

The drums at the Yellamma temple were still throbbing through the evening, but Peddanna who had beaten the dappu for two solid days had handed over to younger men and come to Ramulamma's home for the big meal. Her large earthenware pot of rice had been blessed by the goddess, and it had been proudly brought back to the village by a host of Dalit women. Ramulamma herself removed the large coconut that sat on the mouth of the pot, and some other women untied the turmeric smeared yellow thread round the neck that kept the mango leaves in place like a collar. Then while they sang songs in praise of the goddess, Ramulamma carefully overturned the rice into her prized pressure cooker, which had been adorned with a ring of auspicious red kumkum dots. All the women pitched in without confusion, but with a great deal of chatter preparing the dinner blessed by the goddess.

Well, it was going to be a great feast, everyone knew Ramulamma always gave great feasts with generous helpings all round, whenever she could afford it. Quite a few men, mostly seniors who had known her a long time, were also sitting in a circle out in the open outside her hut. A few young men who were admitted into her circle were also there.

As they waited for the dinner to be made ready by all the women bustling round, some of the men said that it would be a good year for all, with bumper crops, since the festival of the great goddess had proceeded smoothly with all auspicious signs, they had been assured by the dasari ayyavalu. The old priest had said he himself would join them for the feast, and everyone was slightly impatient for him to come, lest the food get cold. A smooth wooden plank had been placed especially for him; others just squatted on the ground for their dinner, though the women had carefully swept and cleaned the place with rolls of cowdung, so really one could not ask for a cleaner dining area.

The old priest came quite early, while the chicken of the biryani was still being cooked, and several men pressed him to sing since he known in the whole region for the power of his voice.

He declined gracefully. "I have performed the ceremony at the temple, as it was my duty," he clarified authoritatively, "but we dasaris sing of Rama and Hanuman, those are our songs. On such an occasion only an asadhi should sing of Yellamma, and who more appropriate since we are in the house of Chattupalli Ramulamma? She had a good voice when she was a girl, and must have heard many songs from her people, so go and ask her!"

Many of the older men laughed with pleasure, for all liked Ramulamma, they were going to feast at her place, and it would add to the gaiety, as well as to the holiness of the occasion if she sang.

She came out of the hut wiping her hands. "I certainly followed the profession of asadhi women by becoming a dai, but the songs of my people I never learnt. You know, Ayyagaru, I left my house when I was too young, and never learnt Yellamma songs properly, and on this good occasion I certainly do not want to commit a sin by singing wrong things!"

"What is all this nonsense, Ramulamma!" broke in young Shanker. "Just superstition, taught us by Brahmin oppressors to keep us poor and extract all work from us. As

long as we believe superstition, we Dalits will remain oppressed!” Shanker was a militant. He wore a khaki shirt and worked as an office-boy for a human rights organization.

“Oh, ho! Look at him talk,” said Ramulamma in mock anger. “We all know that next to Doctor Ambedkar guru you are going to be our saviour! And we know your boss is a Brahmin, don’t let him hear that talk or you will lose your job!”

“No, I won’t,” said Shanker stoutly. “He has shown solidarity with us, he has ‘de-castified’ himself.”

“Oh, well you can use all these new English words, but the fact remains you know nothing of our ancient traditions. You better watch out! Yellamma can punish as well as reward!”

Many of the older men looked uneasily in the direction of the temple, where the drums were still beating rhythmically. The goddess had a golden heart, but also a very short temper, everyone knew that. “Wash his mouth out with cow urine!” said a woman loudly from the kitchen.

Shanker laughed. “You people are just aping stupid superstitions foisted on everyone by the Brahmins. All this is just Brahmin talk, not Dalit talk, not Dalit culture! Even this big pot of rice you brought from the temple – it is just like what they do at Shivratri! These temples are Brahmin creations, nothing more!”

A few men started to get up, they did not want to be punished by the goddess for listening to impious talk. Some older men yelled at Shanker to shut up or get out, no one wanted him.

Ramulamma came forward into the centre. “This rice that you are going to fill your stomach with, this rice which you have just insulted, Shanker, do you even know where this rice grows? It comes from the ayacut of the Dakshin Ganga Dam project, especially blessed by Yellamma so that there may be no starvation!”

Shanker was incredulous. “You, a dai! You believe this nonsense? An irrigation project is created by science, by rational human thinking, not by any blessings!”

The women came out carrying vessels piled high with steaming chicken biryani, and everyone squatted down with leaf-plates to start eating.

Ramulamma was serving the men like the rest of the women, but she paused to ask: “Which of you older men remember Laxinarasimyya, who was chief minister?”

Peddanna nodded his head, making a ball of hot rice and meat. “Yes, he was a good man, not like our leaders today. He worked for the welfare of the people. He was passing my village once in a jeep, and asked if we had any complaints. I shouted out – I was young then – ‘Ayya, I have not eaten for two days!’ ‘Babu, come and eat with me today!’ he shouted back. And true, they took me to the guest house and fed me. He said he would look into the affairs of the village. Of course nothing happened, with all these sahibs in the middle.”

Many men added anecdotes about that leader, whatever they could remember.

“I suppose he never took any money also?” asked Shanker sarcastically.

“Don’t be stupid,” said Ramulamma shortly, as she served potatoes cooked with tomatoes. “Of course he took money, how could he run a big state like ours without doing so? But he never took more than he needed. He had fourteen children, and they all led only middleclass lives.”

Everyone exclaimed in amazement at such moderation.

Peddanna thought of something else. “I am sure he ate well, like us today, but everyday, milk, mutton. I had six children just eating jowari rotis and onions!” He wiped the greasy fingers of his left hand on his thigh, with which he had set aside some bones, lifted a metal tumbler of water and drank noisily.

Men laughed while his wife hid her face in her sari.

“When Laxminarasimayya’s nephew became chief minister, he wanted to do something big in his uncle’s memory, who as I said had been respected by all,” continued Ramulamma sitting down by her doorstep. “He put up a big statue of his uncle’s – twelve feet high it was – and in metal too, not iron, in ‘be-ronj’ – like copper only but with other metals in it to make it strong, you know, like idols in temples. He put it up in the dam on a huge limestone base rising out of the water, so that all who go on the road over the crest of the dam would see it everyday and remember who built the dam and which party did it. In those days there were not these unshaven men from the city and girls with dirty faces and hoarse voices saying there should be no dams. Everyone wanted dams, everyone thought they were good, and they were right.”

The priest lifted his head from his plate. “That fellow thought he would be minister for ever, but then he was thrown out in three years. There were two statues in the dam. His wife Subamma’s also.”

“Yes, that swamiji who went to Amrika and became rich said there should be Subamma’s standing beside him, for what auspicious event can be celebrated without the wife being present?” continued Ramulamma. “A fourteen-day cycle of pujas was conducted in the great temples on either shore, and ten thousand beggars were fed lined up along the road over the dam, with the ministers themselves participating in serving them. But the engineers had added Subamma’s statue later and maybe the base could not bear the weight of both, I don’t know, some engineers said one thing, others just the opposite, some blamed the water currents which had suddenly changed in the lake they said, others that the rock on which the stone base was built was porous, whatever, a big crack developed. Everyone was worried. Everyday some big engineer would come, from Delhi, from abroad, I know, for I worked for the Collector in those days in his house, high on the bank of the dam, it is such a beautiful house, he was such a good man too, from somewhere in the north, near China he said, he had these Chinese eyes, long and beautiful, Olong Sahib never bothered that I was a harijan.”

“Dalit! Say, Dalit, Ramulamma,” pleaded Shanker.

“ Yes, Dalit. Then some big foreign sahib – he was from Austria or Australia, I think - he said they must pour special cement into the rock under the limestone base, and I remember the day they all went out in boats all round the statues, it was the dry season and water was only three feet deep at the base. They needed to make holes in the rock to fill it with cement, and they had these huge drilling rods, a big crowd gathered, what else was there to do in summer, there was no work, and the drilling began. What a noise! My mistress was angry the baby could not sleep. And then just as I was cleaning the Collector’s dining room after lunch, there was a huge commotion, all the attenders running about, the clerks and the police all over the place it was funny but also so, so tragic. The base had cracked completely and the two statues had toppled, with Laxminarasimayya on top of poor Subamma, such a strict lady she had been too!”

Peddanna and the priest cackled with memories flooding in. The younger women covered their mouths with their sari ends.

“Well, you can all imagine, it was disgraceful. Young men, then as now know no better. They hung around there, cracked jokes, laughed. And all this within sight of the Collector’s bungalow. Imagine what he felt. The dignity of government was being lost!”

Shanker laughed and slapped his thigh.

“You may well laugh, but it was not at all pleasant,” said Ramulamma. “You know, soon drunks, people with hashish, would gather to look at the statues, and comment like ‘Look look, look! What he is doing to her,’ and vulgar talk like that. And as you know some women are no better, they began to ply their trade there, for the men were aroused, and even solicit policemen sent to shoo them away. As I said, all in sight of the Collector’s bungalow, it was disgraceful! TV cameras came, the whole scene was shown all over the world, in England, in Amrika, people were laughing at us.”

The men wanted to know what had happened then.

“What could happen?” asked Ramulamma rhetorically. “There was of course a big enquiry into the accident. Everyone blamed everyone else. The contract had been given to some Bombay firm, you know, some minister got some money, that’s the way it is and will be. There was a big meeting in the Collector’s bungalow, and this fashionable lady came from Bombay. I have seen women with short cut hair, but this one, her head was like a man’s, and she smoked cigarettes one after the other, she was so fashionable. They could not pin anything on her company, she said it was all the fault of government which gave her company substandard rods. The engineers said they followed rules, so it all came to nothing in the end. But they had to take the statues apart, but those statues were of metal and very heavy, so special machinery had to be brought. Nothing could be done for several months till the water flow had become sluggish. Then they brought huge cranes on large flat-bottomed boats, and by slinging iron chains started to lift Laxminarasimayya’s statue – remember it was twelve feet high. Just as it came clear and everyone started to clap, a chain broke, the huge crane toppled slowly into the water like some fallen giant and the boat went down into the water making every sahib swim for his life. Peddanna, you remember that strong Muslim policeman, Mustapha, well, if he hadn’t jumped in and pulled the chief engineer out, there would have been a tragedy. Everyone was happy no one was killed,

but then all the young me started laughing even louder, and when the sahibs turned round, imagine what they saw!”

She wouldn't say another word till everyone had another helping of everything. When they started eating again, she continued.

“Laxminarasimayya was still on top of Subamma, but this time the posture was worse – none of us has seen that sort of thing, except I am sure our Shanker here, in these loose foreign films.” She dropped her voice. “His hands had slid forward and were covering her breasts! The tilt had worsened so that his bottom stuck right up in the air, and some men who had gone down from the dam crest by ropes to help tie up the boats they said they could see his – you know, his member. It was all nonsense, but the stiff fold of the dhoti tucked between the legs did look like – you can imagine!”

Everyone was laughing, the women giggling quite uncontrollably. Ramulamma was also grinning. “Yes, everyone was laughing, naturally. They sent down TV cameras over the edge of the dam to film the sight, and really it looked like both of them were... Though the Home Minister came and scolded the policemen for not keep law and order about the place, I saw that he was grinning also. And mind you, he was from the opposite party, so if Laxminarasimayya was ridiculed he didn't really care. That's how it is in politics. Even at night, men with motorcycles would throw a beam of light onto Laxminarasimayya's face and see him straining in passion. You know once people start imaging things, there is no limit. So finally next summer they completely broke the base, and the two statues went into the water.”

“So that's how they came to be there,” said Narasaiah, the house painter, who had joined in late.

“That was not the end of it,” corrected Ramulamma. “Men kept looking at the statues which could be seen in shallow water. When the sun was at its height, the light shining through the waves, it looked like they were moving – so now instead of still statues in some bad pose, they saw something like a cinema. Added to the imagined movement in the water, there was the sound of the lapping waves, and the grinding of the boats in their rowlocks, so really it was disgraceful if you stood there and imagined things. Women refused to cross the road anymore, while men could not be chased away. My Collector, a very good man as I told you, was at his wits end. Anyone could see that people were losing all respect for the government, for the law, for elders. Once in desperation Olong Sahib turned towards me and said: ‘Think of something, Ramulamma! You know these people. Think of something!’ Such a big man, a good man, asking me to do something, you can imagine his desperation.”

Her friends had gathered close round her, now that dinner was over. Some men lit cheroots, some cigarettes, like Shanker, and others ate paan, along with the women. “On Yellamma's festival day, I led a group of women, we were dressed in our best clothes with flowers in our hair, and all carrying pots covered with turmeric and kumkum, we went straight to the procreating statues, prayed to them, broke the pots there, floated marigold garlands on the water, and small lamps in worship. The men were stunned, their laughter fell silent. I explained to those who wanted to know that it was Yellamma's power all along, she put life into those metal murthies, they were idols not mere statues. Why? So, the power of life would start once again when the waters were low, so that it would rain, and the crops grow, and feed us. Some men started

praying with us, including the Brahmins that Shanker hates. Soon all rowdyism stopped. Now go there today and what will you find? Thousands of men breaking coconuts, bathing near the sacred idols, and praying for a better life. It all happened because of Yellamma's shakti!"

Everyone was silent in agreement. Some men and women turned in the direction of the temple and slapped their faces to expiate any guilt.

Shanker rose to go. " I am glad, Ramulamma, you cunning old woman, you are a Dalit and not a Brahmin." With this incomprehensible comment he walked away into the night.