

## *Chikka Narasappa – a small-time gambler in Mysore*



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In the 1940s, in Mysore, Chikka Narasappa operated a small (10 feet by 10 feet) grocery shop, which covered half the frontage of the rented house we lived in.

It was a modest house, perhaps around 700 square feet, and part of a *vatara* (what could be called as a gated community). Our home had a hall (multi-purpose room), a bedroom, and a kitchen and a bath. The bath was large enough to include a copper water container encased in brick, in which water could be heated with firewood.

There was no attached lavatory –it was not affordable. Instead, we had a shared lavatory system some distance from our house. This system had been designed in Mysore, which had become one of the first cities in Asia to undertake a planned development, with the establishment of the City Improvement Trust Board (CITB) in 1903. As part of the planned development, Mysore had introduced a water-borne sewerage system. Since most of the people could not afford toilets with a porcelain pan or flushing cistern, the city had introduced a simpler and cheaper Indian pattern pan, made with ordinary brick and lime mortar.

Wastewater from baths was used to flush the solids. There was enough water for this purpose because most family members took a bath daily. Our landlord had constructed a block of such lavatories at one corner of the complex, to which all bath water was diverted. By consensus, two families used one lavatory and looked after its upkeep. This arrangement worked on a caste basis – two Brahmin families, two Vysya families, two Lingayat families, etc. The system worked smoothly.

In the 1930s, Chamundipuram extension came up as an orderly development near an existing village off Chikka Market (municipal market). The market in the centre of Mysore city was a source of pride for the people of Mysore. There was a belief that this market had been developed on the orders of the Mysore Maharajah under the guidance of a British engineer. The market was well laid out. It had a clock tower and a small fountain. There was plenty of parking place for Tongas and the few cars that were present in Mysore at that time. The market's frontage on two sides faced major roads, all packed with upmarket shops, such as exclusive Calico, Swadeshi mill, Bata shoe show rooms, bookshops, medical stores, and ivory carved furniture stores, a speciality of Mysore. On the other two inner sides, there were vegetable, grocery, condiment and meat and fish sellers.

Chikka Market could not boast of any of those things, but it did have a grand, impressive Indo-Sarcenic architectural facade and a few shops with a promise for more shops as and when Chamundipuram would develop.

Our house-cum-shop was in a complex known colloquially as *Nanju Malige* (shops built by Nanju). Nanju was a wholesale grains merchant. He had bought a triangular plot and enclosed it with shops at the front and houses at the back, with a huge open area serving as inner court.

The inner court had two public water taps. There was a large lime concrete platform with a few small (1.5 ft x 2 ft wide and about 1.5 ft high) inclined platforms with granite slabs on top, which were used to wash clothes. Women would soak the dirty clothes in a bucket of water, apply some soap, fold it lengthwise, lift it high and beat the clothes on the slab. Then, they would rinse and squeeze dry the clothes. Beating on the stone was supposed to remove dirt.

There was a huge honge tree nearby. This place provided an ideal spot for women of the complex to meet and gossip.

One road defining the triangular plot was a macadam (non-tarred) highway leading to Manandavady in Kerala, which was known for the tropical forests surrounding it and the forest produce such as timber and honey. The other was a new tarred road from the city to Chamundipuram, leading ultimately to Chamundi hill.

The shop on the front left side of our house was occupied by Chikka Narasappa, son of a zamindar who owned a large tract of land near Nanjangud, a pilgrim town about 20 km away from Mysore, and lived there. His only son went to school, but dropped out. As Chikka had no interest in farming and loved city life, his father had rented the premises, provided the capital, set up shop and handed it over to him for running.

The front of the shop was covered with interlocking planks that were 12 to 15 inches wide. These planks were held vertical by two timber channel sections at the bottom (sill) and top (lintel) that had deep grooves in to which the planks slid in. The middle plank had a short chain, which went around an iron eye fixed in the sill. A lock passed into the eye and locked the shop. This simple design was cheap and affordable but cumbersome. Every morning the lock was opened, the central plank was lifted out of bottom slot, slanted and taken out. Then other planks were removed one by one. They were then piled one above other on the outside. They sometimes served as additional display space on which open sacks of rice and other grains were kept. The planks also served as ramp to bring up sacks of rice and other heavy loads. The planks perhaps had been coated with cashew nut oil but were not painted.

Chikka Narasappa was unimpressive to look at. Dark, short, rotund and with a balding pate, one would not recognize him in a crowd. One could not say when he had last taken a bath. He wore a short lungi, which might have been white in colour when it was bought. Over that he wore an unironed shirt of bright colour. He always carried a red striped all-purpose towel. He constantly chewed betel laced with tobacco, and spat the juice periodically in to the storm water drain, which ran along the street, with impeccable accuracy.

He was religious. Perhaps more accurately, he was highly superstitious. His forehead had three bands of ash drawn prominently across. He wore ruby ear studs, as was the custom with the affluent gentry of those days. He would not like to have a Brahmin as the first customer in a day, as seeing a single Brahmin was not considered auspicious. He would not like to see a black cat. He would not sell anything to the first customer if the customer wanted something worth 1 *pice* (4 *pice* = 1 *anna*) or 1 *anna* (16 *annas* = 1 rupee) as the number 1 was considered inauspicious to start the day's trade. He would curse if anyone sneezed only once

in his presence. He would not purchase anything from a door-to-door salesman during *Rahukala*, an inauspicious period.

Being a zamindar's son and used to bonded labour at his village house, he was lazy. Therefore, his father had supplied him one or two servants. They were changed every year or two, as it was felt a longer stay in the city would spoil them and encourage tendency to run away.

I doubt that he took much interest in the business. Maybe his father was supporting him financially all the while. However, the stay in the city had given him opportunity to gamble on New York cotton prices, and bet on horse races. He gradually became an addict. Horse races took place regularly on Saturdays and Sundays in Bangalore and during the Dusserah time in Mysore. Betting on New York cotton was an everyday affair. He had a few friends, who were also hooked, and would often gather at his shop in the afternoon. He was also a prey for astrologers and palmists, who would promise him that a windfall was just around the corner.

He would arrive at the shop around 10 in the morning with his servant boy. They would take around half an hour to open the shop and arrange the planks. Then the boy would carry out ritual of sweeping and dusting the premises. If he found a dead rat, he would pick up, hit it twice, and throw it on to the road for crows to pick up. Then, Chikka Narasappa would survey the scene, pick up a few stick of *agarbathi* (joss-sticks), light them, and take them round three times in front of photos of Lord Shiva and Lord Ganapathy, and stick them in crevices.

Then, he would sit down on the raised platform at the front corner. He would open the top of a Davenport (a small short writing desk with drawers) in front of him to see how much cash he had in there. He would then open the shop for customers and his friends. His customers were few because people felt that his merchandise was of poor quality. Most of his customers bought on credit – those who could afford to pay cash stayed away.

In the evening, the boy would switch on a lone incandescent bulb to light the shop. Chikka narasappa would chant “*Shiva, Shiva, Parvete Parameswara, nammappa kapadappa*” (O Lord Shiva, Consort of Parvati, Our father in heaven, please protect us), simultaneously raising his folded hands reverentially towards the bulb. [Most Hindu households, including ours, followed this practice, with the prayer itself dependent upon whether one’s presiding deity was Shiva or Vishnu. Our parents would scold us if my siblings and I did not do it. So wherever we were, whether in street or in the house, we would turn towards the light source, fold our hands, and pray.] Around 9 pm, Chikka and his servant would start closing down the shop. [If I remember correctly there used to be a siren at nine in the city to help people know the time as very few people had watches or clocks.] They would leave by 9:30 pm.

My contact with Chikka started when I was four years old and continued up to his tragic end. One day, around nine in the morning, he beckoned me towards him waving an orange flavoured peppermint. I was attracted by the peppermint. He made me squat before him, with my legs crossed, facing East. Then he took out a small bluish pocketbook and opened it. He asked me to close my eyes and place a finger of my right hand on the open page. I did this, and he wrote something on a scrap paper.

He repeated this on several other pages. Then he closed the book, gave me the peppermint and asked me to go away. He warned me not to tell anyone, including my mother. The greed of getting another peppermint made me keep his secret.

After a few days, he called me and gave not only a peppermint but also a candy made out of monkey nut and jaggery. That pleased me very much and made me think that this 'uncle' liked me. This happened two more times in the following month.

Once I heard Chikka Narasappa tell his friends that I was a lucky boy. That pleased me even more. That evening when my mother scolded me for teasing and quarrelling with my younger sister, I told her not to think I was bad. After all, 'shopkeeper uncle' thought I was born under a lucky star! That made my mother suspicious. On her repeated enquiry, I had to tell her that uncle made me point out something in some pages of a small book.

The same night, she reported this to my father, who called me for a hearing. I had no choice but to tell him the whole story. My father laughed and let me off. I overheard my father saying that it had to do races and, I was being used to indicate the name of the horse or its number. He also told my mother that Chikka Narasappa must have made some money.

However, my father warned me to avoid Chikka Narasappa, as it was possible that Chikka Narasappa might ill-treat me in the future. But that did not worry me as I could hardly understand what could the ill treatment could be.

After a gap of time, Chikka Narasappa again made me do this twice or thrice. After one such occurrence, he called me to his side and pinched my thigh, which made me scream. He immediately put his hand on my mouth, smothered the cry, and warned me not to tell any one. This action made one his friends idling there say, "Why do you punish the poor boy if your luck is bad?" That made him cool down and gave me a chance to run away.

After that incident, I started avoiding him, though he continued to use some other small boys in the block for this purpose. But I could not escape him because the temptation of candy was too strong. And, when he lost, he pinched me. The higher the loss the harder and longer was the pinch. Sometimes the pinching was so severe that I would limp for hours. When my limping was noticed by my mother, I pretended that I was injured at play.

Over the years, gambling became a way of life for Chikka Narasappa. He would bet even on results of Dusserah football matches, the Tonga races, etc. He would always hand over his shop to his servant boys on weekends travel to Bangalore, bet on horses and return by night passenger train to Mysore. In those days, there was no online betting. So travel to Bangalore was a must. He wanted to have a motorcycle so that he would not have to depend on trains, and be more mobile. But the shop did not generate enough money, and his father would not pay for a motorcycle.

Perhaps three years after we had taken our house on rent, (Chikka's shop was there when we rented the place), Chikka Narasappa's wife, Eramma, started coming to the shop and tried to take control. There were frequent skirmishes between husband and wife because Chikka Narasappa would steal money when she or their oldest child could not come to the shop.

Eramma was a soft spoken, illiterate woman. On her own, she would have been content to remain in the home, and not venture out to the shop. But her father-in-law had convinced her

that she had to take over the reins, if their family wanted to have a comfortable life. She made excellent rapport with my mother for gossip and advice.

Even though my mother herself was illiterate and did not go out much, she had acquired a lot of worldly knowledge. She had to manage my father. He would not keep account and was a spend thrift of a sort who would spend money on priests, pujas, *homas* and *hundis* in temple. So on the day my father was paid, she had to extract a part of his salary, with which she had to manage the household. She weighed every expenditure, and kept a detailed account with my elder brother's help. Further, she was an active member of the women's gossip club where all problems of the *vatara* were discussed. She was sharp and kept track of good solutions to problems.

It seems that my mother's advice had helped Eramma, so the bond between them had become strong. Nevertheless, Eramma rejected my mother's repeated suggestion that Eramma send her children to school.

Eramma's management of the shop downgraded Chikka Narasappa's authority. But, even this did not induce him to give up betting on races. He had befriended a rich man of his own caste (Gowda clan, who are landholding gentry) who owned a Matchless motor cycle and was also fond of races. So Narasappa now travelled with him and returned on Sunday night, leaving Bangalore soon as last race ended. One day we heard that he and his friend were missing. Next day their bodies were recovered somewhere downstream in river Cauvery near Srirangapatnam. It was surmised they had fallen into the river near the approach bend to the narrow bridge British had built on the eastern arm of Cauvery. His body was brought to the village, and after much breast beating and crying, was buried in the family fields, as was the custom of the Gowdas.

Eramma prospered, as she was sensible and cautious. Soon after, we moved out from that area to a suburb nearer to city and to my father's work place. Our contact with her was lost. But, a few years later we learnt that she and her family had gone back to the village. Whenever Eramma had some surplus money, she had invested in lands in the village on her father-in-law's advice. One day, with enough money saved, she must have decided to return to the village.

## Epilogue

Those days, I could not understand the intense dislike Eramma and her relatives had for education. Now, after years of imparting vocational training related to civil engineering, I have a better appreciation of their view. In 1858, Lord Macaulay wanted our people to lose whatever skills they had in working with tools and develop a taste for white-collar jobs, as the British did not want Indians to develop manufacturing skill and compete with them. So Macaulay designed an educational system to produce clerks.

With our Brahminical culture and our salary and reward system, we have fine-tuned it. The white-collar job fetches more money, provides growth in career and status in life. But, an artisan gets lower wages and has no chances of improvement in status; he remains an artisan, at the most a supervisor, or a *mistri* (skilled worker). Whenever I have asked my workers what jobs they want their children to have, their wish is white-collar jobs in the Government or in private companies. We have been unable to devise curriculum for rural schools where

children spend more time in fields, learn about seasons, sowing, seeds, or learning trades suitable there, and develop enterprises based on them.❖

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