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The Day Alamelu Grew Up

Krupa Ge

10.11.1936

Chingleput

Today, I bade farewell to my dearest cousin Alamelu. I know my time for marriage is not far away for she and I were born just a year apart. When Alamelu turned 13, offers for marriage started pouring in. But her parents took their time, two years to be precise, in finding her the best match.

Alamelu was the most beautiful girl in all of Chingleput. Fair and tall, she walked with a lot of grace. Her gait is like that of an elephant's and her braid, with a kunjalam held together by a black ribbon, swayed from one side to another, as she softly moved about to the beats of her anklets. Her eyes were always marked by dark kohl and she wore a bright, big spot of vermilion on her forehead. She was of a much bigger build than any of us, which made her stand out. All of us girls in the family were jealous of her beauty and none could match her wit.

Alamelu, my aunt's daughter, was my favourite cousin. Not just because she was the only one allowed into the kitchen when my aunts were cooking because of which we were always able to sample the food before others, but also because she told the best ghost stories. Of kaateris drinking blood, spirits of the dead standing outside the door of a house waiting for their beloved to join them, of revenge seeking neelipeis, mohinipisasus seducing unsuspecting bachelors and more... We would all be seated in the backyard, filled with the scent of fresh guavas and wild jasmine, a constant gentle breeze and swaying drumstick tree branches for company, enthralled by the stories, quietly eating as her beautiful mind concocted tales of valorous men overcoming scary, supernatural villains to join their fair maidens in marital bliss.

Alamelu's week-long wedding at last came to an end today. Before the wedding, Appa called an artist from Thanjavur to paint the scene of Meenakshi Kalyanam – the marriage of the fish-eyed goddess to Lord Shiva - in the house's mud walls, as a symbolic start to the weddings of the girls of the next generation.

At the welcoming ceremony for the groom's family, Chengalpat's most popular nadaswaram party arrived in style. Their hair cut close to their head, short and sharp, their forehead covered with sacred ash and vermilion, the troupe of men – two on the nadaswaram, one on thavil, and one on the jalra, played so soulfully that it brought tears to my mother's eyes.

Guests were pouring in, from all seven villages around us. From our side and the groom's side. It was the grandest affair in town and my uncle had to sell almost his entire share of the land to arrange for this one wedding. My mother told me that he did it because Alamelu was his only surviving daughter. The rest had passed away in sickness, and since only his sons were alive, my uncle would get it all back and more when they were married off.

The house was decorated with mango leaves tied up together as a thoranam. I made the mango thoranams with the help of a few others, while the older women of the house made the mangalathoranam with palm fronds designed to look as if five birds were flying upwards, held together by a string. I drew elaborate kolamson the floor, with red sand and rice flour in front of the house and smeared turmeric on the door frames along with vermilion to signal the beginning of a most auspicious time for the family. My aunts spent an entire week, ahead of the wedding, in the backyard husking rice, singing and exchanging gossip.

Last week, Appa spoke to Mudaliarvaal - the richest man in town whose religious affairs Appa conducted - and brought in rice, samai, almonds, plantains, avaraikkai, podalangai, brinjals, karanai, sweet potatoes, sembu, tobacco, betel leaves and more for the week. We stole into the granary often and took handfuls of the many nuts in there, then went to the backyard and ate them as we took turns on the swing. Every day, there was payasam, my favourite, that sweet broth of rice, jaggery and milk, and meals fit for kings. Our aunts woke up as early as 2a.m. and started work in the kitchen.

After a round of coffee for all, the day's work on the meals would start. Giant ladles, tall andas, large urlis, all heavier than me, would brim with delicious food, peppered with spices and condiments that were a luxury, particularly for us kids. There were curries – potato, beets and brinjal, sambar made with thick tamarind and three watery vegetables, avial with lots of aromatic grated coconut, rasam with pepper and cumin, baadusha made from fine flour and sugar, laddos in pretty yellows, curd, buttermilk flavoured with curry leaves and chillies, pickled mangoes and lime. There was also tiffin, upma cradled in ghee for the elderly and the widows of the house who didn't take part in much of the festivities. As the ceremonies went on, post lunch, a quiet would descend on the house. Everyone including the bride and groom and many of the priest's assistants nodded off.

After the tying of the yellow thread, Alamelu wailed as her new family took her away. She was being carried by her Appa to the horse-drawn jhatka waiting outside. Her 45-year-old husband whose third wife had passed away giving birth to their fifth son three months ago, took her in his arms at the entrance and bundled her into the vehicle. They knew that Alamelu hadn't even got her first period, but they wanted to take her anyway. She would be trained in all the housework before the babies began, the elders said.

I was sad, watching her go like that. Alamelu, who'd walked the streets of the village, her head always held high, even though our aunts scolded her about it all the time.

“Keep your head to the ground!” they would say, “Are you a man?”

She would imitate the bitter, older women, who'd been used to watching girls grow subservient at a very young age, and were forever envious of her plucky, confident stride.

Tears streamed down the eyes of those very aunts, as Alamelu held on to her pet calf Meena that leaped at her, seemingly coming out of nowhere. All of us, Alamelu's cousins, stood in a line, waving, not knowing what else to do.

None of the adults waved her goodbye. Isn't that the thing to do when someone leaves, and you've tried crying but they did not change their mind?

Instead, the men stood tall, stoic. And the women clung to the pallus of their sarees, sobbing gently.

We didn't stop waving, however, and Alamelu didn't stop crying.

When the jhatka reached the end of the road, however, she too stopped crying and waved furiously, wiping her face and smiling.

“How quickly girls turn into women. And how quickly they come to terms with their reality...”
Appa said.

This is an extract from a novel set in the 1930s in Madras that the writer+ is working on.