



## CHAPTER

## two

In our street, when a young girl came of age, they made a little hut-like room inside the house, with palmyra fronds, and got her to sit there for sixteen days. During this time, the girl didn't go out to do any work, nor did she do any sort of tasks inside the house. The relatives took turns to cook a meal for her each day. They also brought her all kinds of sweets to eat.

During the time she was confined to this *kuchulu*, she had to rub herself with turmeric and have a bath every day; wear a freshly washed sari; and eat rice mixed with gingelly oil at mealtimes. We younger children would join together and keep on peeping inside the *kuchulu*. Other young women came to visit, and to whisper and gossip. Every now and again, they would go off into fits of giggles.

The girl who had just come of age played all sorts of games on the floor, like *pallaanguzhi*, *thaayam*, or *thattaangal* with the other young women. For the entire time during those sixteen days, she had to hold a small iron rod or something made of iron in her hands. It was most important for her to take it along when she went outside for 'number one' or 'number two'. They said that an evil spirit, a *pey*, might jump on her otherwise.

The evening of the day that she first menstruated, when the women returned home from work, they gathered together to give her a bath. The girl's mother would have gone round to all the relations, earlier, to give them the news. At evening time, four women would hold out a sari, forming a curtain on all four sides, and with the girl sitting in their midst, they would pour water over her in turn. When she had been rubbed

with turmeric and bathed, then dressed in a clean sari, she would come and sit quietly in the kuchulu. And while they bathed her, the women usually sang songs with choruses of ululations. On the sixteenth day, the kuchulu was taken apart and burnt, and the girl came out, and went to work once again.

Those who were a little bit better off set up a small pandal decorated with banana trees in front of the house on the sixteenth day; hired a loudspeaker, and celebrated the occasion in a grand style, with presentations of money. The girl's mother's brother's family had to donate a sari and *ravikkai*, and big cooking vessels, *andas* and *gundas*. The other relations too came along with food and utensils. All these gifts for the girl, the *siir* gifts, were carried on the head in procession, street by street, lit by petromax lamps and accompanied by the beating of drums. When they saw the procession, people would talk about the size of the *siir* gifts, and wonder whose daughter was getting all this. And when there was a similar ritual in the houses of the people who gave the *siir* gifts, they expected an equal amount of gifts in return. Otherwise there would be complaints and fights. Apparently all this is very recent. In my Paatti's time, she said, there never was all this show and festivity.

Paatti felt sad that when Mariamma came of age, we weren't able to do anything special for her.

'She sat inside the kuchulu for eight days, just for the show. Your mother cooked for her for a couple of days, and put twenty rupees and a couple of measures of rice in her hands. After that, my uncle's children cooked for four more days. What can they afford, after all, poor things; they served her drumstick greens, and rasam, and a salt fish gravy.'

'But why did you let it go without any rites or rituals for her, Paatti?' I asked.

'Do you think it's an easy thing to do, to keep these rituals? If you have a few coins in hand you can do it all. She herself pulled down the kuchulu on the eighth day, burnt it, and set off for work. Her mother went and died. Her father is a drunkard and goes off to his kept woman. He couldn't care less for his children! He's satisfied so long as his stomach is full.'

‘Well, all right. But you said they used to sing and raise a kulavai to the girl. Do you remember that song, Paatti?’

‘Even if there’s no kanji to eat, the women can never be stopped from singing loudly and ululating,’ Paatti said, as she began to sing:

On Friday morning, at day-break  
 She came of age, the people said.  
 Her mother was delighted, her father too—  
 Her uncles arrived, all in a row—

Opened the cloth-shop and chose silk and gold  
 Went upstairs to find the silk of their dreams  
 The lower border with a row of swans  
 The upper border with a row of clouds.

The mountain wind can touch her if she bathes in the river  
 The chill wind can touch her if she bathes in the pond.  
 So bathe her in water that is drawn from the well  
 And wash her hair in a tub made of illuppai flowers.

Shake her hair dry and comb it with gold,  
 Toss her hair dry and comb it with silver,  
 Comb her hair dry with a golden comb,  
 And women, all together, raise a kulavai.

‘After every four lines there was a kulavai, an ululation,’ Paatti said. Then she added sorrowfully, ‘Daughter of a wretch, what good did it do her to come of age and become a *pushpavati*? The very next week she fell ill and took to her bed.’



After they pulled down the kuchulu and burnt it, Mariamma heard that the builders who were digging wells in those parts gave good wages. And so she went to work for them. Only youths and young girls were suited to that work. Even though it meant hard labour, the youngsters went to work there hoping to pick up a few coins which would help to fill their bellies.

In this kind of work, the men climbed right inside the well, dug out

the sides, and filled baskets with stone and rubble. The women had to go down, carry the baskets on their heads, bring them up and tip them out. It was the men's job to blow up the rocks with dynamite, dig out the well, and build up its walls with cement. So they got the bigger wages. The women, in any case, whatever work they did, were paid less than the men. Even when they did the very same work, they were paid less. Even in the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles, but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price.

Anyway, one day Mariamma was carrying away a basket of rubble like this when her foot slipped and she fell all the way down, basket and all. How she fell into such a deep well and still managed to survive was a miracle. There were no great wounds to her head, but every bone in her body seemed to be crushed. They just rolled her into a palmyra mat, put her in a bullock cart, drove her to the free government hospital in the next town and admitted her there.

As soon as we heard the news we all rushed there. Even Paatti came with us. There wasn't a single one of us who didn't weep when we saw her. You could only see Mariamma's face. From her neck to her feet she was covered in plaster. She lay there unable even to roll from side to side. They told us that it would take at least a year for her to get up and walk about.

After we visited Mariamma, we walked home along a path through the fields, talking amongst ourselves. Paatti said, 'This reminds me of a young fellow, just two weeks married, who was working on a well. He was blown up when they were laying the dynamite, and died, poor man. Then there was the other man who was lifting water from a well with a leather bucket, when the bullocks went mad, dragged him round and pushed him in. He was beaten about the face and head, and he too died.'

'Even last year, a couple of kids—both of them young girls—were helping to sow the fields with gram. They ate some of the gram, became violently sick, and then died.'

When Paatti said this, I questioned her, 'How can people die from eating gram?'

'Of course they won't die if they eat ordinary, plain gram. These landowners had mixed the seed-gram with all sorts of chemicals. Who knows, they might even have done it on purpose to stop the girls from eating the gram. At least they could have warned the girls, right in the beginning. And as for the poor fools, they should have stopped themselves because of the chemical smell. Instead they went and ate the gram on empty stomachs, they hadn't had anything else to eat or drink that morning. They threw up violently, and lay down right there in the fields. Our people found them there when they went to start the ploughing, and brought them to this same hospital. That very evening they both died, and were brought home and buried. At least if you die a natural death you can hope to be buried with your whole body. If you die in hospital, it seems they cut out the brains and the kidney and the liver, stitch up everything with just the guts inside, and return the body tied up in a mat.'

We walked home for three miles, along the path through the fields. Suddenly there was a terrifying noise from somewhere. I was so frightened, even my insides were trembling. Paatti told me that there were jackals howling in the distance.

Mariamamma lay in her hospital bed, helpless and suffering for seven or eight months. Then at last she came home.



After a few days, she set out again to find work. Her younger sister Annamma too was ready to go with her. So the two of them found work in the fields, weeding or harvesting. When they couldn't get any of this seasonal work, they went into the hills and woods, gathered firewood, sold their bundles, and earned enough for their daily *kanji*.

One day Mariamma gathered her firewood as usual, and came home in the burning heat carrying her bundle. Bare feet; no chappals or anything. The loose earth lying along the paths was scorching, so she leaned her bundle against a banyan tree and sat down to rest for a moment. Then she saw that there was water running through an irrigation pump-set nearby, and went to drink a couple of mouthfuls of water. She happened



to be in Kumarasami Ayya's fields. The man was actually in the pump-set shed at that time. When she went innocently to get some water, he seized her hand and pulled her inside. Frightened out of her wits, she left everything and ran home, hardly knowing how she escaped.

When she came home and told her friends, they warned her. 'Mariamma,' they said, 'it is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you'll find that it is you who will get the blame; it's you who will be called a whore. Just come with us quietly, and we'll bring away the firewood that you left there. Hereafter, never come back on your own when you have been collecting firewood. That landowner is an evil man, fat with money. He's upper caste as well. How can we even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe their words or ours?' And so they went together, picked up the bundle of firewood, sold it, and then went home.



By this time, Kumarasami Ayya, afraid that his reputation might be in ruins, hurried to the village, and went and complained to the headman of the paraiya community, the *naattaamai*.

'The way some of the youngsters from your streets carry on when they go out to gather firewood is beyond everything. They always come and lurk along my fields. I've been watching them for a long time, and really I have to speak out now. Just today that girl Mariamma, daughter of Samudrakani, and that Muukkayi's grandson Manikkam were behaving in a very dirty way; I saw them with my own eyes. And it's a good thing it was I who saw them. I've come straight away to tell you. Had it been anybody else who saw them, they would have been in bad trouble. Anyone else would have strung them up hand and foot to the banyan tree, then and there. You would have been told about it only after that.'

Soon after his encounter with Mariamma, the landowner had seen the lad Manikkam walking along with the firewood he had gathered; so now he found a way of shielding his own name by throwing them both in the fire, in front of the *naattaamai*.

Our headman replied to the *mudalaali*, 'Ayya, this very evening we'll

call a meeting of the village folk and enquire into it.' So he sent out an announcement with a tom-tom, and summoned everyone to a meeting that night.

All our menfolk gathered in front of the community hall, and sat down. The women stood about, behind them, here and there, watching.

The naattaamai sent word for Mariamma and Manikkam to be brought in front of him. The junior naattaamai, the senior naattaamai, all the older men of the village, the youths and even the little boys were all seated there.

'Silence, everyone. Here is a case where our entire community's reputation is at risk. In a village where there are many caste-communities, if someone of our caste behaves disgracefully, then it brings shame on all of us. As it is, we paraiyas are treated with contempt. And now this happens. The junior naattaamai will explain everything in detail. Tell those two to come up here in front of everyone.' The senior naattaamai, Seeniappan, turned and looked at the junior naattaamai, Chellakkannu.

As soon as the senior naattaamai began to speak, everyone shut up, and there was total silence. The women even quietened the babies, settled them in their arms, and stood still, wondering what was going to happen. Mariamma and Manikkam came to the centre of the circle, greeted the elders by falling down and prostrating themselves at full length, and went to stand each to one side, arms folded.

Then the junior naattaamai, Chellakkannu, began to speak. By now there was a ripple of murmurs from the women. Each woman was telling the next why she thought the meeting was called, embroidering it with what she knew. At once, a couple of young men got up and came towards us saying, 'Do you women have any sense at all? What are you muttering about here, when we men are talking seriously? Go home all of you.' They added a couple of obscenities, scolded us roundly and drove us off. We ran for a short distance, pretending we were going home, then came back in a little while to watch and listen.

'This evening, I was buying cattle-feed in Maangamanda Chettiar's store, and talking to two or three other men there. The mudalaali living in the last house called me and said he wanted to talk to me and to the

senior naattaamai. It was I who sent a man to bring the senior naattaamai there.'

The junior naattaamai was silent for a while, gazing at the men who were gathered there. He took the cloth off his shoulder, wiped his face, replaced the cloth and went on, 'Today, Mariamma, Samudrakani's daughter, who had been out gathering firewood, and Manikkam, son of East Street Chellayya, and grandson of Muukkayi, left their firewood leaning against the banyan tree and went together in secret to the pump-set shed belonging to Kumarasami Mudalaali. It happened that the mudalaali came that side on an errand, and saw them there together, behaving indecently. As soon as they saw him, they screamed and took to their heels like frightened donkeys. Ayya, who saw them there with his own eyes, came to us directly, and left the matter in our hands. Had it been anyone else, there would have been a different end to this story.'

When the junior naattaamai finished, everyone began muttering to each other.

'What's the use if you just talk amongst yourselves?' the senior naattaamai scolded. 'We have to decide together what we should do now.'

At this point Karuppayya said, 'Both the youngsters are standing right here, aren't they? Why don't we question them first?'

'Question them? Why should we question them? Didn't the mudalaali see them with his own eyes and then come and complain? We have to decide what their punishment should be, that's all.' Malayaandi's voice was raised in anger.

Immediately, four or five people shouted together, 'How can that be? If the mudalaali says something, that's it, is it? We can only know what really happened if we ask these youngsters a couple of questions.'

'All right, all right. No need to shout. Let's ask them then.' The senior naattaamai quietened the crowd. Then he asked in an accusing tone, 'Ele, Manikkam, what do you have to say for yourself, le?'

Manikkam folded his arms as he stood there, and spoke humbly. 'What the mudalaali said never happened. That girl came away with her firewood bundle quite some time before I did. We spoke a few words in fun when we were in the woods. And that was when everyone was there together.'



I only joked with her because she is my athai's daughter. I never even saw her along the way, on my way back.'

'Eitha, Mariamma, what do you say?'

'What that machaan says is true. When I was gathering firewood with a few others, he said a word or two to me, in fun. I came away before the others. I don't even know when the others left.' If Mariamma had said anymore, she would have burst into tears. She finished speaking, wiped her face with her sari, and stood there, her head drooping.

'In that case, did the mudalaali lie to us in everything he said? You two had better be respectful, admit the truth and beg pardon. Otherwise we have no other way but to punish you severely.' The senior naattaamai's voice rose again, in warning.

From the group of women, Kaliamma said, as if she was speaking to herself, 'That akka Mariamma went away with her firewood a long time before all the rest of us. Machaan Manikkam helped to lift my bundle on to my head, and then walked home behind me. How could these two possibly have met and misbehaved? This is really unjust. Look at the cheek of the mudalaali. He came here as fast as he could and told his fibs.'

Even as she was saying this, four or five of the men got up once again and shouted at us. 'Will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you? The more we drive the wretches away, the more they come back and make trouble.'

Once again the women were silenced.

The junior naattaamai called out Mariamma's father, Samudrakani. 'Look here, 'pa, Samudran, tell your daughter to fall down and beg forgiveness. The village will forgive her and make her pay a small fine of ten or twenty rupees, and that will be the end of the matter. If not, tell me, can you pay off a really big fine?'

Samudrakani listened to this, went up close to his daughter and said, 'Well girl, you heard what he said, didn't you? Why are you standing there like a stone then? Beg forgiveness, you bitch, I have suffered enough shame because of you.' He stared at her in fury.

'Ayya, I never did any of that. It was the mudalaali who tried to

misbehave with me. But I escaped from him and ran away.' She began to weep loudly.

At once some of the men at the meeting began to shout once more. 'Do you hear that? Slut of a girl! In order to get out of it, she promptly sticks all the blame on the mudalaali. These creatures will come and dig out your eyes even when you are awake.'

Then they told the naattaamai, 'Maama, there's no use questioning her. Just decide how much to fine her. It's only that way we can stop these girls from acting like whores.'

Half the people there agreed. Nobody spoke much after that. But the women continued to mutter amongst themselves.

Anandamma said, 'It was the mudalaali who tried to rape her. She was scared out of her wits, refused him, and ran away. Now the whore-son has turned everything round and told a different tale. I actually went with her that evening to fetch the firewood that she left behind.'

'What can you say to these men,' Susamma replied, sadly. 'There's no way of convincing them of the truth, even when we are sure of it. They never allow us to sit down at the village meetings. They won't even allow us to stand to one side, like this. But it's only to us that they'll brag. Ask them just to stand up to the mudalaali. Not a bit, they'll cover their mouths and their backsides and run scared.'

But Muthamma disagreed. 'You seem to know such a lot. Her own father keeps a mistress, everyone knows that. She could be a bit of a slut herself. Just last week when we were weeding the sesame fields, she was ready to fight with me. She might have done it, who knows?'

'Everybody in the village knows about her father's kept woman, even a baby who was born just the other day. Did anyone call a village meeting and question him about it? They say he's a man: if he sees mud he'll step into it; if he sees water, he'll wash himself. It's one justice for men and quite another for women.'

While they were arguing amongst themselves like this, some of the men came up yet again, scolded them, struck at them with their shoulder cloths and drove them off.

Meanwhile, Mariamma's father stood next to her saying, 'What's

the good of standing there like a boundary stone? You should have used your sense before it came to this. Now fall on your knees immediately and beg forgiveness.'

But Mariamma kept on standing there as if she were dead; as if she felt nothing. She didn't say a word.

Her father got angrier still and began hitting her as hard as he could. Even then she stood still, in a state of shock. Still she didn't speak.

'Stubborn slut! Look how she won't move, however much she is told!'

'She goes and does as she likes and now she won't move even when all of us tell her. Doesn't show any respect.'

A woman spoke again. 'They are making this poor girl suffer so much, but do they beat that boy, Manikkam? And none of them has the brains to find out whether it wasn't the mudalaali who was doing wrong in the first place.'

Chinnathayi who stood next to her said, 'That's a good one! Suppose these fellows go and question upper-caste men. What if those rich men start a fight, saying, how dare these paraiyar be so insolent? Who do you think is going to win? Even if the mudalaali was really at fault, it is better to keep quiet about it and fine these two eighty or a hundred. Instead you want to start a riot in the village. Once before, there was a fight in the cremation ground and these upper-caste men set the police on us. We were beaten to a pulp. Don't you remember?'

Seenamma agreed. 'That's very true. We have to think about all this before we do anything. After all, our men know what they are doing, don't they?'

The naattaamai began to speak. At once, Savuriamma scolded her baby who was sucking at her breast and whining. 'Shut up, devil of a child, let me hear what they are saying.' Settling the child more comfortably as she stood there, she went on, 'As far as I know, this is the first case of sexual misbehaviour that has come before the village meeting. The landowners get up to all sorts of evil in the fields. Can we bring them to justice, though? After all, we have to go crawling to them tomorrow and beg for work.'

When Mariamma saw her father advancing towards her to beat her again, she was so terrified that she fell down at last and asked for forgiveness. Nobody asked Manikkam to prostrate himself. After this, Mariamma was asked to pay a fine of Rs 200, and Manikkam a fine of Rs 100.

The naattaamai finished the proceedings by saying, 'It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies.'

Manikkam's father paid Rs 50 straight away, and brought a big brass vessel as guarantee for the rest of the money he owed. When he paid off the remaining fifty rupees, he would be able to retrieve the vessel. When people didn't have ready cash in hand, they often resorted to this ploy.

Poor Mariamma, having fallen into the well and been almost crippled, had only just emerged from hospital. She didn't even have a paisa in hand. Her father sent the younger daughter Annamma home to fetch a big brass vessel and a brass water pot. He handed over both to the naattaamai.



After this, the crowd broke up and everyone went home. As we were walking home, Arokkyam said, 'Look how unfair these fines are. Even last week, when my granddaughter Paralokam went to pull up grass for the cow, the owner of the fields said he would help her lift the bundle on to her head. That was his excuse for squeezing her breasts, the barbarian. He's supposed to be the mudalaali's son. He's supposed to be an educated fellow. The poor child came and told me and wept. But say we dared to tell anyone else about it. It's my granddaughter who'll be called a whore and punished. Whatever a man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman.'

Our Paatti was furious. She kept on railing at Mariamma. 'When the fellow pulled you into the shed, why couldn't you have kicked him in the balls then and there? Now you've been hauled unfairly in front of the whole village, given a bad name, and made to pay a fine, to top it all.'

Now how on earth are you going to save the money, and when will you redeem the vessel and the water pot? All right, leave it now. Of course your father had an eye on the water pot and the vessel for himself. He was waiting for a chance to sell them off and put the money into the toddy-shop owner Maariappa's hands. Let's see what he does now. All right, all right, go to sleep now.'

But Mariamma didn't sleep a wink that night. She even thought that it might be best to hang herself with a rope. She sat and wept all night long. Her little sister, Annamma, tried to comfort her by saying, 'Don't cry, Akka. Please don't cry.' Their youngest sister, Seyakkodi, sat up in bed and began to whimper. At this, Mariamma patted her to sleep, and lay down at last. She continued to weep as she lay there.





## CHAPTER

### three

I could never forget the way Mariamma was humiliated in front of the entire village. The more I thought about it, the more I felt sorry for her. And although I was filled with pity on the one hand, I was filled with anger on the other. If only they had allowed the other women who had gone to collect firewood with her to speak out at the assembly, all the lies and all the truth would have come out. Why were women pushed aside always and everywhere? The question kept on churning inside me.

Paatti could have spoken out at the village council: after all, she was present at most households whenever a child was born; she was an overseer of women workers; she was an important woman. It was the smaller children and young girls who could not be expected to speak out. Telling myself this, I accosted Paatti. 'Paatti,' I said, 'after all, you are a big woman in this village, why couldn't you have gone and spoken the truth that day?'

Paatti went on crushing betel nuts in the mortar with an iron pestle, as she answered me. 'You talk as if it's all a game. Big woman, small woman, nonsense! Once you are born a woman, can you go and confront a group of four and five men? Should you even do it? When we were little ones, if ever there was a village meeting, we just stayed inside our homes and drank our kanji. But just look at what goes on nowadays. Even small children and young girls turn out to watch the fun; no wonder they are chased away and take to their heels. What do we know about justice? From your ancestors' times it has been agreed that what the men

say is right. Don't you go dreaming that everything is going to change just because you've learnt a few letters of the alphabet.'

'So, Paatti, does that mean that whatever men say is bound to be right? And that whatever women say will always be wrong?' I spoke out because I was really chafing inside my mind.

'Whether it is right or wrong, it is better for women not to open their mouths. You just try speaking out about what you believe is right. You'll only get kicked and beaten and trampled on for your pains. And it isn't just here that it happens, you know. It's the same throughout the world. Women are not given that kind of respect.' Paatti scraped up the betel leaves and nut that she had crushed in her mortar, popped the mixture into her mouth, gave it a couple of good chomps, and stowed it away inside her cheek.

'Look how she talks—as if she's been around the whole world,' I thought to myself. But I didn't actually say this to Paatti. I took some of her betel mixture and began chewing too. 'It's you folk who are always putting us down,' I told her. 'From the time we are babies you treat boys in one way and girls in quite another. It's you folk who put butter in one eye and quicklime in the other.'

Paatti spat out betel juice in a stream and turned on me. 'Oi, daughter of a sinner, look at the questions you ask! Whoever starved you or deprived you of kanji for you to complain like this?'

'I'm not talking about kanji. Why can't we be the same as boys? We aren't allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can't stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes. You tell us all this rubbish and keep us under your control. Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn't eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren't we also human beings?'

Paatti asked me in her turn, 'Do you think it's been like this just yesterday or today? Hasn't all this been written about in books as well, haven't you read about it?'

'What's in the books? You talk as if you've read it all yourself.'

'You know perfectly well that nobody helped me to read. In those days, girls didn't go to school much. The white nuns who came here made a big effort to try and teach your mother. They gave the children every chance to study: free notebooks, kanji at midday. Silly girl, refused to go to school beyond the fifth class.'

'Yes, but you said, there was something in the books,' I reminded her.

'Oh yes, it's about the wife of someone called Tiruvalluvar, you know? Seems she would sit next to her husband, pick up the grains of cooked rice that scattered from his leaf with a needle, and rinse them out. Must have been a very finicky lady. Look, why couldn't she have picked them up with her fingers? Anyway, the point is that even in those days, the women ate after the men.'

'So what would be so wrong if we changed that and the women ate first?'

'Wrong? You'll end up like that Anantamma of West Street, who was thrashed soundly and left lying there, that's all. And haven't you heard that song that children here go about singing?

Crab, O crab, my pretty little crab  
 Who wandered through all the fields I planted,  
 I pulled off your claws and put you in the pot  
 I gave the pot a boil and set it down.  
 I waited and waited for him to come home  
 And began to eat as he came through the door.  
 He came to hit me, the hungry brute  
 He pounced at me to kill me  
 He struck me, he struck my child  
 He almost crushed the baby in my womb  
 He beat me until my legs buckled  
 He thrashed me until my bangles smashed.

The song says that the husband beat her up so much even though she was carrying a child—and all this torture just because she caught some crabs from the wet fields and made a curry and ate it before he came home for his meal. And here you are, just prattling on without thinking! And Paatti got up and waiked off.

What Paatti said was true, too. If women are openly seen to be acting in unexpected ways, it is true that everyone will abuse them.

Even when we played 'mothers and fathers', we always had to serve the mud 'rice' to the boys first. They used to pull us by the hair and hit us, saying, 'What sort of food is this, di, without salt or anything!' In those days, we used to accept those pretence blows, and think it was all good fun. Nowadays, for many of the girls, those have become real blows, and their entire lives are hell.

It's like this from the moment we are born. One day, a number of us were sitting down to a dice-game. In the midst of this, Muukkamma from East Street turned up. 'Ei, sister-in-law Lourdu, haven't you got any common sense at all? There's your son screeching like a crow, having pissed all over the cradle-cloth. And here you are, chucking a dice around. If it were a girl at least, you could leave her to cry. But how can you come away, leaving your son bawling by himself?'

As soon as Muukkamma said this, Lourdu left the game and fled. I asked immediately, 'So you can't leave a boy baby to cry, but you can leave a girl to scream on her own, can you?'

'Why, yes, after all tomorrow he's the one who'll fill a mouth that's desperate for food and water. You rear a girl child and give her away into someone else's hands. Is she the one who is going to look after you in the end?'

When Vellakkannu Perimma said this, Sappaani countered, 'In these days, neither the girls nor the boys are going to look after you. If we work hard, we earn our own kanji. Otherwise, there's nothing. We just have to hope that God will take us away while our arms and legs are still strong, that's all.' And we all got up and went home.



When we played 'buses', there were always boys at the start and finish of the rope as driver and conductor, who allowed the girls to enter in the middle, and shouted at them. And when we played husbands and wives they were the ones in authority; they took the roles of policemen and shop owners.

If it was like this at home, it was even worse at church. When we were in the seventh and eighth class, me and my friends Jayapillai, Nirumala, Chandura, Seeniamma, and others wanted desperately to peep into the sacristy at least once, someday, somehow, and run away without getting caught. But we never ever made it, even a single time. Even the tiniest boys, born just the other day, would manage to get in there as quick as anything. They'd go in one way and come out the other. But they never allowed the girls to join in.

If they put on a play or something on a festival day, they never allowed women to take part. The men themselves would dress up and act as women rather than allow us to join in.

Once they planned to put on a play like this. You can't imagine the crowd that turned up for the performance. But before it could even begin, seven or eight fellows were filling up the stage, chattering away, and discussing the cast. All the women who had come there to see the performance got really fed up.

South Street Sesamma complained, 'If all these fellows can do is to get together and jabber away, as if they don't have a care in the world, when is the play to get going? It's only after the play is over that they'll allow the "record-dancers" from Marudai to do their stuff.'

Mochcha Mary said in reply, 'It seems there's a scene in the play in which the baby Sesu appears. They are still going round looking for a light-coloured child to take the role, that's why it's taking so long.'

'My brother-in-law's daughter is as pink as a rose. They could take her,' proposed Kanni Maria. But before she could finish, West Street Bhakkiyam cut in bluntly, 'Do you have any sense in your head? You're actually suggesting that they should go and find a little girl to play the part of Sesu?'

'Ei, listen to this woman! Are they going to have a Jesus who will be stark naked or what?' Amalorpavam said. 'Who's going to know it's a girl if she wears a shirt that hides everything, and they carry her wrapped in a cloth? It's a good idea, you wretch!'

'Yes, di, that's true enough: quick, run and tell them that. At least let them make a start on the play,' Bhakkiyam encouraged her. At this point,



Antoniamma butted in and said to Bhakkiyam, 'But they are also looking for a fair-skinned boy to play Our Lady. Will you volunteer for that, Perimma?'

Bhakkiyam was angry and snapped back, 'What cheek! How dare you ask me like that! You go and ask your own mother, you slut! What a way to talk!'

Paathimapillai said, 'But why shouldn't they give the role of Our Lady to a woman who is just as fair as the man they want? Our teacher's daughter is fair. If she is made up and given a baby to hold in her arms, she'll look just like Our Lady of Lourdes.'

'We've tried telling them that. They've absolutely refused. And for all that, it's only a scene lasting five minutes. But they won't let a woman do even that much.'

While the women were saying all this amongst themselves, the men dressed up North Street Thomas as the Virgin Mary, and gave him a baby to hold. And so the play began at last. Because they couldn't find anyone else, they agreed to have a girl as the baby Jesus. And of course, seeing the bright lights on the stage and all the people gathered there, baby Jesus raised a deafening racket. After that, one way or another, the play proceeded.

In the middle of the performance, the current failed. At once Bhakkiyam said loudly, scratching away at her head and yawning, 'They kept on competing, talking into the mike one after the other, that's why the current became empty in that Chinnayya's house. Tell them to go and draw the current from someone else's house now.'

Everyone burst out laughing at this.

'What's the matter, you idiots? What are you giggling for? Don't you want it to finish so that we can all go home and go to sleep, you sluts?'

'Ei, Paatti, if the current is off in one house, it's probably off everywhere,' Kozhandaiamma informed her, laughing. 'Is it like kerosene oil or what, to run out?'

'Whatever it is, what do I know about it?' complained Bhakkiyam, screwing up her face.



This Bhakkiyam had borne seventeen children. Eleven of them had died. There were only six left. And she was the one who made us all laugh, one *puusai* time at church.

Usually, on Sundays, the women used to take their offerings to the *saamiyaar* during the *puusai*. They put grains and pulses depending on the season, into a box—paddy, maize, millet, pulses, sesame seeds, or beans, or whatever was growing in the fields—carried it to the priest, gave it to him and received his blessing. It was only the women who carried these offerings. I've never known a man to carry such a box and walk down the aisle during the *puusai*.

On that day too, the women went in a row, carrying their boxes and walking hesitantly, full of fear and devotion. This Bhakkiyam was among them. All the other women had boxes in their hands. Not Bhakkiyam. One of the women at the rear noticed this and commented loudly, 'Look at this old woman Bhakkiyam. She doesn't have an offering or anything, yet she's got up and joined the others, look, the shameless donkey.'

Hearing this, Bhakkiyam turned around, glared at the woman, and walked on in the procession. From somewhere among the row of women, a hen cackled as it was carried along.

East Street Mariaposuppam remarked, 'Some woman has gone and put a hen into her box and brought it along. This is all showing off, you know. Letting a hen cackle in the church!'

'But who can it be? We can only hear the noise but can't make out who's carrying the creature!'

'Watch out as they hand over their offering. We'll see who's got a hen in her box.' There was a lot of joking and laughing like this as the offering was handed over, that day.

Each woman handed over her box, bowed low in respect to the priest and then went her way. There wasn't a hen in any of the boxes. Finally Bhakkiyam came up to the altar railing, took out the hen that she had kept hidden in her sari, and handed it to the *saamiyaar*. The hen flapped its wings and raised a cry that must have reached seven villages away. The entire congregation began to laugh.

The priest didn't know what to do. He accepted the hen, but as it

flung itself about, flapping its wings wildly, he loosened his hold, terrified that it would shit all over his robes and everything. The hen dropped down, squawked even more loudly, and began to run about in the church. At this, ten or so of the boys sitting in the front rows got up. They chased after it and caught it, took it to the saamiyaar's bungalow, left it tied up there and returned. Bhakkiyam alone remained unperturbed, even though everyone else was in stitches. It looked as if she wanted to smile too. But she controlled herself, didn't forget to bow down to the priest, walked back down the aisle with extreme seriousness, and knelt down at her own place. All the men laughed too, but after a while they took it upon themselves to scold the women saying, 'Why are you laughing in church? Disrespectful donkeys! Don't you have any sense of what's right?'

Now, you know this Bhakkiyam, she'd turn up at church once in a blue moon. When she did turn up, she'd keep on touching and kissing the priest's hands and feet and his robe after he gave her communion. The priest was always delighted. There are lots of people exactly like her.



During festival times, people in the village used to sing over the mike. Even then it was the men who sang and beat the rhythm. There were so many amongst us women who could sing really beautifully. But never to this day has a single one of us been allowed to sing in public. We certainly have not been invited. When I was a little girl, during festival times, women used to gather together at night to sing and to dance the *kummi*. Now, even that has stopped.

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands' torment.

How will their bodies stand it if they keep on bearing children? They

don't get proper food or drink. It's the men who fill themselves up at home and in the shops. Women rarely go into hospitals, but deliver their children at home in a makeshift way. Many women die at childbirth or soon after. Almost immediately the men marry a second time. As for birth control, the men won't do it. They say they'll lose their strength if they do. And women say that if they are sterilized in a haphazard way by people without proper training, they will not be able to work in the fields as before. If they can't work, how will they eat? As it is, the families keep going only because of the women. So the questions they ask sound reasonable to me.



## CHAPTER four

As soon as it was the month of Thai, Vellaiamma Paatti said to Mariamma, 'This year the ponds have all filled up. The crops have come up well in the fields. If you and your younger sister find some work reaping the grain, you might be able to gather two, three sacks of paddy. If we are to get you married early in the month of *Vaiyaasi*, then we'll need some rice, no? Your father is not likely to lift a finger. Does he care at all that there are two girls in the house who have come of age?'

Sammuga Kizhavi, who was sitting nearby, parting her hair, overheard Paatti. 'Which fellow is queuing up, demanding your granddaughter's hand in marriage? And here you are, sending her off to cut the grain, all ready for the wedding!'

This Sannuga Kizhavi's real name was Shanmugam. We younger children used to call her 'Maikkuuzh Kizhavi', *ragi-kuuzh* Old Woman. She was always furious when she heard us. Normally, when people made a *ragi-kuuzh*, they boiled up a handful of broken rice with it. They said you could only deal with your hunger that way. But this old woman never put in any rice, but drank her *kuuzh* just like that. We asked her once why.

'If you cook it with rice, the rice grains get in the way and you never feel as if you swallowed your *kuuzh*. Just try the *ragi-kuuzh* on its own. It will slip down your throat as easy as anything, with each gulp. And if you take some bites of the vegetable pickles from the Nadar's shop, in between mouthfuls, it will surely be as good as nectar from heaven.'



And she scolded us on top of that, saying, 'What do you know about it, silly little children like you!'

If you went and talked to her, it would surely end in abuse; and even if you kept quiet she would come of her own accord with some complaint or other and cause trouble. She'd butt into any conversation and start a quarrel. Everyone complained that she could never mind her own business.

Vellaiyamma Paatti was enraged when she heard Sammuga Kizhavi's words, and so was I. Paatti said at once, 'Ei, so do the bridegrooms queue up smartly, one after the other, for your granddaughters, then? Black-tongued *mundé!* Why don't you stick to your own business? She'll stick her head into any conversation that's going, with her evil words! Shut your trap and get away from here, you stinking *mundé!*' Then she turned to Mariamma and went on, still abusing the old woman, 'Let her be, wretched *mundé.* You take no notice of her. If you look into a dead dog's eye, you'll only see a basketful of worms. The stinking evil woman had to open her mouth and give us her opinion.'

I too scolded her under my breath. 'This old woman is really wicked. Just look at her face!' Had she heard me, I would have been done for.

For her part, Maikkuuzh Kizhavi shook out the four or so strands of hair which spread out from her head, tied them into a knot, spat out to one side, and went off leaning against her stick and shouting abuses in her turn. 'Now what have I said about your precious granddaughter that you should fall on me like a pack of rabid dogs? Go away, you whores. If you don't know your reputation, go and ask in the town. Even a babe who was born yesterday knows all about your granddaughter. The whore was caught red-handed and was accused and shamed in front of the whole village. Now she talks big. Thuu! And you too, showing off. If you had such a thing as pride or honour, you'd go and drown yourselves in a well or a pond.'

Paralokam, who turned up just then, commented, 'Why do you have to bandy words with her? You know how she's a blabber-mouth.'

'Why would I talk to that *mundé, di?* She's always the one to start it. Like the fart that comes before shit, or the water breaking before the

baby.' And Paatti too went off with her sickle, to cut some thorny twigs for her cooking.

I got more and more angry as I thought of this Sammuga Kizhavi. In our village, they used to call her 'crazy mundé'. When we returned home from church after evening prayer, if ever this old woman joined us, we'd leave her behind and set off smartly at a run. Because, if she came with us, she'd join the hands of two of the children in our gang, drop a fart in the middle and push off. Dreadful woman. She wasn't scared of anything.

One day we were all on our way to school. Just then, the women of our street who were going off to work in the landlord's fields came past. We had gone into a shop to buy a slate-pencil, and were negotiating for some sweets with the money that was left over, when Sammuga Kizhavi came in.

'Move aside, move aside, you children,' she said. 'As if the entire paraiya community is going to make progress just because these are going to school!' Then she said to the shopkeeper, 'Mudalaali, give me pickle for ten paisa.'

When we saw her, we wanted to fall about with laughter. She had made a cloth pad on top of her head with the end of her sari and placed a pot there; she carried a spade across one shoulder, and had hung a thermos flask from the other. Why would a woman going to weed the sesame fields want to carry a thermos flask? We giggled and whispered amongst ourselves that she must be carrying coffee in the flask. When we were at the convent school, we had seen the sisters drinking coffee out of such flasks. So one of us, a girl named Michaela Pillai, asked her boldly, 'Ei, Paatti, is that coffee you are carrying with you?' Then she giggled.

'Who was that? Beat her with a chappal. She's too clever for her own good. See how she's trying to needle me? If you are up to such tricks at such an early age, I wonder what you're waiting to do when you grow up. Did you hear her making fun of me, mudalaali, saying I'm carrying coffee?' She appealed to Arumuga Chettiar, the owner of the shop.

Chettiar asked in his turn, 'So what's wrong with what the child

asked? Here you are, going around with a flask slung from your shoulder. That's why she asked you. So who are you taking the coffee for, then? Did the Nayakkar ask you to fetch it?'

'Oho, are you talking about this? I've poured my ragi-kuuzh into it. It seems the part inside that's shiny like glass, is broken. Our Nayakkar amma threw it away with the rubbish, saying something is wrong with it. But I brought it home, tipped out all the glass bits, and poured my plain ragi-kuuzh into it. Just in case there isn't enough, I'm taking some in this pot as well. This pickle I bought just now, is to go with it.' And off she went.

The Chettiar laughed. So did we, as we set off for school. That evening, when I went home, I told so many people about the kuuzh in the flask, and laughed so much, my stomach hurt. From that day, the name Maikkuuzh Kizhavi was forgotten and a new name came into being: Flask Kuuzh. It was enough for someone to call out, 'Ei, Flask!' She'd take her stick and fling it at us with all her strength, she'd be that furious.



Anyway, just as Paatti had told her to do, Mariamma called her younger sister, and the two of them set off to find work cutting grain at harvest time. Even when she was working out in the fields, or on the threshing floor, people would always make insinuating remarks about her having been called up before the village council. Mariamma began to feel totally fed up with life. 'For no fault of mine, I get abused wherever I go. Did I ever look that fellow in the face even? Yet the people of this village call me every kind of name.'

The tears came into my eyes when I heard this. I felt so frustrated that women didn't show any pity or compassion towards other women. Paatti too was deeply pained. Her entire face looked faded and withered. She sighed and said to Mariamma, 'Even if someone were to come here and ask for your hand, these awful people will fill their ears with all sorts of rubbish. I don't know how on earth I'm going to see you safely ashore. Then there's your sister who's also come of age. The next one too has shot up and looks as if she's ready to reach puberty at any moment.

There shouldn't be two, three women, all unmarried, in a house. The entire village will be ready to chew us up.'

Mariamamma's father, Samudrakani, turned up just then, so Paatti spoke to him about all these things that were gnawing away in her mind. 'Mariamma is growing older all the time, no? It's best to hand her away to a man in good time. People are saying terrible things about this child and insulting her when she was only minding her own business.'

But Samudrakani only became furious at Paatti's words. 'If she had only behaved herself, who would have said anything? Is there smoke without fire? Who's going to marry her now that she's lost her reputation? We should marry her off to that boy Manikkam, without any more fuss. There's no other way.'

Mariamamma began to sob and sob as Samudrakani shouted all this. But Paatti said in reply, 'Are you saying you'll hand the child over to that fellow of all people—an out-and-out drunkard? It will be like raising a parrot and then handing it over to a cat. He never goes out to work. Whenever you see him, he's gambling. They say he even pawned the household vessels in order to gamble—and then only lost it all. And then he's been to jail seven or eight times for brewing *arrack* on the sly.'

Samudrakani said nothing more, but stalked off, lighting a *bidi*.

But after he went away, Paatti thought for a while, and it struck her that there was some sense in what he said, 'If we can't fix her up with anyone, we can't just keep her at home forever as a virgin. If we give her to this Manikkam, at least there will be a marriage. After that, the other children can be brought ashore, safely.'

When she told Mariamma about her idea, Mariamma refused most stubbornly. 'That fellow hasn't married all this while only because no one was willing to give him a bride. I'd rather hang myself with a couple of lengths of rope than marry him.' And she too left with her water pot.

Paatti realized that what Mariamma said was fair enough, but she didn't know what she should do.

As soon as it was Vaiyaasi, though, Samudrakani himself set about briskly, badgered and chivvied Mariamma, and finally got her married to Manikkam.

From the time she was married, Mariamma suffered blows and kicks and beatings every day, and was reduced to no more than a half-life, or even less.

When I thought of Mariamma's life history, I was filled with such pain and anger. Because of some upper-caste man's foolishness, she was made the scapegoat, and her whole life was destroyed. If a woman is slandered, that's always her fate. People won't consider whether the accusation is true or not, nor will they allow the woman to speak out. They'll marry her off to any disreputable fellow and wash their hands off her, not caring in the least whether she lives or dies. I was disgusted by it. I wanted to get hold of all those who had brought her to this state, bite them, chew them up, and spit them out.

In the West Street, there was another woman in a similar position, called Thaayi. When I heard of her story, I thought to myself, one should never be born a woman.

Thaayi was the lightest-skinned woman in our entire area. When women like that smoothed their hair down, dressed well, and made themselves up and all that, they looked just like Nayakkar women. But never did a day go by without her being beaten up. Her people made a lot of fuss and forced her into marrying a man she did not like. Her husband used to drag her along the street and flog her like an animal, with a stick or with his belt.

One evening I was returning home from school. Even as I entered our street, I could hear Thaayi weeping. As I came closer and saw what was going on, my eyes filled with tears. Thaayi's husband was beating her up again and again with the belt from his waist. She didn't even have a chattai on. Everywhere the strap fell on her light skin, there were bright red weals. Even now, when I remember the way he flung her down, and was treading on her and beating her at the same time, a great shudder passes through me.

Just as I was hoping desperately that someone would come and carry her away from there, Karuthamuthu called out in protest, 'Are you a human being or what, da? Isn't there a limit to how much you hit a woman? You are killing her like this, without any pity.'



When he heard this, Thaayi's husband became even more furious. He retorted, 'Who are you to speak for this mundé? She's my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish. You go and mind your own business.' Then he abused Thaayi some more. 'You common whore, you, any passing loafer will come in support of you, you mother fucker's daughter. You'll go with ten men!' He began abusing her and beating her even more violently.

Everyone who came there was disgusted, and went away lamenting, 'If this fellow were an ordinary man, you could pull him off. But how can you talk to a brute like that? If you try to stop him, he only calls her a whore and hits her even harder.'

I felt strange; my chest was heavy and choked. When I came home, I said to my mother, 'Well, Amma, just because he's tied a tali round her neck, does it mean he can beat his wife as he likes? It's just pitiful to see Thaayi, Amma.'

My mother sighed and said, 'It's as if you become a slave from the very day you are married. That's why all the men scold their wives and keep them well under control. Even so, I've never seen anyone else beat his wife like this.'

Then she went on, 'One day I went to see Thaayi at their house. I saw a big hunk of hair—this thick—tied to the doorpost of the threshold, and hanging down. She had spread the paddy out to dry in the front courtyard, and was calling aloud to the pigs, to come and drink up the water in which the grain had been soaked. "Ba...ba...utti...utti," she was calling out. I called her and asked why there was that bunch of hair hanging from the doorpost. Before she could answer me, her husband came out of the house and said, "The thing is, *Madani*, I wanted four or five people like you to ask exactly that and to spit in her face. It's this whore's hair that I've cut off myself and hung there. Look at her neck—you won't find a single hair left. I cut her hair off to put down her pride." And he laughed. He doesn't have a single drop of kindness in his heart.'

When I heard this, I felt a great fury. I asked her, 'Why, Amma, why must she stay with that fellow and suffer so much? Why can't she leave him and go away by herself? At least she won't be beaten like this.'

‘It’s not so easy to get away, once you are married. Once you’ve put your head in the mortar, can you escape from the pestle? No, she must continue to suffer until her head rests on the earth at last.’ When my mother said this, a variety of emotions grew in my heart: anger, excitement, fury, pride, resentment, hatred.