswamy chuckled and said, "I wonder what my son thinks."

Only now did Raghupathy speak up: "I think *Amma* and *Mama* are right. To end up only with Intermediate in college - just like the name suggests - leaves one with incomplete education. Unless you want to do Bachelors, there is no sense in doing just the Intermediate. One can improve English by staying at home and reading literary books." He spoke without looking at Rajam, but she had her eyes riveted on him.

'Can you think of a language more imposing than English?' That's what Rajam had often heard her father say. 'One may like to compare it with Tamil, but when it comes to literary classics, no other language can compete with English.' Now that she came to know that Raghupathy too was an Anglophile, Rajam reminded herself that the Mahatma and his devotees were only against the British administration and not the English language.

Sweet dreams as well worries continued to crowd Rajeswari's mind.

She, literally, floated in air when opening the adoring letters from her husband; at other times she, with no complaints, plunged herself into mundane formalities of the day, like acknowledging the greetings and enquiries from friends and others who called on her after the wedding and showing them the saris and the photo albums. She was genuinely hurt when people said to her, "Instead of performing the wedding here, you ran away to your native South!" Rajam was eager to blurt out, "Had the wedding taken place here, I wouldn't have earned any bad name!" And what did the music teacher say? "My girl, I was fondly hoping all along that your music will earn fame and honor in your native land; you just wasted away."

"I could hardly raise my voice even when I tried to sing in a lower *sruti*," a teary Rajam confessed to Sarma. "My throat is totally gagged."

"My poor girl, you should have intoned in the same *sruti* you are accustomed to," Sarma said. "Why did you suddenly lower it? You could raise your voice even under cold and congestion, and that's how you have been singing all these years in concerts; how did you forget this? I had no idea you would lower your *sruti*."

Rajam admitted. "Oh, really? It was foolish on my part. I had thought that at my in-laws, when asked, I must be ready to sing with no airs or making fuss lest they think I am arrogant and stubborn. My intrinsic fear and shyness come from my fear of singing. Once I overcome this music fright, I will feel normal and can handle any situation," she convinced herself.

Rajam nagged Visalam for a *sruti* box and bought one with two modes of *sruti*. She practiced music lessons by herself with no help from the teacher.

Raghupathy occupied Rajam's mind in many forms; he laughed; made her laugh; coddled her; ordered her; praised her; teased her; he offered love and also acknowledged her love.

Yet, Rajeswari wasn't greedy; she saw herself in the image of an adoring, deferential wife; she would never, never covet saris and ornaments; she would abide by simple habits and lead a life of a dutiful wife making her husband proud of her; she must

never follow the examples of wives described in the short stories she had read in the weekly magazines; she must not upset her husband in trivial matters; any conflict between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is to be totally avoided. On no account she should turn into an 'awful' daughter-in-law.

An ardent desire grew up in her to become an exemplary woman at home as well as at her in-laws'. It disturbed her that her basic shyness resulted in her becoming an easy target for censure by others. What comforted her adolescent mind now was the confidence that her husband as well as his folks were good people.

Trivial matters lie at the bottom of any problem that, unchecked, would grow into a crisis. Wasn't it Rajam's little misstep that surged into a grave problem? In a similar vein, maybe, Rajam's small deeds with good intentions might hand Rajam a few successes! That faith alone sustained her; she was prepared to offer her best – physically, as well as mentally – at her in-laws'. She would readily do her mother-in-law's bidding even preempting whatever she might be doing then. She conceded what usually breeds fatigue and frustration between a couple often centers on trivial matters like sari or gifts; she would never let herself be enticed by such allures. Rajam found a good model in her mother; did Father ever question Mother on her purchases? Visalam would never indulge in pointless buying.

Rajeswari smiled; a past event now rolled into her memory.

Those were the days when Rajam began dressing up in clothes suitable for an adolescent; after a while, she preferred saris to *melakku* that served as upper garments. Visalam bought her half a dozen saris for twenty-four rupees. "Good, very good," was how her father welcomed the new purchase. A month later, Visalam bought two more saris for six rupees.

Clothed in a new sari and looking as adorable as a spring flower, Rajam approached her father to offer him traditional respects. He was either tired after acknowledging all her bowing, or he was a bit concerned that his daughter might grow too fond of sari's? Smiling, he asked her, "How many new saris you have worn so far?"

"This is the eighth," Rajam answered, and bowed before him.

"May you be freed from sari addiction!" were his words as he offered her his good wishes.

Rajam fled the scene. She knew of Father's disapproval of women frittering away too much of their time in saris and other paraphernalia. She admitted eight saris were certainly too many.

She sided with Father as she heard Mother protesting: "Is that the way to offer blessings? Rajam started wearing saris and seems fond of them, so I bought them. Raja's only blunder was to ask for her father's blessings; had she not asked, she wouldn't have ended up with these 'blessings'. Looks like no good deed ever goes unpunished!"

Natarajan heard her comment, and smiled. In a subdued voice he asked, "What's wrong with my slogan, 'End sari infatuation!' What I really meant was Rajam should continue to be deluged with saris so that, over time, she would not need any more!"

Visalam beamed with a smile. "Your *appa* is very smart when it comes to defending his pronouncements - even when they are weird and border on nonsense. I am glad he came up with something that also sounds positive," she said, and asked Rajam, "Do you see how shrewd he is?"

"Father speaks like *Avvayyar*," replied Rajam.

Natarajan, gratefully, looked at both women.

That event took place eighteen months ago; still, Rajam felt the experience fresh and unique. It bolstered her view on clothes and chic possessions. The mania for clothes can cause immense harm to women when their fixation turns to obsession; she would rein in her fascination for such dispensable items and preserve her husband's high regard for her. Presently, she had nine silk saris and they should serve her well for the next fifteen years. She could buy cotton saris as and when she needed them. There's no need for any more valuable ornaments. She would strive to be humble even while striving to do better in music and education; that's how Rajeswari set her goals.

Natarajan had not invited Raghupathy for the traditional *Adi* festival. "I have no plans to invite him now because he has offered to visit us during *Deepavali*. He won't come now even if we coerce him." That's how he summed up the situation. Raghupathy had received no job offers, so the opportunity to travel to the North didn't arise.

## 11

Bhavani was blessed with a baby girl. Happy and delighted, Rajam sent her greetings, and wrote, "I am very eager to see the

baby." She didn't just write out of formality, she meant it. Rajam always loved children.

Rajam looked forward to the approaching Deepavali – the first time for celebration since her marriage - with growing enthusiasm.

Bhavani, the new, young mother, also yearned for the company of her husband during *Deepavali*. He lived far away and could not get enough vacation to travel to be near her; even if he could, Bhavani thought, it would not amount to much, so she came up with a plan and mentioned it to Raghupathy.

"Yes, I would very much like to have Satyamurthy's company. Otherwise how could I spend my days in that Telugu-speaking town?" Raghupathy asked her.

"Why, have you forgotten your wife? You are just pretending!"

"Are you accusing me that I would keep your husband away from you? Well, you may talk with him all the day you want to in Calcutta on your return home. However, this time around *Deepavali*, I insist you and Rajam keep company talking to one another!"

Doraiswamy was amused watching the ongoing conversation between his son and daughter. He turned to his wife: "Hmm, this *Deepavali* is turning out to be a 'lonely Deepavali' for us," he said. "Well, don't you worry! Some relatives are bound to drop by our house! Can you think of any time when we both lived by ourselves?" Saradambal wiped the smile off his face.

Saradambal was awaiting further details from Natarajan as to how Deepavali would be celebrated in his house among his family members and others, including Raghupathy, Rajam, Bhavani and Satyamurthy.

"Pretty soon Bhavani will be here with us! Great!" Rajeswari welcomed the news. "She and I will make a good pair – donning the same kind of saris, visiting friends' homes and singing together. Her company should help me to feel open and free when mixing with others." But certain uneasiness also tempered her cheerful mood.

The day after Rajam's wedding Bhavani had her baby shower that was attended by many, including those who were at Rajam's wedding. That's when Rajeswari addressed Bhavani as *mami*. Visibly displeased, Bhavani snapped back: "Didn't I tell you yesterday –while helping you with the sari – that you should stop



calling me *mami*? Call me *akka*. How many times do you think I have to tell you?" Then she pulled herself together, and smiled.

'I have been addressing Bhavani in all my letters as *akka* only', Rajeswari reminded herself. "But when I come face to face with her I can't bring myself to use the word *akka*.'

'The word *mami* does sound formal and alien,' Rajam agreed. She decided to start practicing the word *akka*. Yet, when she told the neighbor Sitamma, "Tomorrow *akka* is visiting us," Sitamma seemed puzzled, and asked, "Who's this *akka* you are talking about?"

"She's my sister-in-law. That's how I address her."

"How do you address your mother-in-law?"

"I address her as *amma*."

"How crazy! Does it mean the husband and wife are to be related as brother and sister?"

Rajeswari was caught in a dilemma. When she returned home she asked Visalam about it. '*Amma*, it feels a little strange; why do we have this custom?' She was scared how she could tackle the question when facing others.

Visalam offered her a ready defense. "What it means is for a mother-in-law, her son and the daughter-in-law are the same; there's no distinction. She is a mother to her daughter-in-law as well. It is a nice way of saying that the wife also personifies her son. Now, Bhavani is the sister of our son-in-law, but it is unseemly for you to address her by name. You are also younger to her, so it is right and proper you address as *akka*." Watching Visalam's disarming smile, Rajam couldn't help admiring her explanation: the turn of phrase had completely done away with any notion of a difference between a husband and wife. 'This is the best explanation I have ever heard,' she concluded. 'Next time, when somebody teases me, I can talk about this great Tamil tradition.'

"*Vastaade maa baava*." Rajam's younger brother sang in Telugu. Radhai, the younger sister joined him, asking "I want to see *athimbare* garlanding sister."

"Don't say *Vastaade*; say *Vastaare*. That sounds more respectful," Rajam told her brother.

"*Appa*, doesn't *athimbare* seem a lengthy word?" Mani asked. "In Telugu the word is shorter – *baava*. Our little brother can say only *baaba*." The term 'athimbare' confused Mani and he waited

for his father's explanation; Rajam too stood aside in anticipation.

Natarajan smiled back. "Why don't you call him *baava*? Pretty soon the little brother too will learn to call him *baava*."

"We can also use the word *athaan*," Mani said. "But the baby brother says *attaa*, *attaa*. In Telugu the word *baava* refers to both our Tamil words *athimbare* and *athaan*."

"Well, you may address him anyway you like, that's fine with me. Traditionally in Tamil families the marriages take place between cousins, so the girls call their husbands *athaans*; they would address their sisters' husbands also as *athaans*; if you don't like to use the word *athimbare*, you may call him *athaan*."

Now Rajeswari got really interested in the ongoing conversation. She too had a question.

"*Appa*, we also use the words *athai* and *athimbare* – for father's sister and her husband; their son, we call *athaan*. Does this mean we can call aunt's husband as *baava* as well? Will that be proper?"

"You are right. Let's stick with the Tamil word *athimbare*."

"Mani doesn't like the word *athimb . . . are*; I too don't!"

"Well, what's wrong with it? In Tamil *athai* means sister; *inbar* means the beloved. It's a good word – *athimbare*!"

Mani wanted to know, what the word *inbar* meant.

Rajam seemed embarrassed at the meaning 'beloved' and fled the scene.

Natarajan ignored her abrupt departure and turned to Mani. "Do you know there are many beautiful and meaningful words in Tamil? Do you know what the word *kaNavar* means? Visalam, you better listen before you go!"

"The husband!" shouted Mani.

"It is *kaNavan* - a combination of two words, *kaN* and *avan* - eye and *he*. The husband is called an eye; imagine how we would suffer if we are missing our eyes; we also feel blessed to enjoy many things because of eyesight."

Now Visalam spoke. "My mother is growing blind and when I watch her stumbling while walking I feel guilt-ridden because of my own eyes. It is a heart-wrenching sight." She seemed on the point of breaking down.

"Visalam, do you remember your mother using the word *dEmaa*? That's a play on the word *divyama* – which means 'Everything is wonderful with me!' Mani, Grandma often uses the word *dEmE* – which, again, is a turn of phrase for *deivamE*; what it means is that she's in constant prayer."

"*Appa, appa*, let's hear more!" pleaded Mani.

"Let's wait. I will think of a few more interesting words, and we will talk about them at dinner time."

Mani didn't bother him; he knew Father would keep up his word. Natarajan strongly believed that only the mealtime proffered the best venue for all the family members to get together. At his suggestion, Visalam would set up the banana leaves in a semi-circular fashion, seat all the family members around and serve them handy dishes straight from the utensils. This arrangement precluded Visalam walking back and forth from the kitchen to the serving area.

Thus, the session became less of a ritual and more of a leisurely and relaxed atmosphere for all when Natarajan would regale them with homilies.

Visalam too enjoyed listening to him but she often felt distracted from her task of serving and doing the best of it as a hostess. "No one bothers to tell me if the food tastes good – whether it needs an extra dash of salt or less tamarind in the *rasam*," she would complain. "Why don't you all enjoy the food first and keep away from your conversation for a while?"

Natarajan would answer her without batting an eye: "This is the most proper way of enjoying a meal; why keep all of one's attention on food only? If one feels happy and contented, any food will be tasty and good for one's health. Do you know what I keep thinking when I read a newspaper or ride the bike home from the college? I would be thinking of the most interesting things I have read and I will store them in memory so that I can share them with you all at meal time. Let people make fun of me – that I am a food lover – but I don't care; for me, the mealtime is the most eagerly awaited occasion."

## 12

Rajeswari heard the train's distant whistle, then saw the stream of vehicles with passengers on the way, and as two of them stopped in front of her house, she watched them hiding inside the house.

The first to emerge was Raghupathy holding a leather case, followed by Bhavani with her infant. Once Visalam formally

invited them Rajam sauntered from the back porch and greeted Bhavani. "Akka, akka, please come in!" She was pleased she had used the right word.

The vigor in that welcome note drew a sharp look from Bhavani.

"Let me have the baby," Rajam pleaded with her. "Her name is Chitra, isn't it? Can I call her Chitru?" Rajam voluntarily bent down to took the baby from its mother's arms.

"Be careful, careful, the baby's head may sag," Bhavani replied. "I am a little scared."

"Akka, don't worry. I will be careful with her."

Visalam offered a word of comfort. "Rajam is accustomed to handling babies."

The children Mani, Gani and Radhai took liberties with their *athimbare* and surrounded him in no time.

Rajam heard Raghupathy warn one of the boys: "Be careful, you will break the watch!" Rajam stood at a door entrance and ordered the boys: "Stop it! No more mischief!" The boys, already a little scared by their *athimbare*, obeyed her and moved away.

A sudden fear and diffidence now seized Rajam; she had been longing to meet with Bhavani, befriend her and enjoy her company. But now Bhavani seemed cool and distant, an admixture of kinship and detachment not unlike the blend of oil and water. 'Hasn't she forgiven me for that *nalangu* episode?' Rajam rued. It disturbed her that Bhavani seemed in no mood to put her at ease.

Rajam aspired that sooner or later she would endear herself not only to her husband and Bhavani but also to all those who crossed over into her life. She took her younger brother and sister away, gave those baths and changed their clothes. She rubbed oil on to their dry feet for relief. She took care of herself even as she kept an eye on Bhavani. Because she felt reluctant to draw attention to herself from Raghupathy, she held on mostly to Bhavani; she cheerfully performed the small tasks Bhavani asked her to. When Bhavani told her, "Bring the comb and soap box!" Rajam hesitated for a while; Bhavani laughed and said, "My brother would not like if you are so bashful." Rajam let out a phony smile and followed Bhavani into the guest room. She was

baffled to see two sets of combs, soap boxes and hair oil bottles. At Natarajan's home there was, always, only one comb, one soap box and one bottle of hair oil.

After Bhavani gathered her paraphernalia and asked Rajam to take back the rest, Rajam said, "I can take them both back after you are done with your hairdo". She felt shy at the thought that Raghupathy, who was reading *Hindu* in the front porch, might start wondering why his wife was making frequent forays into the guest room. Despite the fact that the newlyweds had been exchanging letters, Rajam couldn't muster the confidence or intimacy to talk with him. 'Did I actually write *him* so many letters? And *he* is the one who wrote me all of them?' she wondered. But Bhavani couldn't comprehend Rajam's hesitation.

"Why later? My brother would get mad and ask what happened to his comb. He is fussy that everything should be in its proper place. I better take it in myself." As Bhavani tried to rise, her hair still undone, panic seized Rajam who said, "*Akka*, let me put it away, myself." She dreaded the prospect of making Bhavani to get up. Didn't Bhavani say publicly that she would never go around with her hair unfastened and not properly combed? Bhavani even said she was scared some of hair may fall on food, who knows? If that happens she would walk away promptly.

Bhavani starving? Rajam could not think of anything sadder. She recalled the occasions when she and younger brother would get into a fight and her father would threaten – without mincing words – he would go unto fasting unless they patch up and behave properly.

She noticed Raghupathy far away with the newspaper and staring at her. Embarrassed and feeling shy, Rajam left the room. She heard Radhai complaining, "*Athimbare* says I should never go near his table. Why is he here?" Relieved that Bhavani was nowhere near, Rajam told Radhai in a stern voice: "I too will thrash you if you ever go near his table!" She turned around and saw Raghupathy's still eyes riveted on hers.

Was he mad? Or was he warm?

Satyamurthy, Bhavani's husband, arrived that night. He breezed in without any reservation or formality introducing himself as the 'family son-in-law' when Visalam was left pondering if she should invite him into the house with a traditional *aarathi*.

Bhavani cast a warm look at her husband and followed him into the guest room. Rajam watched the couple's banter in the guest room. Bhavani was laughing and sharing with her husband her reservation about putting mascara on the infant's eyebrows; he, in turn, giggled and was telling her: "Do you know? Till I was eight years old, I had my eyebrows painted black and even sported a pigtail!" Bhavani feigned anger saying, "That's enough. Stop joking!" Noticing the couple's intimacy and their open demonstration, Rajam wondered if she and Raghupathy would ever indulge in such an exchange. It has been more than half a day since her husband arrived, yet Rajeswari hasn't spent even a second, not even once, face to face with him.

Standing where only Bhavani could see her, Rajam addressed her, "*Akka*, *Amma* says tiffin is ready."

Satyamurthy heard Rajam and, while brushing his body against his wife's, he stood beside the door and spoke to Rajam: "I guess you are Bhavani's *manni*. I was a little puzzled where this baby-talk was coming from. By the way, did your *Amma* invite only us? You know your *Appa*, your husband and you too, should invite us. He concluded with a chuckle.

Rajam smiled and looked at Bhavani. Meanwhile, Natarajan joined them, smiling.

"I have no intention of intruding into your conversation," he told Satyamurthy. "Maybe you don't feel hungry; I had called you twice."

"That's fine. Are you treating us like Raghupathy and Rajam? We don't need any formalities, and we are not certainly sharing any secrets between us! Don't worry; we will keep talking all day for all to listen! You may now drag us all to tiffin, I am terribly hungry!" He turned to others. "Raghupathy, please join us. As for my wife, she's going to serve me ghee with her own hand." He began walking to the kitchen.

Satyamurthy again teased Raghupathy: "If you insist four *idlis* and four spoons of onion chutney are enough for you, I will feel constrained to lie that two *idlis* and two spoonfuls of onion chutney are enough for me. After all, you are the new son-in-law and I too should act modest! Or else, I will be forced to falsify my name!" Raghupathy had a ready answer: "You are the son-in-law of this house and you may have even eight *idlis*. By all means, enjoy yourself!" This prompted an immediate question from Bhavani to Visalam. "*Mami*, I had some reservation if, as a new mother, I could have the onion chutney or not; but I liked it so much I couldn't resist!" Visalam assured her that was fine and the tiffin-time went on grandly. Rajeswari wasn't hungry at all;

her heart was full. When Bhavani took out a blue, silk sari and showed it to her husband as her Deepavali gift for Rajam, Rajam had begun imagining she would be decking herself in it the next morning and waiting to know how her husband would like it. She was in a romantic mood and all her worries simply vanished.

Neither her parents nor others had any stipulations for Rajam and Raghupathy to getting together as the newlyweds wished; in fact, a few times, Satyamurthy prodded Rajam with remarks like, "Why don't you make some hot water for your husband's traditional *Gangasnanam*?" or "How about offering him some *paan*?" Even Natarajan seemed intrigued by Rajam's studied meekness. "Raghupathy is here because he wants to get acquainted with his wife; why coddle him with all these dishes and rituals?" he broke in.

Bhavani wanted to get it off her chest. "*Manni*, I didn't wait for this many people to tell me to talk with my husband. I simply met with him, answered all his questions, and that was the end of the matter. My husband is quite different! 'Do you have to listen to all these people to talk to me?' he would ask. You don't know how his mood changes when he really gets mad." Hearing this from Bhavani, Rajam determined, "I shouldn't be stubborn."

After all, wasn't she also eager to talk to her husband? It's her shyness that stands in the way.

She composed herself and managed to enter the room; as she stepped in, she looked at Raghupathy; he welcomed her with his gaze.

Slowly Rajam sat on a chair; then, rose immediately, reached the door and closed it before returning to her chair.

"I heard you are learning typewriting, well," Raghupathy began and raised his head. Their eyes met – only for a moment.

Rajeswari smiled; was she sweating? She wiped her face with the tip of her sari.

"Why didn't you type your letters?"

She was tempted to ask, "Why, you didn't like my handwriting?" Raghupathy must have guessed her question because he said, "Your handwriting was grand too; did you understand my handwriting?"

Afraid to say, "I could reply because I fully understood what you wrote", she instead nodded her head violently. She didn't want to tell him that the dictionary helped her to understand some of the words; nor could she reveal that her brother's

cheap magnifying glass helped to decipher some hard-to-read lines.

"I waited here yesterday; *Mama* said you will be seeing me."

Instead of words, her eyes widened as if asking, "Were you disappointed?"

"*Mama* later said you might be hesitant because of your pimples."

Rajam replied with a nod, looked down and chafed her left cheek with fingers.

"They will be gone soon; I too had a lot of them."

Rajeswari raised her voice. "Some people have bright spotless faces without any blemishes. I too had such a face once, then, suddenly ..."

"There's no need to worry ..."

"Sometimes I wonder if it would be a good idea to buy those remedies advertised in the newspapers ..."

"One should never be tempted by advertisements. I wish I could grow taller, and the ads always raise my hopes. It is all a fraud!"

"Fraud?"

"Of course!"

Both were silent for some time.

"I think our wedding photo is smudged; I saw it on the wall," Raghupathy said. "The one we have at our home looks fresh as if it was just delivered from the studio. The children ruin the photo in no time." Rajam became quiet: *The children love athimbare; how could someone not oblige when they ask for his picture?* She was saddened, but also knew the story behind that messed-up photograph. Many had visited the house after the wedding and seen the photographs; Natarajan didn't get the photos framed until the visitors were done with their viewing. The frequent hand-to-hand exchanges and the less than careful handling by numerous visitors caused the deterioration. Then, one day, Rajam pulled out an old frame, stripped off the old photo from it, and put their wedding photo in it. Because the frame was a little larger for the photo, she included yet another photo of Mahatma Gandhi smiling and in a posture of watching over the newlyweds.



She felt let down; instead of appreciating her initiative, her husband complains about the photo getting dirty. She wanted to make the exchange more pleasant, and proudly said, "I put it in the new frame myself!"

But Raghupathy barely understood her intent.

"Yes, one can do that; it is not complicated," he said.

Rajam couldn't bring herself to say, 'I meant to show that Gandhiji was smiling at both of us.' What if Raghupathy thought it was foolish?

Raghupathy presently handed her a book of colored papers he's holding. "I thought of including my letter-head too, but I gave up the idea because I was not sure where I will be working." Rajam flipped the yellow-colored sheets in the book, and said, "Usually I write two versions of a letter – a rough draft, then a fair copy. I must not use any of these sheets for my rough draft."

"You can also write on both sides of the paper," Raghupathy told her. "The ink will not seep through." He added after a laugh, "If you use the paper your father uses for typing, then you can write only on one side."

Rajam recalled using, more than once or twice at home, sparkling new papers in her father's custody when she ran out of the supplies; she has been using the papers meant for typing and she was hesitant to ask Natarajan for more.

Raghupathy watched Rajam keeping an eye on the door even as she was carrying on the conversation with him; then, suddenly, she raised her hand and, with her face registering a frown, she walked to the door. Wondering at her strange expression, Raghupathy looked up. He saw Rajam, gesticulating with her hands, was threatening her younger brother who was standing outside the door quietly.

"The music teacher is here," the boy announced.

"I've got to go," Rajam told Raghupathy, and departed.

She proceeded directly to the hall, spread the mat for the music teacher, and assembled the violins and her *sruti* box.

She invited Bhavani, "Akka, would you like to join me?" Bhavani told her, "I was a little worried you may feel uncomfortable in my presence, that's why I retreated into my room when the teacher arrived."

"I don't feel nervous when the teacher's around," Rajam replied casting her eyes down.

"Will you be insisting your music teacher too should follow you to your in-laws?" Bhavani's question didn't surprise Rajam. Hadn't she heard that question from the folks in her hometown? "How can one carry the *sruti*-box to every concert? Then again, how do you expect the teacher to be always around you?" she had been asked. Feeling at peace with herself, Rajam went and sat in front of the music teacher.

But Visalam noticed a discordant note in Bhavani's voice. Was Bhavani still smarting over that episode in *nalangu* when Rajam had upset others? She restrained herself and told her: "Bhavani, let's go and listen to Rajam's music. Of late she has been practicing her lessons with the *sruti* box; there was a time when she dreaded going out with me to friends' houses lest someone should ask her to sing; nowadays she's not scared."

Bhavani gladly came forward while Satyamurthy, Raghupathy and Natarajan stayed at a distance to listen. Emboldened, Rajam began her recital while Bhavani held her baby on the lap. Rajam's performance, both as a vocalist and violinist, was flawless.

Satyamurthy admired Rajam's rendering of a *kriti* in *raga Saraswati*. "I've never heard this before," he confessed. "It is so pleasing to the ears." He began to recite the *charanam* - articulating the first few lines of the *kriti*.

Sarma accompanied him on violin. Satyamurthy slowly began in *Saraswati* and finally ended it in a *ragamalika* of his own innovation. Then Rajam requested him to recite the slokam *Kasturi Tilakam*; Bhavani asked for *Shyamala Dandakam*.

Satyamurthy nodded at both women. After delivering a song in Tamil, he switched to *Kasturi Tilakam* in *Begada*. Rajam, who was keenly listening and trying to get the finer points of that *kriti*, failed to notice the expression on Bhavani's face; had she done so, she would have been hurt.

Sarma was moved by listening to *Kasturi Tilakam* and couldn't help complimenting Satyamurthy, "What a performance! How nuanced is your rendering of different *ragas*? Your *Dhanyasi* is so inspiring," he told him. Now, suddenly, Bhavani broke in and asked her husband in a voice, stern and demanding, that shocked Rajam: "Are you going to sing *Shyamala Dandakam* or not?" The next moment when Satyamurthy started rendering *Maanikya Veena* in the *raga Bhairavi*, Rajam plunged straight into enjoying it. Music was

Satyamurthy's hobby only but he seemed endowed with a natural gift – a sonorous voice though sweetness. Natarajan was deep into probing what was the most distinguishing feature in Satyamurthy's music that endeared him to everybody; Raghupathy's appreciation showed up in his continuous nodding while listening. Rajam was busy identifying the *ragas* and their finer aspects. Bhavani budged closer to Rajam and whispered: "Don't ask my husband to sing any more songs; he will simply keep on singing and will suffer sore throat. I am concerned about our train journey tomorrow."

"Okay, *Akka*." Rajam was thinking of asking Satyamurthy to sing the slokam *Saayankaale Vanaanthe*, but gave up the idea.

Sarma expressed his appreciation to Satyamurthy, adding, "You can learn all the *kritis* from your wife!" Then he turned to Bhavani: "Can you sing a couple of songs? Just two? Go ahead." Rajam too urged her, but Bhavani refused, saying she had a sore throat. Nobody thought of forcing her because she was well known to oblige without making a fuss.

### 13

Satyamurthy, his wife and Raghupathy were getting ready to leave for Calcutta. With a heavy heart Rajam realized that Raghupathy would be at home for only a few more hours.

Rajam watched, without getting angry at nor threatening him, as her younger brother tumbled on Satyamurthy's shoulders entreating, "*Mama, Mama*, I too want to go with you!"

"Calcutta would be a nice place to visit; I too haven't seen it" Rajam muttered to herself as she stood near the door. "The kid doesn't know you are going to Calcutta; if he did, he would pester you even more!" Visalam stared at Rajam; Raghupathy and Satyamurthy exchanged glances. Satyamurthy abruptly arose from his seat and approached his wife. "Did you hear what your *manni* said?"

Rajam recoiled with guilt: "Why did I say such a thing?" Satyamurthy prodded his wife: "Okay, get your *manni* ready. Your brother has to pass this way on his return home; he can drop her off here."

"Really? Good heavens. I really didn't mean such a thing!" said a surprised Rajam, but she's thrilled at the opportunity to visit Calcutta. Raghupathy needed no nudging for his approval; his face was aglow with assent. It was Visalam who appeared hesitant, a bit scared, and objected: "I don't like to do this without consulting elders."

Bhavani, who had remained silent all this time, now showed interest. "Mami, that won't be a problem. In fact my father was asking me, 'Why don't you get your *manni* for help?' I have noticed Father's words to be special, he will say something casually and invariably it will turn out to be true!" 'Can that be true?' Rajam wondered. Her respect for her father-in-law now went up one more notch.

Visalam was eager to ask, 'What did your mother say?' Why didn't Saradambal suggest the idea in the first place? She worried that it was Rajam's hasty and immature remark that led up to this arrangement. But she softened after noticing Rajam in high spirits as Natarajan enthusiastically handed a suitcase to Rajam to start packing. Visalam recalled an earlier conversation between her husband and Satyamurthy: Natarajan's assertion, "I welcome the idea of young couple moving like friends," and Satyamurthy's rebuttal: "Friends, if they simply move apart but, when they fight, they get closer!"

Visalam didn't want to stand in the way of the majority decision. She acquiesced and went about making necessary arrangements for Rajam's departure, and before parting company with Rajam, she entrusted her to Bhavani saying, "I am leaving Rajam in your hands; She occasionally acts like a child and now ingratiated herself in this trip. I had some reservation to send her without consulting your parents, but I didn't want to go against all your wishes. Please take good care of her; teach her what she needs to learn." Visalam's voice was choking as she uttered these words.

Rajeswari hugged and kissed little brother Kannan before she clambered into a horse buggy and left for the train station, her heart cheery and bubbling with enthusiasm. However, once she arrived at the station she began thinking of the implications of her impulsive decision; 'How could I bring myself to do such a thing? How did I think of abruptly leaving my parents for two weeks?' She observed Raghupathy closely watching and smiling as if answering her: 'I am the prime reason behind your action.' Rajam found solace in the thought that this could actually be a precursor for her next act; after all, she needed training for her new role with her in-laws.

'Everything is for the best,' Rajam assured herself. After all, all that commotion during the wedding now mellowed her: she has learnt to sing without the *sruiti* box; she had been acting less defensive and belligerent and she had endeared herself to others with deference.

Rajam felt gratified when Bhavani applauded her for taking a good care of Chitra and asked her to be in charge of the infant; she recalled with pride how she used to look after her younger siblings Kannan and Radhai back at home. She looked forward to winning more laurels and, prior to spending the time with her in-laws, she's eager to learn from Bhavani's acquired experiences.

She savored Raghupathy's warmth; Satyamurthy's playful talk; and Bhavani's questions that provoked new ideas.

Bhavani would suddenly ask her husband, "Did you shut the gas valve?" or "Did you cover the mirror with a screen?" but pretty soon they dispensed with such alarms in the pleasant company of their baby and its light-hearted moods. Rajam felt she was now watching a rehearsal of a part of her own life yet to come.

Bhavani got busy putting back the house in order. Rajam watched with awe as Bhavani threw herself into the crucial errands while Rajam ably carried out the tasks Bhavani had assigned to her; the experience inspired her to learn many household methods and practices from Bhavani. Rajam doted on Chitra and lavished a lot of attention on the infant. She served her sister-in-law with as much attentiveness and affection as she would toward her husband. The house had only two rooms, so its complete restoration was finished in two days.

Rajam also yearned to learn a few Tamil songs from Bhavani and, one afternoon, she expressed her wish: "Akka, will you teach me *KaaNa kaN kodu*? I hardly know any Tamil songs."

"Yes, I will," Bhavani began. but the tenderness in her voice changed in no time. "I worry if you can sing it properly . . . I have noticed your conclusion of the *pallavi*, *anupallavi* and *charanam*, sound odd to me, and it is not right! There's a lot of difference between the *Andhra* tradition and ours. I will teach you that *kriti* only if you promise to sing it in a proper way." She half-smiled after her demand.

"I will sing the way you teach me," Rajam said in a halting voice.

Rajam easily learnt *pallavi*; she asked Bhavani to coach her *anupallavi* too.

"How can I do that?" asked Bhavani. "The *akaaram* when you pause at the conclusion of *pallavi* is not right." Satyamurthy, who was within her earshot, peeked out of the newspaper in hand, and said, "Such a pause is permissible if you are singing *Kambodhi*."

"Maybe you haven't noticed she does that for every *raga*," Bhavani countered him.

Rajeswari was embarrassed and saddened that she had caused the squabble between the couple.

"*Akka*, this *kriti* is hard; How about some other one?"

As Satyamurthy broke in saying, "Well, the way she has mastered *pallavi*, she should have no problem mastering the *anupallavi*." Bhavani's eyes shifted to Raghupathy's face exuding warmth and appreciation for his wife.

"When did you become a spokesman for your brother-in-law and start defending the wife?" Her voice rising clear and scornful, Bhavani unceremoniously hurled the weapon at her disposal.

"Are you talking about my wife?" Satyamurthy chuckled and mischievously winked at Raghupathy.

"Well, if that were the case, why would I end up like this?"

"You mean, rosy, plump . . .?"

"Well, how do you expect me to look like a vine, thin and green? I have been married for over two years and now a mother of four months . . . . ."

A thin smile played on Bhavani's lips. She was not given to laughing spontaneously lest she expose her two uneven front teeth; that was the reason she always made sure to stick her lips together.

"Good heavens, did you ever look like a sparkling new creeper? You mean, like a slithering snake?"

"Enough! Stop joking!"

Luckily Bhavani's scorn turned into a smile, much to Rajeswari's relief. Raghupathy, who has been watching the verbal exchanges and knowing what caused them in the first place, smiled at his young wife with reassurance and affection.

Hearing baby Chitra's cry, Rajeswari rushed to her even before Bhavani did.

Bhavani, who followed Rajeswari closely, took the baby into her arms and told Rajam: "Go and set the stove ready; it's time for tea. I will have to feed the baby."

"Yes, *akka*, as you wish; the usual charcoal stove, am I right?"

"Yes, you still have problem setting the oven with rock coal."

Rajeswari managed a phony smile; her mind was in turmoil.

Rajeswari's glee has been ebbing since her arrival in Calcutta; fear gripped her; the voice faltered, words barely became audible if they had ever found expression. She seemed tottering at the edge. Thus, when she felt blocked, tears welled up in the eyes. This was caused not by love pangs, nor her husband's indifference; it was the lack of her sister-in-law's kindness.

Bhavani showed no affection or understanding toward Rajeswari; she constantly bruised her ego and bullied her even as she demanded and accepted Rajam's obedience without ever acknowledging or appreciating it. She, constantly, sought and found lapses in everything Rajeswari did for her. And Rajam who, never accustomed to such treatment and did her best in good spirits, had to endure every verbal assault hurled at her by Bhavani.

One day, after noticing that a coconut had become dry, Rajam asked Bhavani if she could use a 'fresh one' Bhavani seemed to have forgotten, for a moment, the other alternatives with a dry coconut. "Then, what are we supposed to do with it? Shall I grate it myself? It's no big deal!"

Rajeswari didn't want to leave the task to Bhavani. She offered to do it herself.

"Our men-folk would be marching into the kitchen at least four or five times before you are done with it," Bhavani said. "Leave it to me, I will handle it."

"Akka, I was only saying that a dry coconut takes a little longer . . ."

"Well, it would work fine if your hand worked a little faster; now, get me the batter. Looks like the tamarind water is also about to evaporate . . . ."

Her face reddening, irritated, Rajam handed the vessel to Bhavani, who rebuked her: "When you go to the South, you will have problems if you keep complaining you couldn't handle things because of this or that. You must learn to manage with whatever is available."

Rajeswari was thrown into murmuring pathetically to herself: 'Oh, mother, I am sorry I didn't learn to grate even a fresh coconut!' Her eyes turned teary.

"I was simply trying to give you some advice so you will have no problems when you start living in the South, but you're getting

mad at me," Bhavani said in a harsh voice. "I will have no more truck with you." She began stirring the soup.

Later, that night, when she served the soup at dinner, Bhavani threw out an apology: "The soup hasn't come out quite well because the coconut was not ground properly."

Rajeswari wanted to scream the coconut in question was a dry one, but no words would come out of her mouth.

Similar incidents followed as days went on.

Rajeswari counted on Bhavani as her friend and a well-wisher, but Bhavani constantly reminded her that she's her sister-in-law and was entitled to treat Rajam at her own pleasure.

One evening, Satyamurthy urged Bhavani and Rajam to play some *kritis* on their *veena* and violin, respectively. "Looks like both of you are well-versed in *Mohanam*," he said, "Go ahead! Quick!" he prodded them enthusiastically.

The pair had just begun performing when a couple, family friends, walked in. The visitors gestured, 'don't stop!' Satyamurthy smiled, invited them in, and Raghupathy rose to show respect. Bhavani welcomed the visitors with a nod and, her face beaming, she continued playing. The couple took their seats smiling. Rajam understood the situation.

Bhavani set aside the Veena and got up asking, "Sumathi, that's a beautiful sari, where did you buy it?" Rajeswari too set her violin down and tried to stand up when Satyamurthy waved her, saying, "You can stay; play two more songs." Then he turned to his wife. "How about your special coffee for Sen? Mrs. Sen, you can listen to Mrs. Raghupathy's solo till the coffee arrives." The couple nodded in assent.

Rajam began wondering if she needed to go to the kitchen and grind the coffee beans for Bhavani. She hesitated to pick up the violin.

She heard Satyamurthy urging her, "Come on, why don't you play *Raghuvamsa Sudhambudhi*?" She knew she could no longer attend the kitchen chore, so she took the violin and set the bow.

And she did her best either because she hadn't practiced for the last four or five days or because Satyamurthy asked her to



perform solo. The song *Raghuvamsa Sudhambudhi* breezed in flawlessly.

Satyamurthy noticed the listeners' appreciation and asked Rajam to play another piece. Rajam watched Raghupathy; feeling encouraged as well as excited, she ventured another song as if conveying to him, 'This is especially for you.' She chose *ninnuvinaa naamadendu*. She remembered her music teacher had selected it as a popular song for her to play in her school orchestra; its lilting music was so pleasing to the ears that even North Indians not familiar with Carnatic music could enjoy it. Needless to say, Rajam's rendering was perfect.

No one clapped hands; yet, the very silence in the room affirmed the listeners' appreciation for Rajam's music.

Rajam got up and walked toward the kitchen. Sumathi followed her.

Even as Sumathi and Bhavani were engaged in conversation, Sumathi often turned around to glance at Rajam. To Sumathi's eyes, Rajam appeared like a mere child, as she asked Bhavani in a beseeching voice, "Akka, would you like me to pour the milk in another jug?"

The Sen Couple spent a good amount of time after coffee, and departed. Rajam felt it would be better if Bhavani had someone to talk to; she's also scared to be alone fearing the next verbal assault from her sister-in-law.

And, she's right.

"You went on and on with your music because my husband asked you; did you ever think, 'my sister-in-law is making the coffee, how can let her work alone, etc . . .' ?' When are you going to learn?"

"Akka, I really wanted to help you with grinding the coffee beans . . ."

"Can women keep doing everything men demand? What will people think of you if you act this way in the South? Would it be proper if you keep playing violin when my mother's busy in the kitchen?"

Bhavani stopped as Satyamurthy now stepped into the kitchen.

"Bhavani, did you hear your *manni* play on the violin? She's excellent, nothing amiss. What did your friend Sumathi think of her music?"

Bhavani evaded the question. "How was the coffee? There's not enough time to grind more beans. The water's in full boil; I was alone, so tossed in whatever I had."

"Why won't it taste good? Mr. Sen comes to our home only for your coffee." In no time Satyamurthy calmed his wife.

He didn't want to remind his wife that she had often served him coffee that she prepared without any help from others.

Rajam tried to probe into Bhavani's spate of complaints culminating in a lesson: Rajam should never let her mother-in-law and sister-in-law do any chores without Rajam ever helping them. That's Bhavani's message.

'Bhavani' is badgering me for my own good,' Rajam admitted. 'She's experienced in family affairs; to come to think of it, Bhavani wasn't the only person who was saying that women should not, always, follow what men ask of them. My mother and mother-in-law have stressed the same point too! Surely, you can't simply go along with men's attitude; it's incumbent upon women to use their common sense and sort out things by themselves. After all, in a family, many small, often trivial things do matter. For example, one can enhance the taste of a soup and *rasam* by cooking in a tin vessel; but what happens if you use an aluminum vessel which too looks like a lead container? Oh, there are so many things one needs to learn; Bhavani is not out to torment me; she's simply trying to drill these lessons into my head.'

As Rajam braced herself to acknowledge and welcome Bhavani's comments in a positive light, her facial expressions too began to show marked changes.

Gone were the tears when Bhavani chastised her on some account or the other; how could she shed tears and risk hurting Bhavani's feelings? She felt she must look happy and pleased so that Bhavani too would feel cheery and keep smiling at her.

One day Bhavani complained to her: "I notice in the kitchen you are leaving things uncovered; I will never leave anything uncovered, even by mistake! Sometimes your mother too forgets

to cover up the dishes; I am always amazed how a hand can move away without covering the food." Rajam's reaction was quick and submissive. "Akka, you're right. All the food will go waste if it is tainted." Bhavani was criticizing Visalam too – doesn't that prove that Bhavani was not acting partisan when she found fault with Rajam?

A few times Rajam heard Bhavani telling Raghupathy how badly Rajam's siblings behaved and needed to be disciplined. "They're real brats, always asking some silly question and making a lot of noise!" However, so far, Bhavani hadn't said anything bad about Visalam.

After a few days, when Raghupathy went into the kitchen to get some drinking water, and asked Bhavani, "Why's the pot open?" Bhavani replied, "Didn't I tell you? Rajam doesn't have the habit of keeping anything covered in the kitchen."

Rajam hesitated for a moment. She didn't want to stand accused in her husband's presence, of a crime she didn't commit. She dared to speak out: "Akka, I wasn't the one who set up the pot; I haven't had my bath yet."

Bhavani, a little stunned, confessed. "Yes, it was my mistake. I was in a hurry serving tiffin, so I forgot to cover it."

Raghupathy remained silent and left the kitchen without ever looking at either of them. As soon as he left, Bhavani keenly watched Rajam's face, and whispered, "Is this how you shield your sister-in-law? It was a simple lapse on my part, and I forgot to cover the pot. How could you ever forget that I am your sister-in-law and you ought to cover me?"

Rajam was silent. At last she savored the truth that her husband had been privy to her innocence; she did rise in his stature, so she shed no tears.

Yet, in the days followed, there was no dearth in the accusations that Bhavani continued to hurl at Rajam; Bhavani totally misread Rajam's gestures at reconciliation. To her, Rajam seemed patronizing, arrogant and even showing contempt toward her. Rajam's smile was dismissed as nothing more than phony. Bhavani was convinced that Rajam's attitude stemmed from her firm conviction that she could count on her husband's full support. The looks exchanged between the newlyweds exasperated her.

One day, a favorite *kriti* of Rajam's – a *ragamalika* – was aired on the radio.

Rajam, who was washing the dishes in the backyard, arose, tiptoed and stood close to the door to enjoy the song even as her fingers were scouring a vessel in her hand. Bhavani dashed toward her and yanked the vessel from her hand saying, "Rajam, you go inside and listen to the music; I will do the dishes."

"Akka, let me handle the dishes," Rajam protested. "This was my favorite song . . ."

"You think I don't like to listen to music and just want to work? You want others see you do the dishes and blame me? That's your intention, is it not?" Her tone was muted, but the eyes betrayed her rage.

"Good heavens! No akka, that's not my intention." Rajam felt her voice choke, and with tears still welling up, she returned to the backyard. She's not trained in washing the dishes but she was skilful in keeping her heart pure and untainted. So, once again, Rajam kept making excuses for Bhavani's behavior; she's so convinced of Bhavani's opinion of hers that Rajam was willing to turn a blind eye to her sister-in-law's faults. 'Yes, that's indeed my mistake; I should have foreseen that she might be blamed, so her fear wasn't unfounded.' She blamed and consoled herself, befitting her rectitude.

Prior to her Calcutta visit, Rajam told herself she would be just happy to have a glance at her husband even if it didn't present her an opportunity to hang around with him in some chitchat. Now even that seemed hopeless.

She hated the idea of appearing timid and inept to Raghupathy's eyes. She wished to present herself with smooth face and radiant face; instead, she was showing up in messy clothes, her feet with water-logged blisters. Raghupathy often showed up with a book in hand and regaled her with a joke, article or a comment; he even shared a couple of cartoons with Rajam. He would stand beside her, explicate on some topic and leave, but not before throwing a smile and an approving glance at his wife. Bhavani dismissed those overtures with a disdain, never failing to tease Rajam: "I have never seen *Anna* visit our kitchen; now, it has become his favorite spot!"

Rajam experienced cruelty she had never seen before. She endured all the abuses in silence.

Was Bhavani furious because Rajam had surfaced as her sister-in-law only to usurp a share of her brother's affection? Rajam was convinced of it, and she had read such things in books. She remained unruffled and cool when Raghupathy was making plans to attend an interview in Patna. Her husband would return home in three days, and during his absence Rajam wanted to do her best to endear herself to Bhavani; she wouldn't shrink from cracking the charcoal pieces for cooking; she would simply tuck in her sari, keep beating the saris on stone, one after another, and wash them; she would harbor no more concerns about the *Kunkumam* leaving stains on her forehead, pimples erupting on the face or nails getting dirty. Rajam's single hope was firm and clear: Bhavani would soon get to know her *manni's* inner love and affection for her.

However, Bhavani never reciprocated Rajam's good intentions – even during Raghupathy's absence; it seemed beyond her to entertain the notion that she could be Rajam's well-wisher, a companion as well as a sister-in-law. Maybe Bhavani was disgruntled by the fact that her husband nursed very positive feelings toward Rajam; she was convinced that her husband too ought to cultivate the same mindset she was harboring toward Rajam.

#### 14

Raghupathy returned to Calcutta after his Patna interview. Before leaving Calcutta for home, he decided to spend a few more days in the city, drop off his wife at her parents' house on his way, and resume the journey home after a few days at his in-laws'.

How could they leave Calcutta without shopping and visiting the tourists' spots? All four enjoyed making trips to the historic monuments and the affluent neighborhoods. Bhavani seemed in a sunny mood because her *manni* will soon be going home.

In a store Rajam was drawn to a box set of toys depicting workers doing different things. She could place various workers at appropriate spots on the street scenes in their *Kolu* during *Navarathri*; they would make an excellent addition. Moreover, her siblings would be thrilled and fondly remember her bringing a gift from Calcutta. As Rajam conjured the scene unfolding before her eyes, the desire grew irresistible.

"*Akka, akka*, this would be an ideal choice for *Kolu*. Let's buy it, *akka*," she pleaded.

Satyamurthy and Raghupathy heard her plea but soon forgot it as they got busy shopping for bargains and other items. Rajam was patient for a while, then reminded Bhavani who assured her, "We will, we will."

"We have to get it, *akka*; this set won't be available in my place," Rajam prattled, waving her hands like a nagging child.

"Is it that important? Are you asking it for yourself or your parents' house?"

Who asked the question?

Rajam was stunned. She felt like a child sleeping peacefully sucking her thumb, suddenly getting yanked with a warning: "One of these days you will ruin your teeth!"

That's how she felt; after all, was it not Raghupathy who asked the question? She ought to stop acting like a child and show some maturity. 'Why did I lose my poise and act like a silly child, for a mere toy?' she regretted. For some time now, she's been enamored by love and with her own wish list, and now is the time to curb her enthusiasm; her inner voice, in a mocking tone, warned her: 'Girl, how could you be so naive? You now belong to another house - your in-laws! You haven't realized it yet. Won't your dear husband feel hurt if you flaunt your prejudice for things back home at your in-laws? Notice the reason for his surprise! There's no reason for distress; he knows and understands your heart.'

She felt the anguish inside but let a gentle smile play across her lips. Raghupathy too appeared reconciled and defused the situation, saying, "Sometimes I wonder what's so special about these toys!"

Rajeswari paid no attention to the banter around her: Bhavani telling her brother, "My husband too was saying it was a childish behavior, and he's right," nor Satyamurthy's words, "I too am fond of these toys; I may buy some for myself, pretending to be for Chitru."

Her adoring husband also finds fault with her; Bhavani who, while offering a lot of advice keeps nitpicking her. So how could she single out Bhavani to blame? Rajam was pondering only over this.

"*Manni*, try this bangle for fit, do you like the color?" Rajam acknowledged Bhavani's enquiry gratefully with a smile.

Soon Rajam found herself climbing up from a threshold to the summit. Bhavani too softened a little towards Rajam presumably because of her *manni's* imminent departure. "Once Brother gets a job and settled, we will find ourselves in distant cities and become inaccessible to one another," Bhavani told her. "How long do you think I can act as your *manni* and make demands on you?" Rajam answered with no malice: "I do feel I am benefited when you frankly express what's on your mind."

Rajam felt she couldn't be happier; how many good things she had learnt from Bhavani! They were like the doses of a bitter medicine that ultimately did good for one's health. Bhavani has turned amicable; what else Rajam could ask for? What she had endured in the last ten days has not been in vain.

Her face was a testimony to her inner joy; she's about to undertake a journey – the first time with her husband – and the very thought roused her body and spirits. She was now at the dawn of marital bliss; after spending a few days in the company of her loving parents and siblings she would be embarking on a new voyage. She counted on her blessings: Bhavani's wisdom to guide her; her in-laws' kindness to encourage her. And her husband's continuing trust, love and affection would fulfill her sweet life.

In a single day Rajam blossomed into a new flower; her eyes fondly responded to her husband's pleasant smiles; her hands were desperately looking forward to help Bhavani within her ear shot; she showered kisses on the baby's rosy cheeks as she prattled in baby talk. For someone who seemed always cautious and held back, now Rajam turned gregarious and easy-going.

The time for her departure arrived. "Did you offer *namaskaram* to the deity?" Bhavani asked her.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Rajam chided herself and darted to the puja room. "*Akka*, can I do *namaskaram* to you? I don't want to go without your blessings," she asked Bhavani as she returned from the *puja* room.

"There's no need to do *namaskaram* to me." Bhavani's voice grew curt, and even snappish, as she continued, "I would be rather happy if you don't curse me! You will be on a jolly trip with

your husband, and it would be a miracle if you don't curse me in your excitement."

Horrified, Rajam wanted to scream, "Why? Why do you think I will curse you? What was your sin? Why should I feel ill toward you? Why this sudden accusation?" But she felt gagged and managed to utter only the words, "Akka, I never . . ." and could go no further.

"Well, you've already begun to cry; don't let others blame me that I made you cry when you were leaving our home."

Rajam could only respond with a few more sobs and she went to the backyard to wash her face. On her return her face was reddened but there was no trace of any turmoil.

Bhavani stood holding a silver plate with *tambooram* to wish Rajam a formal send off, and said, "Rajam, I am not at all satisfied with your stay here. You are acting peevish and shedding tears whenever I ask you something. How can I be with you on anything? Do you think you will be a changed person when you visit us the next time?"

Rajam turned to stone. 'Couldn't she say, 'I am not satisfied because of your short stay?' Doesn't she like me for what I am? My God, don't I have any good qualities, at all? Alas, haven't I pleased her on any occasion? How can I change to someone I am not?' she received the *tombola* muttering to herself.

*'Shouldn't a different girl be my sister-in-law to make me a totally changed woman?'*

No such question confounded her. There was no room for it in her pure heart full of love borne by maturity. There was no confusion; she resolved, "I have to change!"

Satyamurthy saw the couple off at the railway station, and offered them his good wishes.

"Let your pleasant journey begin!"

"It had already begun, as soon as I was born!" said Raghupathy.

"Don't act smart! I meant life with your wife . . ."



"That began last year."

"Oh, be quiet!" said Satyamurthy and turned to Rajam. "Listen how your husband argues! That's how he is. Certainly I can't blame Bhavani for arguing with me; she's after all like her brother!"

Satyamurthy had no problem speaking his mind with his own sense of humor.

"I've never seen *Akka* arguing with you!" Rajeswari interrupted him with a smile.

"Well, if you didn't notice, the culprit, again, is Raghupathy." Satyamurthy winked mischievously while Raghupathy and Rajam, exchanged smiles.

The green flag being shown, the massive train moved. Like a fresh green vine seeking sanctuary under a tree, Rajam sat beside her husband.

"What a crowd!" Raghupathy began the conversation. "The next compartment is full of military personnel!"

"Yes, I noticed, and got scared! Remember someone even offered me to get in!"

"He offered because you are a woman; would he do it for everyone?"

"Oh, my god, is that true?"

"Why, what's wrong with that? An Englishman would never let ladies to be inconvenienced. I didn't get into the compartment only because you were scared." He laughed. "Thanks to you I too would have gotten a good accommodation!"

"Is that so? Then I should have got in without fear!" Rajam said in reply.

The couple began talking and Raghupathy told his wife many a thing and Rajeswari listened and understood. Now and then, silence reigned between them. Rajam would ask no counter question, just recall his words and mull over their import. Raghupathy too sought and spoke about things that proffered Rajam joy and pride.

"You were really excited about that doll set, saying your siblings will love it," Raghupathy said, laughing. Without smiling, Rajam replied, "It was I who was fond of it, eager to use it in the street display in Kolu." To Raghupathy's comment "You think the children will like the figurines of a farmer, potter, post man or a washer man?" Rajam said, "Certainly there are toys that appeal to adults too!" She could have uttered those words in mirth but was nagged by the feeling that she wasn't taking home anything else for the children.

Raghupathy missed her cue. He said, "How long a toy can last in a child's hand? Then too, they are so boisterous in your home! Even the neighbor's children seem to camp in your home!"

His comment saddened her, but Rajam managed to say, in a faltering tone, "The children come to play carom at our home," while several images of her chastising the children flashed in her mind's eye: 'Mani, you need to curtail your playing carom and the Tarzan antics'; 'Gani, *athimbare* doesn't like your asking him all kinds of smart aleck questions; for now, you better contain your curiosity'; 'Radhai, don't be adamant insisting that you must always sit next to *athimbare* during the meals! Do you know, he says, children shouldn't be allowed to eat with adults. So how can you demand that *athimbare* must share dishes with you? He gets mad when you insist that only he and not *amma* has to serve you! You want to make him angry? He is so nice and affectionate toward all of us, we should always try to please him.'

While Rajam was immersed in these thoughts, Raghupathy was contemplating: 'Strange characters, these children! With all the commotion around, my father-in-law keeps reading books and takes a nap! He carries the neighbor's child on a shoulder and stands in a majestic pose!'

When Raghupathy said, "Kannan looks exactly like you!" Rajam was on the verge of asking him, "Is that why you like him?" but he concluded, "Everybody at your home has same features!" Rajam reacted with pride and a smile.

Shouldn't she talk with Raghupathy about some of the foolish things her siblings had done? "Radhai once insisted that *Amma* too should address Father as *Appa*," Rajam said and exploded into loud laughter. Raghupathy stayed quiet probably because she had already contributed his share of the laughter.

That's how the couple carried on their journey punctuated by accords and contradictions.

Natarajan was at the rail station to receive them. As soon as she was out of the compartment, Rajam said, "*Appa*, let's get something for the children to eat. Those oranges over there, please buy some, *Appa*" Raghupathy was amazed; she's so free and close to her father; she hadn't asked him anything during their entire journey.

"Let me get some," Raghupathy said. Natarajan stopped him: "We have oranges at home." To Rajam's, "Let's get something else; no oranges," Natarajan, feigning anger, said, "You are really stubborn, aren't you?" Then he pulled out a small packet from his *jibba* pocket and handed it to Rajam and asked her to put it away in her bag.

"What's it?"

"Chocolates; *Amma* suggested I do this. The kids at home were saying you would be getting biscuits for them – just like you did when you came from Puri. They will mob you what if you were inconvenienced and felt bad over this slip? *Amma* gave me the idea." Struck by his words, Rajam and Raghupathy exchanged no glances!

On their way home, Raghupathy said, "We felt we had the toy set for the kids and never thought of any sweets."

Rajam lost no time in offering her own mind. "I have brought those figurines only to show them to the children; I intend to keep them for myself. The children will not have them."

Laughing heartily, Raghupathy said, "Why do we need them? Give it to the children!" His use of word 'we'

sounded sweet to her ears; Rajam happily consented, nodding her head.

Once they arrived home, Rajam seemed to have forgotten her husband entirely. She swept up brother Kannan over her, fondly kissed his forehead, and exclaimed: "He has grown so big in the last ten days!" That's not what actually happened; her wrong impression had to do with her handling baby Chitra during the last few days in Calcutta.

Visalam asked no questions, and from whatever telltale signs she read from the daughter's face, she understood that Rajam had been unhappy during her stay in Calcutta. She explained to Rajam: "Bhavani is a new mother, so she's lacking in patience; she will easily lose her temper, get upset and endure sleepless nights. The baby will demand constant attention often forcing the mother even to miss her meals. Haven't we heard people say that an infant often tests the mother's preference – food or the baby?"

Rajam listened and agreed with her.

## 15

The year was 1942.

The country was mired in political turmoil. The revolutionaries, radicals and reformers were engaged in the freedom movement.

While not directly involved, nevertheless, a young man like Raghupathy, stood in the front lines hotly debating the paramount issues of the day; wasn't he the offspring of a patriot? Hard-nosed and a deep thinker, he didn't shy away from asking the tough questions. This attribute was on full display during his visit to the in-laws. He was young and fiercely passionate, and so was Natarajan, who never retreated from his stand where politics was concerned. Patriotic fervor filled his heart and he held fast to his Gandhian ideals.

Often the young man and his father-in-law clashed with one another exchanging volleys of argument. When the young, plain-spoken Raghupathy made a spurious argument, Natarajan would never dismiss it as puerile;

what pained him most was the fact that the son of Doraiswamy, a patriot, had shown no interest in Gandhian principles. But Raghupathy set forth his views forcefully and eloquently as if to suggest that he harbored opinions that were entirely at variance with his father's. He had developed his own outlook; why should he always agree with his father?

Visalam and Rajam would often watch, anxiously and with growing concern, the men discussing politics. Even Gani wanted to know why his father and *athimbare* were 'quarreling with one another.' What if the kid's chatter spreads around?

The most hotly debated issue had to do with the influence of *Andhra* lifestyle and its effect on the Natarajan family. Raghupathy often made a pointed reference to his mother-in-law wearing a six-yards-sari which was, apparently, a taboo among the Tamils in the South.

What bothered Rajam was the realization that Raghupathy had an aversion for the *Andhra* customs and their way of life. Time and again, Rajam had been asked, "Aren't you an *Andhra*? Are you a *Tamil*?" Was it possible that Raghupathy strongly disliked what he was seeing and experiencing among the locals in this town? On the other hand, Natarajan never flinched. "I turn deaf to any contrary opinion. This land feeds me; you don't have to demean *Andhras*. Anyway, what do you really know about *Andhras* and their habits?" He concluded with a question for Raghupathy.

"What is it that I don't know about *Andhras*?" Raghupathy would counter and then proceed to list some of their quirks in a derisive tone.

"I know they invite their sons-in-law for the *Pongal* festival, something very common among the low caste Tamils. *Appalam* is served in their homes – not as typical dish flattened and fried in oil – but as dough so that it could be mixed with rice and eaten. And when they visit other homes they always insist on carrying water with them. They make *ubbuttu* with moong dal for filling; can it ever compete with our *poli* with coconut filling?"

"Water has been in short supply in many villages so, to avoid undue stress on the hosts, such a custom evolved," Natarajan would explain. "It was meant to foster cooperation among people in their formal and informal relationships." But Visalam would often inject herself in their discussion and offer her defense for Raghupathy on a different topic: "It is certainly true that the *poli* with the coconut filling is richer and tastier."

Visalam would calm down Rajam, saying, 'Even when men argue vehemently, there's no danger of the situation turning serious; it all looks strange and a little unnerving, so we would rather like them reconcile.' Rajam too wondered, much to her relief and satisfaction, 'How two people, seemingly in a fist fight, conciliated so quickly and were back in friendly terms!'

Still, Raghupathy never seemed to have softened his attacks on *Andhras* whenever an opportunity arose.

"They are decent people, but a little dim-witted," he would often deplore. "They seem content with their old glory – the *Krishna Deva Raya* Empire."

Rajam wished the conversation eschewed any reference to *Andhras* but, invariably, it always cropped up. If it was not about *Andhras*, the topic would be about her siblings' misbehavior or the merits of Tamil compositions in the realm of Carnatic music. Whenever the subject swirled on these three issues, Rajam felt confused, and was often reduced to tears.

And, one day, Raghupathy brought all the three subjects cascading in a single conversation!

They were out on an evening walk when many passers-by appeared to stare at them. "Are we the only strange couple in this town? Haven't they ever seen a husband and wife on walk, are they such a conservative people?" Raghupathy mocked.

Rajam hesitated for a moment before answering. Several among those passers-by knew her, and some of them were personally acquainted with her. A few had even asked her, with liberty and feigning anger, "Why did your folks perform the wedding in the far away south? You grew up here, and you are one of us. We missed all

the fun; you disappointed us!" There were others who grumbled, but fondly, to Visalam: "We had thought of asking for your daughter's hand for our son; we have been thinking all along that Rajeswari was an Andhra girl; you alienated us!" The town was filled with such people who felt, after seeing Raghupathy, 'Oh, he's her husband? An excellent match!" Rajam was totally aware of this. Conscious that she would see many familiar faces, she had hesitated to embark on this walk in the first place!

"Many of them know me well," Rajam said.

"Somebody was smiling at you just now; who's he?"

"He's the husband of the *Andhra Mahila Sabha* secretary."

"His wife is called *Mahisha*?" asked Raghupathy winking mischievously. Then he remembered something. "Didn't you write you sang in that *Sabha*?"

"Yes, that has been going on for the last six years. I sang this year too."

"Oh, yes, you had written! Back home we were talking that the girl who's afraid to sing one song in *nalangu*, was performing a concert!"

And, then, suddenly, this question popped out.

"By the way, do *Andhras* have any idea about Carnatic music?"

Rajam was silent; noting her husband was silent, she began: "People around here would be the first to admit that their knowledge of Carnatic music is not worth talking about; so where is the need for any further argument? We never had good concerts in this town, so how can I improve my music appreciation? My music teacher advises me that I get into the habit of listening to the radio concerts."

"Oh, he's so knowledgeable! Didn't I hear him perform?"

This was certainly an unexpected assault.

“My parents are happy we have at least someone like him in this town.”

Did Raghupathy hear what Rajeswari whispered?

Was Raghupathy piqued that her parents were treating her teacher Sarma Garu – albeit with meager knowledge in music in his opinion – as someone well-versed?

Assuming that he was criticizing Sarma Garu, would it mean he was also criticizing her? Rajam wondered. 'No, he was actually thinking how his wife could refine her musical talent'. Didn't people keep telling Rajam that there are excellent music teachers in Madras? One, who's well established in this small town, can hope of becoming a top artist in Madras. Was Raghupathy too thinking that her parents ought to send Rajam to Madras?'

Should she tell him there are also many in her town who find fault with her teacher; but the same people admire and speak highly of Rajam's musical prowess?

But Raghupathy preempted her.

“Do you know what your teacher's singing sounds like? It is like your sister Radhai, waking up in the middle of night and screaming she wanted sweets!”

For a moment Rajam was at a loss to know how to respond. Then she said, “Radhai wouldn't know night from the day. As soon as a child wakes up it wants something to nibble and, then, go back to sleep!”

For a long time Rajam has been fostering modest thoughts about her musical talent; she thought she didn't deliver her best in the concerts because she lived far away from the South; It was where she lived that probably brought her more recognition than she actually deserved.

What did her mother say? “The other day Sundarammagaru – the woman from the neighborhood – was commenting: ‘Rajeswari has surpassed her teacher; she certainly has native talent.’ Still, can one become proficient with inborn talent alone? I wonder if our Rajam



would have ever learned the basic skills without the help from Sarma Garu. How could I have given her the schooling and, who knows, how much interest she would have actually shown? We do have an ideal guru for her; didn't Bhavani also share with us her appreciation for the teacher?"

"It is only in recent years that Carnatic music has gained popularity around this area," Sarma Garu was telling everyone. "Not many mothers show a personal interest in their daughters cultivating this art, nor the students are assured of steady support and cooperation. As a teacher I can offer only training and guidance, but others at home should nourish and encourage my students."

Well, Rajam feels herself like a king – rather a queen – because there's no competition. Other girls of her age sing horribly and that's how she had endeared herself to the discriminating listeners in the town.

When someone uttered, "Sarma Garu is the best musician we could hope in this town," Rajam was physically present on the occasion and heard it.

"Why are they blaming my teacher?" She agonized and complained to her parents.

"Who knows, maybe if we were living in the South and you had ended up with a different teacher each year - because each teacher disliked the way the previous one taught - you would have been much worse off, I believe your schooling with a single teacher here served you very well. We have faith in him. He's very sincere; saying you are a Tamil girl with music in your genes, he has helped you attain honor and praise. That makes us very proud!" She was overjoyed to hear this from her father.

Rajam mulled over these words that night when she went to bed.

'What is the lasting contribution a woman can make in her life?'

That question haunted Rajam. She recalled her mother's wise counsel. She realized the paramount need in her married life was love, patience and enthusiasm to serve with devotion more than expertise in music and good education. She was not particularly smitten with her husband's M.A. degree; but she felt very proud when Raghupathy regaled her with a joke from a magazine; that would be exactly how a husband would give importance to his wife's love, devotion and courteous disposition. Anyway, where's the shortage of music and education? In Tamil Nadu, there are music concerts everywhere one turns to, and women graduates are dime a dozen! What good is her high school education and inadequate musical skills there? After all, she is yet to learn many basic life lessons!

Rajam made up her mind; she must embody the spirit of womanhood and live an illustrious life. She resolved it would be not only her duty, but it would be her life's goal.

'*Amma*, banish your worries! Am I born to be famous? Fine, but that wouldn't be the fame of a stage-artist but as an excellent housewife! You say I am lucky? Good, that means I will be successful, and not fail in my mission!'

She stopped riding the cradle with Kannan and played carom with her husband. For no reason he would snatch the striker from her hand. Sometimes, if she got distracted and stopped playing, wondering if a picture on the wall was off center, he would mildly chide her, tapping on her shoulders, "What are you looking at?" Rajeswari relished these gentle reprimands!

After Raghupathy left for home, his image was enshrined in Rajeswari's mind.

Youth is the highpoint in one's life. At such young age, the heart throbs with passion like the blazing light in the *Annamalai Deepam*. Its power is immense and it fosters in eager minds the righteous values and ideals.

As soon as he returned home Raghupathy showered her with love and praise. He described Rajam as an ideal wife. "I must admit I have very strong feelings," he wrote. "I intensely like some and vehemently hate some. That's not right. After getting to know you and your

father's empathy for *Andhras*, I am hoping to shed my preconceptions." His words threw Rajam into ecstasy. "I too am aware of my shortcomings," she wrote him back, "and I am hoping your association will eradicate them."

Doraiswamy informed Natarajan of an auspicious date for formally receiving the daughter-in-law into their home. Raghupathy's Patna interview hadn't worked out and the father didn't want to extend any further his son's living without his wife. His wife Saradambal too expressed a wish that Rajam spend some time with them. So arrangements were soon afoot for the formal departure of Natarajan's family to the South.

The journey coincided with the onset of the summer vacation. At the outset, Natarajan told Rajam: "May you shine like the river *Cauvery*; that river, wherever it flows into, brings affluence and prosperity. I wish you all the best to bring glory and riches wherever you go!" After the long journey and arrival at Doraiswamy's house, Natarajan was totally exhausted. He was also distressed that, for a whole day, Rajeswari never came to the front of the house, and he couldn't see her.

As for Rajam who breezed in with excitement, she began to feel awkward how to handle herself in the new surroundings. She's in a dilemma: she didn't want to hang on to her mother and, at the same time, she couldn't get closer to her mother-in-law.

Her mother seemed less spontaneous in her overtures to Saradambal who appeared aloof. Rajam was puzzled: 'what's going on?'

She comforted Visalam. "*Amma*, I understand your concerns. I have had advice from Bhavani, and I am aware of the good things in my new surroundings. I have realized my shortcomings as well. I have learnt how to handle myself. I can always depend on my husband's help and support. I will not lose my heart, neither will I give up easily. I will seek the best in life – exemplifying *Cauvery*. I feel blessed, I am now a Bhagyalakshmi!" She comforted Visalam, mentally.

For the first time, Rajam shared her night with her husband.

At the crack of dawn Visalam approached Saradambal in the kitchen. Smoke whirled up from a burning stove. Visalam looked at it, then she took a look at baby Kannan astride on her waist. She told Saradambal, "Mami, I want to confide something in you. I didn't go through any rituals before I began my conjugal life; my husband was against them. Since yesterday I have been feeling uneasy and didn't know what I was supposed to do. It was only after your suggestion that I thought of doing some flower decorations in the bedroom." Totally surprised, Saradambal said, "I am sorry, I didn't know, Please forget what I told you last night." She said with no airs, and began fanning the flames in the stove and dispersed the smoke.

It was a revelation to Saradambal to learn that Visalam's marital life flourished with no usual trappings of scented oil, interior decorations, and incense sticks. She regretted her deriding Visalam the previous day saying, "If you plead that innocent, how did you end up with a big family?"

Even as a young girl, while setting up the figurines at home in *Kolu*, Rajam had shown the making of a 'good daughter-in-law'. There were two dolls: *Saraswati* and *Lakshmi*. She placed *Lakshmi* at the central tier and *Saraswati* on a tier below it. The arrangement was not appealing. "Why don't you switch the bigger one – *Saraswati* where *Lakshmi* is? It is pure white and will stand out!" suggested Natarajan.

"How can you seat a daughter-in-law above her mother-in-law?" Rajam explained. "I too felt *Saraswati* would stand out if placed at a higher level."

"She did the right thing," Visalam added.

"I like to think we always show more respect to education than wealth," Natarajan said, smiling. Rajeswari thought his words made sense, yet, maybe, she thought one needed wealth to gain education. She left the dolls as they were but set up two ceramic elephants, their tusks raised, on either side of *Lakshmi* - thus creating a *Gaja Lakshmi*. She also stuck in two incense sticks into the cavities supplied on the elephant tusks; these two elephants were previously used as incense holders.

And it was that young girl Rajeswari who now, in full bloom, stood at the threshold of her new married life, and the day one began.

Visalam, with tears, and carrying the baby astride her waist, took leave of Saradambal. With their eyes shining, Natarajan and his younger son Mani, were standing a few feet away. The eight-year-old daughter and four-year-old boy were outside standing near the *jatka*. Visalam somehow managed to say. "We will see you *Mami*; Rajam, take care, be good," as she took leave. Natarajan, unwilling to make his feelings public, suddenly rushed out and soon returned with the two children. "Don't you have to see your sister? We are going home!" Tears rolled off his cheeks as he spoke.

Rajam, who has been silent all along, glanced at her mother-in-law and husband, let out a phony smile. As she smiled, she had uncontrollable tears.

She thought of grabbing little Kannan from Visalam and kiss him, but her body wouldn't move. She was also speechless.

Natarajan nodded and took leave of his daughter and Mani also followed him, in tears; Words failed Visalam; she simply gestured with her hands, wiping off the tears, she pulled the upper part of the sari tightly, and walked towards the street.

Doraiswamy went near the *jatka*. He looked at his wife and told her, "Your *Samabandhi Amma* is exactly like you; she's younger, but still old-fashioned. She doesn't wear any footwear, either!" He was trying to brighten up the occasion and Visalam reacted with a smile that was totally lacking in joy. Natarajan followed her into the *jatka*. He bade farewell to no one in particular and the *jatka* moved away.

Raghupathy neared his wife in the kitchen as she was standing beside a shelf, still in tears. He heard Saradambal coming over. He drew a tumbler from the shelf and asked his mother, "*Amma*, I need some drinking water. Shall I can get some from her eyes?" Rajam heard his tease, and walked away farther into the kitchen.

"Oh, is she crying? Well, this is something new to her. Her father too became very emotional, and I am really surprised! I don't think we were like this when Bhavani was gone to her mother-in-laws'. Well, everyone is different!" Saradambal said.

Rajeswari face was now free from any tears. She wiped her face clean, and smiled lightly at her mother-in-law. That smile held many expressions! Saradambal looked at her daughter-in-law with affection. She told Rajam, "Let's go out of the kitchen. I need to write a letter to Bhavani, you too can read something if you want."

"Shall I put away these for cleaning?" Rajam asked pointing to a few tumblers used to serve coffee.

"Raghu has not had his coffee yet; you too may have some – if not coffee, some *cocoa*. The servant maid will be here at three when she can take care of these, no hurry," Saradambal said.

Rajam followed Saradambal into the hall. 'Where else can one find such a caring and adoring mother-in-law?' she felt proud and comforted by the thought.

She heard Doraiswamy calling, "Rajyalakshmi" as he walked into the house. He had been talking with a friend on the veranda. She followed him and paid respects to the friend with a formal *namaskaram*.

"She's a real *Andhra* girl," he told the visitor. "If you want to hear *Thyagaraja's kritis* with clarity of expression and evoking the spirit, you have to listen to Rajam sing!" Doraiswamy showered praises on his daughter-in-law.

Shy and embarrassed, Rajam continued to stand there; she wondered if she would be asked to sing in the visitor's presence. 'My god, I should not be afraid to sing,' she told herself. When Doraiswamy said, "Well, you may go in now," she went back joyfully.

'Well, he's enjoying his new status as a father-in-law!' Saradambal was saying. "He's going to introduce you to every friend of his passing through our house!" She spoke the words without looking at her, with a mild laugh

and not looking at any particular direction. Why this sudden change in her tone, Rajam wondered.

That fear disappeared in no time. "We got a new magazine this morning," Saradambal said, "You may like to read it." She pulled out a notebook and pen to start penning a letter to Bhavani.

"Where's the magazine?"

"Raghu would know; he was reading it after lunch."

Rajeswari didn't stir from her place. She laughed it away, and just stood there.

"Why, don't you want to read it?"

"No, my eyes are burning a bit. Can I rest a while?"

"Go ahead, you have been crying for a while. Have a nap. Do you need a pillow?"

"Oh, no, I don't need it."

Raghupathy apparently disappointed that Rajam hadn't come to him for the magazine, now craned his neck at the pair. Rajam sat up in no time; then she stood up.

"Oh, why this special deference?" Raghupathy teased her and turned to his mother. "Did you notice what your daughter-in-law did?" He asked with a bright smile.

"Yes, I am watching! Should she act differently right from the start? In any case, will it be right if women always obeyed their husbands?"

"Are you suggesting women ought not to obey their husbands?" Raghupathy asked, smiling.

"If men demanded their wives live on high fashion and if we did so, you will be the ones in big trouble," she said. "Now, why don't you leave Rajam alone? She was resting, and you woke her up."

Raghupathy walked away while resting his eyes on Rajeswari who stood silently for a while, and then sat down. Watching her mother-in-law occupied in writing a letter, she curled up and found refuge in sleep.

But sleep eluded her. After all it was the first day when she wanted to put her ideals into action. Is it proper to sleep and dream? She might get physically tired but she could not afford to get her mind weary.

Amidst her anxiety she had one strong belief.

For a husband to be fortunate to witness the loving relationship between his mother and his wife, and to be the object of his admiration - is the pride of a woman. To elevate oneself in life by striving, offering love, cooperation and understanding, is a woman's duty. The impetus to actualize the goal comes from the husband while the passion to achieve it needs to come from the wife. Rajeswari felt she had that resolve.

She remembered a small incident.

Raghupathy told her he was unhappy to read in one of her letters to him: "I have enclosed my mother's letter addressed to your mother with this."

She has used the word *Amma* for mother.

"You used to write *our amma* before. Why this division? I feel strange!" he wrote back.

"My God, he didn't even realize I had to refer to two different *Ammas*, and he couldn't tolerate my separating them," she laughed. "Well, if he feels that strongly about his mother, he would surely demonstrate the same love to me." She felt happy.

Her marital life began, in good stride, with such a husband. Where's the room for stumbling?

"I have to get along with my mother-in-law; that's my first priority," she told herself, and rested.

She was half awake and half-asleep when she heard her mother-in-law speaking to her husband. "Well, she's young and must be feeling homesick; maybe she has never been alone." Rajam awoke as she heard those



words; she sat upright instantly. Seeing Doraiswamy standing nearby, she sprang to her feet and stood up.

"*Ennamma*, are you done with your sleep? It has been only fifteen minutes," he said.

"Did I sleep for fifteen minutes?" she asked in surprise and felt ashamed. Concerned that she might have messed up her hair and Raghupathy might accost her any time now, she moved and stood in a corner.

"So, finally, your daughter-in-law is home?" A grand old lady, standing behind Doraiswamy, was making a traditional enquiry. Doraiswamy welcomed her smiling, and said, "Please come in, and see our daughter-in-law standing in a corner over there!"

Was he joking or saying she was scared? Rajeswari regained composure, steadied and pushed herself forward. When the woman was well into the house, Rajeswari prostrated before her with a formal *namaskaram*.

"So your daughter-in-law has arrived." The old woman now was speaking to Saradambal while she continued to examine Rajam from head to foot.

Unaware of herself, Rajeswari, retreated to the wall, again.

"She sings very well," Doraiswamy told the woman.

"How good is she with domestic chores?" she asked and, turning to Rajam, asked her directly. "My dear daughter-in-law, has your mother trained you at home?"

Rajam managed to smile; the question was hard to answer. She didn't want to commit one way or the other. She didn't want to lie!

"Whether she's trained or not, she's very keen to handle household tasks," Saradambal told the visitor. "Rajam is very active and ready at any time to offer me help."

Doraiswamy now addressed the old woman: "*Athangaa*, what's the big deal? If one could be ready with all the paraphernalia and had set up, say, four

stoves simultaneously, you can prepare four different dishes in less than an hour! Even I can and, in fact, I have actually done so!”

Saradambal nodded her head and said, “Of course, that’s entirely possible. Why not? I can finish cooking if I had only to cut the vegetables and do other chores like mixing the flour or grinding the spices. I can finish cooking in half an hour; it is the other tasks – like cleaning up the kitchen and putting back the utensils in their place – that seems to take the whole day. That’s where one needs help.” She sounded a little harsh, was it a complaint?

Her words calmed Rajeswari’s nerves. Her mother-in-law would be the one preparing the food, thus dispelling her immediate concerns. Rajam could help her with the major portion of chores that would need attention for the rest of the day. Her mother-in-law would be pleased; hasn’t she expressed appreciation for Rajam’s help and enthusiasm before others? Rajam remembered her mother saying that, with persistence, she could slowly master the household work. Well, Rajam has now reached that very point!

“This daughter-in-law doesn’t seem to know how to wear a nine-yard sari,” the old woman remarked, and Rajeswari smiled and nodded in assent. “Does your husband object?” she asked and, again, Rajam answered with a smile. But Saradambal intervened and explained: “Why talk about her husband? It was I who told her. Till last week she has been going to school and she has a whole bunch of six-yard cotton saris. When they are worn out, we can buy nine-yard saris.”

Rajeswari was touched. Her mother-in-law was not forcing her to wear the cumbersome nine-yard sari and, at the same time, she wanted to make sure that nobody would find fault with her donning a six-yard sari.

“*Amma*, I too can practice once in a while, and get it right – so the sari wouldn’t trip me,” Rajam said.

“Quite a smart girl,” the old woman said in appreciation.

Meanwhile, the servant maid was asking Saradambal for the utensils to be washed after use.

“Shall I give her the vessels in the backyard?” Rajam asked.

“Yes, there’s also one with tamarind scrap.”

“Did you make *pulikaichal*?” asked the old woman.

Rajeswari was entering the kitchen as she heard Saradambal answering the old woman: “Yes, I prepared tamarind rice for Rajam’s family returning home.”

What made the old woman ask the question so spontaneously? ‘Because she’s a seasoned housewife,’ Rajam thought, and she would consider herself lucky if she could ever endear herself to the old woman. She laughed to herself as she remembered how frightened she was when the woman first addressed her – in an authoritarian voice – as *her* own daughter-in-law. Rajam was now happy to realize, ‘This is also good for me, now I can tell who could expect humility from me.’

She got a sense of the ongoing conversation between her mother-in-law and the old woman when she returned from the backyard. When Saradambal said that her husband had flatly refused to accept furniture and gifts from the bride’s side the old woman replied, “Well, we know *Ammanji* would never change!” Saradambal added, in a deprecating tone, “I had nothing to say; I never opened my mouth. This is how I have spent all my years.” Rajam felt sorry for her mother-in-law. She recalled the comment Visalam had made quite often: “I wonder how she felt when her husband gave up his job for the country; I too feel a little at ease when watching her face.”

A couple of visitors showed up that evening. They were formally calling on Saradambal and also took the opportunity of ‘studying’ Rajam from head to toe. “When it comes to elders, you can make their day with just a single *namaskaram* to them,” Raghupathy had told Rajam, so she followed his advice to the hilt. She offered her salutations to the visitors with no affectation; with her head bowed, face aglow, she was a figure to behold.

That night, it was again Saradambal who cooked the dinner. Rajam tagged along with her mother-in-law trying her best to get involved in every chore with her and learn what the right thing to do was.

Raghupathy had gone out for a walk, and Doraiswamy too was away. As dusk approached Saradambal lit the lamp in the *puja* room, and asked Rajam, "Would you like to sing?"

Rajam smiled and her face revealed her gratitude. "Why don't you play the violin?" Saradambal asked.

Rajam liked the idea – she hadn't touched the violin the last four days. But she asked, "Is there any work to be done?"

"I need to make roti, there's nothing else, and that's no big deal. I can handle it." Saradambal spoke softly.

Rajam said, "Why don't I flatten the dough?"

"How many people do we need for making a few *rotis*, anyway? We need only ten at most." Saradambal let out a mild laughter. Rajam was averse to take up the violin when her mother-in-law was engaged in household work. And then, why play violin when there were no listeners – including her mother-in-law who seemed uninterested?

Rajam recalled how, at her home, her siblings would rush into the kitchen and try to 'make' their contribution when Visalam got ready to make *puris*. The children would compete with one another to roll out the small *puris* and *rotis* on their own. There was one particular occasion when Raghupathy bristled at the children's unruly behavior. "Children are always on the move; once they are out of the house there's no way of knowing where they had been and what they have been doing. They bring home all kinds of muck and dirt tainting the food; we must never allow them into the kitchen!" he would say, and Visalam agreed with him.

"Children naturally crowd around their mother; they come running to participate to prepare items like these. They wouldn't listen! Once we have the in-laws and son-in-law visiting, we can't ignore them saying, "only our

children." If we had elders like grandparents in the house that would have brought some discipline and established some mores in the house," Visalam lamented.

Rajam told Saradambal, "I am always interested in rolling out *rotis*; we all used to compete with one another at home," she added including herself in the chore "Oh, that makes sense," Saradambal replied. "Your mother is all by herself, she certainly needs help, and you are the eldest. Looks like the children pitch in too."

"Well, it's fun to watch my younger brother, trying to help our mother, lugging some firewood along with her." Describing the scene itself brought her elation as well as some tears.

## 17

The previous night was her first night, and today's afternoon was the first, in her life with her in-laws. The second night appeared to have vastly changed.

Rajam's mother-in-law entered the living room after closing the kitchen door behind her. Rajam stood between the kitchen and the living room.

Sitting down, Saradambal poured some milk in two cups and offered one to Rajam. Rajam wanted to add some sugar to it, but recalled Bhavani telling her, "We don't add sugar to milk and ruin its taste!" Shy to ask her mother-in-law for sugar, Rajam was reticent and politely refused milk.

"Have some," Saradambal insisted and poured some milk. "Can I have some sugar?" asked Rajam.

"Sure, go ahead," Saradambal told her and Rajam happily complied. She wasn't scared of her mother-in-law as she was of Bhavani. 'What a mother-in-law!' she rejoiced.

Saradambal now offered her a cup of milk for Raghupathy. Rajam didn't hand it directly to Raghupathy who's stretched out on cot in the bedroom. Rajam stood at the threshold and Raghupathy, smiling, took it from her hand. He followed her back to the living room; after sometime, he returned to the bedroom.

"Why don't you spread your bed?" Saradambal asked Rajam who demurred, "Where is it?"

"Over there," said Saradambal as she led her to the place and took out her own bed.

Her eyes timidly looked at a corner where a few pillows together with a new blanket had been rolled into a bed; she felt reticent to pick up her bed.

"No, no, I don't need any help. I can handle this." Saradambal walked away.

"Just the blanket, *Amma*?" Rajam followed her.

"I have even slept right on the floor for many years," Saradambal answered. "Dear girl, go on, take your bed!" She said laughing and keenly watching Rajam's face.

That stare provoked even more coyness in Rajam.

"*Amma*, may I spread my bed right here? On that coir cot? There's nice breeze here . . ."

Rajam spread her blanket on the cot when Saradambal smiled affectionately and feigning reprimand, said, "Don't act smart! You better go into the bedroom!" Rajam complied; she paused for a moment, set right a slipshod blanket lying on Saradambal's bed and picked up her own bed. When she turned back she noticed Saradambal had averted her face away, closed her eyes and began sleeping. A grateful Rajam now hastened to the bedroom.

She spread the bed at the right place and stood idly for a moment. Raghupathy understood her dithering. He asked her softly to switch off the light; still faltering for a moment she managed to come out of the bedroom, tip toed to where Saradambal was sleeping, and whispered to her: "*Amma*, I am going to sleep."

"Yes, hurry up, it's getting late," Saradambal told her.

Comforted, Rajam returned to the bedroom. When she, silently, closed the door, the young couple heard Doraiswamy teasing his wife. "You are indeed lucky – your daughter-in-law wants to make the bed for you! I

want you to be active as before; don't fall sick because you have to help around!" His remark was yet another sign, if it was ever needed, that old age need not wear off the warmth and tenderness in a loving couple; Rajam and Raghupathy exchanged meaningful looks.

That night Rajam had joyful sleep; her intuition let her know that her dreams will be realized – she has found herself amidst yet another dotting home. Ecstatic, pleasant thoughts whirled around her as she drifted into slumber.

*"You will shine like Cauvery!"*

Has Natarajan's prophecy come true?

Is it not a fact of life that the summer storm's arid and sterile winds turn into bursts of rain during the monsoon causing the Cauvery to flow tumbling down on its way, and enriching the banks?

Rajam's memories of certain past events – like the *nalangu* – had unnerved her, but now she felt invigorated with the youthful memories gushing along in a joyful downpour!

By nature an emotional person, Rajam had learned to understand her thoughts with intellect, as well. That's how she could function as an ideal woman even better than she had hoped. And she knew, with all the humility at her disposal, her conduct owed much to the warmth and affection of those around her in the new surroundings.

No harsh words did ever escape from her tongue; it was the adoring lips that swathed her pearly teeth. Does it mean Rajam never shed tears? No, there were such occasions – but the teardrops resembled the moisture that protects *curry* leaves rather than the dampness that decays the *celantaro* leaves.

Raghupathy, now and then, would deliberately say something to drive Rajam to tears – like "Your cousin wanted to talk to me, but I ignored him," or "Your father seems to admire the *Andhras* a lot; why didn't he marry you off to one of them?" Rajam would shed tears and Raghupathy would feel sorry for her. Hasn't he seen her

shed tears in *nalangu*? 'Didn't she want to marry me?' was one of his doubts! He didn't want her cry and actually wanted Rajam to answer his questions with no tears; yet, in spite of being an adoring husband, he had no qualms in hurling, now and then, such spiteful questions.

But it didn't take him long to gauge Rajam's wholesome love and comfort her with his own; for one thing, he was easily attracted by her devotion to his mother and her avid interest in handling the household duties with professional competence. How could he harbor any reservations once he was convinced of her commitment to her new home, family and kin?

Soon Rajam endeared herself to her husband as well as her in-laws, and others. It was in Saradambal's instinct to do the errands on her own – without ever asking any help from her daughter-in-law, but she now let Rajam join in when she understood her zeal. Rajam heartily welcomed such occasions. Even more, she had affectionate gratitude for Bhavani: was it not Bhavani who cautioned her saying, "My mother has her ego and will never ask for any help from others, so you must take the initiative to do things for her!" Rajam never forgot those words.

Thus Rajam preferred sticking invariably with her mother-in-law. She closely watched Saradambal at work observing her routine and manners; she also sought and handled the duties, sometimes even preempting the mother-in-law. When she happened to see Saradambal heave or pick up a heavy urn or a vessel, Rajam would rush in and offer to help, saying, "*Amma*, why didn't you call me, I am right here?" When Saradambal countered, "Whom can I call if you are not around?" Rajam would laugh away without batting an eye, "Why do you say such a thing?"

Occasionally Rajam became self-conscious and tongue-tied and, when she did speak, it would be in a measured tone because, suddenly, Saradambal would seem remote and alien in her presence. Was she trying to convey some subtle message to Visalam and her? But Rajam would interpret its implication for her own good; she's no coward, and she resented being painted as someone who could never put up with disapproval



from others. At the same time she wouldn't turn a deaf ear to what others said and, once in a while, she also answered her detractors. Both lemon and tamarind share a common flavor – bitterness – yet how different they seem to people who view them! The former is lauded as conferring health-affirming benefits – a mark of respect denied to the latter. While Rajeswari embodied the benign qualities of the former, her fellowship and easy-going manner flourished like a tamarind tree.

Raghupathy was ailing with headache and resting in his bed; for a while Rajam didn't dare approach him. "Well, wouldn't others take care of him? Hasn't her mother-in-law said that he suffers from occasional headaches?" she reasoned. At Saradambal's suggestion of a remedy – apparently shared by Raghupathy – she prepared a concoction of ground pepper heated in oil. When she took the blend to Raghupathy he was resting on his bed, his forehead tied up with a handkerchief. Smiling, Raghupathy invited her to apply the mix to his forehead as he uncovered it and lowered his head; Rajam recoiled. She imagined Saradambal's eyes were riveted on her as she walked past her with the concoction. Could she be now thinking, 'Wasn't I who took care of him till yesterday?'

"Why don't you ask *Amma* to rub on the mixture?" Rajam asked. "I am afraid I might let it trickle into your eyes; can you come over there?"

Raghupathy rose and positioned himself in the living room for his mother who, her face beaming with a smile, remarked, "I can't believe it, you are indeed a mother's boy!" She could hardly conceal her delight that her son was still very much in his older form. Rajam relished the scene unfolding before her and felt as if she had indeed made a huge sacrifice.

And, on another day . . .

Her face had turned blood-red, but Rajam didn't complain of her headache. She had heard of daughters-in-laws being accused of malingering and for their obstinacy. Yet, as dusk was approaching, her movements turned clumsy leaving Saradambal appalled. "What happened to you?" she enquired and Rajam gave

a simple answer, "I have a slight headache." Raghupathy brought a thermometer. Rajam had slight temperature but it was gone in a day. Still, she felt guilty over her sickness – even if it lasted only a day. The very next day she was back at her usual self – hectic and totally in her form.

In her letters to home, Rajam wrote frankly of her life with the in-laws; she showed the letters to Raghupathy as if asking for his permission before mailing them. If she were overcome by emotion, she would wipe the tears off while beaming a smile at her mother-in-law nearby. "Here I am surrounded by love," she wrote to her parents, "I don't feel it too hard for missing your company; but I realize it must be hard for you to miss your first child. That's what really makes me sad. I have a mother-in-law with a pleasant disposition; a father-in-law with a keen sense of humor; and an ideal husband. Hence this is a shining moment in my life." Raghupathy perused the passage and immediately read it aloud to his mother.

"There's something to be said about eloquently expressing one's feelings verbally, and in writing," Saradambal said.

In another letter she wrote, "I don't believe that music and education are indispensable for a woman. I realize what a woman needs is a heartfelt fulfillment in her life." Raghupathy teased her: "Do you actually mean it?"

"*Amma*, see how he accuses me! Do you think my letter sounds insincere?" Rajam extended the letter toward Saradambal.

"Don't mind what he says," Saradambal said smiling, and refused to read the letter.

There was a good reason why Rajam had deliberately avoided writing about reading books or her singing in her letters to her parents. When the old lady in the neighborhood had said of Rajam, "She's gorgeous! She extends warm greetings and invites me to come in, even before I enter the house! *That alone is enough!*" Rajam literally took it to her heart! She concluded that she needn't worry anymore about books, music, or violin. Besides, just like Saradambal, Raghupathy and Doraiswamy were indifferent to her musical talent.

There were a couple of occasions, early on, when Saradambal suggested Rajam to practice her music lessons and violin. Still Rajeswari dithered: Didn't Bhavani warn her that it would be unbecoming of Rajam to indulge in music when her mother-in-law was busy with errands?

She thought of practicing lessons when mother-in-law was free from work, but that was never possible. Wasn't Saradambal kept busy in making *appalam*?

Rajam was in awe whenever she witnessed her mother-in-law's passion for *appalam*. Her mind might be filled with frustrations, disappointments and annoyances; yet the very word *appalam* seemed to invigorate Saradambal in no time; the face would brighten and she would carry on a pleasant conversation. Rajam marveled at her stance and even sympathized with her. "What fervor!" Rajam admired her.

Saradambal gave away *appalams* freely— not just to daughter Bhavani, her in-laws and neighbors — but also to strangers in faraway places. She never seemed to be bored or tired of making them. "It's certainly a small inconvenience to us but then think of those folks — how they will enjoy these snacks!" she would say. She once told Rajam, "You volunteered now to help me make the dough, so I let you. With no help, I have single-handedly made all the *appalams* for Bhavani's wedding."

Rain or shine, Rajam thought, when it came to *appalams*, it made no difference to Saradambal.

"*Amma*, did you also make the *appalams* for my wedding?" Rajam asked.

"No, then I had help from *Ammavaasai*, the man-servant. He was so helpful I bought him an umbrella."

Rajam kept wondering; preparing the dough was only a very little part of the whole process. Yet Saradambal took care of the whole errand and didn't mind about the little things Rajam had to handle. "My mother dreaded the prospect of making even a hundred *appalams*," confessed Rajam.

When it came to talk about her life back home, Rajam would always say 'there' or just mention her hometown. She would never use the word 'my home.' No flaunting of her birthplace; it's only while talking about her siblings she would exhibit her pride and love for them.

She would narrate these tidbits with fascination but, at the same time, she didn't seem disappointed that her husband wasn't ready to applaud them.

She had hoped Raghupathy would not disparage the children knowing they had endeared themselves to his wife; and there were indeed occasions when he did prove her right!

Rajam doted on her siblings and other children as well; she understood and sympathized with the children from the under-privileged classes. She would narrate, with a touch of sadness, how, one day, their servant-maid's son came along with some other children to listen to the gramophone; he would only squat on the floor and, even when urged, wouldn't sit on a bench. Did Rajam harbor the same reluctance, deep inside, to venture into the front porch and listen to the radio?

Another day, "There's a boy, six years old, and his parents wanted to admit him in school," she told Saradambal, one day. "The boy's father was asked if they wanted the boy to be admitted into the second class or the third. The boy, who was standing beside his father, told him, "Appa, third class will be crowded, so I would rather go to the second." The family only traveled by third class in trains, and that's what prompted the boy's response!" she said. Who can blame her for talking highly about the children who stayed fresh in her memory?

## 18

'What a woman needs is a sense of fulfillment in her life.'

That's how Rajam expressed her state of mind to her parents, but Natarajan, at his wont, wrote to her: "Sarima Garu is constantly asking us about your music, but you seem to avoid mentioning it in your letters. In spite of my telling him that you would mention it only if you weren't

practicing your lessons and that will not refrain you from playing the violin; he insists on hearing from you confirming what I had told him. What is your reply?"

Doraiswamy too was concerned. "How did you let this happen?" he asked. "Aren't you practicing violin?"

Rajeswari avoided replying with a smile and Saradambal told her husband. "I urged her for a couple of days, and then gave up. Apparently, she started crying when they asked her to sing during the wedding."

Rajam was startled. She wanted to cry out, "I am no more that Rajeswari, *Amma!* I have totally changed since that incident. I was shy in the beginning, but not any more. I will sing if you prod me, again," But she kept quiet.

Many people from their neighborhood visited Saradambal and praised her daughter-in-law; but no one asked her to sing!

Rajam owed a reply back home; one day she asked Saradambal if she could practice the violin and Saradambal said, "Well, surely, go ahead."

Rajam enjoyed her time playing violin and, with renewed enthusiasm, she busied herself with domestic errands. She felt reassured that she need not harbor any more needless fears, and she continued her violin practice during the next three days. She played a few favorite *kritis* suggested by her mother-in-law. Occasionally, her performance was less than satisfactory. She resumed the routine after a week. Finally, she made up her mind: 'No need to worry any longer; I must not throw away a gift I had acquired after a great effort.'

But the time was not in her favor!

Bhavani's husband has been transferred to Nagpur; he decided to leave his wife with her parents before he took over the new position and found a house there.

It was Rajeswari who seemed excited over Bhavani's arrival.

"If I were to visit my parents, I would surely receive a much warmer reception!" Rajeswari told herself. "How come Bhavani's parents are not exactly thrilled by her visit?" So, when she greeted Bhavani, her voice was extra energetic "Please come in *Akka*, let me have Chitra." When she noticed Satyamurthy standing casually in the living room, she urged him to take the chair near the radio. Her manners brightened up the relatively quiet welcome.

That evening Satyamurthy pressed Bhavani and Rajam to play their instruments. Just as she had planned, Rajam set up the *veena* and violin in the living room; she spread out a mat for the listeners to sit on, and set a jug of drinking water nearby. Hadn't she made up her mind to learn a few Tamil *kritis* from Bhavani?

The women played the *varnam* in *Aaboghi*; Bhavani had no coaching and also no practice – Rajam had both. Bhavani's lack of practice was revealing.

On finishing the *varnam*, Bhavani looked at her mother and asked, "I assume *manni* is practicing every day?"

"Yes, she does," was Saradambal's short answer.

"Great! *Manni* has really become smart," Bhavani remarked, adding, "I can't take up the *veena* at my home; something or other keeps me busy all the time. We're just three of us, yet how can I stop with one soup or one curry? I must plan and prepare a few more items for lunch and dinner. The stove is too small for making a small quantity and the other stove is too big for a larger amount. So, I am literally spending all my time in the kitchen!"

As she listened, myriad thoughts of her own, swept through Rajeswari's mind. Mentally, she sympathized with her mother's woes: 'My poor *Amma*, I am sorry I never helped you at home; how much did you have to endure! I am a sinner! My mother-in-law appreciates my work, and she thinks it is because I am the eldest daughter of the family. I learned all the work while helping you; I will behave like an ideal, eldest daughter when I come there the next time.'

Satyamurthy, casting a glance at the *veena* in Bhavani's hands, told Saradambal: "It' is funny how your daughter, with *veena* in her hands, is singing the blues about her domestic obligations." With that pun, he threw a laugh at Raghupathy who turned to Rajeswari.

Bhavani set aside the *veena* and got up. "You want to leave tomorrow, so how can we afford to spend any more time with *veena*? Today's Friday, let's go to the temple." She got ready to leave. Satyamurthy complied, and arose.

Raghupathy laughed. "I wanted you to go out with me, but you said you were tired after the train journey," he reminded Satyamurthy.

"My wife is suggesting we visit the temple; would I go with you to see your friend?" asked Satyamurthy.

"I was looking forward to your company and didn't visit my friend," Raghupathy said smiling, and left the living room. As he was leaving, Bhavani said, "I have never seen *Anna* stay back at home to give company to my husband before. But now, he's very fond of the house and the kitchen!" She ended with a laugh.

Rajam couldn't help thinking, 'How can *Akka* say such a thing? Here I feel bad that my husband leaves home at five in the evening and returns only at seven thirty.' Wasn't Rajam dismayed for some time now, that it was only in the evenings she could find some time to wash her face and make herself presentable?

Satyamurthy departed after only a couple of days of stay and, before leaving, he asked his mother-in-law: "Please let me have your *appalam* – the special egg brand. I will have them for my afternoon snack."

"I've already packed four sets for you," Saradambal told him, "two for you and two for your mother," as Bhavani came in. "Are you saying the *appalams* are in egg shape? Aren't they round?"

Satyamurthy laughed. "By 'egg' I meant a cipher – which has no value or price! I was saying these *appalams* are priceless!" he said.

Bhavani had bristled that he was finding fault with her mother, but Saradambal understood the joke and thought Bhavani was too rash in her criticism. She simply smiled enjoying the row.

Rajeswari too relished these skirmishes. 'How many pleasant occurrences are buried in a married life!' she wondered. She had a full life ahead of her and she would, slowly savor them. It wasn't something that fades away with the newlyweds getting to know each other. She too, just like Bhavani, would one day freely talk and share pleasant memories with her husband. What she had read and dreamt from story books will surely come true!

Rajeswari sympathized with Bhavani who seemed bored after her husband had left. She tried to lift her spirits. "Akka, I have heard people say music is the best medicine for weariness. Why don't we take up music?" She turned to Saradambal. "Do we have any errands pending for dinner?" Rajam took the liberty and rolled a carpet on the floor for her to sit.

Bhavani was all smiles as she sat down on the mat. Rajam set up a *sruti* box and asked Bhavani to sing a few specific *kritis* which she did. She sang them all and, after she's finished, she told Rajam, "That's enough, put the *sruti* box away."

Rajam was disappointed that Bhavani hadn't asked her to sing. Did she think, I would cry, Rajam wondered. "Of late I got interested in learning new *kritis*," she began, "Previously it took me a month or even two to learn a *kriti*, but now I am paying more attention to what I want to learn. When I was in Calcutta I noticed your singing *Mamavasadha*, and I picked up the *pallavi*; can't I learn the *anupallavi* and *charanam* in the next four days? Will you teach me?"

Bhavani turned around. Casting an indifferent look, she said, "I will, but let's do that some other time. Now sing the *anupallavi* for *Enta Nerchina*. I like the *saveri raga* very much. It is not that well known around this area." Rajam was delighted.



'There're so many *kritis* of Thyagaraja's,' Rajeswari muttered to herself and took up the *sruti* box when Bhavani interrupted her. "You don't need the *sruti* box; just sing the *anupallavi*." Rajam's face turned pale; she had been taught that a *kriti* should be sung formally – in a regular order, and not in pieces or fragments; such a violation, she was warned, would be construed as an insult to the composers.

"Akka, why start with *anupallavi*? Is it proper?"

"Why not? Don't some of our best vocalists start with *Balakanakamaya*? And what about *Ela Nee Dayaraadu*? That's a great composition too – the first ever created by Thyagaraja."

Rajeswari's heart swelled with joy; still she could not recall the *pallavi* before she could recite the *anupallavi*.

Slowly and mentally she recollected the lines from *pallavi* and, then, *anupallavi*; she stopped singing whenever Bhavani asked her to, and repeated intoning as she suggested.

"Let's hear the *charanam* now," said Bhavani and Rajam complied; she was pleased that she could render the *kriti* in its entirety, not in splinters.

The *charanam* ended with the phrase *Varada Venkatesa* – the composer's signature. "This is not a composition by Thyagaraja; you said it was. Don't you have to remember the composer's name?" Bhavani asked with a sneer, "You don't have sufficient devotion to classical music; you are fit to sing only film songs!"

Bhavani had used Rajam as a mere gramophone record for her to listen; Rajeswari's face turned pale. She was about to burst into tears. Luckily for her, Bhavani said, "Come on, let's visit our neighbor; pick up *Chitra*?" Rajeswari complied happily - it has been many weeks since she stirred out of the house.

## 19

Bhavani heard of a young musician teaching in their neighborhood. She wanted to have him as a coach and, soon, arrangements were under way.

Rajeswari was eagerly looking forward to the arrival of the new musician; she was fondly hoping she too might be asked to be his student.

The young musician set off the session with his rich and booming voice and rendered two *kritis* that thrilled the listeners – including Doraiswamy and Raghupathy who sat nearby in the hall. The tuition began formally after Bhavani sang a couple of songs - starting with a beautiful Sanskrit composition followed by a prayer to Lord Ganesha. Rajam was overjoyed and moved by her musical display.

She washed the vessels while listening to the music and, as she returned to the kitchen, did her face do something to her mother-in-law?

“You too can catch up with these songs with a little exposure,” Saradambal told her. “You see, there's no need to pay the teacher double wages unnecessarily, that's why.” Rajam felt her voice choked, but managed to respond, “Yes, *amma*, why unnecessarily waste money?” A single tear drop peeked from the corner of one eye. With her face burning hot, how long can a droplet of water last? The bead disappeared, instantly.

Still Rajam vindicated Saradambal's hope. In the days that followed she paid attention to the ongoing music lessons – her mind, ears and the tongue, absorbing the flair and elegance as Bhavani practiced and demonstrated before her teacher. Rajam quickly grasped and retained the songs. She realized that, though she hadn't opened her mouth, she had fully taken in the lesson; she even wondered how she could sop up the lessons so easily. Tirelessly, and with the passion of *Ekalavya*, she continued to fulfill her ambition.

What engenders a young woman's married life? First, she's transplanted into the new world of her spouse and his parents; it is by clinging to her marital bond that she tries to carve a name for herself in the new setting.

Rajam fully understands where her husband stands; he's beloved of his parents, adored by his sister; a companion and lover of his new wife and, in the household, he belongs to everyone – something the new

bride consciously understands and willingly adapts. She has to be transformed into an exemplary housewife – by serving her in-laws with devotion, winning the admiration of the other family members and carving a name for herself. The supreme meaning of her life ought to be, “Everybody is entitled to my love and respect; I will have warm relationship with everyone; I belong to this house.”

Her intuition had already made that clear to Rajam.

Rajam waited on her mother-in-law and sister-in-law even more vigorously than serving her husband. She was shy to hand out the soap and towel to Raghupathy when he wanted to shower, but she never hesitated to serve up the turmeric and *Seezakkai* powder to the women when they needed them.

One day Bhavani asked Rajam, “Is hot water ready? Have my clothes ready for me.” Rajam complied and preempted Bhavani by asking her when she finished showering, “Which sari and blouse do you want to wear?” This continued for a couple of days until, one day, her father-in-law asked Rajam: “Can’t she get her own clothes? Why do you have to do it for her?” Rajam evaded his question with a smile, and Bhavani told her father: “I asked her not to, but she wouldn’t listen!” Rajam felt as if she had won a badge of honor.

Bhavani, invariably, would never stir out an inch; when Chitra, the child, suddenly wandered away unattended, Bhavani would scream, “Get her back! She’s going to trip!” but scarcely move out of her spot. Her hands would be constantly knitting a sweater or pullover.

And, sometimes, she acted very weird.

One night, Rajam, the day’s work done, closed the door leading to the backyard before retiring to bed, when Bhavani wanted her: “Come here.” Rajam went to her.

“Open the door for me, and wait here.”

Rajam complied. Bhavani went out to brush her teeth and, once done, she gargled, and returned. “I ate sweets at dinner,” she said, “I must take care of my teeth,” and walked away.

'My God, she needed me only to open and close the door behind her?' Rajam asked in disbelief.

Her new married life now faced a disquieting moment: it was as if a musical concert – a haunting melody rendered in perfect harmony blending with the right pitch and note – had suddenly lost its rhythm.

But Rajam knew she could handle it.

## 20

For some time now, Natarajan has been feeling unhappy over missing the company of his eldest daughter. Rajam has been gone only for six months but now he frantically wanted to see her; even his wife didn't seem that desperate. It was Natarajan who often turned emotional and teary when he talked about Rajam.

'She's happy over there; why keep worrying?' was how he would try to console himself. But the very next moment his self-assurance would dissolve like a line on water surface.

'A single visit to her would be a great relief,' his inner voice would urge him; he never felt this anxious when he had given her away in marriage or bidden her farewell at her in-laws. Natarajan never imagined his separation from her would be this painful.

'She's forgotten us; she's happy with her husband and his folks; hasn't she written that she is showered with love by all in her surroundings? Still, does she ever talk about her parents who taught her the best things in life? Does she ever enquire about them or convey in writing what she thinks of her folks back home? The simple answer is, No!'

He recalled a Tamil poem.

'The pearl gives happiness to those who possess it; it doesn't show any gratitude to the sea of its birth.'

Rajam was born under the star *Swathi* and that had another meaning – pure pearl. Yes, Doraiswamy was correct!

As his eyes traveled from the front porch to a flower pot, Natarajan remembered what Rajam told him while looking at the flower in full blossom. That's two days before her departure to join her husband: "I had the greatest time in my life," she said, "I have enjoyed its company to the fullest!"

Now Natarajan also sees many flowers in full blossom, but his home looks desolated like a plant robbed of its flowers; his heart suffers like a plant shorn of its leaves.

"Why don't you pay her a visit once?" Visalam asked him, but Natarajan wouldn't. Didn't Visalam too fester inside? Of late, Natarajan had observed how Visalam's face cringed at the very mention of Rajam's name, and the children too shied away in silence.

"Raghupathy will soon land a job, and he would get busy," Natarajan told his wife. "I very much wish he now visits us with Rajam." But he was also concerned that his hope would get in the way of the young couple who had only recently begun their marital life. The truth of the matter was had Natarajan paid some attention to the daily newspaper he would have been entertained by news from national and international fronts; but, presently, his mind was preoccupied with Rajam, and he gave up on his pursuit of political news.

"Appa, Appa . . . "

'Who's that? Is it Rajeswari? Yes, it is her voice!'

It's indeed Rajeswari who was addressing him from inside a *jatka*! Good heavens, why is the cart speeding on without stopping? Her sweet and alluring voice is slowly fading away . . .

With the newspaper still in hand, Natarajan stepped on to the street and rushed to a few houses away; another face – a woman's – now peered from inside the *jatka* – it was Sambasivam's wife.

Natarajan stood in silence when he noticed another *jatka* pull by. Its sole occupant was Sambasivam who was looking over the suit cases and bedding in the cart.

"I've brought your daughter," Sambasivam told Natarajan, laughing, and teased him. "How are you going to pay me your appreciation? How about presenting me with *paruppu thengai*? Then, I will let you take your daughter home."

Natarajan thought his friend was joking. He now glanced over his younger daughter Radhai in front of her house and told her: "Tell *Amma* I will be bringing our Rajam home." He saw there was no room in *jatka*, so he began walking back towards his home.

"I will not let you off the hook that easily," Sambasivam said. "Ask your wife to bring me *paruppu thengai*."

Natarajan understood what he meant.

"I will have it sent as tiffin."

"Fine, that's my formal request and it's a tradition."

Visalam, who has been watching a *jatka* passing past their house and carrying Rajam, now came over to them.

"Start preparing *paruppu thengai*," Natarajan ordered her. "Lunch can wait for a while. Meanwhile, I will go and see Rajam."

"You don't have to go now," Visalam said. "I can prepare *Mysorepak* in no time. You can shower and get ready. I will send the servant maid to fetch fruits, flowers and betel leaves. He (she meant Sambasivam) feels entitled to a special treatment, let us not deny him that privilege. Let's be thankful that he brought our daughter home." She started walking toward her home when Mani, their younger son, darted toward his mother, shouting, "*Amma*, I've already seen *Akka!*" Then he came closer to Visalam and whispered into her ears, "*Akka* looks so different! Looks like she's been crying." Visalam was silent, as she wiped tears off her face.

Rajam's first reaction on seeing her father was to address him aloud but she immediately became quiet; wasn't Sambasivam around to answer her father's questions? Which, he did.

"Why does she look so run down?" asked Natarajan, and Sambasivam told him, "Don't you know, she lives with her in-laws!" Like a baby conveying its message to its father, Rajam cast her glance at Natarajan and, bowed her head down.

Natarajan felt remorseful to see Rajam, thin and emaciated, has to walk on the street; he riveted his eyes on her while struggling to overcome his tears and emotion.

"Why did they do this?" he, again, wanted to know in a halting voice. "I would have come to the railway station to receive you if they had simply dropped a card." He was not prepared to accept Sambasivam's statement that he was asked to hand over Rajam to her parents following the exchange of *paruppu thengai*; he was well aware of Sambasivam's craving for good food. So he was a little shocked when Rajam offered an explanation, "Appa, didn't you hear what Sambasivam Uncle was saying? How can we ignore the fact that my in-laws are trying to preserve their self-respect?" A little time ago Natarajan was feeling grateful that her in-laws had sent Rajam home on their own because, he thought, they understood how keenly Rajam would be welcomed by her parents.

Rajam raced toward her mother who's standing in the front porch astride with little Kannan on her waist. She also noticed the neighbors, perched on their porches, were keenly watching her, and let out a mild laugh.

Her intent was to draw the baby into her arms in one stretch, yet, it was Visalam she first addressed:

"*Amma, Amma!*"

Visalam hugged her with her right hand. Rajam now found herself under her mother's warm embrace. Yet that scene, dramatic as it was, lasted only a moment.

"*Amma!*"

"Rajam, don't cry!"

Both women tried to mask their embarrassment and moved away from one another.

If Rajeswari's departure to her in-laws had marked the first pang of separation in Natarajan's family, her present visit proved the peak of their joy.

Rajam explained the reason behind her sudden, unannounced visit with the Sambasiva Iyer's family: Raghupathy had been called to attend an interview in Bombay; just when Raghupathy was making arrangements for his trip, his parents heard from Satyamurthy that Bhavani would return to Nagpur. With Saradambal wanting to accompany her daughter to Nagpur, the elders wondered if Rajam could be left alone. That's when Sambasiva Iyer was visiting the Doraiswamy family, and it was decided that Rajam could return home under his escort.

Visalam now spoke her mind: "Sambasiva Iyer was right in demanding a gift from us; we owe it to him for having Rajam's company."

Natarajan stared at her saying, "I see it quite differently. It would take Raghupathy only a few days to return home after the interview; I am actually annoyed this Sambasivam has denied the young couple a few days' company."

Rajeswari intervened. "They made the decision because my husband might be asked to stay in Bombay after the interview," she said. "My mother-in-law was saying, 'Why should we spend our money to send her home the first time? We are making everything easy for others.' That's when Sambasivam Uncle told her, 'I will surely demand some special dish from their family!' and my mother-in-law gave him a nod of approval. *Appa*, it is only natural that my in-laws want to exercise their privilege; I feel thankful for their generosity." Natarajan heard her patiently and said nothing, before returning to the veranda.

Afterward, he walked to the kitchen when Rajam was away talking to the servant maid. He neared Visalam and asked her, "Do you think this is really our daughter Rajeswari?" and briskly returned to the veranda.



Rajam asked Kannan and Radhai to get on the cradle and settled on it; she stayed quiet on the cradle doing nothing; Natarajan couldn't stand the scene.

"Why don't you sing? Come on, why don't you swing?"

Rajam tried to set the cradle in motion by shoving her legs against the floor, but the pace was sluggish. What happened to those legs? Did they lose their strength?

"Why are you not singing? The cradle is obsessed with your music!"

Tears flowed down Rajeswari's cheeks, but she let out a laugh.

"What happened?"

"I keep wondering whether I will feel like going back to my home after enjoying a place like this.

"What do you mean?"

"I often wonder if there's a place where I could live with no fear or concerns . . ."

"Free of concerns? Were you not happy there? I was wondering why you look so thin and shrunken."

"That's not what I meant," Rajam said. "I was quite cheery and happy there but, back in my mind, I had to deal with certain tension and responsibility. Here, things are quite different! You see me causally settling on this cradle because I don't have to worry that *Amma* would object! Today, when I first entered the house I made a resolution that I should help *Amma* – be her right hand – but I have simply taken over the cradle." She instantly got off the cradle.

Rajeswari's temperament – her withered face, nervous laugh, coyness and halting voice – wrenched Natarajan's heart; Visalam, in the kitchen, was wiping tears off her face.

"Fine, now you can go and have your bath," he told her. "You must be hungry," He sat on the swing and felt

the chains holding the swing whisper to him, "Some in-laws!"

The family members sat in a semi-circle while sharing their lunch. Visalam arranged the dishes on the floor close to her and served them. It was only while serving the guests, she would carry the dishes in hand and shuttle between the kitchen and the visitors.

Rajeswari seemed to enjoy, after several months, her meal; she's unhurried, didn't feel distracted by anything other than savoring and enjoying every item being served. She eagerly sought what she liked, and gladly welcomed what her mother was feeding her, like a baby.

"I will really get fat in just two days – if I gorge like this," she said.

"Why? Don't you eat properly over there?"

"Of course, I never missed my meals; there's was no distinction between which dish was or wasn't my favorite! I would eat everything, I was ravenously hungry! Bhavani would often tease me that I was trying to win favor from my mother-in-law, but I was really hungry! Every dish tasted great, and pretty soon I was gobbling everything!" she concluded with a laugh.

Natarajan, who was pining to see his daughter – to simply glimpse her just once to make him happy, now agonized: 'Was I really looking forward to *this*?'

'Is this Rajeswari, the young wife now returning to her parents?' he wondered. She was a beauty to behold, and now she seems to have lost all her sheen and luster; her body, ever supple and graceful, is gone'. Natarajan woefully recalled the days when he used to coax Rajam – either when she was engaged in reading or playing the violin – to stiffen her back and strike a regal posture. That imposing look too is now gone, and she resembles a withering plant. She has also lost a lot of hair and even the servant maid was heard complaining to Visalam, "How could you tolerate this? I would have been dead if she were my own daughter!" To Natarajan, Rajam's cheeks exemplified the firm and yellow skin of the *Banganapalli* mango; what remained now is only the inedible seed. And what's her response when Natarajan asked her? "Appa, I do feel a little

strange here," she was saying. "I am happy but also feel tired. Till the last two days I was very active, but now I feel lethargic." What does she actually mean?

## 21

"Have you noticed how much our Rajam had changed? Visalam asked her husband one day.

"You haven't noticed until now?"

"No, I am not talking about her physical features," answered Visalam, and then went on: Rajam washed her own sari and let it dry nicely on a clothesline in their backyard; she checked the bathroom, set down the firewood in the stove and picked up a few hot coals which she brought to her mother in the kitchen; once she was done with her bath, Rajam carefully secured the water in the giant water vessel before filling it up. And as soon as she completed her tasks in the bathroom she entered the kitchen and sat down to grind the assortment of spices ready for the dish her mother was about making."

Natarajan was outraged. "Why should she force herself into domestic chores - so soon after her arrival?" he wanted to know. "Did she take a look at the flowers in the garden or the cement bench where she used to sit watching the scenery around? What else could she have done at her in-laws? It's no wonder her body looks thin and fragile."

Visalam didn't seem alarmed. "She will be all right in a few days; soon her face too would lighten up," she said. "Rajam had never been away from her parents; remember how she was distraught for a week when she was gone on her school excursion? Now she had been away for six months, but she's levelheaded and handled herself well with her in-laws, and she's now physically exhausted. Remember, she was dealing with strangers in new surroundings, she's not accustomed to handle daily errands, and that had taken a toll on her. It is not uncommon that when a bride makes her first visit to her in-laws, her body changes quite a lot; all that growth and perception inside her are suddenly transformed." Visalam managed to stop smiling while trying her best to calm her husband before returning to the kitchen.

She didn't pay attention to her husband's fiery retort: "I think they have simply squeezed the life out of her!"

Shortly afterward, Visalam returned to her topic. "I am now all the more convinced that we need not encourage education and music to our Radhai; if anything, Rajam teaches us that a good heart and a willingness to work hard are the most important assets of a girl can be proud of."

"Well, I am also convinced of one thing," Natarajan yelled at her. "I heard Sambasivam say that Rajam, on her own, volunteers to do dishes over there. 'Why should she do such a thing, when the servant maid is available?' he asked me. He also thinks Doraiswamy Iyer seemed sorry that they were sending Rajam home in poor health. After all, the blame rests with them. What about our home? Don't we have a servant maid here? I know the days when Rajam showed particularly no interest in helping you with errands at home; now, why don't you ask her why she thought of helping the servant-maid."

Rajam intervened with an explanation while facing an anxious mother and a disconcerted father. She began, "I have noticed that my in-laws - both - have their own way of expressing their opinions. I heard my mother-in-law say, 'Why should we overwhelm the servant maid with all the dishes and invite her scorn? Can't we share some simple tasks without her?' and I saw her take a few vessels and scrubbing them; that's how I caught up with that habit. A few days later, my father-in-law noticed me and asked about it, and I told him it takes me only five minutes. I was involved in so many tasks that this one didn't matter much to me. This is how men and women don't look eye to eye on many family matters." Rajam was speaking out of her own experience, which pleased her mother.

Within a few days, just as Visalam had hoped, Rajam regained her poise and self-image; she started visiting her friends and enjoyed engaging them in conversation. But she hardly spent any time at home on a chair propped up with a book; she got actively involved in all the household chores that left Visalam with great pride and appreciation. The mother shared her sentiments with visitors: "Rajam feels guilty that she had never

served me meals before she actually had hers; to be frank, I myself never served meals to my mother! My mother would prepare food and serve the dishes herself. It's only by observing Rajam I am now able to admire my mother!" She continued to shower her praise on Rajam.

Mani sent a word for the music teacher, and soon Sharma visited their house.

Sharma played the violin and Rajam sang to his accompaniment. She felt a sensation – suddenly – that she had overcome her initial inhibition. The teacher too expressed his admiration for her poise and natural delivery.

But he turned sad when Rajam played the violin. "I can see your handwork – you are playing the violin owing to your last five years' drill, but there's nothing to suggest that you had any practice in the last six months. Why, what happened? Are you following the example of the rest of my students who sacrificed their music? Do you think music has no place once a girl gets married?" he asked.

"Hereafter, how can one expect to do daily practice? It's just impossible," Rajam said.

"Why? Are the children interfering in your efforts?"

"No, but how can I act selfish at my in-laws? How can I follow my own interests?"

"One-hour vocal and one-hour violin practice: how can someone call that a selfish act? I don't think your in-laws would feel that way."

"My goodness! I am not saying I don't practice violin because they would object; it has to do with my own attitude. How would it look if I keep playing violin when my mother-in-law is busy in the kitchen?"

Natarajan could never forget her reply; he's well aware of Doraiswamy's progressive views, so he could only confirm that Rajam had, needlessly, misread the attitude of the elders.

He wanted to engage Rajam more and more in his daily conversation and dispel some of the notions lingering in her mind. Yet, he was only getting frustrated in his efforts.

"I am not against your cheerfully and dutifully serving your in-laws," Natarajan told her. "Still, I don't understand why you are needlessly afraid of them?"

Rajam laughed away at his question; she had only one question: "*Appa*, you won't understand."

"Over there, you have fewer people to serve than here, at our home," Natarajan continued. "What is so overwhelming about work there? Won't you find some time for your music practice? You were also telling us that your mother-in-law takes care of the lunch preparation; so, what's the problem?"

"I really don't know how to answer your question," Rajam admitted. "I too used to think the way you do, but time simply goes by and I can't do anything about it." She concluded, "I remember many a day when I hardly found any time to do nothing; I only managed to find some time to sit for my meals."

"Rajam, you think of yourself as a daughter-in-law only; you have failed in your duty to act like a woman; do you understand what happened?" Natarajan's sneer only brought silence and tears in Rajam.

Later, Natarajan reflected on what he has been hearing; it was Visalam who first mentioned it, and now his daughter too said it: women always see things differently!

How could he blame Rajam? She's only conforming to the prevailing rules at home.

He wanted to know about Rajam's marital life, and a few opportunities presented themselves.

Visalam expressed her concern over Bhavani's attitude. "Now that her baby has grown up, Bhavani too must feel less stressed," Visalam said. "Does she get at you as before?" Rajam laughed, and said, "Previously the baby would sleep on its own; now it is very

mischievous.” Visalam, a mother of many children, wondered at her inability to ask an apt question when Natarajan, who had just joined them, blurted out, “So Bhavani has become more demanding?”

“No, *Appa*,” Rajam replied. “I often wondered why nobody in that household seems to get excited about Bhavani *Aka*’s arrival. I used to feel sorry for her. She feels her father disapproves of whatever task she does, so he wants me to help her. And I found a perfect way to solve her predicament; I would take the initiative to help her even before she asked for it! So, I am always upbeat where the household chores are concerned. Sometimes I find it amazing that I have developed this attitude; there’s only one occasion when I felt terrible and even felt like crying . . . .”

“Why? What happened?”

“*Akka* and I were in the bathroom when *Akka* told me, ‘Put out the fire, I see smoke coming,’ and I did. Later, I went back to the bathroom after her bath. I was trying to relight the wood stove when my mother-in-law came and asked, ‘Why did you put off the fire? We have three more waiting for bath.’ Bhavani, who was busy drying her hair said, “It was *manni* who put off the fire!” I didn’t counter and say I didn’t do such a thing; I comforted myself thinking it was *my* hand that actually shut the wood stove. Still, I felt like crying; I avoided embarrassment – the reddening eyes – because of smoke!” She concluded with a feigning laugh.

Natarajan marveled at her reaction. “That’s actually Gandhian,” he said.

“I am sure Bhavani too will admire your attitude,” Visalam said.

“Yes, that’s exactly what Bhavani said before taking leave of me,” Rajam began. “She told me, ‘*Manni*, You have really changed into a new person – just as I had insisted from time to time.’ *Amma*, what more do we need – other than people valuing our hard work?”

“Well said; we must be grateful when others openly say they are pleased with us,” Visalam said. “Not a few would easily brush off with a comment, ‘What’s the big

deal?' I think Bhavani thinks even a small task is beyond her, so she thinks highly of what you have done."

"You are right. I don't think I was accomplishing a great deal; mother-in-law does the main cooking and I only help her with some odd jobs. I have often heard her say, 'A single person's intention to help is equal to eight lending hands.' I am quite happy with her compliment."

Natarajan believed marriage would enhance his daughter's traits, but now her appearance brought him shock.

He openly expressed his ire and disappointment.

He thought of telling her, "Rajam, You have really turned into a pearl!" and her swift response would be, "Father, what did you expect? I was born under *Swathi!*"

Natarajan quoted from an old Tamil poem:

*"The sandalwood tree confers honor on only those who own it; nobody thinks of the mountain range – its place of birth."*

"And that's exactly what has happened to you," he told his daughter. "You seem to place your in-laws on a pedestal higher than your own parents – who reared you and nourished your outlook with music and education. You have acquiesced to your in-laws and are more than pleased when they reward your sweat with good appreciation and good intentions. Is it any wonder that your hard work makes them happy? I am sorry to say this: You have brought us no glory; we rather think that your love and regard for us is second-rate."

Visalam cut him in. "Why do you say she brought no credit to our family? Nobody would ever blame us that we spoiled our daughter and made her obstinate and head strong. Rajam has conducted herself in the best manner and let's not keep harping on how on her body is wearing out."

"Appa, is it not true that worn out sandalwood gives off aroma? What's wrong with one wearing out?"

Natarajan was not cowed down.



"I am not talking just about your health; did you ever pay any attention to reading and music? You keep reminding us once a month that you are practicing on your violin. Should your parents expect nothing more than a letter, once a month, when you are barred from housework?"

Rajam asked with a shock, "How do you know?"

"I know. That's when you have a lot of time to pen a long letter home. In the beginning we were getting two or three letters every month; later, we had a letter once in four weeks; I figured out we were being tricked!"

"*Appa*, my intention was never to lie or deceive . . ."

"Enough, you are torturing her," Visalam chided her husband, and Rajam sought refuge in her words.

"*Appa*, I have heard the proverb that the herb growing up in a mountain feels fulfillment only when it is pounded in a home. Don't you think I should feel more honored at my in-laws than in my own home?"

"Well, what more can I say?" Natarajan asked her in a voice, sullen and defeated. "You seem to know everything; I am just a foolish father!" He said nothing more.

Rajam felt distraught. Well, she's now home, so she revealed her pain to her mother.

Until now Rajam thought she was affectionately called her father's daughter; now she seemed ready to carry the nickname as her mother's daughter.

She had often heard Visalam tell Rajam that her mother had actually understood life only through proverbs and that, whatever she had known about the Tamil culture – their mores and traditions - by reading Tamil periodicals and magazines; Rajam now recalled her mother once rebuking her with a remark. "The audacious ox invariably ends up carrying the load!"

"*Amma*, I come to agree with the saying that a daughter takes after her mother. Of late I have learnt some truisms: the worn-out sandalwood gives away

aroma; the herb is valued only when it is ground into a medicine; my music appeals only to the folks in my hometown. I have often heard you say I am lacking in social skills because I never had the opportunity to mingle with elders; now I feel happy I am able to learn a lot because of my association with elders. That's what makes me so different from you!" Rajam laughed and let out a sigh. "I feel sorry for father."

"Well, your father is different from others," Visalam comforted her. "Can everyone follow his example?" There was a touch of bitterness rather than pride in her voice.

During the last two years Visalam had been growing apprehensive, worried and ill; everything seemed insurmountable to her. What made things worse for her was not just her concern over Rajam's marriage, but the neighborhood woman Sitamma!

Sitamma lived with her in-laws and her family; she's younger to Visalam, but smarter in worldly affairs. She often told Visalam that she was naïve!

Visalam, who always saw the better side of people, extolled Sitamma for her wisdom, but she was occasionally mortified with Sitamma's comments. Rajam knew her mother often tell her with a sense of resignation, "Well, I have become exactly as your father wanted me!"

Was Visalam speaking today in similar vein? Rajam thought her mother's awkwardness had no basis.

Did Natarajan ever impose his will on his wife? Only in regard to her wear; he wanted her to present herself as one of the town folks. "Let no one think of you as a Tamil woman, set apart from the rest," he was reported to have warned her when the couple first moved to this town. "That'll only make you look different. You can wear the simple, traditional *Andhra*-style six-yard sari, and I will go with the traditional Tamil *dhoti*. I have no objection to your looking like a well-to-do *Andhra* woman with diamond studs and nose-screws!" When the couple had elderly guests at home or were travelling to South, Visalam invariably donned the nine-yard sari because she said she dreaded the prospect of meeting with the elders' disapproval. Why her mother should get upset by

Sitamma's remark, "How do these Tamils really manage with a nine-yard sari?"

Rajam felt her father was right about the nine-yard sari; so did her mother who was devoted to tradition.

"*Amma*, isn't the six-yard sari more convenient to work in the kitchen and serve food?" Rajam asked.

Visalam half smiled. "Maybe your father knows it, and that's the reason why he got me into it! He also keeps telling me that I should reduce my household chores. I remember when I first came to this town – some eighteen years ago – I would follow everything he told me; that's how he would put it in words – isn't he a professor?"

A woman, by tradition, holds her husband in high esteem and naturally values his opinions; that's how she's caught up in a trap. While this truth eluded Visalam, Rajam knew better.

Her shyness didn't allow Rajam to confess that her husband was no professor; so, how could she follow his advice?

She composed herself and said, "All right, father speaks with eloquence and authority," putting an end to her predicament.

Visalam paid no attention to Rajam's anguish, neither did she think of her own pain; she continued to praise her husband. "Your father didn't just stop with giving me advice," she continued, "He wanted me to minimize errands at home: he bought me books to read and said I should never remain locked up in the kitchen; he warned me that if I let my work revolve around the kitchen, the children too would simply follow my routine. 'The mother is the first teacher to her offspring,' he would say. He encouraged me to learn sewing, read books and teach Tamil to the children. 'Try to answer every question from the children with patience; don't threaten them saying you have more important things to do in the kitchen,' he would say. I was to improve my knowledge through books and impart it to the children. I had no problem following his advice. I used to accompany you in the

music lessons and, I also learnt Telugu." Visalam's excitement seemed boundless.

The revelation shocked Rajam; her father wanted her mother not to be confined to the kitchen, and impart knowledge to the children; yet, here was Rajam, arguing with her own father!

Didn't Natarajan protest vehemently, short of making his feelings public, that Rajam had shattered all his hopes about her?

"I often wondered if I should write to you in Telugu to find out your real feelings," Visalam said, and laughed. "But I could never bring myself to do such a thing."

"I am glad you didn't," Rajam answered. "Did you think I was just making up things in my letters home?"

'I haven't lived up as my father's daughter feeling him anguished,' Rajam admitted to herself. 'Now, I intend to make him happy when I return to my in-laws.'

Pretty soon her refrain was followed by sweet melody in the form of letter from her husband.

Raghupathy was coming to escort her back home.

## 22

The sudden transformation and the joyful mood in Rajam surprised Natarajan.

She was indeed proud that she had understood her husband's needs, so she started, at once, planning dishes in the kitchen; she also called her siblings and instructed them, in no unmistakable terms, how they should 'behave' in his presence. 'I must leave no room for any of his complaints about my parents' home during this time around,' she reminded herself.

Her face was a revelation to Natarajan who comforted himself, 'this is indeed what love actually means!'

"Well, you are returning to your in-laws," Natarajan said, offering her a bit of advice. "You don't have to rush – on every occasion – to preempt their expectation; they

too are getting on in their years and wouldn't want to look authoritarian. You must behave like a real daughter-in-law!"

Soon Raghupathy arrived. He told Rajam, "You have bloated like a balloon!"

"Well, let's hope it won't burst," countered Natarajan.

Rajam was a little surprised when Visalam insisted she must have a fresh stock of incense sticks. Visalam first lit a lamp in the *puja* room, then the incense sticks; she burnt gum benzoin to let its aroma fill the room when Rajam, perplexed and her modesty overcome by curiosity, asked, "What're you doing?"

"This is the first nuptial night in our home," Visalam said half smiling, leaving Rajam speechless.

Raghupathy seemed awestruck when he set his eyes on Rajam's sparkling face. "Are you the same Rajeswari?" he asked in amazement.

Rajam answered, with no hesitation, "Yes, I am the same 'Rajabai Natarajan,' reminding Raghupathy that she's her father's daughter. She meticulously served him with the best hospitality even as she continued to help her mother in the domestic chores.

Raghupathy riveted his eyes on Rajam and they never wavered as he continued to cherish her, an epitome of thrill and anticipation.

It was after lunch when Raghupathy, all of a sudden, told her: "You are very different now – from the way you were - back home." There's a whiff of sadness in his voice.

"How different do I actually look?"

"A home, where one grew up, does confer some privileges."

"Oh, is that what you mean?" Rajam asked, and continued: "I am not sure about this house, but my hometown does feel something special to me. Over there, I would dread to walk alone on a street – as I keep looking over my shoulder all the time. Here, I have so

such qualms. I walk the streets because I do want to visit my friends and acquaintances. Over there, I would be scared of seeing some familiar person who wanted to talk to me." Then Rajam paused to reflect on something; she didn't want Raghupathy to think she was someone like Bhavani who put on airs at her home. "Anyway, I will be leaving home in a couple of days, so I wanted *Amma* to manage chores without my help, and came over here to spend time with you."

Wasn't Rajam, on her day of arrival, refusing even to acknowledge the idea that one day, eventually she would have to part the company of her home? And, now, she looked clearly agog with her impending departure. "Well, time certainly healed her pain," Natarajan thought, and smiled.

The fingers that weave the cotton into wicks do tend to move away from the cotton ball, but that's when the strands really get tightened and the wick lets the lamp glow brighter at the altar. Natarajan couldn't help muttering, 'Could this be an apt description of a woman life?'

Rajam now threw herself – for the second time – in a mission: she wasn't going to her in-laws but a sanctuary that offered her wellbeing and security. If it were essential that a man ought to balance his life between his parents and wife, such an obligation was no less vital for a woman, and Rajeswari was determined to follow such a course.

Her father was right; she mustn't over-react when it came to serving others; she must keep an eye on her own needs first.

Rajam asked her mother-in-law for permission to practice her violin lessons and she made it a habit, whenever possible, to rehearse for an half an hour; occasionally she complained, in a firm voice, "*Amma*, I was looking for the magazine and it looks like someone had taken it from our home." She regularly penned letters home without waiting for her father-in-law to remind her of that obligation. She never detracted from any of the duties she owed to her husband as well as to her in-laws. She foresaw her mother-in-law's needs and offered her the best even before it was asked for. The

result was Rajam had peace of mind; no more heartache that she hadn't practiced her music lessons; her hands weren't itching for playing the violin. She could eventually grow bold and secure enough to air in public, 'Today I am moving out of the kitchen to the corridor to cut the vegetables while listening to the radio.'

To come to think about it, did anyone prevent Rajam from doing what she's now doing? No, certainly there was no one to challenge her. Still, Rajam left no room for any detractors to complain, in a tone of bitterness, 'Well, a new daughter-in-law would always act meek and obedient!' Any visitor, no exceptions whatsoever, departed only after offering generous compliments on her closeness and cheerful disposition. Finally, Rajam felt freed from her lingering doubts and found peace with herself.

Raghupathy too was pleased at her transformation. Rajeswari was no more a woman whose eyes turned teary at the drop of a taunt or joke. 'She does look happy and cheerful,' he thought though, occasionally, he would scare her saying he would like to enlist for the army. "Oh, please no!" Rajam would recoil much to her husband's relish.

On a certain occasion Saradambal recalled how stubborn and willful Raghupathy used to be in his food habits. "He's so fussy and always tried to win an argument," she said. "I would tell him that ghee is good for health in moderating sweating and body heat, but he would counter, 'Are you saying ghee can *actually* contain heat?' What more can you tell him?" When Rajam first heard this, her reaction was calm and simple, 'What's terrible about it?' She didn't realize why her mother-in-law wanted to bring it up. It was Saradambal's subtle way of making her disapproval known when Rajam, occasionally, talked back to her husband. A case in point: One day, Raghupathy asked Rajam – in a tone of mockery – about the *Andhra* poets' names *Thikkanna*, *Somanna* and *Vemana* – and said they sounded very funny. "Do we have any more *Annas*?" he wanted to know. Rajam snapped back with a question: 'What do you think of the Tamil names like *Appar*, *Ottakutthar*, and *Kambar*?'

"I find it strange that your father dislikes the *Andhra* dish *Gongura*," Raghupathy told her. "What's wrong with *it*?" His tone of derision didn't go unnoticed, but Rajam turned to Saradambal and said, "This is what my husband wants to know; he seems to forget that my father had to adopt *Andhra* culture as a vital part of his existence." Such sentiments pleased Raghupathy and he heartily accepted them. He personally sought Rajam in the kitchen when he couldn't summon her from her chores.

Raghupathy didn't lose heart over his unemployment; neither did Rajam fret about it. His parents too didn't see it as an overwhelming situation. Of late Rajam too had learnt to cope with some disappointments and live with them. She celebrated Raghupathy as a devoted son and a loving husband; Raghupathy too reciprocated her unconditional love.

Their marital bond delighted Saradambal who couldn't help exclaiming, "What a close, decent couple!" She recalled Doraiswamy's initiative in their alliance and reminded herself – once more – that her husband was indeed a man of foresight who never committed a single mistake in his life!

That's what she wrote to daughter Bhavani and urged her to come home. "I will have no problem taking care of your delivery," she said. "I have your *manni* to help me and we, the parents, feel privileged to lend you a hand. You were saying your husband would be missing healthy food in your absence; if so, I can myself come over there with Rajam."

## 23

Bhavani read her mother's letter over and over again.

"How many times do you want to read it?" asked Satyamurthy. "You were never averse to going home." Bhavani simply blurted out, "No daughter-in-law would feel anything against my mother."

That afternoon, after lunch, she penned a letter to her mother.

"Why would I hesitate to go home?" she wrote. "If it's true I don't want to part the company of my husband,



then how could I bring myself to divide my brother and his wife? I think that even God is against their separation, and that's probably the reason that Brother hasn't yet landed a job. Why could I do such a thing?"

"Why is your brother escorting your mother and *manni*?" asked Satyamurthy, and Bhavani answered him. "I did want to go because you will feel free from my nagging. Remember, this year we have to fulfill our vow in *Pazhani* for Chitru's first hair-cut ceremony. She's already a girl past eighteen months!"

"Women certainly feel passionate about their homes," Satyamurthy said, laughing, and Bhavani countered, "What else are men zealous about?" Again, Satyamurthy spoke, warmly hugging his daughter, "I feel attached to our Chitru; I will surely miss her." The couple savored the moment.

Bhavani bought a table lamp as a gift for her brother and his wife and traveled to her hometown.

The very day of her arrival she handed the lamp to Rajeswari and said, "Go ahead and use it in your room."

Rajeswari picked up the lamp with a smile.

"*Manni*, why are you bashful?" Bhavani added in a weary tone, "I had never felt like this."

Saradambal came to her daughter's rescue. "Raghupathy sleeps on the terrace," she told her. "We, the rest, sleep downstairs."

"But, why?"

"I wanted to have the room downstairs made ready for your delivery, so we had it cleaned up before your arrival," the mother said. "But Raghupathy said the room was already hot and stuffy, and he preferred the terrace. I asked Rajeswari to join him there, but she said no."

"How long this game has been going on?"

"Only since a week; no one is playing any games."

Bhavani cast a glance at Rajeswari - as if wondering what to make of her. Later that evening, when Raghupathy came home after his regular evening walk, she asked him, "Brother, aren't you using my table lamp?" "Of course, it is very handy," he said, and left it in the front room that served as his father's office.

Bhavani often keenly observed her brother and his wife; the couple indulged in mutual company and banter proving they had no problems in their relationship; their states of mind and demeanor were a testimony to their commitment to savor life's best moments even as their faces betrayed a sense of yearning for one another,

*"No daughter-in-law would feel anything against my mother."*

That's how Bhavani felt before; now, she looked it from another angle, and concluded, "Which mother-in-law would fail to appreciate this kind of a daughter-in-law?" She felt no resentment nor expressed such an opinion.

But, unfortunately for Rajeswari, such an expression of warmth and admiration came from Bhavani's mother-in-law!

That lady, Janamma, was visiting the expectant Bhavani; she's an elderly and respectable woman – wasn't she Bhavani's mother-in-law?— so Rajam bestowed upon her all the hospitality the elder woman deserved; this she did along with her own mother-in-law at every step; she evinced a keen interest in everything the old woman needed, and doted on her.

Janamma was profoundly touched by the young woman's initiative; Rajeswari was a picture of exuberant youth and vitality. Her dexterity and attitude prompted the woman to exclaim, "This is what one would expect from the younger generation!" Not only that; Rajeswari's innocence became a badge of honor. Was it the same woman who cried during her *nalangu*? What's the reason behind the sudden change?

"I have seen girls, who are cheerful before marriage, but suddenly end up as cry-babies," she said with a chuckle and generous praise. "Here is an entirely

different one! I even like the way she gestures with her hands while talking to me with a constant smile!"

"What's the surprise here?" Saradambal asked. "Rajam is adept in handling the household duties. She's the eldest among her siblings who are very young, so naturally she's disposed to fully involve herself in domestic chores. Bhavani is our only daughter and she's brought up as a pampered child. Once she got married she too had to leave our home and set up a family elsewhere - and this she had accomplished admirably. On the other hand, Rajam's mother will have nothing to worry about when Raghupathy lands a job and Rajam moves out with him. As for Bhavani's housekeeping, we had to provide her everything - I mean, even the coconut scooper! As for Rajam, her mother dropped her off here and, later, we sent her home at our own expense. Rajam's smart and easy-going, so I don't ask for anything else." Well, it was a cold comfort to Rajam: her mother-in-law had spared Rajam even as she voiced criticism about the two elder women, Visalam and Janamma.

On her return from Calcutta, Bhavani had demanded and accepted services from others at home. Soon after Manama's arrival, she started exhibiting to the elder woman the special privileges she enjoyed at home. Concerned that her mother-in-law might suggest that Bhavani plan to come and spend some time with the in-laws, Bhavani began imagining all kinds of ailments. She demanded assistance even for minor chores - if and when she chose to perform them. "I am not concerned about my own health," she told her mother. "I am really worried about the baby in my womb!"

Bhavani did her best to present herself as an ideal daughter-in-law to Janamma's eyes and it piqued her that Rajam had actually usurped the title of an ideal woman and an exemplary daughter-in-law; if anything, this feeling only widened the rift between her and Janamma.

"I came down here to see my granddaughter Chitra, and now I am more than pleased," the old woman told her hostess. "I have also noticed that Raghupathy's wife is a little notch above her husband. God bless them!" "What a smart mother-in-law!" Bhavani muttered to

herself as she led Janamma to the door to bid her farewell.

'What has smartness to do anything with her comment?' Rajam wondered.

Still, it was clear to her that Janamma and Saradambal, for some reason or other, didn't seem to hit off. Again, there were some veiled suggestions her mother-in-law hurled, now and then, at the other woman. The truth began to reveal itself.

Was there a little disaffection between Bhavani and her mother-in-law? Rajam recalled Janamma's query to her - more as a whisper - some time ago: "Aren't you following your sister-in-law's example and insisting that your husband soon get a job? When are you, like Bhavani, planning to have your own house-keeping?" Was Janamma insinuating that Bhavani had actually intimidated her husband into accepting a position?

Rajam was confused; she had heard that luckily, soon after the marriage, Bhavani's husband landed a good job. Why then, would Bhavani have put pressure on him?

Was Janamma hinting, discretely, that Raghupathy was in no hurry to take up to work? The very thought made Rajam uneasy. She recalled her husband openly venting his ire a week earlier when he received a letter from Natarajan: "I don't understand why he's worried about my being unemployed," he said in a tone that betrayed resentment. "After all, I am not living with my father-in-law!" Holding the letter in one hand, he sought refuge in the kitchen.

The attitudes of both Janamma and Natarajan irritated Rajam. 'Why make big fuss? Lack of employment hasn't diminished my husband in any way,' she thought; that very thought made her feel proud.

But the pride didn't last long.

Bhavani was complaining to Visalam. "My mother-in-law insists my husband should give up his job and settle down in his hometown. She asks why he must keep on working and suffering! I believe no amount of wealth,

property or lands would ever confer the same prestige on a man who's not blessed with a steady occupation. There is real pride in a personal career and wealth. It is fortuitous that my husband had sent in ten job applications before our marriage. It was also my stroke of luck that *Appa* had insisted that he would finalize the wedding date only if the prospective bridegroom was seriously thinking of a professional career. Otherwise we would be satisfied with wealth and simply spending idle lives! How does it matter that the son lives away from home? The same folks would later grumble that the family wealth - ample as it is - is fast disappearing!" Bhavani paused for a moment, and continued: "Good heavens! I lived with my in-laws only for a short time, but I feel so exhausted as if I survived many, many years!"

Rajam grasped the meaning of the most significant words uttered by Bhavani: a couple's prestige lay only in personal wealth and occupation.

Well, there's an old saying that one should travel across the seas and seek wealth; it is only natural that Janamma was averse to see her son live far away in Calcutta. Still . . . . Does it mean? . . . .

Does it mean Rajam ought to have protested that her husband not seek a career in the army? Was it her duty to have encouraged him to seek employment? It began to dawn on her that Bhavani was bent on treating Rajam with coldness and indifference. She and her husband were not greedy; Raghupathy asked for gainful employment and, as for Rajam, she craved a little love and understanding. They were living in a small house and could hope for only a few comforts; Rajam enjoyed neither privacy nor any special privilege. There was hardly any time left for reading a book or practicing her music without intruding into other's province. Previously, Rajam was content and pleased that she could leaf through a few pages from a book at night before going to bed, but now she's denied even that concession.

Essentially shy and reserved, Rajam never for a moment regretted over her reluctance to follow her husband up to the terrace at night; but now she started blaming herself. Averse to blame others, she ended up with her own soul-searching.

Wasn't *Bhavani* a tributary of *Cauvery*? Didn't Natarajan exhort Rajam to 'live like the river *Cauvery*'? Maybe *Bhavani* imagines herself in the role of a tributary?

24

A *sitar* artist who trained in the North lived in their area. *Bhavani* heard about him and she wanted to learn *sitar* lessons from him. Doraiswamy teased her saying why she had never exhibited the same curiosity in *sitar* while in Calcutta, and *Bhavani* reacted by confiding in her mother, "I was a little afraid that Brother would object, but now *Appa* seems to echo that feeling."

'I too wanted to pay more attention to my music,' Rajam wanted to say, but hesitated. If nothing else, she expected Raghupathy to intrude and comfort *Bhavani* with words, "Why do you think I will object? I heard Rajam say she practiced music at her home - making up for what she couldn't do here; what's wrong with that?" But Raghupathy did no such thing.

Saradambal warmly welcomed her daughter's wish and arranged for the *sitar* lessons. Rajam, who had never seen a *sitar*, eagerly watched the instrument as it was being displayed on the first day of the lessons. She was fascinated by the posture - the way *Bhavani* sat with both her legs crossed over to one side while leaning with her right hand over the main gourd of the *sitar*. She nursed no dreams. 'I will be just satisfied if I can simply keep up with my violin practice,' she thought.

One day *Bhavani* wanted Rajam to come over and sit beside her when she's starting her *sitar* practice. "To day I need to practice this *gath* twenty times," she told Rajam, "I want you to keep the count." This pulled Rajam away from her obligatory domestic chores for a good amount of time, but she obliged hoping *Bhavani* wouldn't make similar demands the next time. But, invariably, every day, *Bhavani* asked for Rajam's presence at her practice sessions.

Rajam resented this forced diversion from her household duties; she had been always busy doing something or the other and when she did find some leisure time, she would rather like to read a book. This

was completely lost on Bhavani. "*Manni*, you are not counting properly!" she would admonish Rajam.

When the session ended and Bhavani was done, Rajam would like to spend time with her own violin practice. But, invariably, Bhavani went on till the onset of evening. One day Rajam asked her mother-in-law if she could get on with her practice but she gave up the idea when Saradambal told her it was close to the time when Doraiswamy would be getting ready for his evening *japam* and needed Rajam's assistance.

On several evenings, after her practice sessions, Bhavani would abruptly get up and ask Rajam to accompany her for the evening walk. Didn't she need Rajam to carry the child?

Raghupathy was privy to all this, yet he acted as if uninvolved. But he demonstrated his concern for Rajam and offered her solace through discreet looks of warmth and affection which, more than anything, pleased his wife. She found consolation in their relationship - which she saw not as between husband and wife but as between two friends.

Things didn't turn out the way Bhavani had hoped; hardly ever Raghupathy spoke in defense of his wife; neither did he put his sister on a pedestal on top of Rajam. For Bhavani both her brother and his wife remained an enigma; she could never imagine such a deep abiding love and inner tranquility in a young couple; maybe she desperately wanted to test such divine love.

She turned even more malicious and vicious.

Rajam showed no impatience or edginess when it came to engaging Baby Chitra. She was generous with her time playing with her. Bhavani didn't seem to appreciate this.

It happened that Bhavani would choose a dress for Chitra which the baby would vehemently refuse to wear.

"*Akka*, why don't we let her wear what she really likes?" asked Rajam one day as the baby continued to act stubborn.

"Why don't you take a look at the color of the ribbon hair clip? Then, tell me what you really think!"

"Oh, I see," Rajam replied. "The colors mayn't match but a contrast might be welcome!"

"Why should we do such a thing? Just because the child demands it? The baby simply mimics what the adults are doing and makes all kinds of demands!"

Rajam had no clue that Bhavani was inclined to attack her. "Yes, I remember now," she said. "We always take time to decide what sari we should wear; the baby too feels the same way."

Bhavani grew haughty. "I was the one who said that. Why do you say 'we'? I have often noticed you simply grab a sari and a matchless blouse and go out."

"Good heavens! I too worry a lot about these things," Rajam said. "I used to worry about the pimples on my face; I would fret if I am wearing right footwear when I go out!"

"When I said we, I meant the entire female community," she continued with a smile and defused the occasion.

Friends in the neighborhood had invited Saradambal for a function and she suggested Bhavani and Rajam to attend. Rajam examined her feet and found them grimy and grubby. She scrubbed the feet against the rock used for washing clothes and cleansed them; she didn't want to wait till the last moment. This brought an immediate taunt from Bhavani: "Why should we worship our own feet?" she asked.

On another day Bhavani asked Rajam to wash down her face and get ready before the pair went out. She collected her clothes and finished rinsing her face before Rajam showed up. "You always want to sponge down at the end," she told Rajam. "That way you think your face would be brighter when we go out. You are so late by the time we are on our way out my face would begin wearing out." The next time, anticipating such criticism, Rajam cleansed her face first, but this again drew the



umbrage from Bhavani: "You're already ready with your make-up and new sari. By the time I get ready you will be screaming I am late!"

What could Rajam do? She's damned if she did and damned if she didn't.

She dreaded going out with Bhavani; she's obliged to hold the Chitra astride all the time. "My daughter wouldn't allow me to carry on conversation with others," Bhavani told her. "That's the reason I want you. You don't seem to appreciate I am your sister-in-law and I am very keen on visiting my friends. You refuse only because you are loathe carrying Chitra, am I right?"

"Akka, why would I consider little Chitra a burden?" Rajam would reply in defense. "Am I not taking care of her at home? I only thought you might like to make those visits yourself."

"What about the child? She too needs outing, don't you agree?"

"Okay, I will come."

It never occurred to Rajam to question Bhavani, "Then, why can't *you* carry Chitra?"

How would Doraiswamy know these small, daily rows at home? He's safely ensconced in his own world passionately discussing with others the issues of the ongoing freedom movement; he scarcely noticed Havana's tyranny or Rajam's abject surrender. "Our daughter-in-law is smart, well-meaning and has endeared herself to others," he believed, "She ought to have no problems in this house."

But Raghupathy was slowly becoming privy to these occurrences. He was in no hurry to act sweet toward Rajam and he harbored no doubt his wife would continue to honor and respect his parents. Neither did he like to influence his wife. He, offhandedly, tried to remain neutral. He poured out his love for Rajam but with no ardor or intimacy. He seemed eager to confirm what he once wrote to her about his character flaw: "I am aware I have strong opinions regarding the people I like and

dislike. I hope your association will help me do away such extreme views."

"Telugu movies are really getting better," he told Bhavani one day. "We can see better quality in them. But if you want to listen to good music, you have to go to Tamil movies!"

One day he was talking to someone praising Natarajan. "My father-in-law might look like an *Andhra*, but his passion for Tamil will instantly show up when he begins to talk! I know he has a vast collection of all kinds of Tamil books!"

Yet another day he was telling Saradambal, "Amma, the other day Parvatam Patti was telling me, 'Raghu, I was initially mistaken thinking Rajam was a little strange; she walked around the house upright!'"

He would keenly watch Rajam's face as if applauding her: "You are the most ideal woman!"

Rajam was more than satisfied that her husband was keeping himself neutral when it came to intermingling with all the family members. She found peace and comfort in such a thought even as her life seemed to lack clarity and her conjugal life was going nowhere. Imbued with a strong mind and passion for life she only saw signs of redemption and hope in her future.

One evening, while Raghupathy was out for a walk, Bhavani picked up one of his suitcases. She told Rajam: "This is mine; I gave it to Anna because I took his being lighter for my trip. Now I want to return his and take mine." She asked Rajam to fold her saris, then arranged them in her suitcase before returning Raghupathy's clothes to his.

The exchange of suits didn't draw any attention from Raghupathy on his return home; he noticed it the next morning when he was getting ready for bath.

"Who messed up my suitcase?" he exploded. He was very picky about his clothes.

Rajam, who was in the bathroom, heard his angry outburst; apparently, it didn't register with Bhavani in the living room.

"Anna, what happened?"

"Who altered the suitcases?"

"Well, I did . . ."

"Why weren't you more careful in packing? My clothes are jumbled up, the folds are wrinkled!"

"I had asked *manni* to pack your clothes in your suitcase," Bhavani told him. "I was in a hurry - just picked up my saris and left."

"Ayyayyo, that's a lie!" Rajam wanted to yell. "I was the one who folded your saris; you simply stuffed back his clothes in hurry!" She felt her voice choking up while shedding tears copiously.

Bhavani was a little shocked to notice Raghupathy's face reddening as he walked toward the bathroom. She entered the kitchen and told her mother: "I thought *Anna* will not get mad if I told him *manni* put his clothes back."

Raghupathy heard her words as he retreated from the bathroom because he had forgotten the towel. He also heard his mother telling Bhavani, "He never shows that kind of favoritism!"

When Raghupathy entered the bathroom he noticed Rajam wiping the tears off her face. Tenderly he touched her shoulder with the towel.

Rajam suddenly turned around and stared at her husband, smiling. She left the bathroom silently, her eyes conveying a message, 'I will not mind if you now beat me up.'

That very instant Raghupathy felt the sharpest pain he had ever imagined followed by the dismal thought, 'If only I had a job! . . . Is Rajam really a human being?'

He was now freed from any doubt that her dark ominous eyes and dry laughter owed to her husband's

feeble support. Neutrality is a worthy goal, but there's also a limit to it! He was thrown into confusion.

But he soon found relief - only because Rajam too seemed free from any bewilderment.

Rajeswari's heart brimmed with joy knowing she enjoyed her role as an ideal house wife, a loving *manni* and had endeared herself to others; yet, for some time now, she had been nursing a feeling that she hadn't fulfilled her role as a dear wife. Now she felt herself freed from that self-doubt.

She constantly reminded herself that she didn't want to end up like a nagging wife who, occasionally, let out her harsh opinions at her husband and made scenes; she didn't see Raghupathy, her husband, as an ideal, comforting source. On her own, she found satisfaction in the thought that things could be worse. 'This is fine with me,' she told herself. 'My husband and I are not getting any blame.'

Her face revealed her inner peace.

Even Raghupathy, occasionally, wondered if he was in the presence of a divine force; whenever Bhavani seemed bent on upsetting Rajam with some plan or errand, Rajam responded with a smile and carried out what's demanded of her. Raghupathy felt Rajam had surpassed his own mother in serenity and peace.

"I have heard you have stolen your mother-in-law's good name. They are complaining to me!" Doraiswamy told Rajam one day and, for once, the play of words was lost on his daughter-in-law. Her first reaction of bewilderment soon turned into a smile and subordination.

"I am at my parents' house and I will not bother with these things," was what Bhavani said one rainy day, and refused to take out the clothes left for drying in the backyard. Rajam, who's having her lunch, rose to rush to the backyard, but Saradambal waved her away saying, "There's no need; Raghupathy will take care of that."

Raghupathy couldn't help fretting, 'I bring no honor to Rajam, only humiliation.'

Maybe it was his anguish or it had to do with Bhavani exchanging the suitcases, Raghupathy got good news - a job offer.

It's a temporary assignment; the war's ending and the job entailed duties away from the war front.

"Better to accept a job when it's proffered," Raghupathy decided. "Otherwise people will think twice before they make me another offer."

He wanted to share the good news with his wife and approached her but, after noticing that Bhavani seemed to evince no particular interest - she didn't even slacken the grip on her *sitar* while Rajam desperately wanted him to reveal where the posting was - he leaned over and pointing a sentence in the order, he said, "Read this!" Then, sitting beside her, he himself read it for her, and left.

Bhavani murmured, "Oh, she's so happy to move out of this house!"

"My husband was sharing the happy news with me, what's wrong about it?" wondered Rajam. "How can Bhavani call me happy even when I am unable to enjoy the privileges of being a *manni* in this house?" Her eyes turned teary but, luckily for her, Bhavani didn't accuse her of feeling sad because she would be missing her husband.

Rajam was touched by husband's gesture when he simply nodded, and was gone.

"It is better that my husband and I remain apart from one another," Rajam thought. 'That way, we would be spared from witnessing the pain and anguish of one another.' She braced herself: 'We will spend our days in sweet memories.'

"What will I do at my in-laws when my husband is away? I won't go!" Bhavani had told her mother before Janamma arrived. Now Saradambal worried if Rajam too pose her the same question. After Raghupathy's departure she noticed Rajam continued to perform the

domestic chores as before and she also seemed to harbor less anxiety.

"I could have sent you to your home if Raghupathy was traveling along the same route," Saradambal told Rajam. I have been thinking: we don't know when he will find a house and ask you to join him. You too must be eager to see your parents."

Rajam felt her face redden. "Should I be here only if my husband is also present?" she asked without even looking at her mother-in-law.

"I am very pleased to know you feel that way," Saradambal answered, and continued. "Who knows when you will visit this house once you both relocate to some city in the North? When you get pregnant, for delivery you can go only to your mother's house, am I right?"

Rajam beamed a smile.

"Little Chitra has grown very fond of you; you too are very much attached to her. Let it be so, let's keep this going. I can't be happier seeing how things are."

Rajam felt her purpose in life has been fulfilled.

"Where's Bhavani? The music teacher is here," asked Doraiswamy.

"She went out saying she would be back soon, Saradambal replied, "The music teacher has come too early today." She expected her husband would give the teacher company, but Doraiswamy was gone immediately. She now turned to Rajam and said, "Why don't you play a couple of *kritis* on your violin? Why should we keep the teacher waiting?"

Rajam spread out the rug for the teacher and set the sitar on it and asked Saradambal, "*Amma*, you tell him."

'He probably thought I don't know anything other than doing domestic chores,' Rajam thought with a little regret.

She stood nervously near a wall, looked at Saradambal, and asked, "Amma, what should I sing?"

"You may play *Hamsanandi*," the teacher suggested.

"I know only *Hamsadvani*, shall I play it?"

When she finished playing *Vatapi Ganapathim*, the teacher expressed his appreciation by saying, "You are playing so well I feel sorry I have been ignorant all these days and missed listening to your music." He went on addressing Rajam and Saradambal in turns about the aspects of the *kriti* when Bhavani returned home.

'My mother-in-law spoke out freely of her admiration to me; the *sitar* teacher has applauded my music; my husband has found a job. My bad days are behind me; what more do I need? Bhavani will no more think of me as a worm.' Proud and gratified, Rajam spent that night with joy and sweet dreams, as usual, of her husband.

And she's proved right because the very next day Bhavani told her, "Manni, I heard Mother say you want to help me with my delivery. I keep worrying about Chitru; she will miss me during the next eight or ten days when I get ready for my confinement. She will also develop sibling rivalry when she sees the new baby. I expect you, only you, to take care of Chitru." Once again, Rajam felt her esteem rise.

She was glad Bhavani was treating her with dignity and not as a slave. She spared no effort to serve Bhavani in the best manner possible; she became a nanny for Chitru; performed the kitchen chores for her mother-in-law; and a partner for Bhavani. All this rendered her role as an integral part of the household with a conviction, 'I don't have to follow neutrality when it comes to dealing with my parents or in-laws; I need have no obsession with my home.'

But the end result was Bhavani grew only greedier and more demanding; she would deliberately ignore picking up her soap dish on the windowsill on her way to take bath and order Rajam to fetch it. Rajam would follow her to the bathroom when Bhavani, off hand, would issue a few more commands: "Get me that oil bowl," or "Move the turmeric plate closer!" Rajam would console herself that she's helping her pregnant sister-in-

law. She realized that Bhavani was bent on harassing her for each and everything but she silently bore it because she felt it was her duty.

She recalled her father-in-law's remarks one day when he cautioned her, "Where's the hurry? Why don't you finish what you are doing now? Don't leave something in the middle." But her mother-in-law was quick to answer him: "That's not always possible. When there's an emergency one has to drop what is on hand and go for it. The other day all the *appalams* had dried up and I had a hell of a time to pack them up."

That day Rajam decided she had to function in multiple ways, but Saradambal said, "Why are you running around? You can look after Bhavani. Can't I grind this coconut myself?" She asked her to be Havana's helper.

Bhavani was her top priority, Rajam understood; still, she served both Bhavani and Saradambal with equal devotion. Every day, early in the morning, she would help Bhavani with all her needs and, after a shower, assist Saradambal in the kitchen.

And occasionally, Rajam would feel guilty she couldn't help Saradambal because Bhavani needed her even for some trivial and unnecessary tasks.

"Akka, let's wait just for ten minutes, we will clear this alimarah," Rajam would plead. "Let me first dice the spinach for *Amma*." Bhavani would reply with a sneer. "I have come to my parents' house and, remember, both *Amma* and you are obliged to take care of me. Who are you to look after *Amma*?" Rajam understood Havana's mind.

She would rush to heed Bhavani's shouting leaving her current kitchen errand only to listen to Bhavani's charge, "You're always disappearing into the kitchen." Bhavani would then begin her harangue: "Do you see how much dust has collected on the books in these shelves; why are these clothes hanging on the clothesline in disarray? Start folding them, right away. What if one becomes an expert in cooking, is that enough? Let me see how you fold the garments; each garment needs a different technique." Rajam would say nothing and simply stare at Bhavani, acknowledging, "Yes, *Akka*, you're right; every task is like an art," and do



Bhavani's bidding. Accordingly, she often ended up washing clothes in the sweltering sun so they could be left to dry in the hot sun.

Does Rajam actually wash clothes in the scorching weather?" asked Doraiswamy one day. "Had I known, I would have never put my *dhoti* for wash."

"Rajam could as well wash clothes before the sun is up," said Saradambal. "But she's very busy in the mornings, takes shower and immediately enters the kitchen to help me prepare items, and even serves me meals. It is only later, when the weather is really hot, she washes the clothes."

"One should be flexible in performing these tasks," Doraiswamy said.

Bhavani was offended by his remarks. "I let Rajam only because she forcibly took the clothes away from me," she told her mother. "Washing clothes is no big thing for me." But then she did nothing of that sort. Later, when Rajam returned to her household duties after three days of forced confinement, she, once again, was forced to take care of all Bhavani's clothes left unwashed and dumped in the backyard.

"I washed two of your *saris*," Saradambal told her daughter one day. "How come there are now four *saris* for wash?" Bhavani had a ready reply uttered in an imperious tone. "Do you think I take shower once a day - like *manni*? I can't help taking bath twice a day in this stifling weather."

On the evenings when Rajam prepared hot water for Bhavani, she too wanted to take a bath, but she never did. She needed to wash and dry the clothes of Bhavani - the daughter who had hardly done any work at home, and there's hardly anytime left for Rajam to soak her own tired body or clean her grimy garments.

Rajam remained a very model of patience, but Bhavani grew more impatient, day after day.

Rajam had grown up all along with an inclination to endear herself to others and she was determined to keep up with her reputation; she hated the very idea that she might come up short in others' regard for her. Sheer common sense dictated her reasoning and behavior: she steeled her mind, comprehended what's expected of her

at this time or at that place, and earnestly followed it. She deciphered each moment and played her role accordingly.

And she was baffled too; how could one function under constant badgering and moaning? Would this ever end? Every night, when she retired to bed, Rajam dreaded what the next day would bring. Yet, despite all her apprehension, she slept like an inert log devoid of any feelings. Of late Bhavani has been also telling her mother: "How I wish I could sleep like Manni. I hardly get my forty winks!" One day, she even asked Rajam, "If I leave Chitru with you at night, will you wake up when she cries?" She tried to test Rajam's deference to her; she would pull out Rajam, fast asleep, from her bed in the middle of the night and order her to 'switch on this light,' or 'tuck that bed sheet correctly.' Rajam, suddenly waking up, would feel her eyes blink and seem lost for a while to know what was going on, then come to her senses and silently do Bhavani's bidding – while fretting inside, naturally. Saradambal neither endorsed nor condemned her daughter's domineering attitude towards Rajam.

What sustained Rajam's resilience and fortitude – day after day, night after night – was the constant remembrance of her husband. She would rationalize her situation thinking, 'Don't the nurses in hospitals serve strangers, day and night? Where's shame in my serving my husband's sibling?'

Her heart acquiesced, but the body would not. Rajam grew tiresome and her eyes started burning. She felt unconsciously bumping herself against the walls and doors; the utensils began to drop unconsciously from her hands prompting, one day, Doraiswamy, a little annoyed, asking her, "Where's the hurry? Why aren't you a little more careful?" He wanted to know why Rajam thought of setting up the items for his *japam* an hour before it was due; he didn't want her to perform it as an obligation. Rajam had planned to do her chores whenever she found some spare time but this only brought criticism from her father-in-law.

Did he discern Rajam's worsening health or state of mind? One day Doraiswamy said, "Now that we have a daughter-in-law at home, we might as well hire a cook."

Saradambal countered him. "How can we afford a cook? Don't you know in a typical family the cook would be sent away soon after the daughter-in-law arrives?"

These exchanges confused Rajam. "God! How much more do I have to do endure all this to preserve my good name?" she asked herself. One who's about to achieve salvation, she had heard, can't afford even a single slip at the last moment; otherwise, you will end up in eternal hell. Would that be her fate too?

Then, one day, Doraiswamy was proved right; consequently, Saradambal also found her words come true!

A situation arose necessitating the hiring of a cook. A cook was certainly needed because Rajam became sick and bed-ridden, with a big bandage. It was said one won't need a cook if a daughter-in-law is around; now, with an 'out of commission' daughter-in-law, a cook became an absolute necessity!

## 26

Bhavani was blessed with a baby boy.

"Rajam, look, my little girl is standing on the door steps; you only have to watch her!" warned Bhavani. Saradambal was in the delivery room and Rajam was left in charge of all household errands. Bhavani overwhelmed Rajam with orders, one after another. "I will hold you entirely responsible for Chitru's safety; don't let her go anywhere near the stove, stroll along the backyard near the well or creep up on to the terrace." Rajam respected Bhavani's maternal instincts and carried out her demands wholeheartedly. She seemed quite pleased when she heard somebody comment that the baby boy resembled his uncle; Rajam felt as if her husband was coming home. She even felt like she herself had the baby.

She's so fond of children," the women around her were saying. Others called Rajam an exemplary daughter-in-law who could easily carry out the duties of four women. Those who attended the ritual celebrating the baby's birth lamented that poor Rajam had fallen sick owing to some evil-eye on her following the praise lavished upon her.

Rajam's left finger had swollen enormously and she felt excruciating pain and constant needle-like pricking. Slowly, she realized what must have caused it. She must have hurt the finger when grinding the coffee beans as she kept shoving the roasted beans down the grinder while turning the handle with her right hand. She had ignored the injury as slight and carelessly exposed the finger to wetness while washing clothes resulting in septic infection.

The doctor cut an opening to remove the pus and bandaged the wound. Under no circumstances should she move her left hand, he warned her. Still Rajam moved around the house doing chores until she was tired, and then she lay rested on a bed. She managed to perform some chores with the right hand making sure she didn't strain the other in the sling.

When Doraiswamy corresponded with Natarajan and Raghupathy he didn't mention anything about Rajam's infirmity lest he cause them alarm; they couldn't visit her, he told himself, so why cause them unnecessary worry? The accident had taken place in his home and Doraiswamy felt obliged to give Rajam proper treatment and help her full recovery before sending her to her parents.

Rajam was desperate. She longed to see her husband; she's homesick for her parents. When she offered prayers, invariably Raghupathy's face came into her view. 'He understands and mentally acknowledges my greetings,' she assured herself, 'He will be home soon.' There had been little exchange of letters, so Rajam could rely only on her mental invitation to bring him closer to her. Occasionally, for no reason, she would be excited when she heard some noise from the street of a *jatka* passing by; when she heard a train whistling afar she would start thinking, "Where's this train coming from?" She was now turning into a traditional heroine in Tamil Sangam classics pining for her beloved when she found herself lying on a bed fully enveloped in silence.

Raghupathy didn't come, but he penned a letter pouring out all his love for her. It became a shot in her arm and, once again, Rajam began her house routine, albeit with one hand.

The wound wouldn't heal; still, Rajam resumed her role of a nanny for Chitru, washed Bahraini's clothes and helped Saradambal in the kitchen; she picked up the discarded leaves after lunch and cleaned up the kitchen.

"The lesion hasn't healed," the doctor reported after examining the wound, followed by his harsh warning. "I wanted to make sure there would be no need for amputating the finger, but now it appears you are putting your left arm in danger of amputation." That's when Rajeswari realized the gravity of her situation.

It was also an eye opener to Bhavani and Saradambal as well, who expressed utter surprise.

Rajam stood silently, her eyes teary.

"Doctor, can she play the violin?" asked Doraiswamy as he watched Rajam intently.

Rajam recalled her father-in-law's appreciation at the very first demonstration of her violin-playing, '*My dear girl, you don't have to use your finger at all, your voice alone will carry you to success*' Those words now made her squirm; 'Good heavens, will he be proved correct?'

The doctor spoke calmly while bandaging the finger: "Yes, you will be able to play the violin, but that depends on yourself. You have to follow my advice."

"Thanks doctor. I will be satisfied if I could play the violin."

"Stop worrying," the doctor said. "You will, certainly."

Bhavani let Rajam follow the doctor's advice. "*Manni*, sorry you have ended up like this," she said, "You have been of great help to me." For the next two days she helped Rajam to wear the sari.

And, with that, she thought her duty was done.

Was it because Rajam expressed feelings as, "I am so embarrassed that even *Amma* has to take care of me?"

"*Manni*, look, your brother!" Bhavani said one day. Rajam rushed to the front porch asking, "Where, *Akka*?" She noticed a teenage boy, walk by with his left arm in sling, like her.

"*Amma*, see how her eyes tear up? You must have seen how she ran at the mere mention of her brother!" Bhavani teased her. Rajam took it in good humor and acknowledged her words in good faith.

But Bahraini's support didn't last long. The doctor had advised Rajam that she could start doing errands as long as she was careful not to strain herself by making hasty moves. So Rajam decided to resume the kitchen chores; the cook in residence had been gone already thanks to Bahraini's

continuous taunts. Didn't her mother-in-law remark the other day? "Why would any cook stomach those barbs? Only I could have put up with them. My daughter-in-law has been so supportive and was within my earshot to help me, but now she's fallen sick. I feel so helpless!"

Rajam was loath to cause any inconvenience to Saradambal, so she offered her help in the kitchen.

"*Manni*, come out," Bhavani ordered her. "Don't you think you are risking infection, again? Why don't you help me? There would be no danger of exposure to water. I can alleviate *Amma's* problems, and you can be my assistant; what do you say?"

Rajam thought the idea made sense; so she went on carrying out all the tasks for Bhavani.

Bhavani would invite Rajam to play a game of cards. Whenever Bhavani was on the verge of losing, her face would redden; Rajam, sensing her opponent's state of mind would then play a little carelessly. That would only infuriate Bhavani who would accuse Rajam of purposely ceding the game to her.

Rajam had no clue what's going in Bahraini's mind.

One day Rajam said she felt like singing and Bhavani answered her, "I really don't know where my *sitar* and *veena* are; I can hardly find time for them; from now on, Chitru will be my *sitar* and baby Praveen my *veena*." That Rajam too was proficient in music and violin never seemed to have crossed Bahraini's mind.

Rajam felt so scared of Bhavani's presence that she thought, 'I will be content to serve my mother-in-law to the best of my ability, and I don't want to play cards anymore.'

"Why don't we go for a walk? Why should we be holed up in the house all the time?" asked Bhavani one day. They went out and when, on their way, Chitru got tired, it was Rajam who had to carry her alternatively between her left and right shoulders. Half way, on their back, Bhavani would ask Rajam to let the girl down. For a few days Rajam chose to ignore the swelling and pain in the shoulders and she hesitated to complain. But then, what would happen to her hand? She heard the expression, *Saraswati, the Goddess of learning wouldn't abandon even disloyal artists; what they learnt would stay with them.* 'My God, what will happen to me?' Rajam dreaded. Her mind was in turmoil, the panic growing day by day; she found herself tossed between one quandary after another: the painful separation of six months from her husband; the memory and warmth of her

parents; the goodwill and blessings of her music teacher; her precarious situation facing Bhavani's constant taunts; and her mother-in-law's lukewarm support for her. Things finally seemed to have reached a point when Rajam listened to her inner voice tell her, 'This is enough!'

She longed for the presence of her husband, impartial and level-headed, who was not around to comfort her.

She had no inclination to pen any 'secret' letters to her parents; she's not going to be a grumpy wife. She didn't feel free to ask Saradambal, 'Amma, I am unable to help you in the best manner I wanted; can I now go home?' The tip of index finger wouldn't bend and, one day, when Rajam tried to play the violin, the finger flinched under sharp pain.

"Amma, can we check with the doctor?" asked Rajam, tears swelling in her eyes. The doctor advised her to gently massage the finger, with oil. "It will surely bend," was his comforting opinion. "Remember it' a deep cut, so it would be painful. Don't be afraid."

The craving to visit her parents proved too much to resist; the wayward mind gathered all kinds of thoughts.

The music teacher had once asked her, "Why did you leave your violin at your in-laws? Is it because you have one here? You could have brought your *shruti* box too. Remember this: whether you decide to sing or not to sing; practice the violin or not, make sure the instruments are maintained in proper manner: clean the violin at least once in two days and get rid of the dust on the folds of the *sruti* box by playing a little."

Rajam had not sung or practiced on the violin since Bhavani's arrival. Whenever she thought, 'Did I forget?' she found comfort in thinking, 'I haven't really forgotten anything! I really don't know how to sing or play violin in the first place; why worry for no reason?' She had literally given up on music and the teacher's advice as well. For several days, after ignoring her musical instruments, she would be in tears as soon as she heard the melodious violin and sweet music on the radio. She struggled to plead with her ears, 'Don't listen!' and with her heart, 'Don't quiver!' So, now, how could one expect her to retrieve those instruments - her only possessions?

The teacher had asked her to keep dust away from them; Rajam felt that very act might defile her mind.

Wasn't it true that artists would lose their faculties when they cease to honor their mentors? 'Am I losing my voice too?' Rajam panicked. Why was God denying her joy and comfort?

Then she found out that God hadn't forsaken her.

A close relative of Natarajan's invited Rajam and her in-laws for a wedding; he wanted Rajam's presence at the venue four days in advance of the marriage and suggested she might accompany them. He was discussing his plans with Doraiswamy in the front porch when Bhavani happened to intrude into the elders' conversation.

"I am planning to take Rajam with me to *Pazhani*," she said. "I can no more delay my Chitra's hair-offering ceremony at the temple."

"*Akka*, why do you need me in *Pazhani*?" asked Rajam, worried about her trip with her relatives.

"You've changed your mind as soon as your folks invite you for a wedding," Bhavani complained. "Didn't you say yes when I mentioned about *Pazhani* trip just two days ago?"

Rajam wasn't offended. She recalled Bhavani's actual words: "I am keen on finishing the *Pazhani* trip as early as possible. Once we go to *Pazhani* we can't avoid visiting my mother-in-law in Madurai. We can also call on her and return home in no time. On the other hand, if we go to *Pazhani* when Chitra is grown up, my mother-in-law would suggest that I stay a few extra days with her in Madurai and later go straight to Nagpur. Rajam, I need you. With you I wouldn't have to struggle with two children at my mother-in-law's house." Rajam, as her wont, welcomed the prospect to visit to the *Pazhani* temple and accepted Bhavani's idea.

But now that she stood to lose her brief liberty, Rajam even lost her desire to visit the *Pazhani* temple.

"Yes, I did give my consent," Rajam told Bhavani, "But at the time I didn't know anything about this wedding."

"Well, you think the marriage is more important? Don't you respect my words? When are you going to take care of Chitra?"

Rajam started thinking: what would happen if she now flouts Bhavani for a temporary freedom?

"Okay *Akka*, I won't go to the wedding."

"So you have finally come to a decision," Saradambal was saying when Doraiswamy appeared before the women and



informed his wife that they had a guest – a relative of Natarajan's - who was interested in accompanying Rajam to a wedding. He wanted Saradambal to bring a plate.

"I understand what you are saying," answered his wife. "Why do you need a plate? Has he brought coconut and betel leaves?"

"Yes, he has. Traditional respect for the in-laws."

"Let me make some coffee for him."

Rajam was ready with a plate but was averse to go to the front porch.

"Come on, let's go," Doraiswamy invited her. "The visitor is fond of you and wants to see you." Rajam made her way to the front porch with the plate. The visitor formally greeted her, thanked Doraiswamy for his permission and expressed his warmth and affection for Rajeswari.

"I know Visalam as a little girl and we all doted on her," the visitor said. "Now she wants Rajam, and you mustn't refuse her wish. My wife too has conveyed her good wishes to Rajam."

Rajeswari's heart heaved as soon as she heard her mother's name.

"Do you wish to go?" Doraiswamy asked her.

Rajam simply nodded; she's scared she might betray her inner turmoil.

Doraiswamy didn't seem to understand her; he immediately left her and went inside. Was he seeking his wife's opinion?

"What're you thinking?" asked the visitor. "Don't you know me? You have seen me at work."

"Yes *Mama*, I know."

"Your father-in-law has given his consent; why can't you make up your mind?"

"*Akka* wants me to go to *Pazhani* with her; I too have never been to *Pazhani*,"

"Well, why can't you go after we return?"

"The timing doesn't seem right."

"You will always have *Pazhani*; now there's a wedding at my home and you want to miss this occasion? This is an ideal time for your visit. After all you're not offering a male's escort in your *Pazhani* trip, do you? You can visit the *Pazhani* temple later; you may even make your visit with your husband."

"Akka has two small children and I want to help her in taking care of them."

"Akka? . . ."

"Yes . . . my sister-in-law."

"Does she need you that badly? Well, I am not going to force you; tell me if you are really interested in attending the wedding. You are none other than Natarajan's daughter, that's why I came fondly . . ."

Rajam dreaded if he would accuse her of being arrogant by inventing some excuse for her stand. She didn't know how to respond.

"Well, I take it you are not in favor. I also heard that your hand is hurting. I thought of buying an ointment for your hand on our way."

Doraiswamy arrived in the next few minutes; Bhavani had already conveyed him the news: "*Manni* has told me she's not going."

"Can I go now?" Rajam asked hesitantly and darted back to the kitchen. She felt she had made a great sacrifice for Bhavani and that very thought made her happy, but Bhavani lost no time in berating her. She stopped Rajeswari on her way to the kitchen and began yelling at her:

"*Manni*, the baby had bath a long time ago; when are you going to make hot coals ready for drying her hair? I am the one who will feel the pain when my child catches cold!"

The accusation stunned Rajam; she had shown no malice whatever when it came to taking care of Chitra. Now, her heart burning, she froze in her place holding the smoldering *Sambrani* in a ladle for Bhavani; tears flowed down her cheeks.

"Why do you keep standing? Do you want everyone to know you are crying?"

"Akka, say no more!" Rajam moaned and let out a deep sigh, her eyes turning to her mother-in-law.

Saradambal had enough; she could no more stomach what had turned into an unmerited attack. "Bhavani, this is totally unacceptable," she told her daughter, "What are you actually thinking? How do you dare talk like that to your *Manni*? Have you ever done a single chore around this house? Stop hurling one accusation after another at Rajam. Remember you must count yourself blessed to have Rajam as your *Manni*."

Rajam felt herself floating in the air; she acknowledged the warmth showered on her. 'Amma, are these really your words? I am indeed blessed,' she thought.

"Whose side you are on?" Bhavani grumbled, and started to cry. "How do you expect others to respect me when you are against me?"

"I am simply talking about fairness," Saradambal told her. "*Manni* feels hurt because you never seem to be satisfied with what she does for you. You also don't seem to appreciate that she too is young." With no further word, Saradambal retreated into the kitchen like a turtle withdrawing into its shell.

The episode left Rajam with a change of heart; she turned stoical.

'I want to follow my husband,' she told herself. 'We both want no children, no, never! We don't seek the joy of parenthood and family life if they were to cause pain to others. I am just waiting for my hand to heal; I will be content with my voice, my musical talent, dexterity in the hand and the love and affection of my husband. I seek nothing more in life.' Her hand injury has only reinforced her passion for music.

She gathered the few burning coals on the floor into the ladle, handed them to Bhavani and walked to the backyard to wash her face. The smell from the *Sambrani* added to the serene mind. Bhavani put away the baby in the cradle and sought her mother in the kitchen.

"Amma, I no more feel warmth in my heart," she began, and went on: "I am no fonder of this home; you too have abandoned me. I know *Manni* is a good woman, am I denying it? Do you know what she actually told the visitor? That her sister-in-law's children are small; she had to take care of them, and so she wouldn't be able to accompany him. What would the visitor think? That the children are simply left to her care because the parents don't care for them?"

"Rajam would have never spoken in that spirit," Saradambal assured her. "Why don't you calm down before saying anything?"

'This is the trust, love and affection my mother-in-law has for me,' Rajam told herself. 'She knows my mind. I gave my reason to the gentleman why I can't go with him and I spoke the same words to my sister-in-law. I did nothing wrong and my mother-in-law understood my heart.' The thought left Rajam with pride and gratification.

She didn't bother to hear what Bhavani was saying. Why should she? Why would one ignore the stars twinkling in the sky and seek out, on the shore, the fisherman's basket with their daily catch? Why not look and enjoy the vast sea ahead of you instead of the waves that threaten to drag you into the icy waters? Rajeswari had already crossed the hills and mountains and she's now on a sandy soil, seashore. 'Well, I have already shown myself as *Cauvery*,' she told herself. 'The sea is my sanctuary.'

Was fate mocking her? "You're naive, you're not a river, and you're a woman! You are yet to cross *Samsara*, the ocean of life! You may have entered the vast ocean, but you have only tasted a drop of water," it warned her.

## 27

It has been nearly forty days since the baby was born and the two and half year-old Chitra was put under Rajam's care. With the child on her shoulder and the baby in her lap, Rajam was in the front hall seated against a wall when she noticed a young woman walk by her after casting a strange look at her. The woman had a dignified look, she walked steadily with a face dabbed with powder and the hair pulled back into a bun. "I heard *manni* is here," she mumbled and eased herself on the swing.

"Oh, is it Gaura? Please come in," Rajam heard Saraswati welcoming the visitor. "*Amma*, see Gaura is here!" she said in excited voice.

"I don't see *manni*, where's she?"

"*Manni*? She came last evening and was here till this evening. She left half an hour ago to visit a friend."

"My God, she left only half-an-hour ago? I came to ask her if I could send through her a sandal box to my *manni*."

"Your *manni*? She's in Calcutta, am I right? No, I remember now. She's in Nagpur."

"Yes, you are right."

"You may wait for *manni*; she will be here, soon."

"When will she return?"

"She should be here in an hour. Gaura, why don't you come to the hall? You can talk to Raghupathy's wife . . ."

"You mean *manni's manni*? Mrs. Raghupathy?"

Rajam didn't know that the young woman cupped her mouth and seemed as if in a shock. She could hardly stir from where she sat while doing her best to put the children to sleep.

"Why do you look so upset? Haven't you seen Rajam?"

"I have heard about her; I know Raghupathy. I was not sure who she could be; I saw the two children . . ."

"Yes, they are *manni's* children."

"Thank heavens," the young woman said, seemingly relieved. "I am glad I didn't ask her directly if she could be a baby sitter for my Rama." The woman spoke in soft voice but Rajam heard the words clearly and understood what they meant. 'She thought I am a paid baby sitter,' she thought. "I am glad she didn't think of me as an old *ayah*.'

As she heard cousins Saraswati and Gaura come into the hall, Rajam tried to take down, with one hand, the infant from her lap leaving Chitru on the shoulder.

"Please wait, I will help you." Saraswati hurried toward Rajam and took the infant from her. She invited Rajam to rest on a nearby sofa. Gaura engaged Saraswati in conversation while, now and then, casting glances at Rajam.

Janamma, Saraswati's mother, now entered the hall, wiped her face with the tip end of her sari and sat on a sofa. Rajam enquired her, "*Mami*, would you like me to attend to some chores in the kitchen?"

Janamma looked at her with warmth. "Well, I see you don't want to rest even for half-an-hour, you are exactly opposite to my daughter-in-law!" Then she turned to Gaura and gave vent to her anger. "Gaura, do you see what's going on? Their stay here is for only two days, yet your *manni* is not in a mood to mingle with us. She has been resting the whole afternoon saying she was tired after the *Pazhani* mountain-climbing. That's fine; then why can't she stay home in the evening? Now she's gone. She took a shower in the evening and tossed out the wet towel on the floor; she expected her *manni* to pick it up and, of course, her *manni* did pick it up. Then Bhavani comes and tells me, 'I wish *manni* handled the children only after she finished dicing the eggplants; the thorny stalk was close to touching the baby's hand and could have caused septic infection. We know how *manni* suffered from infection, don't we?' Bhavani is so worried about Rajam! I had enough! Gaura, you can understand what you mean. We are both here – as a mother-in-law and sister-in-law – watching Bhavani hurling all kinds of comments at her *manni*; if she ever

heard the same remarks from **her manni**, she would've committed suicide! I will say this: Rajam is one in a thousand . . . no, no, Bhavani is one in a million. I have never seen anyone like her."

Saraswati hastened to quiet Janamma. "Amma, you were just now saying they have come as guests just for two days; why should we exhibit our impatience?"

"Yes, I agree with Saraswati," said Gaura.

Janamma went on raving for the next two minutes before regaining her composure. "I wish she's at least considerate to her husband. The last time my son came home, he asked me to serve him lentil Sambar, but Bhavani protested saying it would make him sluggish and affect his health. 'We are about to make a train journey soon,' she's saying. 'And he may not get any more vacation.' And Satyam agreed with her at once; it didn't occur to him to ask even for a small portion!"

"Amma, please; this will only reflect poorly upon us."

Rajam was eager to know of Gaura's reaction; does she believe Janamma's accusations against Bhavani or agree with Saraswati's comment they shouldn't abuse their hospitality?

Gaura was silent for a few minutes looking at the three women before she volunteered her opinion. "Mami, this only makes Bhavani look bad. She should respect you not only because you're her mother-in-law but also because you are an elder person; a career woman respects her boss in the office; a professional lecturer respects her principal. Where's shame in showing respect?"

It was just then Bhavani showed up and greeted the visitor, "Oh, it is Gaura Rajan? How are you doing?" and sat on a sofa.

Rajam stared at Bhavani. Rajam had been at her in-laws for the last eleven months, but she had never seen Bhavani sit anywhere in the front hall, not even when she came to check the radio programs in the Vanoli issue.

"Amma, did Chitra drink her share of milk? Did she get some water too? Gaura, I was a kind of afraid about these things . . . Rajam, why don't you go inside and see if Chitra is sleeping with her mouth open; what if a mosquito gets into it . . . It is impossible to carry a mosquito net to all the places one has to travel . . . Yesterday, in *Pazhani*, the whole place was full of mosquitoes, *Appa* was saying he had enough with the *Pazhani* trip! I too could hardly sleep, but *manni* had a sound sleep. . . Rajam, why don't you get me a glass of water?"

When Gaura could confirm that Bhavani had finished talking, she laughed and said, "Bhavani, your throat must have dried up with your constant talking!"

"Yes, it is true," Bhavani said, and let out a dry chuckle. "I have this weakness of speaking frankly what's on my mind and getting blamed for things I say."

Nobody laughed. Gaura got up to leave. "I keep laughing at what you say," she said. "Now I would like to take leave of Saraswati, Bhavani's children and Mrs. Raghupathy."

Rajam approached Gaura with a smile to bid her farewell. She looked plain in a simple sari but with eyes deep and penetrating. The anemic face revealed lack of nourishment.

"Please take a look at Chitra," Rajam told her. "She had her hair removed at *Pazhani*; she had very nice curls."

Even before Rajam finished, Bhavani blurted out. "We even had taken her photo before our trip to give to my in-laws."

Rajam heard Janamma muttering to herself, 'Why all this fuss?' before she walked back to the kitchen. For Rajam, the words 'parents back home' had a touch of impropriety as she mulled over Janamma's disapproving tone.

That night Rajam stayed late in the bed musing over the day's events as if to atone for her 'crime' of having slept 'like a log' in *Pazhani*.

Does Bhavani treat Saraswati with respect deserving of *her manni*? No, she doesn't! Didn't Bhavani demand that Rajam should make the bed ready for her *manni*? What were her words uttered with no hesitation? "I have told my folks about arrangements here; the last time I was here with my husband he was asking me if he could leave his bed stretched out for the servant to take care when he showed up for work at eight. But I said no and told him we shouldn't flinch from doing any chores when there's no help around. So, I am saying you must unfold my bed tonight."

It was her strict adherence to convention and the obligations of a daughter-in-law that urged Rajam to do things expected of her, and the revelation left Rajam hurting and in despair. "Haven't we heard of kings who ruled only a part of the land, yet claimed they were controlling the entire universe? They never understood how vast the universe is, and that is my lot too."

And what did Janamma tell Rajam? "How I wish I had a daughter-in-law like you!"

What if Rajam was Satyamurthy's wife? Most likely she would have ended up like Bhavani – with no warmth towards her in-laws and very little appreciation for others.

The Mahatma has said, 'There are no good or bad people on this earth. It is our mind that finally shapes our attitude toward others, so let us cherish humanity.' It was her father's devotion to Gandhi that led to Rajam's marriage and a blissful life. 'The British entered India as outsiders but they ended up ruling the natives; could a daughter-in-law expect to act likewise in her new surroundings and start issuing orders? That too would mean inflicting violence on others.' These truths were so ingrained in Rajam's mind that she could bring maturity, patience and a good feeling to her situation. Yet, why didn't Bhavani share the same feelings? Could it be that Natarajan's devotion to Gandhian ideals are a notch above Doraiswamy's? Perhaps; emotionally, Doraiswamy seems less involved because he had been an active participant in the freedom struggle. But then, Rajam wondered, why's that her mother-in-law had never evinced any interest in Gandhi? The British or any attendant issues barely seemed to matter to her.

That was how Rajam found peace and clarity in her mind.

'I have attained the status of a dutiful wife and a daughter-in-law who has endeared herself to her husband and in-laws,' Rajam assured herself. She's been blessed with such a precious gift, the envy of others. The mind turned to her trip to the *Pazhani* temple. What's her prayer as she stood at the altar facing Lord Muruga and sought his blessings? 'Lord, I don't know what you will grant me; free me from apprehension and vile thoughts; give me happiness so that my happiness will make others happy too. Grant me the wish to nourish my appreciation for music and enhance my musical talent.' Rajam went to sleep that night with these thoughts hovering over her.

## 28

When leaving Madurai with Rajam and Bhavani from Madurai, Doraiswamy Iyer joked to Janamma.

"Here, you're Janaki, that's Lakshmi and your daughter Saraswati there, and here's Bhavani, the Goddess Uma! Rajam ought to display all of your three of your attributes; does she?"

And Janamma's reply was spontaneous. "Of course, she does. Her face is like Lakshmi's, in speech and expression she's like Saraswati; she has a heart of gold like Goddess Meenakshi!



Our names don't mirror our manners, but Rajam's does. She's is really Raja Rajeswari!"

Rajam was overcome by emotion as she took leave of her hosts.

The two names, Raja Rajeswari and Mrs. Raghupathy were trotted out, again and again, in Madurai. And, back home, she was addressed by other nicknames – some expressed in a humorous vein and in unflattering terms – but now she relished only these two – Mrs. Raghupathy and Raja Rajeswari - and was inspired by their very sound.

Still, Rajam was anxious if she would have a happy married life. In his first letter to Rajam after taking charge in the new assignment, Raghupathy had promised to investigate the future prospects of his position before coming to a decision to set up a family; yet, there has been no letter since. Why? What happened?

'He did say his job wasn't related to the military; is it true?' Rajam agonized. "My God, he doesn't need this job. Let him come home. I can't bear this loneliness any longer!"

Even as Raghupathy worshiped his wife as a divine gift he held his parents on a high pedestal worthy of his constant devotion and admiration. They were his *Shiva* and *Parvati*. By his dedication and loyalty Ganesha won the gift of mango from his parents in competition with his younger brother; something similar happened to Rajam who, vying with her sister-in-law Bhavani, had won the accolades of his parents. Even before this truth dawned on him, Rajam had been his first object of reverence and adoration. When the petulant little Muruga, piqued and angry, left home for the mountains didn't his mother Parvati soothe his spirits, saying, 'My dear boy, you are indeed the fruit – the fruit of knowledge!' Viewed in that light his mother's exhorting Bhavani certainly made sense, doesn't it? Raghupathy would accept, graciously, the role of a Nandi or Narada.

He was determined to bring Rajam's dreams of a family life to reality; later he would have his parents come and live with them in what would be surely a happy and blissful household. Doesn't he deserve to share in the dreams of his youthful wife? Wasn't he stung by the fact that he had never been to a movie with his wife to enjoy it in privacy?

Then, one day, Rajam got the invitation from Raghupathy.

Rajam was a girl who didn't know how to hide her joy! For someone who had learnt to keep upbeat when her spirits were

down, she ought to have learned to express her happiness couched with a little bit of discretion; but she could scarcely hide her joy.

When Saradambal told her, "We better sort out your vessels and sundries soon, I may even start preparing some *appalam* for you," Rajam nodded her in assent. And she spoke: "I want the recipes for *Omappodi* and other snacks, so please help me. I am afraid I might get confused as to the exact amount of the ingredients to be used in those preparations. I better make a note for myself." She was ready with a paper and pencil drawing a derisive laughter from Bhavani: "How funny! Now we will have newspapers publishing the stories of people preparing dishes from books!" Rajam calmly answered her: "I need to know only about the flour ratios; that's the most critical fact in recipes. What if I forget?"

"I can't give you the exact amounts," Saradambal told her. "Everything comes in fistful quantities; just follow your intuition; that's the best guide."

"Well, let me note down how many fistfuls are actually needed," Rajam insisted knowing it all.

Rajam recalled that, on several occasions, her mother-in-law talked about Rajam learning all the intricacies involved in home-cooking. "Raghupathy is very picky; he doesn't tolerate even small departures. Whatever one might say, everything in this house – coffee, the meals, *appalam* and snacks – is known to be the best!" So Rajam displayed keen interest to know everything where culinary needs were concerned.

And that's her undoing!

She also listened to her in-laws - not by secretly eavesdropping but standing and making herself quite visible in their presence – as they discussed the arrangements as to how their daughter-in-law could join their son.

"Why don't you escort Rajam?" Saradambal asked her husband. "Let me stay behind. Bhavani is still weak and the baby is only two months old. Next month I can visit my son and daughter-in-law after dropping Bhavani safely at her husband's. I look forward to enjoying a nice stay with Raghu and Rajam."

Instantly Rajam's mind lingered how she would warmly invite her mother-in-law with all the trappings for a dignitary into entering a home, but she composed herself and stopped on the tracks. She couldn't make out the consequences of what her father-in-law said in reply to his wife:

"She said she had to take care of the children, so wouldn't attend the wedding . . . Isn't that enough?"

'What more I need to do to prove my sincerity?' Rajam wondered. She thought her mother-in-law had understood her mind, but it's not true.

The revelation plunged Rajam in utter gloom and despair. This was too much to bear and she struggled hard to contain herself while silently pleading to her parents for their indulgence. Hasn't she failed in spite of her best efforts and failing health? And what about her husband? Does he deserve this?

'A fire engine driver - rushing his way to a site in emergency - wouldn't be liable for anyone who happens to fall under truck.' Rajam read that somewhere. Maybe, in similar vein, after a few minutes of anguish, she looked cheerful with no signs of worry. After all, wasn't it true that her mother-in-law was the one who's making all the preparations to safely entrust Rajam to her husband?

The lotus flower warms to the sun's rays and folds at its disappearance; who would ever perceive its nature if it were seen only during the day?

All these days Rajam held her cool by indulging in happy thoughts; now, her imminent reunion with her husband brought her reassurance.

What's Natarajan's wish? "May you flourish like *Cauvery*?" Rajam was proud that she had fulfilled her father's desire.

She wrote to her mother: "Appa had transformed a brook into *Cauvery*. Maybe I feel a little conceited when I say this. I always looked upon myself as the Grand River *Cauvery* that sweeps through two banks - I think of them as the homes of my parents and in-laws - and brings honor to both. I feel proud that I have achieved my goal. Isn't *Cauvery* celebrated in *Adi*? You may ask father about it. Don't people always welcome and worship the *Adi Cauvery*?"

Natarajan read it. He keenly examined the contents in other sections of the letter: a list of items her mother-in-law had packed for her journey; a list of the items bought by her father-in-law; a few more pertinent details and suggestions as to how the couple may go about setting up a new establishment.

"Well, all these are essential details for one to convey in a letter," Natarajan assured himself, "Says her finger has healed, but she fails to mention whether she is totally free from pain and has resumed practicing violin. And what about the books that I

had rushed through to her? Has she read any of them?" He could hardly contain his anger.

"Well, they are yet to set up a new residence," Visalam reminded him. "Only her father-in-law had made the visit. Neither I nor her mother-in-law could offer her any help. We will hear more details in her next letter," she said.

Natarajan was at a loss to understand Rajam's state of mind.

"Why would she need more than ten days to clean up a three-room apartment?" he wanted to know. "I can see that her mind is totally preoccupied with the kitchen. It is high time I speak to her what's on my mind." He spoke with a voice of sorrow and anger but when he did write to her, his tone turned tender.

"I am glad you are shining like the *Adi Cauvery*," he complimented her. "My dream – during your childhood, adulthood and later - has been that you turn out to be like a university! Hereafter, I would be keenly watching if you pursue your interests to my satisfaction: resume your music lessons, practice the violin, read books and enjoy the company of others. The other day Sarmagaru was horrified and in tears when he came to know about your finger. Don't forget that your finger is now healed and you can resume your violin lessons."

## 29

The couple lived in a small, single family house.

Yet, Rajam was the queen and her husband, the king. It has been a week since Doraiswamy had taken leave of them and returned home. Rajam hardly felt the days passing by; she brimmed with joy and seemed intoxicated. The very thought 'This is our home,' excited her in so many ways.

Now, there's clarity in her thoughts; her speech and delivery were direct and unmixed and they owed to her sense of freedom. Her vision was unmistakable and speech fluent. For someone who was overcome by fear and vacillation when faced with even simple errands, now Rajam gladly accepted her new responsibilities and carried them out with full vigor.

Raghupathy was oblivious to all this; he had left his home after a couple of months when he was slowly becoming privy to Rajam's predicaments, but he hoped Bhavani's attitude toward Rajam would soften over time. How could he know that Bhavani had grown even more hostile during his absence testing Rajam's endurance? He was completely in the dark of the hellish days

Rajam had suffered, and Rajam too never confided to him of her hardship.

But it didn't take long for Raghupathy to sense a new dynamism, excitement, and vigor in his wife.

As days went by Rajam sensed a sparkle in her married life; she shone like a field just harvested; her experiences resembled the heaps of the paddy cultivated, and her feelings lay buried like haystacks.

She was not a housewife who, after she had seen her husband off to work, would lock up the house and roam around the town; she stayed home and read books. The injured finger on the left hand had since grown a little with new skin and its very contact with a violin string caused excruciating pain; she could use only three fingers. Even after two months of the injury and a full month since the doctor confirmed the wound had healed, the forefinger on the left hand was still dysfunctional leaving Rajam in tears. She knew she could play a couple of *kritis* on violin without using the index finger to the exclusion of *ragas* using the *rishabam* and *dhwaitam* notes in the *arohana* and *avarohana* scales. She played only these select ones and often wondered what her neighbors would think of her - how she has been reduced to repeating the same two *kritis*, again and again, the whole day. Often, after Raghupathy returned from work, the couple would go out for an evening walk when Rajeswari would cast furtive glances at others; bashful, she preferred to walk behind her husband. These open and simple gestures endeared the young couple to others in their apartment complex.

One day a girl showed up at their house and Rajam invited her in and talked with her; the gesture immensely pleased the girl's mother. On another occasion Rajam noticed a baby crawling on the floor and hitting one of the steps leading to the house. Horrified, Rajam made a dash, picked up the baby and kissed it as if showering kisses on her brother Kannan. Noticing this from a distance, later, the child's father to his wife, "This is a lady that dotes on babies!"

With such incidents, Rajam soon made many friends. She got introduced to the wives of Raghupathy's colleagues at work.

Her natural disposition – one of frankness and open mind – eased her anxiety and nervousness.

One day she asked an elderly woman in her neighborhood: "Mami, I am practicing violin every day; am I upsetting you?"

"Why would I get upset? I am enjoying your music. Do continue; have no fear."

"I can't; I am really afraid. Look at my finger."

"What happened?"

"I ground part of this finger in a coffee grinder," said Rajam with a mild laughter mixed with sadness. "I can play only two *kritis* without using this finger. I actually need more practice so that I can play *kritis* to include the *rishabam*."

She needed an outlet to speak out what's on her mind and, accordingly, she expressed her opinions frankly and with no malice. She never said anything covertly; what she thought and said in the presence of her husband, she also shared with others.

She found her admirer in another elderly woman who, she later learnt, was speaking to others about Rajam in glowing terms. "Rajam can handle everything a housewife ought to deal with," the woman told them. "I understand this is her first family setup. It is certainly true that a girl, having lived with her in-laws, develops certain dignity and poise."

Rajam accepted such accolades with natural pride even as she told herself, 'Yes, it is true - but there are many like me!'

Pankajam, a woman from the neighborhood and elder to Rajam by only a few months, was a mother of two and shared her thoughts with Rajam. "You come from outside your husband's family circles," she said, "yet you are the darling of your mother-in-law; your father-in-law too admires you and looks after your needs. As for me, my mother-in-law is my aunt, yet I am always in hot waters!"

Rajam's reaction was direct and immediate. "Maybe she wants a daughter-in-law who's always scared of her. Some women do like to occupy a mother-in-law's position and wield authority."

"You may be right. At first I felt carefree because she was my aunt, but pretty soon I was upset at her treatment. I am anxious not to offend my husband, my cousin. But it's not always possible to please my mother-in-law. As a *Nathanar*, she had already exercised control over my mother; now she probably expects to have the same kind of influence over me. It's never going to happen!"

Pankajam words uttered in excitement, gave Rajam a pause. 'I have given her the right answer,' she assured herself.

She narrated this episode to Raghupathy, and offered her own view. "A woman ought not to consider her mother-in-law just as a mother-in-law and keep aloof. Neither should she act indifferent toward her even if she's her own aunt. Simply put, she ought to show respect to the woman who happens to be her husband's mother."

Raghupathy nodded vigorously in full assent.

Rajam and Raghupathy visited a friend's home where Rajam helped an aged woman in some routine, household chores. The old lady was overjoyed. "My daughter-in-law can hardly do any chores," she said. "Actually, after her arrival, I am finding myself deluged with more work and responsibility! She wouldn't even think of rolling the bed; 'I always had servants at home to do these tasks,' she would say, and burst into tears. It is four months since she had gone home to her parents and still is not inclined to come back."

'Do such things really happen?' Rajam thought in dismay. The realization prompted a question: 'Is there a woman more timid than me?'

"Her mother has given her the best training," the woman told Raghupathy. Touched, Rajam told her, "This training is from my mother-in-law only, not from *my* mother!" and tried to laugh while eyeing Raghupathy.

"I am a little confused," the elder woman said. "She kept repeating *Amma, Amma*, and I thought she was actually referring to her own mother, but she meant her mother-in-law! How am I supposed to know? What's wrong if she used the word *Mamiyar*?"

Rajam had a ready answer:

"When I refer my mother as '*Amma*,' I will use the singular pronoun, but I use a plural when I speak of my in-law. I never use the phrases, 'my mother', 'my father,' when I am living with my in-laws."

Rajam's forte had always been plain speaking and now, as well in the days ahead, there were episodes where she displayed the same tendency.

"You say your mother-in-law has sent you appalam by post? That's indeed a fine gesture from an old woman!" The elderly woman expressed her appreciation but Rajam resented the expression 'old' while referring to Saradambal. She lost no time in answering her. "You will be even more surprised if I tell you

that my mother-in-law sends wads of *appalam* to my mother as well. My *Mamiyar* excels in everything she does. One can learn by merely watching her at work; I was just a helper assisting with ordinary chores around the house. In fact I was not well groomed at my home, but I was encouraged to perform with no fear and anxiety at my in-laws."

Well, Rajeswari knew where she stood and how others admired her; why should she compromise her cherished values? Why can't she express what's on her mind? It is no surprise she expressed her admiration for Saradambal to the old woman.

Raghupathy welcomed and respected his wife's right to expression; she never crossed the line. He often wondered how and where Rajam developed the gift to say the right things at the right time; now he found the answer.

"I have gained insight into people from you and Bhavani," Rajam confessed to him albeit, in a sore note. "It is etched deep in me like a nail hammered into a soft tree." Raghupathy would smile at her analogy. There were also occasions when Rajam, in a barely concealed joyful mood, thanked him and Bhavani, saying, "I can never forget some questions you asked me; neither can I forget Bhavani's counsels to me. I feel every one of them as if carved in my heart - like a dye splashed on a pure white cloth." Her words found resonance with Raghupathy who concluded, 'Yes, it is true'. Hasn't Rajam transformed herself in the last three years from a crybaby to a level-headed person? How patiently did she stomach all those taunts and barbs from Bhavani! This is indeed a profound change!

"I am happy I got married at fifteen," Rajam said one day. "I was told girls as they grow become less compromising and fail to see others' point of view; a girl married at twenty could never see eye to eye with her husband. Some say the state of mind of a woman at seventeen would pretty much remain the same when she turns seventy. Please tell me what kind of woman I was at seventeen; I want to note it down in my diary."

Raghupathy answered her with a smile: "I don't like the idea of your being eternally seventeen-year old. I have already begun losing my hair and will soon turn bald; I don't want you to reject me for my looks."

At seventeen, despite her days of pain and suffering, Rajam cherished her memories as a daughter-in-law; now, her husband wants her to be happy, free from adversity. Still, feeling insecure and vulnerable, she blurted out, her eyes turning misty: "I feel blessed I didn't have this crooked finger when you first came to



see me; do you think you would have still consented to marry me?"

That's the way conflicting emotions played within her mind. A conversation between the couple that had begun in a spirit of joyfulness would often spin around here and there and end in strife and silence. Occasionally a single word from Raghupathy would tug Rajam's heart, dissect it in diverse ways before letting her slowly reach her comfort zone. Gradually Rajam learnt to appreciate those overtures – were they not like the students' debates in schools and colleges? She was thrilled at the discovery that the exchanges and the banter between them carried the full scope of all the *nava---ragas* she had learnt in her music lessons. What more does she need?

Her attitude towards Raghupathy had a veneer of sympathy one extended to a child. Of course, he loved her no less. Rajam realized Raghupathy didn't have many opportunities to feel sorry that he had let many opportunities to demonstrate his affection for her, and this awareness elated her. Raghupathy had been proud that he had scrupulously attended to the needs of his parents; now he was anxious - the same way - about his wife. The result was Rajam saw herself in the role of a mother repenting after punishing her child. "I am unable to control my tongue; I talk too much," she would make a confession that confounded her husband. "I am scared sometimes I meant to say something, but then blurted out something that made no sense."

Rajam found herself surrounded by friends and well-wishers who urged her to refurbish her musical talent. "Why don't you try to perform in some AIR programs?" someone asked her. "You need some more practice in *ragas* and *swaras* to excel in a concert," a few others advised her. "Why don't you get a music teacher?" Rajam wondered: wasn't it true that the injury to the finger had turned her all the more eager to practice her violin lessons? It was her stay with the in-laws that actually proved a valuable training – grooming her to understand and cope with the elders' likings and the moods of the young ones. Looking back. Rajam now worshipped those days; she wanted to put any bitter memories out of her mind.

She wrote long letters home about her outdoor activities and new experiences. While penning letters to her mother-in-law she gave full details of how she celebrated the religious festivals at home as well as the couple's trips to friends' homes where Rajam's culinary skills were widely appreciated. "I am now fully convinced that a household itself is an exemplary art," she concluded in the letter.

Rajam understood her mission at her in-laws was to bring honor to herself and her husband; that demanded serenity and patience on her part, and she concluded it was her worthwhile. And nothing detracted her from the special admiration she always had for her mother-in-law. Occasionally she would turn emotional and overprotective, but whatever her reaction, it was directed at only some remark Bhavani had made or of some general nature. Rajam had never forgotten how Saradambal stood up, solid, calm; a tower of forcefulness. Wiser, more loving and worldly, she came to Rajam's defense even at the prospect of defying her own daughter.

'Even living apart, Bhavani and her mother-in-law don't see eye to eye. Living closer, we interact ignoring each other's imperfections, and we have grown fond of each other!' Rajam recalled, feeling elated and proud

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Rajam, who had never been to a music concert, had a chance to attend one of them.

"I notice the violinist simply repeats the *swaras* of the vocalist; don't you feel they are both playing by rote?" she asked Raghupathy who had a ready answer. "That's how the accompanying artist is supposed to play," he told her. "The violin should 'speak' faithfully what's rendered by the musician; he's literally challenged to replicate the vocalist's expertise. Don't you see?"

'Is that so?' Rajam wondered.

"Do they call this a case of *dharma patni*?" she asked him.

"You are right. I guess your teacher Sarmagaru would like you to replicate the *swaras* he plays on his violin. That makes you a *dharma patni*."

Rajam resented his sarcasm; Sarmagaru wasn't a bragging type, neither did Rajam ever go into raptures over his musical expertise. She had Sarmagaru as her teacher only because she had no choice. Now a good number of Tamil music teachers were available but why doesn't her husband suggest Rajam be one of their students? And what did Sarmagaru actually tell her? "Was your musical talent supposed to only help you to get a good husband from Tamil Nadu?" he had asked. "Once married, have you decided to give up on your music?"

Now she has plenty of time at her disposal for music apprenticeship; financially it was within her reach. Rajam's desire for music lessons grew keener and her inhibitions weaker. She

felt confident she could even perform on stage. But she was loath to ask her husband; how many privileges could she demand from him?

What if he doesn't appreciate her love for music and ignored her interest in a new music teacher out of hand? Rajam only wished Raghupathy would stop bad-mouthing Sarmagaru.

How could one expect Rajam to put up with his cynicism? Words failed her and an imminent fall out was averted; the haystack barely escaped the blitz from fire!

It became clear that her husband had certainly reconsidered his opinions in many areas but he hadn't given up mouthing sarcastic comments on Sarmagaru.

Rajam made new friends and won new admirers. Music didn't become her only inspiration; it was one of the social activities she was engaged in.

"How much she dotes on children!" "How adept in handling babies!" Such accolades became common in get-togethers and tea parties where the couple made their acquaintances.

At one such gathering Rajam met someone who was harshly commenting on other guests - a couple - who had a love marriage.

"The husband's a Tamilian; the wife a Gujarati," he was saying. "The family lineage is supposed to flow from the father's side but, in this case, the mother is raising her kids them as Gujaratis! The children speak Gujarati; what a shame!"

Rajam knew nothing about that Gujarati mother but she came to her defense.

"The earliest memory of a baby is the language its mother uses while pampering it, hence mother-tongue," Rajam said. "Don't we use our mother-tongue while we are resting, dreaming or when coddling our babies?"

A few days earlier the couple visited a Marathi friend's house where Rajam took a baby into her arms and cooed, "Ranju Kunju!" She was addressing fondly the baby as 'You, the little One' in Tamil, but Raghupathy warned Rajam she might be inadvertently using a word that might be offensive in their language!

As her activities and earnest attempts coincided with her innate nature, Rajam earned a good name and her married life also progressed beautifully.

"This is the life you craved for!" declared her inner voice.

"Enough?" asked Fate, mischievously.

Her life that had seemingly begun in a desolate tract now blossomed into a green pasture enlivened with a whiff of earth and loam. Rajam's all set to reap the harvest!

She greeted her husband with a smile ready to share happy news with him. Raghupathy entered the house with a sullen face; he was carrying a bad news.

"My *Chithi's* daughter is getting married; we must certainly go," she said, and eagerly awaited his reply.

"Next week? Most certainly we should go. Your parents too would be there. Right? We must go," he reiterated.

"I am not sure if my parents would come. Should we not go, if they don't?"

"If they came, I was hoping to ask them if they could take you home. My work will end here in the next two months."

"What . . . What are you saying?"

"Yes; I don't know what happens next, and where . . . You too haven't been home for a while . . ."

"If that is so, I will be happy to go . . . Do you want me to start packing?"

"Right; once I know where I am getting transferred, I can have our stuff moved there."

Rajam was sorry her nascent family enterprise was coming to an end, but she was convinced she must not let go of this opportunity to attend a family wedding. Her parents might be attending; and if she didn't go home with them, where might she have to go instead?

With teary eyes she took leave of her friends and acquaintances, and the couple set on their trip. "How can I ever forget my days of pleasant experiences here?" she asked them. "It's here I began my married life running our own house-hold - just us both."

Soon it became apparent to her that Raghupathy wasn't too happy about the trip.

"Why do you keep telling everyone this is your first family setup?" Raghupathy asked. "We have been married for three years."

Rajam was still trying to overcome her disappointment over the rupture in her 'blissful family unit'. She seethed within. 'Doesn't he know the quality of married life I have been enduring so far? He acts as if he knows nothing about it!' She asked him directly, "Don't you think the word 'household' means that a couple influences its internal affairs and consequences?" Then she paused awaiting, and fearing her husband's reaction. He might ask: "Are you saying running a family means only issuing orders to the servant maid and exercising authority over others? Are you not satisfied by being a loving spouse and a responsible housewife?" She thought he would be justified in asking such a question: to run a family you need firmness, empathy, authority, and a certain amount of ego too.

Even if Raghupathy didn't ask, he might be thinking about it. So, she went ahead, and said in a self-deprecating tone, "Sometimes I feel running a family means overreacting and going off the tangent." She watched her husband smile, and reciprocated.

Raghupathy still wasn't cheery and Rajam wondered why. 'Is he sad because we will be parting soon? Is that how a husband feels? Maybe he is piqued I would be happily meeting with my relatives and forgetting my worries.' Rajam thought the latter might be the real reason. She did detect such a tone in his conversation. "You look very excited that you will be seeing your parents," he said. "Suppose I suggest we go to see *my* parents; will you feel the same way? I don't think so."

"How can it be? You see, you are not even happy that I will be seeing my parents," she said without hesitation.

"Forget parents. Tell me, do you think the friendliness I share with your cousin Chandru will ever match what you feel toward my sister?"

Rajam calmly told him.

"Really? You know Chandru only the last six months. He thinks you are a big officer and tries to butter you up saluting you all the time. You too were flattered and said he's a smart fellow. Whereas, I am wary how I conduct myself in whatever I do, but Bhavani keeps blaming me forever. How do you expect me to shower love on her? You may ask me any questions, but I wish they are the right ones so that I can answer them calmly and with no malice." Her voice choked, she's ready to accept his apology.

Raghupathy didn't ask any more questions. But he posed a question in similar vein at the end of their journey.

"My *Chithappa* would be at the station to receive us," Rajam exclaimed with joy when Raghupathy replied, "I have to kill three days here! I am not used to village folks!" He smiled, looking nervous and apprehensive.

Rajam instantly realized his predicament. She understood it would be rude to embarrass him at a time like this, but she didn't want to miss this opportunity. How about drilling something into his mind that would make a permanent imprint? Then there would be no further need for pestering and repetition.

"What did you say?" she began. "You have to endure three days? Wow, how tough! That's really a great challenge! Please think about it: you are the only family son-in-law and my *Chithappa* personally addressed and invited you with all formalities. You have accepted his invitation and are now making your presence. Now all our folks will be on their guard to make sure you get due respect and deference. I too will be within your ear and check frequently on your needs and comfort. You will be receiving a royal treatment for the next three days. If you grumble for something like that, where do you think we can go and plead our case? . . ."

"I was a daughter-in-law who, in the last six months to a year, was constantly watched and judged by each and every one: how I talked, laughed, and walked; whether I was respectful of others and if I were good in household chores; did I keep up with the tradition of not talking about my own parents nor my life back home. Imagine how much a fifteen-year-old girl would have suffered amidst such an environment where everyone was constantly watching her every move. Again, she must never question her husband under any circumstances; if she does, there would be a violent storm!"

Raghupathy looked at her with genuine sympathy.

'That's enough, I have got it all off of my chest,' Rajam told herself. 'Now he will understand the reason for my frequent frustrations'. She was very satisfied she spoke her piece.

Raghupathy, of course, got a stately welcome and honor from the hosts just as Rajam had assured him. Rajam too didn't shirk her duties. One day Raghupathy remarked that he was sorry for causing all the trouble. Rajam was furious. 'My husband calls *this* a hassle. What a discovery! All I do is helping him to get ready for his bath and handing him a soap bar, nothing more. This is what he thinks as a big deal for me!' She was naturally

sad; how would a lion that has successfully fought an elephant would like to be applauded for having trapped a mosquito?

Visalam too was attending the wedding. Events transpired as Raghupathy had planned; he took leave after the wedding; he and Rajam parted company in silence. Rajam was stunned to see Raghupathy visibly moved. 'Even I didn't get this emotional, Rajam thought, confused.

There's a reason why Raghupathy was really upset at the time of his departure.

His sadness at leaving Rajeswari behind with her parents was akin to what the unlucky brother-in-law Lakshmana must have felt when he had to leave Sita behind in the forest she was enchanted with.

His authorities had already informed Raghupathy that he would have no job after two months.

He wanted to divulge this to his wife but she preempted him with the announcement of her cousin's wedding. Raghupathy struggled hard to conceal the bad news from her. Later, and during the train journey, his mind was restless even as he was trying to fathom what Rajam was thinking.

Raghupathy always believed in some codes to live by: he aimed at being an ideal son; he married Rajam whom he saw as an ideal partner, and lover. He wanted her to be always happy.

He did convey the bitter news to her by a letter while peppering it with some endearing terms to offset her disappointment, and make it palatable.

"You may recall that I was among the last batch that was assigned to serve during the final phase of the war, so now I am the first one to be asked to go," he wrote her. "Soon I will start seriously applying for jobs. I have begun scouring through the 'Wanted Columns' and ads and soon I hope to land in a good position. Here's *my* ad for you: *Looking for a girl of twenty for a college graduate who will be unemployed in the near future; seeking someone with beauty and brains and trained to become a successful housewife.* You too may apply." The letter didn't upset Rajam in any way.

"What's the big deal if he loses this job?" she asked her father. "He rushes to work early in the morning and returns home in the evening, tired and exhausted. How can one keep doing this for the rest of life?"

"Yes, you're right," Natarajan replied. "There are other occupations to choose from. Why can't he become a professor like me?" He knew how Rajam respected a teacher's knowledge, intellect and the readiness to impart wisdom to others.

Visalam was quick to intervene and express her personal opinion.

"A professor's work is not a child's play," she said. "One can become a professor only after lecturing for over many years! It is never easy to land a right job. I wonder how many sons-in-law are presently looking for jobs; who knows how stiff the competition is?"

"Remember Raghupathy is well ahead of others in the game," Natarajan reminded his wife.

Rajam didn't lose her self-assurance. She has been living through the delights of matrimony and she knew it would last till her husband got a new position - no matter how long it took.

She recalled Raghupathy's face when he took leave after the wedding. 'So, that's what has been bothering him all these days?' she asked with a chuckle. She admired his play of words when he said he would like to have their household items 'transferred' following his move on another assignment. What stood out from that memory was his unabated love and concern for her.

She replied to him; her letter eschewed any feeling of bitterness or disappointment.

And Raghupathy wrote back.

"Yes, I noticed you were quite happy. You gladly bade me farewell when you were encircled by your folks and cohorts. Now you are at home under the loving care of your parents and I was imagining foolishly that you might be brooding over my job prospects. I am now relieved after reading your letter."

What's her husband implying? Rajam set to thinking.

'Today I see the phrases *loving care of parents* and *cohorts* in the letter; and the other day, he tossed at her questions, one after another; didn't he ask "*Suppose I suggest we go to my parents; will you feel the same way?*"

'Good heavens! What's going on?'

'*Because he doesn't have a job . . .*'

'Does he fester I may resent living with my in-laws?'



Rajam had always hoped for a good and contented life and she never begrudged returning to her in-laws. She reiterated that message in the letter to her husband.

### 31

Raghupathy visited his in-laws after relinquishing his professional duties.

His arrival, akin to a *kriti* rendered at an appropriate time and in the right mood, pleased everyone. Soon, with excitement, he departed for his home with Rajam seeking the hospitality of his parents.

Rajam who, at home, reigned like *Adi Cauvery* - the river flowing with full of energy during the monsoon season - changed into *Aippasi Cauvery*, calm, serene, and majestic as she arrived at her in-laws.

The music teacher had exhorted Rajam that she should sing during the ensuing *Rama - Navami* celebrations. Until now Rajam had counted on the presence and support of Sarmagaru beside her on the stage, but now she assured herself that she could perform on her own with poise and confidence. Sarmagaru applauded her selection and the rendering of new *kritis*. He raved about the trip he took to Madras two months ago when he attended several music concerts in the city; what impressed him most was the fervor and passion of the listeners who glued themselves to their seats during the performances, forgetting even to eat; many didn't return to their homes and preferred spending the whole day in the concert halls. The revelation stunned Rajam.

"I heard you are going to Madras," the teacher said. "My dear girl, if you practice regularly. You will excel in six months."

The more she listened, the keener Rajam's obsession for music grew. "I am not going to sing now, sir," She told him. "I shall return from Madras after six months and perform during the *Navaratri* celebrations. I want to do my best and win accolades." She concluded: "Sir, I am no more a little girl; I will not be satisfied with an ordinary performance!"

"Well said, wish you all the best!"

Raghupathy had no reservations about his wife. Once again he's a witness to the sparkle in her eyes, her unhurried, graceful movements and amiable demeanor. He was thinking less about himself; Rajam, as always, looked vivid and animated with the charm of an innocent child.

"I used to be thrilled at the very idea of setting foot on the Madras Central Station," Rajam said. "Now Madras itself is our home!" Raghupathy smiled at her excitement.

"You like Madras very much, don't you?" she asked him eagerly. "When you were studying B.A. there I heard you used to attend every music concert in the city." Suddenly her thoughts veered into another direction.

She recalled many in her home town say she would have stood out as an outstanding musician had she lived in Madras. The sentiment that there was little scope to improve her musical talent and that the local *Andhras* didn't evince a keen interest in Carnatic Music threw her into utter silence. Raghupathy too didn't stay on the conversation.

The silence didn't seem appropriate to her. Suddenly Rajam felt a weary distaste: this was totally out of the normal and might even foreshadow a predicament in their future, but she couldn't articulate her despair. In her mind, a composition, its rendering by an artist, and music in general were inextricably linked with one another; she had become accustomed to discern a similar connection between a composition, the *Andhras* and her husband. It was often a struggle for her to rise above those restraints. After all, she was born and bred in a culture where she heartily drank and breathed the vitals of *Andhras'* way of life and their traditions and customs; her inborn love for music also proved an incentive.

She loathed the silence, and said quietly. "I heard sister Bhavani say that she attended many concerts in Calcutta. I don't know the situation in Nagpur. I never discuss music in our letters, but I guess they do have musical concerts in Nagpur. Tamils, wherever they go, carry with them their passion for music. When they are living away from the South – whether in the North, East or West – they would invite the artists and arrange concerts in their cities." Raghupathy cut in, and said, "The same is true of Tamils who also make their living abroad." Rajam grew panicky and wanted to avoid the conversation from turning into an examination of comparing and contrasting the attributes of *Andhras* and Tamils. She felt heavy hearted, her eyelids growing heavy; the train's movement lulled her into sleep.

"May I lie down for a while?" she asked, and Raghupathy shifted his eyebrows in assent and moved his legs making more room for her. He half smiled; she was exercising her privileges in the train.

Rajam tried to sleep, but her whole body felt ticklish and kept her awake. "Looks like I can't sleep in daytime," she muttered and got up. Her bashfulness seemed to offer resistance but Rajam made up her mind. 'I am *now* going to rest,' she said and retreated into slumber.

"How nice, it feels like a swing!" she laughed. "Why don't you tell me a story? I will doze off in no time."

Raghupathy handed her a book.

Rajam smiled. "What is it?"

"An anthology of short stories, a gift from one of my office friends. He's a bookworm," he said laughing.

"Well, I am relieved you have spoken at least a few sentences," Rajam said. "I have been doing all the talking myself and, no more!" She opened a page in the book.

She remembered somewhere a magazine article explaining the nights the newlyweds spend together when the husband did all the talking and the wife would do all the listening in devoted attendance. The roles get reversed as the married life progresses when the husband is obliged to listen to the wife's constant banter. Rajam desperately wanted to share this joke with Raghupathy but, with a great effort, she restrained herself. She became quiet after a few pages into the book and dozed off.

Raghupathy watched her half closed eyes and smiling face with fascination. He recalled how poets turned out any number of songs glorifying the blooming water lily and the lotus flowers. 'What a wonder! We are witnessing the same spectacle that *Kalidasa* and other poets had composed and jotted down in their works; the same miracle goes on forever!' Raghupathy too shared the same sentiment about Rajam: 'She's a remarkable woman! She's still the same woman as she's before!' he thought in amazement.

The truth was there has been actually no change in Rajam's outlook. Raghupathy was right on the mark that she had not grown despondent. But there was one factor that her husband had missed and that sustained Rajam's spirits. She didn't pay much attention to her husband now being unemployed; she was cheerful and gloating over the prospect to reside in Madras; she was no more shy and reserved in her husband's presence; she considers her in-laws' home as her own. She eagerly looked forward to the days when she would attend the music performances in the city; it was fortuitous her father-in-law too was in Madras - ensconced in a lucrative career. These were the

tidbits that added to her bliss, which she had kept within her check while her face was, as always, aglow. Of course, Raghupathy had no recourse to her dreams and ideals. 'She's very happy,' he told himself and that's exactly what he wished for her.

"I can never understand why the God who deprived you of your job had chosen to give me a promotion now," a saddened Doraiswamy had written to his son. "This honor has come totally unexpected. I know from your horoscope that the present time is not favorable to you; still, why spring this sudden surprise at this old man? God's ways are indeed mysterious!" Raghupathy had shared that letter with Rajam when he visited his in-laws. Rajam's reaction was spontaneous; she let her guard down and was about to burst into a popular Tamil film song celebrating one's joy in moving to a city; but she quickly stopped on her tracks after reciting a few words in prose. Still Raghupathy never knew her hunger for the city life.

Doraiswamy had dispatched one of his servants to meet the couple at the Central station. The first words Rajam spoke inside the taxi were, "We are going home!" with laughter as soon as the passengers settled down. When the servant alerted, "We are almost there," her eyes caught in awe the sight of a row of bungalows on either side of the road. The taxi stopped in front of a spacious bungalow.

"Why can't the taxi go inside the gates?" asked Raghupathy in a voice of self-importance.

"The taxi *must* remain on the road," the servant replied.

As Rajam was suggesting, "Why don't we get down here?" Doraiswamy appeared, asking, "Why haven't you got down yet?"

'Where is he coming from?' Rajam wondered, and looked around. A foot path ran close to where her father-in-law now stood. It led to the bungalow; but the path broke at some distance, and led to another . . . Where does that end? Who is that woman standing there?'

'Why is *Amma* standing near the outhouse?' The question involuntarily escaped Rajam's mouth even as her eyes wandered over a car parked in front of a bungalow portico.

"That's where we live," Doraiswamy informed them. "The main occupant of the bungalow is one Ramaseshan, a very good man. He gave us the space he has been using as his office. This is enough for us old people." He laughed. Rajam hurried along carrying a basket in hand. As she began walking, she noticed a

young woman rush out of the bungalow, getting into a car that quickly exited through another gate.

"Come in," Saradambal welcomed Rajam. As she approached her, Rajam jumped over the threshold, bowed down and offered her respects. "I thought you lived in the bungalow," Rajam said smiling, turned around and asked Raghupathy, "You too had the same idea, right?"

Raghupathy smiled knowingly and nodded in assent and Saradambal joined in his laughter, "The son's here, let him find a suitable place for his father. Will he object?" Rajam agreed and laughed heartily.

For Rajam the small house was a testament to her father-in-law's simple lifestyle unaffected by his latest promotion; her mother-in-law had lost none of her passion for appalam; Rajam recalled her own strong reaction when an elderly woman described Saradambal as 'an aged woman'; she was convinced that her anger was indeed justified. 'I am a daughter-in-law who had won laurels from a very energetic and demanding woman,' she thought, 'yet none of my friends ever seem to think of me as a daughter-in-law.' Saradambal's very presence commanded awe and respect and Rajam felt her own feminine attributes seemed to shine with a little more sheen and sparkle in her company. Of course, when she and Raghupathy had set up a family unit of their own, Rajam had to face a few inevitable consequences: she would suddenly lose her cool, get mad at something or someone and feel totally spent and exhausted. But she realized the only way she could prevail over such distractions was to deepen her bond with her mother-in-law. That's the path to realize her ideals and elevate herself. A loving husband and a mother-in-law with warmth and kindness are the most enduring assets for a woman. Now, reflecting on her role as a daughter-in-law, Rajam felt a sense of privilege and temperament that was absent in the earlier days; the awareness also helped her achieve a peace of mind, which proved elusive before.

Her new acquaintances and friends admired many of Rajam's qualities. 'How astounded they would be at our unique daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationship?' she often wondered. And one day, out of the blue, Rajam proclaimed it to Saradambal.

"We had to close down our new family establishment within eight months, so suddenly; eight months just flew by fast," she was saying casually. "Had I known this would have happened, I would have somehow convinced you and brought you over to our home sooner." Rajeswari spoke spontaneously and with no

sign of unease or awkwardness, but she heard no echo. Saradambal gave no reply. Both women were holding on to the handle and spinning the *Endirakkal*; the top wheel moved, while the lower one remained static.

"Fortunately, *Appa* (she meant Doraiswamy) was there to help sort out things and settle us down, and he could see our house and the city, only you couldn't." For some reason, Rajam stumbled a bit as she spoke these words.

Saradambal stopped turning the wheel, and said. "Didn't we know that Raghu didn't have a permanent job? I thought there was no need to rush for a family setup that soon. Well, you two were in a hurry and came with a plan, so I kept quiet. I left the matter between the father, the son, the father-in-law and daughter-in-law!"

Suddenly Rajam, who has been dreaming of climbing the sturdy steps of a staircase, felt like she was trying to balance herself on a ladder woven from flimsy thread. Words failed her; her mouth went dry and the eyes dimmed even as the hand continued its usual maneuver. The incense stick needs only a little fire – just a spark to give off sweet aroma; any surfeit would be unwarranted and may even prove fatal: the incense stick would only spread fire and no scent. Saradambal's retort carried more than its share of fire; the warmth to inspire Rajam's heart was gone and she felt as if a piece of hot coal has been just tossed into the heart.

'What did we actually plan together?' Rajam desperately sought an answer. 'We barely exchanged a few letters.' Wasn't it true that the two aching hearts found redemption only through communication - mentally – leaving in its trail the scars of physical and psychological anguish?

Rajam was silent but she fretted inside; she felt like bursting into tears; she found herself caught up in a mess, but shook off her gloom and stayed poised. The mind drifted into darkness but her immediate surroundings confirmed she was not hallucinating. It was the sudden shift in Saradambal's attitude that now took over her; never before was she frightened like this.

Was it the same woman – who had made anxious and loving enquiries about Rajam's new family life – now casting aspersions on her? How could she have penned those letters if she really 'didn't care for her daughter-in-law'? Doesn't her friendly posture and glowing face reflect her deep concern for Rajam?

Both bewilderment and confusion wrenched Rajam's heart.

And she resolved her situation – thanks to her innate loving nature and the desire to reach out to others.

But she couldn't help agonizing, 'why are these minor incidents popping out when I have done nothing wrong?'

Was it a mistake that she longed for a separate family establishment to nourish her dreams?

But then, how could your well-wishers object to such an objective?

Rajam deeply pondered over these conflicts raging over her mind; she consciously examined her hopes and desires and sought out her motives; again, her basic attributes – decency and integrity – showed her the way. What was her decision?

She came up with a word of warning – addressed to her own mind:

'Beware! Don't become complacent that you have won the respect and deference of others; stop boasting that everyone is basically good at heart and harbors no partisanship; the relationship between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law is forever open to risk; it is as fragile as the petals of a rose that break off at a simple touch.'

Rajam harbored no desire to deck out her tresses with artificial flowers, however elegant they looked. Even if invisible to the eye, she would rather live with a natural rose tucked in her locks. She sought only the fragrance and reputation of a rose and to preserve its petals with passion.

## 32

It has been two weeks since they had arrived in Madras, but Rajam never ventured outside their bungalow gates.

She visited only Ramaseshan's family – they lived in the bungalow - with her mother-in-law. She watched Raghupathy helplessly as he went out for walks. Accustomed, as she was, to accompany him in his outings in the past, she felt she had the liberty to do so, but her wish stayed as a hope only; no loving invitations ever came. Rajam realized that the simple pleasures during their eight-month stint had diluted her fortitude, and she resisted those temptations. Under the circumstances, she thought it would appear superfluous for her to go out with her husband; it would serve no purpose or necessity.

That's how Raghupathy too saw the situation. But he knew Rajam was interested in concerts, and he made a few attempts to gratify her.

"Let's apply for membership in the local *Sangeeta Sabha*," he told his mother.

"What a waste of money!" was her immediate response. "You know *Appa* does not like these pastimes."

After a few days Raghupathy mentioned about a local concert.

"Why do you want to spend money on concerts? I can probably roll a hundred *appalam* with that kind of money," she said. "Any way, why all this ado about music? Do you think anybody can roll my *appalam* even if they are bribed thousand rupees?"

Raghupathy too joined in her laughter and forgot all about Rajam.

A few days later he heard about a music recital ('it should never be missed,' everybody was saying) and, with no hesitation, he entered the kitchen with a magazine in hand.

"Do you know whose concert is this?" he asked Rajam and showed her the announcement in the magazine. Rajam too lost her composure and shared his enthusiasm. "He's so much into it," she told Saradambal, "I am not sure if tickets will be easily available."

"I will buy them right away," Raghupathy said brashly. "*Amma*, shall I book four tickets?"

Saradambal appreciated her son's regard for her but she was in no mood to grant her daughter-in-law her wish. "Why talk about four or five? You may go, if you wish, with your wife," she said.

She added the words 'with your wife' as a concession; the mother knew what the son was rooting for.

His mother was against the idea of attending; when living with his parents a son doesn't take his wife alone to concerts - that's the way things were supposed to be. Raghupathy's fear and reticence now precluded any action on his part.

Saradambal was not someone who would simply throw a hurdle with a comment; she was open and genial and accepted that the couple might choose to go out on their own; she was charitable enough not to interfere with their decision.



She exhibited this trait not only now but in the following days ahead.

In the aftermath of that small incident, Rajam and Raghupathy grew cautious lest they get caught up in a similar situation. Raghupathy found comfort in the thought that Rajam, like the malleable gold, had the ability to stretch herself to any situation; in the event her husband chose to act against his mother's sentiment, Rajam's intuition told her, she ought not to go against what Saradambal disapproved; she had neither the desire nor the strength to defy the elderly woman. Rajam also found comfort in thinking that it was her own state of mind that held back any audacious action by her husband.

She no more faced Bhavani's domination; why not please her mother-in-law and keep her in good spirits? Indeed that's was the most important thing Rajam should aspire. She should strive for harmony *within* her family circle rather than looking for things outside; what would be more rewarding than making a name for yourself at your in-laws?

That's how Rajam's dreams fell apart; the thought *my home* didn't even arise.

It was the year 1947 when India would finally achieve her independence from the British rule.

The word 'freedom' was on everybody's lips. Only a few weeks remained for the tri-color national flag to be hoisted atop the Red Fort. Everyone fondly looked forward to that red-letter day.

That sweet word 'freedom' has been echoing across the cities, towns, villages and slums. While the clarion call to freedom stirred the whole country, the word itself remained vague and incomprehensible. The refrain 'Where's the freedom?' now gave way to "We're now a proud, sovereign nation!" Everything was becoming real as the manacles were being thrown off; suddenly the word carried significance and the sentiment it evoked was alluring and welcoming.

Rajam too heard the call of freedom reverberating within her – stirring her memories, thoughts and her lips.

But she didn't look upon them as harbinger of *her* freedom. The absence of happiness in her family life weighed down heavily upon her with a fear of worse days to come; she thought the notion of freedom would be not only alien to the life she had led at her in-laws, but even a downright insult to the term. She

concluded, with her artistic bent of mind, that her emotional outbursts were only a reflection of her unfulfilled musical aspirations. It was a natural reaction to a mind shaped by a religious and artistic mind.

She had hoped that a congenial atmosphere at home would offer her chances to hone her musical talent; she eagerly waited for the day and time to practice the music lessons and play the violin. It didn't happen. Neither of her in-laws did ever ask her, "How's your finger? Do you want to get back to your practice?" Rajam took the initiative and, one day, she told Saradambal – half smiling – that she had finally learnt to play the violin with a bent finger. But the elderly woman rebuffed her in no time.

She examined the hurt finger casually. "You brought it on yourself," she told Rajam. "You kept it to yourself, resulting in more suffering and more medical bills." Rajam shrugged away her the remark with a mild laugh; that day Rajam was in no position to reveal her pain when it actually happened; it was only when she could no more bear the pain did she open up and divulge her condition. Didn't her mother-in-law know that?

Rajam had never been comfortable currying favor with elders by unduly praising or thanking them. That was how she steered clear of the pitfalls that would have only worsened her situation.

When it came to music, initially, Rajam was hesitant because she never heard her mother-in-law urge her to practice. 'Let them know I am no more scared; if anything, my interest in music has actually grown over the years,' Rajam told herself and took out the violin after two days. That day she played only two *kritis*. She tried again the next day but, when she noticed Doraiswamy entering the house, she got up with confusion whether she should restore the violin to its box. There was no sign of encouragement – verbally or with some physical sign – and she couldn't bring herself to continue her session. The house had what one might call a central section, the most important part of the house next only to the kitchen; that's where Rajam's father-in-law rested and dined. The third section was the veranda. It was not easy to find the time and space for practice inside such a house. Raghupathy would be listening to the music from the radio in a corner of the central section and Rajam often felt like entreating him, "Why don't you pay some attention to *my* music and violin?" But she couldn't; wherever she practiced inside the house, her music would resonate in the next room.

Rajam saw her problem: You may pay a lot of attention to small things, but when those small things assume major importance, you end up with a chain reaction . . .

That's the house she now lived in and she must learn to live with what's given. Given her tradition and upbringing she has to break her session in deference to her father-in-law; and she would never, never do anything to alienate the affection of her mother-in-law. What do you actually gain by hurting the sentiments of others? 'I can't afford to be too ambitious,' Rajam concluded. She thought she would be more than satisfied with the privilege of living under the shadow of her mother-in-law and receiving her approval and blessings.

But that too seemed to be slowly going out of her grasp!

There was no warmth in Saradambal's words; the eyes showed no tenderness and Rajam noticed less support was forthcoming from her. Didn't Saradambal know Rajam felt privileged to receive counsel from her mother-in-law? But she remained cold and impersonal towards Rajam.

Rajeswari had always been a high spirited girl who discerned the best among those who crossed into her life. She watched with fascination everything around her and examined it meticulously to get a sense of it. By the time she arrived at her in-laws at fifteen she could turn her bookish knowledge into practical lessons. Of course, at times, she was naïve too but her naiveté was genuine, not deliberate. Now she used the same tools to ferret out the sudden shift in Saradambal's attitude toward her.

She had known a legend that, when a swan is presented with a bowl of milk diluted with water, it would drink only the milk and leave the water intact. Rajam always believed she was a swan. Until now she has sought only the good. But of late her natural inclination to differentiate between honesty and deceit has weakened. Now Rajam herself realized this fact.

As days passed, she noticed the tone in Saradambal's voice change when the topic was about Bhavani. "She doesn't see things as well as you do. A woman surely gains insight when she lives with her in-laws." Rajeswari was thrilled to hear the compliment.

But, the very next moment. . .

"Bhavani is naive, she thinks her mother and mother-in-law are the same; that her co-sister-in-law and sister-in-law merit equal respect. If her husband ever got unemployed, she still wouldn't change; she doesn't understand one has to act smart and please others." As Saradambal finished talking, Rajam realized her mother-in-law was *not* actually complimenting her.

"Am I any less worthy because my husband has no job?" Rajam wondered. "Does it prove I am not smart enough?"

Bhavani had written a letter home. Doraiswamy singled out some of the words like *firm* and *emphatic*, and let out a chuckle instantly drawing Saradambal's ire. "Yes, Bhavani says what's on her mind! There's no pretense in her."

On another occasion, she continued in the same vein: "Bhavani is very plain and open; she reveals right away what she thinks. That's not a wise thing to do. Once you know somebody's nature you should be on guard when dealing with that person. You should never indulge in name calling or personal attacks. That would reflect badly upon you."

And that's when Rajam harbored a suspicion: was Saradambal being nice to her only because she wouldn't be accused of acting like a tyrannical mother-in-law? Rajam noticed a perceptible change in her affection for her; there has been also, correspondingly, a marked improvement in Saradambal's love for Bhavani as well as escalation in her ignorance about the daughter – which Rajam accepted as inherent and natural; still she was dogged by disbelief.

'How different I am from Bhavani when it comes to thinking a girl's mother and mother-in-law are equal!' Rajam wondered. 'They may be equal, but does Bhavani treat them equally? Is that the right thing to do?' And what about Rajam herself? Was her love a facade? The whole idea was nauseating to her as if someone other than her husband was caressing her. 'How is my love for my husband different from Bhavani's to Satyamurthy? So, where's this distinction? Was I wrong in wishing to live with my husband in our own family setup?' To whom she could pose these questions? Rajam festered inside, questioned and begged her conscience. The answer she received only brought her more fatigue.

### 33

The pain would not heal; the more Rajam tried to put the memories of the past humiliation behind her, the fiercer they grew and kept gnawing her brain.

She got paranoid: did she and Raghupathy return to his home as some guilty, secret lovers? Her brief stint in their own home; the applauses from by her numerous friends - were they just sweet dreams? Rajam dreaded the loss of Saradambal's favor and started doubting her own good nature and competence. All that she tried hard to endear herself to others has come to naught. Still, after she pondered over her dilemma and examined

the present situation, Rajam would rationalize, 'Wait a minute, what am I worrying about? Where will I possibly find in-laws more loving and adoring than mine?' Accordingly, she learnt to find peace and comfort by recollecting only the agreeable events from her past and the benefits she realized from them. She still hoped her life hereafter would end up strengthening her convictions. So, once again, she would cheerfully acknowledge her condition and, willfully, choose to find moments of grace and joy in her everyday life.

The recurring episodes in that small house didn't escape Saradambal's attention.

'She's clever; with her husband still unemployed, she realizes she has to act subdued. Like a chameleon she changes her colors in seconds.' That was how Saradambal initially felt about Rajam. And that view, slowly, grew into a conviction. She was not ready to face any emotional conflict and, at her age, neither was she willing to reassess her opinions. Indeed, she didn't want to. She stuck to the position she wanted to. She reinforced her love for daughter Bhavani and followed that course. Didn't, the other day, Bhavani ask her mother, "Whose side you are on?" and begin to cry? "How do you expect others to respect me when you are against me?" Saradambal could never stop thinking about it.

The daughter's protest profoundly changed Saradambal: Bhavani was her only and loving daughter and, what with her blemishes, she needed her mother's invariable backing. She's her dearest love - to be cherished as gold. When a mother doesn't care for her own daughter, the town and the entire world do the same. And, what's Bhavani's crime, anyway? At home, as a daughter, she receives certain privileges, that's all! She only demanded certain privileges; why would she lose them when her mother is still alive?

And tomorrow, when Saradambal is gone, would Rajam and Raghupathy feel duty-bound to honor Bhavani's demands?

That's what weighed down heavily on Saradambal's mind now.

The change in her attitude hardened after Rajam and Raghupathy arrived. One day Rajam told Saradambal, "I have missed you for a long time and now I am very happy to see you." That was the truth and Rajam didn't say she was eagerly looking forward to meeting with *both* Bhavani and Saradambal; Rajam had no inclination to embellish her disconcerting feelings for Bhavani - in speech or action. But this only steered Saradambal

to view Rajam in an entirely different perspective: Rajam must never look down on Bhavani; her standing in that household was only secondary to Bhavani's; and, the most important thing, a daughter-in-law ought to be shown her rank and place. Her speech and manners reflected this state of mind and Saradambal by her wont started extolling Bhavani while deprecating Rajam; invariably, on every occasion, she hinted that Rajam fell short of Bhavani's attributes. On these occasions she didn't say much, but the implication was always the same.

Of course, Rajam could have pacified Saradambal by praising Bhavani, but she didn't want to sound like a hypocrite. What remained in her memory of Bhavani's were only her heavy-handedness and the barbs she hurled at Rajam; why should Rajam now act against her conscience? She simply accepted Saradambal's natural inclination was to be on her daughter's side, and nothing more.

Rajam's steadiness and poise only added to the elderly woman's bitterness.

Her mind refused to acknowledge that her daughter's future would be secure in good hands after she was gone. The fact that Rajam presently nursed a grievance against Bhavani was enough to alienate and condemn her; what she conjured up as a future Rajam was appalling to her.

Maternal love triumphed over the love for an outsider, a daughter-in-law, and drowned it.

Love needs tenderness to grow; so does water for a plant to grow and thrive. But what if the water is hot and starts boiling? It can destroy the plant in no time.

Rajam saw herself being adored on two fronts: an understanding husband with undemonstrative love, and a mother-in-law outwardly affectionate; both hurt her. Her mind turned into an ocean of milk where the thoughts, both good and wicked, lay in wait. As far as she was concerned, what were the wicked ones? That her mother-in-law's love for her has slackened and Rajam's disappointment over her life with the in-laws. The twin thoughts hissed at her like a snake spewing venom. Rajam was seeking the nectar of steadfast love and abiding faith in the ocean of milk, but found only poison. Only someone like *Lord Shiva*, who saved the earth by swallowing the poison, could rescue her.

And the Lord soon answered her prayers!

"*Amma*, can I go home to help in my mother's delivery? Grandma is unwell; I too will be eager to know whether it is a brother or sister. I would like to go myself and offer help," Rajam said in a voice mixed with desire, confidence and earnestness.

Raghupathy endorsed her plan. "After the delivery Rajam would surely like to visit her mother," he said. "She might as well go now and lend a hand."

"Your mother depended a lot on your grandma, didn't she?" Saradambal asked. "Now she must be missing her very badly."

Was it difficult for Havana's mother Saradambal to guess that Rajam was eager to get away from her these surroundings? She did.

"Even if grandma comes, she's old. If I go, I will be plenty of help. Grandma was there when Kannan was born, and I didn't do anything. I didn't even take out the discarded leaves after meals. It is so embarrassing, to come to think of it. I can make up for that now. Grandma too will be pleased."

She felt proud of herself and thought, "No need to equate me with Bhavani. I will not be creating any ruckus ordering around in my parents' home!"

'I will enjoy the privileges, but also render help. I will roam around the house like a queen making sure everything is in order.' Her excitement pricked Raghupathy a bit! 'Every woman thinks her home is the most treasured one in her life; Rajam's no exception!' he muttered under his breath on his way back from the train station.

Rajam was mobbed by her friends and well-wishers at her hometown, applauding her for coming to help her mother. She smiled quietly when some women blessed her, "Let it be that your mother helps you with your delivery next year." The familiar surroundings swept away all the distress she had been feeling in recent days. She realized her home was a peaceful place to live, free of fault-finding, bickering and backstabbing, and felt very happy.

Visalam was even more elated. She had been wary for some time about letting her daughter perform tasks that were a mother's obligatory role. But the arrival of the daughter – at her own volition – made Visalam very proud.

"Were your in-laws happy to send you home?" Visalam asked.

"They must be feeling proud too," said Natarajan. Wasn't he privy to all the accolades Rajam has been getting from the neighborhood?

"I don't know what they were thinking, but I was very happy to leave," Rajam exclaimed. "My foremost feeling was not pride, only humility." Then she cut her lip; would her parents get the wrong impression that she has been hurt because she couldn't visit them as she pleased? Rajam was actually alluding to her reticence, but she used the wrong word!

She noticed her parents bewildered, staring at her. "In Madras, invariably every day, there would be a special function or celebration," she began. "How many concerts and performances! I haven't been to even one of them!" She laughed. "I was there for three months!" Her voice choked.

"You wrote us three letters – post cards - in three months," said Natarajan, with a chuckle.

"What's there to write about?" Rajam asked. "I thought one card told everything I had to say. Where's the need to give statistics like, 'I rolled so many *appalam*, or 'I went round the temple premises so many times?'" Her voice choked a whimper.

"Did you practice your violin?" The question irritated Rajam.

"How can I play the violin? The house is small, like a hut . . ."

"Why, there're only three in the house except you . . ."

"Yes, there are only three. But did anyone of them care about my finger or violin practice?" Rajam's eyes swelled with tears.

"Why? Why are you crying?"

Rajam stopped crying and looked at the hurt finger nervously.

Visalam looked at Rajam, dumbfounded.

"You ought to let your in-laws know you are interested in music and violin practice," Natarajan told her. "You are still keeping with your singing, am I right?"

Rajam gave no reply.

Rajam was in tears when the music teacher came to see her. She got emotional by his very appearance; like a child, hurt in a game and not crying, but breaking into tears on seeing the mother.

"My God! Why are you crying?" He was shocked.



"I don't know what happened," Visalam began, but Rajam preempted her with a shrug, saying, "I can hardly think what's going on in my head," in an excited voice. She wiped tears off the face.

Sarma's face darkened. Visalam too looked dazed, and Rajam instantly sensed something: she felt her stance seemed to suggest that she was pointing an accusing finger at her in-laws. She wanted to remedy the situation.

"I wouldn't have minded even if someone tried to stop me from practicing violin," she said. "Whatever the situation there's always some obstacle or hurdle cropping up when I sat down to practice."

Sarmagaru chuckled; he had been only too familiar with many of his students' complaints. He said: "Rajam, forget what happened over there; you can begin those exercises right here to sharpen your skills. Polish your flair in *ragas* and *swaras*. I too will come, now and then, and help you. Remember, you are getting a chance to perform in *Andhra Basha Vardhini Samajam*."

Rajam felt she had regained all the energy she thought she had lost forever. Rejuvenated, she cheerfully welcomed a chance to relive the occasion when she performed, before a live audience, four years ago. She had performed on stage before but, in the interim period, she ended up so frightened that she couldn't perform even at home. That should change; her mother-in-law would know that Rajam's interest in music has not diminished and she might even vigorously encourage her in the art. Bhavani learnt music at home; Rajam would hone her skills at home and would perform – much to the public acclaim - before a deity. Won't her mother-in-law be surprised?

Amidst her love for music, Rajam didn't forget the purpose of her visit. She was proud to serve her mother and attend to all her needs. She wanted to forge ahead to swim in her imagined milieu so that she could communicate to the world her dedication to music and love for service. She had harbored some misgiving in the past that she might be slipping in her path to excellence. Now she felt secure enough to draw inspiration to win fame and inner peace. The emotions she had bottled up in the past might have steered her into creative efforts; now she was determined to channel feelings in new directions.

"She's here for her mother's delivery, but she's so keen to learn music," said Sitamma, the neighbor, praising her. "Rajam's always curious and active!"

“Doesn’t a woman at my age keep herself busy and inquisitive?” asked Rajam with a laugh of contentment. “I wonder what you would say if you saw how active my mother-in-law was!” The very thought heightened her mental agility.

What were Rajam’s private thoughts? What did she actually want? Why did she feel sad? Even if one acknowledged that she was gradually pulling through her disappointment over her cherished dreams of her life with in-laws, why did she, suddenly, think her passion for music was causing her more harm than good? Why this contradiction?

Well, that’s the paradox about the human mind. It is anything but methodical jumping like a monkey haphazardly from one thought to another. It is forever mischievous and its ways look even more mysterious when humans are caught up in conflicting thoughts.

At some point, Rajam who had nursed lofty feelings about life with the in-laws, began to wonder if she had been harboring an illusion, but she could never, ever, bring herself to accept or believe in such an outcome. She was terrified to think that she might be turning into a ‘vicious daughter-in-law.’ That’s when she began blaming herself for her state of mind. ‘This has to do with my own thinking,’ she thought. ‘I have grown undisciplined with my obsession with music; I was at fault because I thought I couldn’t find time and place to practice. But for this obsession I could have sat happily with my mother-in-law and rolled any number of *appalam*’.

And now she set to deal with her unresolved conflict; she channeled her passion for freedom into a passion for music. Her music performance was included in the list of programs during the *Dassarah* festival. Rajam duly conveyed the news to Raghupathy who wrote back that he was happy; he didn’t express any pride or surprise.

Rajam gave a successful stage performance.

“This is indeed a welcome change,” wrote some reviewers. “The artist is from Madras and she rendered several new compositions. For those who have been long accustomed to Sarmagaru’s trademark items, this comes as special surprise. There were a few occasions when even Sarmagaru had problem accompanying his disciple.”

“What a performance! We are watching Rajam’s performance after an interval of five years,” was how some others spoke of her. “One observes notable improvement in the quality of her

performance – proving that a marriage needn't destroy one's musical talent. What a comforting thought!"

"I heard her husband and father-in-law are avid lovers of Carnatic music," said another critic. "That's what makes her music great." His friend clashed with him: "Keep in mind Madras is not like our town; *Tamils* are no neophytes; you will hardly find there someone with no ear for music; they are the eternal worshippers of Carnatic music!"

Rajeswari heard these exchanges and reacted with a stately smile.

She was overjoyed her enduring interest in music and faith in her competence finally paid off. She had included in the concert a few compositions she had learnt from Bhavani which the critics called them 'new'.

Rajam mentioned this to Natarajan, and what was his response? "It was your perseverance that finally became your most powerful tool," he said, and laughed. "You never displayed this resolve in your earlier days. Your mother used to say that you would often tiptoe around a song and keep massaging it for over two months!"

Rajam couldn't agree more. She was thankful that the decline in her ardor for music at her in-laws had actually spurred her to excel now; still, she felt a little ambivalent about the influence of surroundings on one's evolution: the setting that strengthened her resolve was less congenial and more deceptive, and this made her sad.

A few days later Sambasivam visited her. "Rajam, you still need to brush up on your *laya*," he said. "Remember the *raga* and *swara* are important, next only to *laya*."

His comment hurt Rajam. She had been accustomed to acknowledge praise calmly, so his criticism upset her.

She had heard the expression '*sruti mata, laya pita*.' Even Sarmagaru had mentioned during her apprenticeship that her skill in *laya* needed improvement. Rajam never used to miss *laya*, but thanks to her lack of practice, she had once caused some aggravation to the *mridangam* artist who accompanied her. But she had never erred in *tala* even when rendering new songs. Again, when she tried *swara-kalpana*, she did commit a few blunders; that was indeed her shortcoming. The reality was, in the last few years, Rajam practiced music only sporadically and those sessions remained mostly half-done. Still Rajam made an awesome comeback that was totally missing in Uncle

Samabasivam's calculation. Rajam was not put off by his comment but she thought he could have, at least, mentioned her rendering of the *ragamalika*. Again, he said nothing about the other songs delivered with flair and tonal control. Rajam had sung the *ragamalika* after just two days' practice and her sense of confidence and natural ease drew appreciation from the audience; Sambasivam had simply ignored it.

'Here, I am singing as and when I wish,' Rajam mulled over. "Did Uncle ever think of my life over *there*?" That word *there*, deep in her heart, brought a touch of sorrow, which went beyond her awareness of Raghupathy's role in it.

Rajam was growing optimistic about her musical talent in the days ahead. She's convinced that whatever the future holds for her and wherever she's destined to live – in Madras with her in-laws, or where her husband lands a job – she mustn't let her musical talent dissipate. There's a time when she admired a *kriti* for its beauty and quality; she didn't delve deeply into a *raga*'s grace or the emotion it evoked in a listener. Only recently she had come to appreciate music at a deeper level; rather than focusing on the *kriti* only, now she got interested in innovations, like *raga alapana* and *swara kalpana*. She fell into ecstasy when Sarma told her that he had once listened to a vocalist elaborate on a *raga* for several hours; Rajam closed her eyes to mentally offer her tributes to that invisible artist. Instantly, she prayed that in her next birth she must be reborn as a renowned artist. But she had a different thought when she opened the eyes: 'Why not in *this* life itself? I am not even twenty-years old! How much have I accomplished in just five weeks?' Her initial training in music had served her as a good foundation; why can't she now erect a building on it? Can't she excel like others with steady and uninterrupted practice? One needs only a congenial atmosphere. She thought of the eight months when, in the threshold of her separate family, she wanted to shine in everything; now, she wanted to stand out in music only. The feeling that her objective seemed possible and lay within her reach quieted her. In the end, wish triumphed over emotion.

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The days raced ahead.

Raghupathy, who was left without Rajam, his roving minstrel, now found refuge in the radio. He made no distinction between the 'good' and 'bad' music programs on air and went on carelessly dialing one station after another. Having failed to control the mind dithering, it was easier for him to keep surfing the radio and listening to some snippets of news or music to engage his attention. Still, Raghupathy wasn't someone who

easily gave in to wayward thoughts or emotions. If anything, Rajam's letters reinforced his peace of mind. What a comfort and relief he felt on reading that Rajam had no time to waste and was keeping herself fully occupied with music and domestic chores! The fact that she was not a wife disconcerted over her husband's unemployment eased his nerves; he would reassure himself that his setback was only temporary. Yet, occasionally, he couldn't help but imagine that Rajam's attitude toward him has changed a bit. In the past, his thoughts of her were invariably only pleasant emotions; but now, occasionally, he felt a little chill and apprehension when he recalled her occasional gazes and stern looks.

'It is obvious the present circumstances make Rajam's life hard and testing,' he couldn't help thinking. "How could she ever forget those eight months? She's a young woman with a tender heart. But how long can she hold out?'

Rajam extended him an invitation.

"They are saying my baby sister exactly resembles me," she wrote. "Please come down and see how I looked as a baby!"

Rajam asked only for his presence; it didn't occur to her to mention that he could offer to take her back on his return trip. This, however, didn't bother him; he sensed only her love for him, and smiled. Then he stopped smiling and set about thinking, which finally produced his reply to her.

"I am coming. I wish your baby sister would grow into an illustrious woman just like you. I hope at least her dreams would bear fruit." He penned his blessings with a touch of empathy, and that's exactly what Rajam needed at the time. She got ready to welcome her husband with love and tenderness.

Raghupathy was all set to visit his in-laws. "Did your father-in-law ask you to escort your wife back home?" asked Saradambal.

That's when Raghupathy really thought of the possibility of his bringing Rajam home. He recalled Natarajan had invited him for *Deepavali* but has not mentioned anything else.

His mother's question prompted Raghupathy to think. "My visit has nothing to do with her returning with me," he replied, but mentally he was wary what might happen during his visit. 'If she came, doesn't she have to be happy? Will she be?' Still, his love for Rajam prevailed, and he made the trip.

"Here, give this to your mother-in-law," Saradambal said and handed him a tin of *Appalam* and *Murukku*. Ever in a romantic mood, Raghupathy had really not thought of buying a gift in the

city and, eventually, arrived at his in-laws, empty handed. Rajam too, loving and passionate, didn't pay much attention to the presents from her mother-in-law.

It was Visalam who offered her words of praise audible enough for Raghupathy: "Rajam's lucky to have a mother-in-law like her own mother."

Now Rajam cut in, and told Visalam. "*Amma*, I know you are always scared of making *appalam*, but for others it's a child's play. My mother-in-law is accustomed to roll out and present bundles of *appalam* to others, so what is so surprising when she sends you a full tin?" Her words, uttered in a tone with an admixture of pride and indifference, betrayed Rajam's way of giving vent to the emotional baggage weighing heavily on her. But at the time nobody paid any attention.

"I feel really very grateful that she prepared fresh rice *appalam* for me," Visalam added as a thankful note. As a new mother in postpartum period she needed to rebuild her strength and she found Saradambal's gesture very thoughtful and considerate. But Rajam didn't share that sentiment.

But Raghupathy was feeling very proud. He said with excitement, "Last week *Appa* had invited four for dinner. *Amma* needed to make *appalam* that day, so she started working from the morning; she soaked the rice early in the morning, let it dry, ground it by the evening, and got *appalam* ready for the dinner!"

Visalam was amazed; Rajam was shocked.

"But why? *Amma* (she meant Saradambal) and I rolled a lot of *appalam*," she said. "What happened to them? I have been here only for the last three months," she asked.

"Well, *Amma* sent seven hundred to Bhavani," Raghupathy answered. "Everybody was asking for her special *appalam*. She also gave two hundred to a friend of mine traveling to North. That's how . . ."

Rajam understood what might have really happened. Probably there were more visitors – some distant relatives – and, predictably, her mother-in-law loaded them with her special gift. .

Rajam reflected: there's something extraordinary about Saradambal when it came to *appalam*; she was so generous and high-minded that she wouldn't stop giving them away even to her sworn enemy and bless the recipient. She had come to treat preparing wads of *appalam* as an art and a cornerstone of her life.

And what about Rajam? What she's trying to cultivate was fine arts: how does it accord with her family life? Would it be strong enough to win the opposition?

Rajam was eagerly looking forward to a get-together between Sarmagaru and her husband; previously she felt no such enthusiasm; she used to fret that Raghupathy might actually say something deliberately offensive to Sarmagaru.

Now the situation's entirely different; sooner or later, both men would get into a talk about Rajam's recent performance and Sarmagaru would assert in so many words that, given proper training, Rajam would grow into an outstanding artist. Raghupathy would be immensely pleased and try to advance her goal: happy days were ahead . . .

And Sarmagaru came one day when he and Raghupathy had a desultory conversation; casually, at some point, Sarma mentioned about Rajam, her music, and her proficiency. Raghupathy listened patiently but he couldn't help thinking he was just listening to a teacher's reflection on one of his disciples; Raghupathy never seemed to have recognized that his wife had recently won fame or that the woman the teacher was praising happened to be his own wife who was sitting across the room from him. He didn't pay much attention to what he was hearing.

Rajam felt as if knocked down by a boulder; the pain was too much to bear. When Sarma took leave, he told her, "I will be back in two days and we can start off with a composition in *Kambodhi*; I will also initiate *niraval* with *swara*. We have been talking of many things today and ran out of time."

Rajam looked at her husband; he was staring at Sarma and the way he riveted his glance suggested to Rajam what's on his mind: 'Some teacher! You are surely going to ruin *Kambodhi* forever!'

Rajam let out dry laughter and said, "Sar, I shall sing no more!"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you know? I won't sing while I am his wife!" She tried to laugh away as she gazed at her husband. His look and attention were not on her; he was flipping through the pages of *Vanoli* on the table.

That small incident, however, caused no disruption in the days ahead; Rajam made the best of her husband's visit and took pleasure in talking with him and enjoying his company.

At the time she felt liberated and harbored no reservations, and her interest in music took a backseat . . . But that too lasted only for a short while; the scales started moving up and down, fickle minded, like a monkey, again!

Sarmagaru continued his visits for Rajam's music lessons with no expectation of a tuition fee; he knew he would be rewarded in kind – a souvenir or gift, and not in cash. He came despite Rajam's assertion that she wouldn't be singing any longer. He actively sought out Raghupathy's company and engaged him in long conversations, but Rajam was in no mood to change her mind.

"Please leave me alone," she pleaded; her heart was still hurting.

"You're still practicing, aren't you?" asked Sarmagaru, one day.

"Well, I do when my husband and brother Mani go out for a walk," she replied with a touch of resentment. Her hasty comment that she wouldn't sing as Raghupathy's wife continued to reverberate in her mind.

What did she mean by that remark to Sarmagaru?

She actually meant to say, "I will practice music only when I am here - right at my home - as my parents' daughter," but she wanted to give some extra weight to what's on her mind; she also felt some comfort in thinking that she had, in a way, bared her inner turmoil to her husband.

She resorted to an oblique statement only because she couldn't tell Raghupathy, face to face, "I will never sing again - as your wife!"

Rajam didn't expect Raghupathy to openly assuage her feelings; still, she hoped for a softening of his heart and a genuine promise, like "But why? You are sad for that? Trust me, it won't happen again!"

But Raghupathy's posture was entirely different.

He never comprehended the subtle message in Rajam's words. Here's a mildly rebellious wife and he could have fathomed what she was actually trying to communicate to him. But he dismissed her comment with no further thought: 'She gets



into mood to practice her lessons at home, and then she goes on and on. . 'And he stuck to that stance.

Rajam believed she had spoken her piece. 'What more do I need to tell him? This should work.' She anticipated results, but was disappointed.

It is said that a woman's mind is a mystery, beyond a man's comprehension. Could it be true?

Yes, it is true; however, does it undermine her uniqueness? No!

Someone has said: "A woman's entire life is enveloped in love; for a man, love is but only part of his life." That must be the answer to the riddle.

A woman's love for her husband embraces lofty ideals fused with fierce emotions; she's imbued with wisdom and extraordinary ability to perceive his likes and dislikes and make her way into marriage as his lover and partner; thus, a husband's life is never a mystery to his wife.

But in a man's love for his wife there's demonstrably less attention and tenderness; the wife seeks a recognition echoing her deep love for him but is repaid with love devoid of sympathy and understanding resulting in her unhappiness, which the husband doesn't care to notice! The wife finds herself caught between love and anxiety; the sentiments she exhibits – fretfulness and hostility - only earn the label: ' a woman's mind is a mystery!

Rajeswari has now become an embodiment of that 'mystery' woman!

She continued to fester over her dilemma, and her disappointment added to her worry.

"How about singing a couple of songs today?" Sarma asked her one day. "You haven't practiced since your husband's arrival." Rajam turned her gaze at her husband.

But Raghupathy seemed unaffected. He could never bring himself to say, "Yes, let her sing; I heard she's very good in rendering Sanskrit *sloakas*, and I want to listen to them." He showed no interest or willingness to share in her joy of music.

Was he indulging in total indifference towards Sarma? Or was he cynical about his wife's musical talent?

Both the questions irked Rajam.

Of late she has been keenly observing the ongoing conversations between Sarma and her husband. Sarma's visits confirmed that he thoroughly enjoyed chatting with Raghupathy. How eagerly both men were desperate to share what they have read in the daily newspapers! The topics would range from music to food rationing; Rajam knew Raghupathy never tired of arguing, and Sarma too was enthusiastic about looking at issues in depth; a victim of the Second World War, he was desperate to understand day-to-day issues and their deeper political and financial implications: "We have achieved independence; what happens next? Are happy days ahead? Why is the government hurting the common man with controls and rationing? Will our struggles ever end? There has been talk about shortage of goods and the government implementing regulations as a remedy. Still, plenty of goods are available in black market. Why? How did they suddenly appear there? Wasn't the shortage actually a fiction? How could the government claim ignorance?" Sarma constantly sought these questions and pursued their answers. He was pleased that Raghupathy, educated and well read, was willing to clarify his doubts. Raghupathy too was thrilled at the opportunity to lecture and articulate his opinions before the elderly man.

But, occasionally, Raghupathy's excitement took a spin; he betrayed his proud sentiment that he's a *Tamilian* implying, in a sarcastic tone, that Sarma was an *Andhra*. Invariably his words veiled a message with a question to Sarma: 'What do you know about music, anyway?' Once he lectured to Sarma as if the latter, in spite of his recognition as a music teacher, knew next to nothing about music. He also seemed to question Sarma's knowledge in other fields.

Sarma would acknowledge the comments with moderation and self-restraint. Then, within a short time, he would, once again, hoist Raghupathy on a pedestal and solicit his opinions.

Rajam would often pity her teacher's plight; if nothing else, she wished her husband would treat Sarma with at least some respect he was entitled to as an elder.

And she had a reason to feel that way: elders do have flaws which one ought to view as their mental makeup; and that's exactly how Rajam dealt with elders in general. For example, initially, she yearned that Saradambal would treat her just like Bhavani: allow Rajam to accompany her husband when he went out to call on his friends. But then she understood Saradambal wanted to impose discipline and obedience at home – a natural instinct on the part of an old woman. So, now how could Rajam accept her husband pummeling Sarma with constant harangue?

'Whatever one might say, Sarmagaru is the one who instilled music into my character,' Rajam reminded herself. 'But my husband would neither acknowledge nor respect his importance.' The thought saddened her even more.

She viewed Sarmagaru as her *Saraswati*, the Goddess of Music; it was his coaching that won her fame as *Rajyam*, glory and grandeur. She would never forget that gift as long as she lived!

Her respect for Sarmagaru took an unusual form.

The day Sarma asked her to sing a couple of songs her first reaction was one of outrage. 'He doesn't get it!' she fumed. 'He's totally blind about my husband's apathy!' She bristled with anger.

"Now, I am his wife, so I won't sing," she told him.

"I don't understand." Sarma was confused, and laughed.

Rajam hesitated for a moment; now she understood what she really meant. She savored her self-esteem.

"Sar, music has become a sticking point between us since the first day of our marriage," she said betraying her resentment. "So, let's not talk about music anymore!" And, after a pause, she concluded: "I shall never sing in his presence!"

Now, even Raghupathy watched her intensely.

"Is it a vow?" Sarma laughed, again. His gullibility and Raghupathy's condescension infuriated Rajam even more.

"Yes," she hollered back and left the scene.

The following days brought no episodes to test her determination or the depth of her feelings. As usual, the couple went out and visited their far flung friends in the city; and when at home, they socialized and hovered over one another; they wore no masks to shield their inner feelings.

It seemed as if Raghupathy had more than his share of time with his in-laws; he was called for a job interview in Bangalore. He finalized a date to leave.

"You say Friday?" Rajam asked, a little hesitant. "It's forbidden to leave one's hometown on a Friday."

"But I am only going to my home," Raghupathy said.

"I was talking about myself." Rajam chuckled.

"You want to come with me?"

He asked in a tone full of calm and warmth.

"Of course, I want to."

He watched her face: was she reacting with excitement?

No, but it pleased him to note she indeed looked happy.

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As they were approaching Madras, Rajam felt her body tremble overcome by apprehension.

She hadn't had such a feeling even when she first traveled with her parents to her in-laws. Her present mood was entirely contrary to what she felt the last time she visited Madras with her husband. The only sentiment common between the two: she's again in the City of Music and would soon resume life with her husband. She conjured no other dreams or thoughts. Her desire to return had been inspired by a sense of duty; there was none of the anticipated excitement.

They reached home. Rajam bowed to her mother-in-law in a respectful gesture. Saradambal invited her into the house but, suddenly, Rajam felt ill at ease for conversation; it took a while before she could raise her voice. She spoke, but there was a dam-like barrier; words came out in a measured tone.

"*Amma*, your daughter-in-law bought this as a gift for you," Raghupathy told his mother and held out a folding bag. One can use it as a bag, a basket, and a box. It was painted in an attractive color and seemed a larger version of the vanity bags used by women. Rajam insisted on buying a larger bag for her mother-in-law; she knew Saradambal had no decent bag or a stack of saris. At least this new bag, she believed, would serve an essential and useful purpose.

"He (she meant her husband) wasn't in favor, but I insisted we buy it," Rajam said with laughter.

"Where is the need? How much did it cost?" asked Saradambal returning her smile.

"Two rupees and twelve annas, I think," Rajam said and looked at her husband. "Right?"

"Two rupees and four annas . . ." he said.

"No, it was two rupees and twelve annas!" Rajam corrected him. I remember you also bought batteries for the torch light and some chocolate too."

"Did he (she meant her son) pay for it?" Saradambal wanted to know.

"Yes, we both went out on shopping; like this, there were so many bags selling like hot cakes!"

"Did you buy this stuff?" Saradambal turned around to question her son but he was busy looking for something in a shelf, and paid no attention to her words.

"Why would anybody spend that kind of money for such things? . . ." Saradambal uttered under her breath.

A sudden suspicion ran through Rajam's mind. She's the one who fondly thought of buying the bag and her husband paid for it; maybe it was wrong for her husband to say that Rajam bought it? Rajam noticed the smile on her mother-in-law's face disappear in no time.

That afternoon Mrs. Ramaseshan paid them a visit; she always liked Rajam and had a high opinion of her, and Rajam too was aware of it.

Rajam's face beamed with a smile, but the visitor noted a lack of vitality in her face.

"She doesn't look tired," said the old woman, "But her face looks withered."

"She's after all back from her home," Saradambal said in a firm voice.

"Sarada, very good, you answer smart," the old woman offered her compliments, and continued in a soft tone: "Still, she had gone home explicitly to help her mother, didn't she? We should feel proud about her accomplishment!" She spoke wholeheartedly.

"Well, who says no?" asked Saradambal. "Here my daughter-in-law has ease and comfort that she can't have even at her own home. Theirs is a big family with children, and Rajam is the eldest. She's always in good shape when she goes home from here."

"Looks like she finds a congenial atmosphere at her in-laws," the elderly woman said in an approving tone.

Rajam was fully aware of her somber mood and its reason. Her cheeks actually began to fade and the body began to weaken ever since her Madras trip was confirmed four days ago. It's true she always had pleasant memories of her home and, especially, when she was travelling home from her in-laws, her face would carry an aura of pride. Her mood the last time she went home was one of ease and comfort; now, she has returned

subdued as well as a little confused. The change was quite perceptible!

This was certainly not something that would make her mother-in-law proud!

Rajam felt gratified, as never before, by the accolades from Mrs. Ramaseshan.

It goes without saying that a woman is naturally attached to home and her parents; of late, Rajam's understanding as well as appreciation has grown towards her folks. But her love for home didn't seek to undermine her love for her husband or her in-laws. Her love put her in a state of mind not to take sides.

Now, Bhavani harbored an entirely different attitude; whenever she felt proud about her home, she seemed arrogating to her own conceit and self-importance; and, gradually, she changed her attitude how a woman ought to view her home and parents; now that Rajam too was a member of their household, Bhavani narrowed down her admiration to her own parents, and parents only. Often, she reminded Rajam of that rare breed: her mother, with patience and serenity, and her father, an embodiment of patriotism and sacrifice. It was her father's sense of nationalism, she said, that lay at the root of her mother's endurance and lack of complaint. According to Bhavani, her mother was generous to a fault and thus put up with Rajam's lapses and missteps.

Such a feeling comforted Rajam; did Satyamurthy share his wife's sentiment? No. He was a man not given much to reflection: he read in a letter that Rajam had returned to Madras with her husband and that Raghupathy was not successful with his Bangalore job interview. Satyamurthy empathized with the young couple.

"Why can't Raghupathy visit us with his wife?" he asked. "Well, his wife has just now returned from her home," Bhavani reminded him. She hinted that Rajam too, just like herself, looked for a pretext to visit her parents. But Satyamurthy's rejoinder sounded like a reprimand.

"Well, she went home on an important mission," he said. "Now, she would be ready to offer her service to you as well – if you only ask for it," he said, and laughed.

At the time Bhavani was on the family way.

"I can't help asking for my parents' hospitality," she retorted. "That doesn't apply to *manni*. She's simply looking for an excuse

to go home. Her husband has no job and how long could a daughter-in-law stay holed up with her in-laws?"

Satyamurthy had no idea Bhavani has been nursing jealousy over Rajam and that she was bent on disparaging her character. He told her: "I heard girls usually emulate their mothers, but you are an exception. Your *manni* has taken after your mother. Your father gave up his job and I wonder if this runs in the family." Then, after a pause, he continued: "I am sure Raghupathy lost his job in a calculated move; I can hardly get a two-month vacation!"

Bhavani had a quick rebuttal.

"Why talk about a run in the family? *Manni* has no children; had she become a mother like me, she would hardly find an excuse to offer help to her mother or mother-in-law!"

Still, somewhere, back in her mind, Bhavani heard a voice that kept annoying her:

Was it not true that Raghupathy's lack of employment has in no way undermined Rajam's sterling qualities? If anything, Bhavani knew, they only enhanced them. She had known only too well that, from the beginning, Rajam has been never too concerned about her husband being unemployed.

Rajam had turned her back on wealth, status and separate family life; she seemed a little naïve too – believing the couple's mutual love was all that mattered; there was an even a touch of pride in her attitude. And that's really tough, Bhavani told herself. Her mother survived hardship while bottling up her aspirations; with Rajam, she's free from cravings and feels emotionally secure. She's no novice; it was her good heart that served Rajam quite well.

Bhavani wanted to share with her husband how they could spend their two-month vacation: one and a half month in Madras with her parents and half a month with her in-laws in Madurai. She grew a little jealous thinking of Rajam's presence and her brother's inactive days at home.

What was on Havana's mind when she penned the following in her letter to Rajam? "I wish and pray Raghupathy will soon land a job paving the way for your happiness." She's scared that her husband, well acquainted with Rajam's reputation with her in-laws, might think less of her own relationship with his parents. She dreaded the prospect her husband dare ask her, "What will be your attitude if you were in your *manni's* place? How about

some soul-searching? Does your *manni* ever show and act with unfairness?"

At the time Bhavani was in dark about Rajam's state of mind; around this time Rajam was feeling miserable at her in-laws and her home was cordially beckoning her.

Bhavani's caring and thoughtful letter touched Rajam. She was thankful that Bhavani could occasionally act a little generous. But a paragraph tucked away toward the end of the letter seemed to mock her.

"I am duly in receipt of the *appalam* and snacks," Bhavani wrote. "Because the parcel included refreshments made of ghee, the *appalam* were ant-infested and tainted. I had to dry them all over again before I could use them. This became an extra burden to me."

"Is that too big a task?" Rajam asked with dismay.

She too had worked hard in rolling out all those *appalam* some of which eventually found their way to Bhavani. Her work didn't stop there; now, the preparation of *appalam* has turned into one of the major and exasperating chores in the house and, unfortunately for Rajam, she had to sacrifice her time and energy at the altar of a 'new project'.

Her frustration grew day after day as the 'new project' consumed her time to the exclusion of music. Wasn't there something really wrong here, she asked herself; how could a mundane household chore triumph over divine music?

Music was Rajam's way of serving humanity; maybe she was becoming a little too aggressive in her pursuit of it; after all, insecurity and disappointment have a way boosting one's tenacity.

She had been home to help her mother and, once there, she fulfilled her obligations, also sang while occupied in her work. She intoned in the kitchen while cooking and, when she washed clothes, she chanted tunes in sync with beats on her hand. She often chose trifles - small bits of songs - that came handy. She didn't feel she's wasting her time - even a couple of hours - during the preparation of *dosas*; she would devote that time to a few more songs.

She had achieved good tone control but now she felt as if someone was trying to choke her. She would have progressed well even if her husband and in-laws offered no or lukewarm support; such was her commitment to music.



Yet, she's still a woman, totally devoted to her family, marriage and in-laws; her mind often wavered even as music and an array of household obligations competed for her attention.

Where's Raghupathy in all this? Did he turn a deaf ear only to his wife's artistic urges? No, he disregarded even her feminine instincts. One can hardly blame him; he had not meant to hurt her feelings. He clung to his faith: 'The times are getting a little tough for her.' He concluded, "What can we do? Let's wait for a while. Rajam has the strength to handle this adversity.' Was the government bent on keeping him unemployed? No, the whole country was in a bad shape and it hoped Raghupathy ought to feel grateful that he could secure work during the wartime. Raghupathy too shared that sentiment; weren't he and Rajam the lucky couple that had a harmonious life for eight months? Before that, essentially, they had the same life they were now going through . . .

Still, Rajam had no complaint that her husband hadn't been gainfully employed; money was not her principal concern. She knew she's entitled to certain privileges in a marriage, and now she felt herself vindicated. In all fairness she couldn't think of a life at her in-laws like the one she had enjoyed at her home; Raghupathy's role here would be one of a loving and caring son, and Rajam is an ideal daughter-in-law. But what she resented most was the demise of their conjugal love – the union of heart and soul.

'Other than in my presence, my husband doesn't act in any way as a man without a job,' Rajam told herself. 'I can understand his modesty and deference to his parents; but does it mean he ought to give up his role as a husband? He doesn't have to offer material things, but he could certainly offer ease and comfort to his wife. I am stuck here – totally paralyzed in body and mind - and he hardly knows what I am going through!'

This was her lovelorn mind's anguish. But Raghupathy's mind harbored only pure and healing thoughts; he didn't perceive any serious harm to their present life.

Rajam didn't understand her husband. 'Is he acting neutral?' She wanted to know. 'He mayn't understand what I am going through; he should at least recognize I too have feelings, and demonstrate that he's aware of them.'

One day there was a concert on the radio and Rajam recalled that one of the *kritis* rendered happened to be the one she sang in the recent *Dassarah* festival, and won accolades.

'Did I actually sing, did I win those accolades for that one?' she began to wonder, and instantly burst into tears. She buried her face in her palms, and sobbed.

Saradambal noticed her. Was she surprised? She continued to watch as the sobs grew louder.

"Is it Rajalakshmi?" asked Doraiswamy; he immediately came out and saw her.

"This has been going on for some time now," Saradambal answered him. "Now and then I have seen her wiping tears off the face."

It was now beyond Rajam's control and the shrill didn't stop. Raghupathy rose from his chair, stood near a pillar and watched Rajam crying aloud and shaking as she cupped her mouth.

"Why is she crying – like this?" Doraiswamy was stunned at her open display of sorrow. He paused for a moment, and calmly said, "This is hysteria," and left. Raghupathy too followed him. Rajam wiped off the tears, calmed herself and washed her face; after half an hour she entered the kitchen and told Saradambal, "I too want to roll the rotis, *Amma*."

Rajam was thankful to Saradambal for not questioning the reason for her crying; the elderly woman knew what was bothering her daughter-in-law.

Rajam couldn't bring herself to speak up the truth and say, 'My disappointment has to do with my pipe dream; I am not blaming you. If there's anything, it has to do with my husband only.' She could mask her gripe with her easy manner. She diverted her criticism at her husband, an easy target, only because it wasn't proper to find fault with the in-laws.

Yet another day, Raghupathy was listening to some third-rate artist's radio performance with devoted attention; maybe he hoped it would cure his mental anguish.

Rajam dismissed that half an hour performance with disdain. She was living smack in the center of Madras, a city that offered every week a wide variety of musical performances in local *sangheeta sabhas*, but she had never been to any one of them. If only . . . How her talents would blossom if she were to get an audition in AIR! But it was a hopeless idea and she was embarrassed, even to dwell on it.

Her husband was keenly listening to music only because it was a radio broadcast; his coldness toward Sarma became so extreme that he lost sympathy even for his wife. It never struck

him to think of Rajam as an artist who had also won laurels from public for her stage performances.

Overcome by distress, Rajam burst into loud sobbing.

"What's happening?" asked Raghupathy.

"Here she goes again," Saradambal said in a tone tinged with outrage. "It is inappropriate to shed tears in a wholesome family home."

Rajam cried to her heart's content, calmed down, and soon returned to her natural state of poise and composure. Saradambal seemed to approve such an outburst, which, once in a while, found an outlet but was soon held in check. But Rajam grew a little concerned: what would happen if she suddenly became emotional and caused embarrassment to Saradambal when Mrs. Ramaseshan or some other visitor was present? Rajam hoped to find a way whereby she could remove herself from such circumstances, but she found no way out.

Her problem only worsened when news came about Bhavani's imminent arrival. "My God, what can I do, now?" Rajam let out a deep sigh. But her heart told her that it was no occasion for regret. 'Certainly Bhavani has the right to visit her parents; how can anyone say no? Under the circumstances, it will be indecent on my part to go home. I helped my mother with her delivery; now I am obliged to offer help to Bhavani as well.' She also found solace in the thought that Bhavani's arrival might afford her the chance to attend concerts in the city. After all, wasn't Bhavani her well-wisher? She decided to stay.

But her decision resulted in an entirely different outcome. Thanks to Rajam's demeanor and Bhavani's arrival, Doraiswamy came up with an idea of his own.

He hired a young man as an in-house cook; Saradambal was against the idea but she did not push her objection too hard.

Now Rajam began to feel she was no more indispensable.

One evening, as usual, she washed her face, put on *kumkumam* on the forehead and donned a new sari. Around the same time, Raghupathy too washed his face, donned a new shirt and was about to leave for his evening walk.

Her eyes swelled with tears when she pondered, 'My husband's makeup does have some meaning; why should I deck out myself as if I am going out somewhere?' During their eight-month family life, they both would dress up in new clothes and leave for evening walks. There were a few occasions when

Raghupathy complained that Rajam was late. "There are so many small errands I need to finish before I can think of going out," she would remind her husband. "It's no easy task for one to simply lock the house and walk out." Those were the days when she was proud that she felt duty-bound to treat each and every little task as important. One day Raghupathy had misplaced the front door key and Rajam searched the area near the front door; she was wary of venturing out into the street.

"We will find the key - if God really exists," she said sounding a little like an atheist.

"Are you suggesting there's no God if we don't find the key?" Raghupathy asked.

Then, they found the key!

"I do believe in the existence of God," Rajam told him. "I meant we will surely find it, and that it could be right here!" Now she looked like a believer!

"You are smart," Raghupathy said. It's only a casual remark but Rajam savored it and found many meanings in it.

Would she ever again relive those moments?

Such was her state of mind now, blank and seemingly with no purpose or meaning in her life. But Raghupathy seemed unconcerned and had forgotten those sweet (sweet for her) memories. Later, a friend came over to see him and Raghupathy went out with him.

Her heart wrenching, Rajam sought a corner in the house. Her head was reeling and the eyes were burning. She began sobbing, "*Amma, Amma,*", and burst into tears uncontrollably.

Raghupathy, for some reason, was returning home. Doraiswamy was in the backyard beside the well; Saradambal was combing her hair; she saw the confusion on Doraiswamy's face and told him, "Yes, she's crying again; how could she go on like this? She ought to know it is inauspicious to cry in a family."

Raghupathy was watching the scene from afar standing at the main doorway. The young cook came running and prudently stopped at the kitchen entrance. Both of them stood apart with a long distance dividing them, but mentally they weren't wide apart.

The young cook begged off on an excuse that there's nothing he could do to ease the tension, and in fact, he had no right to intervene in a family affair; Raghupathy too seemed to share the same sentiment, and stayed away. It was Doraiswamy who

rushed to the scene and spoke to Rajam. "My dear girl, what are you sorry about? We are all very sad and confused. What's our crime anyway?"

Rajam felt a shudder and said, "Really nothing," and let out another sob.

"Well, you are saying there's nothing to it," he warned her. "But we may end up with a real tragedy; young women are not supposed to howl like this!"

"I want to go home," Rajam said and, again, let out a moan.

"Her brother was supposed to come this way," Saradambal said. "He can escort her back home; we don't want her to feel unhappy here!" she spoke the words without stirring from where she stood.

Everyone seemed to agree with Saradambal's plan but the fact it became a possibility that soon was indeed a surprise. Mani had written a letter to his *athimbare* Raghupathy. He wrote he had two weeks of vacation and was coming to Madras.

Mani was the young adolescent now growing up free and independent; he no more hung to the coattails of the elders, started watching movies on his own and recently decided to visit Madras for sightseeing. He very much wished to visit cities where his relatives lived and explore new places so that he would be well prepared to attend job interviews coming on his way.

Soon he arrived and enjoyed Raghupathy's company. Raghupathy welcomed the young man with a little mustache and treated him as his equal.

"Can you escort Rajam home on your return trip?" asked Raghupathy one day when they were seated on the veranda. Mani looked surprised as he watched his sister's face through a window.

"She often cries; I don't know why?" Raghupathy was saying, and Rajam's eyes turned teary.

"I feel like seeing our little baby sister, Mani," Rajam spoke through the window.

She had given up the company of her parents and siblings and devoted herself to her husband and in-laws; now even simple pleasures were eluding her. How she enjoyed taking care of Bhavani's little baby Chitra? What has she actually done to her own baby sister beyond helping her to enter this unhappy world?

Everybody said the baby resembled Rajam; was Rajam too so beautiful at birth? The baby's face now floated in Rajam's eyes. Soon it would start distinguishing faces, cling to her folks and shun the company of others implying, 'Who are you?' If Rajam doesn't mingle with her now, who knows, the baby might stare at her own sister and ask, "Who are you?"

Every incident, big and small, seemed to reinforce Rajam's desire to go home; for a hapless young woman the urge was too strong to resist; Rajam made up her mind.

With sparkling eyes and a reddened nose, she bade farewell to Saradambal who packed food for her journey. Rajam's voice faltered when she took leave.

Mani keenly watched her face and was quick to think, 'Is it absolutely essential that Rajam make this trip? I don't think even my parents are expecting her now'.

Who would ever know that it was Rajam's baby sister who was beckoning her home? Time alone would prove her foresight was correct.

### 36

Visalam was upset on learning that Rajam was coming home with Mani.

She had never been away from Mani this long, and was anxiously looking forward to his arrival. At first she did feel happy to read in his letter, "Rajam is coming with me, this will be a welcome news!" But she began to worry as she mulled over its significance, again and again. Did her son-in-law land a job? Any change in Rajam's health? Why this sudden trip?

"Rajam had mentioned that Bhavani might be coming home for her delivery," Visalam told her husband. "Maybe there's change in their plan, and Saradambal herself is going to Nagpur."

"That makes no sense," Natarajan said. "Are you suggesting Rajam can't take care of both her husband and father-in-law at home?"

Visalam stationed herself at the threshold and eagerly waited for her son and daughter to arrive. On her way home, Rajam's anxiety lightened and she approached the house exchanging banter with her brother; but the instant she saw her mother she broke down

"Why this sudden visit?" asked the mother. "Mani took the responsibility to bring you home; that means he will remain your escort in the future too; I am afraid here after your father wouldn't think of stirring out of the house."

"Why didn't your *athimbare* make this trip?" Natarajan asked Mani. "How was your Madras trip?"

"It was great," Mani answered, as he checked the luggage.

"Great? For whom? I wish I too had a wonderful time," Rajam said. "I didn't get to see even one high spot in Madras." It was a spontaneous outburst with unmistakable resentment.

"Well, you too could have gone out with him. What's the problem?" asked Natarajan.

"Maybe that's what got her mad in the first place," Mani said with intuition. "And she suddenly decided to come home with me."

Tears are the refuge of the weaker sex. Rajam began to cry. "*Amma*, they're saying I am suffering from hysteria. I came away because I didn't want to cause them any problem." The tears flowed copiously and her siblings, who were busily rummaging her belongings, suddenly stopped.

"Hysteria?" asked Visalam in bewilderment.

"Is the baby sleeping?" asked Mani and approached the cradle, and Rajam followed him. She was raring to scoop her up, hold her tightly and play with her. The baby seemingly felt her sister's urge and stirred. Mani extended his both hands for the baby; Rajam refused at first, then yielded. The baby was still asleep with her tiny hands resting under the eyelids. Both of them – the brother and sister – were competing for the baby's attention.

"Why don't you play with the children?" asked Natarajan, and laughed.

"They are now competing for the fruits in the basket," Rajam told him. "We both are competing to hold the baby!"

When Rajam was gone to take a shower, Visalam neared her husband and whispered; "What is hysteria?"

"Hysteria . . . hysterical . . . it means suddenly becoming emotional and giving in to feelings . . . There may be some deep-rooted grievances that give rise to meaningless outbursts," Natarajan went on. "There are different types of hysteria. Why? Are you worried about Rajam?"

"No, I hate that word. I have heard someone mention that hysteria meant hatred for one's husband . . ." Her concern drew her husband's immediate concern.

"That's what I was telling you; one can explain hysteria in many ways. That's because everyone subconsciously nurses a different grievance; a woman may hate her husband and give in to sobs; another woman might be grieving for her dead husband and feel depressed; yet another woman might be upset because her husband is chasing other women . . ." As Natarajan went on and on Visalam lost her patience, and asked, "Why do you keep saying women all the time? Don't men suffer from hysteria too?"

"Only women are experts in the art of worrying, so hysteria affects women only," said Natarajan preempting any further questioning.

"You don't seem to understand what I am saying," his wife said. "What did I get with my worries? I am just being cautious. Is that wrong?"

"Have no fear," her husband assured her. "You are always telling others what worries you, so you are out of any danger. A man may suffer from hysteria too – if he, sad and feeling depressed, bottles up his emotions. It's usual for a woman to pour out her feelings to her husband or fight out with him. But men always fester inside and they become easy targets for hysteria. Neither our daughter nor our son-in-law is likely to suffer from it. Our son-in-law is not the one to get depressed over his unemployment. I have been watching him closely and he doesn't seem to be unduly worried. 'I am feeling fine,' he says and he stays fine. I know, of course, Rajam is worried. Mani tells me their house size is not even one-third of ours; how would Rajam feel if she couldn't even move around the house? How would you feel if you couldn't afford a place for ten minutes to sit and read - away from the prowling eyes of others? Do you know every British family has a guest room in their home – what a smart thing to do! Say we have a guest visiting us. We can't discuss our personal affairs in his presence; we may even begin to feel he's a hindrance; he needs rest too. No person would be interested in talking all the time and will surely welcome some place to rest. If we provide a room for the guest's exclusive use he will enjoy his privilege and stay away from others. Take my own case; whenever we have a guest I offer him a separate room, talk a little, and leave immediately! Does anyone complain about me? Now, it's all becoming clear to me: it was the house and its limited space that caused her illness." He concluded his professorial oration.



'Rajam should never hate her husband,' Visalam told herself and she firmly believed it would never come to that. And Rajam's words allayed that fear. "I really enjoy my special freedom here," she told her mother. "I can sit or stand wherever I want; I can lie down at my whim and fancy. That's simply impossible in that house. It was a real hell! I had enough of it."

Rajam called her toddler brother Kannan and played with him. She held both his extended arms in a grip and spun him around in circles and, after a while, both were exhausted and slumped together on the floor.

Saradambal was a little worried when the neighbor Sitamma came to see Rajam. "I myself had no inkling of her coming," she told the elderly woman. "Her in-laws wanted to honor her wish and sent her over."

"Did her sister-in-law come home for her delivery?" Sitamma asked.

"They now have an in-house cook and Rajam doesn't have much work to do," Visalam tried to explain. "It so happened that our Mani had gone over there and Rajam too is very fond of her baby sister. She felt she might as well help her mother here, so she came with Mani." Visalam gave all the possible reasons she could think of with no exaggeration.

But Sitamma had a keen mind of her own, and she said, "*Mami*, our Rajam has a curious mind. She probably thought she might be a burden to her in-laws when her husband is still looking for a job. She has her own self-respect and she decided to come over here. She is smart and has her own independent spirit. Hmm, he will get a job soon." She profusely offered her blessings to Rajam and expressed her sympathy. Rajam smiled; though she was in no mood to engage in chitchat, her eyes conveyed the message that she's thankful to Sitamma for her good wishes.

Presently, music held no more inspiration for Rajam. She seemed to cherish her new freedom that was until now denied to her by her husband; he had failed to be dispassionate where her appreciation of music meant so much to her. In the end, his attitude actually crushed her optimism.

Sitamma and some other friends concluded that Rajam was unhappy over her husband's unemployment. "That doesn't diminish you anyway," they said, reassuring her. Rajam tried neither to deny their conclusion saying, 'I have no such regrets,' nor offer any explanations of her own. 'So be it; when my husband finds a job somewhere and move there, we will resume

our independent life! He too will not hesitate to shower his love on me. There's nothing wrong if others point out the root cause of my suffering," she told herself.

Pongal, the harvest festival celebrated mostly in the South, arrived within a week of Rajam's arrival. Andhras called it *Sankranti* when maids and married women went from home to home and offered *kumkumam* and turmeric.

Friends and acquaintances mobbed Rajam and wanted to know if she made a special visit for the festival. "Well, in our Tamil tradition, it's during *Deepavali* that the daughter and son-in-law make their appearance," Rajam said. She only spoke the truth: "We are Tamils, we have different customs."

She also gave some detailed answers. A few were surprised to know her husband was unemployed. Rajam told them her in-laws now lived in Madras.

When Rajam mentioned her father-in-law held a prestigious position in Madras, an elderly woman chuckled, "Then he can easily set him up for a job."

Rajam recalled her father-in-law once commenting to his wife, "How can one compromise his values for the sake of a son?" Only now she understood the full import of that statement. "My father-in-law would never do such a thing," she replied with pride.

She narrated that conversation to her father. What was Natarajan's reaction?

"Let us assume a father is in a high position and his son gets a job through him; there's nothing to be ashamed about it. It is natural that a son inherits his father's aptitude and talent. When we are told a diplomat's son is in a high position, we can't automatically assume that he had that position handed over to him through some recommendation or due to nepotism. Take the Nehru family, for example: everyone from that family is now in a coveted position. That's a reflection of their ancestral family – its standing and esteem. The family background fostered a culture in which every family member strives for excellence and succeeds. That's how the family members came to hold high positions. It would be wrong to accuse them of exploitation, favoritism or back scratching."

Rajam agreed with him. She hoped there wouldn't be any further delay in her husband landing a job. She was at peace with herself.

"*Amma*, do you remember the plastic bag we bought in *Parlakhimidi*?" asked Rajam, laughing.

"I was the one who came up with the idea of buying it for my mother-in-law, but because my husband paid for it, my mother-in-law says it's a gift from her son."

Visalam smiled and said, "Your husband is now enjoying your father-in-law's wealth; why not call it simply a gift from your father-in-law?" For a moment Rajam stared at her mother, a little surprised. "Money certainly has a lot to do with it," she sighed.

"I was told there were times when my husband used to buy saris, biscuits and chocolates as gifts to his folks at home," Rajam continued. "I wish he now buys some gift for me!"

Visalam took only a moment to answer her. "At the time he was only a son to his father; he would have had no regrets about using his father's money; that has changed slowly over the years; he became your husband – and his attitude too has changed. Now he feels he should buy gifts for his wife with his own earnings; he thinks he's less entitled to spend his father's money on his personal needs."

Rajam thought it was a very reasonable assessment and, more than anything, she found comfort in that interpretation.

Was it fate that conspired to squash her peace of mind? The baby sister, the bundle of joy that soothed Rajam's heart as she doted on her, carrying her on her chest and shoulders, was suddenly snatched away from her hands; the baby died.

When a loved one dies, the survivors, struck by the bereavement, wail and wish that they too could follow the departed soul. Rajam felt the same way; actually she was a step beyond even such a feeling. "I have experienced all the good Life has to offer; only hard times will follow hereafter. This little one has departed hardly enjoying anything in life. Why didn't you take me instead, oh, God?"

Rajam's sorrow was no less than Visalam's, and both women mourned over the baby's loss by fondly stroking its back. Sitamma too shared their grief and, fighting tears off her face, she offered Rajam advice: "Don't talk like that! It is the loss of the grown-up children that usually ravages their parents; your parents will be simply devastated if you are gone; it will affect other children too. This tragedy is quite different – in scope and size. We already lead tough lives even when our parents are around; what happens if parents lose their heart and the children

are left helpless? Stop hating yourself and inviting tragedy on yourself; it will affect your siblings as well; remember *Yama* wouldn't go empty-handed!" Her advice steered Rajam's thoughts in a different direction.

'Willy-nilly I invited death into my life,' Rajam pondered. "I often hated my existence; was *Yama* heeding my plea? Did the little one pay the price for my suffering?' The more Rajam dwelt on the matter the more she was convinced of her offense. "Didn't I shed tears in a happy abode, was that a reason?" she asked, feeling guilty. Sometimes her mind took a different track: 'I was feeling less sad here; but I have been cursed with eternal suffering, and God has unleashed this tragedy on me.' She wished she hadn't returned home at all. 'Over there my sadness would have been only over my longing for freedom . . . and here, my baby sister too might have actually survived . . .'

Such contradictory musings, inevitably, sank Rajam into depression. "I am unhappy and I desperately wish to see you," she wrote to her husband. "I am born in a happy family, enjoy all the privileges of being the eldest daughter and am proud of my accomplishments; still, I feel very sad. Why? I am not yet twenty, but I already feel bitter about my life. My sister's life, at least, ended in a heavenly abode." She poured out all her bitterness in that letter, and, often ruminated over her words as a way of putting her thoughts of her baby sisters behind her.

Happy days are only temporary; gloom too doesn't last forever; Rajam was reeling under a shock when the nation too tottered under another disaster.

Suddenly, Mahatma Gandhi's life came to an end.

The Mahatma too had reached the heavenly abode, but it offered her no solace; it plunged the country into gloom and every citizen into shock.

Suddenly, Rajam felt the death of her baby sister was a trivial thing.

'What a great soul! He's a great leader, the heart-beat of an independent nation!' Rajam extolled. Does her life mean anything more important? Such was her devotion to Gandhi.

Raghupathy too echoed her sentiment. "I am here idling my days with nothing else to do," he wrote to Rajam. "Gandhi was the very life of our nation. He's now gone and we have lost our savior." It's then Rajam realized that her husband was also an admirer of the Mahatma. Did not Gandhiji exemplify mutual love that found nourishment in tolerating the drawbacks between one

another? Rajam proudly and openly expressed her regard for her husband and he too reciprocated her gesture.

Again and again Raghupathy pondered over the words in her letter: "I am unhappy and I desperately wish to see you." His keen eyes noticed that she had first written 'I am driven,' then scratched it out with words "I am determined,' before settling on 'I wish to see you.'" He understood her predicament: mentally she sought his company and physically she's being held back.

Was Raghupathy mad at her? No, of late he had been reflecting on his life and turned a little philosophical too: Rajam could stay where she felt happy. Thus the news she's presently unhappy alarmed him, and he knew why; she had been brooding over their separation and the loss of her beloved baby sister. He wanted to ease her agony.

This time around, Raghupathy arrived at his in-laws with a marked empathy and change in his attitude. He was no more awed by the thought of Rajam as a 'divine presence'. 'She's a mere mortal,' he concluded.

The discovery didn't disappoint him at all. He thought of the hopes and dreams Rajam must have nursed in her adolescence; her continued ill treatment at Bhavani's hands and how Rajam put up with them and even forgave her tormentor. It was Rajam's simple humanity – open, decent and straightforward – that now impressed him most. His mind summoned the old scenes from their past – the laughs and cries; scenes of anger and harmony, the days of arguments and compromise, and they gratified him.

'We're a couple – bonded by love – and are an ideal pair!' he told himself with a touch of self-assurance. "We share both our joys and sorrows.' Rajam welcomed him warmly with dutiful attention. Now she spent more time talking to him, and laughing with him. She had never before laughed liked this, yet an element of joy was missing in that laughter. With teary eyes she spoke of her dead sister, and then, she instantly changed her tune and spoke with a dismissive tone: "What good is it to be a woman? She happily escaped persecution!" Rajam's mind displayed her turmoil with all their inner contradictions.

"What about a man's life?" asked Raghupathy with a touch of cynicism. "Even his wife will not respect him when he's unemployed!"

Rajam became tongue-tied.

'I must tell him what really makes me sad. I have to make him realize that it is not because of his joblessness,' she resolved.

She recalled how the other day, an elderly woman and Rajam's well-wisher, tried to cheer her up. "Rajam, what's actually bothering you? Why do you look so sad? It's true your husband is now unemployed. But, frankly, does it adversely affect anyone in the household? Has he caused any problem to his family members? You too are fine; you have your parents and in-laws. It's only the couples with children who fret inside that they are becoming dependent on others and, of course, they are right to think so! You have nothing to worry about!"

Rajam brushed off the elderly woman's remarks with a smile and said nothing. But her face conveyed a message: *'You may be right. But I can't help but be sad. My situation is entirely different.'*

The old woman seemed to have read her mind!

"You must stop worrying right now," she said, and continued. "I agree a woman should share in what goes on in her husband's life – the good and the bad. At the same time, if your husband is unemployed and feels disheartened, it doesn't mean you can lessen his pain by yourself becoming sad and dispirited. You can help him only by remaining happy and cheerful. We all should seek love above everything; power and position are not the most important. A woman's paramount need is her husband's love; don't you agree?"

Rajam was about to retort, *"I am not concerned my husband is unemployed,"* but she hesitated to say it.

Meanwhile the old woman concluded what she wanted to say: "Else, what's the difference between us and a street-walker?"

She was referring to a prostitute who rejects the man with no money and welcomes the one with money. Can a housewife do such a thing – reject a husband with no job?

This was the old woman's question!

Rajam has been distressed that she could not dispel others' opinion that she had been affected by her husband being unemployed; however, she understood they were right to hold such a view.

Until now she sensed no malice in such a view. When others thought of her husband's shame, Rajam felt, she too carried that

shame within her, and it only seemed to enhance her status as a wife rather than diminish it.

But now, this old woman's question hit her like a ton of bricks.

She wanted to scream in public: *'My concern has nothing to do with my husband's employment.'*

Her husband too was free from any job worry. Still, why does he put aside the traditional rights a marriage confers on a man?

She felt no shame or humiliation because of his joblessness. It's his aloofness and indifference that bred her misery. Rajam's only asking for his love, but nobody seems to understand her . . .

She wouldn't care if the outside world didn't understand her; she wanted her well-wishers and, especially, her husband recognize the void in her life. He should know that Rajam's not craving for money or title. She wanted a life she can cherish – what that would be? It's hard to put it in simple terms. And her misery held her back to describe it in some detail; was it not unseemly for a woman to declare openly her bitter complaints in public?

She came with an idea: why not bare her inner turmoil in public - throw in just a little hint or a clue, now and then? Might not her husband get a whiff of what goes on in her heart? Let her husband try to decipher the message; she knew he would certainly 'get it'.

Thus she embarked to untangle her bewilderment through subtle messages that - overtly and covertly - gave away her scorn and sarcasm.

How?

Sarmagaru showed up one day; it was a routine visit, but that day Rajam changed her tactics. "I really think it a waste of time to ask a girl before marriage if she could sing," she said, casually. "I would rather suggest we don't ask that question when we are looking for a bride for our Mani." She wouldn't come out and openly say that, after marriage, the girl's in-laws were unlikely to foster her music appreciation. Raghupathy didn't get her message, and Rajam grew impatient.

But Natarajan told her with a laugh: "Our Mani will surely appreciate music - just like your husband."

"Some appreciation!" Rajam fumed. "The herb that one grows in the backyard would never heal a wound."

"What's it – a proverb or something?" asked Sarma.

"Oh, it means nothing," she replied, and walked away.

Rajam was alluding to the price she had paid for her music appreciation, but now, it meant nothing.

She got another opportunity.

One day she's said, "This constant talk of *appalam* drives me crazy! Gosh, when I see a moon, I feel like I am looking at an *appalam*," and cupped both her ears.

"Even when you look at my mother's *appalam*, you will be reminded of the full moon," Raghupathy told her.

"Good heavens, the conversation is always about food, food and food!" Rajam reacted with a scowl on her face. Raghupathy was silent.

Visalam commented from the kitchen: "The whole world is after all is struggling only for the stomach!"

"This struggle is for the tongue, not the stomach." Rajam grew mad and flung her glance at her husband's face.

"Do you realize how many women are dependent making *appalam* for their very survival?" Raghupathy asked her. "It's the tongue that demands *appalam*."

Rajam was scared to further her argument. She desperately wanted to ask him: 'Hasn't your mother caused many *Appalam Mamis* to lose their business? Thanks to this obsession, I too have lost valuable time to brush up my music; my ears have also soured, and I am now heartbroken.' But she couldn't bring herself to act so spiteful; she buried her ire deep in her heart.

'He keeps arguing,' she went on thinking. 'Doesn't he realize what this *appalam* madness done to me?' She averted her face, and grumbled, "We have got rid of liquor, and I hope soon the same thing happens to *appalam*. Down with *appalam*!"

Her anger found an outlet on another occasion.

"I can understand the pride of womenfolk ranting on and on about *appalam* because they are forever engaged in rolling them," Rajam said. "But men? Why this fixation on *appalam*?"

Now, Raghupathy, finally got it.

"You don't seem to think highly of my mother's *appalam*," he told her. "But naturally I feel proud about her product."

"What's so special about her *appalam*?"



"They are indeed special; can others excel her? Her stuff is A-one!"

"What's there to rave about her *appalam*? I too can them. Anyone can - with practice." Rajam tried to defuse the situation with a laugh and a casual remark. "I am wondering if I should turn into another *appalam mami* at an age when I could concentrate on music and studies." It was a contrived laugh; she believed, again, she was baring her soul to him.

Wary that she couldn't possibly pour out all her animosity in one long stretch, Rajam sought to hurl taunts and questions at her husband on every occasion that came her way; she seized every opportunity to argue with her husband at her own whim and pleasure and ventured out boldly to speak her mind. Hasn't she been, till now, coy and hesitant, and found no faults in her husband? Now she would be different; so Rajam continued to field her arguments with Raghupathy even when she felt guilty over her constant bickering with him. Often the tongue would resist and her good instinct would stand in the way; but in no time she would tear it down and try to push ahead only to shy away at his physical presence. But, then, she would overcome her reluctance and tell him, anyway. His reply would be quick and deadly - like a scorpion bite.

The earthworm serves a useful function in nature; without them, we couldn't eat vegetables and fruits!! Or even breathe! Because they help trees! It is said when an earthworm is cut into pieces, each piece regenerates into a new worm. Now, that's exactly what happened to Rajam's artistic urge within her; with every attempt to hack it into pieces, every piece was reborn with renewed vigor and spirit.

In the past she had been frustrated by a lack of a congenial atmosphere. And now?

All those discussions about *appalam* now narrowed down to one blunt fact: her husband, being without a job, had actually bred his fanatical preoccupation with food!

'Nobody would consider Bhavani superior to me. If I were like her, I wonder what would be my reputation.' The question haunted her.

'As a wife, what kudos have I won?' Her resentment crept towards her husband.

The caustic comments - hurled too often at various occasions - directly and indirectly - had serious consequences. "Why is she always against me?" sighed Raghupathy. Natarajan

shook his head in dismay; Visalam too began to feel things have gone a little too far.

One day little Kannan dropped his *athimbare's* watch and broke its glass. Raghupathy, ever dependent on paternal benevolence, understood the pecuniary loss and was seething which annoyed his wife.

"Can't you get a new glass for the watch?" she asked him. "Do you remember? The other day when I tried to feed some medicine to your niece, she got mad and bit my wrist very hard; I said nothing – like a fool and kept quiet. Would you have done the same?" She sighed. "I think that's when I began hating children!"

"How could you become so mean – even to the point of hating children?" Raghupathy asked.

Rajam broke into tears and, speechless, she walked away.

But her heart turned into a volcano spewing epithets in her own mind. 'Yes, I have turned mean – only because of you!' she wanted to scream. 'Did anyone love children more than I did? I too was like a child – naïve and innocent – and doted on them. It was you who corrupted my mind. How dare you condemn me now? And you claim you love my siblings? Great! How noble and adorable! Who else cared for children more than I ever did? I have done more for Bhavani's child than even her own mother! Do you know this? When I hurt my left arm and it was in sling, I handled all the household chores with my right hand – including cleaning the kitchen! And what about Bhavani constantly bullying me to assert authority in her home? I will never forget her cruelty – never, till the last day of my life! Now you may go ahead and curse me for hating children, but only you and you alone are responsible for my attitude!'

Delirious, she went on sobbing, her body shaking in agony.

Why was she crying? No one seemed to know.

After two days, out of some fondness, Raghupathy called the toddler Kannan and challenged him with some bet. Kannan answered something in reply and Raghupathy told him, "Yes, you are right. Now you may hit me!" And he silently bore the strikes from the boy; Rajam, who watched the scene, felt a lump in her throat.

Another day, another incident. Rajam remarked, in an unyielding voice, "I have ruined my life because of people around me!" Raghupathy, seething with anger, turned around and watched her face. The ire on his face lessened when both their

eyes met. Raghupathy raised his voice and asked her, "Tell me how you ruined yourself."

Rajam was taken aback for a moment, then, she said, "I have already told you. It comes with association. My tongue was just repeating what your Bhavani told me a long time ago." Then she added, "I am afraid in the last four years I have forgotten all the good things, and learned many bad ones."

Four years. Raghupathy understood she meant four years *after* their marriage. Rajam thought he would pounce back at her and she was ready to spill out everything deep from her heart in one long stretch. But he didn't take the bait, and she was disappointed.

She was growing restless and continued her refrain. "Bhavani would say I was always complaining – even when she was intentionally offensive to me. What a strange justice! She's free to say anything about her home, but I can't say about hers? Why not? I am also a member of that house! What do you say?"

"Very funny . . . funny indeed," Raghupathy muttered under his breath.

Natarajan now joined their conversation. "A woman must not boast about her home; neither should she disparage her husband's. Rajam, didn't you share this view before? I remember you said as much."

"Yes, you are right. But that was a long time ago, the time when I was naive and misled. She grumbled to herself: "I mistook the clatter in the village market for a festival," and left the scene.

His face reddening, Raghupathy told Natarajan, "She speaks nonsense and doesn't know when to stop. I never expected Rajam to act like this. I am really shocked."

"Something has seriously affected her; that's why she has changed like this," Natarajan said - much to Raghupathy's irritation. He felt Natarajan's defense of his daughter actually undermined his own standing. Had Natarajan disapproved of Rajam's behavior, still Raghupathy would have taken it as a phony gesture to please his son-in-law.

The reality was Raghupathy's mind too was in turmoil.

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Humans interact in three levels: physical, mental and emotional.

Rajam had been extraordinarily successful in the first two: whatever service her body rendered to others came inconspicuously; with her speech and manners, she endeared herself to others. Some applauded her in the past and others criticized her at present, but Rajam never told a lie; on every occasion, she spoke truth as she perceived it.

Yet, success eluded Rajam where her emotions came to play; self-possession was gone and her thoughts scattered all around.

Defiance, argument and talking back invaded and occupied her natural disposition.

One day, Natarajan told Rajam softly, "Why do you always argue with him?" he asked. "Talk with your husband with some restraint." Both Natarajan and Raghupathy enjoyed mutual respect. Raghupathy appreciated his father-in-law's deep and abiding affection for him that found easy expression in his words and deeds; if there were a few occasions when Natarajan sounded to him a little naive, it didn't matter much. Natarajan admired Raghupathy's quiet manners and serenity and he wanted Rajam to emulate them; he didn't like Rajam spewing harsh words. But he was also a teacher and a thinker, so he respected Rajam's emotional outbursts; he didn't think her attitude had no basis; he understood what's troubling her. He too didn't want her life to be sacrificed to the '*appalam project*' at her in-laws. He saw nothing wrong in Rajam's desire to foster her artistic urges and delight in life's pleasures. Wasn't it true that he too looked forward to a future where his daughter's high ideals will bear fruit? So, Natarajan was not unduly concerned over the couple's divergent views. "Let her say what she wants; she's not going to cross the line," he assured himself.

But Visalam didn't share his view, and she took her husband to task. One day Rajam had gone out with her husband for an evening walk; Visalam noticed Rajam chafing about something and using harsh language when the couple left the house. Visibly upset, she complained to her husband.

"She keeps badgering him with all kinds of questions. He stays calm and doesn't counter her. When such a person says something, she can't tolerate it! When you and our son-in-law argue, I get scared. Now, when I see the kind of argument these two have, I fear it will lead to some disaster. How she talks!"

"When the mind has a firm opinion, any questions or answers surrounding it will be hard, as nails," Natarajan said.

Visalam, growing anxious, said: "You're a professor and you are expected to instill in students what you are lecturing them. Can Rajam lecture to her husband? If one is smart, that smartness ought to be used to say or accomplish something good. Yesterday her husband was listening to a good song in the radio, and Rajam said, "It makes one wish the ears turn deaf!" "Whose ears?" he asked, and she replied, "Why, everybody's!" I was shocked to see how she could turn so malicious. She says she took a vow not to sing in her husband's presence! She keeps ranting on this and that, and I am simply frightened!"

"Looks like the son-in-law is returning home in the next four days, isn't he?" Natarajan asked. "What's Rajam saying?"

"He is returning home alone and plans to go to Nagpur to escort Bhavani to her home," Visalam replied. "Rajam came here to help me; how nice it would be if she could render the same help to Bhavani also?" Visalam sighed.

"No, no, let Rajam stay right here. Over there her situation will be terrible, again," Natarajan said. "Why should she get entangled with Bhavani, again? It's only because of Bhavani's cruel taunts her tongue has turned vicious." Visalam too was privy to Rajam's ill treatment at Bhavani's hands, so she agreed with her husband.

As Visalam observed a stoic Rajam bidding farewell to her husband, she realized how stubborn Rajam was. At the time Rajam remained unmoved; but this didn't last long. Gone was her sense of spirited attacks on her husband; she was repenting how some of her questions tossed at Raghupathy would've actually hurt him

She cringed while recalling a few instances of their encounter.

"It was a mistake that we ever got married," Raghupathy had said one day.

"Was it really a marriage?," Rajam answered barely concealing her tone that was cruel and sadistic, as she ran her index finger around her neck implying it amounted to beheading; not tying the *thali*.

Didn't her husband ask why she had become so hateful of children? That question now tormented her. 'Did I ever harbor noble thoughts?' The very thought was revolting to her mind.

She tried to reject her inner voice, 'You have now totally alienated the love and regard of your in-laws! Wasn't her revolt a reflection of her better feelings for music and arts? 'I am

fanatically in love with music; it's the unsympathetic atmosphere and my husband's indifference that made me a different person. I hated those surroundings; only music runs in my veins', she told herself.

The same thoughts pursued her the following days.

One day she had a dream; Raghupathy was bed-ridden with typhoid - causing concern to everybody. Fortunately, he recovers but . . . he loses his hearing.

And, in the dream, Rajam mocks her husband: "You certainly deserve this punishment! You have spent all your time ignoring me and enjoyed listening the music of other women; now you are denied the privilege of enjoying any music!"

Rajam woke up; the significance of the dream flabbergasted her.

She had heard that lurking, negative thoughts shaped one's dream; if so, what's the origin of her dream?

Rajam would often be so enraged while watching her husband enjoy several hours listening to radio concerts that she would feel the itch to jump, shut off the radio, and scream at him, 'To hell with your music appreciation! You have only ruined my taste!' But she would bottle up her revulsion and do nothing; so, those unresolved conflicts now haunted her in dream.

She repented for grievously hurting Raghupathy's ego provoking his ill feeling and anger. She found no comfort by thinking that it was her misfortune that proved a hurdle to her husband's success. Vulnerable and anxious, she sought someone to ease her pain and rescue her before she turned wicked. 'Oh God, help me!" she prayed, and restless, spent days and nights reflecting on her past indulgence.

Mental anguish – left alone - brings about physical illness. Human emotions follow a definite pattern that depends on the proper functions of the body parts. The heart as well as the surge of thoughts has a powerful effect on how the body parts interact with one another; any conflict, unsettled, will lead to their dysfunction.

Rajam fell sick with typhoid and was bed-ridden for several weeks. Delirium brought her hallucination and bewilderment. She fervently wished her life would end, but realized that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. 'A lot of misery is in store for me', she moaned. 'Soon I shall lose my hearing, and speech too!" Even her father and Mani had asked her one day, 'How does your music matter now - when you are dead against your husband

listening to it?' Who knows, she might lose her speech too; God will condemn her to eternal silence. It's her ear and tongue that had pulled her into music's orbit, but now God has decreed that she remain simply a dutiful daughter-in-law rolling *appalam* beside her mother-in-law . . . .

Then, again . . .

God might punish Rajam duly for using her tongue not only to sing but fling invective; doesn't she like to spew only venom at others and offer no kind words . . . ?

In the final analysis, she feared, some catastrophe was about to strike her; the injured finger foreshadowed more to come. Hadn't she hurt her finger when leading the life of daughter-in-law, pure in heart, respecting her husband and serving elders with obedient devotion? Now she stands against her husband, and any trace of love and empathy in her, has disappeared. Why can't she expect a retribution that fits the crime?

Such thoughts continued to torture her during her wakeful hours and in her nightmares.

Bhavani delivered a baby in Madras.

Saradambal, who had to trek from her home to the nearby hospital, griped that Rajam hadn't come to help in the delivery. Raghupathy, who was there, was of help in running some errands.

He received an invitation from Natarajan: Rajam was down with typhoid and she might feel better if Raghupathy showed up.

Saradambal let out an early warning. "Our Bhavani never lived with her in-laws; neither our son-in-law ever lived with us. We are now witnessing Raghupathy spending more time with his in-laws than our daughter-in-law does with us!"

Doraiswamy spoke as if he had a ready answer. "Let's leave things as they progress," he said. "Right now Raghupathy doesn't enjoy any privileges as our son; he's going through a bad period. He's holding on only as Raja Lakshmi's husband. We can even say Rajam caught the typhoid that was about to hit him."

Saradambal was silent; even Raghupathy was a little surprised. He longed to see Rajam right away, and departed.

He found her serene and peaceful. Tender and affectionate, he told her she had taken his place and become ill. He spent most of the time beside her and gave her ease and comfort.

And Rajam was touched; he had become so scared at her plight! She began slowly recovering, and also overlooking what she thought were his flaws; the feeling grew that she and her husband were made for one another and had been united over the ages. There's something else that hastened her recovery; there's lecturer's position vacant at her father's college. Natarajan urged his son-in-law to apply, and he did so right away.

Rajam's thoughts turned into her future. 'We both need to live as a couple, free and independent, in our own house,' she thought. 'This is also my home; still I don't want to live here. I like to set up our home elsewhere.' But how could she reveal her mind to her husband?

She told her father, impatiently: "I came to know, next month, Dr. Prasad Rao will be shifting his dispensary to his house; his current dispensary is small but it will be sufficient for us both."

Natarajan promised to look into the matter; Raghupathy said the new location would be closer to the college. Visalam, for her part, decided she would prepare and send them food until Rajam recovered fully.

Rajam's optimism seemed vindicated when Dr. Prasad Rao told the family, "You will surely get the place; all you need to do is ask the owner!"

Natarajan did no canvassing or drum up support for his son-in-law; he believed Raghupathy would get the job strictly on merit.

But it ended in disappointment; the job went to someone else. "Had he refused, Raghupathy was next in the line," Natarajan said. "Wonder how long *he* was looking . . ."

"You seem to think I was anxiously waiting for this position," Raghupathy told Natarajan. "I am used to take things as they come. I don't unnecessarily worry or imagine things."

His demeanor, calm and quiet, now surprised his wife, who stared at him with mixed feelings. Until now, she festered, 'I am the one who silently bore your worries, concerns and imaginary plans for our future. You seemed unruffled.' Now, his firmness stunned her.

She managed to conceal her reaction and let out a laugh, saying, "I have lived enough in this town, so I am not too excited to set up residence here. I used to worry if I would be stuck here for good and won't go to other cities." She's not overstating her



case; didn't she venture out of her sheltered life and endear herself to others in distant places?

She welcomed similar encounters in the future.

"According to my horoscope, my bad days will end when I turn twenty-eight," Raghupathy told her before. Rajam remained hopeful because his twenty-eighth birthday was soon approaching.

And the horoscope proved right; Raghupathy got a telegram with a job offer; at Madras!

Madras? Yes, his job was in Madras!

At the time Rajam was reading a magazine; thoroughly disappointed, she threw the magazine at him and walked away, her eyes swelling with tears.

It took her almost half an hour to regain her bearings; Rajam had never been more disappointed. She had been clinging to music as harbinger of her freedom; she was even willing to put up with the stigma of her husband's joblessness. She had willingly embraced the idea of freedom that seemed anathema to her elders. Still, she didn't expect the veil behind her wounded heart to be torn so suddenly exposing her vulnerabilities.

For a long time Rajam had harbored a feeling that the repressive environment at her in-laws had driven her away to seek refuge at home; now everyone seemed to know it, and her actions only confirmed their disbelief.

Her ordeal was just beginning; the light of freedom beckoning her now lost its sparkle, and she has been unmasked: she could no more parade her urge for freedom by faking her inner feelings, erecting a false front and deceiving others.

Can it be true that in this vast country her husband couldn't land a job in any city other than Madras? It was obvious God was testing them, and Rajam too had run out of luck!

An Indian woman's life revolves strictly around her husband and family life; she forever seeks to win the goodwill of her husband and make herself exemplary among the family circles. Should she find the husband less than supportive, she could blame him – but only at her peril: she would lose even more affection. That's when her better instincts make a retreat. She tries to convey a message to her husband: 'No other woman is superior to me!' And, in trying to boost her own appeal, she succumbs to a common, human foible: she disparages others

and, especially where women are concerned, she becomes a keen observer, an expert and indulges in gossip!

Sitamma was old enough to be a close friend of both Rajam and Visalam. She's not even thirty, but worldly wise.

"I had suspected for some time now," she told her husband one day. "I felt it was Rajam's early excitement and enthusiasm that made her praise her in-laws and her life with them. I couldn't help telling myself after a few months, 'Oh, here's a strange woman – she has not lost any respect and admiration for her mother-in-law!' Now, I know better – Rajam too is like all other women. As for me, I have always stayed with my husband, no matter if I argued with him or my mother-in-law. I too had fallen sick, but I would speak out frankly what's on my mind." She continued: "I never imagined Rajam would leave her husband; she has certainly crossed the line!"

Her husband was not that keen on Sitamma's research; it made no impact on him, but it was important to Sitamma. She said impatiently, 'You keep accusing me that I always pick up fights with you; now, see this Rajam - who's hurting even without opening her mouth!' When her husband turned a deaf ear, Sitamma managed to whisper her complaint to a friend in the neighborhood.

A few neighbors even forgot that Rajam had been sick with typhoid. Some said, "What's wrong with her, she looks fine. It is all psychological; something is bothering her!"

"It is almost two months since she recovered from typhoid," said another neighborhood group. "What's still holding her? She has been here already for six months; is the body refusing to budge?"

Visalam found out about all of this chitchat. How? "Is Rajam still here?" asked some. "Hasn't her husband issued the orders, yet?" someone queried in a sarcastic tone. Someone dared ask Rajam, "Aren't you going because he keeps coming here?" All the queries were couched in humor, friendliness and some privilege, but Visalam understood they were aimed at spreading rumors. Rajam neither suspected nor gauged the import in their comments. Her tired face reacted only with a dry laughter implying, 'You will never understand my pain.'

Visalam spoke on behalf of her daughter: "The next time her husband comes, he will take her with him. He knows typhoid has strained her health; he's concerned that once she joins him she would get busy and rush here and there, all over," she said, and went on: "Still, if getting good home-made food was difficult,

Rajam has to go. What are they missing without her, anyway?" Rajam couldn't fully grasp what her mother was saying, but she didn't contradict her.

'Do they really need me only to cook?' she thought. 'Where's the chance for me to go proudly feeling, Yes, *my husband will find it hard without my cooking?*'

Occasionally Rajam bemoaned her life had no meaning, and was even prone to suicidal tendencies. She found less and less affection toward her parents and siblings though their love for her was always generous and never waned. Rajam constantly got into some brawl or other; she often cursed them and argued with them.

She would pick up a fight with Mani, her younger brother, the eldest among the siblings, when he turned a bully and harassed the younger ones; she would automatically extend her sympathies to the younger ones and admonish Mani. She would snap at him with a retort, "That's what you really think?" when Mani applauded his brother-in-law's virtues – his innate decency or appreciation for music. Rajam had been awfully hurt, so she's hurting others, and made no secret of it.

One day Visalam expressed her concern with tact. "Rajam, you seem needlessly hard on others and upsetting them," she said.

"Well, I am in constant agony," Rajam replied. "Why do I care what happens to others?"

On another occasion, at some point, Visalam seemed vexed and let out an expletive *Saniyan...* It was a common epithet one often heard in a family; but, under the circumstances, Rajam thought Visalam was actually cursing her. She played on the word alluding to *Sani*, the planet Saturn.

"Yes, you are right!" she screamed at Visalam. 'I am the *Sani* – a well-wisher of the strong and a punisher of the weak,' and walked out. Everywhere people facing some personal crisis seem eager to know their future – through astrology and horoscopes; Rajam was no exception.

She read, occasionally, the weekly magazines that carried articles by specialists from various fields to educate the readers on psychological problems, and how to alleviate them. Most of the questions seemed related to her own situation, so Rajam read the answers. She found comfort in thinking, 'There are many out there sharing my condition, but, surprisingly, I am the only one who's not upset!' It was a relief to know that she was

only human and her mental anguish was no different from what ailed many others.

"We have to be like others in the world. It is not easy to seek new paths, Rajam!" Raghupathy wrote in one of his letters.

Rajam lost no time in replying to him: "I too want to live like others," she wrote. "But I am denied such a privilege, and that's my biggest disappointment."

Happiness and positive thoughts go in tandem. Happiness doesn't last forever; sooner or later, sorrow takes over – that's the law of nature. And when sadness casts its shadow, the mind tends to evoke the negative thoughts from the past, which only add to its turmoil. It seeks answers: 'Did I do the right thing? Was I thinking right?' The mind will not acknowledge an error even when it recognizes one; such is the nature of the human mind – roguish and naughty. This results in a self-fulfilling prophecy that one did the right thing, after all. This is a universal truth.

That's how Rajam saw her situation thinking of Bhavani: 'I am certainly a better person than she is, there's no doubt about it. I have no malice, I treat everyone as equal; but I am naïve and easily trusting.' She felt sorry for herself.

Well, she's upright and innocent; but why should she consider herself naïve?

Her thoughts went back to the early days of her marriage when the couple exchanged letters regularly. On one occasion Rajam missed writing her letter on time. Her home was being painted and things were in a pell-mell. The household items were strewn all around, and in the ensuing rush, they couldn't be sorted out and restored to their proper place. Rajam was charged to take care of more serious duties. She's accustomed to write letters deliberately and in no rush – but that day she had no choice. She was upset and had even grown a little angry. So when she penned the letters the next day she couldn't help telling her husband in that letter, "I am overwhelmed with house work; I have no time even to write letters! I hate this place."

"Even *Amma* is a little surprised to know you are so busy at your home," Raghupathy wrote to her. "Be patient! Soon you are going to join me!"

Wasn't Rajam really naïve to let her mother-in-law think she was buried in work at her home? Rajam had complained because of just one day's overindulgence; now she must endure its consequences for the rest of her life! What's Bhavani's attitude? How she flaunted her privilege as a favorite daughter

and raised hell – all in the presence of her mother-in-law! As for Rajam, she wanted to assuage her mother's anxiety, so she helped her when Raghupathy and his folks came down to see her as a prospective daughter-in-law. That's the reason why Saradambal had remarked saying, "She's the eldest – how could she not help her mother with the errands at home?"

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'I am so gullible,' Rajam uttered under her breath.

Didn't she nurture a faith that her music would flourish and she would endear herself to all at her in-laws? Now, all her hopes were dashed.

Natarajan has been listening to his daughter's catchword for some time now. While he didn't understand what she really meant, he thought she was saying, 'I am disappointed in my life.'

"In life we can't always expect things to go in our way; won't we ever experience disappointments and sadness?" he asked one day.

"No, What I meant was that I was not smart like Bhavani; I dreaded even her children! I had a delusion about my life with my in-laws. Only now I understand how people are so different and how they behave," Rajam said. "There has been no one more gullible than me."

"Deceiving others is cruel, but there's no shame in trusting others. It could be even a badge of honor," Natarajan said.

"So, I have been greatly honored?" Rajam fumed.

"Why not? Why are you disparaging yourself? There are so many things you can be proud of," the father told her. "Why don't you take another look at yourself?"

'I am unable to concentrate on anything; I am hurt beyond healing,' Rajam wanted to say but was too weak to utter the words; her eyes turned teary.

"Why should you feel bad for your good behavior?" Natarajan consoled her. "Be happy that you served others with a sense of sacrifice. One can repent for being selfish or harming others. I just can't imagine you feeling sorry for being candid and forthright."

"Appa, they think I can be easily fooled; alas, they haven't realized how I control myself, while yielding to their demands; or else, they think of me as cunning and scheming; they don't seem to think of me as being good at all."

"They do know, deep in their hearts, that you are selfless and treat others with no malice," Natarajan said. "Stop worrying. Self-pity is not good! Others might pity and feel sorry for us, but we should never feel sorry for ourselves!"

Rajam said nothing.

She prayed, fervently, 'Will I ever get back my pure heart? Will I ever be out of these evil thoughts?'

The love in a marriage is ever present, like the sun and the moon. The celestial objects, even unseen, go about performing their functions reliably and perfectly. Decreed by the laws of nature, they are ever with us. The love in a marriage too sustains in the same mode.

Raghupathy wasn't troubled by the changes in Rajam's demeanor. Before, he admired her for her sharpness and intellect; now he watched her with sympathy and concern. Otherwise why would he undertake this sudden trip?

He had received an invitation for a job interview in Orissa; and, because he was averse to a position in Madras, he decided to attend the interview, so he broke his journey to visit Rajam on his way.

Rajam was delighted by her husband's sudden visit, but the joy was gone the very next day.

Natarajan asked his son-in-law, "You do plan to stop over here on your way back, right?" Raghupathy, like Rajam, looked at him with dismay. The very tone - what kind of question was *that*?

"Rajam will be here, ready for you. I can bring her to the railway station if you are unable to break the journey due to any leave restrictions."

Rajam stared at her father. Raghupathy made a pretense of looking at some distant object. Rajam strode into the kitchen; she wanted to tell her mother that her father was 'driving me away from home.' She saw Visalam wiping tears off her face; why was she crying? Well, she understood her daughter's predicament.

Rajam too burst into tears.

"I heard what your father said, and he's right," Visalam told her. "If you are unwilling to accompany him now, your in-laws will surely sense your unconcern. Until now they were thinking you were sick, still recovering and didn't want you to go along with him. And that was the truth; but now, your reluctance . . ."

The mere thought of Madras disheartened Rajam and plunged her in grief. She wished the ground under her would cave in suddenly and bury her alive. She couldn't suffer like this for the rest of her life. There are so many ways to embrace death in a few minutes . . . Why not seek a way out?

She sat alone, the whole day, crying incessantly. She noticed something crawling along the wall next to her.

"*Amma . . . Amma, scorpion!*" she screamed, and got up.

Visalam came down with a broom; meanwhile Natarajan showed up with a shoe; the scorpion was dead in no time.

"Good heavens, you were sitting so close; only God's grace helped you," said Visalam.

'I wish it had bitten me – ending my life,' Rajam wanted to say, but how could she?

She was a little ashamed she's panicked at the sight of a scorpion.

"Maybe it's a scorpion that could instantly kill a person; I could've given my hand to it," Rajam said without batting an eye. "I am really scared of living like this . . ." She looked at Raghupathy through the corner of her eye.

"I didn't ask you to come to Madras with me," Raghupathy told her. He was visibly angry but restrained himself, and spoke softly: "It was your father's suggestion; I am not interested to take you home if you think you won't be happy there."

Natarajan looked at Rajam, and said: "Don't say anything now; first you must purge the poison from your tongue. There's a limit to what one can say; think for a moment how your husband would feel about arriving at his home alone, without you."

Raghupathy watched her teary eyes; he shed no tears, but the pain on the face was unmistakable.

Natarajan steadied himself and asked Rajam, "What do you say?"

"Well, I will go . . . I want to get lost!"

Natarajan was shaken by her retort.

That evening, Raghupathy left for job interview.

Natarajan tried to calm his daughter. "Assuming he's offered this job, it will take at least two months before Raghupathy reports for work," he told her. "If you don't go along with him now, you will be merely asking for more anxiety and panic; you may

even dread the very idea of meeting with your in-laws! You will find the going easy if you compromise now." He was trying to ease her alarm, and Rajam couldn't object.

She's getting ready, albeit with exasperation; Raghupathy would be back in three days!

But he didn't; instead came his letter on the day of his arrival.

"I have decided to visit my brother-in-law in Nagpur, and then proceed directly to Madras," he had written.

Rajam, once again, was reduced to shedding copious tears. What was on his mind: A husband's love for her or his deliberate avoidance of her?

*'Come on, let's go! It is my duty to keep you happy and contented, I will see to it . . . You will see how smart I am!'*

Why couldn't he bring himself to say such a thing? Rajam wondered. And now, he's gone home by a different route!

Natarajan made up his mind; he felt duty bound to see that Rajam joined her in-laws. He respected Raghupathy's intent that Rajam could stay with her parents as long as she wished; but, as a father, his obligation went beyond the daughter's wish; and it was Visalam who talked him into it.

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Soon, the message arrived: "The Orissa interview was not successful."

"Rajabai, you better get ready to start your life in Madras," Natarajan told his daughter.

Rajam was heart-broken, and all her hopes and dreams now seemed to reach a dead end. Wasn't she reeling under one onslaught after another? She was thwarted in pursuit of her music; her name has been tarnished in spite of her every attempt to hold on to her good demeanor and conduct; she's even reduced to hearing harsh words from her own parents. What's the point in her living any longer? How many more slings and arrows she would have to dodge in the days ahead? There had been a time when everyone was friendly toward Rajam, each admiring one outstanding attribute of hers. They called her a 'wonderful woman'. Now, she's just a woman – not an exemplary one – with a host of negative qualities. And finally . . .

Rajam bemoaned her worst predicament: she no longer craved fame and honor; she lost even the love of others.



Natarajan understood her dilemma; still, he needed to act as a father in her best interests: he offered the best advice he could, and tried to ease her discomfort:

“Don’t be afraid; don’t shrink from demanding what’s rightfully yours,” he advised her. “Try to be a friend, not a slave. You don’t have to wield authority over others but demonstrate love and sympathy towards others. You need to give up on music if it doesn’t give you joy; accept only those that add to your happiness. It’s within our hands to act smart and avoid unhappiness.”

He decided to dispatch his wife and children to Tamil Nadu; Visalam would drop off Rajam in Madras and then travel to Trichy where she would spend a month before returning home.

Rajam was quite pleased that her mother would be accompanying her. She felt a little better after her father’s pep talk. She now shone like the deep and peaceful river *Cauvery* in November.

The in-laws warmly welcomed Rajam and her mother; once she found herself inside the house, Rajam felt she had forgotten her fear and shyness. Bhavani was talking heartily and her children were freely mixing and playing around with the family members. Saradambal was at ease as if she had forgotten all the past memories. Raghupathy too eagerly joined them in the ongoing conversations and relished Rajam’s warm and tender looks. Doraiswamy had recently, at his own expense, remodeled the house, adding a broad veranda in the front with protective metal bars as barrier. It was roomy and airy and served as children’s playpen.

On the third day of her arrival, Visalam left for Trichy with Mani and other children. Suddenly the house seemed empty but Rajam had the company of Bhavani’s children Chitru and Praveen, the new infant. She enjoyed watching them play. At night, Raghupathy called the cook and asked him to put kerosene in a lamp. Just as he was taking out a new lamp from a box, Chitru noticed something novel and came running towards him prattling, “*Mama, Mama!*”

“Watch out . . . I bought it only today!” Raghupathy said and pulled the child away. Then, he got ready to hammer a nail into the wall for hanging the lamp.

“Chitru, come on, let’s go to bed,” Bhavani said, and took the children to the front porch.

'So, this is how our family life going to be?' wondered Rajam, and stepped aside from Raghupathy's looks.

'This is going to be a turning point in my life,' she thought. 'My husband is now about to begin a life where he will handle, without prejudice, his twin obligations as a husband and as a son; my troubles will end soon.'

Rajam now adopted the role of a friend as her father had advised her; contrary to her apprehension, she faced no hostility or prejudice. Still, something seemed wrong; she missed the ambience of the earlier interactions. What happened?

Bhavani stopped nagging her; she seemed to be boasting 'Now I know your true colors! I don't want any of your services!' She was taking care of her needs herself.

What was Saradambal thinking? She remained amazingly remote and silent, as if asking Rajam, 'Can I ever trust you, again?' Even Raghupathy seemed to be telling her, "How could I ever stop loving you? You're my wife. Of course, you have your faults, but I will never hate you." But his extolling her virtues as, "I think of you as a precious gift; you are an amazing woman," ceased.

'Well, what else can I expect from them?' Rajam asked herself. 'I too have changed, haven't I? No more do I feel that untainted love I had before.' Her basic decency sought an explanation, and that reflected her graciousness. But what happened to her other life-long passions? Her artistic urge has been thwarted; her womanly feelings craved; her child-like heart wept, and her loving heart grieved.

Raghupathy's attitude too had changed, and now it bordered on extremism; 'I feel neither sorry that I didn't have a job nor did I lose my head when I got one', he seemed to be thinking. He had always been a little diffident to suggest to Rajam that they go out to attend a concert or even for their evening walk; he still seemed to feel the same way now: he wasn't earning a lot of money and he didn't want to alter his lifestyle lest his parents feel their son's now an entirely different person. Doesn't he love his wife and understand what she wants? Of course, he does. On noticing Rajam's withered face for a couple of days, he said, "Rajam, don't be sad. I will do everything possible to keep you happy. The rest is God's will." His words were promising, it was a little talk, a pep talk, and they only added to Rajam's aggravation.

Bhavani's husband had to attend a six-month program in another city, so Bhavani was now staying with her parents. She

wasn't bullying Rajam any longer, but treating her with indifference. Before, she pushed Rajam around, but now she seemed to say, 'I have had enough of your service!' Rajam too had grown apathetic, and her posture seemed to convey a message to Bhavani: 'We two are now two different people! You were bent on driving me crazy, and I won't put up with your harassment anymore. You better stop your intimidation!' Rajam's now a quite different woman, and she wanted others to know it! She's no more frightened of being lectured to or taken for granted; never again would her face display trepidation or confusion when she answered Bhavani; her eyes didn't blink as surrender.

Did Rajam succeed or fail? She couldn't be sure.

One day, Bhavani's son Praveen fell off a bench when he was climbing it; Bhavani was seated next to the bench, but she didn't pick up the child; she looked dazed. Rajam was standing a few feet away, and she felt an urge to rush and pick up the child, but when she noticed Bhavani did nothing to lift the crying child, she backed out.

Before, Bhavani constantly nitpicked Rajam with sundry orders, like, 'Take my kid out! The vessel might fall on his head,' or 'Come here, pick him up at once! He's too close to the water tap!' The child would be closer to the mother; Rajam would be busy with some errand in the kitchen, but Bhavani, unoccupied, would not stir out from her perch. Did Bhavani now expect Rajam to scurry up and attend to her child?

As soon as she felt the urge, Rajam steadied herself and stopped. 'I am not a servant who could be pushed around,' she told herself. "There's no doubt that I am now a new Rajam!"

Only when Saradambal came running and asking, "What happened? Did he fall?" did Bhavani lift the baby off the ground. She sat quietly for some time, stroking her son gently as she looked at her mother and sister-in-law in an odd way. Her face seemed to be hinting at Rajam, '*Manni*, I know what you are thinking.' Rajam noticed the weariness on Havana's face.

Suddenly Rajam felt guilty over her inaction; how could she become so mean - even hating children?

After some time Bhavani told her mother: "I feel awful whenever my baby tumbles down or gives in to sudden outbursts. I am always scared something unpleasant is going to happen. I have heard but never paid much attention to a family curse that no second child would ever survive in our family; still, every now and then, that anecdote horrifies me, and I

immediately freeze. I could see my child has fallen off the bench and feel I ought to lift him up, yet I couldn't even move my feet!" She revealed her maternal instinct with her heavy breathing while putting both the hands on her chest.

Rajam's heart, already scarred by guilt, now felt like hemorrhaging.

'Was Bhavani really that scared?' Rajam asked herself watching Havana's face. 'I imagined she's testing me! Why test me? She understands I am now a changed person; now she's wary when dealing with me, and her maternal instincts are so revealing to me! I must stop finding fault with her.'

But, in the next few days, Rajam discovered her remorse was not justified.

One day, while chastising her daughter, Bhavani hinted – viciously - at Rajam's childlessness.

Rajam had asked a simple question. "She (she meant the little girl) is crying even as she's getting ready for oil bath; is it absolutely necessary she should have oil bath today?"

"Only one who has children knows when to exercise patience in dealing with a child," Bhavani said, and dragged the little girl into the bathroom; Rajam, unwilling to follow them, stopped on her tracks.

'Yes, I don't love children anymore; only love and enthusiasm will foster patience,' Rajam told herself. 'I have been denied the gift of having my own children, and I offer no apologies. And I am not certainly put down by your digs; can you find fault with me on any other account? I am sterile because it is God's will, and I can only blame Him for my void.'

Rajam longed for a loving heart, and when it was deficient, she had to disguise her turmoil with a pretense of laughter; this went against her grain, so she often felt the flame of anger and shame sweeping over her.

One day Rajam saw Raghupathy sewing buttons on his trousers before leaving for work. "Why don't you give it to me?" she asked and, at once, he handed it to her. She fixed the buttons, and felt proud.

But the pride didn't last long. 'Why wouldn't my husband ask for my help when he can rightfully demand it?' Rajam felt. 'Does he care for me so little, that he can't even ask me to fix his buttons?'

It was Bhavani who offered her ease and comfort!

"I came along and noticed Brother sewing the buttons," Bhavani said in a tone tinged with sorrow. "I don't know why, I didn't feel like telling him I could take care of it. I simply walked away, but *Manni* noticed and asked for them at once, and he handed the trousers to her. Poor man! Now I feel a little ashamed for not helping; he must have wondered about his sister's uncaring."

'That's the special relationship between us!' Rajam exclaimed with pride and joy secretly within her. 'This is a sign that our ties are strengthening!'

Rajam won in the test Raghupathy pitted between Rajam and his sister. Yet another situation arose that set up Rajam and his mother as rivals. Rajam's love for her husband proved no less than Saradambal's maternal love for her son!

The family members embarked on a pleasure trip. There were two cars – one with men and the other with women. The vehicle with the women led the way and the other followed it. Everybody enjoyed the ride and the scenery, exchanged jokes and engaged in chitchat. Rajam too had a great time and, in her excitement, she frequently turned around and watched her husband in the other car. No dust was raised because the cars were traveling on a paved road and Rajam had a clear view of the car behind theirs.

Bhavani, who noticed Rajam turning her head often, teased her: "All our *Manni's* attention is on her husband in the second car." Rajam accepted her tease in good humor. She was in a cheerful mood and even wished that Raghupathy were riding in their car. She genially acknowledged Bhavani mockery.

Rajam didn't seem offended when Bhavani, sometime later, said, "Even a new bride will not cast glances at her groom like our *Manni* does." It was then that Rajam began to feel Bhavani might be right in hinting that her conduct might be construed as 'improper.' So she totally stopped turning back to see if the other car was following them - at a distance, in a curve or when it was hidden from her view.

They reached a particular destination; their car was the first to arrive; the other car didn't show up.

The women spent the next ten minutes happily chatting as they waited for the men. No car could be seen anywhere.

"Wonder what happened, let's go back and check," Saradambal said.

"No need . . . they will be here soon," others comforted her. So they waited for some more time.

Time was passing, still there's no sign of the other car; Saradambal asked the driver to retrace the path. After fifteen minutes they noticed the men's car stranded on the highway.

When the women approached the car, Ramaseshan came briskly toward them, and said, "You are lucky to see us alive." Their car barely escaped a hazard, he said.

The engine suddenly stopped working for some reason. Everyone got out; only Ramaseshan and the driver were standing near the car; others walked around, leisurely.

A pedestrian, who came along, was looking at the car where it stood. While passing the car, he asked, "What is this? Smoke?" He was pointing to a hold-all at the back of the car; smoke was slowly rising from it.

The men pulled the bed and examined it; the cotton inside had caught fire and a whiff of smoke was coming out of it.

Ramaseshan thanked the man, approached the other men and told them; they found out that Ramaseshan's son had been smoking in the car and had thrown out the butt while he was still inside the car.

"Had we remained in the car for ten more minutes," Ramaseshan told the women, "the fire would have spread, caught the petrol tin, and that would have been the end of everybody trapped inside the car. It was by God's grace that the car stopped suddenly; we were also lucky that a pedestrian warned us. Fortunately we escaped burning to death, in spite of all these hazards."

The women were stunned. Saradambal said, "I had no peace of mind at all; I kept worrying and had no peace of mind. You see, somehow I knew my son was in danger! Everyone said, 'Don't worry', I was the one who got jittery and decided to come back . . ."

Rajam's eyes were riveted on Saradambal. 'Her maternal instinct knew it - no doubt about it'. She was amazed.

Now Ramaseshan spoke: "I am wondering why none of you cared to turn back and see, at least once or twice, if we were behind you! Why did we let your car go ahead of us? In case your car had trouble, we shouldn't be in dark; that's why we wanted you to be in front of us. You had no such thoughts and

kept going without looking back at all!" He asked and laughed mischievously.

Rajam's mind was on Bhavani who now said: "In the beginning *Manni* was watching you frequently. She stopped doing so at the most important time."

'That's only because you were laughing at me!' Rajam wanted to say openly – but there's no need. Ramaseshan's mother set the record right, laughing: "We have teased Rajam for looking back, again and again; now we are blaming her because she did not look back enough!"

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Rajam had no problem in reestablishing her rapport with the other women in her social milieu.

In many ways, those women were like diplomats who were friendly and shook hands with one another, even when they held politically divergent views; they took upon the roles of politicians who seemingly eschewed the instinct for battles carefully and with finesse. Rajam had no time to be concerned with this. The lack of intimacy with her husband loomed in her mind like a big mountain.

'Let diplomats and politicians do what they like,' she told herself. 'It's more important that the masses and their national leader saw eye to eye with one another. What would be the fate of the masses if the leader simply ignores them?'

'The country faced a food problem – always an acute and major one; but what about those who are starved of their cultural urges? A nation's character depends on how it nourishes its cultural values – even if one has to concede that not too many of its citizens feel that hunger.'

Rajam was mulling over these thoughts crowding her mind.

Doraiswamy, by virtue of his status and position, moved in his professional circles among the community and civic members; so Rajam and Raghupathy found themselves attending those get-together sessions as well as helping in hosting such parties at home. The guests were entertained in small groups because of space limitation. Raghupathy was in charge of making dinner arrangements – and what an excitement did he feel at that honor! He frequently visited the kitchen to plan a menu for the guests and make sure the right supply of plates, bowls, dishes and other items were on hand. Such practices are common in foreign countries and in the hotels and restaurants; does one

need to make such elaborate plans in a house get-together? Raghupathy was so excited that he never entertained such a question. He meticulously and alphabetically listed each menu item – *Badam Kheer, Bajji, Potato chips*, etc. in a sheet for each prospective guest enthusiastically which only made Rajam grow weary.

“*Sambar, rasam, koottu, . . . Sambar, rasam, koottu;*” *Rajam* repeated the catchphrase, and murmured, “You may get the salvation of writing *Sri Ramajayam* over and over!” She set down a couple of incense sticks she was carrying in her hand and returned to the kitchen.

“What’s it? What were you saying? Let me hear it, again.” Raghupathy beckoned her; meanwhile Bhavani appeared with a vessel in her hand.

Rajam answered him with no hesitation: “I was wondering if we really need this menu for our party.”

Raghupathy knew what Rajam muttered under her breath was different from what she said. He realized Rajam changed her lines, well aware she made a mistake. He overlooked what she said; he was in no mood to argue with her; he placed a menu under a tumbler next to each plate on the table, and left.

One night Raghupathy was complaining aloud, “I bought them – but I ate only one . . .” He repeated the refrain a couple of times; apparently he had bought two dozens of bananas; only a few were left after the family members consumed them, and the rest were given away to guests who showed up that evening. That night, Raghupathy asked for a couple of bananas after dinner.

“You had only one? Why didn’t you take a couple more? I didn’t know, I gave them away,” said Saradambal in a faint voice.

“These were of special variety. I thought I will have more, later. The one who bought them couldn’t have them.” He complained, again.

Rajam didn’t appreciate her husband’s attitude. “So what? I remember once *Amma* toiled the whole day to make *idli* batter; she prepared the *idlis* the next day when, unexpectedly, several people from Erode showed up. They were served the *idlis* and at the end of the day, *Amma* was left with only an empty vessel. And, how many times this happened! Would she ever talk about it? No! As for the bananas you talk about, they were grown by a farmer, sold to a merchant, and you simply paid for them! Why do you keep harping on it?” she asked openly.



"*Manni* is flattering her mother nicely," Bhavani said. Saradambal was surprised, as well as happy to hear Rajam, but she wasn't too pleased to notice her son's face wither.

"He was simply asking for fun . . . so what, do I feel angry?" Saradambal asked.

"I too meant it as a joke only," Rajam said, trying to cover up her embarrassment with a laugh. Even if Raghupathy meant it as a joke or whatever, but why should it be on such a trivial matter? Where's is the joke when he was simply bemoaning, 'I bought something to eat, but I couldn't? There was none!

'I did the right thing, and I know how I noticed the reaction on his face,' Rajam told herself, with pride. She wished her husband would be less obsessed with food.

One day Raghupathy was telling the cook he wanted *cocoa* instead of coffee – something different. Yet, how come it never occurred to him, Rajam thought, to suggest to his wife – just for a change - "Why don't we go out today for a concert?" Is it only the tongue that wants a change?

He had many friends in the city; yet Raghupathy never thought of visiting any of them with his wife.

One day, he told his mother, "My friend John keeps inviting us to his home; why don't we all go?"

"I don't want to go to those homes," Saradambal replied, with some vehemence in her voice. "You have visited them before, didn't you? That's enough. If you are interested, why don't you go with Rajam?"

Still, Raghupathy evinced no interest; he let out a silly laugh, and kept quiet.

Rajam was struck by his timidity; she understood her husband's penchant for quiet disposition in the company of elders; she also knew, as a couple, they could never live here as they did when they set up a family elsewhere, and that's fine too; it's always wise to live with certain restraints, she agreed, but shouldn't Raghupathy sense that Rajam deserves recognition as a wife with her own sense of joys and pleasures? A man's love is one of control and authority, the woman's one of deference and obedience. That's how God has decreed. Rajam was prepared to play her role, and her fondest wish was that her husband would rule over her.

Now, Raghupathy did rule over Rajam; he certainly loved her; yet, his demonstration of concern for her were marked by mixed

feelings. He thought of Rajam only as his "life- partner". He didn't treat her as his wife; she didn't evoke in him the erotic impulses of a lover; she was someone who fulfilled his need, that's all.

Can humor help one to cope with the daily quandaries? Yes, that's how Tamil Nadu faced the food rationing, inflation, the long queue lines, overcrowding, and kept its bearings. Tamilians endured their predicaments with a sense of humor and imagination where these shortcomings transformed themselves into works of art - cartoons, stories, articles and jokes. It helped them to sustain their sanity by relishing and laughing away at these stumbling blocks.

Raghupathy did nothing to alter the cultural scene at the home front; to be sure, he didn't ignore the food problem, but he totally ignored the cultural aspect. He didn't care how Rajam's artistic urges could find expression; rather he spent most of the time at home discussing his mother's culinary skills, and how such and such item – he could pop up the list of dishes with no effort at all – should be prepared; Rajam hated his rants.

Didn't the poet crave for the flowering of his artistic spirit? It was a cry deep from his heart. Rajam too bleakly alluded to it amid the aridness in her heart.

*I made a noble veena;  
Will I throw it in the garbage?  
Answer me, oh Goddess!  
Why did you create me with sparkling wisdom?  
Won't you give me skill and brilliance to make  
The society lead a purposeful life?*

'I have excelled in music, studies, beauty, character, love and compassion,' Rajam thought. 'Yet, I am unable to augment these God-given gifts. I firmly reject a life that stands in my way. I am not a mere puppet.' She was desperately seeking a way to prove her competence. One finds zest in life only when talent and competence complement one another, and pride comes in transcending that capability. This is the force that sustains every living creature and nourishes the root of creativity and growth. Absent competence and passion, the world can hardly function. The sea may be vast and immense, but it can never match a fountain's power in quenching our thirst.'

Her recent foray into the upper class society did nothing to revive Rajam's sense of freedom and artistic ambitions; nothing

to add to her musical aspirations, either. The surroundings as well as the fact that neither Bhavani nor Raghupathy cared for her music, made the situation hardly congenial; so Rajam never again sang or practiced. Now, cooking is also an art, but there too she had no luck. There's an in-house cook but Saradambal insisted on herself preparing the important dishes for lunch. "I will not let anyone take over this, you can do all other tasks," she insisted. Dinner was light, and the cook prepared it. The evenings were mostly devoted to visiting friends in the neighborhood. Occasionally, Mrs. Ramaseshan would accompany Rajam and Bhavani, so did Saradambal. Raghupathy didn't seem to hit off well with Ramaseshan's son; that has been his stance from the very beginning. The daughter-in-law would occasionally join the company of Bhavani and Rajam – but this occurred only sporadically – because she was busy with her college and its cultural activities. Should she wanted to enjoy, in leisure, a concert or a movie, she preferred attending it with her husband who frequently traveled to other cities on business. So the couple tried to squeeze as much of their available time as possible to enjoy their activities jointly. Everybody admired them as an exemplary couple; they had two children who were also brought up in a healthy manner endearing themselves to others. Mrs. Ramaseshan was the ostensible head of the family; her daughter-in-law was the next in command.

Rajam, who pretty soon became privy to these family matters, envied the young daughter-in-law, and wished similar luck would favor her; it was a reasonable wish, certainly not something beyond her. But she knew she would never enjoy such a life because of the attitude of others - especially her husband's obsession with his sense of 'neutrality.'

"My brother has really changed a lot," Bhavani told Mrs. Ramaseshan one day. "I remember how he used to bully me until four months before my marriage!"

Rajam tried to imagine the Raghupathy of those days; what if he had remained the same man to this day?

"*Amma*, we are now going to an exhibition," he would inform Saradambal and, without any other ado, drag Rajam away, saying, "Come on, get ready! Don't delay!"

He would get mad at Rajam and yell at her. Then, after a while, he would comfort her, "Oh, I am sorry; I didn't mean it."

Only if he ever did such a thing!

Raghupathy's nonchalance saddened her. Even when he was angry with his wife, he tried to bottle it up with, "Oh, this is what you have become? Okay, so be it!", and kept quiet.

A husband maintains his reputation only when, with his manly demeanor, he rules over his wife, makes demands and receives what he wants of her. There might be girls who think that a husband should never use his authority over his wife because she's not his slave; but Rajam wasn't looking for this in Raghupathy. She had little interest in her husband's condescension; she expected him to convey his concern as well as his clout. She would be more than happy if he understood what she wanted, and satisfied her. A mischievous toddler brings more joy to its parents than a quiet, no-nonsense child. Hadn't Lord Krishna spent most of his childhood in being naughty? A subject is pleased only when the ruler commands authority.

All humans have three physical needs: food, clothes, and shelter; the emotional needs are three, as well. The first is for the person to be loved by others, and possess some unique qualities to cherish and feel proud about them; the second, the awareness that others extend recognition and respect for what the person is; and finally, the reassurance that the ties between that person and others are strong, and unbroken.

Lacking any of the above emotional needs, life becomes tiring; as for Rajeswari, she needed all the three, and none was within her grasp.

The male peacock has a thousand eyes on his entire plumage, but its vision is limited to only two eyes; the others see no light. Rajam's life had color and beauty; still, what's the use?

With these thoughts circling in her mind, Rajam began to think of her life with her in-laws. There's a vast divergence in her conduct at her in-laws – before and now.

She could see her life passing through phases . . .

The great Shivaite *Ciru Thondar* appeased Lord Shiva, and offered him his own son *Seeraalan* as food. He did so only because of his religious fervor. Rajam too sacrificed her music because of her loyalty to her in-laws. And just as the legendary *Seeraalan* was reborn, her music too survived.

The next . . .

She was seized with a sense of justice that overwhelmed the king *Manu Neethi Choza* who, in his wisdom, offered his own son to be run over by a chariot to atone for his injustice against a cow. Rajam too ceded her fame in the name of justice. What

happened? She ended up being called all kinds of names; her fame was gone too . . .

That phase has also ended. Now she's seized with an urge for freedom – yes, freedom for herself! Hasn't she heard that those who seek freedom would settle for nothing else!

When did Rajam first sense that urge coursing through her veins?

It was the day when Saradambal was thinking aloud in somewhat a sanctimonious tone: "any daughter-in-law in this household ought to feel thankful; where else would she find a husband, mother-in-law, and a sister-in-law – all within such a harmonizing atmosphere?" She meant, apparently, that the concerned daughter-in-law must have performed penance – in many of her previous births! – to find herself ensconced in a home with a cook and a husband, who demanded no service from his wife, and in-laws who never complained about her! But Rajam's conscience rejected that premise. She told herself, 'My primary need is freedom – the freedom to accomplish my deepest aspirations! The freedom to attain the lofty ideals of marriage and prove myself a successful wife! My mind is constantly under attack: What made me turn into a 'bad' daughter-in-law? Am I wrong in seeking freedom? I want to be liberated from such thoughts!'

Why did Sita prefer going to the forest to live with her husband? It might be a forest only, yet it would nurture their love; it was in the forest that Sita felt totally dedicated to her husband. She savored her life in the woods even when, later on, she reigned as an empress in the royal palace. Rajam too yearned to return to the house where she and her husband had once set up their home; she wanted to revisit the old friends and take a look around the house they lived. It remained for her, always, a sweet dream at another home in a different time, but she still recalled those days with a sense of fulfillment that she didn't experience at her own home or at her in-laws.

What other recourse would Rajam have should her husband conclude, 'we are here, so we can only live like this, there's nothing for us to look forward to?' Rajam squirmed at the very thought; she felt like shrieking, "No, I want Freedom! I want Liberty!"

It's the man who molds a woman's personality. Essentially, it is the husband who lends meaning and significance to his wife's life. Birth and rearing shapes the woman's formative years, and it is through her husband that a woman is presented to the outside

world. There are women who find themselves entirely changed – either due to their husband's success or even, failure. The husband might have erased the *Kolams* his wife had learnt in her formative years, and created a few new ones of his own. Some husbands are innovators and create new designs in their married lives; on the other hand a few might also come up with their inventions that are just silly and preposterous . . .

"A man never loses his mother," goes an adage. "His wife takes over her place when the mother is gone." Here, the wife is put on the higher pedestal.

"The wife is next only to his mother," says yet another one.

"No wife ever comes close to one's mother." Here the wife is given a status lower than the mother.

"There's only one mother - she's irreplaceable; but a man can acquire as many wives as he wants." This lowers the status of the wife.

Every one of these statements was based on a man's personal experience; evidently all the four are true!

Raghupathy believed: 'Wife's next to mother.'

Rajam felt that he believed that no wife could be like a man's mother.

Why all this talk about husband's mother only?

The wife too has a mother, Rajam told herself.

Can it be true that a wife, who's totally devoted to her husband, couldn't be a viable competitor to his mother?

Then again, can a wife feel reassured that the love of her mother-in-law is same as her own mother's? Let's assume she's totally devoted to her mother-in-law and that her mother-in-law too reciprocates her love and affection for her; does it mean the mother-in-law too has maternal instincts toward her?

What hurts a husband impinges on his wife; for the better or the worse, the wife abides by the consequences of her husband's actions. And that's the reason why the wife's mind is constantly on the edge, and she has to cope with her own insecurity and unsteady love. On the other hand, the husband perceives his mother's love as steady and unbroken. Is this how the dynamics in families are explained?

Let's, for a moment, accept this reasoning as valid; let's treat the relationship between the husband and wife as less than ideal. Then what about the relationship between the wife and her

mother-in-law? If the wife's love toward her husband is insufficient, then what can one say about the mother-in-law's love for her daughter-in-law?

It is not as if only the husband has a mother; the wife too has one; won't she be longing for that love too?

Rajam expected more from life, perhaps a kind of complete renewal, but was forced to accept that everything had remained the same and, furthermore, seemed inalterable. Music had conditioned her to accept that there's a spiritual counterpart to her physical life. Was her faith tottering? The idea disillusioned, and tormented her.

She's suffering from spiritual void; her humanity was on a slippery path. How long will it take it to lose her footing?

By some vicious turn, cruelty now infected her mind.

"I want to die! Get me some poison!" she screamed at her husband, her eyes swelling with tears. She gave no reason; she only wanted to tell him that her life had become unbearable.

"Are you asking for Pakistan?" Raghupathy asked her. "Why are you spewing this venom – surely it will kill my parents!"

'Alas, the man who thought me an angel, says I am a murderer! Am I such a horrible person?' Rajam moaned. Rajam could only respond with sobs growing with a little apprehension that others might find out she was crying. She couldn't come up front and say what's on her mind: 'What are you accusing me of? Can't you see why I hate these restrictions? What more would I need if you honor and gratify my simple wishes? Please act as my husband and don't call your parents a stumbling block. I am no criminal and neither are your parents. You are the only culprit!' But words failed her.

After a while, she regained her composure, and continued.

"I am not asking for Pakistan. Don't we have any other place to live?" Rajam asked. "Let's get out of here. We can always live freely anywhere – even if it means only a humble existence. I am asking for freedom like the Mahatma did."

"I too want to drop dead!" Raghupathy sneered. "That would make you free!"

Rajam cried no more. "You have already granted me the freedom to drop dead," she said, and went on: "Do you really care for me? Am I not your wife? I am now really living like a prostitute – a prostitute on demand!" She sobbed, again.

"What do you want me to do?" her husband asked in an agitated voice. "I don't want you to be called a prostitute because of me! I respect you as my wife, but you don't seem to like that." He went on: "If you really dislike me as your husband, let's live away from one another, as we always did."

The other day, as a loving husband, Raghupathy had promised Rajam to do all the best for her; now he says he's offering her only what he could afford. Is he not now unambiguously telling her, "Expect nothing more from me?"

Rajam's eyes shed no more tears; the heart refused to soften. "Please send me back home," she pleaded with him. "I am scared I will grow crazy if I am here any longer."

"Whatever you wish," replied her husband, who had no inkling that his charitable attitude was torturing her with even more cruelty.

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Within the next three months, Rajam returned to her home apparently for no rhyme or reason.

Visalam grew nervous as she heard the tentative details of her daughter's return: Rajam wishes to come home; she plans to come, and finally she was really coming! Visalam was trying to do her best to avoid a scandal.

"Good, come on over," she wrote to her daughter. "For a while I wanted to take you to a lady doctor to test and perform an operation that will help you conceive. Now that you have recovered fully, this is an ideal time."

She was prepared to give the same answer to anyone who might ask, "Why is Rajam coming all of a sudden?" She felt relaxed by her reasoning.

With a baby on the way, family life will be sweeter, the love between the parents get stronger, and the grandparents too would enjoy a grandchild. Visalam realized this and what she wrote to Rajam was the truth.

Rajam came one day.

Visalam was shocked by her callousness. "We all knew, over there, you were unhappy," she told her daughter. "What can your husband do? This is the job he had. Your father-in-law was already there, so you went and lived with them. At least they didn't come to live with you. How can we find fault with anyone? You have run out of luck."



Rajam's got angry at her mother; "You lived independently from the very beginning," she told her mother. "How can you fathom the hardships of life with in-laws?" She didn't conceal the carping tone in her voice; she couldn't help feeling a little jealous at her mother.

"You married me off when I was barely fifteen," Rajam went on. "Where was the urgency? Was the world coming to an end? Only to kick me out of the house in a hurry, I suppose? Now suffer the consequences! I will stay here and die!"

"I am not sure what you would be saying if you were not married by now, at twenty," Visalam said. Rajam had no response to her question.

"As if getting me married off was not enough, you now want me to have an operation to have a child. My misery is not enough; you want to see me suffer with a child and nowhere to go?" Rajam spoke with sarcasm.

"Look, to hear you say that we would be happy to see you suffer, is because of our sin; my being your mother is a sin," Visalam said, her voice choking.

Rajam didn't soften.

"Where's the doubt? You had me lovingly, that's your bad luck! You too had an operation to have a daughter like me? Why did you have me?" It was a silly question, but she asked it with mounting fury.

"I didn't know you would be asking me these kinds of questions," Visalam said with a disarming smile – like the crescent moon peeping through a cloud.

"So, you had me because you wanted to? You are now advising me on operation and treatment? I can't forgive you!" Rajam said with contempt.

Visalam shed copious tears. "You were God's gift to us. There's nothing wrong in your birth or your rearing," she said. "And what about now? You have nothing to apologize for. You are unnecessarily imagining things and torturing yourself." She finally revealed the parents' confusion: "We really don't know what's bothering you."

"What do you want to know?" Rajam grew angry. "Everything is clear under the sun, for all to see! Give me one reason why I should be happy." She challenged her mother.

"Why not? You can always count on many who are ready and willing to support you," Visalam answered. "You have a husband who doesn't get mad at you. I see the only thing missing in your life is a child." She was careful to act discreet and not to provoke Rajam, who raised no objection afterwards.

'What does she miss here?' asked those at her in-laws.

"What do you miss at your own home?" was the questions her parents asked.

Rajam felt she was being treated as an alien in both settings. Were they not trying to keep her at arm's length? Why doesn't she hear someone say the right words to her, 'Your life is at our home?' hinting a spirit of inclusiveness.

Yes, she had many things to enjoy and count herself lucky: a home, good company, comfort and amenities in both surroundings; still, she couldn't help thinking she's unhappy; Why?

Her wounded heart says so; its scars, yet to heal fully, have taken the liberty to invade and occupy her consciousness; only Rajam understands their subjugation, but nobody else does.

'What am I asking for? Freedom; autonomy and a sense of pride in my life,' she told herself. 'I don't hate my elders; did Gandhiji ever hate the British? He hated only their policies; he vehemently opposed their autocratic rules and the way they were thrust on the baffled citizens. He used no weapons; his was a non-violent movement, and peaceful reconciliation was his goal. Mine is a similar one; I too don't engage in disruptive behavior and unnecessary brawls. I only seek a climate where my intellectual and artistic urges can thrive. I have voluntarily courted this *imprisonment* to reveal my mind to others.'

Yes, presently she sees her own home as a prison; no more does she enjoy the pleasures she had eagerly sought before; her body functioned as a daughter, but mentally she lived like a daughter-in-law. When people noticed her outside her home, invariably everyone asked her the same question: "Oh, you are still here?" A few others asked no questions but simply stared at her, and walked away. It was left to Visalam to clear up her daughter's confusion.

"That question, 'Are you still here?' reveals their high regard because they think you are soon going to be a mother. If not, they will presume immediately that you had some row with your husband. That's how gossip spreads all around."

'Good heavens! How could things go downhill like *that*?' Rajam asked, in horror. 'Many in the past praised me for my aptitude and intellect, and vouched for me; now, they seem to have forgotten the old Rajam!'

She recalled the day they all went to see the movie *Sakku Bai*. She had returned home from her in-laws a few days ago – the first time ever after her marriage.

In the movie, Lord Krishna comes down in the guise of *Sakku Bai* and attends to her mother-in-law's personal needs, and the elderly woman, ever autocratic and stern, is highly pleased.

Rajam wondered, 'Is it *that* difficult for a daughter-in-law to serve and please an easy-going or even a stern mother-in-law? Of course, *Sakku Bai* wasn't perfect in serving her mother-in-law; she didn't always behave like a dutiful one and that's the very reason why Lord Krishna came in her disguise and took her role.'

She blurted out with no hesitation; "Had *Sakku Bai* served her mother-in-law with this zeal, her mother-in-law wouldn't have turned into such a cruel woman!"

Many eyes turned at her direction. An old woman, close by said: "My dear girl, *Sakku Bai* was a blessed soul who gave up all the worldly possessions and indulged in pure *Bhakti*. We could never hope to reach her level."

Rajam thought for a moment. At first she didn't want to contradict the elderly woman but, then, she spoke out: "*Mami*, what I meant was that one could cite *Meera* as an example; she paid no attention to her husband and to the royalty. Now *Sakku Bai* wasn't like *Meera*. She brings her husband a glass of water or milk whenever she enters his room. We also notice that, when her mother-in-law retires to bed at night, *Sakku Bai* fails to bring her even a glass of water – so the elderly woman is pleased when *Krishna*, in the form of *Sakku Bai*, performs even some petty errands. Doesn't it tell us that duty is prized more than devotion?"

A few, from afar, tried to hush Rajam away, and the old woman didn't answer Rajam's question.

But another woman praised Rajam, saying, "Wonderful! I thought you were only an excellent singer, but you also speak well and are good at putting across your arguments nicely." Then, she turned to the old woman – who had earlier talked to Rajam – and whispered, "*Chitti*, do you know who this is? Her name is *Rajyam* – the one I told you sang in the *Navaratri* festival!"

"I see, is she married?" the old woman asked, and Visalam told her, proudly. "She has recently returned from her in-laws."

"The in-laws are really blessed," the woman said and went euphoric.

And that's all in the past, Rajam reminded herself. Now, none in her neighborhood mentions about her musical proficiency. There was a time when even strangers, who had never personally known Rajam, talked about her in lofty terms. Gone were the days when she was lauded as 'Rajyam, our best singer!' Now, even some strangers began gossiping about her, saying, "She's *that* Rajyam!"

What were they actually saying? "How can any woman with an artistic bent, who has no problem getting on a stage and performing openly before the public, would ever function in a traditional Indian family?" was their main point of criticism spoken as if that was a veritable truth. "That's the reason why our ancestors had decreed that family girls should keep away from arts," they claimed. For Rajam, who longed for a 'sweet family life,' her music had become a curse – a sort of neurotic disease. And her detractors explained away her melancholy saying it was due to her seeking "stage fame" that she lost her husband's love.

Rajam understood the outside world. She realized, shorn of her husband's support, she could never claim any respect or honor. Her husband loved her but nobody seems to know it.

"Please come, spend a few days and we can return home," Rajam wrote to Raghupathy. "We can go on walks for people to see us as a couple, please hurry! I used to say, proudly that, only in my hometown, I could walk with my head held high; now I walk with my head down, and I constantly dread even the prospect of looking at the watchful eyes of others; I feel terrorized to even imagine what they might ask me and, if not, what they were already talking about me. I can hardly count on any one's support – here, there, or anywhere. Many seem to think this is not my place . . . I too realize it; I feel orphaned; I hate my life. Please come to see me. I am a little hesitant to say I want to return to Madras with you while I am also averse to say that I want to live here. Only recently I have begun to see the truth that the life we both share is unique; now, more than ever, I feel my ideals have no place in it. This is my choice, and it is the right one. At one time I believed - naively - that one's life revolved only around parents; now I believe every human being is blessed with a unique life. I am a little annoyed how I came to this decision. But I can't imagine my unique life without you. Now I earnestly

seek peace of mind – even if it is only temporary. Please do come without any further delay.”

Raghupathy acknowledged Rajam’s loving command with no hesitation, and came down to see her.

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## GLOSSARY/NOTES

### *Akka*

Elder sister; a term of endearment from a younger woman to an elder woman

### *Anna*

Elder brother

### *Angavastram*

A piece of cloth worn by men during festivals and auspicious occasions.

### *Aupasana*

A ceremonial ritual with fire performed by the bride and bridegroom initiated into marriage.

### *Bhai/Ji*

The suffix *bhai or ji* to a name addressed by father to a daughter conveys admiration as well as affection; it is customary to attach such a term to an elder person. The novel takes place in pre-independence years where national leaders were usually referred as *Gandhiji* or *Panditji*. The queen of *Jhansi* was affectionately called *Lakshmibai*. Natarajan's refrain looks unconventional but, then, Natarajan is anything but conventional.

### *Cauvery*

A river of South India venerated as a goddess. Also a common name for a Tamil female, there are instances in the novel alluding the protagonist to this river.

### *Chittappa*

Father's younger brother; also mother's younger sister's husband.

### *Garu*

A suffix, in Telugu, denoting respect to an elder.

*Kasturi Tilakam*

A Sanskrit hymn by Jayadeva, a poet circa 1200 A.D.

*Kolu*

Traditionally a women's festival when an array of figurines are displayed in the houses during the nine-day *Navarathri* festival.

*Manni*

Elder brother's wife.

*Mami*

Literally means an aunt. A term of endearment used by a younger person to address an older woman. For the older men, the equivalent term is *Mama*.

*Nalangu*

A wedding custom for the newlyweds to relax and bond through games and light-hearted fun.

*Naathanaar*

The husband's sister.

*Paligai*

A marriage custom that consists of sowing germinated seeds of nine kinds of pre-soaked cereals in five mud pots by married women (called *sumangilis*) - the relatives of the bride and the bridegroom.

*Sandow*

A strong man. Natarajan's pet name for his youngest child.

*Shaddagar*

Co-son-in-law. A man's wife's sister's husband.

*Shyamala Dandakam*

A Sanskrit hymn on Mother Goddess Shyamala by  
*Kavi Kalidasa.*

*Vastaade maa baava . . . .*

A film song from a popular Telugu movie in the Forties that means, literally, "Our brother-in-law is coming home!" Here the subject is referred to in singular and Rajeswari chides her younger sister to use a plural as a mark of respect to her husband-to-be: *Vastaare maa baava . . . .*

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Bharati Venkatesan



Naranan with wife Visalaskshi, circa 2010

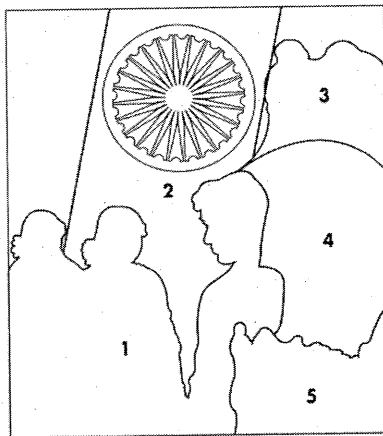
## THE TRANSLATOR

Andy Sundaresan (b.1939) has been translating Tamil novels and short stories into English for the last 20 years. To date he has published four collections of short stories and novellas of Jayakanthan in English and a novel in Telugu translation. His most recent work is *Autumn Reveries* - a translation of Neela Padmanabhan's novel *Ilai Uthir Kaalam*, published by the *Sahitya Akademi*, New Delhi, in April, 2013. Sundaresan also hosts a website to promote modern Tamil literature through translations. You can visit him at [www.kurinijpubs.com](http://www.kurinijpubs.com).

This book's story and characters are fictitious. The setting is India in the pre-Independence years and certain long established institutions and political events are mentioned. But the characters involved in them are imaginary.

### Front Cover

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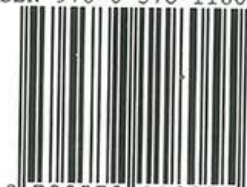


- 1                    *Swadesamitran* issue dated July 7, 1956  
2,4 and 5        National Archives, New Delhi, India  
3                    *Gopulu, Ananda Vikatan* issue August 14, 1955  
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