

The Sinners

After the morning service, the priest came and stretched himself in an easy chair in the veranda. He put his spectacles on and took the English newspapers from the tea-poy on his right. An attempt to rape a French girl at Chandigarh was a prominent news item in the front page itself. Evil items like murders, looting and suicides were all over the paper. Within two months the number of deaths due to cerebral malaria were ninety. It said that even Phulbani was recording cases of cerebral malaria.

The priest removed his spectacles and held them in his right hand carefully. His forehead creased. He raised his body with some difficulty from the easy chair and placing his forearms on the arms of the chair, looked at the horizon serenely. The newspaper was still held between the fingers of his left hand.

Because of the heat of the sun the priest was looking at the distance with partially closed eyes. The dust raised by a lorry going towards the ferro-alloys factory at Theruvalli floated in the dry air for a long time. Beyond the tarred road was the pond. The pond developed due to a small fountain coming from Niyamagiri hills. These days the flow across the fountain was dry because it was early summer and people had experienced drought last year.

The aged priest stretched himself again in the easy chair. He felt that a very unpropitious period could emerge in the near future and his face took sorrowful look. He sent his fingers through his completely white hair and then shook his head several times. He tried to remember the day he came to this Church, which was in close proximity to Dongoriya Kondhs of Rayagada.

After drinking the cup of sugarless tea the servant brought, he got up to go to the inner room.

"Fa ... a ... therl"

The Woman's scream he heard came from the front of the Church. The priest's residence was behind the Church and the Veranda of the residence was not facing the main road but the pond in the last.

The Father stopped where he was. He had no time even to turn round. He could only turn his head instantly. The scream was such heart rending, it gave him a shock.

"Father, please save me!"

She collapsed on the lower of the two steps leading to the veranda. She was breathing hard. Her breasts rose and fell.

Her lips were dry and pale. On her forehead was a light eruption of perspiration. She gazed at the priest in fear.

"Gurubari, why are you screaming?" Gurubari hardly heard the Fathers' compassionate voice.

"Help, Father, they are coming to kill me."

"Who?"

"Budhia Jani"

"Why does he want to kill you?"

"He says that I am getting down his eldest son to my place 1"

Gurubari's husband died at the most, about two years ago. She and her husband had come to Chhatikona from Kulri about five years ago. They got a meager income by cultivating pineapple and guava. That amount was just sufficient to tide over the day. Her husband unfortunately contracted malaria and later succumbed to it in a missionary hospital. Gurubari remembered how the body, which was brought from the hospital, was buried close to the house with the assistance of the priest.

Because she had married on her own against her parent's wishes, she decided not to get to her village after her husband's death. She remained at Chhatikona with her only child, a boy. Gurubari had to work in other's field for money.

"Why Budhia, at this ungodly hour?" The father inquired in a benign voice as he sat down in the chair. He took his eyes from the left to the right slowly looking at each one of them carefully. He knew all the faces.

The first was Sambharia. The whole of Chhatikona knew him as Malua Sambharia. He earned money by employing people to distil salap (wine) from dead palm trees.

Next was Budhia Jani's brother-in-law, Parsu. If there was any trouble in the village it was very rare that he was not connected with it. He was often drunk and had an ugly face.

His bloated face had the scar of a cut injury on the right side. Because of the pale color of the skin, the scar was very prominent. One button of his short sleeved shirt was not in place. Hence part of a black tattoo was seen. It showed "ve us" only. What was tattooed was "Jesus save us" which he must have done for money and wine only.

Then there were several young girls and boys. They had come without knowing the why and the what for. They watched perplexed.

To the right of the boys and girls was Manguli who was released from Brahmapur jail about two months ago.

Manguli had his hair cut very short and wore a silver colored steel bangle with a design engraved in it. To prevent perspiration seeping down and dirtying the shirt collar he had a handkerchief folded and placed round his neck. He was the right hand man of Parsu. Among them only fat Sundari was there for a woman. She was Budhia Jani's eldest son's mother-in-law. The flesh danced on the flabby arms of Sundari. The priest knew about Sundari too.

She had left her legally married husband and come to Chaatikona with her paramour with whom she is living now. The children of her first husband she had left with him. Maguni who worked in the Church detailed that story to the priest.

Whatever it was Sundri was a woman who had a soft heart. She always came to the rescue of her neighbors who had fallen in to difficulties. In Chhatikona where health facilities were limited Sundari ran to the assistance of any woman who sought relief from a pregnancy.

"Sundari, You also gave a chase to Gurubari, aawh? "

'Yes Father"

"Father, you are asking that without knowing this woman's number. She is wailing now as if she can't count lot up to two!"

"Did she do any wrong, Sundari?"

'What if she does it to me, Father? She's trying to break up my eldest girl's family. "

"Father, this Sundari auntie's son-in-law Sambhu – he troubles me. My idea is to bring up the boy well in the name of my dead husband, But...?"

"This bitch likes to stay quiet in the dead man's name!"

That was Sambharia. Though the priest heard it faintly he remained silent as if he did not hear it. Gurubari looked behind at Sambharia with suspicion. At the same time she noticed Budhia Jani's eyes, reddened by anger, directed at her. She immediately turned towards the priest.

Sundari got another chance.

'She is always trying to pull Sambhu into her hovel. Is it correct that she should do that, father?"

"Every time he passes the house he stops and talk to me, Father." Am afraid that if I don't talk I would be found fault with. On several days he gave sweets to the child."

The man with the tattoo looked at Gurubari with his faded eyes. 'The muscles on his chest, on the left side rippled. His cheeks became flushed, they shore.

Lips drooped. He disobeyed himself

You dirty bitch, are you trying to be the mother of God in the presence of the Father?" Parsu swung his night arm back and pushing his trunk forward tried to jump to the place where Gurubari was.

The Father stood up erect. Looked straight. Getting down the two steps went pass Gurubari on to the compound. Now Gurubari was behind the Father.

Two people held Parasu's hands behind his back. Because they held them tight, those places became reddish. The muscles, which were wet with perspiration, became slippery.

The priest looked at him with kindly eyes. When Parasu saw his calm eyes he hesitated to a certain extent. The priest took three steps forward and came very close to Parsu who stepped back and loosened the knot of his tucked up sarong. The crowd became more dispersed.

'I am not saying in any way that if Gurubari is getting down Sambu, it is correct'.

"That's it father", several said simultaneously.

"She should be stoned to death, Father."

"But the Son of God has told that if any man looks at a

woman carnally, he commits adultery with her. It is not only for men, for women too it is the same."

"Can any one of you here say that you have not done such a wrong, even in mind?" The priest looked intently about. "If there is such a person, let him to come forward, I will allow him to punish Gurubari!"

They all looked at one another. Their faces registered defeat and shame. They thought of the wrongs they have done. They compared them in their minds. They realized that though they were so ashamed of and could not stay in the presence of the priest, it was not easy for them to leave the place either.

"Did every one of us realize that all of us are sinners?"

"Yes, Father!"

"Instead of looking for the mote in another's eye, it is better to see about the beam in one's one eye."

"Yes, Father!"

Their hearts, which were filled in anger gradually, began to empty. The eyes that glared with hatred partially closed and looked down.

"Gurubari, in the name of your dead husband, try to live blamelessly".

Gurubari held the feet of the priest and sobbed. The elders in the mob made the sign of the cross and turned back. The Father watched them going with a light heart and a compassionate look.