

Ramulamma

Ramulamma finished the oil massage of Sitaram's wife's swollen tummy, and announced complacently that the baby would be born without any trouble, on due time, and if her experience meant anything, it would be a boy. Sitaram was happy, and his wife relieved that it would not be another girl.

As she came out of the thatched hut, Sitaram gave her five rupees as her fees, and made loquacious by the good news said: "I am taking two of my best goats to the Police camp. The Bara Sahib himself is there, and the Inspector Sahib is organizing the big dinner. What's more, I will even get paid for my goats!"

Ramulamma snorted. "Well, if the Police pay us poor Harijans, that's news," she said tartly. "Their fat bellies will get fatter after they have eaten your goats."

Sitaram laughed and went his way. These old widows were soured by life, and had nothing to look forward to, but nonetheless she was a good midwife. Ramulamma was unreasonably angry as she walked back to her village. How quickly these people forgot. It was only two days before the last new moon that Pentamma had died, had been killed, and pulled about like a goat by lust-maddened dogs. Two days of whispered fear, and then it was past news that no longer interested anyone, and that orphaned girl, just past her first menstruation, had been gathered to her forebears, and the village was celebrating that the police had established a big camp nearby! The new bara sahib, the Deputy Inspector General of Police, was rumoured to be an honest man, and if that was true it meant a new age of goodness had at last come about; which was highly unlikely, she thought, spitting on the ground as she walked, but even then what would he care for a stupid Harijan untouchable orphan girl, killed by her own headstrong stupidity?

Anger welled up inside the midwife, she had delivered that child just thirteen years ago, named after cow-shit by her despairing mother, who had wanted to appease the angry gods with that no-good name, after losing three kids in quick succession. And Pentamma was aptly called, no better than common cow-shit, though right from childhood she had given herself airs, as if she was a movie star or newscaster she saw on the school teacher's TV every Saturday night. The girl would wash her hands delicately, her nose wrinkled up, after making cow-dung patties to dry for fuel. She would refuse to eat cast-off food, as if she was 'somebody.' She had even repeatedly asked her aunt to be sent to school! That good woman had been flabbergasted. She had very kindly taken the girl in, as well as her kid sister, after their parents had died in quick succession of the new wasting disease their dad had brought home from the city. How could any untouchable woman send a child to school, when money was needed to be earned everyday to feed mouths? The children at the village school laughed at poor Pentamma, when she hung about outside the schoolroom window. They called her a fool, and that she most certainly was, said Ramulamma to herself through tight lips.

When the girl had soiled her shift with her first menstrual blood, there had been nobody to celebrate her coming into maturity. Only Ramulamma, remembering she herself had delivered her, took her to the temple, broke a coconut to the gods, applied kumkum to her head, and put a garland of marigolds round her neck. Then she had given the girl her own silver nose ring, and two of her silver bangles. Well, the girl had not been a widow then, but silver was all Ramulamma had. And how had she been repaid – the stupid girl had got herself pulled apart by mad dogs, that's how she was repaid.

She wouldn't have known a thing had it not been for that white Memsahib, Sheila Madam, who had come to do a story about poor women. Ramulamma, as the best known midwife for forty villages all round, was the best guide, and she had not grudged the time or the work taking round that white madam, who was very clever and very stupid at the same time. She knew so much about the world, told such magical stories about America, and yet she was stupid about the most obvious facts about villages, how could that be? The white madam took photos of everything, but best she loved to take photos of even the most common birds. And when she went away she gave her camera to Ramulamma, showed her how to use it, and asked her to send her photos of birds, imagine that! She would have known nothing had she not gone that evening to the pond drying up beside the harvested fields, to try and photograph the egrets Sheila Madam liked so much.

Ramulamma's mind came back to that terrible late afternoon, however much she tried to push those images out of her mind. She had crept silently through the gully so as not to scare away the birds, when she had heard the jeep roar up away near the mango grove. She had heard drunken laughter, some men shouting that they had caught somebody, and then she heard a thin scream. When she had cautiously lifted her head to peer through a thick ipomea bush, she had seen the china dorra, the son of the biggest man in the district, squeezing Pentamma's budding breasts, and ordering her to take off her skirt, as punishment for trying to steal his mangoes, while a few of his rascally friends stood around laughing at the fun. Who was she anyway, screamed Ramulamma's mind, just cow-shit as she had been named. It was thought an honour to be had by the china dorra, and after it was over he may have even given her some money. Why did the girl have to spit in his face, and throw away her life? Tears streamed down her lined face, even as she grimaced in anger as she walked home. After he had finished with the girl, the young lord in great anger told his henchmen to have a go. One of the last strangled her to shut off her screams as he did it. Anyway she fell silent towards the end. When they were all done, she was dead. They peed on her body, and then still laughing a little uncertainly, they roared away in their jeep, the heads of two black bucks they had shot dangling over the tail-gate of the vehicle, their long curved horns banging on the metal at every bump in the road. They had killed the antelopes, they had released themselves into the girl, and then had gone to make a feast of it.

Five minutes after the jeep had disappeared, the dust in its wake almost settled, Ramulamma with a low moan had run crouching to the girl, but she knew she was already dead. Her neck was twisted in a strange angle, her bloodstained ragged skirt pulled well over her little belly, blood still oozing from between her legs. What could Ramulamma have done? If they had sighted her they would have killed her too, mercilessly. Who would care about two dead poor Harijan women? Not even Harijans, for all their talk about now being Dalits. That was just so much political talk, good only

for those Harijans in power, whom the Reddys, and the Banias, and the Brahmins, permitted to be in power. It didn't even mean cow-shit for people like her, neglected by all. Without a word, without touching the body, she had run home. To be caught with the body would mean questions, when had she come across the body, whom had she seen? Any suspicion of the truth, and she would be dead, quietly done away with, without police enquiry, without any report. So that had been that. What proof could she offer? Who would value it, even if she had any? She would be dead, and her proof destroyed long before anyone thought of registering a First Information Report with the Police, even if the local Inspector would entertain an FIR against a powerful family.

That evening, her belly full of ire, Ramulamma made herself one of her own bitter herbal decoctions. She drank the hot draught, went to bed, and had a troubled night. Even as dawn was breaking she fell into a peaceful sleep, and in the pleasant cool of the morning dreamt of Pentamma, smiling at her with her marigold garland round her neck, and leading the two antelopes like pet goats. In slow ghostly fashion, the girl took off her garland, and threw it round the neck of the china dorra, who eyes cast down sank into the ground. When Ramulamma woke, she knew what she had to do.

Seetamma was sitting in front of her hut sunning herself, and drinking an early morning cup of tea. Whatever her name had been before marriage it was changed to match her husband's. Yellanna, the worst of the no-good wastrels of the village, was leering at her from across their narrow dusty street. He drank some tea, burped loudly, and farted, getting up from the charpoy he had dragged out in front of his hut.

"Don't worry about your delivery," said Ramulamma, raising her voice a little more than necessary. "I have thought of a way to make your son a strong man – the toughest of men, and very good with women. I shall go to Mamidipudi Thanda where the dorras had that big feast during the last new moon. I shall buy a black buck antler from the Lambadas – they are sure to have kept them, they are such cunning business people – if you swallow every morning even a spoonful of the paste I shall make of powdered black buck horn mixed with ghee, honey, and herbs, your son will become a hero."

After drinking the tea that was offered, and chatting a little, Ramulamma set off on her errand, noting with satisfaction that Yellanna had overheard her, and smarting under her open contempt for him would now try and get back at her. It took her a good three hours to walk to the Lambada thanda, she would not waste any money on bus-fare. Her Lambada counterpart Laxmi Devi was an old witch, with a long lined face, heavy silver ear-rings dangling from pendulous ears, her hard cracked feet stretched out in front to show off heavy silver anklets. She drove a hard bargain from a darkened corner of her hut, and she would bring out the antler, every now and then, from a large mirrored bag to tempt Ramulamma into a rash offer. It was only when Ramulamma got up in disgust that the bargain was finally struck; still Ramulamma had to pay out three hundred rupees. She walked back leisurely, sitting under a well to eat the dry roti and onions she had brought along as lunch. On the edge of her own village, she spotted Maheshwari trotting back home from school.

"Hey, Maheshu!" Ramulamma called out to the upper-caste girl, who would drop in every now and then at her hut, without her parents knowing, to hear the stories Ramulamma was famous for. "Listen, I knew I would catch you before you went home.

Here! Take these twenty rupees, don't say no, take an auto-rickshaw back to town, and tell Yadaiah Sir that the Inspector is questioning me in the thana. Don't ask any questions, now, I shall tell you later. It's the best story you will ever hear."

The girl promised to go to Yadaiah after she had dropped her school-bag at home, and washed her face. Yadaiah had once been an untouchable, no one dared to call him that now, he was a Dalit Sahib now, a journalist known throughout the country, with plenty of political muscle power behind him, a man who could dine with Collector sahibs, and SP sahibs. They all knew he could go to the Ministers and get anyone transferred anytime. Normally, Yadaiah would be in Delhi or in Hyderabad, but he was now spending two weeks in his new home, built on his ancestral plot of land. But twenty years ago he had been only a young hunted Naxalite she had sheltered in her hut for two weeks. Luckily for Yadaiah and her, her drunken husband, who beat her as a matter of principle everyday, had gone to the city to try his luck and live with that other woman, and she had saved Yadaiah. He would remember what she had done for him, even as she remembered the feel of his soft hands on her body, as though it was yesterday.

As she entered her hut, the Sub-Inspector Sahib rose from her charpoy, a fat grin splitting his betel-stained lips. "What, you whore, did you think anyone can steal in my illaka, and I not know about it?" he asked pleasantly.

"Ayyo! Siru! I have done nothing! I am only a poor midwife helping poor women, you know that?" She sat down on the earthen floor at his feet, looking at him with a mixture of fear, and bravado, but letting her eyes dart to her bag.

The policeman kicked her playfully. "Ho, ho, ho! How innocent all you whores are! What do you think this is, you bitch!" he shouted into her face, and grabbing her hand twisted it till she screamed, and the black buck antler fell out of the bag. Spent with the effort, he sank back on the cot, and gloated over her, part salaciously, and part in disgust.

"It is a crime to kill these animals. It is a sin to kill them! They are protected by the law! Now you tell me how you killed them, who your accomplices were, when it happened, and I may not totally thrash your wretched skin off your whoring body!"

She groveled on the floor in front of him in great fear, while he kicked her about a bit. She knew nothing, she was trying to save the lives of poor pregnant women, the great Inspector Sahib should have mercy on a poor nobody like her. After a few minutes of his shouting at her, the policeman grew tired of the charade.

"Get up! Get up! You whore. I am arresting you. Yes, you will come to the thana with me. By then you may have gathered your wits and realized what is good for you. What do I care about insects like you? I know you did not kill this animal. I want to know who did it. If that rascal thinks he can do shikar in this day and age, he will be my shikar! Come, to the thana and you will tell me everything."

She followed him meekly out of her hut, her neighbours watching with curiosity and fear from the safety of their doorways. She spied Yellana at a distance whispering with some loafers of her own village. She got into the back of the police jeep, and the

inspector wedged himself behind the steering wheel, not even deigning to check whether she was in. The loafers jeered as they roared away.

At the police station, the inspector offered her some water to drink; then told her to be calm, not worry about anything, was he not there to protect her? He sat in his chair while she squatted on the floor. One constable wandered in to be of help, in case his superior needed it, and leaned against the wall. The inspector tried to carry out a dignified interrogation, but soon got exasperated when she kept mumbling nonsense in fear. He wanted facts, quickly, to catch the hunters of protected wildlife, and earn the commendation of the new Deputy Inspector General, who, everyone knew, was a mad conservationist, who had even threatened to shoot up a whole village of tribals when a poisoned leopard had been discovered some six months ago.

As if suddenly losing his cool, he jumped up, roared at the unfortunate woman, slapped her a few times, and then drawing out his leather belt, whipped her bare lower back, till rope-thick welts stood out on her skin, and the blood ran down into her sari. Ramulamma gasping and moaning in agony was doubled over at his feet. She had almost lost consciousness, with one thought troubling her, whether Maheshwari had failed to meet Yadaiah, whether he was away from home...

The Sub-Inspector was streaming with sweat. Exhausted, he sat down heavily in his chair, and signaled to the constable to give him a glass of water. His belly flopped over his loosened pants. Wiping his moustache, he put down the glass, and panted. "I don't know what to do with you," he remarked perplexed, kneading her buttocks with his leather boot." You are no good even for a fuck. Fit only for pigs. Why don't you tell me the truth?" With a kick he sent her sprawling.

"I hear you are on to a big crime, Inspector Sahib. Maybe I can report your success for the national evening news." Yadaiah's cool friendly voice cut into the room, as the journalist walked in, smiling, freshly showered, and in a crisp brown bush shirt. Ramulamma quickly gathered herself, pulled her sari round her body tightly and sat cowering on the floor. The journalist hardly cast a glance at her. The Sub-Inspector loudly ordered his constables to get two cups of hot tea quickly. The journalist commiserated with the policeman about the stubbornness of village people, and turned reasonably towards Ramulamma to help out.

"Listen, the police officer is only trying to help you, to protect you. Why don't you tell him, and me, who is responsible for this crime? You know it is a crime to kill endangered species, don't you? Well, tell the Inspector Sahib everything you know, and no harm will come to you."

She seemed to look gratefully at Yadaiah. "How can I say anything against the pedda dorra?" she mumbled. "We all live on the crumbs he gives us. He will never let me work, and then I will starve to death. Everyday he eats a goat, why can't he kill this animal, it is his?"

The Sub-Inspector was quivering with excitement. To catch a big man like Mahesh Reddy would surely earn him a quick promotion, and in addition, he could milk that man of money every week to save him some hassle or other in the courts. He would surely get promoted to a better paying police station, and in the process he would also earn big money. He would question Mahesh Reddy that very moment. Even the

Minister would be happy with him for getting an important opposition party supporter into trouble. He called loudly for his jeep, and proudly asked Yadaiah garu to accompany him on this important mission, an offer which the journalist accepted with alacrity. Despite her fearful protests Ramulamma was once again bundled into the back of the jeep, and forced to sit on the metal floor, while two police constables sat on the benches on either side. They roared off in high humour, a constable stretching his leg, and seeming by accident to touch her crotch with the tip of his boot.

Mahesh Reddy lived in an old, large fort-like mansion, its high walls protecting its inner courtyard from the sight of passersby. The Sub-Inspector blew his horn loud and long at the high nail-studded wooden gates, which a servant opened quickly enough after seeing the police jeep. They drew up in style in front of the mansion. Beyond a terrace, where the flowers were already beginning to wilt in the growing summer heat, was a long deep verandah, with three doors opening into the dark halls, barely glimpsed from outside. At the left of the mansion was a shed where tall Ongole bulls were being fed, and it was from there that the great landlord emerged. He was a tall vigorous man, though well past middle age, and for all his wealth, was dressed in simple white cotton dhoti and kurta.

Half listening to the sub-inspector's rambling accusation, he asked his servants to serve up sherbet to all his guests, and made sure that the constables and Ramulamma also received a glass each. "You woman, when did you see any of my retainers kill this black buck?" he asked her, looking with firm kindness into her face. "You can tell the truth, and you will not be harmed. My law here will protect you," he added with emphasis.

Ramulamma set up another wail. She was too stupid a person, and she was very frightened. She held up the blood-stained paloo end of her sari to corroborate her fear. She had not meant this Reddy dorra at all; her village after marriage was her husband's village, though after she became a widow she had been driven back, unjustly, to her mother's hut. She had meant the pedda dorra of her husband's village, and she deserved to be beaten for giving so much trouble to all the sahibs and dorras. She knelt on the ground in submissive misery.

The Sub-Inspector shifted his weight uncomfortably from one foot to another. Surinder Reddy was another matter altogether, a vengeful harsh man, whose party was in power in the State, who would see a small man like him destroyed out of pure spite. "I am very sorry, Mahesh Reddy garu," he tried to say with tolerable composure. "This woman is stupid. Most probably she knows nothing. I apologize for wasting your time. If I can be of any service please order me in future." With that he turned to retreat. But Mahesh Reddy had scented the discomfiture, knew exactly what it was about, and it was his turn to press for exposing Surinder Reddy, a political opponent and neighbour he politely hated.

"No, no, Sub-Inspector, it is for officials like yourself to fearlessly implement the law," he said unctuously. "Don't you agree Yadaiah garu, we must take up this task, however unpleasant to ourselves or neighbours?" Yadaiah assented that they had no option but patiently to seek exposure of all the facts. The sub-inspector felt himself caught in a cleft stick. If he refused pointblank to pursue the case, he feared his name would appear in the evening news as a conspirator in a heinous crime. He wouldn't put it past the pair of them to go straight to the DIG with stories of how he had killed

and eaten a black buck and was now hushing up evidence. He would let the enquiry run its course, and find a chance to tell Surinder Reddy that it was all a political plot, which he would quash as soon as possible.

Mahesh Reddy and Yadaiah had gathered round Ramulamma and coaxed out of her the news that she could lead them all straight to the scene of the crime. Mahesh Reddy called round his Ambassador car, and got into the back-seat with Yadaiah, while Ramulamma had to sit up front with the driver. She mumbled that she was as good as dead, and only the great DIG could maybe save her life. At this, Mahesh Reddy was struck by a new thought, and called up the DIG on his cell-phone. The sub-inspector noted unhappily that his superior seemed to agree with alacrity when the dead black buck was mentioned. Instructions were rapidly conveyed to the driver of the DIG's car. They then set off for Mamidipudi thanda with the police car tailing slowly behind them.

The DIG's cavalcade was already drawing up on the main road, at the turn off down to the dirt track, leading to the Lambada thanda. From his lofty height the DIG loftily questioned the shivering Ramulamma through a submissive translator, who told him enough to draw a long, set, threatening frown on that high official's forehead. With a firm wave of his baton, the DIG ordered his cavalcade to sweep down on the thanda.

Weeping and wailing loudly, Ramulamma led them straight to Laxmi Devi's hut, who came out in alarm at seeing the police cavalcade, and all the police officials. "Akka, the police know everything. See, how I have been beaten," said Ramulamma, turning round and lifting the paloo of her sari to show her gory back. "Bring out everything, Akka, otherwise we don't know what will happen!"

Laxmi Devi lifted up her arms and beat her forehead with a wail. She remembered past police raids all too well, and what it meant to her and her people. She ran into her hut and came out with her mirror-embroidered bag. She pulled out the remaining antler, poor Pentamma's blood-stained clothes, the silver nose-ring and bangles Ramulamma had given the girl.

"Sahibs, I am not a thief, I have taken nothing. The whole Thanda is my witness. Well, the girl was dead. What was I to do? Leave her body to wild animals? Poor thing. After all, I am a woman. I gave her a decent cremation myself, and prayed to the gods to accept her soul. It was not the poor girl's fault she was raped and killed, but we know what drunken men are like. And I kept her things safe, to give anyone who claimed them. I am not a thief! I did a good deed! God is my witness! I swear it on the head of my son, may your highnesses protect him!" Laxmi Devi kept on wailing and beating her breast.

The DIG looked very tired. This fuss had nothing to do with the hunting of an endangered black buck. It was about the rape and murder of some girl, and his time was being wasted. He turned to the Sub-Inspector irritably. "Prasad Rao! Come here! Where the devil are you, and get that old woman to shut up!" The sub-inspector ran up and stood obediently like a small boy in front of his angry superior.

"It's your job to investigate crime under your Police Station. If you don't do your job, you are no good!" At each word the DIG dug a finger into Sub-Inspector Prasad Rao's palpitating breast. "Why was I brought here? My God! I am surrounded by incompetents! Ask her what this is all about!" shouted the DIG at his trembling

subordinate, while all the constables ran helter-skelter, forcing the villagers to stand back, far back from the great man. The whole story came out, piece by piece. The big feast that was held by their campfire, by the china dorra and his friends two nights before the last new moon. Yes, they had cooked and eaten the black bucks, and then had drunk and danced with some girls. No, no one had seen any rape, only the body later, found by Laxmi Devi, who told them there had been a rape and murder that night. Who knew who did it? Maybe the china dorra knew? It was all noted down carefully by Yadaiah the journalist. If it had not been for him, most probably the police would have called the villagers a pack of liars, and driven away in disgust, after taking a couple of chickens in part payment for the time wasted.

“Sir, there is no body, no proof of any crime, only hearsay,” wailed the Sub-Inspector. The DIG nodded grimly. “Anyway, complete the panchnama, and get that Laxmi Devi to put her thumb on the First Information Report. I want to see the whole coherent story in front of me tomorrow morning by eight. Do you understand?” asked the DIG scornfully, and the sub-inspector nodded unhappily. “Anyway, those antlers are evidence that an illegal hunt of endangered species was carried out by person or persons unknown, and I shall personally shoot the bastard who did it!” With that the DIG left in a huff and a cloud of dust.

Sub-Inspector Prasad Rao tried to gather together a semblance of personal dignity. Nothing these idiots had said amounted to an indictment. No one had seen the death or even rape of that girl, whoever she had been, that is, even if she had ever existed. These were the points he would make. These villagers having poisoned the black buck were trying to get the big people of the land into trouble to save their own miserable skins. But they would not succeed. He would see to it; and hint discreetly to Surinder Reddy how well he had managed the whole affair, even laughing in a man-to-man fashion that young men must be allowed to prove themselves, otherwise what difference was there between men of good family and girls? Yes, he could still gain by this misadventure.

Seeing that there was no further need for them, Mahesh Reddy, and Yadaiah, got back into the Ambassador car, with Ramulamma in front beside the driver, and set off home. They decided to drop her off first, since by then it had got quite dark, before repairing to Mahesh Reddy’s mansion for a drink, a meal, and a chat how to take forward politically the events of the day. When they came to Ramulamma’s village, she begged them humbly if she could make them all some hot tea. She looked so woebegone that they graciously consented. Her neighbours ran forward with chairs for the honoured guests, and stood in a respectful circle in front of her hut to see them drink tea. Mahesh Reddy made a point in front of Yadaiah of telling her that he would come everyday if she would promise him such good tea. In her clumsy hurry to collect the cups, she spilled a little tea on Yadaiah’s sleeve, and insisted that she would wash it clean with a little hot water. Smiling, he took it off, and she busily took it inside and emerged with it a few moments later, with one sleeve wet but clean of any stain. As she helped him put on the bush shirt, she knocked his hand against a side pocket. His fingers touched a small cylinder. Her eyes met his for an instant, and then she stepped back into the crowd of her neighbours, and waited respectfully while her guests drew away in the car.

Yadaiah had once been an underground revolutionary. That experience stamped you for life. He would know instantly that she had passed on to him a roll of film, which he

could produce at the appropriate moment in the investigations. He would find his own way of saying how he came to find the incriminating pictures. Later that night, when she went to draw water from the well, she would drop the camera down into the water. She had taken it along to take pictures of egrets, but instead had filmed the murder of poor Pentamma. Till that moment she had not dared to tell anyone, or bring the camera out from under her coarse cotton saris at the bottom of her tin suitcase. Neither Surinder Reddy nor his son would ever know who produced the evidence of the rape and murder. They would tyrannize the Lambadas, but those people were tough, and you couldn't push them beyond a certain limit. Not that the china dorra would ever see the inside of a jail. Money would flow copiously through all the villages to make people forget what had happened. The best she could hope for was that one of the thugs in the pictures would lose his nerve, turn State witness, and send a few other minions briefly to jail. Pentamma who had received nothing from the village but indifference would be donating to them all the largesse of hush money that would be flung at them. There was no God in heaven, but she, Ramulamma, would convince her neighbours that some of that money should be used to send Pentamma's younger sister, Rosamma, to school. That would only be justice, and they would also see it like that.