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The Tamarind Plucker

V. Shoba, M.A., M. Phil., Ph.D. Scholar



“Amma, Can I pluck tamarinds for you?”, came the most familiar voice when Papamma was enjoying the beauty of her garden with the watering-can in her hand. Immediately she turned back to see who it was. It was none but the tamarind plucker, Pichandi, who lives beside

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her house. People lovingly call him Pichai. He usually plucks tamarinds, coconuts, jackfruits for all the people in the village, Kalaipuram.

Kalaipuram is a village peopled with a wide range of backgrounds. The people are known for their routine fight and quarrel, which start early morning especially at the public tap, which is at the center of the village, where women come to fetch water. Pichai's wife is also one among the women quarreling for the tap water.

Pichai earns his living doing petty jobs, and sometimes he runs errands for the people living there. The money he earns never reaches his family. It ends up in the hands of the arrack shopkeeper in the outskirts of the village. He spends it for his drinks and blabbers the whole night calling the passersby for a duel. But the people in the village have to depend on him for plucking fruits because there is no one to do this job. He plucks tamarinds every season for all and particularly for Papamma.

Papamma loves to grow trees and cultivates flowers in her garden. One can see a bed of balsams stretching from her gate to her house with colourful flowers in red and white. In her garden, there are tamarinds, papayas, coconuts, pomegranates, guavas, jackfruits and mango trees. She loves gardening and loves her trees as her own children. Being gifted with four children - two daughters and two sons - she considers it a boon to have her garden as another.

It was a Saturday evening. The tamarind plucker opened the gate and stirred into the garden of Papamma repeating the same phrase: "Amma, can I pluck tamarinds for you?" He has used this phrase many a time. But this time, did it sound strange with hidden intent or mocking or simply the result of the overnight hangover?

"Amma, can I pluck tamarinds for you?," the same voice recurred to make it clear to her what he wants to rave about. Coming out of the fantasy she had been enjoying in the midst of her roses, marigolds, jasmines, hibiscus, and balsams, Papamma, herself demanded, "What do you want?"

"Amma, can I pluck tamarinds for you?," the tamarind plucker mumbled the same words.

“Of course, you can,” said Papamma. “And when are you going to start the work?” she continued.

“Amma, I can do it for you tomorrow... but... I ...b-u-t... I need hundred rupees today. Amma, will you kindly give me? S-u-r-e-l-y, surely I will come and do it for you...,” the tamarind plucker stammered. His speech seemed to cringe for money.

Papamma left her gardening tools there and stepped out of her garden slippers into her house. She came back with the money and handed it over to him without any hesitation.

He said, “Amma, think the work is done”. He left her hoping.

Days went by. His words remained only words, but no action. When Papamma called him for the work, he procrastinated. “Amma, don’t worry! I will come and pluck the tamarinds,” saying this he would put on a mysterious expression, which Papamma hated. Even this she could tolerate but the very sight of the fruit-borne tamarind trees caused in her a great deal of pain, which she could not express through words.

The tamarind trees were brimming with the ripened fruits. They often fell down from the trees swayed by the force of the wind and the breeze. As rain poured, the tamarinds were washed away and some were found buried in the soil. Some fruits were soaked by the water and the edible fruits, used for preparing curry by Papamma, were of no use. She agonized, only when the tamarind fruits are plucked and removed from the trees, can the magnificent tree bring forth new flowers and fruits. Till then the tree cannot bear any new fruit. Looking at the trees in such a helpless condition her heart ailed and sometimes her heart palpitated with warm breathing air. His act not only irritated her but also led her to cursing him within. She hated that she stooped too low to curse another human. She had the feeling of an albatross tied round her neck. Often she blabbered: “God will see to it.”

Papamma slowly became weak and ill always thinking of the tamarind tree. She stood at the gate to see if she could find the tamarind plucker passing by. She often saw the hallucination of the tamarind plucker when she saw the sight of any men moving on the street. She thought it was Pichai and called a man passing by on the road “come Pichai, pluck my tamarinds”. The

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man answered: “No Amma, I’am Govindan”. And added “You don’t know what happened to Pichai?, Amma!”, the man exclaimed.

Amma became curious. She asked “What? What happened to him? Where is he now?”

Govindan is the chief of the village. He is the first person to know whatever happens in the village and around. He used to sit in the temple and chat with the people who have nothing to do and who are retired. When Govindan says something it must be the correct information.

“Amma, Pichai drank a lot and fought with Karuppan yesterday. Karuppan pushed him down and twisted his leg and now Pichai is admitted in the Government hospital, at Ulvanchari.” And continued saying, “The doctor says he can never climb trees in his life.” Giving her the information, Govindan parted.

Papamma saw him leaving. The sun was setting. The sky was in golden orange and Papamma looked at the sky and then agonized. The night was long and dark, with humans and tamarinds dangling around.

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