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The Radiant Tree

(Translation of *Deepamanu* story of Dr. Vempalli Gangadhar)

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Dr. Vempalli Gangadhar is a noted short story writer in Telugu. He produced short story collections like *Molakalapunnami*, *Devarashila*, *Greeshma Bhoomi* etc. In 2011, he received Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar (Telugu) for his short story collection *Molakalapunnami*. He was the first Telugu literary personality to attend Writer – in – Residence Programme hosted by President of India at Rashtrapathi Bhavan.

Passing the hillock by Veerapuram rivulet through the west Banyan tree route via short way by Sidhulakona, and going further the same route leads to a marigold grove. Moving the same way a few defective walls are found, after crossing them we'll find a huge fig tree touching the sky among some bushes Tamarind trees...*Neem* trees. The people of the village call it as radiant tree. There is a ruining tomb made of black marble statue under this tree. The 'light' in the base of the tomb is unceasing.

Before the dawn itself, the women in that village clean the dust, sprinkle the cow dung water, put *rangoli*, light the lamp and offer prayers at the radiant tree. The passersby pray and move ahead.

People of the village do not tolerate if it is called a tomb.

It's like a temple where the almighty lives.

That's the respect the tomb has.

That's the devotion those people have.

Yes... He was the man who lived for the village.

The man who stood for the people... That is the tomb of BukkapatnamVeerashiva Reddy. Even the soil reminds the valor of Veerashiva Reddy.

The entire village came behind Veerashiva Reddy on knowing about the bullock cart competitions at *Gandi Kota*. We will quiver, when we think of those competitions. Reddys from different parts competed. The bullocks tied to the carts moved with anger. There were excellent dances, blowing of trumpets, sprinkling of colours, tiger masks, *bhajans* and lot of people around. People climbed the bank of Mailaram streamlet, as the ground was not sufficient.

Veerashiva Reddy's father, Pedda Nagi Reddy and uncle, Pratapa Reddy came to that place to witness his bravery.

Half of our village people, inebriated with country liquor, were dancing to the tunes of *tappetagullu*¹.

Veerashiva Reddy's younger brother smeared *kumkum* on the faces of pair of bullocks after patting them.

The competition started.

The bullocks started running, hurling dust into the sky.

The happiness of the people touched the sky.

They were shouting with happiness.

The bullock race gained momentum....

The reins in the hands of Veerashiva Reddy were tightened. That cart went fast all others and won the race.

It upheld the pride of our village.

Pedda Nagi Reddy stroked his moustaches with virility. Pratapa Reddy lifted Veerashiva Reddy onto his shoulders with happiness and danced.

People around Veerashiva Reddy started garlanding him. We were very joyous.

We came in the bullock carts as procession from Gandikota. The pride of the village is the life to that family. They feed many people even if they themselves are starving. That's why the six hundred *putty*² of paddy which they won in the bullock race was distributed to the people of the village. They built Bhairaveshwara Swamy temple near Banyan Tree in the village with the cash prize received in the competition. Even today, many people get marry at that temple itself.

The generosity of '*saying no*' to anybody who asks for help, made them to get very good reputation in the villages around. Their land from *Thimmammakonda* to *Peerlasaavidi* in the village has been distributed to the poor without denial.

‘Everyone should live happily... All villages should be happy...Let us eat together and go together’ says Veerashiva Reddy with smile.

Shiva Reddy’s smile is like that of Shiva in the shrine.

Heart goes anguish when the days of drought are thought of. People suffered a lot as there were no grains to eat because lack of at least a single drop of water. The grains sowed in the soil were buried in the soil itself.

No lightning in the sky.

No rains at all.

Many villages were at his stone-mansion asking for gruel due to drought and he arranged *raagi* porridge.

Our problem is solved if we go to Stone-mansion. Stone-mansion is the savior of all our problems. We will get some food... will get some *dharmam* (charity) without ‘*any no*’.

The stone-mansion is not just the one built in three acres of land with one acre stone structure, but it is a big symbol of the family which feels that the people are the strength... and support...

“Pshaw...why is this drought all the time... it’s not allowing the people to live... or die. Something should be done...whatever happens will happen... it doesn’t happen till a canal is dug from Mailaram rivulet to connect Bukkapatnam reservoir. Had it been done earlier, water could have come to reservoir and from there to fields...grains could have been produced... I’ll take up the task now” told Veerashiva Reddy moving forward with crow-bar and spade in hand.

Many villages moved along with him. No night... no day... People worked all along day and night. The canal started from Mailaram. People didn’t think of food, sleep, families or anything.

A ray of hope for rains and the desire of better lives if the canal is full...

The people, hiding their anguish in the eyes itself, are striving on the canal work with dreams for the golden future.

The small stream moved from Mailaram rivulet. It moved slowly...people continued the work for water with the same enthusiasm.

The water moved a bit further.

During that period itself, Pedda Nagi Reddy, father of Veerashiva Reddy, died of heart attack there itself.

‘Let his life go like that. But you should not stop working. If this canal work is done, our lives will be bettered’ saying this Veerashiva Reddy himself held the crow-bar.

Though the canal work was close to end, the water in the Mailaram rivulet was drained out further due to drought. Where is the water? This canal will not get water and no improvement in our lives till the Mailaram rivulet is full.

Veerashiva Reddy sat dull as he could not do anything.

People need food to get out of drought.

Grains are needed to have food.

Crops are required to have grains.

Rains are necessary to have crops.

What to do for rains?

Nothing is there to do.

Whatever to be done should be done by the one above.

Why does the god do it for free? He wants the fairs to be done and asks for prayers and festivals... He has no concern for our problems. Whatever we do with so much difficulty, we'll have hunger.

To come out of hunger we need grains.

As they are nowhere, we have to migrate.

Even for migration, we need to have money.

‘If we have money, we can get out of drought know’ said Veerashiva Reddy looking at his uncle, Pratapa Reddy.

‘Yeah, what is there? Can't we bring carts full of paddy if we go on migration’ said Pratapa Reddy putting his towel on shoulder to the leg of a cot with rope.

‘Where's the money uncle... we have lands but who will buy them during drought. What else do we have except selling this stone-building’ wept Veerashivudu saying this.

‘Stop my dear. Your eyes are now on this stone-mansion. This is the remembrance of your family. Losing everything, we should stand empty hand on the road. Nobody will look after later. What is the use of selling this stone-mansion? Touch that once...can we think of selling it. We lived with great respect my dear... if we sell this now, what about our life and modesty’ said Pratapa Reddy with anger and anguish.

‘I don’t know uncle... Whatever I want to do, I’ll do... I can’t live in this stone-mansion looking at the people caught in the drought. Is that the life?’ said Veerashiva Reddy and climbed down the stone-steps, moved directly to the Bhairaveshwara Temple and sat there.

The message of sale of the stone-mansion is spread to all the well known Reddys. It was announced from Gandikota to Siddavatam fort. Everyone likes that stone-building. But, who can afford to buy it in the surrounding villages and mandals?

Whoever is asked, they said ‘we can’t afford it’.

Some Reddys enquired whether Veerashiva Reddy is mad to sell the stone-mansion for the people suffering from drought.

Though it was announced for the sale of the stone-mansion, nobody came forward to buy it, may be because of respect for it or lack of affordability!

Veerashiva Reddy was disappointed.

He sent words to some of his close friends saying that he is selling the stone-mansion because he is unable to see the problems of the people and he wants to live for the people.

Those who came were happy with this invitation, though they were unable to buy; they have the desire to buy it.

One fine day they assembled at the stone-mansion.

‘We don’t want anything about the welfare of the people or the problems of drought, we can’t afford buying it’ all of them said united.

‘Don’t say like that...whatever is to be done should be done by us. If all of you can think together, you can do... think once again’ said Veerashiva Reddy.

‘Whatever we think is only this. Tell us what we should do. We can’t buy it together’ said all the Reddys with one voice.

‘How to do’ said Veerashiva Reddy.

‘Sell the land, I’ll buy it’ said Siddavatam Sinagareddy.

‘Why did you say like that brother’ Veerashiva Reddy asked with surprise.

‘The stones in the stone-mansion are good...sell them to me, I’ll construct the same building in Jammalamadugu’ said Narasimha Reddy.

‘Tut’. Pratapa Reddy spat and furiously went away looking at Veerashiva Reddy seriously.

For that blow, the towel on the shoulder of Veerashiva Reddy fell down.

‘Should I sell it making into pieces?’ asked Veerashiva Reddy with pain.

‘It’s up to you. We said whatever we wanted to. What to do and how to do is left to you’ said they.

Silence prevailed there for two minutes.

Later, the stone-mansion crumbled down in seconds.

Veerashiva Reddy’s heart broke looking at that scene.

The sky roared. There was lightning in the sky.

It started drizzling.

Rain drops....

One after the other...the rain started... the clouds burst.

There was incessant rain...rain...

Mailaram rivulet is full.

The canal overflowed.

Bukkapatnam reservoir is also full.

Lives of the peasants glowed well.

Starting from that, there were no droughts and starvation problems in the surrounding villages.

Though there were many changes from time to time, nobody forgets the past.

They narrate the same story even to the children

Even today if somebody asks about Veerashiva Reddy...they will show the route... go straight on the same road, you'll find a marigold grove... go a bit further... there is a tomb with black marble under the radiant tree ready to touch the sky.

1. Tappetagullu: a kind of drum
2. Putty: an Indian measurement