

## *The Village*

There was a small village in north Karnataka with a population of five to eight thousand. It boasted of a beautiful lake with a temple of Lord Hanuman on its shore. The area was dotted with banyan trees. In Kannada, a banyan tree is called 'aladamara' and 'halli' means village, so the village was named Aladahalli.

Aladahalli had only one main road, with houses on either side, and a bus stand right in the middle of the village. Most people who were from here preferred to stay on and commute for work to the cities nearby: Hubli and Dharwad. The advantages of staying in Aladahalli were a laid-back life, less noise and almost no pollution. The greatest attraction though was the school, which was on a par with any city school, and where the medium of instruction was both English and Kannada. Just like in city schools, the students got a rank based on their merit. Bheemanna's daughter, Mridula, was among the top students in her class and was known for her intelligence.

Bheemanna's family was rich and owned a lot of fertile land. His ancestral house was very old and large. The green backyard was filled with varieties of plants and vegetables. There were jasmine creepers in the backyard; Mridula had long, dark hair and would not step out of the house without a string of flowers in it.

Bheemanna's wife, Rukuma Bai or Rukmini, was from a neighbouring village. She was quite different from Bheemanna and talked less than her husband. They had two children, Krishna and Mridula.



When Krishna was born, Bheemanna had wanted to name his son Hanuman but Rukuma Bai had insisted on calling him Krishna. After a while, Bheemanna had lost to his wife's iron will and started calling him Krishna too. But when Mridula came along three years later, he put his foot down. He had once read a novel in which the name of the main character was Mridula. He liked the name since it was uncommon in this part of Karnataka. So, Bheemanna insisted that his daughter be called by that name.

Little Mridula was a bright student. Rukuma Bai frequently told people that Mridula had inherited the smart genes from her side of the family. At such times, talkative Bheemanna usually stayed silent.

Young Mridula was sitting on the swing under the big banyan tree opposite the Hanuman temple. It was Ugadi time—the New Year festival for the Kannada people, celebrated in the month of February or March. Summer had just arrived. The mango trees sported soft reddish-green leaves and the cuckoos were making lovely coo-coo sounds. Everyone in the village was busy preparing for the festival. Yet, there was a pin-drop silence near the temple.

But for Mridula, nothing mattered. She was swinging without any bondage and with a free mind. From the swing, she could see her house. She was happy.

Mridula was not like everybody, she was different. She had enormous enthusiasm for life and unlimited energy for reading, cooking and sketching. She wanted to spend every minute of the day fruitfully. It seemed that the sun rose for her and the rainbow colours were meant only for her. Every day was to be lived to its fullest and every beautiful minute to be enjoyed.

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Years passed. The family was content and happy. Bheemanna had added some basic modern amenities to his home.