

Translations



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Lust for Fame

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Actually Venkayya Naidu's clan was like that. From their forefathers' times, their clan was known for philanthropy. The Goddess of Fame had entered their house in their forefathers' times, and remained there for three generations.

But to ask why the Goddess of Fame is not visible in that house anymore, would be stupid and meaningless; she may have got attracted to money and gold elsewhere, and not stayed back steadfast in that house.

Venkayya Naidu's property was not meagre by any standard. He owned 40 acres of land. But the entire property melted down like lit camphor. How this transpired needs a long narration.

Naidu was not a spendthrift; nor was he a dimwit or an unaccomplished person. It is just that he simply failed to acknowledge that some of his spendings was excessive and unwarranted.

Since the time his ears began to make sense of sounds around him, Naidu had repeatedly heard only one maxim. During chit-chats, while listening to stories and poems from literature and the sacred books, he would always hear the same precept in myriad forms.

Though he was not very educated, from the recitation of Thammanna Sastry, the saying, 'It is acts of charity that define a King' had almost become a chant.

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Therefore Naidu, not trusting his wife or children or even his own self, was a firm believer only of the Goddess of Fame.

Naidu's house often saw visits by members of the erstwhile courtiers' clan. They used to sing panegyrics in praise of his largesse, grandeur and fame to pocket five or ten rupees, and only then would depart from his house. In accordance with the prevailing folk tradition, the Sacred Bulls would come to pay respects to him, and would go back with a gift of one or two excellent traditional wear on their hump. Jugglers and other performers of wandering clans would visit Naidu playing the drum. That is it; gifts would be rained upon them. In addition to these people, an unending stream of visitors, alms-seekers and well-wishers too used to visit Naidu's house.

However...

As Thamanna Sastry had forewarned, people, probably stung by his growing fame, began talking among themselves, about Naidu's indulgence in reckless spending; whereas some others, who were his real well-wishers attempted to caution him to his face for his excesses.

But..

Naidu was a person born in the sacred land of India which has given birth to the 'Kalpa Vrikshas' like, Karna, Sibi, Mandhata and Raghavu, known for their munificent grants and donations. He may be an ordinary farmer—but all the sastras and all the emperors of the earth unanimously sang paeans in appreciation of charity and donation as a basic human quality. Would he listen if these stupid people condemned the same? Ignoring their words, he continued his munificent activities as usual.

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Naidu followed his elders in matters of spending, wealth calculation and accumulation, true to his clan's tradition. In all matters including agriculture, to secure the blessings of Goddess Lakshmi, there wasn't a donation or penance or ritualistic festival which he did not observe.

If any ignoramus found fault with him, Naidu would say-

'Sir, may I ask you one thing? You being a farmer, tell me, does not cultivating the land incur expenditure? For tilling the land you will spend money; for bringing the tank's mud into the land, you will incur expenditure; to make the land fertile further expenditure will be incurred; then you will sow seeds; after that for weeding and for leveling the land, you will keep on spending. Further, for watering and keeping vigil on the crop day and night, you will trouble your body and slog.

What is all this for? Expecting good yield of crop? By chance, if the crop fails, what can you do?

Why do you keep mum?

Let that be, now consider this -

If you don't invest and work hard, and simply lie down silently folding your legs, would seeds sow on their own, and yield crop?

Today we may sow and tomorrow we may reap the crop; if you do not open the granaries to sow the seeds, you won't get the crop; how will you then get the returns on the land? You will end up with only what you have, and will not get any new grain. What do you say?'

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The group around him would listen to these wise words and nod in agreement, and the one that had earlier objected to him, would keep mum. Naidu would make it seem like he was making explicit the knowledge that he had got from the sages.

How poverty struck a person who had gone on as per the words of the sages is a matter to be deciphered.

Never an idle one, Naidu always yearned for a rightful way of living. With the help of his peasants, he cultivated his forty acres of land, never leaving it barren.

By the time he stepped into active life, the value of rupees had started increasing and the value of grains had started decreasing, in the exchange trade. Many began to hoard rupees in place of grains. As long as Venkayya Naidu's mother was alive, there was no scope for any change in the house. Even Naidu himself was not in favor of any changes. Therefore rupee failed to reign in that house.

It is no wonder that there never occurred a need for rupees in that house, with twenty-five acres of wet land and fifteen acres of dry land that had been inherited through generations.

The needs of life had all been met with the produce and by-products from the land and the cattle. People could eat to their heart's content, and feed others as much as they could, and donate as much as they wanted. If still something remained, that used to take the form of gold and adorn the body of the women of the house as ornament.

In that house for the first time, the need for rupees arose when a dispute erupted over water sharing with Rami Naidu.

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Venkayya Naidu was basically a calm and easygoing person. But as was often indicated by Thammanna Sastry, he was like the mythological Dharma Raja. Once, merely to assert himself, or rather, his self-respect, he had allowed the bloodshed of forty to fifty able-bodied men, and had squandered away twenty-five thousand rupees.

Ever since then, in sorting out similar disputes, and also for performing the marriages of his daughters one after another, there arose the need for the rupee. Rupees came in. With the coming of the new wealth in the form of rupees, all the hoarded wealth was flushed away.

On the night when his valour was exhibited over the dispute of water sharing, some of his wounded henchmen gathered in the hall of Naidu's house and thought over the further course of action. Most of them resolved that by day break, they should go to town and complain to the police. However, Naidu felt complaining to the police was against his dignity. But others warned him that if the other party complained before them, to defend it would be a costly affair. But Naidu simply said that if he were to turn bankrupt in the process, it was okay with him. Many tried to convince him, but failed, and kept quiet leaving the matter to his fate. By the third day, the police descended with arrest warrants.

However, sensing trouble, on the preceding night itself Naidu took some care. Calling Dharma Rao Patnaik from the neighboring village for consultation, he deliberated on the matter. As per his advice, in five minutes' time there came about a need to raise five hundred rupees. Venkayya Naidu, who didn't know to hoard anything except grains in the house, sent word to the local money-lender for money.

Thinking that the entire matter of borrowing money could be sorted out in the end, he continued to borrow, but never attempted to clear the debts.

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By the end of the year, the principal and the interest came to be twenty-two hundred. The hoarded grain stocks had already diminished for adjusting petty debts.

Even at that time, had he taken care and cleared out the debt, wouldn't the story have been different? But it did not happen like that.

He raised and allowed his debts to grow secretly, thinking it would be disgraceful for all and sundry to know that the ornaments of the women of the house and the inherited lands had been disposed off for the court adjournments; he had decided to credit some amount against the debts from every year's crop yield.

A quintal of grain was sold in auction for thirty or forty rupees. In those days, by deducting his expenditure, a farmer could manage to retain ten or twelve quintal bags of grain. With this, was it possible to clear the debt that had exceeded rupees two thousand by then?

Naidu struggled to rein in his philanthropic acts. Here also the Goddess of Fame came in the way.

That year a Brahmin Pundit visited him to collect his annual grant. It was customary to donate every year a fine cotton long cloth to him. On that occasion, Naidu attempted to give the Pundit a less expensive coarse cloth. Except for explicitly shouting at Naidu, the Pundit showed his anger in every other way, and sulked like a new son-in-law.

He said: 'I don't know why Naidugaru, what mistake I have committed for which I am slapped with a soft sandal. In all these twenty-five years, I have been attending all gatherings wearing clothes gifted by the Gorle family. Today how can I go to those meetings wearing these coarse clothes? If anybody asks me who has given you this coarse long cloth, what should I reply? What will become of me?'

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When this line of complaint continued, Naidu felt that his throat got stuck. Cornered like this, Naidu called the local weaver and got made another set of fine cloth and gifted it to him.

In this way, not only Brahmin Pundits, even others, who used to come begging for gifts - his sisters and alms seekers, the peasants tilling his land, the village washermen and barbers - whenever there were attempts to reduce their annual grants, became angry and sulked, and sat for satyagrahas, compelling Naidu to give their due before they left.

It was not possible for Naidu to explain to everyone about the change in his financial position, and to convince his visitors to accept the given gifts. That is why he was unable to reduce his expenditure.

After all these gifts and payments, Naidu would credit whatever was remaining towards interest. The principal amount remained as it is. Of course, there was always the assurance of the plot of forty acres and hundred tolas of gold.

In three years' time, with the thousand rupees that was borrowed at the time of the eldest daughter's marriage and the consequent interest that got accrued due to crop failure for two years, when the debt deed was rewritten, the entire amount came to four thousand rupees.

Gradually, fear began enveloping him. In spite of the fear, mustering courage he managed to somehow protect the inherited property for three more years. For the second time, the debt deed was re-written. In the meanwhile, the debt that was incurred for performing the second daughter's marriage joined the existing debt.

Finally, he entered the eighth year as debtor.

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The village money lender who went on lending money to Naidu gradually prospered financially, but was not able to acquire his land. So on an auspicious day, he visited Dharma Rao Patnaik's house with a basketful of mangoes and a dozen coconuts as gift.

On the third day after, Dharma Rao Patnaik called on Naidu. Consultations were not fruitful. After a week, the postman came to deliver a registered notice.

At last, the matter became public. The village elders interfered and asked Naidu whether he would move the court again. The women at home and the men outside forced Naidu's hand and compelled him to agree to sell his land. But who was there to buy?

Because of the compulsion and maneuvers of Dharma Rao Patnaik and other elders, the village money lender himself agreed to buy the land. But he expressed his inability to buy the land at the rate insisted upon by them. Finally the land was disposed off at the rate quoted by the village money lender.

In that way, by the time the debt was cleared, of the twenty-five acres of wet land, fifteen acres, and of the fifteen acres of dry land, five acres remained.

Naidu felt relieved for having got rid of the rot of that debt with that much at least.

But Naidu did not realize that having got used to living on forty acres of earnings, it would be difficult to adjust with the income from twenty-five acres. By the time he realized that and by the time the other two daughters' marriages were performed, another five acres of wet land and five more acres of dry land had to be expended away.

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In the course of these activities over the years, the mouths that had praised him began to condemn him in private.

In spite of his initial unwillingness to recognize the ruined state of his finances, finally he couldn't help recognizing the same. Though he was well aware of it, he would not acknowledge it explicitly. His belief in the Goddess of the House (not the woman of the house) who had left his home for reasons that were not clear to him was unflinching. Even in the present state of his meager income, he kept on trying to get back her blessings.

These days, in Naidu's house there is not much violence on animals. However, violence on the animals cannot be helped to shower hospitality on the visiting relatives. Like in the past, for some alms seekers gifting of a kilo of rice, salt, dal for facilitating self-cooking is no longer there. However, during the Sri Kurmam temple festival period, gift of grain from his granary, still takes place.

But all these gestures are only to prop up the past fame. In the neighboring villages during the meetings of the village elders, whenever Naidu's matter crops up, they say---

'What is there with Venkayya Naidu? Now everything is exhausted. During his father Surayya's time and even when this man began, how the situation used to be? Is it the fault of the ones who solicited his generosity? If someone comes along and says, 'Mother I want to build a house' and she says, 'Strike down these logs of wood of my house and take away' – that was the case with Naidu'.

Now neither the grandeur nor the wealth of the olden days exists.

Now Naidu has become greedy for money; he doesn't say so explicitly, but his actions do. Yes – the goddess of poverty has engulfed him, and struck him down. The quarrel with Rami

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Naidu, the old lady's death, the marriages of daughters – all these have pushed him to the brink. Now he just sits having lost everything, except the remaining ten or fifteen acres. In these drought-ridden days, that is not sufficient even for feeding the family. What else will happen? Does wealth remain when it is donated to someone? In any case, is the Goddess of Wealth indebted to you to remain with you?

When people spoke thus among themselves, the acquaintances of Venkayya Naidu who knew his whole story felt sorry for him saying— 'Oh! Ill-fated person!'

But Venkayya Naidu has no use for their pity.

Naidu says...

'By showing kindness and pity, can you revive me? That Almighty has to show kindness and lift me up. What has happened to me now? For eating food, for wearing cloth and for my living, this house is there! There are many people who have lost that also, being left in the lurch. Aren't we better-off than such people? In any case, will we take all this wealth along with us when we die? All that comes with us is the name and fame that we have earned from the people, the words they speak about us. What is the meaning of life, however short or long it might be, without self-righteous anger, or without grandeur? What is the use of consuming so much, all for oneself?'

Yes, Naidu is a person with lust for fame. Those with lust for fame are immortals. Immortals do not care for the worldly needs of food, clothing and wealth. But those who witness all this may feel pained. A person with lust for fame might buy fame by spending as much as he can. But the question is how god will hold trial for him about his 'lust for fame' which has deprived his children of the ancestral property.

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****Translator:** Ch. A. Rajendra Prasad has been a Professor of English since 2008. Originally deeply interested in reading and enjoying Telugu Short Story since childhood, he turned to translating Telugu creative writings over a period of time. He has to his credit an anthology of translation of Telugu Science Poetry which was published by Dravidian University. He has translated a substantial number of short stories which included the ones did under UGC innovative Project along with colleagues in the department, and presently that is under consideration for publication. In continuation of this love and passion for Telugu Short Story, he published three articles pertaining to the practice of translation activity, and the theoretical issues involved thereof.