

## ***Whose Privation!***

**Sharada Allamneni & N. Yaswanth**

*“.....it was a good deal, if they could manage to get work, twice or thrice a week...a daily commission had to be paid, to the agent who helped them find work.... Moreover, on such days...come here for work today, they are informed, it seems...once they reach there, there isn't work for so many, they are told and sent somewhere else.”*

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Nonstop coughing of Ramudu wouldn't let Eeramma sleep properly. 'If only I could sleep a little longer, the soul would feel so relaxed,' thought Eeramma. Then, she remembered the day's chores waiting for her and jolted up... Beside her, on a slack string cot, lay Eeramma's grandson and granddaughter, sleeping without a care in the world. She bent down and smoothened their clothes. 'It's so windy', muttering to herself she spread, over them, the quilt she had used for the night.

'Poor thing...! The old man has been coughing since last night', she approached Ramudu's cot.

"Darn this cold wind! The cough and wheezing have increased...put the cot inside..." he sighed weakly to his wife.

With the help of a staff, he dragged his feet into the hovel. The thatch of the shack's roof and the wall at the rear end was partly lost. In any season, living in the shack, was quite difficult. On the day it rained, the earthen stove would become sodden. On such days, the whole household would go empty stomach. In summer, it made no difference, whether one was inside the shack or outside it.

Eeramma lit a kerosene lamp. She raked the ashes from the stove and lit the fire. She made coffee decoction and gave some to Ramudu. The rest, she left for the kids.

Hearing the sound of the hand pump, far away, 'Oh God...the mob is already clamouring for water', mused Eeramma. Picking up two plastic pots and a big clay one, she hurried to the spot. There were pots already, a score of them, lined up.

"Every day, you beat us to it. How come, aunt, you are late today?" enquired the daughter of Eeramma's elder cousin.

"What can I do...tell me...your uncle's whooping cough kept me up all night...thought something warm would give him some respite, so made him some coffee....I have yet to go to my Reddy's place..."

“Yes...I know! With uncle being in such bad shape...don't we all know the daily struggle you go through all by yourself...If only my cousin and his wife had been around, they would have lent you a helping hand... unable to live in their own village, they left...! Even this time, look how many have left as there is no grain in the village. And people like us are left behind, to guard these hovels...” she moaned.

“What times we have come to my child...what more will I have to witness with these eyes, I wonder...” sighed Eeramma heavily.

Summoning all her energy, she got ready to use the hand pump.

‘Had he been around...he would have pumped the water....and she would have carried it back...wonder, when they will be back...how they are doing...the children are pining for them...it would be nice if they could come at least for the new year's...' putting down the pots, she thought of her son.

“Listen...I am going to the Reddy's place...ask the children to wash their faces, when they get up...there is coffee on the stove. Ask them to pour, each a little, in the glasses and drink it...they will both fight over the coffee, see that, they don't fight...” She entrusted the house to Ramudu.

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Holding the milk container in her hand, Ramasubbamma was talking to Ankireddy, when she caught sight of Eeramma going towards the cow shed. “You got free now...you should have come after the sun is on the top...Don't you know; Your master goes to work early while it is still dark? The cow dung, you can pile up later, first lead the buffalo here...I shall milk it here...” she instructed.

Eeramma led the buffalo out of the cow shed and tied it up in the open yard. Fetching rice bran in a wicker basket, along with a bucketful of water to wash, she set it before the buffalo.

“...it won't look good to serve chicken for dinner...we will anyway slaughter a goat for New Year's, we can call them for dinner then...” suggested Ramasubbamma to her husband.

Studying his wife's face, Ankireddy reflected for a while, “...the one we have at our place now, won't be enough for everyone...we need another bigger one... Oh yes! I remember Sivaram, might have two or three goats with him...a few days ago, he had asked me ...mama, I need to buy black pearls, can you lend me two thousand rupees...and I did.... for that I can ask him to send a ram. He won't be able to repay the debt anytime soon ...moreover, he had said, I have to get the child married, I shall sell a couple of acres of land.... You buy it mama” ...he keeps on pleading with me”.

Halting the milking in the middle, Ramasubbamma cried...” Don't you have any sense! If you burn all the money buying land... what will you do when faced with a big crisis? ...tell him, we don't want your lands, sir....”

“Why do you yell so loud? ...why would I buy it?” I told him, “If there is anyone willing to buy, I am thinking of selling my own land” ...I have to somehow find a way to extract those two thousand from him...anyways, send Eeramma to call upon Sivaram”, he rose from his chair.

After cleaning the yard, Eeramma heaped up the dung from the cattle shack and dumped it in the dung pile towards the side...then splashing water inside, she cleaned up the shack. Taking a large wicker basket, she walked to the store, to fetch some fodder. The haystacks had shrunk in size. The nearby fodder stores were almost empty.

‘During good harvests...at least two to three haystacks are seen...Oh god! What rough times have we come to’, Eeramma rued to herself, every time she entered the shack.

Vengalreddy, Ankireddy’s father didn’t know of any other work, other than farming. In those days, Ramudu was a wage worker at their place. When Ramudu suffered a stroke and his hand and leg were paralysed, he sent his son Obilesu in his place. By then, Ankireddy was slowly moving on from farming into politics and contractual work and had started to lease out his farmland.

Sickle in hand, Eeramma began to chop a bale of haystack furiously from one end.

“These greedy crooks have got addicted to easy money, collecting interests from loans, and started contractual work...no one is keen on farming any more...did this Ankireddy ever rise so early and go to the field before sunrise...now, he wakes up in the dark, and before the first light, gets into his motor car, burrrrr...he goes off. Lakhs and lakhs of rupees...he has earned...how can land, fields, oxen, granary, or barn be of interest to him anymore...leasing his farmlands, he has destroyed them...Huh!...if the lands, farm, and cattle were there, he would be in the village, with his wife....he has sold all the oxen ..made sure there is no plough...pulled down the old bungalow and built a new one...kept the cattle shed though....hired me to pile up and clean the dung...deprived my son of a job....God alone knows... how he is doing...what he is eating...so far away from home...’ thoughts of her son assailed Eeramma....

Setting the basket down in the cattle shed, she walked into Ankireddy’s house.

“Madam...” she called from the porch.

“I am coming, wait...” the voice replied from inside.

“Is Suneethamma coming for the festival? it’s been ages since we saw her...” Eeramma asked Ramasubamma, as she served food on her plate.

“Yeah...she will come it seems, her exams will get over...your master will go and bring her. Seenu, it seems, will not come.... he will come only after his coaching is all over, after writing his exams,” she served the previous night’s leftover dal.

“This time, where will you join him?” Eeramma was served with some buttermilk.

“Don’t know... what to do...it’s a challenge...we Reddys, where can we get a seat...we have to spend lakhs and lakhs of rupees it seems, to join him in a college...while, people

like you, madigas are so privileged. You need not spend a single penny, you people get invited and admitted into colleges, for free....Moreover, last year and this year, there has been no yield, farm leases could not be collected...somehow or the other, we thought of paying his fee, now, after joining college, he wants us to buy him a motorbike...all the money is getting spent on him...had the farm lease been collected, I had thought of getting diamond bangles and a long chain made for Suneetha,....but then, gold has also become so expensive these days...don't know what we will buy..." saying this, she went inside.

Eeramma's mind was mulling over Ramasubbamma's words. Some part of it made sense, the rest was puzzling to her.

'What! ...what was she saying...will we, madigas be offered free education? ...if that is the case...then...why couldn't a single madiga get educated in the village...let alone become an engineer or a doctor? ...they couldn't even make it to the high school in Cheenampalli...But then, why is this woman, comparing herself to us, madigas? where are they? Where are we? ...are we overfed like them and spending money lavishly...do we travel by motor cars, wear diamond bangles or chains? what is she even saying? ...left with nothing to do here, struggling to live, are we not leaving the village? ...are they leaving? ...has such a plight ever befallen them...' Eeramma was seething with indignation. And thus, lost in her own thoughts, she didn't respond till Sivaram's wife, Chandamma had called out to her, a couple of times.

"Why!...have you gone deaf?... I have been calling out so loudly, yet you are walking on without responding..." asked Chandamma sardonically.

"Nothing like that...was lost in thought, so didn't hear you...in fact, I was coming to your house...madam has sent for you...she has asked you to meet her at the house..."

"I will go...but listen, there is half a sack of peanuts...when you are free, can you come over and crack them open?" She looked questioningly at Eeramma.

Eeramma thought for a second, "Tomorrow is Sunday ... I don't have to go to school...will come tomorrow and help you with those..." then remembering something, she asked with a smile, "Is it for Jayamma's wedding you crack the groundnuts?"

Chandamma's face turned pale "God knows about the wedding...everyone is asking for grain this festival...Your madam wants five bags... I borrowed five hundred rupees from Ramasubbamma, for Jayamma's engagement...I will ask her to accept the grain in lieu of money..."

"But, you said that the wedding would be in summer...."

"Yeah...the groom's side wants it earlier...we are going a bit slow on it"

Eeramma looked questioningly at Chandamma.

"They have asked for a dowry of thirty thousand rupees and six sovereigns of gold...and here we are...last two years, there are no harvests...the earnings are not sufficient to

meet the expenses of food and household...thought of selling a couple of acres, but, there is nobody willing to buy... my husband pleaded with his uncle, Ankireddy to buy the land....he replied, if anyone is willing, I am seeking to sell off my own land...what will I do, buying yours...Now, even if we think of transferring the two acres on the bridegroom's name...what should we do about the gold?...all my gold ornaments were pawned a long time ago... it doesn't seem possible, that I will redeem them...God alone knows what I am to do...yesterday we sent our son-in-law to the groom's place...don't know what they will say" she said despairingly.

"Don't worry...everything will be alright" Eeramma consoled, "the wedding will happen...they are also farmers, aren't they?...it's getting late...I will get going...but then, don't get busy with your work and forget to show up at my Reddy's place..."

Catching the sight of Eeramma walking back home, the kids stopped playing and came running to her. 'When would Eeramma return? When would she get them something to eat? They would be waiting'. Without eating any part of it, she served the leftover food brought from Ankireddy's house to the children and Ramudu. It was not enough, the children started to cry for more.

She cooked some broken rice and ground some red onion into chutney. She packed some rice and chutney in a misshapen and dented lunch carrier for herself.

"Aren't you going to the market today?...get some grain and jaggery for the festival...I feel like eating sweet porridge...kids are also here..." said Ramudu, turning to Eeramma, an expectant look on his face.

"I won't have time to buy the grain...Chandramma has asked me to help her crack some groundnuts...will go there tomorrow...poor woman!...her daughter's wedding is causing her much anxiety..."

She laid out Ramudu's cot under the shade of a tree.

"Then...just buy some jaggery..."

"Ok, I will get it...and you can eat...even during drought, you want variety..." Eeramma jeered at her husband.

Ramudu paid no heed to Eeramma's words, his thoughts drifted towards the porridge, Eeramma would make for the New Year's.

Entering the shack, Eeramma snapped at the children still fidgeting there and shoed them away. After they left, she unlocked her trunk. In it she stored the goodies, she sold to the children at Chenampalli High School, and the money coins were all there. She took out the boxes of salted lentils, roasted ground nuts, and spiced beans and arranged them in her wicker basket. Then, she took out the plastic bags, one by one, containing sweets, lollipops, biscuits, peppermints, and other confectionaries and arranged them also in her basket. She packed her water bottle and lunch carrier. On the way out, she gave a biscuit to each of the kids.

“You don’t give me even a rupee for my beedis” ... Ramudu stretched his hand, swearing at her. .

“Hmm...here we are starving...not having enough to eat and you are worried about beedis...” retorting sharply, she pressed half a rupee in his palm.

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Cutting across the road, Eeramma took a short route and began to walk briskly along it. It took her about half an hour to reach Chenampalli High School. Hunger was gnawing at her insides, but she wouldn’t touch the eatables in the basket. ‘If she started to eat them, how would she save money, and how would everyone at home get two meals a day’, these thoughts, inured her to hunger. Now and then, she would rub a dry tobacco leaf on her teeth and swallow the saliva to suppress her hunger pangs.

A little farther away from school, she set down her basket under a tree. She spread out an old cloth. On it, she arranged separately, the boxes and the plastic bags containing the confectionaries. Feeling the blistering sun tingle on her skin, she pulled up the loose end of her sari to cover her head. Just then, the recess bell rang. In no time, the kids began to stream out of the school and flock around Eeramma...

“Granny...give me a spicy coil...”

“I want four lollipops...”

“Give me half a rupee worth of roasted peas please...”

Collecting the money carefully, she started dispensing her wares. Eeramma knew, the slightest inattention on her part, and the kids would hurry away without paying her. She was breathlessly busy for about twenty minutes. The bell announced the end of the recess, but Eeramma continued to sit there for a while, hoping someone would turn up. There were no more customers, so she packed everything back into her basket. Keeping some coins aside to buy some rice grain, the rest she put into her box. The remaining money would be Eeramma’s capital. With it, she would buy her weekly provisions from the Chenampalli market and sell them at the school.

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The crowd in the Chenampalli market was thin. Business was dull. The shopkeepers who had put up their stalls looked anxious. Eeramma went around the market, to check out where she could get the best bargain for her weekly provisions. Wherever she went, she haggled. “I am poor, pray give me a discount...” she pleaded.

A little farther on, she caught sight of an old woman in a blue sari, walking ahead with a basket on her head.

“Akka...Hey! Ademma akka...” hollering, Eeramma approached her.

“Oh! Eeramma...is it you!...how are you....? How’s your husband doing?” Ademma enquired affectionately.

“Not good at all...how about you...? Oh! By the way ... heard that both your sons along with their wives and children have returned...why are they back? ...what will they eat here?”

“It's already a month since they returned...they were there for two months, you see...anyhow...our people cannot survive there, it seems...from the moment they landed there, they faced a lot of hardships it seems...they set up shacks, for living, on the outskirts of the city...but they aren't like the ones we live in...they are made, with layers of empty cement and fertilizer bags stitched together...they would get up early in the morning, cook some food and pack it...before going off to sit at a bus stop or a railway station, hoping that someone would call them for work...”

Mouth agape, Eeramma listened.

“.....it was a good deal, if they could manage to get work, twice or thrice a week...a daily commission had to be paid, to the agent who helped them find work..., on some days...come here for work today, they are informed, it seems...once they reach there, there isn't work for so many, they are told and sent somewhere else...or else, come tomorrow, they are informed and kept hanging around.”

“Oh!...is it so? ...Then, do you think my son, Obilesu is going through a similar struggle..., what to do, then? ...I wonder, how they are...what they are eating...so far from home...away from kith and kin...ccha...ccha...what to do.....” Eeramma mourned.

Then recollecting herself quickly, she asked...

“Now, what work are your sons going for, Akka...”

“That job...where they lay roads and are not paid wages but paid in rice...they are going there...they call it by some name...yeah!...food for work...that too, will be completed in a week or ten days, it seems...don't know what to do after that...”

“If they aren't paid money and given just rice, then....what will they buy vegetables and other things with? ...if they fall sick or contract any infection, what will they do?...are these crooked contractors existing just by eating rice?...even Ankireddy of my village, may well, be doing such contracts...the whole house is filled with bags of rice...as for him...he eats eggs, and twice or thrice a week he has to have some meat too...” she vented out her anguish.

“You tell me, what can we do? If we have to eat that way, don't know how many more generations it would take...we have our onion chutney and we have ourselves...if we want to buy anything else, are we able to do so? Before New Year's, has the market ever been so dull? ...there is nothing to eat...in such times, how can we think of buying this or that for the festival?”

“That's what I was thinking too, look akka...how deserted the market is!...instead of a bad drought like this...wouldn't a flood have been better... at least, we would have water to drink and fodder for animals to graze on. For us, there are never any jobs ...even if wish to work. When we come to know of a place, where there is some small work...forty to fifty people flock there, hoping to grab something...it turns out, there is work barely enough for five or six people...the rest have to come away, empty-handed...isn't it why...everyone is leaving the village...and again, returning...your folks are back now... may be my folks would also return...,” she agonized.

Their hearts grew heavy...

“If any of your folks go to Nellore...could you ask them to enquire, how my Obilesu is doing?... I would be grateful...now, I have to get going...the kids will be waiting for me...”

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As Eeramma turned into her lane, she found people gathered there, discussing something animatedly.

‘It looks like, some clothes’ vendor is here...anyways who has the money now, to buy anything...’ she muttered to herself.

“Hey! ...don’t you know... Chandramma’s younger one consumed poison, it seems...they were taking her in a tractor when she breathed her last ...” informed her second sister-in-law, rather loudly as she approached Eeramma.

“What!...what are you saying? Who!... Jayamma?...ccha...ccha...oh my god !.... What has she done...” Eeramma’s voice quivered.

“Yes...the same girl...” Eeramma did not let her complete.

“It was, this morning, I had asked Chandramma...when is Jayamma’s wedding? Now, all of a sudden...what happened...that she had to resort to this...”

“It’s the wedding, that has led to all this...when their elder son-in-law visited the groom’s place, they demanded, it seems...that the gold and cash is to be handed over in the wedding, ...or else, they would go for a different bride...apparently, the young one pleaded with them to put off the wedding for a further six months...but those rogues turned a deaf ear to his pleas...” she briefed Eeramma.

“Thoo... they be damned...are they not human...don’t they have daughters...may dogs shit in their mouths...” She spat on the ground in a fury....

“If the wedding is called off...they would lose face in the village...they wept before their son-in-law,...both the husband and wife...unable to see their grief, the poor girl consumed the poison...that’s what the neighbours say....”

Eeramma felt as if the sky had fallen over her head.

Everyone around was talking about Jayamma. They were cursing the groom’s family. Eeramma paid no heed to them. Feeling dazed, she walked into her shack. She forgot to put away the provisions she had brought from the market into the trunk box. She left her wicker basket, went out and sat under the tree, feeling rather pensive. Taking a look at Eeramma’s face, the kids could not even plead, “Hungry, granny....” They didn’t dare to eat what was in the wicker basket. They were scared that Eeramma would spank them. They drank some water from the pot and sat calmly on the side.

Eeramma’s heart was heavy. She couldn’t digest the news of Jayamma’s death. She shared her grief with Ramudu.



“Weren’t you telling me this morning...that the wedding of Chandramma’s daughter was in trouble...may their mothers feed on dust...and damned be those, who didn’t let us enjoy sweet porridge for the festival...”

“You are worried about your porridge...huh!...just thinking of it makes me feel terrible ...had some son of a bitch bought their land, then the wedding would be underway...the girl would be alive...but then, who has money to buy the land in the first place...maybe Ankireddy could have...but surprisingly...even he is seeking to sell his own land. And his wife Ramasubamma is getting jewellery made for her daughter’s wedding which is years away...alas...this Chandramma couldn’t get the jewellery released, that she had pawned for her daughter’s wedding...” She muttered.

“It’s sad...poor Chandramma will cry inconsolably without food or water, for the next few days...”

When Eeramma did not respond.

“It’s getting dark...kids will cry of hunger...,” Ramudu’s words reminded her of the reality. His words pricked her conscience.

‘Chandramma will cry without food and water ...poor thing...why won’t she cry...unable to get her daughter married, they drove her to death...then...what about me? ...unable to feed my kids, I will also drive them to death...What shall I do? Oh! God... In about twenty days, the schools will close for vacation. Then, what’s the way out? ...with the small earnings from there, I am somehow eking out an existence... and if we didn’t have it...we will have to go jump in a well...again, to do that...none of the wells have water... by the time schools close, wonder whether he will return or not?...why won’t he come...? Even Ademma akka was saying that there are no jobs there...if I tell this to my old man, that’s it! He will pine away to death...what, if unable to bear the shame of failure, he doesn’t return... how to manage food for so many...maybe we will all die of hunger...we will die, perhaps, without even seeing each other...then, there won’t be anyone to even bury us...all my people have left the village...and even if he returns...would our lives be any better ...whatever happens...it will be nice if he returns...he isn’t doing any better there...’ While Chandramma wept desolately for her dead child, Eeramma’s heart wept for her son, who, though alive was at a distance, far away from her.

Ramudu nudged Eeramma again about cooking. She got up, jerking her head.

“If all of us are here...then we will eat within our means...or else, all of us, will starve to death... unable to earn a handful of grain, must we resort to killing ourselves...why should we die?...”

Suddenly, the sacks of rice, stacked away in Ankireddy’s house flashed before Eeramma’s eye.

‘Here we are struggling desperately to earn a few grains...and there...heaps of rice bags are laid waste...how will people like us access them...’ she lit the stove.

The light spread through the shack...and shafts of it glimmered through the cracks in the walls...

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