

## People vs Pesticide

Rukmini and Venkat sat on the stone platform built around the base of the large *peepal* tree in the heart of the SERVICE campus. Dappled morning sunlight fell on them through the dancing leaves, as they sipped their morning cups of tea, and shared a plate of hot *pakodas*. Rukmini was still in her blue house-dress, while Venkat was already quite ready for work, bathed, shaved, and dressed in jeans.

“The old goat wants to impress the foreigners with that silly play he has written,” said Rukmini, “it is so silly, I am afraid everyone will laugh and we will look ridiculous.”

Venkat was giving her a strange look, a half-smile on his face. “Oh, I thought you were his pet lamb,” he said. “Have you fallen out with him, or something?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, arching her eyebrow. “I had never fallen into him. This is a very good job, Venkat, or even you wouldn’t be here for half a second. If I can get a permanent job in a good company, I would be off.”

“Don’t put me off,” said Venkat, still smiling. “Has he made it with you? Come now, you can tell me.”

“Nothing is going on,” she said. “I am not interested in him.”

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“I don’t want to insult you ever, Ruku,” said Venkat softly. “Just want to know if he has had the courage to make a pass at you. Is he any good?”

Rukmini drained her cup, got up, and flicked a long finger against his cheek. “No one is as good as you,” she said, walking back to her room.

The campus was beginning to fill up with gaily decorated bullock carts, and choruses of traditional songs could be heard from groups of women, who were sitting down in circles to light a fire and make their breakfast. Sharmaji had declared a *mela*, and all the poor women and their children were invited, from all the neighbouring villages, which he dominated. Of course, many of the men were also there, driving the carts, putting up *shamianas*, supervising the work.

Nagaraju came striding across from between the groups of squatting women. He was tall and handsome, with a full, black moustache, oiled and curved. Even his village-made *chappals* looked masculine, the way he stood with his left foot trust out. “Rukmini amma! I am looking for you all over,” he said smiling into her face, as she came out of her room, freshly dressed in a printed nylon sari. “Nothing will be done right, unless you come and stand there. They have not even started to cook the big meal, and the stage is falling to pieces!”