The Haunted Sampige Tree

Siddalingaiah

OURS WAS THE LAST house in the dalit colony. There had once been a house beyond ours, but its roof had collapsed, and mud walls, three or four feet high, were all that remained of it. Like me, children from the other houses climbed onto the squat walls and peered into the distance for a glimpse of their parents returning from work. We sometimes shouted out to them to come home soon. Whether they could hear or see us from such a distance we didn't know. The fields, owned by a man called Ainoru, stretched some five or six hundred feet beyond these walls. His beautiful house stood on the land, as did a huge well and a pump cabin. The water from this pump irrigated his fields. As for the people of our colony, it was a big thing if we got any water to drink. Our people trudged to a flower garden some distance away and fetched water from the well near it. I never saw anyone but dalits fetching water from this well.

When my parents were at work, I took care of the house. As evening fell, I would look for the hens and put them under the baskets. I would then light a little oil lamp. The moment my parents returned, they would prepare to cook. On some days we cooked and ate sweet tubers. On others, we

ate kadle poori, drank water and went to sleep. What we grew was barely enough to pay the interest on my father's loans.

Never enough money

The money my parents earned as labourers was simply not enough to support the family. My mother would sometimes go to the Savandurga forest to collect firewood, which she sold at the weekly market. She would fling down the firewood bundle as soon as she came home and run inside, saying she wanted to pee. Coming out again, she would pull some sugarcane out from inside the bundle and give it to us.

My father inherited, from his father, two portions of land which we called Hosa Hola (new land) and Haluru Hola (land in Haluru). My parents and I walked a long distance to Hosa Hola where they would labour much of the day. They made me sit under a tree while they worked. They took a break for lunch in the afternoon and went back to work till the evening. I once heard my mother tell someone, "I must make my son study, at least enough to read our relatives' letters."

Soon afterwards, my uncle and some others told me they were going to send me to school. They wanted to sign me up that very day. I slipped away and they tried to grab me. I ran hard, but they wouldn't give up. They carried me, shrieking and wailing, and admitted me to school. On my first day, when I thought of home, my parents, and our sheep and cows, tears welled up in my eyes. Some boys in the class were even more distressed. A teacher lashed me with his cane. I let out a loud wail, but quietened down after that.

R. Gopalaswamy Iyer Hostel

I had come to Bangalore after studying in primary school in Magadi and Manchanabele. My mother admitted me to the R. Gopalaswamy Iyer Hostel for dalits in Srirampura. The fact that she worked there gave me some courage. I felt bad when some boys at the hostel spoke roughly to her. My father, who seemed at the time to be almost a walking symbol of poverty, visited the hostel frequently.

Hostel life afforded me many new experiences. Three hundred students, hailing from different places in the state, stayed at the hostel. They all spoke different versions of Kannada. When four or five of us from Bangalore City opened our mouths, nothing but swear-words came out. Anywhere between ten and thirty of us slept in a single room. Eczema was rampant in the hostel. The boys applied ointment to their skin and warmed themselves in the sun.

The hostel was huge, with a four-acre field in front. Across the road, there was a government primary school and a police station. At night, we heard disturbing cries from the police station when the policemen beat up people in their custody.

A group of older boys in the hostel played excellent volleyball, and gathered admirers. Once, the ball went flying and hit the warden. He was knocked off his chair and had to be hospitalised. Some of the players went on to make a name for themselves on the state volleyball team. They called themselves the 'Ambedkar Volleyball Team'. In another part of the hostel's grounds, the 'Kennedy Kabaddi Team' honed the skills that had allowed it to defeat many rival teams.

Ghost! Ghost!

After dark, the hostel grounds were haunted places. A huge sampige tree stood in the hostel's inner yard. When it was in bloom, the ground below it was strewn with fragrant yellow flowers. We were all too scared to go near the tree after dusk, since rumour had it that it was haunted. When we learnt that several ghosts had set up their families in the tree, we were so scared, we didn't even want to look at that tree.

Everyone believed a ghost lived in the old well beside the hostel. Students would get up at four in the morning for their baths, scooping water up with their meal plates and pouring it over themselves. One morning, while they were bathing, a fire broke out in the field in front. Shouting that it was a 'torch ghost', the bathers started running. The other students and staff were aghast when they saw all these bathers running around naked, bodies half covered in soap, looking like ghosts themselves. Suddenly, the flame went out, and the boys were able to retrieve their clothes.

One day, we were sitting in rows, waiting for dinner to be served. A student became suspicious about the person sitting next to him. He had never seen him before. He looked at his face, and it seemed normal, but his misgivings didn't subside. He glanced at his neighbour's feet. They were not only three times the normal length, but were also flipped backwards. He let out a terrified scream, "Ghost! Ghost!" The boys jumped up from the tables and ran helter-skelter.

After dinner, students would tell ghost stories until they fell asleep to dream of ghosts.

We were hungry

The food they gave us at the hostel just wasn't enough to fill our bellies. The boys would rush for the mudde and saaru left over at the end of a meal, holding their plates. The man serving us would hold the vessel high above his head. No matter how firmly and how high he held the pot, it would tip over and spill all over the clamouring boys. It gave their heads, shirts and shorts a peculiar colour.

If there was any mudde left, the practice was to serve all those sitting in line. They used to call this 'extra'. The youngest boys often refused it. The older boys would rush in and reserve seats for the younger boys. As soon as they saw the young boys, they would act friendly and invite them to sit beside them. The older students had much use for the young ones. I was very young when I came to the school. I was so short that I looked as if I was the youngest among the young. A huge boy, who behaved as though he had found a treasure in me, called me to his side very affectionately. He told me to accept the 'extra' and hand it over to him. I turned down his request, saying I would eat any extra helping myself. He was surprised and disheartened.

On school days, after prayers, we would walk from Srirampura to the Government High School on Malleswaram 18th Cross. Most days, we had nothing to eat and were hungry. Our eyes would fall on the fruit trees in the front yards of the houses along the way. Few people were up and about at this time of day, so we jumped over the walls and carefully plucked mangoes, guavas and grapefruit. We would pick dense bunches of gooseberries. We would

gather the purple jamun fruit and fill our pockets. We drank water from the taps within the compound. We plucked jasmine, sampige and cannonball flowers. The girls' high school was on 13th Cross. Some boys presented the girls with stolen flowers and gained enough ground to be able to talk to them. At school, teachers and students could easily make out the boys from the hostel from the purple jamun stains on their teeth.

One day, raiding the fruit trees as usual, we made a boy climb a tall tree to pluck bela fruits. He went up with great enthusiasm. To his dismay, the owner of the house came out with a stick in his hand. We fled, shouting to our friend that he should climb down quickly. But he just sat there, petrified. The owner ordered him to come down. The boy on the tree gathered some courage and said, "I will, if you go in."

The owner was livid. "This isn't your father's house!" he shouted. "Come down, you thief!"

Wondering what awaited our friend, we stood watching from a distance. The owner got angrier and threw a stone at the boy, who started screaming even though it hadn't so much as touched him. To make it convenient for him to climb down, one of us threw a stone at the owner, who then charged at us, enraged, with his stick. In the confusion, our friend scampered down, jumped over the compound wall, and made his escape. We sped towards the school. Our friend's face and limbs were all bruised. We changed our route to school for a few days.

Good-for-nothing

The hostel students competed with each other academically. To get ahead of the others, one boy would get up at four in the morning, take a cold bath, and quietly start studying. Noticing him, a second would get up, rush through his bath, and sit down to study. One of them even studied in the moonlight when the electricity failed. Some students constantly studied the notes given by the teachers, memorising them. They never spoke to anyone. Sometimes, during the prayers, we would hear all kinds of sounds: voices muttering English words during the Kannada prayer, lessons being learnt by rote as if they were prayers. A couple of the most dedicated students actually went mad.

As for me, despite all these examples of studiousness, I had embraced the label 'good-for-nothing'. I was sitting in our room one day, without my three companions. Rangadhamaiah, one of the students who got up at four in the morning to study, called me over. I was in the eighth standard, and he was in the ninth. I had once covered someone with his blanket. Fearing that he had found out, I walked over to him hesitantly.

"Doesn't your mother work as a sweeper in the hostel?" he asked, in a kind voice, to which I said yes. "Didn't your father bring food to the hostel yesterday?" he asked, to which I also said yes. He was silent for a moment, as though pondering over something, and then he said suddenly, "You are bright. Don't loaf around with those three good-for-nothing friends of yours. You are poor. They are the children of wealthier parents. You are my friend from today. You must listen to what I say."

This seemed odd to me, but I nodded.

I felt someone waking me up early the next morning. It was Rangadhamaiah.

"What is it?" I asked, startled.

"Come with me for a cold bath," he said.

I got up meekly and followed him. After that, it became my practice to take a bath and study every day, to the disappointment of my three friends. They threatened me and tried everything they could to get me back to my old ways. I did not budge.

Finally, one day, they caught hold of my guru, Rangadhamaiah, accused him of ruining me, and tried to hit him. They let him go when I intervened.

A separate plate

M. Revanna was my favourite Kannada pandit. He recited old Kannada poetry in an engaging style. He happened to come by Srirampura, and stepped into our hostel. The next day, he told the class of his visit and remarked that he had found our hostel floor so clean that he had felt like washing his hands before touching it. The level of hygiene had impressed him. I was filled with pride for my mother and her companions who swept and mopped the floors.

A boy studying in our school, who looked older than me, had become my friend. He would take me to his house. Although it was an orthodox household, everyone in the family spoke to me with affection. His mother gave me delicious things to eat. One day, I noticed that they kept my

plate in a separate corner outside. I was disconcerted. My friend realised what was happening, and his unhappiness showed on his face. But his family was not able to give up its orthodox ways, even though they felt unhappy if I did not visit their house every few days. Despite everything, our friendship continued for many years.

Extracts from A Word With You, World, *the autobiography of Kannada poet Siddalingaiah, translated by S.R. Ramakrishna. Siddalingaiah was a key figure in the dalit literary and political movement in Karnataka in the 1970s and 1980s.*