

## The Gentleman Advocate

As the trial ended, the courts began to be vacated gradually. The fans that were not stopped continued to rotate slowly. A sub-ordinate staff went about switching off the electric lights one by one. Lawyers were dispersing in individually and in-groups. Though the front yard could not be seen, the noise of the vehicles starting, reversing and turning away through the gates could be heard. Advocate Karunakar thought of delaying a moment but not solely because he would have to walk when others traveled in cars. He intuitively knew that the man he appeared for and saved a while ago would be waiting for him on the way.

He had decided to come to courts to appear in the case on behalf of the woman, his friend Prasenjit, and also a lawyer, referred to him. Customarily he did not appear in these courts. As he thought that it would be advisable to start practice in some distant courts till he gained experience, he had made Nayagarh his hunting ground. His wife too approved this idea as there were more litigants in his own village, Manikagoda, who were known to him.

Because Prasenjit had sent the woman to him and as she had a helpless look about her, he remembered, he was induced to accept Malati's case.

"What more are you asking for?" Karunakar asked with a questioning look at the woman. She had lost one tooth and rest others seem discolored. Her eyes, however, had a sparkle that was out of place with her woebegone face. Her face was no index of her age. The mouth, which drooped at the corners, was that of a vexenish woman given to casting slurs at others. Between the chintz cloth with faded flowers that she wore and the sun washed blouse, the skin in her abdominal region was so wrinkled that it looked like that of a person caught in a famine.

Realizing that she was under the observant eye of the lawyer the woman looked at him with more confidence. But she answered him very submissively.

"Anything, more Sir"

Though he did not say anything to that he decided to accept the case. When the defendant agreed to give an additional five thousand rupees, Karunakar burst out in anger. The argument of the defense was that the woman did not suffer major injuries.

"This woman is a poor, helpless person, Your Honor" Karunakar told the judge bowing his head. "She goes to various houses daily to work, to earn some money. It is with that money that she brings up her four children and supports her sick husband. At the time of accident she was on her way to the hospital to see her husband. The injury caused to her thigh by the accident is not yet healed. Because of that she is unable to earn her living at present. The money given by the defense at the beginning was sufficient only to take treatment for her injuries. Therefore we are appealing to you to obtain for us at least a sum of rupees ten thousand." "Ten thousand!" Even Malati's eyebrows rose. She had thought that if she got another thousand rupees that would be sufficient. The first thousand rupees were also obtained with difficulty.

The defendant became greatly agitated. Karunakar who was determined to get an amount like that fired several questions one after the other. "Do you have a license? What is your job? What's your daily income? I am asking your daily income." Towards the end he thundered, pointing his index finger like a pistol.

"As far as I know, Your Honor, he is a shareholder in a ready-made garment making business. His daily income is very, very much more than what this helpless lady is claiming." The defendant whispered something in the ear of his lawyer. He agreed to settle the case by paying ten thousand rupees.

Malati never expected to receive such an amount. What she thought was that after all their arguments and counter arguments she would get a pittance. She realized that she was a poor, helpless woman only after her lawyer's address to the courts. Karunakar himself wondered how he got the idea that she goes from house to house to work for other people. Malati had not told him of such a situation. Undoubtedly her appearance had given rise to such an idea.

As the peon came and peeped into the lawyer's rest room, Karunakar's eyes traveled to the large clock hung on the wall and rested there. The courts were so quiet that it appeared as if only he was there and no one else. Only, the fan was set in an attempt to snatch the flimsy papers on the table. Lawyer Karunakar collected his papers while getting up from his chair, then taking the black coat with which he had draped the backrest of the chair, he himself wore it.

Karunakar came out and stood alone, soon he became angry and displeased. The outside could be viewed only with shielded eyes. Two police constables were walking across the compound in the scorching sun as if walking in moonlight. One of them partially closed his eyes to shield them from the glare and looked at Karunakar. The old court employee was now busy in sweeping the corridor very carefully like cleaning an archaeological artifact without leaving a single speck of dust. Karunakar looked at him and stepped on to the compound feeling little irritated because of the intense heat.

A man seated under the shade beneath the large Banyan tree, among its large columnar roots heard the gravel being trodden upon and got up. When Karunakar saw him, his face shrank with displeasure. He realized immediately that the man had been waiting for him.

"Honored Sir, may you gain merit," the man said removing the dirty towel from his shoulders and bending down up to Karunakar's knees, worshipping him.

"Why didn't you go?" Karunakar asked angrily. When he realized that he delayed coming out of the court until now. In order to avoid this man, he became more angry. His anger increased as the man remained silent.

"Why the hell didn't you go, man?" He roared without trying to show his anger. If he does not control himself to some extent he would be uttering filth very soon. Though at that time when he saw the man's helpless state and appeared for him and got him freed, he now kindles Karunakar's anger.

"If you get caught by the police, they would lock you up, again. Why didn't you go, man?" Karunakar asked, this time, fuming furiously. "Go man, go in any bus that comes this way!"

The man started shivering and fell on his knees. "Oh, honor, sir!" he worshiped Karunakar holding his feet. "I have no money to go by bus. I came from home after a quarrel. With the money I had, I bought cigarettes for the police constable. I am afraid to go to Bolagarh walking. Sir. I have no money for the bus fare. It is over."

When he heard the man, though his anger rose beyond control, he realized the man's plight. He threw fifty-rupee note that he got from Malati in the morning, at the man kneeling before him.

"Go at least now, man, in any bus that comes."

He walked for about a quarter of a mile under the boiling sun till he reached Prasenjit's office, but yet, Karunakar's anger had not subsided. As soon as he entered the air-conditioned office, his anger evaporated considerably and he looked about with a light heart. In a corner of the office, which had a polished red floor, was a rack with magazines. As he took a magazine and sat down, Prasenjit entered into the office smiling.

"Malati spoke highly of you. She told me that when the gentleman started arguing, as if he was going to fight and the other side got frightened". As the office was closed for clients Prasenjit discarded all formalities and became almost flippant when he spoke. "Malati said that she gave you fifty rupees. I scolded the woman severely. Why the hell did you take such a small amount?"

"How can I ask for more from that woman? It was I who suggested that she could give any amount she liked," Karunakar said peeping in to the magazine.

"You asked her to give whatever amount she liked?" Prasenjit queried astonishingly and plucking the magazine from his hand at the same time, he threw it on to the rack. "Is that a thing a lawyer says?" he continued angrily "Only a laborer says that! Malati is

a woman who is well used to litigation. She knows that no lawyer appears in a case for less than hundred rupees. When I heard that after getting five thousand rupees also she had given only fifty rupees, I scolded her."

"Did she say so about ten thousand rupees to you?"

"Ten thousand rupees!"

"Yes, ten thousand rupees."

"That despicable woman told me a lie too then." Prasenjit said, biting his lips.

"That woman's husband worked for us for a long time. I wouldn't have appeared for her even for hundred rupees. It was because I couldn't take any money from her that is why I sent her to you."

"In that case you would have appeared free for her. I got fifty rupees at least."

"Karunakar, this is not a job you can do maintaining decent human qualities." Prasenjit said, looking intently at his friend's face. The people who come to waste their time in the court are very crafty people. We must not get caught in their tricks. It is a joy for them to say that they retained an advocate who charged high fees. They have no regard for people who appear for small fees. Several people spoke to me about you today. A person who joins this profession must safeguard its practical ethics."

"Ethics?" Karunakar laughed shaking his shoulders." It is the poor who come to the courts. I am also a villager of middle class. Their privation and deprivations I too have suffered and I am used to them. That is why I didn't mention figure. I too thought that she would have at least hundred rupees. But she is a shrewd woman."

"That's what am also saying. When you sympathize with them they take undue advantage of it. They have great difficulties, why do they come to courts? We must not think of their benefits but of ours."

"Prasan, you don't understand me because you are a rich man's son," Karunakar said this looking around the luxurious room with its polished floor and air conditioning.

"Though I got into the profession, this is good for the affluent classes, not for lower middle class people".

"According to your abilities, you can rise in your profession. You are equally proficient in Oriya and English. Your appearance is not that of a novice but of an experienced lawyer".

"In that case I must be having a crafty look," Karunakar said smiling. "Because I lost my job due to a strike in our factory I was pushed into this. When I failed, twice and was studying hard, undergoing all sorts of difficulties for the third try, it's a wonder that it never struck me that there is this aspect in this profession."

"What aspect?" Prasenjit asked puzzled.

"The heartless aspect," Karunakar said smiling.

"Are you disgusted?"

"No, no, but I feel as if I am going on a robbery mission. I think it is not only I who have this feeling. Every one who had come from middle class must have had it in the beginning. As time goes on, it will be right by it self."

"That's it, several people told me that you have a great prospect here. All you have to do is to practice here itself. There is lot of work here."

"I got another case today and also succeeded," Karunakar replied.

"So let's go and have a drink. We must celebrate," Prasenjit was very happy.

"I don't have any money, Prasani"

"What? No money?" Prasenjit exclaimed in surprise. "After appearing in two cases?"

"The police had caught an innocent man and remanded him to custody. The fellow quarreled with his wife and left home. It was when he was looking for a relative in Sahidnagar area that the police had caught him. No one known to him knew about the case to retain someone to appear for him. He was being brought to the court and taken

back to jail. It had been going on for two months. He fell at my feet and cried telling the story. So I appeared for him and got him out. When I was returning at the end of the session, the man was under the Banyan tree waiting for me."

Why?', "To get some money to go home. A strange anger overtook me. But there was no one known to him here. I gave him the fifty rupees that I got from Malati."

Prasenjit who was waiting impatiently till the story to end, burst out laughing loud. He was shaking his abdomen and wiping his eyes as he laughed. The noisy laughter without having any escape in the air-conditioned room got echoed in it. When Karunakar saw that the laughter was not ending, his impatience slowly developed in to anger. He tried to escape from the anger and walked up to the door. He turned his head and looked back. Seeing Prasenjit still wiping his eyes and laughing Karunakar's anger melted and a smile flickered around his lips. He left off the doorknob and came back to his friend allowing that smile to remain as it was.