

*Chinna* or ‘small’ Latchmama, or Latchi, as she was called by all, was left at the village centre, rather than quite abandoned by her mother *Pedda* or ‘big’ Narsamma, who had been ‘set aside’ for a younger woman by her husband, a drunkard and a wastrel, and yet with some compelling attraction for women. The absence of her husband made no difference economically to Narsamma, in fact much more of her daily wages now remained in her hands, except when he came around occasionally in the dead of night to snatch away her money for a drink. Though she had complained bitterly when she had been his only wife, now she would gladly have given up all her earnings, if only he would be by her side. Tired, depressed, and lonely to the pit of her stomach, she decided to leave the village and go and look for work in some housing construction site in the city. She could not take her daughter with her to a city slum, full of unknown drunken men, so after a palaver with *Sharmaji*, she left Latchi in the safe compound of the SERVICE rural center, where in return for some light work, the girl would get food, cast-off clothes, and shelter at night.

Latchi herself seemed quite happy at this arrangement, and was always seen taking on any work given to her without complaining, and in fact offering to do something or the other, which seemed odd to the others. She would smile all day if one of the older women gave her a sari they did not want any more, or a helper gave her a pair of discarded tennis shoes, two sizes too large for her bony feet. She always waited till everyone else had finished in the canteen before eating herself, and then at night when everyone else was going off to bed would be seen cleaning the canteen all by herself. She slept on the office verandah, covered by an old blanket, and using a rolled up skirt as her pillow.

*Sharmaji* didn’t notice her at all, after the first few days, when he tried to judge if she was a thief, or of bad repute in any way, and then satisfied that she would be content to behave herself if fed and sheltered, he lost interest in the child. Early in the morning, while he was still half awake, he would hear her sprinkle water on the dust in front of his ‘unit,’ before drawing a *moggu* design in front of the steps with rice flour. Idly one day as he sipped coffee on his verandah, he noticed the perfect symmetry of form in her design, and its perfect curves and straight lines, which formed really rather a unique pattern. He wanted to ask her where she had learned that design, but forgot the matter later in the day. Then, next day, he noticed she had changed the design, the new one was much simpler, but equally elegant. In the days that followed he started to notice her *moggu* designs, each one very different from the preceding one, each one seeming to reflect her feelings for the day, somehow creating a motif which he carried in his mind, which started to influence his thinking for the day.

He questioned her closely one day when he was up early enough to catch her, but she only shyly hung her head, and said she didn’t know how she drew the *moggu*, or why she changed the designs, or why she drew them. *Pedda* Narsamma appeared one day, looking more cheerful than when *Sharmaji* had seen her last, she had a new sari on, and was chewing *paan* and had a string of jasmine in her hair. She ran laughing to her daughter, who stood shyly by, and gave her a box of sweets she had brought from the city. The girl would have one piece only after all the others round her, including *Sharmaji*, had

taken a piece. Sharmaji complimented *Pedda* Narsamma on the way she had brought up a good girl, and then asked who had taught the girl to draw such beautiful *moggus*.

“*Saaru*, who would teach a poor girl like her,” laughed *Pedda* Narsamma. “She just does whatever comes into her head. Hey! You answer *Pedda Saar*. He is being kind to you! Did you learn by watching others?” The girl nodded uncomfortably.

Sharmaji forgot about the matter till he attended a gender conference in Delhi sponsored by Christians Everywhere. In the lobby of the Sheraton, where the conference was held, he saw huge panels with photographs of *rangoli*, the *moggus* of North India. Pramila Choudhury, Chairperson of Women in Craft [India] entered the lobby in a richly brocaded silk sari, with a large intricately carved antique silver and onyx pendant at her throat, and shepherded by the American Ambassador. Young Kamal Chand, scion of a former princely house, and Minister of State for Textiles, drew up a chair for her.

“Thank you, dear boy, I am glad so many people are interested in *rangoli*, the unique art of the humble,” she said, speaking with remote haughtiness in an Oxbridge accent. “Its discovery, like Jawaharlal’s discovery of India, is really self-discovery. We have not found something new in the India all around us, we have found something new in ourselves. Art as conceived by modernity is dead art, it was art yesterday, when shaped by the living hands of the artist, it becomes a dead commodity today in a gallery, or a museum. Money and art can never live in the same space-time,” she added with condescension, the light from the chandeliers flashing dazzling shafts of ice-cold blue from the sapphire rings on her fingers. “The pictures of this uniquely feminine, and at the same time empowering, art have been taken by three of the foremost young photographers from New York, who agreed to work with me, thanks to a small grant of two million dollars from the Adams Foundation.” Three bearded men in black clothes stood up to applause.

Well, thought Sharmaji, the *rangolis* were not all that superior to what little Latchi drew everyday, in fact they were definitely not as good. And two million dollars for this, and the American Ambassador dancing attendance to boot! Pugnaciously he determined he would hold a show of Latchi’s work, which he looked forward to seeing every morning when he woke up. Whatever this heavily made-up lady might say, the *moggus* gained respect and money not when they were seen in the dirt for any dog to walk over, but when beautifully photographed, enlarged, and presented on panels in a five-star hotel. He would bring Latchi’s art to Delhi, and teach these Northerners that people from the South knew more about art than would every enter the thick heads he saw around him.

The problem was getting the pictures right. He made Venkat, Rukmini and Abraham all take photos of Latchi’s *moggus* with the society’s field camera, and he tried his own hand in desperation, but all the photos came out drab, and the designs looked disproportionate. Whatever it cost, he would have to get professional photographers to take the pictures. He was good friends with Syed Hussain, the best known cinematographer in the region. The first opportunity he got, he asked Syed *bhai* to shoot photos of Latchi’s *moggus*. Syed Hussain had just come back after a long shoot in some villages, and had had a fight with

the cheeseparing producer of the budget film, and was already into his fourth *patiala* peg of Scotch. But he was a good friend, and mellowing fast took to the idea by the sixth peg.

“ Sharmaji, dead photographs are absolutely *passé*. Who wants to see them, when not sponsored by some rich American, and followed by Scotch and a lavish dinner? Nobody! Film is the medium everyone understands. It is quite sometime since I made a documentary. We will make one on your little girl, and show it at Cannes!” As the night progressed, both of them became completely convinced that they would make a documentary out of Latchi’s *moggus*.

Money was not to be a stumbling block. Syed *bhai* would organize someone to pay the shot. He and his entourage turned up at the rural center after a couple of weeks, complete with several movie cameras, a generator van, a small crane, for vertical shots at the drawings, and a traveling film-editing kit. There was a lot of good natured excitement for the next couple of days, with Sharmaji and Syed *bhai* happily partying round the campus, and visiting interesting sites in the vicinity, for ‘background colour.’

When finally the cameras were all set up, and everyone was up early, despite the grumbling of Syed *bhai*’s assistants, and all focused round the spot in front of Sharmaji’s unit, Latchi was asked to make a *moggu*. A crowd had gathered by then, and Syed *bhai* dressed in black, with a black cap on his head, shouted tensely for the cameras to ‘roll.’ Latchi was trembling, tears started in her eyes, and she did a very quick small *moggu*, which really by any standards was only on par with the worst one could see. Abraham shouted at her, Latchi cried, Rukmini went up and put an arm round her and told her to try again. The girl tried several times, but none of the drawings were in the least appealing. Tersely, Syed *bhai* ordered his group to ‘pack up,’ and they all retired to the canteen for lunch. No one noticed or cared that Latchi did not eat that day.

Next morning, when the cameras were set up again, she did not come running when called. A search was conducted, and she was nowhere to be found. After shouting for her, and scolding loudly that she was a disobedient, ungrateful girl, they packed up again, and Syed *bhai* retired to Sharmaji’s unit to steady his nerves in the morning with some more Scotch. Two days later a driver caught the girl in a village some distance away, and brought her back. With everyone clustered round her, Sharmaji spoke to her sternly; asked her if she knew how much money had been wasted because of her, money that could have been spent feeding hungry people, and then he softened his tone as he saw her standing there weeping silently, and asked her whether she ever wondered what her mother would say if she had run away for good? When there was nothing more to say, she was dismissed, and the crowd dispersed, with Sharmaji mulishly telling Syed *bhai* that they should try again the very next morning.

The next morning, they had very little trouble with the girl; she was already waiting in front of Sharmaji’s unit before anyone got up. When all the cameras were set up, and the shouting abated a little, she did exactly as she was told. She drew when she was ordered; swept the mess clear when asked to do so, and started again. They all gave her advice. Rukmini brought out a book on Irish Lace and suggested that Latchi could copy some of

those designs. The girl tried her best. Abraham then looked at the work, and suggested alterations. Latchi made them. The cameras kept rolling. That afternoon while seeing some rushes with the traveling editing kit, Syed *bhai* said that they were not to worry, and while the designs they had captured were indeed mediocre, he had some superb shots of her at work. They should have patience, and let her settle down. He had learnt patience through wildlife photography.

But it was not to be. That very evening Syed Hussain got a frantic call from the producer of the budget film, only it was no longer going to be one. The producer spoke for half-an-hour; he said he had raised a great amount of money from interested angels, and sold the distribution rights through five territories already; Syed *bhai* should rush back. When the cinematographer's group were loading their vehicles next morning, Syed *bhai* embraced Sharmaji, assured him that everything was working out just fine; he himself would have more than enough money to do a even better documentary on Latchi; he was committed to it, and Sharmaji should wait and see. However, within a few weeks, Syed *bhai* was called away by an American company for location shooting in the Himalayas, which, as he told Sharmaji over the phone, had a unique story-line, he would laugh when he told him everything, but it was also radical, taking a dig at everyone. Syed *bhai* said he would send a big box of Bombay halwa for Latchi.

Time passed and what with new worries created by new projects, canards spread by his jealous enemies, Sharmaji got involved in many other things. If he did notice Latchi's *moggus*, it was only casually, for he had lost interest in them and her, and sometimes he would show deliberate irritation when he saw her early in the morning, for he was still sore at her for thwarting his art project.

One morning he was woken early by Abraham knocking on his door. Abraham said in low tones that they should send right away for the assistant civil surgeon from the district hospital to look at Latchi. Sharmaji was going to burst out angrily, but seeing the look in Abraham's face instructed for the jeep to be sent to the hospital. He dressed very slowly and when at last he went over to the office building, he saw a small still group of women, with their sari *puloos* drawn across their faces silently staring at Latchi stretched out on her old blanket. The assistant civil surgeon was just getting up from his examination, and Abraham was shouting orders.

“ We cannot determine the cause of death by a cursory examination,” said the doctor unemotionally, “ but maybe we can if you request an autopsy. Do you want one? I would not advise it. The girl is gone. I shall give a death certificate stating death due to illness. They say she was coughing a lot. Maybe TB, pneumonia, even in this weather, a little chill can polish off a person of her class.”

“ She has not eaten for weeks,” said the sweeper looking down on her ruminatingly, which mildly seemed to surprise everyone.

Sharmaji looked down at that small still form, her ragged bodice drawn tight over her bony ribs, and for no reason he could name, tears streamed down his face. Many times

before when he showed emotion before his staff, or at a meeting, a part of him would stand back to watch the effect he had created, but this time, he did not care, he felt humble and he wept. “ I am in charge here,” he said to no one in particular, “ and I shall cremate her.”

“ She is a Christian,” said Venkat, who had come up. “ *Pedda* Narsamma is a Christian, and so was her father, so she should get a Christian burial.” *Sharmaji* was surprised he had never known this. He ordered for the body to be prepared and then carried to the Christian graveyard next to the Baptist Church. The padre would have to be sent for.

The padre, a large man with blood-shot eyes, arrived around noon at the graveyard. He was displeased at having his routine upset and even the thousand rupees that *Sharmaji* thrust into his hands did not mollify him. With a grunt he shoved the money into the side-pocket of his white habit. It was a brief ceremony with the padre reading from a Telugu Bible. *Sharmaji* said he would say a few words, since he was in the position of a father to the girl. He praised her sweet nature, her simplicity, her dutiful behaviour, her skills. “ I am reminded of Grey’s Elogy Written in a Country Churchyard,” he said in English to the padre. “ Full many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness in the desert air.” With the padre making no response, *Sharmaji* looked around at the barren landscape, the brown empty fields, the few sad trees, the shabby huts, and then taking up a clod of earth he looked at her face for the last time, and tossed it into the grave. Tears came again, but this time it was for himself, for what he had become, a fraud, an essentialist fraud.