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‘Ilaa’

Close to the city of Paithan, in a small village called SauviraGram which lay along the banks of the great river Godavari, lived a woman named Ilaa. Being cotton farmers, her family was well to do, but not among the richest in their area. It was the harvest season, and cotton had to be picked from the plants. The wholesalers and traders from Paithan would be arriving in just a few weeks, carrying gold and goods for barter. They would exchange what they carried for the cotton that the farmers grew. The bales of cotton had to be ready in time. Work was at its peak! But Ilaa was not to be found in the fields. She wasn't working. Instead she was sitting by the banks of the great river Godavari.

*‘I am sick of this!’* she grunted loudly while she swung the next stone into the river.

In her late Twenties she was a mother to two children but somewhere deep inside she still was a child herself. The ripples had vanished when she again threw a stone into the calm Godavari. It was her favourite pastime. The banks of the mighty river were the only place where that child came out.

*‘All the time it is us! Who works in the farm, WE do! Who harvests the cotton, WE do! Who makes bales out of them, WE do! And when all is done who goes home to make the food, rear the child, prepare the bed and all that bullshit, WE do! And what do WE get, nothing, not even applause.’* And she threw all the pebbles in her hand into the river, a rain of them, disturbing the calm, to make it resonate with the wrath inside her.

*‘It has always been like this Ilaa, the sooner you understand the better for you’* replied Vaisakha politely, drained of her energy. *‘The more you grunt the more hard it will become for you, you are a woman, and it is what women have been doing ever since’* she added.

*‘I wish I would have been a man instead. Vaisakha only if you know, how much I long to be a man’* She mumbled.

*‘And then Ilaa, what would you do, the same thing your husband does? Would you?’* asked Vaisakha.

*‘Ilaa, here you are, it's time to get back in the farms, the month is already ending, in the first week of next month Trades will be here and we don't want to miss that, do we?’* shouted Shiva, her husband, from across the field behind her.

The conversation died there. Both of them, hurriedly, moved back to the source of the sound. Ilaa draped in a beautiful, multicoloured village made Sari, of the pure cotton they harvested, walked briskly up to her husband. *‘Yes, we don't’* she replied and passed her husband still standing there and started to move towards their own farm, slowly coming into the sight with every stepped she furthered.

That day Ilaa found it hard to work in the farms. The ripe cotton plants, overflowing with cotton, waiting to be hand-picked, together extending to as far as the sight could transverse, looked like a sea of foam, where Ilaa was lost, bent at her back, concentrating to curb her thoughts and to pick the cotton and place it into the basket along her side. The question asked by Vaisakha haunted her the whole day. *‘What would she do if she was a man’*

Walking back along with her husband, she entered the village, SauviraGram was a small village, but beautifully cut into small blocks of houses encircling the inner

blocks of sparsely built houses, with no walls or fences to demarcate. The centre of the village which was also the main centre of activities was quite that day. The old pekul tree and the scaffold underneath, the evening table for the elderly people of the village where they spent most of their time talking to each other was empty. The village women who used to pass these old men muttering to their own gossip to fetch water from the well had finished their work in the early morning. Children, who whistled and ran around with sticks balancing and pushing the wheels, who after four o'clock usually poured in from every street, some with their little sticks for gullie-danda, some with socks stuffed with clothes for mithu-gram, breaking the dullness of the day with their hues and cries were sitting inside their homes. It was late and only people who went to the farms were returning home with loads of cotton; their day's toil.

Both her children were already asleep when they entered the home. It was natural for the villagers, the old grandmothers, would take care of the children, while the young mothers went to the farms along with their male counterparts to harvest the cotton.

The question that day made her keenly observe the characters of a male and a female. Subconsciously she knew everything, but for the first time her conscious mind was analysing the notions.

The two months, August and February, were the only two months of the year, when the people would retire into the bed and sleep without love-making. August was the sowing month and February was the harvesting month, the hard-work made them tired, so much so that once they hit the bedding, they slept.

The next few days Ilaa didn't go to the Godavari. Her inner conflict against her own self made her efforts to grasp the notion of male-hood more sublime. Vaisakha owned the next farm to her's. During the meal hours they sat together along with their husbands.

*'It was not 'ever since' or 'always' Vaisakha, it used to be different earlier. Women were respected and treated equal to men, and sometime even superior in some senses.'* She said while gulping down her chapatti. *'In the Ancient times, when the Satavahanas ruled, women were educated, they took part in Religious functions, and they were consulted for decisions, unlike today.'* She added.

*'So now you want to go back to ancient times Ilaa'* replied Vaisakha teasingly.

*'NO! Neither do i want to be a man, nor i want to go to the ancient times, but can't i remain a woman and the times, these very times become like the ancient ones. Don't i have a right to enjoy, to rejoice, to rest, to sleep, to love, to be whatever i want to, to do whatever i wish to, without asking for somebody's permission, without being accountable, like men, like my husband.'*

*'Now that's a very grand thing, Ilaa, can't you live in reality, can't you be like us. Don't you think we, enjoy, we rejoice, we sleep or whatever you were saying, don't we do all those things. We do, its just that we are destined to be what we are. Women, you know, are so weak and so not-men-like, that they have to be protected and cared for, and looked after, and for all that we have to at least serve our men with all our hearts. Can you imagine, if not for men, where would we go, what will become of us'* She said and stated to rise to go back to the farms.

*'So, that is what you think? Vaisakha why don't we ask the women of the village and see what they all think? And should we be having equal treatment as men, should we be having equal rights, or we deserve to be what we are? What do you say?'* A spark of activity flamed in her eyes as she spoke.

In her mind she was playing the whole scene, the way she will go to every women, ask them about how they feel, the way she will then try to influence them, try to tell them that they are much better than what they are being treated.

To Vaisakha the idea felt somewhat dumb, but the possibility and hope that she might deserve to be what Ilaa says, kindled in her a curiosity.

They decided to confront the women individually and gather the views, in the early morning at the well, when they went to collect the water.

As the pressure to harvest the cotton and to make bales out of them was taking a toll on the men, the women became the cushions to their anger. Whenever a thing went wrong, they would vent out their anger on women. If the food was late, if it was cold, or too hot, if the bed was hard, or too soft, everything out of context for men was a mistake deliberately made by women.

Shiva and Ilaa came back earlier that day. Their farm was harvested completely, the whole raw material was assembled at the room besides their house. The yield that year was fine, and the quality good. They were left with the processing only. A few traders had already set up their tents along the right banks of Godavari, just a few miles away. The next day a few of them would cross over and arrive at Piathan and in a few more days, the markets will become filled with cotton and other goods.

Ilaa was thinking of her conversation with her husband a few weeks ago. She had asked her husband to take some gold in return for the cotton for her, and the rest he can take whatever he wishes. That day she was happy. But today it meant something different. She had to ask her husband for what she needs, she had no will of her own. The idea again pushed her into a deep gorge, where she was in darkness and the questions of her existence, her freedom, her wishes poked fun at her.

The next morning she went to the well, awaiting the great discussion she had planned to have with other women. Vaisakha came a few moments later, and soon women from the village started to pour in from different directions.

The past few days had changed Ilaa a lot from a talkative, young housewife, she had become a contemplative and wise woman. The inner awakening and the shirt conversations with Vaisakha topped with the recent behaviour of men around her, she had observed and analysed a lot. She was getting herself ready to start a conversation with the village women.

*'Namastey, Mamta Didi, Radhadidi. Me and Vaisakha were talking about you people yesterday'* She went up to two of the women.

*'Namastey, Ilaa, about us, why in the god's name would your highness remember us, what do you need from us poor'* they joked.

*'Arey, its nothing like that actually we were discussing about our rights and freedom and wishes and feeling, about how we, the women are treated, about how we should be treated, and i wanted to know what do you all think about it'* she said loudly, attracting the other nearby women. Now everybody was gathered around her and Vaisakha.

*'Dont you want to be treated like men, live like them, do what you wish, get what you want from the traders for yourself.'* She added.

*'Have you gone mad Ilaa, we are women, how can we live and be like men, and we do get what we want'* replied Radha.

*'We are women. We have to live like women. We can't compare ourselves to men.'* Added Mamta.

*'And how can we do trade by ourselves, we can't, we never can do, we don't know how to do'* replied another woman.

*'We do equal work, in fact we do more work than men, we go to farms, we carry the loads, we come back home, prepare the food while the men rest, we clean the house while the men rest, we do a lot of things while they laze in their beds, but then, we are women and you say we are weak. We bear the child and have all the pain, we feed him on our milk, we raise him up into a man, but then we are women and you say we are weak. Without us the men cannot survive for a single day, they depend on us for every other thing and we give them all we have, but then, we are women and you say we are weak.'* She said increasing the intensity of her pith with every progressing word. Everyone was ears to her.

Nobody replied. A moment of silence engulfed the atmosphere.

*'We deserve to be respected, we deserve to be treated equal to men, we have the right to live, and to live the way we want, to enjoy, to sleep, to rejoice, to play, to work, to be free, to be like men when we are in actual more hard-working and industrious than men'* She emphasised.

*'But how is that possible, how can that happen'* asked one of the ladies.

*'Today you just think about what i told you, and tell me tomorrow morning if i was right, do we deserve to be treated equal of not, do we have rights or not, and then i will tell you how and what to do'* she said while making her way towards the well, to pull out water.

That day Ilaa felt somewhat relieved of the inner turmoil. At least she was not the only one who thought about freedom and equality, inside every woman somewhere, there was a germ, a germ to be free and be respected. The new question now weeded her mind. The 'how' and 'what' now seemed to be a lot difficult than she thought. She devised a plan to ask men for their demand to be treated equal and respected. She planned to protest in a new manner.

That evening it was announced that day after tomorrow, people of Sauviragram will go to Paithan to sell the cotton. Shiva was happy with the yield and hoped for a large barter that year.

The next morning Ilaa told her plan to the women folk and told them to do as she said. That day Sauviragram saw what it never had expected. Collectively the women denied the men the keys to the storehouses; they told them that they won't allow them to sell the cotton. And if they try to force, they will burn the yield. Confused, the men asked what had happened to them all of a sudden. Every one of them was told to assemble at the central ground, where Ilaa spoke to the men about their demands. She asked for a 50% share in the selling, to mark the equal treatment, that the women be treated with respect and given freedom. She advocated for all the women, and told men to look upon their ancestors and learn from them how to treat women.

Plagued by superior ego and dignity the men beat the women and the keys were snatched. That day for Ilaa and other women, and for Sauviragram, brought a new dawn, it sowed the seeds of demand for rights, it united the women, it inculcated into them a desire to be free and treated equal, which up till now was just an absurdity.