

## 6. The Curds-seller

Masti Venkatesha Iyengar

**Masti Venkatesha Iyengar** (1891–1986), distinguished scholar, journalist and writer, was born in Masti ('maasthi'), Kolar District, Karnataka. After an excellent academic career, he obtained his M.A degree and joined the Indian Civil Service. He held various positions of responsibility, rose to the rank of District Commissioner and then retired in 1943. He edited the monthly journal *Jeevana* in Kannada, from 1944 to 1965. He wrote many books in Kannada and English over seventy years. Generally, his short stories deal with social themes and problems of the common people. His poems in Kannada deal with various social, philosophic and aesthetic themes. In 1946, he wrote the biography of Rabindranath Tagore in English, covering all aspects of his life and works. He won the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 1983 for his novel about the Kodava king, *Chikkaveera Rajendra*, in Kannada. He passed away in 1986 at the age of 95.

(5) *The Poetry of Valmiki: A Literary Appreciation of the Best Parts of the Ramayana, Popular Culture in Karnataka*, a description of the organic, spiritual and cultural unity of our society, and a collection of his short stories published with a foreword by C Rajagopalachari, are some of his important works.

'The Curds-seller' is a deeply moving description of domestic conflict. It is the story of a fond mother ill-treated by her daughter-in-law and callously ignored by her son. She takes a bold decision to live independently and leaves her son's home. However, her grandchild comes to her rescue and brings about reconciliation.

Mangamma has been supplying curds to us for several years now. Our relations are of the kind usual in this city. In other places the curds-seller supplies the curds you require day after day and takes payment at the end of a month. Here, supplying and payment take place on the same day and you are not bound to take any quantity every day. On such days she gets into the house and asks if we want any curds. We buy if we need it and pay at the rate prevailing on the day or, at the latest, pay her next day. Her village is close to Avalur. I forgot its name: Venkapur or something like it. As I talked sym-

pathetically Mangamma sometimes visited me both on her way to the city and back to her village. She would sit in the yard and say a few words about one thing or another, chew pan-supari or ask for it, and after resting for some time start for her village. If I had the time she would tell me of the troubles in her household and ask me to tell her of mine. What trouble had I to report to her? By God's grace everything is well with me. The worst I can report would be that the cat came and drank up the milk or that the rats ate the cucumber overnight. When I told her of such things Mangamma would say: 'Alas, that is the way of the world' and that would start her on a discourse regarding her experience, with hints for managing this world of refractory ways. Mangamma and myself thus came to be very intimate companions.

One day about a month ago Mangamma came and called out as usual asking if I wanted curds. I was within. My little boy said: 'Yes. We want curds,' and walking up to her and stretching his hand out asked: 'Give it.' Mangamma sat down and took out a piece of good thick curd and put it in his hand. 'Ask mother to come soon,' she told him. 'I have to go.' By that time I had come out. Mangamma said: 'Ammayya, you have a child precious as gold. You are so good and your child is worthy of you. But, Ammayya, what is the use of all this? It lasts only till he grows up. When he does grow up some creature comes along to own him. The boy who calls one mother, mother, so prettily will not ask then whether the mother is alive or dead.'

I said: 'Something seems to have happened, Mangamma. Surely your son treats you with respect?'

'Oh well, I suppose I am foolish to expect anything else. My husband deserted me: I can expect nothing better from my son.'

'Why Mangamma, I thought you were happy with your husband.'

'You see, Ammayya, I never bothered about wearing good saris and looking pretty; another woman did, and she drew

my husband away from me. I thought it best to bear it without a murmur. I let him feel that he had his home and his wife to come to any time he chose. I shouldn't grumble, Ammayya. They say we shouldn't sell milk and curds – they are 'Amrita.' I sinned that way and paid the penalty. I lost my husband. That is my fate. But look, Ammayya, you must be careful. Wear pretty saris at the time your husband comes home. Men are inconstant. You must snare them with a pretty sari or blouse. Buy flowers and perfume, and make yourself attractive.' Then she glanced at the sari I was wearing and shook her head. 'This is all right when you are alone and working in the kitchen. But you must change it towards evening. Wear something pretty.'

I laughed. It was sound sense all right. But it was a pity that she should have had to pass through years of sorrow to learn this wisdom.

'You are right, Mangamma,' I said.

'Look, Ammayya, there are four ways of keeping husbands true to us. Some people would tell you to administer this or that herb or root. You might as well take them to the cremation-ground straightaway. Don't you listen to such advice. Give him something nice to eat every now and then; whatever your difficulties at home, dress well, look desirable, and keep smiling; get all the grocery you want once every month and don't worry him about marketing; lay by a little money and give him a rupee or two when he asks for it. This is all the herb and root needed. Let a woman do this, and her husband will follow her like a dog. Forget this, and his thoughts begin to wander.'

'Here is a wise woman,' I thought as I bade her good-bye.

One morning, about a fortnight ago, she came in a very dejected mood.

'What is the matter, Mangamma?' I asked.

'Nothing pleasant, Ammayya. Why talk about it!' she said, wiping her eyes with the edge of her sari. 'I don't seem to be wanted by anybody.'

'What has happened? Had words with your son?'

'Words enough, Ammayya. I have told you of that little child, my grandson. He did something and his mother beat him. I couldn't stand it. "You are brutal," I said, "to beat that child like a Rakshasi!" She faced me, bold as brass, and abused me roundly. "Is this the language you use to me who gave birth to your husband?" I said, "Let him come home. He will have something to say about it." When he came home I told him of what had happened: "She thrashes that poor darling mercilessly, and when I protest she has the temerity to abuse me. Can't you put some sense into her?" "Put sense into me indeed!" she intervened, "Have I no right to bring my own child to order? Didn't I give him birth even as you did to your son?"

'Well, she is his wife; I am only his mother. She can turn round on me any time, and I can do nothing. "Well, mother," he said, "after all it is her own child. Why should you interfere? If you must call somebody to order, here I am."

'Then you think I am wrong?'

'I don't know about right and wrong. But you cannot very well deny her the right to punish her own child.'

'I see. You are completely under her thumb. She may beat her child, and heap abuse on me, and it is all right with you. Tomorrow she will ask you to drive me out, and I shouldn't wonder if you do it.'

'Well, mother, what would have me do? Suppose you tell me that you will not stay here if my wife does, and that she should not stay if you do. If I am to choose . . . well, she is a helpless woman . . .'

'And I am not helpless? Who will look after me?'

'Well, you have money laid by; you have cows and calves; you are not dependent on me.'

"So you would have me set up house by myself?"

"That is as you please. If you insist on setting up separately, I wouldn't say no. I have had enough of these bickerings."

"Very well then. From this afternoon I live apart from you. May you and your wife be happy."

'I said this and came away with the curds.' Mangamma burst into tears as she ended her narrative. I did what I could to comfort her. 'Forget it, Mangamma. I know you will go home and live with them as before. These things adjust themselves.'

The next day she appeared to be a little more composed, though certainly not her old cheerful self. I asked her if she had made peace with her son. 'Peace! Do you think this daughter-in-law of mine would permit mother and son to be on good terms? By the time I went home yesterday she had kept my pots and pans, an earthen vessel full of ragi and another of rice, some salt and chillies, all on one side. She and her husband had finished their meal and she was lolling on the mat without a care in the world. Apparently they were waiting for an excuse to put me out, and I supplied it. All right, I wouldn't thrust myself on them. I now live by myself. You see how far they go, Ammayya? I used to give some curds to the child everyday before going out. Today she took the child out just at that time. Clearly she doesn't want me to speak to her child.'

I was surprised that what was after all a trivial incident should have assumed such proportions. But of course there was nothing I could do about it. After a few common places, I sent her away.

For a day or two after this Mangamma did not mention the subject again. I took it that she was living separately. And then one day she asked what the velvet jacket I wore cost me.

'Why this interest in it, Mangamma?' I asked.

'You see, Ammayya, hitherto I was saving up money for my son and grandson. I see no point in my doing so any longer. I thought I might buy myself a velvet jacket.'

'It might cost seven or eight rupees.'

She left and apparently ordered the jacket on her way home. She wore it when she came the next day.

'You see this finery, Ammayya? When I had my husband I never bought a good sari; and he went after another woman. I saved money for my son, and you know what he has turned out to be. Now I am flaunting velvet!'

Had the shock of being turned out by her son unsettled her mind, I wondered. Extreme passion sometimes has that effect. I said nothing however.

The story of the velvet jacket did not end there. It led to quarrels with some people in the village. One of the boys of the village was attending a school at Bangalore. He affected western dress - collar, tie and all. When he met Mangamma he said jocularly, 'Well, Mangamma, what is the festive occasion? I mean, the velvet jacket....'

Mangamma flared: 'The impudent youngster! Hold your tongue, will you? If you can choke yourself with that thing round your neck, why grudge me my velvet jacket?' Hot words passed, a dozen people gathered, and there was laughter at her expense.

This was reported to me duly the next day. The daughter-in-law made this the occasion for comments of her own - made in the hearing of Mangamma. She said to her neighbours, 'My mother-in-law cannot buy me a blouse. But did you see hers?' At the time of her son's marriage Mangamma had given the bride a necklace, ear-rings, bangles, pendants, etc., and every year she had been buying her some ornament or other. The daughter-in-law forgot all this.

Mangamma took no notice of her comments the first and the second time and then complained to her son: 'Your wife has been making biting remarks about my jacket. She has

been going about saying that I never bought her any present. Haven't I given her bangles, necklace and ear-rings?" Before the son could say anything his wife snapped, 'I suppose the old widow wants to wear ear-rings and bangles. She can have them and flaunt them.' 'Less sauce, my girl,' said the husband in mild rebuke and turning to his mother said, 'Mother, I have had enough of these quarrels. If you want the jewellery you gave my wife, you can take them back.'

'You see, Ammayya?' Mangamma commented, 'He does not ask his wife to stop saying things about me to our neighbours. He offers me the jewellery, putting me in the wrong! I am sick of life.'

I felt very sorry for her. She was old and this son was her only child. Surely his wife could be more considerate to her mother-in-law! And all this because the old woman asked her not to beat the child! Why can't people be more sensible? But then, this is how quarrels generally develop. If two people do not like each other, any trivial incident is enough to touch off a quarrel; and there is endless pain to all concerned.

Some time after this, Mangamma came to me with a request: 'Ammayya, you are good people and I can trust you. I have some money laid by. Could you put it in that place they call a bank? It is attracting people's attention.'

'What happened?'

'There is a man called Rangappa in our village, a dandy and a gambler. Yesterday as I was coming along with the curds, he joined me and said, "I hope you are keeping well, Mangamma."

"So, so, I said, you know how things are with me."

"Yes, Mangamma, I know. You are right. With people behaving as they do, how can anybody be happy. These young people cannot keep their tongues in leash and we older people wonder that such things should be. But that is how the world goes, Mangamma."

'We walked on. I grew uneasy wondering why he was following me – there is a deep well near that grove, and I had some money in my purse. But nothing happened. He asked me for some lime, took it, and went his way. Today he was there again. He talked of this and that and then said, "Mangamma, I am badly in need of money. Could you lend me some? Come harvest time, I shall sell my ragi and pay you back." "Money!" I said, "how should I have any!" "O, we all know. What is the good of keeping money buried, Mangamma? You can help me, and earn some interest on it." And after a while he added, "I would not have asked you if you and your son and daughter-in-law lived together. Naturally you would have liked to give them presents now and then. But now that you are living away from them . . ."

'You see, Ammayya, when a woman lives alone she draws attention.'

I said that I would speak to my husband about it.

The next day she said, after measuring out the curds, 'Shall we go in, Ammayya? You can count the money.'

'I haven't mentioned the matter to my husband, Mangamma. Some other time.'

'But I am feeling frightened, Ammayya. Rangappa waylaid me again this morning near the grove. "Sit down, Mangamma," he said, "you are not in a hurry?" I sat down – I was afraid he might use force. He talked of all things and sundry and then took my hand and said, "How nice you look, Mangamma!"'

'Ammayya, even when I was young, my own husband would not hold my hand. No other man has ever held it. And now this has happened! I drew away at once and said curtly, "Enough of this nonsense, Rangappa. You are not my husband, and it is no business of yours how I look."

'Yesterday he wanted my money, and today my honour. The man who sat by my side on my marriage-day, had the auspicious rice showered on him, and called me wife – he

left me in my youth. Another woman would have sought consolation elsewhere. But I preserved my honour. And today this rascal dares to seize my hand!

Mangamma's affairs seemed to be taking a serious turn.

'Look, Mangamma, you are heading for trouble. Tell your son about this. Why don't you forget the past and go back to him?'

'And give my daughter-in-law a chance to spread rumours about me and make me an outcast? . . . Well, it is getting late, Ammayya. Please mention the matter to your husband and tell me tomorrow.'

She was back again an hour later. 'A strange thing happened today,' she began.

'What?'

'I bought some sweets for the child . . .'

I didn't understand this. She had told me that her grandchild was not allowed near her.

'What child?'

'Why, my grandchild, of course. What other child could it be?'

'But you told me that he was not allowed to come to you?'

'True, the mother forbids it. But would the child keep away from me? He runs up to me when his mother is not looking, drinks some milk, asks for curds, and dances about when I give it. When he upsets things I tell him that his mother will take him away, and that keeps him quiet. It is a delight to watch children's pranks, Ammayya. So today I bought some sweets for him and put them in my basket. Near Shankarpur a crow swooped down from a mango tree and carried off the packet.'

'That is nothing to worry about. You can buy some more.'

'Of course I can. It is not that, Ammayya. But they say it is a bad omen, being touched by a crow.'

'Why, what happens if it does?'

'They say it means death. That is why I was perturbed. But after a minute I told myself it was as well. Mine is a life nobody values. The sooner I touch the feet of God the better. Anyway that is what happened.'

'Don't be silly, Mangamma. You put a packet of sweets where any sensible crow would go for it, and when the packet is carried off you say it is an omen of death! Go home, and don't be absurd.'

'Then you think it does not mean anything?'

'Nonsense. Go home and forget it.'

It is strange, the way this woman's thoughts run. She wants her son, wants her daughter-in-law and her grandson; she wants to be respected as the head of the household. All that is natural enough, quite human. Now that she is denied what she wants she is tired of life; and yet she is afraid of death! And she wants to conceal that fear. We say these village folk are simple and unsophisticated. But how complex her mind and thoughts are — layer on layer, fold on fold! It is a queer game, this thing we call life.

Mangamma reported fresh developments when she came next. Her grandson had come to stay with her. She was delighted. 'The courage of the child!' she said, 'He is such a little fellow, hardly that high, and yet he leaves his mother and comes to me! He used to come on the sly; but yesterday he came and said he would not go back to his mother. She came, threatened to thrash him, made a scene — but the child clung to my knees and would not budge. Of course I urged him to go back, and his father also coaxed him. But the child would not listen. It is strange, Ammayya: these ten days I have been a little scared of sleeping alone in the house. But the presence of this little child has given me courage—I feel I have male protection. My grown-up son will not have me with him; but my grandson tells me he will stand by me. It must be God that put it into his head. My daughter-in-law raged throughout the night. But it had no effect on the child. This morning I felt that the child should not be left alone

when I was away curds-selling. I took him to her door, and he went in.'

'But suppose she beats the child?'

'No, she won't. She might beat him sometimes when he is always with her. But now she will be happy that the child will be with her at least for half-a-day. It is this way, Ammayya: you see, when we lived together I had never noticed how pretty my daughter-in-law was. Of course she does look queer when she frowns. But now I see her from a distance, as you might say. She does look pretty, and that is why my son is her slave. I took my son too for granted. I never noticed when he came in and when he went out. Now I sit at the door of my house and wonder why he is so late in coming or why he leaves home so early. She must feel the same about her child. If she beats him he would come away to the city with me tomorrow. Would she give up the child she has borne?'

'Thoughtful woman,' I said to myself. I felt that their differences would soon be amicably settled.

And that is what happened. The child spent two mornings with his parents and on the third he insisted on accompanying his grandmother on her rounds in the city. The old woman could not, of course, carry both the child and the basket with the pot of curds. This presented a problem. Then her son and daughter-in-law came to her and said, 'Mother, grant that we were in the wrong; should you carry your anger so far?' The neighbours also spoke for them. Mangamma went back without loss of face, as she was longing to do. But taking the child to the city with her was still a problem. So they came to an arrangement. Mangamma had so far kept the milk-and-curds business in her own hands. The ostensible reason was that the daughter-in-law had to do the cooking; the real reason was that Mangamma wanted the purse-strings in her own hands. Now that the child insisted on keeping company with her, things had to change. The daughter-in-law said, 'Why should you in your old age

go out everyday in the hot sun? It is time you stopped working. You are the head of the family and it is right that you should be at home to see that everything is in order. I shall do the curds-selling.' Mangamma agreed. 'You may take it over,' she said, 'I shall go one or two days in the week when I feel like it.'

One day Mangamma and her daughter-in-law came together. One of them had the child in her arms and the other carried the basket. 'This is my daughter-in-law, Ammayya,' Mangamma said, 'She does not want her old mother-in-law to work any more. She has taken me back home. She says that at my age I should not walk all this distance in the hot sun. She will bring you curds henceforth.'

And so Mangamma handed us over to her daughter-in-law. I spoke to them for some time, exhorted them to treat each other well and dismissed them with pan-supari.

So far I had heard only Mangamma's version of the quarrel, and I was curious to hear the other side. So one day I asked the daughter-in-law, 'You seem to be a good and sensible woman, Nanjamma. How could you drive out your own mother-in-law?'

'I would never do so, Ammayya. I am not a Rakshasi. But you see, she insists on having her own way in everything and makes a nonentity of my husband. If he is not respected as the man of the house what sort of husband would he make? What sort of wife would I be, and how can I run the house? I stood it for some time—after all she was his mother and had brought him up. But when she started saying I shouldn't beat my child I thought it was time to protest. Have I no rights as a mother?'

I smiled. 'So your way of asserting your rights as a mother is to beat your child?'

'I beat him and I fondle him too. She who objects to my beating him may also object to my fondling him. She would hold me accountable for anything I may do. My son is my

son, and my husband is my husband. If I do not have the right to say a word to my husband or to slap the child when he goes wrong, what sort of life would I be leading?"

If Mangamma had sounded sensible, so did her daughter-in-law.

'Now you have won your freedom?'

"Things look better. After all it is a question of adjustment. If I push the matter to the breaking point some designing person may wheedle her money out of her. There is a fellow called Rangappa. When mother-in-law lived separately he asked her to lend him money, and I heard she was willing. He said so. Then I told my son, "Go to your grandma. She will give you sweets. Don't come back till I tell you to." I wanted to end the quarrel and thought of this device.'

'So the child did not go to her of his own accord?'

'He did, but I suggested it to him.'

'Did you tell your husband of this?'

'You may be sure I did not. Men don't understand these things.'

Nanjamma was certainly not inferior to Mangamma in commonsense. The struggle is still going on in that household. That woman's son and this woman's husband—it is for him the battle is being fought. The mother is determined not to give him up and the wife is equally determined to capture him. It is difficult to speak of victory or defeat in a matter like this. The daughter-in-law is like the crocodile safe under the water, catching hold of the leg of the child. The mother is on the bank and is pulling at the hands of the child hoping to save him. The plight of the child is far from enviable. The same battle goes on in the house of Mangamma the curds-seller in the village, and of Thangamma the curds-buyer in the city. The last act of this play will never be written.

### Glossary

curds : thickened, coagulated milk

prevailing	: current, existing
<i>pan-supari</i>	: a morsel of the betel leaf, a customary offering to guests in India
discourse	: conversation, discussion
refractory	: unmanageable, unruly
penalty	: punishment
inconstant	: unpredictable, easily changeable
snare	: trap, capture
murmur	: to complain
grumble	: to complain or protest in a bad-tempered way
inconstant	: not constant, unfaithful
dejected	: feeling sad or gloomy
<i>rakshasi</i>	: evil, wicked woman (cruel, supernatural spirit)
temerity	: unreasonable confidence that can be offensive
bickerings	: arguments, squabbles
lolling	: reclining, to lie back
trivial	: petty, not significant
proportion	: size or scope, the extent of something
finery	: fine clothes
flaunting	: showing off
unsettled	: disturbed, troubled
jocularly	: jokingly
impertinent	: impolite, disrespectful
grudge	: (here) be unwilling to allow
rebuke	: scold, chide
curtly	: rudely, in a snappy manner
dandy	: person who pays too much attention to one's own clothes and appearance
pranks	: playful or mischievous tricks
swoop down	: to come down in a rush
omen	: forecast, warning
perturbed	: anxious, worried
on the sly	: secretly
budge	: to move
exhort	: to encourage, urge
amicably	: in a friendly way