

# AGNI

C. Radhakrishnan

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### **About the Author**

C Radhakrishnan is an established writer in Malayalam language. A scientist-turned author, he has contributed to all branches of creative literature besides popular science. He is widely read and well recognized. A prolific writer in Malayalam, he has to his credit more than 56 major works. He has been honoured by India's National Akademi of Letters, the Kerala Sahitya Akademi and almost every other body promoting creative literature of the language he writes. He is the winner of Ezhuthachan Award (the highest recognition given to authors in the Malayalam language), and also the Murtidevi Award of the Bharatiya Gnanpith Trust for the best creative work in Indian languages. A multi-faceted personality, he has worked as scientist, popular science journalist, film director, columnist, and editor of national and literary journals.

His works, deceptively simple and eminently readable, have been assessed to be creative contributions to the science-philosophy dialogue. He has done a commentary on Bhagavad Gita critically approaching yogavidya in the light of modern science and, at the same time, also evaluating modern science vis-à-vis yogavidya.

He helped launch and establish Science Today (Times of India), the first popular science magazine of India at a young age of 24, and later held senior positions with national print media organs.

He is a filmmaker too – two of his four creations form part of the Indian Panorama of Feature Films.

His research on problems fundamental to astrophysics gave rise to a monograph titled "Unity of Space-Matter Manifestations", published as early as in January 1988. An article titled "Avyakta: The Fabric of Space" was published in the Prespacetime Journal Vol 7 Issue 16 (Prespacetime Journal (ISSN: 2153-8301), QuantumDream Inc., P.O. Box 267, Stony Brook, NY 11790-0267, USA; is a physics journal which focuses on the origin, nature and mechanism of spacetime and its possible connection to a prespacetime; and models and experimental results on elemental particles, fundamental forces including gravity and related topics.)

<http://www.c-radhakrishnan.info>

To my teachers

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## **Part I**

### **THE HARD MANTLE**

Moosa the village butcher slaughtered his boy assistant today for no reason and walked away God knows where. All are afraid that when he returns, his chopper may fall on anybody's neck. He has no place else to go, so it is believed he is bound to come back. The village is in the grip of mortal fear.

Moosa's only child Amina, a lame girl of seventeen, a beautiful blossom despite the disability, has been missing since last night. She was all that he had.

The name of this village is Chamravattom. It is part of the Muslim-majority District, Malappuram, in the middle of Malabar, the northern half of Kerala. It is not known for human sacrifices. The event has no parallel in written or folk history.

Tourism promoters call Kerala "God's own country". In fact it is just a narrow strip of green land, some fifty miles

across and four hundred miles long, between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. More than forty rivers, narrow and wide, meandering their way from the mountains to the ocean slice it into odd-shaped landmasses. It now forms a State in the Indian Federation.

It attracted international attention by hoisting the world's first democratically elected communist government. The leftists themselves were surprised when they reaped two-third majority in the legislature. News spotlights fell on it a second time when that government was dismissed by the Federation on grounds of failure to maintain law and order, and a third time when results of the next election accorded popular approval for the disputed dismissal.

Countless gods reside here, some native and the rest having come through the many old time ports dotting the sea coast where trading ships from all over the world anchored for eons. Therefore this piece of land has been a crucible of cultures, beliefs and traditions. It has been boiling incessantly but *chaturvarnya* (the four-tier caste system)



has outlived all the heat and thrust, refusing to boil and vaporize away.

Religions freely flowed in. The Jewish settlements are undated. God alone knows what else was already in residence when Christianity arrived here shortly after its birth. Buddhism came crossing the Western Ghats followed by Islam a few centuries later, again from the west. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the British came, traded, subjugated and ruled. The British outwitted the rest, captured the peninsula, unified India by force and heralded railroads, telegraphy, post offices, schools, modern science, colleges, universities, hospitals, tea and a lot more including smoking and democratic thinking. The Mahatma however turned the (round) table on them. They left after dividing the country on communal lines. The infant nation shot its father dead shortly thereafter.

Kerala, like the rest of India, is now supposed to be ruling itself.

Jewish settlers left for Israel long back. Other transplants took roots and spread. Most religions of the

world are here. The caste system is perpetuated through reservations. This provision helped create vote banks by fragmenting the population. Castes and sub-castes, numbering over thousand, now allow everyone to mentally belong to a narrow minority. However, for all practical purposes, the *thrinamool* (grass-root population) now consists of self-contained single individuals and nuclear families.

The consensus is Moosa is unlikely to have turned mad. In fact, he is reported to have appeared saner after perpetrating the atrocity, eating his lunch in tranquility, chewing beetle-nut and nonchalantly walking away. The village has to prepare itself to contain him when he comes back. What really went wrong has therefore to be discerned.

The village is poor. People fish in the river, rear cows and goats, cultivate paddy, coconut, ginger, pepper.... and manage to subsist. Mosques, temples and churches dot the village. People pray a lot, most of it for redemption from poverty. For more ambitious purposes they try to appease deities at hand (represented by various stones implanted in

backyards) with the warm blood of goats and cocks as a matter of routine and more ceremoniously if and when advised by astrologers. Some have their own private (living) god men and god women protecting them in return for whatever is offered.

The nearest police station is ten miles away. Constables are in short supply there. Most of them always go body-guarding one or other of our rulers hurrying about to lay foundation stones for projects supposed to better the living condition of the people which has remained more or less the same for decades. Therefore, these very stones have to be protected by armed constabulary when threatened by popular anger and discontent.

Law enforcement is always late to arrive, be it even a murder. Nobody complains. Complaints are known to be counter-productive. People shoo stray dogs off the dead body and patiently wait.

Police investigations take a long time to complete. Filing of charge-sheets takes still longer and primary justice as long as decades. Then, the appeal courts take as much or

even more time to reconsider. The pending list with courts still higher extends to infinity.

The entire village has assembled at the place of the untoward incident. Everyone personally knows the murderer and the victim. Officials of concerned civil departments have arrived. The ward member of the *gram panchayat* (elected body for local administration) is in control. An officer from the public works department (PWD) has taken charge of the road in front of the shop. There is one from the irrigation department trying to adjudge the trickle of human blood into the irrigation canal by the side of the road. Revenue department personnel have come looking for Moosa's heirs. They are in charge of land registration and taxes. The vet surgeon of the government hospital is inspecting the heap of decaying meat in the shop. Bank officers are holding private discussions with the owner of the shop building.

Down here, checks and counter-checks make executive powers overlap. Which department has jurisdiction over what aspect of a case, has to be sorted out first. Part of the dead body lies on the road belonging to the

PWD. They are supposed to keep the road clean. The traffic department is duty-bound to see that the only bus running this way is not blocked for want of clearance. (The service provider bribes them on monthly basis.) The gram panchayat is supposed to oversee the quality of meat and collect professional tax from the butcher. The vet is in charge of the health of animals slaughtered. Human blood has entered the irrigation canal by the road. The canal also provides drinking water to many. For years Moosa has not paid the land tax due from his small patch of homestead land (eroded by the river decades back).

In case Moosa fails to turn up, his legal heir has to be found. Surcharge as well as penal interest is to be added to the original amount of land tax before demanding payment from that person. That means a lot of paper work. The banker is here to ensure repayment of loan by the owner of the shop building if Moosa's butchery is closed down.

On the non-official side, office bearers of the *majlis* (body elected by the local community of Muslims to regulate religious practices) are consulting human rights activists to

evolve a consensus regarding the amount of compensation payable to the aggrieved party -- apparently without much success, the main bone of contention being the formula for apportioning the percentage of commission among the intermediaries.

The boy's severed head that rolled down to the road from the floor of the shop and finally resting face down in the dust has been covered with a plantain leaf, pieces of rubble placed along its edge to hold it down against the wind. The loose end of the leaf flaps in incessant protest. The rest of the body sprawls prostrate across the shop's doorstep. The tattered piece of sackcloth purporting to cover it is stretched to extreme limits and reveals more than it hides. The pool of blood on red mud has turned black, crusted and cracked.

A stray dog sits a few yards away watching, waging a war of patience with the assembled crowd.

The air is still and silent.

The police, when they arrive, have to be told a plausible story. They generally look for easy solutions. If confronted by an intriguing crime, they end up playing foul,

especially in a case of murder. It is no joke. Arrest someone they must, whom it doesn't matter much to them. Bails mean heavy bribes. Once behind bars, it takes ages to get innocence proved, if at all. The price of freedom hereabouts therefore is the ability to evolve and offer a simple consensus story to the law.

The village has no claims to erudition. It relies on the few literates to find out what a post-card says if one ever comes anybody's way. The villagers have had occasions to see me carrying books (bought at bargain prices from footpaths of the nearest town miles away). So I have been asked to take down what everybody has to say, sort it out and string it together so as to make it acceptable to all and also prepare the simplest version of it to be submitted to the police.

It isn't easy. Nobody volunteers to talk. None desires to top the list of deponents. I have to fight the nausea welling up from within and the swarm of flies that has arrived much ahead of the law. Their fuzz is deafening.

"I'm finished!" said a familiar voice behind.

It was a welcome break.

I turned to find the ‘brain-nair’ lamenting “I’ll die of my damned headache now!”

Genuine despair was writ large on his familiar face composed of squinted eyes, sunken cheeks, decaying teeth and cracked lips. His mouth remained always open to freely let out garlic breath. A last-grade employee of the government (now retired), he lived alone cooking and eating all by himself and spent all day describing his physical ailments to everyone he met or to himself if none happened to come his way.

He had consulted scores of physicians of all descriptions but none was able to find what was wrong with his aching head. His latest physician was a hereditary *vaidya* (practitioner of indigenous medicine) from the village nearby. The prescription consisted of a goat’s brain once daily, prepared with scores of herbs. He was Moosa’s first customer every morning. Nair by caste, he had been nicknamed brain-eating Nair, brain-nair for short.



He went about with a long piece of cloth wound tight around his head. That was supposed to keep the headache at bay. While depositing he kept tugging at the ends of it but it was already too tight to improve. He graphically outlined his encounters with the butcher, ending with the frightful experience this morning.

The police loved graphic representations. Words bothered them, not just because of the limits of the size of their vocabulary. Clever lawyers usually made mincemeat of their choicest words and picked holes through. Fortunately, all descriptions I got from witnesses were graphic. In fact, the *kalamezhuthu kurup* (the caste that fabricates large-size images of gods and goddesses for a ritual also involving dance and music) volunteered to draw the scenes described on the floor of the shop if necessary. He had traditional expertise in doing larger than life color pictures of goddess *kaali* (the fierce goddess of destruction) with powdered charcoal, turmeric, rice and red stone. After the ritualistic song and offering, he himself ceremoniously danced on the

fine work of art laboriously composed to make a thorough mess of it.

### **Brain-nair's first encounter**

“One of these, please” the brain-nair had said on the first day, his eyes glued to the row of severed heads of goats on display in front of the shop.

“Make your pick,” Moosa had mumbled. He was busy chopping meat. He didn't like distractions at that hour. Roughly estimating the quantity of meat done, he deftly gathered it from the wooden base on to the blade of the chopper and threw it into the pan of a balance hanging from the roof, making its iron chains clatter. He picked up a weight and threw it into the other pan to the greater chagrin of the rusted chains. He watched the moving pointer on the bar.

“I want the best. It's for medicinal use.”

“I don't sell anything bad here!”

The nair continued, “The vaidya insists that it must be the head of a young male goat, healthy and good at mating.”

Moosa got up growling. He scratched the gray stubble on his chin and spat beetle chew out on to the road in a long arc. He wiped his hands and lips with the bloodstained towel on his shoulder and mopped the sweat on his shaven head with the same, kicked back the softwood packing case serving as his seat after dumping the towel on it.

“Here!” he said picking up one of the heads on display, “You will have to shell out three-and-half, not a *paisa* less.”

“Krishna, Krishna!”

“Why, isn’t it worth it? Your head and mine may not fetch even a copper anywhere in the whole world! But a goat’s head is precious!” Moosa retorted with a wry smile and made a concession, “All right, make it three. Cash down.”

“Even that’s too high.”

“Forget it then!” Moosa replaced the head on the wooden board.

“Won’t two-fifty do?”

Moosa moved back to his seat waving final goodbye, “No.”

“All right,” conceded nair, “please clean it for me.”

Moosa unsheathed a slim knife from his buckled leather belt. He then picked up the merchandise with his left hand, removed the dangling ears with two expert slashes, deftly made a skin incision beginning at the upper lip, running between the horns and reaching the cut neck. He sheathed the knife, sat down, supported the stuff on top of his right knee and simultaneously pulled down applying enough pressure. The skin peeled off like wet rag. Throwing it to a corner of the shop, he proudly fondled the ware. Red and blue lines on smooth white, hairy holes for ears, teeth bared, lash-less glass eyes arrested in perplexity at the onslaught of sudden death, dried shreds of fat dangling from the neck. “Ha! Made of gold this is!” Moosa held it high for the whole world to admire.

Balancing and poising it in his left hand, Moosa picked up the chopper with his right and hacked just once precisely along the knife line on the temple.

“Cluck”

The skull split revealing hemispheres of brain.

Nair took a close look and approved.

The purchase was packed in fresh teak leaf.

Moosa deposited the cash in the purse built into his belt, “Take some meat.”

“Not today, please.”

“Remember, none ever swims in today’s river tomorrow!” Moosa laughed, “at least try some of that fine liver.”

“No. Thanks.”

Thereafter Brain-nair visited the shop every morning. Later on, there was no need to bargain, no ground for any complaint either. But on one morning he found the shop closed without notice. It was rumored that Moosa had quit butchery. He did not open shop even during *Id* (Muslim religious festival). Brain-nair had to walk to a meat shop miles away. The stuff was bad, the price higher.

One day, on his way back from there he found Moosa’s open with just one head on display. He wanted to

throw away the messy thing he had already got. But he had spent all the money he had on it. He would have to ask Moosa for credit. Hoping against hope he decided to try his luck.

### **The second encounter**

Moosa appeared happy, contented and at ease. He apologized for the inconvenience caused by the closure of the shop. He seemed to be detached. With a rare smile he described how the mercy of Allah helped his only daughter recover from severe fever, delirium and death.

Brain-nair explained his sad predicament and asked for credit.

Moosa laughed with genuine warmth, “Yes, of course; why not!”

Nair couldn’t believe his hears. He suspected whether the import of his request had registered good and proper. So he repeated, “I don’t have cash.”

“It is yours, anyway!”

Nair waited to get the piece dressed. But Moosa did not get up from his seat. He excused himself saying he had a sprained wrist.

“But he was chopping meat all right meanwhile”, observed Nair in retrospect.

“The boy will do it for you,” Moosa had said.

Pleased with the never-before credit facility enjoyed, Nair patiently waited.

“How many goat brains have you eaten so far?” asked Moosa in a rare light wane.

“I’ve lost count,” brain-nair admitted, “Let me see... Thirty-nine, I suppose.”

“That’s a creditable lot!” Moosa laughed aloud, “Forty male goats will now help you think a lot better! But watch out when they decide to fight each other!”

Brain-nair couldn’t but appreciate the joke.

However, the shop did not open the next day and for long after.

The stray dog slept in front of it all day.

### **The third encounter**

At long last the shop was found open this morning.

Brain-nair, on his way to the shop miles away, halted in his track, thanking his stars. He turned and went to Moosa's.

The sun was yet to rise. The shop's interior was in darkness. Moosa sat behind heaps of meat, chopping away. Dozens of heads were on display. No customers were in sight.

Brain-nair wondered why no lamp had been lit and how Moosa could work with so little light. But a close look at Moosa's face stifled all thought and sent a cold shiver through his spine.

"Do I see *yam dharma* (God of Death) incarnate!" he asked himself.

Backing away without taking his eyes off Moosa lest the devil possessing Moosa's soul pounced upon him, he ran for his life.

"I can't believe I made it and am alive!" said he as his eyes tended to go on a quick look around to make sure *yam dharma* wasn't close at his heels. He wanted to rush to the



*kuttichathan madom* (Shrine where the demon-god envisaged as a naughty boy is worshipped) to buy a *mantra* (Secret and sacred word code) thread. Worn on the wrist, neck or waist, it protected one from ghosts. Many villagers, irrespective of caste and religion, believed in its efficacy.

Each knot on the thick cotton thread held one variety of foul spirit at bay. There were thousands to check. Hundred-and-one knots were the standard. The *mantrik* (one who knows the mantras) decided how many knots were to be done after the astrologer estimated the number and nature of spirits likely to invade. Severe varieties warranted special amulets and very bad ones were to be driven away by costly *poojas* (offerings to appease gods) performed in secret at midnight.

Brain nair was sure Moosa was victim to someone's *abhichara kriya* (evil magic); a destructive ritual clandestinely performed to undo a person by invoking a spirit and make it usurp his body. Notorious mantriks did it for sufficient consideration. Unless the *kriya* was countered with equally expensive *prathi kriya* (the special *kriya* to

counter the *abhichara kriya*) the person would go mad and/or die.

“But why should anyone do that to him?” asked Munir, the emaciated young mason of the village, “For what?”

Moosa was not rich enough to make impatient heirs play foul and had no enemies in profession or love. “Maybe,” he opined, “he butchered a *nercha* (an offering to god) animal.”

Male goats were often dedicated to a *jarram* (grave of a Muslim saint) or one of the many deities. These animals roamed free till the day of the sacrifice, usually the birthday of the deity or the saint concerned. They fed on whatever they could find anywhere on their own or was given to them as offering. No one hurt them. The wrath of the *oulia* (saint) or the deity to whom the animal was dedicated was proverbial. In the normal course, not even seasoned animal lifters dared lay hands on them. But it was now rumored that a special gang, working in tandem with a certain mantrik, had been crossing the forbidding line. Armed with adequate

protection against supernatural punishment, they stole nercha animals, sold them and shared the spoils with their protector. To avoid being apprehended by the uniformed enforcers of criminal law, they transported the loot to far places where it was not easily recognized.

### **Munir 1**

Munir's mother suffered from chronic fever and cough. According to the *apothecary* (medical practitioner) the best treatment of her condition consisted of eating mutton soup, milk and eggs. Munir regularly visited Moosa's to buy meat.

One day he had no money. He asked for credit. Moosa refused. But the next day Moosa sent for him and barked at him, "Why didn't you tell me it was for your sick mother?"

But Munir admitted that having thus taken advantage of Moosa's benevolence on many a day, he sometimes tried to avoid the shop even on days he had earned some money as he had to settle more demanding debts. But Moosa found out, pounced upon him, demanded payment on the spot and

got it. At the same time, Moosa insisted that Munir came and took the daily quota of meat next morning as well.

Munir remembered a stranger bringing a fat and untidy goat to the shop, its legs and mouth tied, in a covered basket on the carrier of an old bicycle. In a hurry to sell and get away, he was in no mood to bargain.

Moosa quoted his own price and paid the stranger with a grunt, “Beware! If this thing turns out to be stolen, I’ll cut your throat instead!”

## **Munir II**

Munir failed to find work for a while. Moosa’s shop remained closed so the balance of credit didn’t bother him.

But the day the shop opened again, Moosa spotted Munir passing by.

Munir had no money.

“How is your mother?”

“No better,” murmured Munir, wondering what was coming.

“And you don’t need meat to make soup for her!”

“I already owe you heavily, *Moosakka*.”

“So what?” he snarled, “Does it mean you let your mother die sooner?”

“I didn’t want to add to my debt.”

“Did I ever say you shouldn’t?” He packed a lump of meat without weighing it, “You don’t have to pay for it.”

Munir wanted me to note down that this gesture was despite the fact that Moosa was *Sunni* and he a *Shia*.” Police officers knew that the two sections had no love lost between them and normally didn’t help one another.

Munir’s eyes went humid, “It is an evil spirit that killed the boy, not Moosakka! I clearly saw the *moorthy* (evil spirit) on his face this morning on my way to work. He behaved as if he didn’t know me though I stood right in front in broad daylight for quite a while! Allah be my witness, it wasn’t he!”

### **Dhar I**

Kumbhan, proprietor of Cafe de Kumbha, the soot-stained ramshackle tea stall next to Moosa’s, was of the same opinion. He had been Moosa’s neighbor-in-business for years, from the day he came back after fighting in Ceylon

(Lanka now) during the Second World War. He was proud to have helped win the war by cooking in a camp kitchen. While there, he heard of Kumbhakarna, Ravana's gigantic brother, the most voracious eater ever known. He came to admire Kumbhakarna's appetite. To the villagers, however, Kumbha (literally a huge mud pitcher) meant the owner's remarkable paunch.

Kumbha greeted Moosa every morning, gave him tea twice a day and bought meat from the shop for his business. He also helped Moosa with odd jobs when he was free.

He brought hot water from his *samovar* (tea-making equipment) to pour over the wooden planks set in front of the shop serving as display racks, helped Moosa put down the bamboo basket of uncut meat and shooed the street dog away if it ventured too near. By the time he went back and brought tea, Moosa would have hung the carcasses, displayed the heads and chopped the regular quantity of meat for the cafe.

The tea was sipped in between work. Customers came and went. Bones were cut for soup. The stray dog was given a

piece of bone. Moosa enjoyed watching the dog struggle with it. Then there was a lull in work till the boy appeared with the bamboo basket to carry meat packets to household customers. The lad also brought Moosa's lunch of boiled rice and leftover fish curry.

The boy was an orphan, his father having deserted him and his mother soon after his birth. Pranks of adolescence on the lad's part invited punishments from Moosa, the least of which was a not-so-light knock on the head with the butt of the chopper. The boy fancy-drove a bicycle rim wherever he went. All the time he had one *kess* song (a lyric made at the spur of the moment) or other (of his own making) on his lips and many a livid dream in his mind. If he met anything alive on his way, be it even a hummingbird or a silent butterfly, he stopped to earn better friendship with it. So he was invariably late and it was the same crime and the same punishment every day.

The boy anticipated the knock and shrieked ahead of it, "Oh Allah!"

"Quiet!" commanded Moosa.

If that did not work, the chopper went for a repeat encounter with the boy's shaven head. That made the boy shut his mouth however severe the pain.

“It is getting late, you lazy lout!” Moosa would go on as he helped pack the basket for sale, “You want the entire duniya cursing me for making people eat stale meat?”

A routine trial followed the punishment.

“Where were you all the while?”

“*Itha* (elder sister) asked me to go to the market first.”

“What did she want to buy?”

“Salt it was.”

“All right, I'll salt her meat good and proper today!”

The basket packed, the boy fetched the straw cushion to protect his head, if he could find it. If not, he made a new one. Moosa helped him lift the load to be carried. The boy balanced it so well on his head that his hands were free to fancy-drive the cycle rim. Off he went merrily, making a kess song out of any absurdity that dawned upon him afresh at the moment.



Moosa now took time off to wipe the sweat off his brow, chew raw tobacco, scratch the itching spots on his back with the knife and sharpen the chopper.

The chopper ready, he went back to work.

Chulk ... Chulk ... Chulk...

*Kumbha* remembered the rhythm, interrupted only by an occasional customer or visitor, the arrival of the chap who regularly collected the raw skin or the lunch break that extended to encompass chewing beetle-nut at leisure and a brief shut-eye.

Moosa closed shop early, reckoning time by the length of the shadow cast across the road by the mango tree that stood next to the shop. He made an effort to clean himself up with the blood-stained towel. However, the dried-up blood and the cobweb of fat on his bushy chest refused to budge.

People brought in goats to sell. Moosa bargained hard. He wanted to be sure of his meager margin. However, *Kumbha* wanted it to be recorded that, to the best of his knowledge and belief, Moosa never exploited any one's dire plight. Of course, he chided, hissed, acted tough and even rebuked. Like when the *Namboodiri* (man of the highest caste, a Brahmin) landlord's

steward came asking for help to do away with a calf that had broken its legs in a fall.

“Bury it fathoms deep!” snorted Moosa.

The landlord’s social and caste position was the highest in the village. No one talked back like that to the *Namboodiri*’s emissary. Why, even the steward in his own right was a celebrity.

“Bury it alive?” asked the steward startled.

“Kill it first!” Moosa went on in the same vain.

“Please take it away and do whatever you want with it,” pleaded the steward, “We will gladly accept whatever you offer as price.”

“You could have said that first and spared my breath,” Moosa pointed out.

Moosa worked seven days a week. After closing shop, he clipped the key to his waist belt and went home with the goats purchased that day - all of them tethered to one and the same rope and driven ahead with a branch snapped from a wayside plant. If they resisted, they were dragged all the way however loud they bleated in protest.

## **Ornaments**

Half way home, there was a culvert on which Moosa sat for a while, enjoying beetle-nut chew and sharpening the knife. The goats were tethered to a milestone nearby. He moved on only after performing *magrib namas* (evening prayer) on the roadside.

It is here that the *Chettichi* (woman of the trading caste from Tamil Nadu) offered her merchandise to him. *Chettichi* is a mobile store of ladies' items and curios. She carried the whole lot in a cloth bundle on her shoulder, going door to door, also supplying gossip.

She remembered the first time he bought bangles for his daughter. She was frightened when he stopped her on the lonely road. She tried to hurry away.

“Stop,” he roared, “I won't cut your throat! Let me see some bangles.”

“Of what size?” she asked.

He drew a circle on the ground with the sharp point of his knife, “This.”

She opened the bundle revealing bangles on paper rolls, combs, mirrors, earrings, nose-studs, soaps, talcum powder, threads, needles and what not.

“Of what fashion?” she asked, “Flat or round?”

“Which is better?”

“British are the best.”

“All right, *Sheema* (Great Britain) will do.”

“But they are a rupee a pair.”

“Give me four pairs. Make sure they are not defective.”

She wrapped the bangles in a piece of green paper, “Here, these are the best I have.”

“It is for my daughter,” revealed he, “Have you got the contraption girls hang on their ears?”

He bought two pairs, with green and red stones.

She tried to sell more wares, “Take a round mirror and a necklace of pearls.”

“No.”

“Not even *suruma* (eyelash-blackener)? I have a very special variety.”

He paid her, “Pack off!”

“Isn’t your daughter the cute girl with a limp?” she asked in an effort to socialize.

He sneered, “How does it matter to you if she limps? Did she ask for your legs?”

She moved away as he untied the goats from the milestone, “To be slaughtered, aren’t they?”

“No,” he derided, “to be adorned! Is that ok?”

“O, poor dears!”

“Come along! I will butcher you instead if you are that much concerned!”

“God, no!” she ran away, “Let me go!”

“Good for you!” he laughed mirthlessly.

### **The mantra**

Lakshmi, on the other hand, allowed no scope for any soft corner of any kind ever in Moosa’s mind. She lived with her elder sister. Both were spinsters. They were called *ammayis* (=uncle’s wife) by the village. Being Nair women they could have accepted eligible Nair men as husbands, but they hadn’t. None knew why. It remained a mystery. Lakshmi, the younger, was endearingly called Laks for short.

Laks had been very fond of a goat that she had reared. She called it Anu, loved it more than she loved her sister or even

herself. From a tiny lamb it had grown into a spotlessly white robust beauty. But everybody except Laks was convinced it was barren. So one day, when there was no money in the house her elder sister sold the goat to Moosa.

Later in the day Laks found out and ran to Moosa's to recover Anu. The shop was closed. Laks encountered him on his way home.

"Anu, my darling!" she wept and implored Moosa, "Please let me take her home!"

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Do you know how much I love her, what all I have sacrificed for her?"

"Why should I bother?"

"Let me take her back home, please!"

"I have paid hard-earned cash for it."

"Take it back," she produced the cash, "Here!"

"A sale is a sale!"

"I won't allow her to be taken away from me!"

Moosa raised his voice, "Won't you let me go?"

"O god! Anu is with child!"

“If it is it will give birth in heaven early tomorrow!”

“I beg you! I will do anything....” She took hold of the rope.

“Take your hands off!” he roared

“I won’t!”

“You will!” threatened Moosa.

“All right, kill me first!”

“Your sister sold it to me as she was in dire need of cash to buy rice for supper!”

“She is mad!”

“You are mad, not she!”

“My Anu is full with child!”

Anu moved closer, rubbed its neck against her body, as if beseeching refuge.

“This goat is barren, I tell you! Leave it to me, or I will have to use force.”

“Here is your cash,” Laks wept, “Let me take her home, please!”

“The sun has already set. How do I earn my bread tomorrow? Leave me alone,” Moosa moved away dragging Laks together with the goats.

Laks cried, “I starved myself to feed her! If she fell ill, I kept awake nursing her. She is the only creature on earth to love me! I can’t live without her! She is full with child. Don’t cut her throat! It will be the greatest sin on earth! Please!”

Moosa went on, “I can’t care less!”

The *Namboodiri* came their way, accompanied by the steward. Laks begged him to interfere. He tried to, but Moosa had already moved many paces away and did not respond.

“Did you sell it to him?” the landlord asked.

“My sister did, behind my back!”

“But, why did she?”

“We haven’t had anything to eat for two days.”

“Don’t weep. Let it go. Get another one.”

“She is the soul of my soul. She knows me by smell, touch and sound,” *Laks* wept.

“Calm down! Those who kill anything will be duly punished in the next world.”

“Those who eat meat too will be punished,” said the steward in support of his master, “Butchery will end only if nobody eats meat.”



His master turned and asked him, “How many are butchered daily?”

“Many,” said he, also venturing, “But, isn’t there a saying that the sin of killing is atoned by eating?”

“Despite all the meat eaten, you remain intelligent!” laughed his master.

Laks remembered the last words of consolation from the Namboodiri, “All near and dear will die sooner or later, Lakshmi. *Gathasu na gathasum cha na anusochanthi panditha* says the Bhagawat Gita.”

Laks had been parroting this mantra ever since without knowing what it really meant. The local pundit-cum-astrologer said it meant wise guys did not grieve about either the dead or the living. One had to feel sorry only for those in between, he explained. So, he called upon all those who considered themselves to be no more than half-alive to “come and find out what the stars have in store for you”.

### **Holes in the thatch**

Moosa lived in one portion of a hut on the riverside. He shared the hut with a mother and daughter. Aisha was thirteen

and naughty. She was afraid of Moosa, so watched his movements through holes in the thatched wall. She remembered the day Moosa brought bangles to Amina.

Moosa reached home after dusk. Bleating of goats heralded his arrival. The animals were tethered to a coconut tree in the yard. Moosa kicked the ramshackle front door open. Nobody was in. No light either. He stumbled on a mud plate. Cursing, he collected dry leaves from outside, lit the mud stove and found the kerosene lamp. Attempting to light it he found it empty. He smashed it on the ground and shouted, "Amina!"

She responded from somewhere in the dark.

Moosa went out, punished the goat that bleated the loudest with a warning kick and shouted again, "Amina, where are you, pig?"

Amina limped in and negotiated her way into the hut avoiding Moosa, "I just went out to borrow some kerosene."

"Why didn't you ask the boy to get some from the market in the morning?"

"I forgot."

"Why? What else was in your mind all day?"

Amina enriched the fire in the oven, collected the parts of the lamp scattered on the floor, assembled it, poured kerosene and lit it.

The gruel in the mud pot Moosa had stumbled upon was splattered on the floor. Moosa put a heavy hand on her shoulder as she got up to fetch a mop to clean, “Watch out, you wooden donkey! I will cut your throat one of these days!”

Amina remained passive and silent.

Moosa went out, untied the goats, took them to the ramshackle cage behind the hut but they refused to enter the unfamiliar abode. Moosa lifted one and threw it in, pushed the other on to the threshold and kicked it in.

As he closed the cage, Amina went to him with the light.

Moosa pushed her away by her neck, “Get me something to eat, you bandicoot! I’m famished.”

As she went off balance he helped her steady herself, “Don’t damage the goat-cage!”

He took the pot she offered and took a long drain. Then he sat down. Amina put a spoon in the pot, found a stool for him, served chilly and salt. Moosa ground rock salt between his fingers,

sprinkled it, stirred the pot, bit off a whole chilly in quick succession and drained the watery part of the gruel nonstop on top of it.

Amina tended the fire, cooked dry fish straight and served it hot and crisp.

Moosa ate some of it, took a few more mouthfuls of gruel, remembered the paper packet in his waist belt and threw it to her with his left hand, “Bangles for you. Break it all as soon as you can! Your great grandpa will bring more!”

Amina shoved the packet into a recess of the thatch. Her eyes were sore with smoke and ashes from blowing into the oven.

Moosa softened, “Put them on. Don’t you like them?”

Amina tried a bangle and examined the ear-rings in the flicker of the fire.

Moosa got up leaving most of the solid part of the gruel ordering her to eat it and helped her with the remaining bangles.

“Suits my girl!” he said.

It was a hot evening. Moosa fanned himself with the blood-stained towel, wiping the sweat on his brow with the same in

between. The sky was dark, the trees tired and thirsty. No wind stirred.

Moosa walked over to the goat-cage. The goats turned glowing eyes to him and cried aloud. Laks' dear one wasn't eating the leaves provided. "Mad," he mused, "like the woman herself! All right, have it your way! You can't be stubborn beyond tomorrow morning!"

As he departed towards the river he shouted to Amina, "Take care."

Amina listened to the receding footsteps as she washed raw rice, put it to cook and stuffed the oven with more firewood. The bangles jingled. She watched their sparkle. With the help of a piece of mirror positioned in the thatch, she decked herself with the ear-rings and the nose-stud, wiped ashes off her face and smiled to herself. Her image smiled back at her.

A cat came in as she began dressing fish. She talked to the cat as to a friend. The cat mewed and rubbed its body against her legs. This went on as she ground *masaala* (paste of spices) on the flat stone, checked how far the rice had cooked, adjusted the fire and went out to the goat-cage. Unlike in the presence of Moosa,

the goats pleaded in smooth tones. She told them, “I know you are hungry. Just wait till the rice is cooked!”

“Serve it quick!” said a gruff voice in the dark, “Don’t forget the gravy!”

Amina instinctively put out the light and stood still holding her breath.

“It is me!” Sulaiman moved closer.

“Better vanish soon!” she warned.

“I won’t.”

“Father will cut your throat if he spots you!”

“I don’t care.”

“The edge of his knife is pretty sharp!”

“Sulaiman is of harder material!”

Amina slipped into the hut, checking Sulaiman at the door, “Wait out there. Let me drain the rice. It is ready. Watch out for footsteps!”

As she worked inside, Sulaiman got impatient, lighted a country cigar and kept calling out to her. Every time she admonished him to silence. As she came out, he put out the cigar and dropped its butt.

“No,” she said, “*Baappa* (father) may chance to see it!”

Sulaiman retrieved the butt and ground it between his fingers, “Let us spend some time together.”

“I am sure *baappa* will surprise us today!”

“Let him! I can’t help coming to you!”

Amina allowed him to move closer. They sat jostling. He fondled her, took her in his arms and kissed her whispering sweet things.

All of a sudden, she freed herself as if activated by a sixth sense, “Get away, quick!”

The next thing they saw was a country torch drawing arcs of fire in the air.

“There!” she said giving him a hard push and fell dead silent till his white dress completely melted into the darkness of the night.

Relieved, she went to feed the goats with rice soup. They refused to take it. It remained untouched as Moosa came in and took in the scene. He extinguished the torch by rubbing its burning end on the ground, threw it away, took a piece of hollow bamboo from its place on top of the cage, caught hold of a goat,

tucked it in between his legs, held it tight, poured soup into the hollow of the apparatus, force-opened the goat's mouth and expertly administered the liquid at one go. He repeated the act several times with one animal and as much with the other.

Moosa then sat down to eat supper. He sampled the fish curry and expressed displeasure, "Would have been better with coconut paste."

"There wasn't any."

"Alright, let it go. But why haven't you put medicine on your leg!"

"It smells rot!"

"It cost a fortune! It wasn't bought for its famous smell!"

Moosa stopped eating and commanded, "Apply it, now!"

"Let it wait till morning, *baappa*."

"I said now!" he shouted.

"It smells rotten and spoils my sleep!"

"I see! And the prince of Arabia comes in the night to check how you smell!" he derided and declared half to himself, "I know I haven't punished you enough! That's it!"

As he got up Amina tried to intervene, "You haven't eaten!"



“You eat all of it!”

He went out, washed and came back to apply the medicine. His way of doing it was rough and thorough, the massaging almost brutal. In between he exclaimed, “Intriguing indeed! This leg of yours has stopped growing at age ten!”

Amina suffered the treatment in silence, ate, tidied up and spread a mat outside for Moosa. Moosa made a last visit to the goat-cage. He tied the animals’ mouths tight with pieces of coir rope to stop them from blaring and spoiling his sleep. Their cries now rolled back and forth in their throats like subdued thunder.

Closing the thatch door behind him, Amina removed her headdress, wiped her face and neck with it, untied her hair allowing it to fall back, enjoyed the jingle of the bangles and the ear-rings and fondled them in front of the broken mirror. The still of the night took the jingle to its heart.

“Aren’t you asleep?” enquired Moosa.

“Yes, *baappa*,” she said.

The air inside was too warm for comfort, the bad smell of the herbal oil to boot! She dipped her fingers to her scalp and scratched to her heart’s content. Undressing, she tried blowing air

on herself, gave it up in despair, half-unrolled a mat and curled up on it with a sigh.

Moosa snored aloud. The goats grunted. The planks of the cage squeaked. Two owls perched on a coconut tree nearby question-answered each other. The same question and the very same answer, throughout the night! “Go on!” she told them, “I don’t feel like joining you today!”

She wiped the sweat off her chest and fanned herself with her headdress. She knew by the soft touch on her belly that the cat wanted to sleep there. She pushed it aside saying, “Go away! It’s too hot, you silly!”

But, all the same, the cat came back to sleep beside her. Tired, she slept well despite the heat, the sweat, the cat, the ants and the other bugs.

She kicked off the cat asleep on her bare stomach and scrambled up when the cock crowed a second time. Putting up her hair and covering her body with the headdress, she lit the stove after removing ash and cleaning it, set up a pot of water for tea, dressed and went out to the back of the hut to wash her face from a pitcher. The herbal oil was all over her dress, dried to thorny

stiffness. She said to herself, “*Baappa’s* precious oil! Nothing ever can make my wretched leg grow good and proper, I am sure!”

She opened the front door with a pot of hot tea, “The cock has crowed, *baappa.*”

Moosa got up with a grunt and consumed the steaming tea, blowing into the pot between sips. He then walked out into the pale moonlight and the morning breeze.

Amina released the goats from the cage, tethered them on the mango tree behind the hut, untied their mouths and gave them leftover gruel to drink. Once their freedom to cry was restored, they used it fully. She tried to pacify them by stroking their backs but knew it was in vain. Leaving them to their fate she returned to the kitchen.

Moosa came back with the *mullah* (teacher of Islam religion). The *mullah* was no more than a skin-on-skeleton apparition with a goat’s beard consisting of no more than a dozen gray hairs. Head and upper lip shaven, he had the look of a bald mouse. He taught at the *madrassa* (school to teach religion – Islam).

The *mullah* murmured *bismi* (prayer to Allah the All-powerful for mercy), made scratches on the necks of both animals with his own worn knife, folded the knife, put it in its sheath on his waist belt, accepted the usual coin for the job, re-wrapped himself with his tattered towel and moved away.

Moosa caught hold of the animal nearer to him and kicked its legs under. As it fell flat on the ground he held it down with a foot and cut its throat. The last cry of the animal got dissolved in the blood gushing out. Moosa threw it on to the coconut-front mat. Its legs frantically ran in the air for a while.

Moosa handled the second animal the same way. It was easier as it was smaller. Moosa held it standing between his legs and cut its throat with just one back-and-forth movement of the knife. Released, it fell on the mat and died without much of a show except its genital erecting and unsheathing in a hurry and receding very slowly.

Moosa now turned to the first animal, made sure it was dead by kicking it over once, severed its head after tucking in the protruding tongue back into its mouth. He skinned the body of it drawing a knife line of accurate depth along its belly and expertly

peeling the skin off to either side like removing a wrap before the glue on it had dried.

Moosa skinned the other animal too and then opened the carcasses to remove the innards. Two urchins passing buy got curious and came close to see better. They were new to the place as they belonged to a group of wandering merchants of sorts camping in the village on their first visit.

Moosa caught one by his neck and smeared his face with blood and fat shouting “Get lost, you two!”

Stray dogs and crows duly arrived. They made noises, but the dogs kept themselves safely away and the crows didn’t dare fly low.

Amina brought in the much-used bamboo basket with fresh plantain leaf spread in it. Moosa loaded it with the carcasses.

The late moon lay drowned in daylight. A clean-skinned sun was coming up!

The old hag came to collect butchery waste. Amina avoided her sight. She looked a ghost. Hairless scalp and face devoid of flesh, her head resembled a ripe pineapple abandoned to dry up in the hot sun. She had twigs for hands and legs, always in a tremble.

Dogs and crows surrounded the old hag. They had forgotten all about their infighting. She stood her ground brandishing a broomstick.

Amina served Moosa with gruel leftover from last evening. She had decked the pudding-like fermented gruel in the plate with grilled chilly and grains of salt. An accompanying plate carried leftover fish gravy. Moosa poured some of the gravy onto the gruel, ground the crisp chilly together with salt between his fingers, mixed all, ate the potion, lifted the basket all by himself on to his head and hurried away.

Amina swept the floor of the hut and the yard outside, washed all earthenware with a sponge of coir-fiber smeared with ash from the oven, fetched two pitchers of water from the river and sat down with a pot of tea.

The boy arrived with a broad smile driving his imaginary vehicle. He proudly displayed a bunch of pandanus flower, “*Ithaatha* (elder sister doubly dear), see what I have brought for you!”

Though no more than an orphan employed as an errand boy, she loved him and liked to be addressed as elder sister.

“How did you manage to get it?” Amina asked, admiring its beauty.

“Don’t you like it!?”

“Of course, yes.”

“But you won’t get it unless you smile!”

She put up a smile, mocking him.

“Not that,” he said, “the real thing!”

“Please, dear!”

“Smile first!”

“I don’t feel like, you fool!” she said, a genuine smile lighting up her face.

He gave it to her. She ran her fingers along the soft petals and also enjoyed its enchanting fragrance, “Get me a piece of plantain leaf to roll it up so that it remains fresh.”

“Why, you don’t want to deck your hair with it straight away?”

“I want to bathe first,” she packed the bunch in the leaf he brought and kept it in the cool recess of a rolled-up mat. She then gave him hot gruel straight from the oven and spicy fish gravy to

go with it, “Eat it fast and reach the shop early! Don’t forget to fasten the front door.”

“But why, where are you going?”

“I am going to the river, you blockhead!”

“*Ithaatha*, please let me come with you.”

“If you are late for work in the shop you will have it!”

“It is alright with me!”

“Don’t be a fool!”

“I am coming with you,” he said stroking his gullet almost burned by the hot gruel hurriedly gulped down.

“Go to the shop, I say!”

“Why? I want to bathe too.”

“Do it in the evening.”

“But you won’t be there.”

“Won’t your mother do?”

He did not reply but as she stepped out after packing a piece of soap in the linen to be washed, the boy followed, “I am coming with you.”

She screwed his ear, “I say, go to the shop!”



He took it stoically. When released he stood still looking at her for a while, his eyes brimming with tears of pain. But he took hold of her arm and brought it to his other ear daunting her to hurt him more, “Go on!”

She tried to move ahead pushing him aside.

He doggedly followed her.

“*Baappa* will finish you off today!”

“It’s alright with me!”

She turned back, “Well, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Me too,” he squatted facing her.

“Listen!” she said, “If you are late, it is me he takes to task, you dumb-head! You were late yesterday and I have had it!”

“Did he beat you up?” the boy got concerned.

“What if he did?” she complained, “You don’t care!”

He thought it over for a second and moved off, smiling sadly back at her.

### **Friendly warning**

Kateeja, who lived in the other portion of the hut with her daughter Aisha, was Amina’s best friend. Her husband worked in Mumbai. He sent money, but his visits were rare. In fact the hut

belonged to Kateeja. Moosa was offered a portion of it when the river carried away his ancestral land and the house on it years back. No rent was ever asked for or paid.

Kateeja lowered her voice when she reported to me, “One look at her breasts told me she was with child. They were getting ripe. Her nipples were almost ready to feed.”

At the women’s bathing spot by the river Amina sat in ankle-deep water, in front of a flat stone, scrubbing linen. Wavelets lapped on her feet to the rhythm of her bangles jingling. Her torso was naked but for a wet towel thrown over her back to ward off the hot sun.

The river, almost dry, resembled a rice cake half eaten by rats. There was some water in pools amidst extensive sand dunes. Amidst them a thin stream snaked its way towards the sea.

Amina had not noticed Kateeja coming down the steps.

The discovery shocked Kateeja. Premarital relations of any kind were anathema to the religion and the community. She called out to her in dismay, “Amina!”

“What is it, *ithaatha*?”

Amina followed Kateeja's look and rearranged the towel so as to cover herself better.

Kateeja asked her straight, "You are with child, aren't you?"

"What if I am?" Amina retorted.

"Who is it, you silly?"

"Who is what?"

"Don't pretend not to know what I mean!"

"I don't."

"As if you were asleep while it happened!"

"Stop pulling my legs, *ithaatha!*"

"This is no joke!"

"There is nothing in here," Amina tried to hold her stomach back flat.

"Acrobatics won't do!"

"You are mistaken."

"I am not! Don't forget I happen to be the mother of two, my dear!"

"Shouldn't I grow big if I am carrying?"

"Who is it?"

"Your great grandpa it is!"

“Take it from me: You are in trouble. Whoever it is better tell him early. Is he *kafir* (non-believer)?”

“No! It is a *malik* (angel)!”

Kateeja came closer, put two fingers on Amina’s nipples, pressed them in and withdrew, “See that, you silly!”

Kateeja’s cross examination was cut short by a commotion not far away from them as the old hag came to clean slaughter waste in the river and bathers objected in unison. Meanwhile, Amina slipped away. Kateeja hastened to her and followed her back to the hut but Amina was in no mood to entertain further discussion on the topic.

Kateeja waited further till Amina spread the linen to dry and finished looking all over the place for the blouse she had put out to dry the previous day and failed to find it. Kateeja knew she had no other to change.

“It is the dog,” Kateeja volunteered, “It shredded mine yesterday!”

As Amina continued to keep mum, Kateeja kept an eye on Amina through the whole in the thatch to make sure she didn’t “do anything foolish”.

Once inside, Amina hurriedly examined herself in the broken mirror, particularly her breasts, applied pressure on her nipples as Kateeja had done, watched with rapt attention as they restored shape, got furious with herself and threw the mirror at the dog asleep in front of the door, “You *saitan!*”

While looking for something to wear, she fumbled on the bunch of flowers presented by the boy. She threw it out too, “The last thing I need now!”

Tucking up her wet hair, she lit the mud stove and hastened to make lunch for Moosa. The smell of meat attracted the cat. It pleadingly nudged against her legs. She got angry and splashed wash water on it. The cat, in its turn, quivered its body showering her with the dirty water.

By the time she put rice and curry to cook, she felt tired. She lied down on a weathered mat and immediately slept off.

The boy woke her up, “*Ithaatha!*”

She got up with a start. Her immediate concern was the stuff on the oven.

“Are you unwell?” asked the boy.

“I felt tired. Maybe it was the hot sun.”

“Why did you throw this away?” he held the bunch of flowers out to her.

“Leave it!”

“If you don’t like it, I will take it to my *umma*.”

“The cursed bitch stole my new blouse! Help me find it first!”

The boy went out fast as an arrow.

Amina poured hot gruel into a plate for the boy.

“Ah! Here is my sister’s blouse!” the boy sang aloud in excitement from the courtyard, “What a sight it is!!”

“Bring it to me,” she demanded.

The boy came in dancing and singing, the tattered blouse hoisted flag-like on a long pole.

“O, Allah!” she sighed, “It is finished!”

The boy took the mess to his nose. “It doesn’t even smell anymore of you!” he lamented.

“Come and eat,” she told him, “I will pack *baappa*’s lunch meanwhile.”

The boy went out looking for the bitch and located it sleeping beneath a coconut tree. He fetched a stone, hid it behind

him and attracted the animal with the shredded blouse by dangling it in front of it. Familiar with the boy and his antics, the bitch allowed him to come near it. The boy danced around it playing with it for a while, suddenly put the rag on its head covering its eyes and threw the stone down on it. The animal shrieked in pain. He gleefully mimicked it.

Amina called for him again.

While he ate the gruel, she packed Moosa's lunch. He walked away with it singing merrily about a sultan who ran away in fright leaving his queen behind when confronted by a thief who had stolen a crown and decorated himself with it. Meanwhile he mimicked his hero the bus driver expertly steering the bus with his left hand. The thief managed to get crowned by the people. The queen then gave birth to ten sultans but all of them turned thieves as they grew up. They conquered other kingdoms the same way and thereafter all emperors of this world happened to be thieves!

### **A marriage proposal**

The *mullah* is the religious head of the local Muslim population. He is a respected person. He also functioned as arbitrator, broker and confidant for the community.

For submission to police records he outlined the outcome of a marriage proposal he took to Moosa. Kumbhan corroborated his statement.

“A minimum of ten sovereigns of gold and a matching set of utensils will clinch the deal,” the *mullah* had told Moosa, stroking his goat-beard and revealing tobacco-stained teeth.

Moosa went on chopping meat pretending not to have heard.

The dog, impatient at not getting a second piece of bone, suddenly barked. The *mullah* was startled.

“No gold and no vessels,” Moosa said, “I can offer only the girl!”

“The boy’s demand is justifiable. Isn’t ten sovereigns of gold just chickenfeed compared to the going rate these days! After all, the boy’s family has to keep up their reputation. Don’t you want your girl married at all?”

“Let someone man enough come and take her.”

“You are right, but...” The *mullah* hesitated.

“What do you mean? Isn’t she good enough?”

“Don’t we have to compensate for the minus points?”



“You mean replacing her bad leg with a golden one?”

“A handicap is a handicap, after all.”

“She didn’t have it at birth, you know. It is an affliction.

With the right medicine she will be all right overnight.”

“Is it that simple?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Allah the great alone can help! Let Him!”

“If this fellow thinks a girl without gold is no girl at all, he isn’t good enough. I don’t want him to marry her.”

“Is that final?”

“Sure. Don’t you know I can’t afford even one sovereign of glitter?”

The dog barked again moving a step further towards them. The terrified *mullah* took refuge deep inside the shop.

Moosa threw the chopper at the dog. The dog, anticipating, sidestepped in time. It then went to the knife and licked the blood on it. Kumbhan poured a pot of boiling water on its head and drove it away with stones. Street urchins joined the melee.

Moosa interfered, “Let it live, soldier! After all, I feed it with my meat.”

Kumbhan and street boys stopped stoning. The dog came back to solicit another piece of bone.

Kumbhan retrieved the knife, washed it with boiling water, brought it back to the shop. The *mullah* emerged from the recess of the shop eyeing the dog warily, “In that case, why not give her away to Sulaiman?”

“He doesn’t have a decent lineage, you know. Moreover, the devil is just out of jail after serving life term for murder. How can I trust him with a girl?”

“He killed because he had to. You know the story. Brave boys often get into that kind of trouble. He is strong and brave. He drives heavy vehicles and earns a decent living.”

“All the same, he was born a bastard.”

“But doesn’t the whole world know who fathered him?”

“Did he ever make any such claim? If at all he did, would it ever be conceded? What good is gold under the earth to anyone until it is dug out?”

“He can’t be called a bastard is all I say.”

“Does hair on a dog’s back help any barber?”

“But...”

“What is it now?” Moosa stopped chopping meat and raised his head.

“Nothing,” the *mullah* hesitated for a while, stroking his beard and took leave, “See you later.”

### **Through Aisha’s peephole again**

Amina watched Moosa moving away into the gathering darkness. She looked around, listening for footsteps far and near. The goats tethered to the mango tree in the front yard were unusually calm. Amina took them to the cage one by one, talking to herself, “Do I not I know it! No one will come! Who wants a lame thing, after all!?”

She then went to the kitchen to refresh the fire in the oven. Ants scurried away from the other end of burning twigs. She lit the kerosene lamp and looked into the pot on the oven in its light. The water was yet to boil. So she packed some more twigs, listening all the while for cautious footsteps and a slow whistle. And when she heard both she opened the door to the aroma of his sweat, the glint in his eyes and the white of his dress.

“There you are!” she complained, “The one who comes only when his highness pleases!” she chided.

“I was away for a week on a long trip.”

“And leaving tomorrow perhaps forever?”

“How can I?”

“Why can’t you?”

“Because you are here,” his voice kept growing louder.

She lifted a finger to his lips “shhhh!”

“You are scared!”

“I am,” she admitted, “If *baappa* finds out...!”

“Why don’t you come with me?”

“Come where?”

“Does it matter where?”

“Doesn’t it?”

“Why?”

“Who will take care of *baappa*?”

“Can’t he look after himself? Listen, he does not approve of me but I can’t live without you. There is only one way. Come with me straight away.”

“I don’t want to burden anyone with myself,” her voice faltered.

“I want you, your naughty leg and all!”

“Are you sure?”

“I am, my dear!”

He embraced her, holding her close to his heart, “Don’t you understand?”

Amina whispered to him, “I do...and I am...”

“You are.... what?” he demanded as she appeared too shy to go on.

“No, I won’t tell you!”

He lifted her face up and stooped to bring his ear close to her lips, “Tell me.”

“I am with child!”

“Truly?” thrilled, he looked into her eyes with ardent affection.

Mistaking his reaction for an expression of doubt, she tried to get free in disdain.

Sulaiman exploded into loud laughter. Amina tried her best to control his mirth, but in vain. No amount of pressure on his neck checked the peals of laughter. She tried blocking his mouth. That too did not work. So she balled up her headdress and stuffed his mouth with it. He laughed in silence for a while, pulled the

cloth ball away from his mouth, caught hold of her hand and demanded, “You can’t remain here for a second longer. Come!”

She struggled to get free. Her bangles broke in the tussle.

“I know how to take you,” he said and scooped her up in his arms.

When every other effort to get free failed, she bit into his arm.

Reeling with pain, he let go but insisted, “Decide here and now. If you don’t come with me this very minute, you won’t see me ever again!”

Amina heard footsteps outside and pushed Sulaiman away. He disappeared into the darkness of the night.

“Why no lamp is lit?” asked the boy coming in.

“Isn’t it never too late for you to wander about?” Amina screwed his ear.

The boy enjoyed the pain.

“Go home,” she pushed him away.

The boy clung to her waist, “Wherever you are going take me along *ithaatha!*”

Suddenly they heard Moosa shouting, “Who was it that ran away from here?”

His angry voice echoed in the still of the night.

She went dumb.

“I’m asking you,” he roared, “Who was it that jumped over that fence?”

The boy hid himself behind her.

Moosa moved into the glow of the oven. Amina anticipated the blow any second and kept a close watch so she could move to cushion its impact as far as possible.

“I’m asking you!” Moosa roared again, “Speak out! Who the devil was it?”

“I haven’t seen anyone.”

“Don’t fool me!” he caught hold of her by the neck and pulled her towards him, “What brought him here?”

“Please *baappa*, I....”

The blow landed heavily on her temple.

The boy cried aloud.

Moosa pulled him from behind her the way he extracted a goat from its cage and swept him away with his left hand. He flew

in the air for a while and fell a few paces away wailing like an animal being slaughtered.

Moosa turned to Amina again, “Quick! Tell me who it was. What brought him here under the cover of darkness?”

The boy crawled up to Amina and clung to her.

The second blow, even more severe, sent Amina off balance. She fell down.

“Speak out, now!”

“Please!” the boy pleaded, “Spare her. It was *Sulaimanikka*.”

Moosa helped her up, insisting, “You tell me!”

The boy begged Amina, “Tell him, *ithaatha*, please!”

“Yes,” she said, helpless.

“What did he want?”

“He wanted to meet you.”

“Is that so!” he sneered, “And he runs away jumping over the fence at the sight of my shadow!” He squeezed her neck, “Come on, out with the truth!”

She kept silent. He laughed murderously, “How long has this been going on?”



Amina collapsed in his hands. He gave her a mighty push that sent her beyond the door. He went over and kicked her over. The boy fell on her body to shield her from more attack. Moosa lifted him by his neck as if he was a rat and threw him out into the night. The boy came back and tried to drag her away from him. He kicked her again as she tried to get up. It was the boy that shrieked. She covered his mouth to contain the uproar lest Moosa got further enraged by it.

However neighbors heard the cry and came running. Moosa raged at them, “Ah, stray dogs at the smell of blood! Did I send for any one of you? Get lost!”

Kateeja boldly admonished him, “Don’t kill the poor girl, *moosakka!*”

“She is my daughter,” said he, fuming, “I will do whatever I want with her, even kill her. It is none of your business! Find your way home!”

“Why stop at that?” Kateeja retorted, “Why not eat her too!”

Suddenly Sulaiman appeared on the scene as if from nowhere, “Please don’t hurt her anymore! Punish me instead if you want.”

Moosa turned to him, “You rascal, how dare you teach me what to do?”

He kept his calm, “Go on! Vent your fury on me.”

Moosa delivered a heavy blow to his head.

“Is that all?” he asked keeping his cool.

“No,” Moosa said, “I will finish you off!”

“Spare her, please!” pleaded Sulaiman again, “Punish me instead. Allah has made me strong enough.”

Inside the hut, Amina listened with baited breath. The boy opened the door wide.

Moosa tried to push Sulaiman away, “Get out, you bastard!”

Sulaiman stayed firm.

“Let me see whether I can pack you off forever!” Moosa unsheathed the knife.

The neighbors interfered. The major part of them surrounded Moosa and held him back. At the same time, the rest jointly tried to push Sulaiman away. But he managed to dodge

them and enter the hut to ask Amina, “Are you coming with me or not?”

“Go away!” she said.

“You won’t see me again if you don’t!” he threatened her.

She threw a wooden ladle at him, “I said go away!”

For a brief while Sulaiman stood crestfallen. He then left on his own, his head held low. Moosa made an effort to go after him with knife unsheathed but the crowd held him back and stayed back long enough to pacify him somewhat.

The boy, sobbing silently, fell asleep next to Amina.

### **The second proposal**

The day after, the *mullah* went to the shop at noon, again with a proposal. The air was hot and still. The lone and reluctant customer in Kumbhan’s café had been idling for a long while with a cup of tea. An old man, leaning on an umbrella, awaited the bus with his eyes affixed on the endless road. The dog patiently waited for the bone. The sun, apparently stationary at the very top of the sky, burned fiercely. The mango tree had prudently shrunk its shadow to the minimum possible. Gaping cracks in the open ground on the other side of the road breathed silently. The

*mullah*, arrested halfway through stroking his beard, sat facing Moosa. Moosa was chopping meat. The only thing that moved was the chopper and the only sound the *chulk* of it falling on meat.

The arrival of the bus de-froze all. The old man stepped closer to the road and extended his umbrella signaling the driver to stop. The customer in the café drained the tea in one gulp. The dog left the road, moving closer to the shop. The dust that lay settled on the road rose to drown the bus and all. The *mullah* finished stroking his beard, spat out on to the road and looked into the bus. No one got down from it.

After the bus made a belabored and noisy departure, the *mullah* brought his hand back to stroke his beard, “I’m afraid your stand is unreasonable.”

Moosa went on chopping, “I can’t help it.”

“In that case, why not accept Sulaiman?” the *mullah* proposed again, “What have we got to lose?”

“Don’t ever mention the name of that bastard!”

“As far as I know he is clean, loving, good, healthy and straight now.”

“You forget that a criminal is always a criminal.”

“I am afraid he won’t take no for a reply.”

“I am sure the sharp edge of my knife will persuade him well enough.”

“Haven’t you heard it said that those who have seeds deserve fertile lands, those who are well built deserve good clothes and those who are men enough deserve the best among damsels?”

“I don’t care for proverbs.”

“Does it mean you won’t ever concede?”

“It does.”

“But,” the *mullah* said looking away, “there is a problem.”

Moosa held the raised chopper in midair, “A problem? What is it?”

“You better concede,” the *mullah* fixed his gaze upon the heap of chopped meat, “Ripe fruits rot if not disposed early.”

Moosa’s eyes grew sharper than the knife’s edge.

Scared, the *mullah* got up and blurted out as he moved out and away, “Please take it easy. She is with child.”

When the chopper fell after a few seconds, it was with a force so fierce that it almost split the wooden base. Also, an error of judgment got a portion of his left thumb chopped off.

Moosa took the severed piece of his thumb and tried to rejoin it with its bleeding stem. It did not stick. He threw the piece out to the dog. The dog smelled his master's blood and moved away from it.

### **Kateeja's turn at the peephole**

Kateeja took over the watch now. Aisha had made another hole in the dividing wall of thatch close to Kateeja's, so she was able to endorse Kateeja's testimony.

It was dark inside Amina's portion of the hut. There was no fire in the oven. The lamp had not been lit. Too weak to get up, Amina lay on the mud floor. She had managed to find a threadbare rag to cover herself. She was in the grip of high fever and body pain.

The boy came in, "*Ithaatha*, are you better?"

As there was no response he threw away the basket he had brought with him into a corner and knelt beside her, lifted the edge of the rag and placed his hand on her neck, "O Allah, you are burning with fever!"

She made an attempt to get up but couldn't.

“Lie down,” he stroked her back and helped her lie down again. He arranged the rag back in place, found another to cover her feet, lit the kerosene lamp and the stove.

“Get me some water, quick,” she pleaded, her voice quivering, “I am parched.”

She took the black coffee he made and sighed with relief.

“Put the rice pot on the stove,” she said, making a fresh effort to get up.

“Don’t,” he insisted.

He washed rice and put it to boil.

“Don’t burn your hands and feet,” she warned him.

“May I apply herbal oil on your body? It may help ease the pain.”

“No good as long as there is nothing to stop *baappa* from beating me up again!”

“Don’t you want to get well?”

“I don’t! Let me die!”

The boy approached her with the bottle of oil.

“No,” she pushed him off, “Fever gets worse if oil is applied on the body.”

The boy put the bottle back on the half-wall, “If I were you I would have left long back.”

“And gone where?”

“Where there is love.”

“Arrest your blasted tongue!”

“I heard what *mullakka* said in the shop! You will be butchered today!”

“That will make it easier for me!”

“Should everybody with child be butchered?”

“Perhaps, yes.”

“But, my *umma* wasn’t. Why?”

“You had a father.”

“But wasn’t he far away in Ceylon?”

“Being far away is perhaps a lot better!”

“What good is it if one has a *baappa* so far away?”

“Sometimes the farther away one is it is the safer for him!”

“What do you think? Is my *baappa* dead?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Will I ever see him?”

“May Allah the Most Merciful be kind to us!”



“Why doesn’t my *baappa* ever come?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it because *umma* has married his brother and he knows about it?”

Tired, she drifted off to silence.

“Will he bring anything for me?”

“Yes, a golden watermelon!” she murmured irritated.

“Can’t you dream of something else, you fool? He is dead! Now, keep quiet!”

“You are angry with me!”

Again, there was no response.

The boy brought a pot of hot gruel and tried to wake her up. He did not succeed.

### **The time lapse**

The boy ran to the *mullah* and blabbered out of breath, “*Ithaatha* is dying!”

The *mullah* was just emerging from the mosque after *magrib namaz*.

Together they hurried about looking for Moosa. The *mullah* knew where he would be at this time of day. They found

him making slow progress on the road. The dozen goats he was taking home impeded his progress. The stock was meant for *Id*.

The goats bleated in chorus.

On that day Moosa did not take time off to rest on the culvert or chew beetle-nut. But he did not forget to sharpen the knife on the stone façade.

The *Chettichi* who crossed him on the way that evening described him as nemesis itself. Her hopes to sell bangles for the girl in view of *Id* celebrations gave way to mortal fear. She scrambled away.

The *mullha* approached Moosa cautiously, “Amina is seriously ill.”

“Good,” Moosa grunted, “If Allah ends her life before I reach her, I won’t have to!”

“Listen,” began the *mullha* but Moosa took off unheeding.

A lamb in tow refused to walk with him. He prodded it over and again but it did not fall in line. He gave it a violent kick, breaking its legs. It fell flat on the ground, bleating at its loudest. He lifted it and put it across his shoulder like a rag. He held its broken legs together while its heart drummed on his chest.

A dog came barking at the caravan. The goats got scared, making it harder to hold them in one bunch. Moosa picked up a piece of stone and threw it at the dog. The dog, enraged, jumped up to attack him. Moosa applied the knife to its open mouth, slicing down to its neck. The dog fell back, wailed in agony, moved in circles and ran into the nearest household, its home.

Its master came down with a hurricane lamp, found the dog in agony and confronted Moosa, “Stop! What have you done! You can’t leave a creature in this state. At least cut its throat and put an end to its suffering!”

He lifted the lamp to level with Moosa’s face so as to look into his eyes and make the message better delivered. But one look at it made him flinch. Meanwhile Moosa had raised the bloody knife, but finding his way clear, moved on dragging his reluctant and noisy accompaniment.

The *mullah* and the boy followed him. The *mullah* tried to put in better sense into Moosa. He talked as loud as he can about the duties of a father, how precious and loving a girl Amina was, the trial and punishment that awaited all evil-doers at the very end of the road, the retribution for taking Allah’s power into one’s

own hands and extolled the doctrines of love, forgiveness, goodness and affection.

But Moosa appeared not hear a word of it.

They reached the hut. It was dark, deserted and lifeless. An overcast sky had heralded darkness early. Stars hid behind heavy clouds. Fireflies frittered about drawing uncanny lines of light at random.

Moosa dumped the lamp on his shoulder on the ground, tethered the goats to a tree, unsheathed the knife, held it between his teeth and kicked the door of the hut open.

The *mullah*, on the point of tears, kept calling Moosa and Allah alternately.

Moosa groped for the box of matches, found it in its usual place on the half-wall and struck a light. Amina lay unconscious on the floor half covered by the rag. He roughly pressed her stomach down with his free hand and released.

He found her burning with fever. She did not react to his touch.

The match-stick died out. He struck another and turned her over.

She showed no sign of life.

Moosa tried to light the lamp, but there was no kerosene left in it. Cursing between clenched teeth he rekindled the fire in the oven by blowing into it. He drove the knife on the floor, filled the lamp from the bottle of kerosene on the half-wall and lit it from the oven.

The boy and the *mullah* were at the door. The *mullah* was praying. The boy burst out crying and moved towards Amina. Moosa pushed him out in one sweep. He tried to get back, but the *mullah* restrained him.

Moosa knelt beside Amina, mopped her face and neck with the blood-stained towel, assessed the fever with the back of his hand, loosened her hair, removed the rag covering her, put the towel instead and warned her, "Just wait till dawn to get your due!"

Restoring his knife to its place on his waist belt, Moosa left the hut in a hurry.

The boy fell at Amina's feet wailing. Neighbors heard it and ran in once again. Women among them hastened to attend to Amina.

The *mullah* thanked Allah the Most Merciful as loud as he could.

## **Part II**

### **THE MOLTEN CORE**

Amina was a little better by the time Moosa came back. Kateeja and a few other women of the neighborhood sat with her. The boy curled up at her feet was asleep. The *mullah*, squatting nearby, chanted the scripture incessantly.

Moosa took stock of the scene, “So, the wretch is still alive, is she!”

As the women moved away, Moosa took two small paper packets from a pouch in his belt and carefully opened them. He took a tablet from each, fetched rice soup from the pot on the stove, assessed its warmth with a finger, dissolved the tablets in it and went to Amina, “Open your damned mouth!”

The boy waking up found Moosa in front and took refuge behind the women.

The *mullah* requested Amina, “Take the medicine, dear.”

Amina feebly indicated she wanted to be spared.

“That is not the language she understands!” declared Moosa. In one deft movement he force-opened her mouth by pressing her cheeks together, poured the potion in and held her nostrils closed for long enough to make her swallow.

Then he asked the boy, “Did she have any supper?”

The boy shook his head in the negative.

Moosa asked Amina, “Don’t you want to eat?”

She indicated she didn’t.

The *mullah* suggested, “Bear with her, please. She will, after the medicine settles down.”

This earnest solicitation notwithstanding, Moosa fetched the piece of hollow bamboo used to force-feed goats and filled it with the rice soup.

The *mullah* again tried to interfere, “Why, she will have it by herself.”

Moosa challenged him, “All right, let me see her have it, now!”

The *mullah* fed her with a small spoon made of fresh plantain leaf. She took two mouthfuls. She could not swallow the



third time. The gruel drained on to the mat. The *mullah* put the pot down, “She will be alright by morning.”

“Leave her to me,” Moosa said, “You may go.”

The *mullah* offered, “Let me stay back, just in case....”

Moosa declined the offer, “A dose of medicine at moonrise is all there is to attend to. I can manage it myself.” He told the women, “Better go and look after your own affairs now!” Next, he ordered the boy, “Go home.”

The boy whimpered, “*Ithaatha ....*”

“No,” said Moosa pushing him away. The force of it landed him outside amidst goats tethered to the tree. The *mullah* went to him and took his hand, “Come on.”

The boy, in tears, accompanied the *mullah*.

The women departed.

Concerned as she was, Kateeja kept watching Amina from the other portion of the hut. (This report of events would have had many a hole in it but for that tiny hole in the wall of thatch in between.)

Moosa prepared a wet mop and cleansed Amina's face, hands and feet, shifted her to a clean mat and covered her body with whatever pieces of cloth he could find.

He then went out and took the goats to the cage. It was too small to contain so many so he decided to leave some tethered to the tree. He provided them with leaves to eat.

He came back into the hut, took another look at Amina, unrolled a mat outside in front of the door and placed the lamp on the threshold. The plaintive wail of the injured lamb disturbed him. He took it to the lamplight. Its broken front legs dangled and its stomach looked empty. He brought a little rice soup to it. It didn't take it. He dipped its mouth in the soup to make it sense the food. Even that didn't work. So he force-fed it using the bamboo device.

He refilled the same plate and drank the rest of the soup himself.

As he stretched, a thunderstorm began to brew. The prospect of rain made the goats bleat aloud, the lamb with the broken leg leading the chorus. Moosa tried to help it by straightening its broken legs. It only wailed louder.

Inside the hut Amina groaned.

Moosa applied herbal oil to the lamb's legs and stroked them. The lamb seemed to go to sleep. So he laid it by his side, adjusted his position on the mat so that he could watch Amina from where he was.

The cat came to sleep over Amina's belly. Moosa shooed it away.

When a cool and moist wind blew indicating rain on its heels, he got up to collect the box of matches. He kept it beneath his pillow. He checked the lamp for kerosene and lowered its flame to economize.

The wind gathered momentum. Lightning and thunder came.

The goats created a pandemonium. Moosa got up once again to shift the ones left in the open to the verandah, next to his mat.

A drop of rain fell on his face as he looked up. Scattered drops drummed on the thatched roof.

Amina made a feeble effort to get up.

"Where to, wretch?" he shouted.

She mustered just enough strength to say, “I am thirsty.”

“By all indications,” he said while heating water on the oven, “you deserve to die of thirst, you wretch!” A cloud of ash covered his face and entered his breath as he blew into the hearth.

She took a couple of mouthfuls of water and fondly watched his ash-strewn face.

“Drink it all,” he said, “Don’t dare wake me up again!”

She took a little more.

“Sleep well.”

“I am not able to.”

“Just close your eyes tight!”

Even the mighty roar of rain did not drown the cacophony of goats. Moosa covered the injured lamb on the verandah with a part of his mat, “What a bother you are!”

The hut profusely leaked as annual re-thatching of the roof was yet to be done. Moosa pulled Amina, mat and all, to the only dry spot. He placed pots and pitchers around to contain splattering.

With the scent of summer-baked mud getting soaked, came hoards of winged termites. They shrouded the lamp, smelling rot

as they got burned in hundreds. The ones that lost wings crawled about. Moosa placed the lamp in the centre of a wide and shallow pot of water so that the flies got attracted and drowned. He threw fly-filled water far away to ensure the insects did not crawl back to the only light in the area.

He went on re-arranging the thatch as best as he could to check the leak.

By the time the rain stopped, it was almost morning. Thunder too had receded. But the soaked roof kept leaking. The flies drifted in freely as there was no rain to wet their wings and ground them.

The moon was already up. Moosa prepared a roll of beetle-nut and enjoyed it watching moonlight turning gold in pools of water. The moon, just a sliver, played hide and seek behind streaks of muslin clouds. Droplets on the leaves of creepers on fences had turned into pearls and diamonds.

The oven was damp. Moosa removed wet ash and kindled a fire, heated water, diluted the cold rice soup with it, tested its warmth, dissolved the medicinal tablets in it and went to Amina, “Open your mouth.”

Amina swallowed it, grimaced at its bitter taste, wiped her lips with the back of her hand and turned over.

He felt her forehead for fever and carefully covered her body as best as possible. His effort to make coffee failed even before it began as he couldn't find coffee powder. He tried many a container, came across various odds and ends but not coffee. He watched her sleeping like a child and told himself, "Let her be."

He took the pot of hot water from the oven, blew on it to cool it a bit, quenched his thirst and went to the goats. They were dripping wet and shivering.

A movement at the door of the hut caught his eye. His hand moved to the knife and unsheathed it. But it was just the boy.

Moosa put the knife back, "Why have you come back at this odd hour?"

"How is *ithaatha*? Isn't she better?"

"What if she isn't?"

Amina raised her head a little.

The boy's face beamed up.

Moosa ordered him, "Go back home and sleep!"

The boy ran out into the compound and stood wiping his head as drip-drops fell on him from coconut fronds above.

Moosa went back inside, sat down by Amina, rested his head on his knees and dozed off. The boy cautiously came up to the front door, unrolled a small portion of the mat covering the injured lamb and squatted on it. He fell asleep before he knew it.

The boy was awakened by the *mullah*, “Come. Let us begin work.”

Moosa came out and instructed the boy, “Bring them over.”

The boy’s attempt to take another look at Amina was aborted by a second order from Moosa, “Take the lamb in the mat first.”

The boy lifted the lamb and found it stiff.

“It is dead,” he said.

Moosa and the *mullah* examined it in turn.

Moosa moved out into the open ordering the boy, “Bring it along.” He dug a knee-deep pit, dumped the dead lamb and filled it up, “Press the earth down firm and place a few thorny branches of bamboo over it, lest jackals come and do havoc.”

This accomplished, the boy led a goat by its ear to Moosa. It was a she goat. Moosa felt its belly and udder. Meanwhile the *mullah* was ready with his knife, chanting *bismi*.

But Moosa wondered aloud, “Why not let her live?”

The *mullah*, surprised, quit chanting *bismi*, “Have you forgotten it is *Id* today?” He then resumed *bismi* and stooped with his knife a second time.

“Yes, I know,” Moosa said. Holding the goat away from the *mullah* he asked, “But isn’t it *Id* for her too?” He then asked the boy to take her back to the cage. The boy readily complied.

“In vain did I get up early and walk down all the way!” complained the *mullah*.

“Come,” Moosa invited him, “let us have a cup of tea!” He also paid the *mullah* the customary fee for the ritual, adding, “In any case I have to rush to the *vaidya*.”

They left as the sun emerged to visit the cool and moist earth gleaming after a long and severe dry spell.

### **At the Café**

Kumbhan served Moosa and the *mullah* with tea, “*Moosakka*, what about meat?”



Moosa sipped the tea, “Didn’t kill any today.”

“But it is *Id!*”

“Something is wrong with my wrist,” Moosa fondled his right wrist with his left hand.

Kumbhan called out to the crowd in front of the closed mutton stall, “Nobody eats meat on *Id* this year! Those who are over-eager may bite off their fingertips!”

The Namboodiri’s steward rushed in, “Why does the shop remain closed, Moosa? What’s wrong?”

Moosa said, “Fortunate that I am able to meet you sooner than I expected! I need certain herbal plants from the Namboodiri’s estate.”

“Who is unwell?”

“My wretched daughter is down with fever.”

“I have been sent to fetch you immediately.”

“Why? What is the matter?”

“Please come with me and find out for yourself! The long and short of it is: if a family begets an incurably malicious child, it marks the end of the line!”

Moosa invited him to take a cup of tea. But he was in too much of a hurry to enjoy any, “Later, thanks! Let us go now! The situation is so bad that there isn’t any moment to waste! Moreover, I have just had my usual breakfast of gruel with ghee.”

Kumbhan wrote with chalk on the slate of daily credit: “M – Rs. 3.”

### **At the Namboodiri’s**

They found the Namboodiri pacing the floor of the portico of his *illum* (typical Namboodiri house), lost in thought and much agitated. He did not see them come.

The steward announced his and Moosa’s arrival by a soft grunt and respectfully half-concealed himself behind a pillar of the porch.

Moosa stood in the open, the morning sun behind him casting his shadow towards the Brahmin, almost touching him.

“Isn’t that Moosa?” asked the Namboodiri, formally greeting him.

“Yes, it is me,” said Moosa.

“Someone tells me just now that your daughter is not well. What is wrong with her?”

“She has fever.”

“How bad is it?”

“Very bad it was, but a little better now.”

“I was afraid you might not come.”

“What can I do for you?” Moosa asked, his tone making it clear that he had no time for niceties.

“The household is in serious trouble. No one here has had a wink of sleep last night. Listen carefully,” said the Namboodiri. “There is a young goat among the livestock of the household. It was born here. It gobbles up everything that sprouts afresh in the compound so I have been asking my people to get rid of it. But my wife is fond of it and wants to keep it. However, what my naughty son did to it has nothing to do with all that. He filled its ears with mustard seeds! Perhaps some mischievous fellow instigated him or he did it on his own. He is only eight years of age. He finds pleasure in hurting living things! He gives hell to the home nurse. She must catch frogs for him, tie them by their waist and make them jump till they drop dead. If he finds any crawling thing he takes it to the well to enjoy the fun of it trying to swim unsuccessfully and get drowned. He laughs at live fish put out on

the shore gasping for breath. He attaches a string of crackers to a dog's tail and sets fire to it. He adds ground pepper to the bottle of the eye lotion used by the home nurse! The goat has been beating its head against whatever it can find, bleating ever since. Don't you hear it? I suggest you take it with you and let me have a little peace of mind! I won't ask you how you plan to give it *moksha* (salvation), also please don't tell me about it! You may do whatever you deem fit."

Moosa did not show any enthusiasm. "Butchery is no longer attractive," said he.

"Just hand over to the steward whatever you consider is a just price."

"I didn't butcher today even despite it being *Id*. There is no money in it. I am looking for something else to do."

The Namboodiri stepped down to the courtyard and came nearer. That was a rare gesture of solicitousness. Very rarely did he go that close to any untouchable. "All right, don't pay anything. Do me a favor. Just take it away, please."

The steward tried to help, "Moosa will certainly jump at that! Who doesn't like to have a fat goat for free?"

“But what do I do with it?” Moosa asked him.

“Just cut it to pieces and sell it,” the steward spelt it out to highlight how easy and profitable it was.

“My right wrist has been sprained and my left thumb is cut,” explained Moosa, “I am not able to hold the knife.”

The Namboodiri insisted, “Please end the lamb’s agony somehow. I am unable to witness it any longer.”

“Don’t worry,” Moosa pointed out, “It will die in a short while.”

“If Moosa isn’t ready to take it even as a gift,” the Namboodiri instructed the steward, “arrange to pay Moosa a fee for taking it away.”

“I am sure we can find someone else to take it free,” submitted the steward.

“In that case, why don’t you yourself take it straight away and do whatever you think best with it? I would like to have some peace of mind!” wound up the landlord in despair.

### **A domestic scene**

The boy was up the mango tree shedding a few branches to feed goats as Moosa returned. Moosa threw the bunch of herbs he was carrying to the veranda and shouted at the boy, “Get down!”

The boy slid down the trunk in haste and scratched the skin on his chest at several places. He stole a few steps backward anticipating punishment, “The goats are hungry.”

“What if you slip and fall down head first?” chided Moosa and deftly cut a few low branches with his knife, “There.”

The boy put the branches into the cage as Moosa entered the hut, wiping and sheathing the knife.

Amina was eating gruel. Moosa sat down beside her and opened the packet of *ayurvedic* herbs. The boy served him with a pot of gruel. Moosa instructed the boy, “Put this medicine in half a pitcher of water and boil it well.”

Moosa took the plate with both hands and drained the gruel at one go.

The boy put the medicine to boil and informed Moosa, “There isn’t any rice left.”

Moosa emptied the purse in his waist belt and gave the money to the boy. The boy counted the small change and put it in his trouser pocket.

Amina ventured, “Everybody around wonders why the shop wasn’t open today.”

“I should have and sold your flesh,” growled Moosa, “I don’t know why I didn’t!”

The boy took the goats out of the cage one at a time and tethered them to coconut trees and shrubs in the fencing. The goats enjoyed eating moist blades of grass. The boy picked up a fight with a he goat by pushing it back a couple of paces by its head and letting it go. He gave it a loud clap as it charged him ominously raising itself on its hind legs.

Moosa splitting firewood happened to see the mock fight. He picked up a log of wood and took a few paces towards the boy intending to chastise him but changed his mind halfway. His anger slowly melted into amusement. He returned to work on the logs.

The boy ran out to buy rice wearing a cap made of a jute bag turned inside out and folded back to suit his head.

The *mullah* approached Moosa from behind and surprised him, “So, there isn’t anything wrong with your wrist after all!”

Moosa put up a wry smile.

The *mullah* went on, “I remember the day you took a wild buffalo by its horns! Now you say you don’t have the strength to cut a goat’s throat! I don’t understand.”

“We were twenty-three then,” smiled Moosa, “fifty-six-plus now!”

“Is Amina up?”

“Yes, she is better.”

“Let me be frank with you,” said the *mullah*, “Cut her throat if you want, but please don’t leave her beaten up and half dead.”

“You don’t know her for real,” Moosa sneered, “She deserves to be cut to pieces and thrown to cats and dogs!”

The *mullah* lowered his voice, “What are we going to do with her and the child she is bearing? Don’t you want the child to have a legitimate father?”

“How can a murderer-father be legitimate?”

“It is heard Sulaiman has already left the village.”



“He won’t dare come back!” said Moosa, “He knows if I get a chance to lay my hands on him, he won’t come out in one piece!”

Amina emerged and stooped to gather firewood. Moosa apprehended her, “Why get the hot sun on your damned head and make the fever worse? Go, get in, I say!”

Amina gave up and went back.

The *mullah* asked, “Do you want me to come tomorrow morning?”

“This business is no good,” said Moosa, “I don’t make enough out of it. Let me find something else to do.”

“Won’t it have been better if this idea had dawned before buying so much stock to provide meat for *Id*? What will you do with it now?”

“I will sell it the way I bought it!”

The *mullah* walked away, “Who will buy?”

Amina came out again, “What is wrong with your wrist, *baappa*?”

Moosa barked at her, “Do you not know, you wretched? I have had no peace of mind ever since you were born! I wish I hadn’t begotten you! I work day and night to feed you but as you

get fat and big you don't care a wee bit for me! Remember, his child won't grow up in this hut! I will cut it up and stuff your mouth with it!"

The tether of a goat got entangled with thorny vines on the fence and the goat fell on its side bleating. Moosa went to its help, freed it and tethered it on a tree instead. Amina used the opportunity to collect firewood from the yard. But as she packed the oven with them and blew on to them to enrich the fire, fatigue took over. She fell sideways unconscious. Moosa heard her fall, ran in, took her up in his arms and laid her down on a mat, "O Allah, why don't you relieve me of this satanic child of mine!"

### **Two confrontations**

Moosa met the livestock supplier on the road, "Would you like to buy back the goats you sold me?"

He was baffled, "I don't understand."

"Simple," said Moosa, "I bought a few goats from you. But I have developed a pain on my wrist now. Also, this business has ceased to be attractive."

"So?"

"Why not take them back?"

“A closed deal is closed forever, you know.”

“Don’t give me a lecture on conventions of trade. I have been in this before your father met your mother for the first time!”

“But you are proposing a thing not done.”

“The goats will be given back to you in the same good condition.”

“Whatever is over is over. Let’s not waste time trying to turn ashes back into firewood!”

“All right, in that case let us make a new deal. I have goats to sell. You buy them.”

“I don’t want them.”

“What if I am ready to accept less?”

“You don’t understand. I can’t take them back. I have already invested all the money on fresh stock.”

Moosa left him behind and entered the bazaar. *Id* merry-makers surrounded him. One of them complained, “No meat for *Id*! You let us down!”

The others made a chorus:

“It isn’t a decent thing to do.”

“You won’t be pardoned by Allah the Merciful!”

Moosa, enraged, caught one of them by his neck and pulled him forth, “I know how decent you are! How decent your father was! Didn’t he misappropriate the collection for rebuilding the *juma masjid!*”

Elders intervened, “Let go, *Moosakka*. Why take the boys seriously?”

Moosa let him go.

A question darted from his left, “What good is *Id* without meat gravy?”

“If you are that fond of flesh,” Moosa retorted, “eat your mother’s liver instead!”

Up came another poser from his right, “What would one without a mother do?”

Moosa turned to him, “Dig your father’s grave, you scoundrel. Eat the rot left behind by jackals! That’s what you deserve!”

“When is your daughter getting married?” was the next question.

It was closely followed by “When is she giving birth?”

Moosa unsheathed his knife. The crowd dispersed with catcalls and laughter.

### **The boy prompted**

Amina sat lost in thought. The smoky kerosene lamp spread a jaundiced yellow light. Next to her the boy lay on his side with his eyes on her and whistling a song of his latest making. A queen craved for all the gold ornaments in the world. She wept day and night like the monsoon. Her husband, the monarch, ordered all gold upon the earth to be brought. Tons of gold heaped on the queen suffocated her to death and she was buried together with all the gold. This was how gold got deposited deep under the earth.

“Can’t you do what *baappa* has been doing?” asked Amina.

“I can’t,” he said.

“If you can’t, how do we earn our bread?”

“I will dig up gold deposits!”

“Eat the moonlight and drink the wind too!”

“I will make money selling *attar* in faraway places.”

“Hunger doesn’t get abated by the scent of *attar*!”

“I will get rich somehow and bring you all you want.”

“I will be starved to death long before that.”

“I am serious.”

“If you are, why don’t you handle the goats tomorrow?”

“They will cry!”

“You are a man, aren’t you? Prove your mite.”

“I am bolder than you think! See!” he said holding his hand above the wick of the kerosene lamp collecting soot on it withstanding the heat.

“If you don’t do the job we will have to go hungry.”

“But the *mullah* won’t come tomorrow.”

“Why don’t you go and tell him?”

“I don’t know how to skin and clean.”

“*Baappa* will help.”

“Can he with the bad wrist?”

“If *baappa* can’t, the *mullah* will help if he is paid a silver coin.”

“I don’t think he can manage it.”

“First, prove you are man enough!”

“Enough if I handle just one?”

Amina’s response was a deep sigh of resignation.

The boy got up, started his imaginary vehicle and drove towards *mullah's* house.

“Where is the boy?” asked Moosa coming in after a while.

“He said he would try to do the job tomorrow. He has gone to tell *mullakka*.”

“Did he cook?”

“There wasn’t enough rice, so I asked him to prepare gruel for all. I will drain some and serve you with rice.”

“You eat it,” Moosa said, “I don’t feel hungry.”

“If you don’t eat I too won’t.”

“You dare talk back to me like that, you devil!” Moosa went angry, “Do as I say! Did you take the medicinal brew?”

“The boy will prepare it as soon as he returns.”

“Did you apply the lotion on the leg?”

“I did.”

Moosa checked her leg and delivered a blow to her head, “You will never quit fooling me, will you!”

As Amina rearranged her headdress disturbed by the blow, Moosa pulled it off and took her hair in his hands and mercilessly

ran his fingers through it, “Can’t you at least comb your hair and keep it clean? See, it is all knotted!”

She grimaced.

“Speak up!” he shook her by her hair, “I am asking you!”

She suffered the extra pain in silence.

Moosa let her go and got up to fetch the comb and oil, “You earn for me the worst reputation and also make my life miserable!” He combed her hair, put medicinal oil on her leg and massaged it. She winced with pain.

“Am I hurting you?” he asked.

“No *baappa*,” she said.

### **Love’s amateurish labor**

The *mullah* arrived on time.

The boy dragged a goat out of the cage. It was the one he had played with earlier. Amina offered it the customary last meal of gruel.

The boy took the goat to the usual spot. The *mullah* mumbled *bismi*, scratched the goat’s neck with his knife and, sheathing the knife, took hold of the goat by its hands and legs. The boy held its body between his knees and, at the same,



managed to bring its head up to cut its throat. A wound was made but the goat, in a last-ditch struggle, shook itself free of its detractors and ran away, bleeding. The *mullah* fell down sideways and the boy backward. They got up and followed the animal and made an all-out effort to grab it. But they could not. The *mullah's* beard and the boy's entire body got smeared with blood. The commotion woke up the neighborhood. Many hovered over the fences to watch the fun.

Moosa got up and cried a halt to the absurd chase. The *mullah* and the boy froze. Moosa took aim and threw the knife at the goat. The knife pierced its heart and it fell. The boy and the *mullah* together dragged it to the work spot.

Moosa then went to work as usual. The sun rose amidst a great lot of blood smear. Crows and dogs arrived. The goat was skinned.

The *mullah* stroked his beard, smelt the blood on his hand, tried to rub it off on the trunk of a tree, spat out the flood of nausea and wiped his lips with the towel on his shoulder.

The boy prepared the basket by spreading fresh plantain leaves in it. Moosa loaded it with the carcass and took it on his

head. He told the *mullah*, “Please bear with me. I can pay you for the *bismi* only a little later.”

Turning to the boy he shouted, “Go to the river and wash the blood off your body, you dunce! What did you think of this job? It isn’t as easy as boiling a ripe banana and swallowing it!”

The boy walked away licking the blood smear on his lips and spitting it out. Moosa balanced the basket on his head, collected the knife from the ground with the fingers of his foot, wiped it, put it on top of the carcass in the basket and departed for the shop.

As he passed the front of the hut, Amina brought breakfast to him. But he did not seem to see her. Amina stood looking in the direction he went long after he had disappeared.

### **Laks says no**

Laks was away when Moosa went to her house in the evening.

“What can I do for you?” asked her sister in dismay.

“I want to meet the younger one.”

“She has gone to bathe in the river.”

“I have a very good she goat. I want to give it to her.”

“O no! Not all over again! Isn’t it enough if we are taken to hell once?”

“Let us make amends.”

“None can! She hasn’t pardoned me even now and I am afraid she won’t, ever! She breaks down half-a-dozen times a day blaming me. She has been starving.”

“This one is of commendable lineage, the best one can get.”

“She took care of the other one for as long as two-and-half years. It did not conceive. Was it wrong on my part to sell it?”

“She has been deeply hurt, I know. So let me help.”

“No, please! Won’t it be the same if this animal dies or has to be disposed off! I can’t stand it!”

“This one is with child.”

“In fact her grief made me consider buying another. But what do I do for money?”

“I am prepared to accept payment in easy installments.”

Laks returned at that point. She took one look at Moosa and cried to her sister, “Why have you called him in again? Are you going to sell me too to be butchered?”

Moosa went apologetic, “True, I killed it. But I have come to offer another, looking the same and with child. You may pay as and when you can.”

Laks burst out, “Satan puts on the garb of an angel and comes to pour acid on my wound!”

“Stop it!” her sister chastised her, “Enough is enough!”

Moosa tried again, “I admit it was wrong on my part to kill...”

“Please leave me alone,” Laks sobbed, “No living thing can replace her! She loved me so much! You cut her throat! Did I not fall prostrate before you begging you not to? You didn’t heed. How dare you come back here! I don’t want to see your face ever again!”

### **The boy and the meat**

The boy prepared the meat to cook and lit the stove. All the while Amina had not moved from where she stood leaning against a coconut tree in the yard. The boy said, “How long are you going to remain out there? Why did you leave the meat uncooked so long? It was here right from the morning, wasn’t it? I won’t give you meat curry today.”

“It suits me! You eat all of it!”

“I will,” he said and went to serve the goats with water and take them to the cage. Coming back, he tried to drag her by her hand, “It is dark already. Haven’t you seen enough of the sky?”

Amina shirked him off. The boy sat on his haunches before her, watching her against the darkening sky and enjoying her angry-sad demeanor.

First stars appeared and night lamps flickered from houses far and near.

“I am hungry,” said the boy.

Amina moved in, lit the lamp and served him with rice and curry.

The boy tasted the curry and moved the pot away from him, “I don’t want it.”

“Eat,” she persuaded.

“It smells raw!”

She tasted it, “Something is wrong with your nose!”

“It has goat-stench.”

“The stench is in your mind!”

He ate a few handfuls of plain rice and got up.

“I am to blame,” Amina told herself, “He isn’t grown up enough!”

### **The final decision**

The *mullah* was in tow as Moosa came home.

“Are we working tomorrow?” asked the *mullah*.

“We aren’t,” said Moosa.

“What do you propose do with the stock?”

“Let them live.”

“The boy can eventually take over the hard part of the work.

All that you will have to do is to sell the meat.”

“I don’t want to do this business anymore,” said Moosa with finality and asked Amina to serve supper.

The *mullah* wondered, “Hasn’t this been the livelihood of your family for generations?”

“Would you like to eat with us?”

“Thanks, no.”

“Do you want to rear a goat or two?”

“I won’t get time to take care of time!”

“One is with child.”

“All right, I will take it if you insist.”

“On second thoughts,” Moosa backtracked, “Why should I spare it? Can’t I rear it myself?”

“The rest are either old or barren.”

“Supper is served,” said Amina.

“I was born into goat’s blood,” Moosa told the *mullah*, “and butchered all these years. I have had enough. I am old. I want to give up.”

“But what is your plan to earn your bread?”

“Won’t there be some way out?”

“I wish Amina does not go hungry.”

“I wish she does, for a change!”

### **Misery and after**

Kateeja and Aisha revealed that they were much pained by the ordeal Amina went through in the next couple of days. Moosa was unable to find anything else to do to earn a livelihood. Amina went borrowing from neighbors. She often starved all day and limped to the fence after darkness fell to say, “*Baappa* isn’t back yet.”

“Why don’t you come over for a while?”

“It is already late. If he doesn’t find me there on his return....!”

“Where’s he gone?”

“Allah alone knows!”

“Have you had anything for lunch?”

“There was some leftover.”

“You need food for two now! You could have come and shared whatever we had.”

“Please, *ithaatha*, quick.”

A small measure of rice was handed over in a jute bag, “Has he quit butchering forever?”

“He says he can’t hold the knife any longer.”

“What does one do to keep the oven burning?”

“It is almost a month. He leaves early in the morning, wanders looking for something else to do and returns at nightfall to take it out on me.”

“What does he have in mind?”

“I don’t dare ask him again!”

At that very instant they heard Moosa calling out to her. Amina took the jute bag and limped back as fast as she could. As



she reached the front door, the rice Moosa had brought tied up in the corner of his towel came flying and hit her square in the face, “Why do you wander about after dark?”

He took the bag of rice from her, raised it and shouted, “What is this?”

“A little rice,” she submitted.

“Ah!” he sneered, “The loving daughter goes round begging to feed her father!” He threw the bag away, slapped her across her face and rudely pushed her in, “All ovens will remain unlit wherever you live, you wretched!”

The rice in the bag was spilled out on the sand in the courtyard and the rice Moosa had brought lay scattered all over the floor of the hut.

Moosa left in a huff.

Amina was sweeping the floor of the hut to recover the rice strewn all over when she heard footsteps outside.

“It is me,” said Sulaiman as she opened the door.

“Ah! Here is the great *sultan* who comes visiting once every hundred years!” angrily she closed the door between them.

“I have come despite all to ask you just once again,” he said.  
“Haven’t you changed your mind? Don’t you love me, Amina?  
Won’t you come with me?”

She kept mum.

He repeated the question, “You will, won’t you?”

“Yes, I will!” She opened the door sobbing.

Sulaiman held her in steely embrace, “I can’t live without  
you!”

“Easy!” She pleaded, “Don’t crush the one inside!”

He did not let her go and she did not hasten to get free.

“We are leaving this very instant,” he said.

Overwhelmed, she was unable to speak.

“Ready?” he asked again.

She held him closer and breathed hard on his chest.

“Move,” he commanded but, on second thoughts, lifted her  
up on to his shoulder.

The door was left open. The lamp threw a rectangle of light  
on the verandah pockmarked with scattered grains of rice.

**Sulaiman**

There was commotion as a truck drove down to the spot of the crime where I was writing down the statements and Sulaiman jumped out of the driver's seat. He was looking for Moosa. The elders present together asked him to leave immediately as he was the one most likely to be Moosa's next victim. But Sulaiman said he wasn't afraid. He wanted to help. When requested to report on his deeds during the previous night, he obliged.

He had parked the truck on the other side of the river and used a cargo boat to get across. Many boats-men were his friends as he was one among them before going to jail.

On his way back to the boat with Amina on his shoulder, she warned him about a shadow following them. He put her down and turned back to find the follower hide behind a shrub. It was the boy.

“Let me come along, please!” he pleaded.

Amina heard him and called out to him. The boy ran to her and clung to her. Sulaiman removed him from her, took her again on his shoulder, climbed on to the boat, spread a mat on the load of copra bags and gently put her down saying, “Easy now!”

The boy tried to clamber up the high rim of the boat. Sulaiman pushed him ashore.

The boy wailed.

Amina whispered in Sulaiman's ear, "Please let him come along."

"No," Sulaiman murmured back, "Not now anyway."

"All right," Amina told Sulaiman aloud so that the boy too heard, "Collect him as soon as you can."

Grunting approval Sulaiman untied the boat, pushed it away into the stream and jumped in.

Amina called out to the boy, "*Ikkaakka* will come and take you, I promise. And now, listen carefully. Don't tell *baappa* for a while. Tell him only after the cock crows for the second time. And once he is told, don't remain anywhere near him. Run for your life and get as far away as you can."

The boy sobbed in despair.

"Promise!" she said and sadly watched the boy's silhouette slowly disappear in darkness and distance.

### **The enquiry**

Moosa shouted across the fence, "Is my daughter there?"

A woman's voice replied from inside the house on the other side, "No, she isn't."

"Don't hide her and lie to me. I won't hurt her. Let her out."

"Didn't she come home with the rice?"

"Yes."

"We haven't seen her after that."

"Is that the whole truth?"

"In the name of Allah, the All-knowing, yes, it is."

Moosa called at his loudest, "Amina!"

In the house the woman wondered to herself, "Where would she go now!"

The whole of the neighborhood thronged to help look for the missing girl. Someone suggested, "Being handicapped, she might have fumbled against something and fallen down unconscious somewhere."

Country torches were prepared, lighted and the search began.

"God forbid, but what if she had thought enough was enough?" a voice amidst the search party asked no one in particular.

“Let’s therefore look at low branches of trees first,” opined another.

“She can’t climb any tree, you know why.”

“Let’s look in wells and ponds then!”

The torches lighted up the face of a well. Moosa entered it, remained submerged for a good while and surfaced empty-handed. He climbed ashore dripping. They went to the village pond next. There was not much of water in it. Many went in to search. Moosa found a piece of cloth.

“Is that what she wore....?”

“It looks too old to be,” someone said.

It changed hands a few times and was discarded.

Gradually, the members of the search party lost interest, more so after a rumor gathered ground, “She might have eloped.”

“But she had publicly refused to go with him. Do you mean he came back despite the insult?”

“All said and done, he is a nice fellow for all I know. He might have.”

“Would she have dared....?”

“What else could she do?”

“But why go away without a word to anyone!”

“If she had stayed back to tell someone she couldn’t have got much of a chance to go at all! That’s why!”

This line of thinking gradually gained general approval.

The crowd told Moosa: “Don’t bother to drown yourself in the mud of the pond!”

“You won’t find her in any well or pond.”

“She’s gone!”

“He has come and taken her away with him!”

Independent discussions followed:

“Where does he live?”

“He used to run a cargo boat service.”

“In that case, this cargo is safe in his boat at the moment!”

The crowd thinned out.

Moosa searched every nook and corner of the hut -- behind the half wall, inside the roll of mat, in the makeshift bathroom and in the recesses of the kitchen. He stood stunned and bewildered for a while holding the burning torch hissing and crackling. He suddenly felt he saw her moving in the yard but it was her blouse put out to dry. A stealthy night-wind had moved it.

He refused to believe it, but he had to at long last: Sulaiman had taken her away by the river. He hurried to the river and scanned the wide expanse of darkness for the sound and sign of any boat moving. He found nothing.

He ran upriver. The torch burned out. He threw it away and groped in the dark. As he spotted a boat moving downstream in the distance and heard its overboard motor he relieved himself of his belt, unsheathed the knife and waited for the boat to come abreast. When it did he held the knife between his teeth, dived into the water, swam towards it silent and quick it like a water snake. Reaching it he held on to it, raised his head above its rim and looked in. The boat swayed. The boatmen thought it was someone trying to escape from a watery grave and helped him in.

He removed the knife from his mouth, "Where is my daughter?"

"What do you mean? There is only copra in the boat."

Moosa searched the boat in vain.

"Where is Sulaiman?"

"We don't know."

"Did you see his boat?"



“We didn’t.”

“Did he go upstream or down?”

“We have no idea. Please don’t wet the copra anymore.”

### **The boy’s mother**

The boy’s sobbing mother told us what happened next.

The boy did not sleep a wink during the night, revealed she.

He woke her up again and again with the same question, “*Umma*, has the cock crowed a second time?”

“Why don’t you sleep awhile? What is bothering you?”

“Did the midnight cock crow?”

“I will stuff your mouth with dirty rags if you don’t keep quiet! What is special about the cock crowing? Is His Highness your father expected to land from Ceylon at that unholy hour?”

He refused to be silenced by any threat or thwart. After a few seconds he again woke her up, “*Umma!*”

“You dare again!”

“*Aminathatha* is gone!”

“Good for her! Let her go and live in *Bilathi* (London) if she wants!”

“She went east in a boat.”

The mother turned her back to him.

“Do you hear me?”

“Don’t worry about me. Keep reciting your scripture! Go on!”

“Listen!”

“I don’t want to!”

“She went with *Sulaimanikka!*”

It was at this point that she heard Moosa calling the boy from outside.

“Who is it?” she asked though she knew.

The boy pretended to be deep asleep. His mother groped beneath her pillow for the box of matches and lit the lamp. She put her headdress in place and opened the door.

“Where is the boy?” Moosa came into the circle of light, knife held firm. He looked anger incarnate. She was frightened.

“Why at this hour?” she asked, shivering.

“Amina is missing. Perhaps he knows where she is.”

“I don’t think so,” she ventured, “he is fast asleep.”

“Wake him up.”

She tried her best but he deliberately took a long time to come awake.

“Where’s Amina gone?” Moosa asked him.

He pretended to be too sleepy to comprehend.

“Where did she go?” Moosa continued.

The cock crowed just then.

He sleepily got up, quietly slipped beyond Moosa and ran out into the darkness saying, “She went away with *Sulaimanikka* in a boat.”

“Which way did they go, upstream or down?”

“Westward.”

This was a deliberate lie. The truth was just the opposite.

“Why did you not let me know soon enough?”

His mother pleaded for him, “He fell asleep the moment he came in.”

Moosa disappeared into the darkness as suddenly as he had come out of it.

## **Part III**

### **THE ERUPTION**

Moosa entered the hut in the dark, made an attempt to light the lamp but threw it down on the floor as he found it without fuel. Instead he re-kindled the oven by blowing into it and searched the interior once again in its light.

The cat was asleep on the kitchen floor after toppling the pot of cooked rice and eating most of it. Moosa lifted it up by its ear, cut its neck clean and threw its head away and out, lifted its body by the tail and threw out that too. He then went out, sat down, looked for the beetle-nut pack but he had forgotten the belt together with the pack and all on the river bank.

The light in the hut made the goats in the cage bleat aloud. Moosa went to the cage, pulled out the one bleating the loudest, lead it to the yard by its ear, held it between his legs, lifted its head up with his left hand and cut its throat.

The remaining goats bleated all the more louder as if warned by some sixth sense. Moosa took them out one by one,

butchered them all and heaped the carcasses on the veranda of the hut. He was bathed in blood.

Deathly silence prevailed.

Moosa made a couple of country torches with dry coconut fronds, lit one and went to work. The carcasses were skinned and cleaned. He made three trips to the shop with the basket on his head, burning the torches out one by one. When he reached the shop for the first time he found he had no key. He broke the lock open with a kick. As he returned to the hut to fill the basket, he found dogs feasting on the carcasses. He threw the knife at one of them, killing it instantly. Coming back to the shop with the last head-load he saw the street dog emerging from within. He threw the knife at it but experience helped it sidestep in time.

The light in the east gained ground. From black the sky turned purple to pink and grey. Moosa supplied Kumbhan with meat. He worked relentlessly and sweated profusely as the day broke and soon grew hot. He did not speak a word to anyone. When all meat was chopped, he went to work on the bones.

He threw chunks of meat to the street dog. The dog produced sounds of joy and devoured to its fill. As more meat came its way, it lay prostrate before the profuse supply guarding it

against crows and other mongrels as it couldn't take any more but, at the same time, didn't want to lose any part of the booty.

No other customer came to buy. The Muslim population abstained as the rumor that the meat was not *halal* spread fast. Customers from other communities were driven away by the very look on Moosa's face.

The sun reached the pinnacle of the sky.

The boy came with the basket prepared to carry meat packets and the lunch he had cooked. He was surprised at the huge amount of meat heaped up for disposal.

Moosa took the basket from the boy and mechanically filled it with meat and deposited fresh teak leaves and a balance on top of it.

The boy got himself ready by positioning the cushion in place on his clean-shaven scalp. Moosa lifted the basket and placed it on the boy's head. The load was too heavy for the boy to bear. He fell backward. The content of the basket got scattered on the mud road.

The boy immediately got up and held the basket back so that as much meat as possible was saved from coming into contact with mud and dirt.

Moosa chopped his head off.

The severed head falling on the meat rolled on to the dust beyond. The body convulsed as if to pump more and more blood out of it. It then went listless.

All those who had been waiting for the bus in the shadow of the mango tree took flight in fright.

The bus almost coming to a stop speeded away as the driver saw the boy's headless body on the road.

Kumbhan woken up by the roar of the bus saw the severed head and ventured a look into the shop. Moosa was nonchalantly eating lunch.

He sneaked away deserting his shop but waited at a vantage point some distance away, watching.

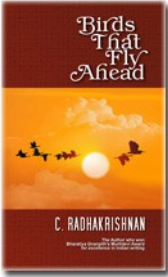
He saw Moosa walking away, unmindful of what he was leaving behind and apparently not knowing or caring where he went.

The village as a whole is afraid that he may come back the same way. But none knows when and what to do if he does. That the police may arrive before him is the only hope. But if experience is any guide, they may not.

Whichever way one looks at it, the story does not end here.

## Fictional works of the Author:

### Birds That Fly Ahead



This book presents many an untold part of the left-extremist upsurge that took place in India four decades back and the way it has influenced the fabric of life ever since. It has been a bestseller running into more than a dozen editions and winning as many major awards.

It is a modern Indian classic, the work of a master craftsman, different in style, rich in content, revealing and invigorating.

### Heart-Rending Times



How much can a woman take without breaking down? A great lot more than ever imagined is what this book portrays. Most epics and, later, classical works of literature have women made to walk on fire, but Anuradha lives in a veritable inferno. At critical moments of despair and pain she is surprised by the array of



strange personalities emerging from deep within her own self.

In ways how unusual can a man love a woman? No one can say is what one will think after experiencing this saga. How selfish and cruel can intense love turn when spurned? As much as one finds in here.

What does vengeance do to the person in his teens harboring it? And what all drives a mother to act in ways so bewildering in circumstances never faced before in human history?

### [Now For a Tearful Smile](#)

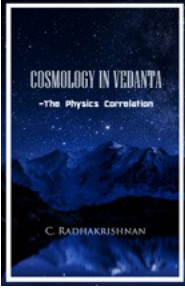


This book is a unique and poignant love story of two very special people living under assumed identities for different reasons; and a thriller chasing the intriguing tentacles of espionage activities and the untold stories behind political assassinations in India. The translator notes: “This landmark novel, a socio-political silhouette of contemporary India, is a poignant juxtaposition of materialism and spirituality, contemporary geopolitics and history in the making, India and the world, urban and tribal cultures, tragedy and comedy, saints and sinners, displacement and assimilation, cyanide tablets and self-healing, arms and man, war and peace, hospitals and hermitages... innumerable are the strands that form the warp and weft of this literary milestone. It thrills, threatens, moves, shocks, calms and exhilarates!”

## Non-fictional works from the Author:

### *Free e-book:*

### [Cosmology in Vedanta – The Physics Correlation](#)



This is the free e-book of the famous work 'The Secret Behind the Universe' by the physicist turned author C. Radhakrishnan.

Exploring the secrets of the Universe as far as physics can go, and even beyond.. along with its Vedantic integration.

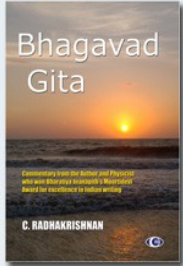
This book is divided into two sections. The first section is a work in physics which presents an in-depth exploration of Avyakta – the hidden metaphysical reality behind the apparent universe - through scientific study. A condensed version of this part has been published in the Prespacetime Journal Vol 7 Issue 16 on 08/01/2017, titled "Avyakta – The Fabric of Space". This section of the book attempts to explore the role of avyakta behind various phenomena like matter waves, – energy in the vacuum state, spiral

The second section of the book presents in-depth study of cosmology as outlined in ancient Indian Philosophy, researching from the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads. Since God cannot be considered in physics due to lack of experimental evidence, this section is provided as a separate part!

The first book of its kind, it brings the diverse fields of Science and Philosophy into face-to-face contact.

[The free e-book is available from kobo here](#)

## **Bhagavad Gita** **(Modern Reading and Scientific Study)**



This book contains in-depth study on ancient Indian philosophy and scientific analysis of Vedantic cosmology. In contrast to old and monopolized religious commentaries on the Gita, it brings out the essence of Vedanta in its clear and pristine form, devoid of all religious consideration or superstition. This is the first ever scientific reading of the Gita. It is the guide, friend and companion to a new age – an age of oneness devoid of sectarianism and divisive tendencies – the future of mankind.

The work contains the Sanskrit text of the Gita in roman script plus simple translation of every verse. Sanskrit terms used in the Gita are retained and explained clearly in the commentary. All concepts however deep are presented lucidly making it very easy for objective interpretation even for the beginner.

This mega work establishes how the wisdom provided in the Gita can help anyone lead a successful and happy life irrespective of religion, gender, nationality, caste or creed, successfully integrating the Vedantic path with modern life in unbiased, simple and practical manner. (No self-help books required anymore!).

The book is available from all leading booksellers. E-book is available from Amazon kindle.

**[E-book is also available from kobo.](#)**