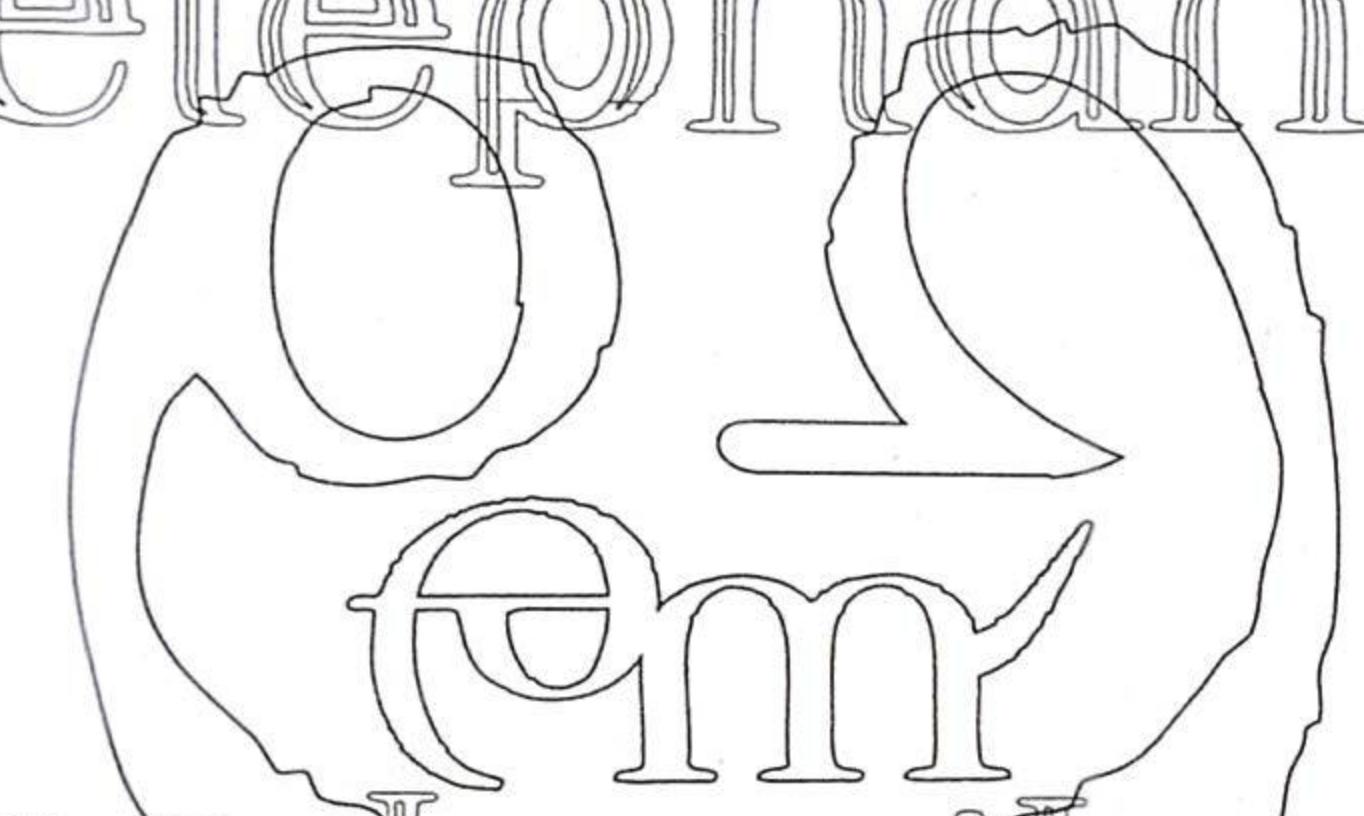


Father
maybe an
elephant
and mother
only a small
basket,
but...



gogu
shyamala

Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Basket, But...

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Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Basket, But... is her first collection of stories translated from Telugu.



But Why Shouldn't the Baindla Woman Ask for Her Land?

Baindlame Bhumadagada Mari?

W



herever people gathered or met in the wada of
the village, they asked, "Why does the dora keep
saying the baindla woman banged her fist on the table?
She didn't do it for nothing. It was only to ask for her
land."



It was still dark, the light just a glimmer. You couldn't
make out who was coming towards you. The women
were busy sweeping their courtyards and coating the
floor with cow-dung slurry. The men went 'herre! herre!'
prodding the cattle awake while they cleaned out the
sheds. Others prepared to harness the oxen and assemble
the ploughs. One by one the women drifted towards the

well carrying their pots for water.

'Bantu' Pentappa came up running pell-mell, holding up the 'servant' staff.

"What's the big hurry, Pentappa? You're running as if your life depends on it. You'll trip on stones in the dark and fall," chided Madiga Dunnolla Narsamma.

"Amma, I've to give this message to the sarpanch and rush off," Pentappa said without breaking stride. "Is Sarpanch Balappa awake? Please wake him up."

"What are you saying? Do you imagine that he is still curled up and sleeping?" the sarpanch's wife retorted.

"Ya, ya, I know he is already busy ploughing the fields! But tell me, is he up?"

"He's gone to the fields with the farm-servant to start the ploughing." Saying this, she got busy with the decorative skirting she was creating on her front wall.

"I couldn't catch him despite coming so early. Amma, please send one of the children to tell him that the dora wants him, and to come fast. Tell him I came personally. I still have to tell the caste elders." Pentappa wound up his turban again so that it sat more tightly round his head and hastened off.

Morning had still not fully broken when, on hearing from 'Bantu' Pentappa, the caste elders along with the sarpanch gathered at the dora's house. They all sat in their places waiting for him.

Finally, by noon, the dora came out holding the tail of his lungi in one hand. As if on cue, the other big men—Krishna Reddy Patel, Srinivas Rao Pantulu, Narasimha Reddy and Anantha Reddy Patel—entered.

All the seated elders stood up, removed their turbans,

tucked them under their arms and paid obeisance with folded hands. The dora and the four other Patel then sat on the chairs placed a few feet away.

The dora, Narender Reddy, began speaking: "Orey Saiga, Yelliga, Malliga, Naga—listen carefully. Let me tell you what happened last night. Ooradamma appeared in my dream and said, 'I'll destroy the village; I'll create havoc. If the village is to prosper, I have to prosper. I want a sacrifice. My sisters Mysamma, Pochamma, Raktamysamma, Bangaramma, Eedamma—are all famished. You have to satisfy them with a gift of seven he-goats. Otherwise I will bring down a pox on your house and everyone in your family will die a painful death.' She didn't allow me a wink of sleep the whole night. What shall we do?"

"Let us call the erpula woman, the baindra man, and Pothuraju Sayigadu, and consult them. We should make sure that, somehow or the other, we conduct the festival this year and make sacrifices to please the Goddess," said Srinivas Rao Pantulu.

The dora ordered 'Bantu' Pentappa, "Go, get the erpula woman first. Let's see what she has to say about when it should be held. Hurry!"

The servant hurried off. He had only gone a little distance when he came across some friends.

Looking important, Pentappa said to them, "Orey, Ooradamma came into the Patel's dreams last night and told him to hold a jatra in the village ... or else! So I think we're going to have the Ooradamma festival this year. They've told me to go fetch Baindra Saayamma. That's where I am headed."

He got to Baindla Saayamma's house and said, "Saayamma, the Patel has asked you to come. I don't know why."

"This does not happen often. Why's he asking for me? Don't try to tell me you've come without knowing why. You must know something. Tell me! He won't eat you up if you do. I'll come only if you tell me ... I'm busy right now. Go away," she said decisively.

"What do I know, Amma? Do they tell me everything? It seems Ooradamma appeared in his dreams. We have to hold the jatra and he asked me to fetch you. This is what I learnt and I don't know anything more."

"You could have told me all this right at the beginning. Okay, let's go. Yelluga, bring brother Ramsendra along to the Patel's house," Saayamma said and walked out of the courtyard.



"Greetings, Patel. You've thought of me after a long time."

"Saayamma, when did we ever forget you? You people have been conducting the festival since your grandfather's time. During my grandfather's time, your grandmother did it. It was the same during my father's time. And so it continues. Come, sit down. Have your brothers come? Did you call them?" asked the Patel.

"Yes, I did. Look, they have arrived," said Saayamma. "Is it enough if your brothers come? Where are the palodu, edurupalodu and avathalodu? Don't you have to call them as well?"

"What's the problem, Patel? Send for them if you want them."

"Arrey! Go tell that pali-baindla fellow also to come."

"I'm here," Baindla Anthappa called out from the back. He had wrapped a blanket around himself.

"Hey, Antiga! We don't see you much these days! Are you people still together or is it everyone for themselves now? It's better to find out right at the beginning," said the Patel.

"Aah Patel! What's there that you don't know? We're all together. Whatever festival we conduct, we share what we get equally—be it debts or earnings. Ramaiah, why are you not saying anything?"

"Why do you need to ask me? As if you are saying something that's not true! Yes Patel, we're all together," said Ramaiah.

"When did you all become so united? Just the other day you were breaking each others' heads. You tricksters can't be trusted. Anyway, since you say you are united, let's get to the point. I had a dream last night and I want to realize it. All the important people of the village are here. The caste elders are here, the erpula woman is here, the pothuraju is here. All we have to do is talk and come to an agreement. We've decided to have the Ooradamma jatra. What do you say? This is the time to clear your doubts and share your opinions."

"What's there to say? This is for the whole village, so everyone has to contribute money, and the festival must be conducted in a fine manner. All the neighbouring villages have held their festivals. It is my desire that our village should also do so this year, and I am offering a

male buffalo calf from my herd for the sacrifice," said Patel Narasimha Reddy.

"Yes, what the Patel says is right. I also have a male calf and will give it in the name of Ooradamma," said the patwari, Srinivasa Rao Pantulu.

"That's already two. I'll offer a bull to Ooradamma," said another reddy.

It was decided that each household from the mala, madiga, golla, mangali, eediga, chakali and besta communities would give four seers of rice each. In addition, each of the sabbanda elders would contribute a he-goat.

"Okay. No one should come in the way of good deeds. One from the pantulu, one from the dora, two from the Patel and five from the sabbandollu. That makes nine, all told. Tomorrow we'll bring all the animals in a procession to the temple, to the accompaniment of drum-beats, and let them loose in the village. So everything's settled. Make sure that all the drummers come tomorrow morning at nine to the Ooradamma temple. Is there anything else we need to talk about?"

"Only the erpulamma's issue. Once we discuss her payment, we'll be done. So what do you say, erpulamma?"

"Look, Patel. Can I bring up past issues also or should I stick to the present festival?" Erpula Saayamma asked.

"This is a festival. A big festival. Why should you restrict yourself to the present festival? Go ahead, ask for your other dues too."

"The last time we had the Ooradamma festival in our village, instead of calling me you got the erpula woman from the neighbouring village to conduct it. This time

you are asking me, but not even bringing up the issue of the manyam land I'm entitled to."

"Now Saayamma, don't start on all that. First, just tell us whether you want to be the erpula woman for this village or not," the pantulu said angrily.

"I do. But first tell me about my land. Earlier, when my paternal aunt used to perform the ritual function, the Nizam Sarkar gave her three acres of land. Now, that land has been taken over and is being cultivated by one of your cousins. You've to get that land returned to me."

The dora didn't expect her to be so brazen, openly asking about the land encroached upon and being cultivated by his cousin.

"You shouldn't talk so loosely, and that too in front of everyone," he admonished her, struggling to keep a calm front. "We'll talk about this tomorrow," he said and turned to talk to the patwari.

The caste elders gestured Saayamma to go away, indicating that the dora might really lose his temper if she continued to stand there. Saayamma prepared to leave.

"If we give her the slightest chance to talk, she starts digging up things from the past. She doesn't allow anyone else to intervene. The problem is, she does not know her place and doesn't know how to talk to her superiors," the dora said, looking at the others expectantly as if wanting them to confirm what he had said.

"Really, Narendra! What guts she has. Saying your man is cultivating her land. Where did this woman get the land from? Who gave it to her? Even if she suspects something, how dare she speak so openly? It's really your fault, being so lenient with all of them," said Patel Krishna

Reddy. "These baindla people are all like that. Just let them get a word in and they will eat up your head. You should always make sure they stay in their place. If you give them so much as a foothold, they'll take over the house. See now, all you do is ask them to perform the erpula's role in the Ooradamma festival and they start talking about land ... do they think land comes for free or that the wind brings it? Why do these riff-raff need land?"

"No, Reddy. There's a lot to be done, and we cannot get frustrated over such little things. Let's drink some tea and think through this problem coolly. We'll give these people bidis to smoke and ask them to sit outside and wait," the Karnam Pantulu said, placating the dora.

Everyone felt much less tense after a round of tea. Then the karnam began. "If we scold this erpula woman, she may refuse to come, like she did last year. We have to sweet-talk her into performing the rituals and the soothsaying. Also, there are other things linked to this issue. If she makes a fuss, it will affect the madiga, and then the sabbanda. In your anger you are forgetting how many connections this woman has. We should remember what the brahman purohit said—these village goddesses are not really part of the real Hindu tradition. If there are goddesses, they are only Lakshmi, Gayatri and Saraswati. These—Ooradamma, Mysamma, Pochamma, Ellamma and so on—we don't have them. These mala-madiga and the sabbanda—only they worship such deities and we should let them. But if we don't do all that is required on our part for this Ooradamma's festival, people will think that your dream is a lie and stop believing you. What is more, the elders will not give the animals they

have pledged. There is also this other thing ... though we should keep this in confidence." Lowering his voice conspiratorially, he continued, "This is a tradition that is handed down from our ancestors and we should maintain it without compromise. We've to divert the deity's anger from us to the animals we're going to sacrifice. This is also the time to test how much the other castes in the village, specially the lower ones, are in our control. Keeping all this in mind, we have to conduct the affair with some foresight and make sure that everything happens smoothly."

They called in the elders and the erpula woman again. Addressing Saayamma, the Karnam Pantulu began, "Saayamma, to tell you the truth, in those days your aunt did not have any land, nor did she purchase any. If there was any such thing the record would be with the karnam. After my grandfather and father, I've been doing that job. If there were any record, wouldn't I let you know? Look, you are our village erpula woman. Wouldn't I want to help you? I help the whole village; I even help neighbouring villages. But the fact is that at that time your aunt didn't have any land ... and today you don't have any land. How can you ask for the village records? That is not at all the proper way to proceed."

"No, Pantulu. The village elders have all seen my aunt cultivate the land. I have the receipts of the taxes she has paid. And I inherited the erpula duties from her. She was my erpula guru and I am the successor to both her profession and her property."

"Look here, you're asking for your aunt's land, but you also say you do not want to perform the rituals. Yet you

claim that you belong to this village. How's this possible?"

"Dora, I'm not saying I won't perform the *erpula* rituals. If you give my land back to me, the produce will feed my children. What I'm saying is that if you give me my aunt's land, I'll surely conduct the festival."

"Now, look here..." the dora stopped her roughly, but thought the better of it and continued more calmly: "Amma, whenever you open your mouth you keep saying 'land land, land'. Let me say this to your face. Your aunt did not have land and you do not have land. Conduct the *erpula* ritual if you want to, otherwise forget it. If you perform the rituals, do it for a payment ... if you do the soothsaying, do it for a payment. I don't want to hear all this stuff about land. Do you think the festival will stop if you say you won't come? Will we cut our own throats just because the knife is golden? Do you think there is no one else we can call? We will bring the *erpula* woman from Kotapally or Chintakunta. The festival will take place come what may."

"Why do you speak as though I am a wage-worker? I'm a daughter of this village. How can you treat me like a coolie? Was I not born here? How am I a coolie? My aunt's land is mine. I want that land, and only that. That's all. This village—all of you together—made me a *jogini*. From the times of my ancestors, the girls of my family have been forced to become *erpula*. To deny me the land that is already in my name, you are trying to turn me into a coolie! Did I conduct these festivals all these years only to be insulted like this?" As she said this, all of Saayamma's many painful experiences flashed through her mind. The hardship she faced in raising and educating

her children; getting her elder daughter married. You couldn't wish such hardship even on your enemies. All the anger and torment pent up in her stomach burst into flames and overwhelmed her. These dora and patel—what disgusting people they were. Earlier she had treated them with respect since they were dora. She had thought naively, 'These people who made me a *jogini* will look after my welfare.' Now they all seemed like poisonous creatures to her.

Saayamma, who had been controlling her anger so far, walked up and glared at the dora.

There was a dark, brooding silence. Everyone was waiting to hear whether she would agree to a wage. The dora, the patel and the sabbanda waited anxiously for something to happen. Bairla Saayamma spoke: "Dora, don't pay me coolie wages. Just give *your* daughter away as a *jogini*. Tell her to do the soothsaying during the festival. I will pay her the wages." Saying this, Saayamma pounded the table in front of the dora with her fist.

The dora's eyes popped out and his mouth fell open. The same thing happened to the Karnam Pantulu and the other patel men. Their mouths dried up and they fell silent. Time seemed to stand still. The sabbanda were all agog, thinking that Saayamma was going to grab one of those big men by the collar and drag him down. The crack of a tree trunk breaking in a high wind somewhere startled them. The thunder came crashing. Saayamma took one more step forward. The patel-folk stood transfixed, aghast at what was happening.

The sabbanda elders at the back rushed forward saying, "Amma ... Amma ... please stop, Saayamma," and tried to

come between her and the dora. She pushed one of them on the chest with her palm and he fell backwards. One who can push away a man with such strength is no ordinary Saayamma; surely she must be possessed by Ooradamma herself! This is the work of Ooradamma, they all thought. As if unconsciously, all the patel paid obeisance to her, their palms joined in salutation. The Ooradamma who appeared to Narender Patel in his dream was already making good on her threats. A thunderous look appeared in Saayamma's eyes. She looked like a cheetah walking on burning embers. Everyone looked beseechingly at Saayamma's brothers. They pushed Pothuraju Sayappa forward. The five brothers got hold of her and tried to pull her back.

She glared at them defiantly.



Saayamma was the only girl in a family of boys and she had been raised with a great deal of affection. She had grown up without a care; her baindla family looked after her like she was a princess. She played with children from the madiga, mala, eediga, kummaris, kammari, mudiraju, golla and chakali communities. Her mother often couldn't find her at mealtimes. Her brothers would have to search for her in the other neighbourhoods and bring her back so that her mother could cosset and feed her.

In keeping with the family tradition, they made her a jogini. But her maternal uncle freed her so that, unlike in other villages, she didn't have to become the wife of the village. Her family was prosperous, owning eight acres

of fertile land. She had strong brothers who supported her with great affection. People from the other artisan communities addressed the baindla family as 'brother', 'sister', 'sister-in-law', and 'aunt', and had a friendly and respectful relationship with them. Saayamma had lived her life like the daughter of the village.

In due course, she gave her heart to Mudiraju Sendrappa. Her parents got her married to him and brought him to live with them. Then a domestic routine took over—children, their education and so on. All of a sudden, Sendrappa died.

They took the corpse from the baindla house to the mudiraju house and laid it out there. Saayamma's children were keening and mourning near the body. The mudiraju also wept along with Saayamma, sharing her grief. No one knows exactly what happened, but after some time the village servant came and whispered something in the mudiraju people's ears. Their faces changed. Unaware of what was happening, Saayamma continued to weep. Her mother and sisters-in-law were trying to comfort her.

Then the mudiraju elder came up to Saayamma and said, "Saayamma, don't fall on the corpse and weep here. Go outside and weep. Go" The humiliation caused by his words pierced through her, adding to the sorrow she was already feeling. How had she suddenly become an untouchable while all this time no one had thought of it?

"If his wife does not sit near him and weep, where else will she cry? If he'd thought he was so high caste, why did he marry her? After he had three children, and after he died, this issue of untouchability comes alive with the corpse! How can that be?" the madiga elder Nagappa said.

Once again the mudiraju instructed Saayamma to leave the house, this time more firmly. Hearing that they were preventing Saayamma from grieving near her husband, the youth from the mala, madiga and baindla houses quickly gathered in the front yard of the mudiraju house. "Who is the bastard who has stopped her from grieving?" they asked. The elders restrained them, asking them not to create a disturbance near the corpse.

"Get out of the house. Go outside and weep.' Why do we have to suffer the humiliation of listening to such things? Let's take the corpse and go back to our place," the madiga women consoled Saayamma.

"Let's pick up the corpse. Come on." The madiga and baindla men hitched up their dhotis and wound their turbans more tightly.

"How can you take him? He was born into this caste. We have to perform the rites and rituals. When he was alive, we never opposed him. Now it is our duty to bury him. The father has to perform the last rites," said the mudiraju elders.

"He has a wife and children. How can his father do the rites?"

Arguments were getting sharper between the madiga and the mudiraju.

"Why should we discuss all this with them? We are higher and they are lower in caste. She was not made a wife by the caste. She's only a mistress."

"Let's go. Let's go." The madiga group moved out and connected up with the madiga youth.

Seeing this, Saayamma said, "Why should all of you get so upset for my sake? I don't want this corpse and I

don't want their caste. Come, my brothers, we should not utter a single word." She requested them with folded hands, "Let them not allow me to perform the last rites. Let them not allow me to weep. Let them keep the corpse if they want. Come!"

Everyone cooled down except for the madiga and baindla women who suddenly began to wail. Like a procession they wended their way through the mala houses, the madiga houses and finally arrived at the baindla houses. They made an effigy of a corpse with cloth and laid it out in the room. They lit a lamp near the head. In the night, they told funeral stories. The madiga brought their drums. The baagar dug the grave. They buried the effigy in the burial ground of the madiga. The whole village thought that the baindla people had observed the proper rituals.



Saayamma's father walked up unsteadily, leaning on his staff, and lovingly smoothed back her hair. He tied up her loosened hair into a knot and sprinkled some cold water on her face. He placed a turmeric bottu on her forehead and said to his sons, "Take your sister home." The strapping Yellappa hoisted his sister on to his shoulders and began walking home. Though her face had been sprinkled with cold water, her heart was smouldering and her innards were on fire....

"I'll see how you get this done by paying wages, you bastards! If you don't vacate my land, I'll sacrifice you. Only then will the curse be lifted from this village," she

declared loudly from her brother's shoulder. He carried her away against her will.

The dora, the patel and pantulu heaved a sigh of relief. They looked at the caste elders and said, "How dare the baindla woman bang her fist on the table and talk legalities while all you buggers just stood and stared? Are you men, or do you wear bangles?"

"Fuck your mother ... wife ... you bastards ..." said the dora, trembling with rage. Karnam Pantulu and Komati Narayana interjected: "Dora, there is no use getting angry. It's no use wasting time scolding these people. We should focus on the festival that has to be held." They signalled to the elders to leave.

TRANSLATED BY SASHI KUMAR

Jambava's Lineage

Jambava Munum