

The Daughter of the Puzha

Krishnan Namboodiri had three sons. The second – Brahmadattan – was the most promising of them. A budding poet, his understanding of the finer points of Kathakali was perfect. The Namboodiris of Naduvam Mana in Chalakudy were highly respected. The young Brahmadattan's fame, as a critic-connoisseur of classical dance, added lustre to the family's reputation.

"Excuse me, Aniyar, where is the Namboodiri home?" strangers would ask a boy at the bus stop. "We have come from Thripayar to invite Brahmadattan to our Kathakali festival," the group leader said. Proud of being the famous man's neighbour, the boy would probably escort the outsiders to the doorsteps of the Namboodiri home.

Even before he was out of his teens Brahmadattan was a well-known name in the literary circles. His poems were regularly published in the Malayalam literary magazines. A handsome man, he was a romantic at heart.

Since social conventions forbade him marrying a Namboodiri girl, he had to settle for a *sambadham* with a Nair woman. Nanikutty Amma of the Perimcehri house was the lucky girl. For her family the rising literary star with striking good looks from a redoubtable Namboodiri home was nothing less than a windfall. The girl's father accepted the marriage proposal from Krishnan Namboodiri with clasped hands. He deeply bowed to the boy's father saying again and again he indeed was grateful. Guided by

the conventions of a matriarchal society, Brahmaddattan would come in the evening to the Nair sambandaveedu, spend the night with his wife and leave for his *mana* next morning. For his in-laws Brahmaddattan was like a prince on a white horse. They were awestruck by his presence.

A creative man, Brahmaddattan left his mark everywhere. He became the proud father of nine children – five girls and four boys.

Gouri, the youngest of the five daughters, was her father's favourite. Quite a few times in a year Nanikutty bundled the younger children with luggage and left for her rich uncle's picturesque house in a river valley. Gouri looked forward to those trips. They were part of her growing up. A jovial, fun-loving girl, she went to the neighbourhood girls school. She ran and screamed playing with her classmates. Bursting with energy, the sprightly girl was quite a tomboy. She chased the boys, fought with them. She did not want a line drawn around her for being a girl. What she enjoyed most was the trek to the ghat of the Chalakudy *puzha* at the head of a gaggle of children – her siblings and cousins – for the morning bath. The river ghat came alive with so many boys and girls splashing and swimming. Gouri loved the daily trip to the ghat, an hour of mirth and merrymaking in the water. The river pulled her. She swam faster than her cousins and reached the other bank ahead of the boys.

“You're a fish,” the other girls teased her.

Back from the bathing ghat the girls would go to the Krishna temple. It was part of their daily routine – puja in the temple, morning and evening. For every young girl in the village this was important – temple going. Their grandmas, mothers and aunts had also followed the same routine, back from the *puzha* off to the *ambalam*. Over the centuries this had been the trajectory of their life. Family elders perhaps thought this was one way of tying their daughters to the tradition. The temple visit early

in the morning, they believed, would keep the girls away from waywardness, prevent deviations.

But the times were changing. The temple was the sanctuary of the deities but these days it was the backdrop for a rendezvous of the lovebirds too. For the young hearts it was an excuse for meeting each other. Boys and girls looked forward to the three annual uthsavams at the temple.

Fond of elephants and fireworks, Gouri counted days, weeks and then months for her wait to be over. For the temple to be decked up, for the richly caparisoned pachyderms to trumpet the opening of the festivities. The temple festivals meant a lot for the impressionable girl.

She missed her father a lot. An important cultural personality, Brahmadattan's fame had spread beyond Thrissur. A week ago he had been in Bombay to judge a classical dance competition. A fortnight later he would travel to Delhi to participate in a seminar on Kathakali. A man much in demand, he was quite often on the road. Even when he was in Chalakudy, he was not always available for Nanikutty and their children. During the day he would be at his parents' house. But being the youngest daughter, Gouri was her father's pet. Despite his pressing schedule, his preoccupation with the affairs of culture, the poet-critic felt a twang for his favourite daughter.

They were all proud of his artistic talent and striking looks. The poetic afflatus would seize him early in the morning. "Ah Gouri Mol, come here," Brahmadattan called her looking out the window from the bedroom. "Write down the lines as they come out of my mouth." His new poem.

The proud girl would later run out of the house and recite her father's new poem to everybody who cared to listen.

Days went by. Brahmadattan's children grew up. The elder daughters were married one after another. It was like a relay race. The family cast around the whole of Thrissur for a suitable

boy. The would-be groom's people came. A sumptuous meal was served. Brahmaddattan made an appearance as if doing them a favour. The wedding happened. Then the next daughter in line...the baton was passed. The next one...

The big girls had no time for little Gouri. She started feeling lonely, left out. Gouri was nearing twenty. And yet no prince rode into the village and knocked on her door. A tall girl with chiseled features, her thick dark hair went down to her knees. Her charm softened hostilities, wiped out meanness all around. She was no ravishing beauty. But the young woman could cast a spell on a man. There was something very pristine about her. When she talked her hazel eyes smiled. The long eyelashes flapped. It was difficult for a young man not to succumb to her fatal attraction.

The problem was her horoscope. It did not match those of the prospective grooms. So the lonely girl waited and wondered what mattered more: the offering of her heart or the mumbo jumbo of the horoscope. She still went to the temple every morning, waited for the festivities to begin but there was no armoured knight vowing his love in defiance of astrology.

The dejected girl did not know that even before she was born a war was waged by two bravehearts in defence of their love and against the tyranny of horoscopes and astrology.

Pitambara Menon was a big man. More than six feet tall, he was broad shouldered and muscular. His smiles, his friendliness would enchant any young woman. And what made him irresistible was his robust sense of humour. The young revenue inspector in Cochin was known for his impeccable honesty. Posted at Ernakulam, capital of the princely state of Cochin, he had to travel a lot. He was only twenty-six and perhaps the most eligible bachelor around. He began his new life in a rented house on Chittoor Road near Valanjambalam. A man cooked for him and did the domestic chores.

Pitambarā's next-door neighbours were the Kuruppathu Tharavadu. In no time he became friendly with the family. The elderly couple and their three children were very fond of him. Of the three the eldest – a daughter – was already married and her husband was staying with them. The matriarchal tradition was strong in that part of the country. Next was the son – Diwakara Kurup. He was twenty-six and his parents had started looking for a well-groomed girl for him. In no time Pitambarā and Diwakara became close friends. Quite often Pitambarā got past the hedge gate into the Kuruppathu house for a long chat with his new friend.

The youngest Kurup child, Anandavalli, was an attractive eighteen-year-old. The petite girl had a wonderful figure and lovely long hair. Pitambarā was fascinated by those snaky long tresses. They captured his imagination, taking him to the realm of dark clouds. The moment he stepped into the Kurup home, his eyes flit around looking for the black waves swinging with her every movement. Their eyes met and her face flooded in a smile.

Pitambarā did not know that his masculine hulk had already overpowered Anandavalli. She admired the neighbour's sheer manliness. They pulled each other. When the man was around she was excited, a little nervous. And when he was away she was distraught, felt a lump in her throat. A bachelor living all alone, Pitambarā was often invited by Diwakara to dinner at their place. Anandavalli could do wonders with pots and pans in the kitchen. The rich aroma of food would waft around the house. The day Pitambarā was invited to dine with the family she was over enthusiastic in the kitchen. Preparing special *aviyal*, *erisseri*, *kaalan* and his favourite *ada pradhaman* she hummed, *Priya maanasa vaa vaa priya mohanaa deva ...* She would love looking at the big man's happy face when her mother served and he gulped down the *pradhaman* with great relish, casting a secret glance at her. *After a long day's work the man comes home*

to eat what that manservant cooks for him, sticky rice, sambaar, thoran and just pacha chammanthi! Aha. She breathed deeply.

In no time the infatuation turned into a full-blown love affair. The Kurups would have been happy marrying their daughter to the man she loved but... In the complicated caste hierarchy Pitambara's family ranked a few notches lower than the Kurups. Sensing disruption of the esoteric but irrevocable webs of the caste structure Anandavalli's parents put their foot down on the affair. *It's a question of our family's standing in society*, her father grumbled.

But it was too late. One morning the family found that Anandavalli was missing. No trace of the petite girl with snaky tresses. Gone, vanished into thin air... Actually she had eloped with Pitambara. The Kurups reacted angrily. They disowned their once favourite child. Her mother screamed, cursed Anandavalli. "Now our good name is tarred with ignominy for this wayward child...oh! Ho!" She burst into crying, pulling her hair. For her brother, sisters and parents Anandavalli's wantonness was shocking. They just could not believe...

But the love-struck couple could not care less. *We listened to our hearts.* They hugged each other. Setting out to define their destiny the two were impervious to the turmoil back home. They ran away to an obscure village and the priest at the temple performed the ritual announcing them man and wife. Sitting in the temple courtyard Pitambara looked at Anandavalli, resplendent in the glow of marriage.

Perhaps we have hurt our parents. Pitambara looked sad. *Marriage is a happy moment, time for the two families to celebrate.*

We had to do it, Pitam. The choice was clear: either to listen to our hearts or suffer for the rest of our life. The assuredness in Anandavalli's voice surprised him.

Diwakara later softened and accepted them as family. He could not forget those evenings when Pitambara came to dine with

them and the two went on chatting till midnight. *If anybody is responsible for this marriage, it's me. I was the catalyst.* He gave Anandavalli a share of his property. Touched by his gesture the couple came back and lived in a part of the house. The two friends chatted through the evening talking of Tamil cinema, R. K. Narayan's books, left politics. The evenings became lively again. For Pitambara and Anandavalli it was happy homecoming.

The couple had three children – two boys and a girl. The first, Gopalan, came within a year of their marriage. Then for a long time they did not have any children. The second son, Ramakrishnan, came after a gap of twelve years, though a daughter followed soon afterwards. They called her Kumari.

Gopalan, was the only child in the family till he was a teenage boy. A well-mannered boy good at studies, after graduation he got a job in the accounts department of Cochin Port Trust. He was twenty-two. Quiet, meditative by nature, he was a keen observer of the restlessness in the air, changes beginning to sweep society.

When friends and relations started bringing marriage proposals for the eligible bachelor, the family faced a piquant situation. By then Kumari was a gushing sixteen. They were not sure if they should look for a groom for their daughter first or a bride for Gopalan. Around that time, Gopa Kumar, a family friend, came calling one Sunday morning. Sipping strong filter coffee with a masala dosa, he came out with a startling idea. He had known the Kurups for a long time.

Brahmadattan was still looking for the right boy for Gouri. An old man now, the cultural icon had a big regret. Everything he had touched turned into gold. Success preceded him. He was a legend in his lifetime. No Kathakali artiste would gain legitimacy without Brahmadattan's blessings. No discourse on culture anywhere in Cochin would be complete without his participation. He travelled all over the world speaking on

Kathakali and Carnatic music. Indian expats invited him to their clubs and homes to get photographed with him. *Why could not I find a boy for my favourite daughter?* The question troubled him. He was getting old. In fact, some of his grandchildren were of marriageable age now. And still Gouri kept walking to the temple every morning without a man turning up for her hand.

Brahmadattan looked out the window. A handsome young man was reading the day's *Malayala Manorama* in the courtyard. He reminded Brahmaddattan of his own youth. Damodaran, son of his eldest daughter. A bright lawyer, he was planning to settle down in Ernakulam. The big city where young professionals like Damodaran wanted to go. He had talked to Gopa Kumar sometime ago. *Do something, brother, I cannot look at Gouri anymore.* Gopa Kumar was a distant cousin. After retiring from the postal department he now moved around in many circles working like a facilitator. A man for all seasons.

For Pitambara this was indeed good news. The horoscopes of Damodaran and Kumari matched well. But the astrologers were not happy about the compatibility of the horoscopes of Gopalan and Gouri. Only five of the ten *poruthas* being in agreement between the two, the marriage was rated at best a *madhyama* – neither good nor bad. A progressive man, Gopalan had only contempt for astrological predictions. *I'm going to marry the long-haired girl, I don't give a damn if the horoscopes match or not.* His family was shocked but buckled before his iron will. Anandavalli quietly smiled. *My boy after all, that defiant streak is in his blood.* Gopalan's disregard for orthodoxy reminded her of her elopement one early morning to marry the man she had loved.

Perhaps Gopalan thought of his sister's prospect as well. Since Kumari was only a sixteen-year-old the families decided that she and Damodaran should have just a betrothal ceremony giving them a couple of more years before actual marriage. But

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Damodaran moved into the Kurup home chasing his ambition to be a big lawyer in Ernakulam.

For Gouri it was the end of a very long wait. The daughter of the *puzha* who had swum across the Chalakudy faster than the boys, had been disappointed that no man had actually proposed. No one said she was ugly or ill-mannered or something else. Many of them came, said sweet nothings, flirted and then – after the horoscopes were swapped – ran away, tail between legs. Freshly bathed, an abundance of dark long hair over her back mildly fluttering in the breeze from the river, every morning she walked to the temple with a coconut in a brass urn. Closing her eyes before the deity of Krishna, she unburdened her heart. With the Lord of Amour began a silent conversation. *Oh flute-playing enchanter, why no one for me?* Coming back from the temple she wiped a tear.

During the festivals in the temple she had a secret expectation that the prince charming would ride down from the *puzha* bank looking for her. Quite a few good looking young men did get close to her trying to strike up a conversation. They moved to the backyard away from the crowd, held hands, breathed deeply. When the Thrissure Pooram procession started from the temple with the musicians playing Panchari *melam* tune, one young man pulled her behind a bush. He dipped his face in her hair and vowed not to live without her. *This life has no meaning unless you are with me for the rest of my years.*

The words kept ringing in Gouri's ears long after the boy went back on his promise. The moment the family elders frowned hearing about her incompatible horoscope, the suitor too disappeared. The astrologer's ruling was more important than the pounding in his own heart!

So Gopalan's rebellion came like a gust of west wind to her. *Can there be a man man enough to listen to his heart, trust his own eye and say no to the gibberish of a horoscope?* In love, in gratitude

Gouri's heart ached. She wanted to hold the man tight and ask him to take her as far as he could.

A few weeks later Gouri and Gopalan got married. Gopalan had always lived in Ernakulam. His office was only a little distance from home. He was reluctant to live in his in-laws' home in keeping with the matriarchal tradition. *How do I come to town every morning and be in my office before 10?* He was talking to Gouri about their new life. A modern man, he found the concept of *bharyaveedu* ridiculous. Why should a man move into the in-law's house instead setting up his own home?

Already the wind of change was strong enough to knock off the old shibboleths. A new mood was sweeping across the princely state of Cochin. Gopalan was among the avant-garde young men who got a hint of the new waves. Gouri too was very keen to leave her birthplace, the scene of her disappointment. The proud river child who had ruled the waves midstream, was in a mood to leave the place. *Not a single gallant man? All wimps?* Her mind was bitter. She was more than eager when Gopalan suggested they move to the capital of the princely state. Those days Ernakulam was a big bustling city. She was one of the first brides to walk into her man's home. Relations, friends, conservatives in their social circles raised their eyebrows at the new-age marriage, its tone of defiance and hint of unseen things waiting to happen around.