

SATI

“Maybe you should change the story’s title,” said Tirumala Rao after reading his wife Satyawati’s short story.

Tirumala Rao had read none of her stories before they were married. When he had first gone to see his future wife he learnt from her elder brother that Satyawati was a good short story writer. Tirumala Rao, since his childhood, had never paid much attention to tattle-tales or rumor-mongering; he was curious to know only about the people and events happening around him and their causes. He used to digest a lot of books to understand people’s psychology, their character and motives. Later, that skill helped him in his career as a police official.

His first reaction on hearing about Satyawati’s literary skill was to seek comfort in the thought, “Well, she can follow her hobby as long as she doesn’t bother me!”

Since their marriage, Satyawati had never asked her husband to read her stories; he was too busy with his work. Whatever time was available to the couple it left them little to indulge in joyful company. Tirumala Rao was on call duty and he had to be in uniform always to answer an emergency. When they were together Satyawati talked only about her husband and his work rather than her stories; she felt the case studies and events she heard from him were more interesting than her own stories.

She penned a story based on one of the case studies she heard from her husband and asked him to read it, and offer his opinion.

“What can I tell you about your stories?” he tried to dodge her. “You’re a successful writer. Why do you need my opinion?” But Satyawati didn’t leave him off the hook. She insisted and, finally, begged him for a comment.

He relented, either because of fondness for his wife or curiosity about her story. He read the story and, even as he praised her, he edited some of the dialogues and offered his opinion that she might consider changing the title.

“What better title can you think of?” Satyawati countered him. “The major theme of the story has to do with the flaw in the protagonist and how he was humbled by his opponent; I think the title *Balaheenata (Frailties)* is very fitting.”

“I agree; still it seems a feeble one to me,” Tirumala Rao spoke as if he were a professional reviewer. “Think again.”

“Please, suggest a new title.”

“Call it ‘*A Weak Point*’. That’s a more attractive title, I would say.”

“Why do we need an English title for a Telugu story - as if we can’t think of good words in Telugu?”

“Did you say ‘please’ because you ran out Telugu words?” he asked in a tone mocking her.

Satyawati acquiesced. “I have a request though,” she said.

Tirumala Rao stared at her.

“This is a story based on your case study and you have also suggested the title; so let’s send it out for publication under our joint authorship.”

“No, I will be laughed at if people come to know I wrote this story.”

“Nobody will laugh; a story will look great when it’s authored by a husband-wife team; it will also suggest our mutual affection. What is there to be ashamed of? Do you realize how proud I would feel when your name is associated with mine? What more does a marriage need for fulfillment?”

But Tirumala Rao was unyielding, so Satyawati sent the story under her own name to a popular monthly for publication in their special issue. The story was published even in a grander style in that special issue, the story title prominently displayed in big, bold letters accompanied by an apt two-page illustration. The story was widely praised by one and all with readers flooding the magazine

office with letters of appreciation; the great reception thrilled Tirumala Rao.

Satyawati was mulling over her next story when Tirumala Rao offered her a suggestion: How about a story on the illegal drug trafficking? It would deal with the corruption and the clandestine deals between the doctors, medical representatives and the police.

“I don’t know much about that subject,” Satyawati said, feeling awkward. “Then the story will not be convincing.”

“Don’t worry,” her husband assured her. “You can come up with bare outlines and I will help you with other details.”

Initially a little hesitant, Satyawati set herself up for the task. First she made notes – jotting down the specific details as well as the minute features from her husband’s inside knowledge on illegal drug trade and finally produced a plausible story. Once again, it was her husband who came up with a title – in English.

This time Satyawati was determined that her husband’s name must be included as a co-author. Tirumala Rao protested – this time only mildly – and was mellowed enough to accept her suggestion; he also had a nagging feeling that he had been denied his share of the readers’ adoration for the previous story. Still, he was wary that, owing to his professional constraints, it might not be a good idea to lend his name to this new enterprise.

He offered a middle course; how about sending the story with a pen name that included both their names?

Satyawati was a little hurt that her actual name wouldn't show up; still she felt she had won over her husband's resistance. She welcomed the idea and the couple thought of many pen names. They tried as hard as finding names for their own children. Finally, it was Satyawati who came up with a solution.

She suggested the pen name *sati*: it included two Telugu letters – the first letter from her name followed by the first letter of her husband's.

The story was duly published because Satyawati was already an established literary writer. The publisher accorded special importance to the new pen name. The editor held the readers in suspense by noting he's in no position to reveal the author's identity. The readers loved the story and their excitement had no bounds. The new buzz word was *sati*; was it the name of a male or a female writer? Why would such a great writer, it was asked, write under a pen name? Some said the author must be a man; they questioned how a woman could have an insight into drug trade; how could she come up with such razor sharp words alive with the slang and idioms unique to the drug world? For some readers certain passages and descriptions in the story revealed an unmistakable female touch; only a female writer – and no male

writer- it was said, could evoke those gentle sentiments among the readers. Still, the overriding question remained: Who wrote the story? "Please extend our felicitations to the author/authoress," said the readers' letters to the editor.

Then, following that success, Satyawati and Tirumala Rao submitted that same year five or six more stories to various magazines under the pen name *sati*. Soon *sati's* stories became a gold standard in the literary world; the following year saw the publication of five more stories; still, nobody knew who 'sati' was and the readers' mounting restlessness was held in check.

Tirumala Rao chuckled to himself when he noticed the police officials and other security staff in his division talked about the *sati* stories; pretty soon he too joined them in their discussion.

A few even asked him: "Don't tell us you are the author of these stories!!"

By the time a *sati* novel began publication in a magazine in installments, that magazine's circulation had skyrocketed surprising everyone, including its editor. Finally, when the novel ended, another publisher came forward to publish it as a book; yet another publisher wanted to publish an anthology of all the *sati* stories; so they both sought *sati's* address from the editor.

The editor promised to reveal the author's identity but dilly-dallied till three more issues came out, and finally released the pair's name. Tirumala Rao too softened his attitude when the news about the novel and the anthology became public. Soon after their names were revealed, Satyawati and Tirumala Rao had their photos published in another magazine in its *Ugadi* issue along with worthy write-ups and compliments.

All this didn't diminish the readers' interest in *sati* authorship; they debated on what role each of the pair played in their joint venture. Their queries encouraged some magazines to arrange a face-to-face interview with Satyawati and Tirumala Rao; the couple answered the questions –much to the satisfaction of the viewers – about how they divided their tasks and produced a product that appealed to so many. They peppered their answers, sometimes with a majestic demeanor, and a few other times with cunning and a sense of humor.

Eventually, the books were published and received good reviews followed by awards. Satyawati and Tirumala Rao couldn't avoid any longer their public presences; both gave speeches and it was difficult to say which of the pair got more ovation and rounds of applause; still, that was the time when Tirumala Rao began acquiring more fans and admirers in literary circles.

Satyawati became pregnant; she couldn't sit down and write stories as before. Soon a boy was born and motherhood literally robbed her of any spare time to devote to writing.

As for Tirumala Rao his increased exposure to work and writing boosted his interest in fiction and, pretty soon, he's doing all the writing himself. Because his handwriting was terrible he asked his wife to pen it in her own handwriting; she complied and, now and then, also edited the story.

She became pregnant again, and much to her delight, the baby was a girl. Satyawati always loved baby girls, so the new baby became her total fascination. She got by keeping the son under control while mothering the new baby – along with the ubiquitous duties in the kitchen; Of course, there were servants but Tirumala Rao wanted perfection: only his wife could do everything right.

There was hardly any time left in the day for Satyavati to copy down the stories, so she accomplished that task only at night – by missing her sleep – after the children went to bed. She found neither time nor the patience to discuss the stories with her husband and edit them with regard to their themes, plots or even the titles.

The readers who avidly waited for '*sati*' stories now wanted to read even more of them and their number swelled; soon the fans

began visiting Satyawati at her home. Satyawati managed to send them away when her husband was not present, otherwise she would invite them into the house, entertain them with a brief chitchat before returning to the kitchen to attend to her other errands.

Following the death of Tirumala Rao's father, his wife came to live with her son leaving Satyawati with markedly more obligations. Satyawati had to drastically curtail her visits to literary conferences and writers' meetings so that it was Tirumala Rao who spoke for his wife in those sessions. When asked about her absence, his stock answer was, "How could she come? She's busy with the children."

As their exposure to Satyawati was gradually receding some of her readers began talking about her situation. For a long time her admirers had suspected of something; in their opinion, she was a much better writer than her husband; of late her husband has been doing the writing on his own but insisted on her presence in public forums only as mark of a respect for her. On the other hand Tirumala Rao's fans firmly believed that he was better.

When the magazines published a special issue they invariably included the couple's photos along with their story or an interview.

Satyawati was guilt-ridden that her name was included in a *sati* story even though she had played no part in its origins. She was determined that she would eventually find time to come up with her own. Why not write a story based on the problems she's now facing? She broached the subject with her husband.

"What a silly idea!" he said and rejected the idea out of hand.

Afterward Satyawati wrote a few short stories based on her experiences prior to her marriage; Tirumala Rao argued they didn't do justice to him in light of his current fame as a writer. His abrupt dismissal shocked his wife; for the first time since her marriage Satyawati felt she had lost her freedom.

Until now she had been penning stories with a sense of discipline without inconveniencing others; she often worried how the readers would receive her writings. She felt her stories always followed the same blue print; still they brought her success and a sense of satisfaction.

Now, she was on the verge of losing everything; she hardly found any time for writing and also faced mounting restrictions from her husband; his influence now extended to a story's title as well as its plot; he would admit no editing or changes when Satyawati copied the stories by hand. At every instance he would shrug her off saying she doesn't know what he's doing. Satyawati

agonized it was her fault that finally landed her in a tight spot but, immediately, she felt remorse that she was thinking contrary to her husband. She fought off her mental conflict: she seemed to be losing not only her freedom but also her distinct personality.

Soon after the death of Satyawati's mother-in-law Tirumala Rao, on promotion, was transferred to New Delhi. Satyawati stayed back because the couple didn't want to interrupt the children's education. Tirumala Rao visited his family once in a month or two.

Now Satyawati had a lot of time at her disposal, but she was not free to pen any stories of her own! Her mind was in turmoil; she was confused what to do next, so she subscribed to a number of magazines and read them avidly. Then one day, suddenly, she noticed a story under the pen name *sati*; her husband had neither talked to her about that story nor asked her to copy it. He made no mention about it in a letter or over phone.

'By now he has close contacts with many editors,' Satyawati thought of her husband. "Nobody seems to worry any more about his terrible handwriting."

A few readers telephoned to convey their deep appreciation for the story leaving Satyawati short of total joy. She toyed with the idea of writing a strong letter to her husband, but soon changed her

mind. She hoped Tirumala Rao, on his own, might bring up that story in one of his letters; otherwise, Satyawati told herself, next time he visited her, she would question him at the door step and demand an explanation. She expected such a letter; she consoled herself that she could at least ask him about it over phone when he called.

That was her wish but fate had a different plan. Suddenly, the nation's capital was thrown into religious riots leading to imposition of indefinite curfew all over the city. Tirumala Rao was put on special duty and ordered to institute new regulations for the safety in the old city.

That day, around midnight, a secret message arrived at the control room: hooligans were coming from the neighboring states to foment trouble in the old city. Tirumala Rao took along two constables with him and, after duly conveying his whereabouts to his seniors, he left on a jeep. Soon they reached their destination but saw no constables on duty. The jeep made its way into the lane when a bomb exploded. Escape was impossible and the jeep tripped over. The driver and one of the constables died, mercifully, on the spot while Tirumala Rao and the other constable lost their conscience. In the prevailing frightful atmosphere none living in that neighborhood dared to open their doors; not a single soul thought of opening a window to see the horror on the street

outside. Tirumala Rao was on the last throes of his life when his superiors visited him; he breathed his last even as his body was being moved to a hospital.

Satyawati, horrified at the news, was on the verge of bursting into tears but she restrained herself lest the children suffer in grief. In no time the news spread around and friends and acquaintances gathered around her to offer their condolences; that was when she actually broke down. Everyone said that she didn't deserve such a calamity in such a young age.

"I too want to die," Satyawati moaned, heart-broken and violently smiting her head: "Why did they kill only him? How can I live without him?" One of the ladies, Satyawati's neighbor, took her into her home while others, in their own way, shared their grief with her; they vented their genuine anger at those who instigated the riots by cursing them to their hearts' content.

Tirumala Rao's body arrived in the city where his wife and children lived. His superiors, relatives, friends, colleagues, representatives from the press and literary circles, paid their final homage.

The dailies published the news of writer *sati*'s premature death along with condolence resolutions from several prominent citizens. The regional news broadcast on air that night devoted substantial

time to the late writer and showered praise on him for producing great stories under the pen name *sati*.

Naturally, the death of writer *sati* saddened the Telugu literary world. On the tenth day a condolence meeting was held when literary friends, magazine writers, friends and relatives, assembled for the occasion. No one bothered to invite Satyawati presumably because she was still in mourning and hadn't fully recovered from her loss; even if they wanted her presence, it was stated, and she wouldn't come.

This was the first time that the writer *sati* was being honored without either Satyawati or Tirumala Rao being present.

A few prominent forum members talked about the Telugu literature and their close association with Tirumala Rao; they elaborated on his courage, his commitment to a great cause, his integrity, humanity and sense of humor; others praised his literary service, his craft, including the choice of themes for the stories and their presentation, story plotting, and characterization – all aimed at the celebration of human values through his writings.

The unanimous opinion of the attendees was that Tirumala Rao's death has caused a void in the Telugu literary word. "Can anyone fill that void?" asked one of the well-known reviewers. There were many writers in the gathering and they too, in their

choking voices, spoke of their association with Tirumala Rao, his influence on other writers, and expressed their strong affiliation and sympathy for the late author.

One remarkable item that was barely mentioned – even by a single person among the attendees in the meeting - was the fact that the other person – half of *sati* – was still sound and alive. All the speakers, in one voice, were lecturing on the death of ‘*sati*’ but nobody seemed to have entertained – even for a second – the notion of Satyawati being alive. Maybe they were brooding over the loss of Tirumala Rao; yet, none thought fit to mention that because Satyawati was still around, they hoped to see a continuous stream of stories published under the pen name *sati*. The truth of the matter was, as far as they were concerned, no one ever thought of the other literary *sati*.

So far no short story – either under the name of *sati* or Satyawati has been published.

(Original title: *Sati*)