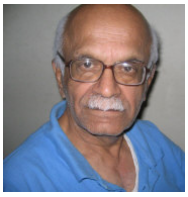
Seethamma Madam and My Mother: A Tale of Two Widows



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In the 1940s, she might have been about fifty years old when I, a teenage boy, became aware of her as a teacher who lived in the corner house of our lane in Mysore. Her house had a high boundary wall, and was built on a high plinth. Further, you had to walk up a short flight of steps to reach the entrance door. All these indicated that it had been built for a family with a status higher than that of most others in the neighbourhood.

Her family was once large and prosperous. Her husband's father was a scholar in Vedas, highly revered by the then Maharaja of Mysore. Those were the days when Maharaja bestowed land grants to distinguished men who served him i.e., Scholars, Musicians, Writers, Administrators, High Ranking Army Officers, etc. These grants were known as *Jagirs*. Those who were bestowed with this munificence were supposed live by the revenues of the land grants. Rid of financial worries they were supposed to pursue their callings with unstinted devotion. But an epidemic of cholera and an unwillingness to use western medicines had killed all the members of her family except her and her nephew.

She was tall, lean, lanky and wheatish in colour. Her hair was greying at the ends and at the temples. Her face was longish. She did not wear any ornaments, not even the glass bangles other women wore. Her forehead carried a vermilion *namam* (a straight line 3 to 4 mm thick, made of coloured powder starting from the centre of the eyebrows and ending at the root of the hair on the head. It represented the lotus feet of the almighty).

This announced to the world that she was a widow, and she belonged to the highly revered and scholastic Iyengar caste – Vaishnavaite Brahmins living in an area what is now Tamilnadu, South Karnataka and South Andhra. Had her husband been alive, she would have sported a biggish red dot on her forehead, worn some seasonal flowers in hair, a diamond nose stud, diamond ear studs, a *Mangalsutra* (a gold chain strung with black beads worn only by a woman whose husband was alive), and one or two gold chains around her neck and gold and glass bangles.

Following the Iyengar customs of those days, she always wore a simple nine-yard cotton saree, parted in the middle, folds taken to the back in between the legs and firmly tucked into the saree's waist band. The saree's pallu came up toward her right shoulder and over it, another indication that she was an Iyengar.

She walked in measured strides, with a little stoop. This type of stoop while walking was common among women from respectable, high caste households as they were supposed to look not straight ahead but down towards the ground. She carried a slight frown on her face, though she would smile a little whenever she recognized an acquaintance. She carried a thin reed stick, one or two books, and a jute bag which carried some fruits, a towel and perhaps a comb.

The *mohalla* (neighbourhood) knew her as 'Seethamma Madam'.

Like other married Iyengar women, before her husband died, Seethamma had lived a sheltered life, stepping out of the threshold only

occasionally. After she became a widow, an uncle coaxed her to come out of the cocoon. She took a year's training to become a primary school teacher; in those days, since there were few educated women, there were no requirements that a teacher should be a graduate, or trained in Montessori etc. She got a job in a private school; to supplement her income and perhaps to keep herself busy she took to giving private tuition mainly to the children of affluent respectable families.

She also shed some of her inhibitions, learnt ways of the world, and enlarged her social circle. In the course of time, by luck and some help from a distant cousin, who was a *raja-purohit* (royal priest) and a famous astrologer, she gained access to the princes' *zenana* (women's living area) and some courtiers, and began to teach some of the palace children. These connections helped her become a tutor to children of some other high officials.

She also became a tutor to some of my uncle's children – he had eleven surviving children. My uncle had a growing business and was making good money. My aunt, who did not care much for academic studies, liked Seethamma coming to her home because this meant her younger children were at home, within her control, and did not have to go outside the home, where they might fall into bad company. In the house there was hardly any scope for play or entertainment, no radio, no TV and not much light, Above all, there the elders' watchful eyes! Street and beyond the street, inviting and tempting – specially for boys who were always looking for an opportunity to sneak out.

Seethamma's day started early in the morning. She would brush her teeth with a neem twig and bathe in the cold water at the well. In those days, town water supply was in its infancy. Even though many highly orthodox families had got the plumbing connection, some of them considered tap water to be impure, and not fit for religious rituals, for cooking and bathing. They thought that tap water came from a distant unknown source, had been stored in many places, and passed through leather washers and gaskets, which were considered impure.

Then, she would enter the pooja room in the same wet saree, clean the idol and surroundings, pour oil into the lamp, and put in a new wick if required. She would go out into her small garden to pluck some flowers, bring them into pooja room, redecorate the idol with them, fold her hand in reverence and sing some *bhajans*. Next, she would enter the kitchen, still in wet saree, grind some roasted coffee seeds, and make strong coffee for herself and her nephew.

Once her coffee was finished, she would change into dry clothes, wake up her nephew, and prepare breakfast for him. After his breakfast, Seethamma would prepare a simple meal for both of them: rice with *sambhar* or *rasam*, and some seasonal vegetable, and she would eat only after he had eaten. Once her nephew left for work, she would go to her school. On her return, she would sleep for a little while, and out again around three in the afternoon for her tuition. She would return around seven in the evening, cook her nephew's meal, and perform evening pooja. After her nephew had his dinner, she would have some fruits and milk – but not eat the meal she had cooked because in those days widows were supposed to eat a normal meal only once a day.

Seethamma Madam had become a well-known figure in our neighbourhood with a well-established routine in which she had much more flexibility and freedom than most widows in her community at that time.

Like Seethamma, my mother had also become a widow at a young age. In those days it was common for a widow to close her home, and go live with her father or oldest brother, though there was no assurance that she would be welcome, and in some families, her status was little better than a bonded labourer.

My mother refused to follow the practices expected of a widow in our community. This created major financial, emotional and social difficulties for her, but she stuck it out.

My father had not left much money behind, and we barely made ends meet. She sought help from her father and brother only when it was absolutely necessary for her children's future. She earned our day-to-day living expenses by going out and getting odd jobs/orders from here and there. Sometimes we children helped her complete these jobs, and we also tried to earn some money on our own. I remember getting a job as a newspaper delivery boy but I was fired after a month because the owner anted to

employ a boy from his own community. Occasionally, our grandfather would send some products such as Areca nut and *beedis* from his coastal home, which we sold in Mysore.

As we had migrated from South Kanara, which was then in Madras state, we were always considered outsiders and were discriminated against. In schools we hardly got any respect or concessions even though we had good academic records. The local Brahmins did not like to socialise with us. We did get some support and sympathy from members of the Vysya community who knew my father, and also from some well-to-do Shudra families. In fact, I earned some money by becoming a tutor for a child in a prosperous Shudra family.

My mother's defiance occasionally created personal difficulties for her. I remember an incident that pushed my mother into depression for some days. One of my father's relatives, an older woman who was a widow and had shaved her head in keeping with tradition, visited us from our ancestral village. She refused to eat any thing that my mother cooked or even touched because she considered my mother impure, as she had not shaved her head. This old lady also criticised my mother obliquely for not rigorously observing the practices of widowhood.

Nevertheless, my mother did not cave in to the pressure to conform. Unlike other women, when she had her monthly periods, she did not isolate herself by sitting out in the backyard. Later, when I was grown up, once I asked her how she had the courage to defy this convention. She said, "How could I have managed you children and my paid work if I had sat outside for days?" When I asked her about the reactions of other people, she said, "Who cares? Life has to go on." I also remember her telling an elderly lady, without any sense of embarrassment, that she had had an early menopause.

Seethamma used to visit our home, perhaps because she felt sympathetic to my mother's condition. The bond of oneness developed by such meetings perhaps helped them deal with their loneliness. I suspect Seethamma acted as an informal psychiatric counsellor to my mother to help her overcome spells of financial and emotional stress.

But, there was more to it than empathy. Seethamma had an abundance of gossip about happenings in high places, particularly the palaces. The princes had their share of wives, concubines and passing affairs – sometimes with visiting Western women. Some of the *zenana* women were frustrated. One had to wait for long to spend time with the person who had legally wedded her or brought her. One had to compete for attention. Many a time one would have been bypassed after initial infatuated intimacy. And these women full of intrigue and plots against one another and also other members of the court. There were frequent occurrences of extra marital affairs.

Seethamma had a knack of gathering information about racy topics that were of interest to many people. She had perfected the art of using this skill as her business promotion tool. Most of the upper class ladies loved gossip. They could not get such 'exciting' information themselves because orthodoxy constraints forced them to remain inside their home, while Seethamma went out of her home every day. And they had a lot of spare time because they had many servants. So, these women were eager to hear Seethamma. She selectively dispensed the tales, to each according her taste, choice and mood.

My aunt too had a great appetite for such gossip and Seethamma was aware of it. Sometimes when I went to my aunt's house on an errand I could overhear them. My uncle had a sprawling house with a large veranda in the front. Immediately behind the entrance door, there was a large multipurpose hall where my aunt spent most of her time, squatting on a mat, sometimes combing, applying oil and making pigtails, or removing lice from the hair for one of the girls. Seethamma would also sit on a mat in this hall.

Once settled, Seethamma would call one of the children to sit across from her. After asking the child to open the textbook to the lesson she had taught day before, and ask the pupil to proceed with the reading the lesson from where it had ended the previous day. Hardly anything was explained or asked for.

Seethamma would then ask for water to drink, and my aunt would ask the cook to bring a glass of butter milk and some fruits. This offer, and its acceptance, transcended the barrier against

eating or drinking in a household of a different caste. After taking a sip of butter milk, Seethamma would clear her throat and murmur to my aunt, "Sulochana, have you heard this? Or do you know what I heard today." She would be careful to announce a disclaimer statement, "I do not know how much of this is true." "ಸುಲೋಚನಮ್ಮ, ಈ ಸಮಾಚಾರ ನೀವು ಕೇಳಿದೀರಾ?" ಅಥವಾ " ನಾನು ಇವತ್ತು ಕೇಳಿದ ವಿಶಯಾ ನೀವೂ ಕೇಳಿದ್ದೀರಾ? ಎಷ್ಟು ನಿಜವೋ ಎಷ್ಟು ಸುಳ್ಳೋ, ದೇವರೇ ಬಲ್ಲ!"

Then she would pour out her tales of how a concubine of a prince was caught in the act of making love to a *Durban*, and how that poor man was dispatched to a forest near Nanjungud to be trampled by a wild elephant. And the unfaithful woman was punished. The more horrific the tale, the greater the attention it got! Or she would narrate the tiff between another prince and his wife over some indiscretion of his with a Western lady. Later on in my life, when I recalled the stories, I suspected that Seethamma sometimes invented stories just to keep the interest going.

She had a different set of stories for my mother. To her, she would speak of the indignities that the dowager maharani was suffering. For example, the dowager had not got a suitable palace for herself or had not got the allowance she was entitled. How humiliating it was for her, a person who had been the queen of all she surveyed when her husband was alive!

When life had more or less settled into a comfortable routine for Seethamma, luck turned against her. Seethamma wanted her nephew to get married, though he was not keen to do so. She searched for a bride far and wide, and ultimately located a young girl of thirteen, the fourth child of a poor priest in the temple town of Melkote. She was charmed by the simplicity of the girl and the orthodoxy of the family. Horoscopes were matched, dowry and gift settled and the marriage took place.

Once the girl reached puberty, after some nuptial ceremonies appropriate to the occasion, she came to live in Seethamma's home. Initially, the young bride's parents and siblings came to visit her occasionally, and with time more frequently. On the first visit itself, the parents refused to eat anything prepared by Seethamma because she had not shaved off her head as was customary for an orthodox Brahmin widow. Then they started grumbling about Seethamma's going out of her home, and spending most of her day in different places, interacting with non-Brahmin households.

The nephew's wife joined her parents in these remarks, subdued initially, but later in a more vocal fashion. Seethamma began to hear taunts about her dress habits and character. In response, she first discontinued her tuition and a short while later she resigned from the school.

This was not enough. Now she faced pressure to shave her head. She was told that she could not cook any food, or offer anything to God or even go to pooja room until she behaved like a proper widow. She succumbed to the persistent pressure: she shaved her head and began to wear only red cotton sarees. Then she was forced to confine herself to the rear quarters of her home.

Now, it was difficult for her to come to our home. Sometimes, she would sneak out to our home to unburden her woes and degradation. Her nephew and his wife did not approve of Seethamma's visits to our home, and spread malicious comments about them. My mother, though a poor widow herself, did not care that these comments might hurt her social status. My mother found that Seethamma had lost her will to fight back. Now it was Seethamma's turn to seek support and advice from my mother.

Soon I left Mysore in search of a job. When I came home on vacation, we had shifted to another locality, and my mother did not know much about Seethamma's condition. She told me she had heard Seethamma was suffering from cancer of the intestine, taking some ayurvedic medicine, and had become thin and emaciated. A year later my brother wrote to me that Seethamma had died. A curtain was drawn on the life of a woman who had gained some freedom as a widow, but was ultimately foiled by her nephew's indifference and malicious attacks from his wife and her kin.

Epilogue

It is said Indian women had great freedom during the Vedic period, but this was not the case in Mysore in the first part of the 20th

century. It was expected that upper caste widows would shave their heads, wear only red or white sarees, live a secluded life, attend only religious discourses run in temples, eat vegetarian *satvic* food only once a day, and fast once a fortnight. They had no inheritance rights, were barred from taking significant part in religious ceremonies, and had to obey the orders of the head of the household. These customs were often enforced more rigorously in lower middle class families than in upper-income households.

Mysore did change in one significant way in early 20th century, when schools were set up for girls. My mother told me that when the Maharajah opened the first girls' school in Mysore, and offered free transport and free education to girls. Initially the attendance was low because no family was willing to allow its girls to be seen in public. When enclosed bullock carts were introduced, some families decided to send their girls to school, though these carts were stoned in some localities.

For most part of the 20th century education for Mysore girls stopped at 10th standard, or marriage, whichever came earlier, and only a small number of families allowed girls to take up jobs outside their homes. A standard reply by a parent of a daughter of marriageable age was "Not before marriage. If her husband gives permission it may be alright."

There was not much change in the status of widows. Sometimes their families would grudgingly accept that they should take work outside the home. Remarriage of a widow was rare - only a few strong willed would do that, even though pubic ostracisation of such families had come to an end.

Over time, many of these customs have faded, especially after the 1990s. With the explosive growth of technical education, IT, BPO and Biotechnolgy, there opened up new opportunities for women looking for work. Today, many middle class families welcome working women when looking for brides for their sons. There are no rigid dress and behaviour codes for widows, and they are often encouraged to stand on their own. Some prejudices still prevail. Widows are not still allowed to take part in religious ceremonies. Widow remarriage is still low.

Overall, women's emancipation has travelled a long way from the days about five centuries ago when an upper class widow in India was often thrown into her husband's funeral pyre!❖
