

The death of the young excise inspector was totally unexpected and deeply regretted by the police. With his help the police had laid a trap for inter-state smugglers. A tip-off had been received that along with Goan wines, foreign liquor, and light white goods the trucks were running in guns. A capture was essential, not only to stop the trade but to find out which extremists groups were receiving the arms supplies. The bar had been lowered, and metal drums ranged across the road at the check-post when they received a wireless signal that the suspect trucks were headed their way. The timing was certainly right, it was around two-thirty in the morning, and the smugglers should have every expectation that the sleepy guards would let them through after being paid the usual mamul. The police report graphically described what happened, in fact, it was quite poetical in parts. Seeing the drums across the road, the desperadoes swung their heavy trucks down the shoulders of the road and tried to evade the barrier by speeding through the brush on either side. The police had jumped out into the open, and challenged them to stop. The criminals had opened indiscriminate fire. The police had returned fire regretfully. The trucks had doused their head-lights and firing was taking place in pitch darkness. Even as the trucks circled round to get back onto the road, they shot up the police jeep hidden in a clump of trees, so pursuit was made impossible. At this juncture, Ramnarain Reddy, the young excise inspector in charge of the check-post, who had been advised to leave the capture to the special armed force that had been deployed, seeing the vehicles making their get-away, without a thought for himself ran up and boarded a truck. Even as he gained a foothold in the wildly swinging truck, two shots were heard, and they saw him fall onto the road. As the police rushed to his rescue they found him killed, dead even before he hit the ground.

“Damned bastards,” had commented the Circle Inspector in charge of the contingent. “They had already shot him through the heart, where was the need to blow away his face?” He took a personal vow to bring the culprits to justice or give up his life like the brave young officer, who was cremated with full honours.

The encounter was the talk of the district for days to come. Who were these desperately armed smugglers? Were they supplying arms to Marxist-Leninist Naxalites, or to some Muslim terrorist group, or somebody else? There had been talk of a group of dam oustees forming themselves into a guerilla unit and blowing up the dam under construction. Then of course there was the regular mafia who ran the gambling joints, supplied cheap liquor that had evaded the state’s high duties, or those kidnappers who stole comely young women, mostly from poorer families, for the flesh trade in Bombay. It could be any of these groups, or maybe a consortium? Police patrolling was strengthened all along the national highway, and some legislators even demanded that government helicopters should be pressed into service, as they did in America, to catch the criminals. As no clues were ever found, the atrocity faded from the public mind in time, and anxieties came to be focused on some other issue of national importance.

The one person for whom the nightmare of that night remained in full chilling shock was the dead man’s poor young widow, clutching her baby to her breast, and sobbing in a corner of their little apartment. Ramulamma had been among the first to think of her and rush to her aid, with words of consolation, with comforting companionship, by taking on the tedious chores of paperwork; for getting the government pension, the hardest of tasks even in such tragic cases; and service compensation money, almost an impossible task to achieve without bribes or pull at the highest levels; and pleading for a job for the widow so that she could make a living and bring up her baby.

Pressed into action, Ramulamma discovered that she knew various important people, and could recall services she had rendered to them. It was time to call in her cards so to speak, and luckily a few obliged, partly shamed into doing the right thing for the widow of a young officer who had died trying to protect their interests. The government money came slowly, but it came. The dead officer was awarded a posthumous bravery medal, and his widow, young Sushila had to go to Hyderabad to receive it from the hands of the President himself, who was spending a few weeks in his southern capital. Ramulamma remembered that journey as a turning point in the young woman's life. From weeping disconsolately and repeating endlessly she would have ended her life but for her baby, she smiled for the first time when she returned home and hung the medal on a nail under the garlanded portrait of her husband. Everyone came to admire, and tell their story of his courage, his goodness, the hopes they had of him, and that it was her duty now to bring up her boy to be as great as his father.

Under Ramulamma's persistent effort, the Collectorate gave Sushila a job as a lower division clerk in keeping with her qualifications, and the forward-looking Sushila made arrangements with Ramulamma and other local women for the care of the baby till he would be old enough to be left in an anganwadi nursery, eighteen months on. So though the worst had happened in her life, in a way the worst was over and a new life could be started. A few kindly modern souls even suggested that she should consider marrying again, after all she was good looking and many men would be happy to have an educated working woman as wife, and accept the other man's child. Sushila was shocked. Though she came from a very humble family, and had been an orphan in fact, she had been married into a well-known Cuddapah Reddy family, which had also come down in life, but retained a great name. Even thinking of remarriage was impossible. A distant uncle on her mother's side was visiting her from far away, and partly to absolve himself of all responsibility pressed for her remarriage. Such old-fashioned thinking as hers should be done away with. What great name was she thinking about? There was nothing great about her in-laws family, most of them had drunk themselves into debt, and were notorious for carrying on deadly blood-feuds with the other Reddys, killing and being killed senselessly. Ramnarain had been the only sensible one in that family, he had educated himself, married her, though she had no money, and no one, so that he could break cleanly from the past. He had not wanted to stay in that old mansion falling to pieces and get shot by some family thirsting for revenge for what his uncle had done, and everyone knew what a terrible fellow that old man had been. Sushila wept, remembering her kind husband, but refused all such advice, stating that she would devote herself to bringing up her son single-handed without any help from anyone, though she thanked her uncle for his solicitude. He went away his conscience eased and she was thankful secretly that he was gone.

Life in that little town settled back to normal, and the unhappy incident was all but forgotten. People began to see a good side in that tragedy. The wife had a good job, she was settled. There were local people who would take care of the boy at all times. Her husband had been awarded a medal from the President himself. Even if he had served all his life he could not have expected such an honour. So, he had been honoured for service to the nation, and his family was settled. Arre, few men could count such felicity in their lives. What if he had lived? There would have been danger everyday, and this would have happened sure enough, without the honour. Vishwanath, who ran the local Hanuman akhada wiped his moustache as he downed a pint of beer in the dingy bar on the main street, and said he knew a bit more, that man's life was as good

as gone, he would have been killed any minute! When people exclaimed in amazement, he condescended to explain. Remember that young man was the only male heir of a Cuddapah Reddy feuding family – OK, he was not talking about money, they had none, but his uncle had organized to have his rival in the local elections blown up with a claymore bomb; yes, that had happened when Ramnaraian was still a school-going boy, but a blood feud had to be continued generation after generation. The women of the injured family would remind their male members everyday that if they were men they would have spilled the enemy family's blood before then. When one of his drinking companions said lightly that the beer was getting to his head, Vishwanath had got angry, challenged him to come to the akhada right then and there, and try three wrestling falls with him. When tempers cooled, Vishwanath lowered his voice so that only those in the bar could hear and said what he had said was a fact. Did they remember that strange group which had come one night in a jeep last year, saying they wanted to buy rice-growing land, and then had shown no interest in any of the acres shown to them? Remember? They were from Cuddapah, they were not looking for land, they were sizing up the lie of the land to carry out their family obligation of killing Ramnarain. That poor fellow had known it! Did they remember how disturbed he was for days afterwards, and would return home early? He had put in thick bars at all his windows, and reinforced his wooden door with a steel sheet – why? He feared an attack, that's why, and made his door bullet-proof. So, he was in a very disturbed state of mind when he made his brave attempt, most probably he was psyching himself up for the attack to come, but lost his life anyway, poor fellow. A very good thing in a way, the blood feud was ended with his death, and his son could grow up in peace.

People began to see everything in a new light, but mentioned none of this to Sushila out of respect. She stuck to her child, her office duties, and the temple, which she visited everyday. Whenever she got any vacation, she would go on a short pilgrimage to some especially sacred temple with her child. If a holy man, a babaji, sant, or Sufi fakir was visiting anywhere near, she would join the throngs for a darshan, and bring back some prasad to give everyone. Ramulamma agreed with the others that this was the best way for her to live, reconcile herself to what had happened, shake off her depression and find some peace of mind.

Soon after her child was getting used to his anganwadi teacher, Sushila discovered a new holy man to follow, known as Vaid Baba, who was effecting remarkable cures for mentally disturbed people. He numbered the Home Minister among his devotees after curing his son of deep depression. The young man had tried to commit suicide two times and had been luckily saved by his watchful family. In desperation they had taken him to the baba who had blessed him and given him a drink of water from his own earthenware pot. When the minister's son returned home that night everyone recognized a remarkable change in him. The news about the baba's shakti had quickly spread. People flocked to have a darshan coming from far and near, but the baba was reclusive spending most of his time in meditation, and then after a brief holy address to a gathering would call a few persons forward for treatment as directing by devi mata. Those who were privileged to be so chosen reported remarkable cures, from being relieved of persistent headaches to a lasting cure for madness. Sushila went to a few of these holy appearances of his and was delighted not only to be called forward to be blessed, but have herself appointed as a volunteer to serve the baba during his visits to the region. She did not even mind taking leave without pay to render such service, and no one minded as long as she got some peace of mind.

At the end of next year, it was announced that Vaid Baba would be camping at Sangareddi, the district headquarters, for a whole week to work his miracles and bless people. By then he was very well known, and the local merchants pooled their resources together to make his stay comfortable. A special thatched ashram was hurriedly built in the fairground for his personal use. Water from the Ganga at Varanasi was flown over for him to drink, and Brahmin cooks brought along to cook while he was there. An American follower it was rumoured had been converted to a godly life by the baba after coming close to death as an alcoholic libertine. He was now a manager of the baba's entourage, and came in a Mercedes to inspect the site before the baba's arrival. He was young, with a clean-shaven head, and wore a sanyasi's saffron robes and wooden sandals. Every sentence of his was punctuated by 'Vaid Baba ki Jai!' Then, the other close devotees came, and then babaji himself in a retinue of great cars.

For a week, non-stop bhajans were sung round the baba's temporary ashram, with Sushila given the rare privilege of personally serving the baba. On the following Thursday Ramulamma traveled to the large town, now bustling with devotees, to take Sushila's little son there to see his mother. She was directed to a house that had been vacated by the owners for the baba's circle. Sushila came into the anteroom after a little while and gathered up her son with great joy and kissed him several times. She was radiant. She turned to Ramulamma and said confidently that she had decided to follow the baba to Rishikesh in the Himalayas, where the grateful Home Minister was establishing a permanent ashram with his own money and that of several other businessmen who were obliged to him.

Sushila seemed so happy Ramulamma knew this was the end of a remarkable story and the start of a better one. "Sushila, the devi has blessed you! You are a true pativrata, like Sati and Savitri of legend. You will be happy forever, and your progeny blessed!" With that, she left the boy with his mother, and ran out overcome with holiness of the moment.

The day the babaji was to leave with his devotees, which now included Sushila and her son, Ramulamma got a hurried message that the baba had called her to receive his blessings. "You are a chosen one and blessed," whispered the enthusiastic young woman who brought her the summons. When she went hesitatingly into the inner sanctum, she found the baba seated in a deep alcove, with the sunlight streaming in from the windows behind his head, so for a minute she could see only his silhouette. She kneeled in front and touched her forehead to the durrie in obeisance.

"Dheerga Sowbagyawati Bhava!" blessed the baba.

She looked up respectfully, fearfully. He had an eternal unlined face behind a full white beard. She noticed in passing that though the long hairs were snow white, their roots were jet black. He wore a crisp white dhoti and held a white muslin angavatsaram delicately round his body.

"You have been of great service to Sushila, who has come under the protection of this ashram," he said softly. "Take that plate of prasad in front, it is for you."

She then noticed the silver salver in front to which he pointed, with five bananas, a pot of kumkum, a turmeric stick, and a wad of hundred-rupee notes over a piece of dark

silk cloth. She took the salver, touched her forehead to the durrie, and remained kneeling.

After a moment, the baba asked softly. “What more do you want than my blessings?”

“Your blessings for all of us Dalits,” she said humbly. “You cured the Home Minister’s son of madness.”

“That was the devi’s shakti,” said the baba.

“May the devi instruct the Minister through you to set up a special school here for all the poor Dalit children,” she pleaded, her head down, not daring to look at him. When she looked up at last, he was smiling and his right hand was held up in blessing. With that assurance she withdrew.

Fools did not believe in gods and goddesses and their power. She thought of a fearful young man trapped by a family blood feud, a chance encounter in the night, the death of a smuggler, the quick help of his police comrades to disappear forever. This much she had come to guess over the months through her friendship with Sushila, who said nothing out of fear, but who betrayed the truth artlessly. And then the miracle had happened turning the hunted lonely person into a guru, to an American and then to a Minister, this was the grace of Yellamma indeed, who restored his family to him and gave him unassailable sanctuary in Rishikesh, the abode of the rishis of old.