



CONSCIENCE

(A Translation of a Telugu Short Story *Papa Bhayam* by Dr. M. Sridhar)

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May be you will say that prevention is better than cure. But there's no use crying over spilled milk. And how can one redeem one's self from the engulfing sin?

I suddenly recollected Aesop's fable of the honest woodcutter who had gained silver and golden axes along with his wooden one as a reward for his honesty.

Just the day before we just got a 50 year old, tall – taller than a two storeyed building – casuarina tree felled. Venkat who visited us commented that it created a kind of void.

Just a month ago ... just out of interest ... as planned earlier, we got a patch of lawn spread out in front of our portico. This vaguely brought to my mind the story of how a man had to buy one thing to maintain another. Gardener Seenayya was carrying on his work with expertise. The Asoka trees on the side of the wall were trimmed to half their size so that their shadow wouldn't disturb the lush growth of the lawn. And Seenayya cut them with our permission.

The casuarina tree behind the row of Asoka trees, a much older mango tree behind the pine, the mangoes with a sweet flavor; though part of it is rotten, dried up and broken, the tree yields a lot of fruit every summer. We affectionately relish the pickle made from the mangoes of this tree; we proudly share the fruit. These days it is in full blossom. Surprisingly it has flowered in December itself. Are we morons to cut off the branch we are seated on? That's the reason neither Seenayya nor we would dare hack the mango tree!

Neither fruit nor shelter does this casuarina offer. What's the use of this tree? That's the primary query. Moreover there is already a long drawn complaint that the dry leaves dropping from the pine are destroying the beautifully nurtured cactus growing under the mango tree. Yet the high tension wires running past the pine let it survive undisturbed.

Now it is time to discuss Ellayya. His age must be around 50 or 60 years. I think it was some 10 years back, there was a huge mango tree in the back yard and unfortunately one night, one of its biggest branches broke and crashed to the ground. It was then that this Ellayya made his entry. He is ever ready to chop trees and drink away half the money earned. He gets his team members. But they all don't arrive at the same time. It's only after settling the bargain that he gets down to work with his team. So you must understand!



This time, there were seven of them. Actually, I remember only five men coming, when the mango tree was felled. And the truth is that the rate increases when they are fully drunk. Though there were seven men, the greater part of the hacking was done by one fellow – Tirapathi! Which branch should be cut first, to what length, when should hacking be stopped, flinging the rope to the top, forming a tight noose, instructing the men below, cutting the branches and conducting the entire operation giving the feeling that all that was an easy job! His age must have been around 27 or 28 while others were above 50.

I cannot forget the incidence of an electrician bragging about his skill and efficiency. A power failure that demanded his services. He clearly stated that his work should be estimated according to the risk element involved in it. He wanted 1500 for that day's work. When asked why he quoted so much, he replied that he had to make hay while the sun shone as he had no regular salary like us. His argument seemed unbeatable. We said okay. Mention of high tension wires reminded me of him.

As we were wondering how they would chop the top-most branches, without those falling on to the live wires, Tirapathi asked 2 or 3 men to go onto the terrace of the second floor, made a noose and pulled the branch down. After hacking the main branches, they gradually cut off the long trunk, others chopping the fallen stems into smaller pieces, placing them in a rickshaw, the thick trunk of the tree being sawed into shreds, the activity continued till dusk fell.

To be frank, this activity began only after our Papa left for school. She is a staunch ecologist though still in her 4th class. She tutors us with the lessons we had taught her. I can't imagine what would have happened if she had been at home. Her school finishes by 3.30 everyday, but on Saturdays, she is back by 12.30. It was our luck that, on that day she had dance practice for the school anniversary programme and had told us to get her lunch pack, as she would stay back till 4 o'clock. Cutting of the tree should be over before she reaches home. If not, convincing her and consoling her would be a Herculean task. Anyway, by the time she returned, hacking the tree was over, with only a part of its trunk remaining. For her brother the entire activity seemed to be a festival and preventing him from going near the tree was a testing exercise for us.

As expected Papa enquired why we got the tree felled. We had only one answer – that the tree gave neither shade nor fruit nor flowers. Being tired that day, she resigned herself into acceptance.

The next day, as I was coming inside, the desolate house appeared to me like a temple with a felled flag staff. How did the fear of sin enter this atheistic mind? How can it be purged?