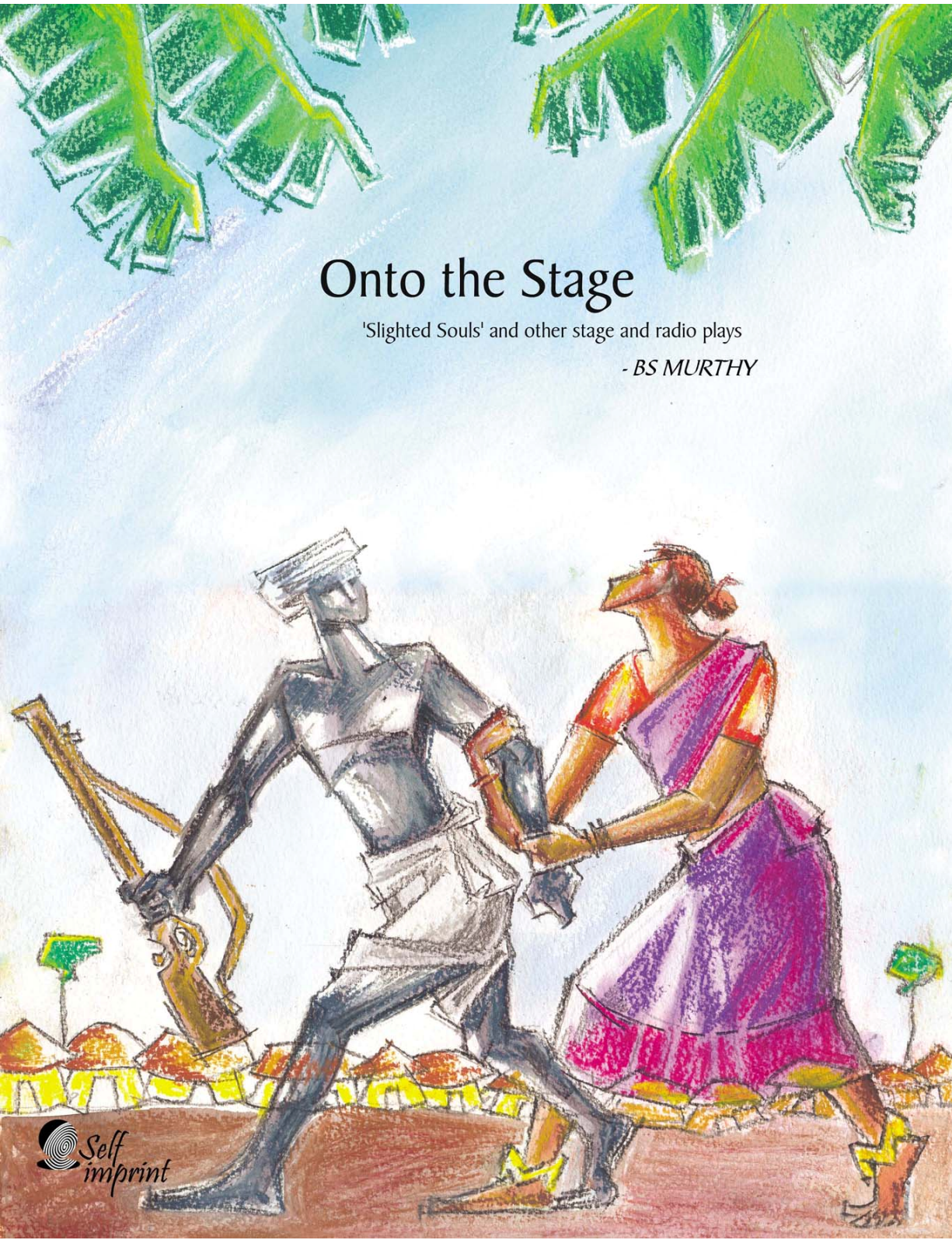


Onto the Stage

'Slighted Souls' and other stage and radio plays

- BS MURTHY



Self
imprint

Onto the Stage

'Slighted Souls' and other stage and radio plays

BS Murthy

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Cover with Mohan's water color painting



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Dedicated with boundless gratitude

to the peerless Chatla Sreeramulu,

the director–actor of Telugu theatre,

who had opened the wide windows to the grand stage

the sneaking view of which enabled me to shape these plays

Stage play 1
Slighted Souls

Dramatis Personae in this political stage play

On one side

Muthyal Rao, *Dora* of Rampur.
Papa Rao, Police *Patel*.
Rami Reddy, *Patwari*.
Papi Reddy, landlord.
Shaukar Suryam, moneylender,
Veeraiah, Head Constable,
Venkataswamy, MLA,
Mallesam Goud, ex-MLA.
Narsi Reddy, son of Rami Reddy,
Henchmen, Police Constables,
Capt. Kapoor, Home Guards/Greyhounds

Of the other side on this side

Anasuya, Yadagiri's wife,
Saailu, Anasuya's brother,

On the other side

Yellaiah, a peasant.
Mallamma, Yellaiah's wife.
Narsimma, Yellaiah's son,
Sarakka, Yellaiah's daughter,
Maisamma, Mallamma's mother.
Yadagiri, Maisamma's son,
Renuka, Yadagiri's daughter,
Maisaiah, a peasant,
Lachamma, Maisaiah's wife,
Madanna, head of a *naxal dalam*,
Mallanna, Madanna's confidant,
Srisailam, Narsimma's friend,
Nirmala, victim of Narsi Reddy,
Annalu, and onlookers,

And on neither side is Raja, the six-year old grandson of the I.G of A. P. Police.

Scene – 1

Voice Over: Under the British Raj in India, the self-indulging Nizams of Hyderabad abdicated the administration of their vast principality to *doralu*, the village heads, letting them turn the areas under their domain into their personal fiefdoms. While the successive Nizams were obsessed with building palaces and acquiring jewelry, the village heads succeeded in ushering in an oppressive era of tyrannical order. Acting as loose cannon from their palatial houses called *gadis*, the *doralu* succeeded in foisting an inimical feudal order upon the downtrodden *dalits*. Besides making these *dalits* toil for them as cheap labor without impunity, the *doralu* had no qualms in making vassals out of the hapless women folk. What with the police *patels* and the revenue *patwaris* in nexus with the landed gentry and the moneyed *shaukars* making a common cause with the *doralu* in their unabated exploitation, their sub-human condition ensured that the *dalits* were distressed economically, degraded socially and debased morally. Ironically, lending the privileged few the muscle power to perpetrate the inimical social order were their henchmen from the other backward classes. Moreover, given the British political pragmatism of an indifference to the Indian caste conundrum the downtrodden *dalits* had nowhere to run for cover.

Though the merger of their province with the Union of India brought the curtains down on the Nizams' two-hundred year misrule, the exploitation of the rural *dalits* by the *dora-patel-patwari* nexus continued unabated. And that led to the formation of 'communes' as part of a peasant movement in July 1948 under the Telangana Struggle that didn't take off any way. On the other hand as the seeds of egalitarianism began to take roots in the urban Indian soil, in

time, these “slighted souls” too began to envision the dawn of an equitable era for them. However, the nascent upward mobility of the downtrodden was at odds with the vested interests of the feudal order, and to nip the *dalit* moral assertiveness in the bud, the ‘axis of evil’ saw to it that such were brutalized to make an example of them.

“Slighted Souls” scripts the life of the downtrodden of Rampur nearly a decade after the famous but failed peasant struggle of Telangana. Making cohorts with Muthyal Rao the *dora* in oppressing its *dalits* are Papa Rao the Police *Patel*, Rami Reddy the *Patwari*, Papi Reddy the landlord, and Shaukar Suryam the moneylender. Beginning with the life and times of Yellaiah and his wife Mallamma this play unfolds the urge of the deprived to unyoke themselves, and the desperation of the privileged to rein in them.

[Curtains up: Mallamma sits in front of her thatched hut in the *dalit mohalla* weaving a bamboo basket. Enter: Yellaiah, and seeing him, she goes into the hut to fetch some water for him, and he takes over the work.]

Mallamma [Back with a glass of water]: Why make a mess of it *maava*.

Yellaiah [Taking over the glass]: Take it I’m giving them their due.

Mallamma: I wonder how they’re harming you.

Yellaiah [Having emptied the glass]: Aren’t they harsh on my darling’s delicate hands?

Mallamma [Taking back the glass]: I’m glad you’re still fond of your old woman.

Yellaiah: Who said you’re old dear. I’m ever scared that some *dora* or a *patel* might grab my Malli.

Mallamma [Taking the bamboo work]: You know it would never be the case.

Yellaiah: Well but still.

Mallamma: Leave alone the *patels* and the *patwaris*, would the *dora* ever forget that incident in a hurry? Besides, I’m behind the bamboo curtain, am I not?

Yellaiah: Well who can forget that potential tragedy turned farce? [He laughs heartily]. But still it hurts to let you toil day and night.

Mallamma: So be it, till our Narsimma becomes a big officer. Till then, the fact that you care keeps it going.

Yellaiah: Where is Sarakka?

Mallamma: Wonder why she hasn’t turned up yet.

Yellaiah [Making a move to get up]: Why not I better check up at her school.

Mallamma [Holding him back]: Isn’t it enough that you’ve been toiling like a mule all day long.

Yellaiah: Why their lot is any day better dear. They are well-fed by *peddollaru* and attended by doctors. See, they’ve doctors to look after them but we’ve to put with the quacks. I hear even their lives are insured these days.

Mallamma: Well, mules have a price tag on them, but what about us. Don’t *dalits* come cheaper by the dozen?

[Enter: Maisaiah on his way in a hurry.]

Yellaiah: O Maisaiah, where are you running to now?

Maisaiah: Running around on Shaukar’s errands, oh, how I’ve forgot about *mehsaab*. She said she has some work for me before he returned from Warangal.

[Exit: Maisaiah.]

Yellaiah: Why, their women too boss over our men, don't they? How I wish our Narsimma won't have to put up with all that.

Mallamma: Why should he as *Pantulayya* says he's bright. He feels the same way about our Sarakka, and Renuka. But I think Renuka is better than both.

Yellaiah: Don't I know you're always partial towards your brother's daughter.

Mallamma: It's as if I'm a stepmother to your kids.

Yellaiah: Why get hurt dear, I was just joking. But still our kids are hot heads while she carries a clear head? If not for you, wouldn't they have become rebels by now?

Mallamma: Whatever, once he sets his mind; Narsimma is not the one to waver. And Sarakka too is developing the same traits, isn't she?

Yellaiah: Well, how you've been drumming him not to get distracted from his studies.

Mallamma: Why not? You know how we're undone by being an *anpad*. I want all three of them to be well educated. I've been hoping that an educated Renuka makes an ideal wife for our Narsimma. But sadly *vadina* seems to have developed second thoughts about giving her to him.

Yellaiah: Don't I see Anasuya is rooting for Saailu, her good for nothing brother. Well, we can only hope that your brother Yadagiri puts his foot down for once.

Mallamma: But can he do that? Anyway, there is still a long way to go. Let's see what the future has in store for them.

Yellaiah: What a wretched life ours is Malli? We don't even have a say in our own affairs. It's Papi Reddy *Patel* who's behind all this. And don't I see his game plan?

Mallamma: Don't they say woman is woman's enemy. Let's hope Renuka's fate prevails over *vadina*'s whims.

Yellaiah: How I wish that happens.

Mallamma: I'm quite hopeful, more so as times are changing.

Yellaiah: Wish I've your strength of belief Malli.

Mallamma: *Maava*, if you want change, you've got to dream about it.

Yellaiah: How're we to dream Malli, when life itself is a nightmare? Oh, how the *peddollu* have reduced us.

[Enter Sarakka with a slate and a few school books, and collapses in front of them.]

Yellaiah: Malli quick, fetch some water for Sarakka.

[Even as Mallamma brings in some water, Yellaiah takes Sarakka in his lap. After the mother sprinkles some water on her, the girl gets up and greedily drinks from the tumbler.]

Mallamma: What happened to you my child?

Sarakka: I felt thirsty on the way *amma*. But they didn't allow me to drink from their well.

Yellaiah: They refuse water to a thirsty child! Oh, how lowly are these *peddollu*.

Mallamma: Well, their well is full of frogs, yet they think it gets polluted if we drink from it. What an irony?

Yellaiah: Why, being a frog in the well is better than the bane of being a *dalit*.

Mallamma: Oh, why did God make it so inhuman for us?

Yellaiah: And see their gall; they say its God's own will. Isn't it like rubbing salt on our wounds?

Mallamma: He must be a cruel God to say that. But did He say that?

Sarakka: We're dearer to God, that's why Gandhiji said we're *harijan*. We've that lesson in our class.

Yellaiah: If only Gandhiji lived long enough to make it true for us.

Sarakka: *Maastaru* says God helps only those who help themselves.

Mallamma: Who knows another *mahatma* might be waiting in the wings to pick up the threads?

Yellaiah: Having made us *anguthachaps* all along, mercifully, they're letting our children study these days.

Mallamma: Well, grudgingly. Whatever, it's going to be the turning point for us.

[Enter a tired Narsimma with his schoolbag]

Yellaiah: How our poor Narsimma has to walk all those miles. If only we've a high school here.

Mallamma: Why're you so dull my boy?

Narsimma: I couldn't go to school *amma*.

Yellaiah: Why what's the matter?

Narsimma: I was crossing the *gadi* and the *dorasani* held me. As their *Maali* fell ill, she made me work all day in the garden.

Mallamma: Why, when it's *julum* on us, the *dorasanlu* score no less.

Narsimma: And all the while she was yelling, Narsiga, Narsiga, Narsiga. It's as if she can't get my name right.

Yellaiah: Well, they think we're not entitled to our name even.

Mallamma to Narsimma: Bear all that for now my boy. Once you're a B.A., all will call you Narsimma.

Yellaiah to Mallamma: I'll sell my shirt to make him a B.A., and it's my word to you.

[There is a commotion outside, and Sarakka exits.]

Sarakka [Reenters]: Maisaiah *mama* is being carried on a cart. Shaukar *Saab* is also there.

Yellaiah: Let me find out what's the matter.

Mallamma: I'll also come. Lachamma might need me.

[Exit: Yellaiah and Mallamma leaving Narsimma and Sarakka. Curtains down.]

Scene – 2

[Curtains up: Maisaiah's body 'in drawer' laid in front of his hut in the *dalit mohalla*. Lachamma, his wife wails over it. Shaukar Suryam and two of his henchmen with sticks stand aside. Enter Yellaiah and Mallamma anxiously.]

Yellaiah: *Dandaalu* Shaukar *Saab*.

[Yellaiah goes over to Maisaiah and sees he's dead.]

Yellaiah: Shaukar *Saab*, how's that Maisaiah died in his drawer?

Shaukar Suryam: *Yera* Yelliga, are you questioning me?

Yellaiah: Is it possible Shaukar *Saab*. But what it means to die in one's drawer?

Shaukar Suryam: *Yedava Naayala* stole my money. It's only to make him open his mouth, he was stripped and beaten. But sadly for me, he died before coughing up.

Mallamma: Shaukar *Saab*, we're poor but we're no thieves.

Shaukar Suryam: That will be known now. [He turns to his henchmen.] Go in and see.

[The two go into the hut as directed.]

Mallamma: Shaukar *Saab*, there aren't any attics in our huts to hide booty.

Shaukar Suryam: O, Mallamma, mind your own business or else.

Yellaiah: Don't mind her words Shaukar *Saab*.

[Thrown out of the hut by the search party, some dented and unkempt aluminum vessels fall all over the place. In the end, as his henchmen appear with a cloth bundle, Shaukar Suryam is delighted, and the gathering is stunned. He eagerly unfolds the bundle and finds a plastic kiddy bank that he expectantly opens. But disappointed at finding only some small change, he throws the plastic on the floor, however, after pocketing the money. Lachamma takes the empty box, and wails inconsolably.]

Mallamma: Now what do you say Shaukar *Saab*? Why didn't you make sure he really stole? Oh, how you've killed an innocent man.

Shaukar Suryam: I suspect he was at it all along. *Naayaala* might've hidden it somewhere.

Lachamma: Oh, he was saving for his child in my womb but couldn't save his own life. As I'm penniless, his child would be posthumous.

Shaukar Suryam: Don't worry Lachhi. Aren't you good enough to find a mate in double quick time? Do you think I'll let you down in the meantime?

[Enter Papa Rao *Patel* in *mufti* and Head Constable Veeraiah in *vardi*.]

Shaukar Suryam: *Randi* Veeraiah *garu*, but sorry for the bother.

Veeraiah: Isn't it my duty Shaukar *Saab*.

Papa Rao to Veeraiah: *Mori Saab*, don't think Shaukar *Saab* won't how know risky it is for you?

Shaukar Suryam: Don't I know Papa Rao *Patel* that I've to provide an 'all risks cover' for Veeraiah *garu*.

Veeraiah: [Goes near Maisaiah's body.] What happened to this fellow?

Papa Rao: Poor fellow died of snake bite *Mori Saab*.

Shaukar Suryam: If Veeraiah *garu* clears the air, they can cremate the body.

Lachamma: *Mori Saab*, please listen to me.

Papa Rao: Didn't you hear what Shaukar *Saab* has said? What is left for you to add?

Mallamma: *Mori Saab*, she's his wife after all, and you've got to take her statement, won't you?

Veeraiah: Keep your mouth shut or else I'll drag you to the Police *Naaka*, and book you under the Brothel Act. You dirty bitch, what do you think of yourself?

Shaukar Suryam: Pardon her Veeraiah *garu*. After all, it hurts to lose one of their own. Now let's go about the *panchanama*.

[Exit: Shaukar Suryam with his henchmen and Veeraiah.]

[Enter: Yadagiri, Mallamma's brother. After condoling Lachamma, he whispers into Mallamma's ear. In turn Mallamma whispers into Yellaiah's ear.]

[Exit: All three of them. Curtains down.]

Scene – 3

[Curtains up: Maisamma on a stool besides two wooden chairs and Renuka on a mat in the hall of a *kacha* building in the *dalit mohalla*.]

Renuka: Why all this fuss *naanamma*?

Maisamma: Because our Renu has matured.

Renuka: So what.

Maisamma: Well, it's the day that begins your nights.

Renuka: What do you mean by that?

[Maisamma whispers into Renuka's ears.]

Renuka: But isn't *amma* against *baava*.

Maisamma: Sadly she's rooting for Saailu. Say you don't want to wed any till you pass Matric, and we'll see later.

Renuka: But why is *naayana* afraid of *amma*?

Maisamma: Well, how long can it be hidden from you. Your mother is hand in glove with that cruel Papi Reddy, and so my poor Yadagiri is scared of him.

Renuka: I hear *naayana* call *amma* a loose woman. Who's a loose woman *naanamma*?

Maisamma: Someone close to more than one man, but as things stand, it's rare for a *dalit* woman not to be loose, especially in youth. These *peddollu* force upon us and there is no way we can resist them.

Renuka: But don't they say we're untouchables?

Maisamma: That's the irony of sex Renu. How I wish you remain untouchable for them.

Renuka: What about you?

Maisamma: One day Shankar Rao *Patel* caught my hand in the fields, and I slapped him with all my strength. Imagine what he did. He took my hand, rolled it over his face, and said that he loved it far better that way. After that, I couldn't resist him for long. Well, we had a steady affair till he died, sadly at fifty. But unlike the *peddollu* you've come to see, he was a kind man.

Renuka: What about *aththa*?

Maisamma: My Mallamma is made of a different mettle. When this *dora* tried to molest her, she said she would rather die than yield to him. But as he tried to grab her still, she ran like hell and jumped into their well. Luckily, she was saved in the nick of time.

Renuka: Oh, really!

Maisamma: That's not all. What a predicament it was for the *peddollu* that an untouchable jumped into their well. As nobody was prepared to drink from it, they had to purify it with

gangajal, that too after pumping out all the water from it. In the meantime, oh how long it took them, they had to fetch water from other villages. Well, what news it made then, and they got the message that Mallamma won't bend any way. Maybe, it could be the fear of her jumping into the well again that keeps the *patels* and the *patwaris* too at bay.

Renuka: Why not all of us do that *naanamma*?

Maisamma: It's because of our love to live that we put up with the indignities of life. Being branded loose women is just one such.

Renuka: What about the *memsaabs*?

Maisamma: Why aren't they women like us.

Renuka: But do they get close to our *dalit* men?

Maisamma: In hush-hush ways that is. But if the cat is out of the bag, often it gets killed. Of course, the dark one, but the fate of the fair thing depends on other things. But, mostly the affair is pushed under the carpet.

[Enter: Yadagiri with Yellaiah and Mallamma.]

Yadagiri: Amma, Maisaiah is dead.

Maisamma: Oh how come?

Yellaiah: I doubt that Shaukar got him killed.

Maisamma: But why should he get his own *naukar* killed?

Yellaiah: Shaukar says Maisaiah has stolen his money but I suspect there's something fishy about it. [Then he turns to Mallamma.] Malli, didn't Maisaiah tell us that he was going to *memsaab* as she had some work for him before Shaukar returned from Warangal. Can't we now put two and two together?

Mallamma: Why all that now before Renuka. [To Renuka.] So, you've left Sarakka behind.

Renuka: *Po aththa*.

Mallamma: You better preserve your shyness for your *baava*. Well, where is *vadina*?

Maisamma: Don't you know she's always with that Papi Reddy *Pate*?

Yellaiah: It's high time we had put some sense into her head.

Yadagiri: Whenever I'm hard on her, she goads him to get tough with me. Why blame him when she herself is so mean.

Mallamma: Why not I give her a bit of my mind.

Yadagiri: Don't ever do that *akka*; you know what a foul mouth she has.

Mallamma: So be it. It won't do any good to Renuka if she won't mend her ways now.

Yadagiri: Let's get Renu married to Narsimma, and that solves all the problems.

Mallamma: How I wish we could do that. But I want Narsimma to be a B.A. at any cost and you know marriage means its curtains down. Moreover, aren't they too young to wed?

Yadagiri: Oh, how my poor girl is caught between two stools. If we don't move fast Anasuya would make her wed that good for nothing Saailu, her pimp of a brother.

Maisamma: Be a man at last, and let not things come to that pass.

[Enter: Anasuya.]

Anasuya: Whom is the old hag instigating?

Yadagiri: Learn to respect my mother at least.

Anasuya: Respect her, my foot.

Yadagiri: Any way, what does a loose woman know about respect?

Anasuya: Oh, don't tell me your mother kept her thighs ever closed.

Mallamma: It's sickening really; at least consider her age *vadina*.

Anasuya: True, an old whore is chaste no less. Oh the poor thing.

Mallamma: Forget about her past; now think about Renuka's future.

Anasuya: Don't I know what this *panchayat* is all about.

Yadagiri: Why what's the secret about it? Who would want Renu wed a pimp.

Anasuya: Oh, *penimiti*, better mind your tongue.

Yadagiri: Don't forget Renu has a mind of her own. Don't you know she's fond of Narsimma.

Anasuya: Once she weds Saailu, she would be no less fond of him.

Mallamma: *Vadina*, why hurry things, let her first complete her Matric.

Anasuya: Why, to let your B.A son elope with her then?

Yellaiah: Well, all along you've been teasing them as a couple in the making, didn't you?

Anasuya: Maybe, but I've changed my mind.

Mallamma: But then, they're in love with each other.

Anasuya: Don't worry; it won't take long for them to fall out of it.

Mallamma: But *vadina*, why are you bent upon breaking the alliance?

Anasuya: *Yeendee lolli*. Am I obliged to tell to you?

Yellaiah: I'll see how you can back out now. Don't I drag you to the *panchayat*?

Anasuya: Listen Yellaiah, Renu can wed your son over my dead body, but before that take care you don't die of some snake bite like that poor Maisaiah.

Yadagiri: What to do when the fence itself is bent on eating up the crop. [Turns to Yellaiah.] Why should you suffer more of her foul mouth?

[Yadagiri leads away Yellaiah, and Mallamma follows them.]

Anasuya: Good riddance bad rubbish.

[Anasuya goes inside.]

Renuka: Who's a whore *naanamma*?

Maisamma: An abusive word for a loose woman that loosens her lovers' purse strings.

And the irony of abuse is that in abusing man, it's the woman that is abused. Won't the list of abusive words reveal that?

Renuka: And what about a pimp?

Maisamma: Why do you want to know all about sex the day you've matured? [She laughs heartily.] Well, God forbid you won't have to deal with any.

[Curtains down.]

Scene – 4

[Curtains up: The sun is still some way to set on Rampur's horizon, and seated on the square cement dais around a mango tree at the temple are Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao *Patel*, Rami Reddy *Patwari*, Papi Reddy *Patel*, and Shaukar Suryam. A couple of Muthyal Rao's henchmen stand guard as well. Papa Rao *Patel* opens the day's daily, and is about to read out the earmarked news to them.]

Muthyal Rao: Papa Rao *Patel*, for once why not give precedence to the local news. Let's hear the update on Maisaiah' widow from the horse's mouth.

Rami Reddy: *Dora*, why embarrass Shaukar *Saab*?

Muthyal Rao: Why *Patwari*, what's new in it? Won't he take women on lien in lieu of interest?

Rami Reddy: Why don't you realize *dora* that he has to pay for her upkeep in this case? Isn't it like parting with the principal? What an unwelcome development for any moneylender.

Papi Reddy: Why isn't she well-endowed to make value addition.

Rami Reddy: By the way, Shaukar *Saab*, have you any clue who stole the money?

Muthyal Rao: God knows that but don't we know the widow's stole is in Shaukar's hands? [Laughs.]

Shaukar Suryam: And the money under my wife's pillow. She was to send it to her brother but forgot to tell me about it. It's as well she didn't part with it for that gambler would've squandered at the races.

Papa Rao: Now that Shaukar *Saab* had galloped with the widow, what if his brother-in-law got stranded in his tracks.

Papi Reddy: If not for the brother's turn to the tale, surely it's tabloid stuff. And that would've made Shaukar Suryam a household name.

Muthyal Rao: That is if our Shaukar is prepared to spend some time behind the bars. Well, don't ever spread it, it won't help any. Now let's turn to the press Papa Rao *Patel*.

Papa Rao: There's disturbing news from West Bengal *dora*.

Shaukar Suryam: Isn't West Bengal too far away to disturb us any way.

Papa Rao: Don't they say what Bengal thinks today the rest of India thinks tomorrow, and that's my worry.

Rami Reddy: What's it anyway?

Papa Rao: Well, it took place only the other day and God forbid 25 May 1967 won't be a red-letter day.

Muthyal Rao: What for is all this buildup, Papa Rao *Pate*? Why don't you tell us in a nutshell?

Papa Rao: You know, well who would've ever known, Naxalbari is a small village in West Bengal. As it happens all the time, there was a dispute over an assigned land between a landlord and a peasant. And again, as is the case all over, the landlord got the peasant thrashed by his goons. That was on 2nd March, but on 25th May the story took a different turn with an unpalatable twist to it. Led by the ultra leftists, Charu Majumdar and Kanu Sanyal, the peasants of Naxalbari revolted against the landlords and usurped their lands. What's worse, vowing to take this revolutionary opposition to every nook and corner, the Maoist duo gave a call to the downtrodden to join the movement in numbers.

Muthyal Rao: Even then, I'm not the one to lose sleep over a storm in the Naxalbari teacup. After all, haven't we seen the so-called Telangana Struggle fizzle out before? Why not move on to something more relevant.

Papa Rao: Maybe you're right after all? Well, our *sarkar* says it's going to distribute *banjar* among the peasants.

Rami Reddy: Won't it make some welcome news?

Shaukar Suryam: Our *Patwari* must be out of his wits to say that *dora*.

Rami Reddy: What would moneylenders know about land grabbing? How long would it take us to relieve them of their *pattas*?

Muthyal Rao: That's true. We can look for better times then. But how are we to believe the politicians?

Papa Rao: They also plan to propagate family planning among them.

Papi Reddy: Why isn't it a sensible measure? Won't that cap the scum?

Shaukar Suryam: Papi Reddy *Patel* seems to miss the point here. What if that picks up amongst them? Won't we be short of women pandering to us?

Papa Rao: That's true; *Shaukar Saab* has some foresight after all.

Muthyal Rao: Why, won't that shrink his customer base as well? What a double jeopardy it could be to our *Shaukar*. But then, there is no need to worry as things won't change in a hurry, if at all they change.

[Enter: *Anasuya*.]

Anasuya: *Dandaal dora*.

Muthyal Rao: Why, any problem?

Anasuya: I seek protection for my daughter *dora*.

Papi Reddy: Well, what's the matter?

Anasuya: *Dora*, my sister-in-law and her husband are forcing my daughter to wed their son.

Papa Rao: What's the objection? After all, isn't it the custom?

Anasuya: But the custom in my family is to get her married to her *maama* that is my brother *Saailu*.

Muthyal Rao to his henchman: Bring *Yellaiah* and *Mallamma* to the *panchayat*.

[Exit: *Henchman*.]

Rami Reddy: How old is your daughter?

Anasuya: *Patwari-ji*, she has just now matured.

Shaukar Suryam: Won't it be in the know of *Papi Reddy Patel* as well?

Papi Reddy: Why poke your nose into my affairs. Did I ever enquire about her *EDD*, you know who.

Muthyal Rao: Oh, stop it. [Turns to *Anasuya*.] What's your man's take on this?

Anasuya: He's coerced by them into agreeing *dora*.

[Enter: *Henchman* with *Mallamma*.]

Mallamma: *Dandaal dora*.

Muthyal Rao: What about Yelligadu?

Mallamma: He's gone to town *dora*.

Muthyal Rao: *Yeme* Mallamma, Anasuya complains that you're fiddling in her family matters.

Mallamma: *Dora*, my son was betrothed to Renuka at her birth itself. Now it's my *vadina* who backtracks.

Muthyal Rao: *Yemey* Anasuya, is it true?

Papi Reddy: Whatever, we may restrain the Yellaiahs to keep away from the girl.

Mallamma: *Dora*, how can Papi Reddy *Patel* decide for the *panchayat* even before Anasuya replies?

Papi Reddy: *Yeme* Mallamma, aren't you talking like a *panch*. Don't you know it's the parents who decide whom the children have to marry? Now the *panchayat* decides that none from Yellaiah's family should take things into their hands.

Mallamma: How come *dora* fails to stop Papi Reddy *Patel* from hijacking the *panchayat*.

Papi Reddy: Oh how dare you? Don't we see you're thrashed and then thrown out of Rampur?

Mallamma [in all fury]: *Dora*, they say *panch* is *parameshwar* but here I see the Satan in collusion.

Papi Reddy: You dirty bitch. [He spats on her.]

Mallamma: *Orey* Papi Reddy. [She leaps up to Papi Reddy but drops down holding her chest in pain.]

Papi Reddy: Won't it serve you right, you upstart. It does no good for the *dalits* to be angry. Realize that.

Mallamma: *Orey luchcha*. [Getting up with some effort, she pounces upon Papi Reddy.]

[As Mallamma tries to throttle Papi Reddy, Anasuya tries to restrain her. In the end, Mallamma collapses as Papi Reddy *Patel* pushes her away.]

Rami Reddy: Looks like she's dead, maybe, it's a massive stroke followed by a mild one.

Papa Rao: Thank God, she didn't have a sickle in her hand. Now I can imagine the peasant fury at Naxalbari.

Muthyal Rao: Papa Rao *Patel*, forget about Naxalbari, surely it's one headache less in Rampur.

Shaukar Suryam: More so for Papi Reddy *Patel*. Oh, the way he's rooting for Anasuya! *Dora*, don't you see some *daal me kaala* in this?

Papi Reddy [Recovers his composure]: Why not you go and please yourself with that just widowed.

Muthyal Rao (Gets up): Let's go.

Rami Reddy: Where, to Maisaiah's widow.

[All laugh as they exit and Mallamma lay on the floor.]

[Enter Yellaiah with a bag in hand, and seeing Mallamma, he rushes to her.]

Yellaiah: Oh Malli, why did you desert me? Now how am I to live without you? [Lying over her body Yellaiah wails inconsolably.]

[Enter: Narsimma, Sarakka, Yadagiri, Maisamma and other villagers as the curtains are slowly down.]

Scene - 5

[Curtains up: Standing near the well of the downtrodden, Narsimma peeps into it.]

[Enter: Renuka on tiptoe, and blindfolds him.]

Narsimma: Don't I smell my Renu from a mile. [He clasps her hand that blindfolds him.]

Renuka [Pushes a sweetmeat into his mouth]: See how my success in Matric tastes.

Narsimma: [Taking her into his arms.] But I'm for sweeter things from a sweet sixteen.

Renuka [Coyly]: *Po baava*. [Coquettishly] As if I'm holding you at the threshold. You can smell me from a mile but won't move an inch into my life. What a *buddhu* you are *baava*.

Narsimma: *Buddhu* or *badiya* you would only know after we wed. But don't you feel the pull of my love from the pulse of my heart?

Renuka: [Puts her ear to his chest.] Well, now if you don't pull me into your life, my mother would push me out of it, and *baava* that would be the end of me. [She sits morosely on the wall and looks into the well.]

Narsimma: Don't you know Renu that lovers never die. Ask Romeo - Juliet, Salim - Anarkali, Heer - Ranjha etc.

Renuka: Do you want us to go their way or what, to live 'happily ever after' only in the hereafter.

Narsimma: Don't lose heart Renu; we'll make it a unique *baava- maradalu* saga in Rampur itself.

Renuka: With Saailu as villain, don't you know my mother has her own script. Oh, the very thought of wedding him is so scary. [She looks into the well.] Well, if ever the push comes to the shove, like *aththa*, I too would jump into their well.

Narsimma [Holding her]: Why don't you have a thought for me Renu? Don't you know I live with the hope of living with you? If you die, it would be the end of me as well. [He peeps into the well.]

Renuka: Oh, *baava*, how you keep me in the *trisanckhu swargam*.

Narsimma: Bear with me, I'll find a way out.

Renuka: I don't see any way out but to elope, and now is the time. If not. [She mocks to slip into the well]

Narsimma [Catching her by the waist.]: Do you think I didn't think about it?

Renuka: *Baava*, I suspect my mother has a secret agenda. We've no time to lose now.

Narsimma: Oh, if only Sarakka were married and I've my degree on hand. Then I would've left this god-damn place with you and my father. But if we run away now, my father and sister would be hauled over the coals by your mother. Leave aside Papi Reddy *Patel*, she would have the full *panchayat* to back her on that score.

Renuka: Don't I foresee that? But I don't want to lose you at any cost, and that's my dilemma. Oh, God, I'm going mad.

Narsimma: Even if our fears are liars, still our move puts a full stop to my studies. How my mother lived and died dreaming about my being a B.A.

Renuka: Don't I value your feelings for her and cherish her memory myself. In a way, didn't she die trying to avert my fate? Now it's up to you *baava* to see that she didn't die in vain. Let not your misplaced sentiment make me a living dead.

Narsimma: More than my sentiment Renu, it's my conviction that's inhibiting me.

Renuka: What is it *baava* that overrides the fate of your beloved?

Narsimma: Don't you know how I swear by *dalit* education. What's the use of preaching without practicing?

Renuka: Oh! Life is not for tagging to theories *baava*; it's about grabbing its moments.

Narsimma: Maybe, I'm too young to be realistic about life.

Renuka: It's nothing but escapism *baava*, and that's going to ruin my life. [She looks into the well over her shoulder]

Narsimma: Don't you see that I'm powerless now to protect you? Let's see how your life itself protects you.

Renuka: You don't need any crystal ball to see what my future portends, do you? [She looks into the well.]

Narsimma: Don't I know what my future would be like without you.

Renuka: Why, I've an idea. [She jumps down to the ground] Let's elope with *mavayya* and Sarakka in tow. We three will toil to keep you going.

Narsimma [Excitedly.]: Why couldn't I think of it myself Renu? Is it that I love you any less?

Renuka: I know you love me more than you realize. Well, your wooly ideologies seem to be the bane of my life.

Narsimma: Maybe, it's possible. But Renu, if there's a way of not losing you, do you think I'll ever lose you?

Renuka: But *baava*, God forbid what if it's a foiled bid.

Narsimma: Why do you think so? As you've buoyed my love, I'll fly you to the moon itself. All said and done, it's better to try and fail than never to have tried at all.

Renuka: Just in case, don't forget that I live in the hope of being your wife before I die.

Narsimma: If ever I lose your love, I know it would be the end of my life. Well let's plan for our life together.

[Narsimma and Renuka talk in undertones. Curtains down]

Scene – 6

[Curtains up: Muthyal Rao, Papa Rao, Rami Reddy, Papi Reddy and Shaugar Suryam sit on the dais of scene - 4 with a couple of henchmen standing guard. While Yellaiah, Narsimma, Renuka and Sarakka stand accused, sitting on the floor are Maisamma, Yadagiri, Anasuya and other villagers.]

Muthyal Rao: Papa Rao *Patel*, let the *panchayat* begin.

Papa Rao: *Hahn dora*. Abetted by Yelligadu and Sarakka, Narsigadu tried to elope with Renuka. All were caught red-handed while leaving the village at the dead of the night, last night.

Renuka: Dora, as my mother fixed my marriage against my wishes, it's I who goaded them to take me away.

*Muthyal Rao: Keep quiet, no one called for your *sanjaayishi*.*

*Narsimma: Dora, Renu is my betrothed, and my *aththa* is the spoilsport.*

*Muthyal Rao: Narsiga, why didn't you approach the *panchayat* then?*

*Narsimma: Dora, you know how Papi Reddy *Patel* takes sides.*

*Papi Reddy: Narsiga, how dare you accuse a *panch*?*

Yellaiah: Dora, please pardon me and bless the children.

Reddy: Wah Yelliga wah. Blessing the runaways, what a precedent it sets.

Yellaiah: [Bows his head in silence]

Muthyal Rao: Yera Yelliga, why abet your son, don't you know elopement is a crime in Rampur?

Yellaiah: Hahn dora, but Anasuya is the cause of it.

Yadagiri: Hahn dora.

Maisamma: Dora, bless the children and may God bless you.

*Muthyal Rao: Maisamma, sadly it's all too late now. Had any of you brought the issue before the *panchayat*, we would've addressed it suitably.*

*Narsimma: Is it so *dora*?*

*Muthyal Rao: Well, now that the crime is committed, it's the punishment time. What the *panch* have to say?*

*Papa Rao: What's there to disagree *dora*.*

Papi Reddy: Dora, we might note that Yellaiah's family members are habitual offenders.

*Shaukar Suryam: Well, didn't Mallamma attack Papi Reddy *Patel* in the *panchayat* itself. If not for that stroke of luck and for lack of a sickle, God knows where he would've been now.*

Muthyal Rao: its five lashes each to Narsigadu and Yelligadu, and two to Sarakka.

*Renuka: Why leave me out *dora*. Let me also share their fate.*

Muthyal Rao: What makes you think you're let off scot-free; your turn would come any way.

[Taking cue from Muthyal Rao, his henchman was about to lash at Narasimma. Even before Narsimma could take the blow, Renuka rushes to him and takes it herself. While other henchman holds Renuka, Narsimma, Yellaiah and Sarakka are whipped as directed.]

*Muthyal Rao: As Renuka tried to elope with Narsigadu, the *panchayat* prohibits her from marrying him.*

Papi Reddy: And for having shamed Saailu, she should be his slavish wife.

*Renuka: Dora, is not history repeating itself. Don't you see Papi Reddy *Patel* hijacking the *panchayat* all again.*

[Instinctively Papi Reddy gets into a protective posture.]

*Narsimma: And yet *dora* says we should've approached the *panchayat*.*

*Anasuya: See his audacity *dora*. I'm afraid he may frisk her away before the wedding.*

Muthyal Rao: When is that?

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