SITA AND THE FOREST BANDITS

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Prologue

Vengai watched the blazing red sun go down behind the dark Vrali Malai mountains. He prostrated before the sinking sun. Vengai's day began and ended with the sun. He believed the sun gave him the energy and dynamism to scorch his enemies and to quickly disappear into hideouts, dark like the clouds, whenever the policemen began their hunt for him.

True to his name, Vengai was brave and ferocious like a tiger. Wild beasts and elephants abounded in the Vrali forest. But Vengai had easily become the self-declared king of the forest. Deer and wild cows stopped still on their tracks when they heard Vengai's footsteps. Vengai the forest brigand was a much-dreaded figure in the region of Dravidapuram.

Vengai waited for his friend, Ambuli to arrive. It was the auspicious day of amavasya, the new moon night. Through the darkness, Vengai looked like a lion standing upright on its hind legs. His matted locks and flowing beard, gleaming eyes and canine tooth
made him look terrifying. He had broad shoulders and a wide chest. His broad upper torso tapered towards the waist and his arms and legs were sinewy. Vengai really looked like the king of the forest.

Vengai gave out a roar, which thundered across the forest. Soon came back an echo. Vengai laughed loudly. Only one man or beast dared to answer his roar—that was Ambuli signalling that he was on his way. Ambuli was Vengai’s trusted friend and aide. On the day of the new moon night, Ambuli went deep into the Vrali forest to offer prayers to Lord Shiva—the Lord of the mountains, the Lord of destruction, the mighty Shiva who bore the moon on his crest.

Ambuli had a strange relationship with the moon. On days when the moon waned into nothingness, a bizarre spirit seemed to seep into Ambuli that made him do odd acts and strange deeds. The first time the spirit of the moon possessed him, Ambuli walked around the Vrali Malai mountain in a trance. Now and then he pulled out herbs and roots of medicinal value. The concoction made out of the herbs had miraculous properties. Ambuli’s remedies restored health to the sick and the dying. “The Moon God works through him,” said the cured ones gratefully.

Once, on the day of amavasya, an old sick man came and lay down on the verandah of Ambuli’s home. A severe stomachache, which had tormented him for the past twenty years, prevented him from falling asleep. Unable to bear the pain, the old man began to cry out for help. Hearing the cries of pain, Ambuli came out of his home. Even before the old man could
explain his illness, Ambuli got down to work.

Ambuli threw a towel on the man’s stomach and slid his hand beneath the towel. Like a surgeon proper, Ambuli began to knead the man’s stomach and, surprisingly, the excruciating pain, which even the renowned doctors had not been able to cure, was gone in less than a minute.

On days other than the new moon night, Ambuli was normal like any other youth. Ambuli had a rotund figure and a chubby red face. He had almost no hair and always wore a white dhoti tucked between his legs. His sole companion was a long staff, which he used to ward off small animals in the Vrali forest. On that inky dark night, when no moon or star shone on the sky, when even night birds maybe wary of straying from the safe haven of their nests, Ambuli walked across the thicket of the forest, resplendent like the moon.

It was widely rumoured that it was with this same sureness of steps that Ambuli had strode into R-2 Police Station a month ago. The R-2 Police Station was known for its preferential treatment of the upper caste people. Particularly Bhegan, the Police Inspector, who was merciless and cruel to the lower castes just so he could curry favours from the upper caste and the rich!

Ambuli had walked into the station with sure and mighty steps. Looking at the sacred thread across his torso, which signified that he belonged to the upper caste, the policemen greeted him. But Ambuli was not looking at them. With giant steps he approached
Bhegan. Pulling the Inspector's hair, Ambuli simply sliced his head off in one clean stroke. Then thumping his chest victoriously Ambuli said, "I am no longer jambulingam of the upper caste, I am Ambuli the Moon, which shines on the rich and the poor alike, the just and the unjust, the high and the low. Ambuli shall henceforth give his life to struggle against the caste system which divides and rules us." With that he walked away, as confidently as he had come in.

The same Ambuli was now headed to meet Vengai whom he had joined as an aide and confidante after the murder.

Vengai belonged to the Vrali Malai tribe, a small community, which worshipped sandalwood trees and snakes as their Gods. In the Vrali Malai forest, there grew tens and thousands of sandalwood trees scenting up the air and making the surrounding villages very aromatic and fragrant. The tribals showed their gratitude by offering flowers, fruits and sandal paste to the Goddess of the forest. The Vrali Malai tribe was a gentle lot who would not even harm a fly or an ant. How then did Vengai, a member of the same tribe, become a dreaded forest brigand?

A few months earlier an officer, Rothling, had come riding into the Vrali Malai forest. He was drawn to the hills by the aroma of the sandalwood trees. The officer dismounted from his horse and began his trek uphill, attracted by the pleasing sandal scent. When he reached the hilltop, a breathtaking view awaited him. Lush forests spread out like a rich, verdant canopy beneath him. In addition, the sandalwood
trees were throwing off a pleasant perfume.

He enjoyed the soft glow and gentle heat of the morning sun. He picked up a stone and began to work away on a sandalwood tree. He wanted to take a piece of the bark with him as a souvenir. Thok-thok, his stone fell with a dull thud on the bark. Suddenly, a coiled snake fell near his feet from the tree and slithered away. Rothling shrieked in shock. But a greater shock awaited him. He looked up and saw dozens and dozens of snakes coiled round the cool branches of the sandal tree! The cold-blooded snakes had wound around the branches of the sandalwood trees to escape the heat of the day. For a brief minute Rothling was terrified. Recovering the next instant, he began to shoot at the snakes. One-two-three...bang-bang-bang...he shot. The noise attracted a small crowd of tribals who rushed out of their huts to see what the commotion was about.

Vengai was the first to call out. "Hey! stop shooting! The trees are sacred and the snakes are our Gods. Don't shoot, please."

Rothling, who was not used to the ways of the tribals, stopped shooting and looked amused at the small crowd.

"So the trees and snakes are your Gods, huh?" he asked, sarcastically.

"Yes, they are!" the crowd cried in unison.

"Then see what I am going to do to your Gods," said Rothling and started shooting again. Pieces of bark flew here and there. A few more snakes fell dead to the ground.
"Oh, Lord! Oh, Protector! Oh, Deity of the forest! Protect us...save us...help us..." cried the crowd.

But Rothling turned a deaf ear to them and continued to shoot, killing more snakes. Some birds were hit too and they fell lifeless to the ground. The sandal trees chiselled away under the onslaught of the bullets.

"Officer! stop now or be ready for the consequences," yelled Vengai.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" ridiculed Rothling. "I am an officer all right, and my name is Rothling, in case you want me penalized for this."

"Officer! Stop shooting or else..." warned many people from the tribe.

As if to show that he was not afraid of them, Rothling shot a few more times. Then everyone heard a huge roar from behind.

It was Vengai. He had got into an angry frenzy. Looking terrible with matted locks, flowing beard, a sickle in hand, he advanced towards Rothling, roaring like a wild beast.

The crowd parted to make way for the tiger of a man, Vengai. In a swift motion, Vengai lunged forward. Then he caught hold of the officer’s right hand and cut off his forefinger—the finger that had pulled the trigger on so many innocent creatures.

"Aaaaaawwwwwww!" Rothling let out a wild shriek. "You’ll pay for this. You’ll pay for this," he shouted, shaking with uncontrollable pain and fury. Then he beat a hasty retreat while the jubilant crowd carried Vengai on their shoulders.
Rothling rushed to the nearest police station with his bleeding finger. To his shock he found R-2 in a greater chaos. He took charge immediately. "All of you fall in line! ATTENTION!" Rothling barked out orders. There was instant silence.

Rothling looked around to see what the furore was about when he noticed the body of the slain Inspector. Rothling let out a small gasp of shock and cried, "Who dared lay a finger on the Inspector?"

In bits and pieces, the assembled policemen broke the news about the rotund figure, Ambuli, who had walked into the station and attacked the Inspector.

"How awful, how awful!" gnashed Rothling. "Arrange for the body to be removed to the mortuary and inform his family," he ordered. Then he looked at his mutilated hand and cursed angrily, "They shall pay for this! Vengai and Ambuli shall pay for this!" he vowed bitterly.

An evil idea formed in Rothling's mind even while he seethed in fury. Within a minute Rothling was ready with his villainous plan. He summoned the police artist and began describing Vengai's features.

"His eyes are red and almost round, with thick, bushy eyebrows. He has a triangular face and a narrow, cynical mouth..." Rothling kept directing the artist until the final sketch closely resembled Vengai. Then he turned to the policeman and asked, "Who can describe the murderer of the Inspector?"

A policeman came forward. Rothling instructed the artist to draw a picture based on the man's description. When it was ready, Rothling asked the
policeman, "Is it a good reproduction?"

"Yes, Sir! It is," he replied.

"Okay! Now put out the pictures of the two thugs along with this notice:

Wanted Dead Or Alive
VENGAI
Vrali Malai Forest Bandit
Cash Prize: Rs. 1000

Wanted Dead Or Alive
AMBULI
Murderer and Vengai’s aide
Cash Prize: Rs. 900

Rothling was happy with his ingenious plan. He had depicted the two thugs as partners in crime. He knew it would be easy to nab them this way.

The following day, the town crier went out with the drums, from dawn to dusk, tom-tomming the news around the ten villages in Dravidapuram. The villages were agog with rumours that Vengai was a dreaded murderer and Ambuli, a mad upper caste, a killer of those who perpetrated crimes against the lower caste. People added flesh and bone to the rumours. Their imagination turned wild. They believed that Vengai and Ambuli were not only highway brigands who robbed and killed wayfarers but were also merciless men who poached elephants for ivory and hacked down sandalwood trees indiscriminately for money. Within a day or two the wild stories about Vengai and Ambuli flew across the entire region.
The duo were talked of as notorious bandits with a crew of fifty to sixty armed men, all up to no good. The entire gang was described in blood-chilling terms.

Vengai the Tiger, as he was called, was believed to make his victims run before he hunted them down like a real tiger with bare hands and nails. Ambuli was reported to cast a spell on the victim which would still their breath and suffocate them eventually.

Rothling was pleased that his foul scheme was working out so well. 'Linking Vengai and Ambuli was a stroke of sheer genius,’ he thought. 'That would not only darken Vengai’s reputation further, but also ensure that Vengai and Ambuli were brought to book by the people themselves.’

Rothling, Vengai and Ambuli did not know, then, that there was a little girl, Sita, playing in her small hut, who was going to touch and change their lives irrevocably.
Sita

Anybody who looked at Sita, or Sitamma as she was lovingly called, could not believe that she was all of ten-years-old. Lithe and energetic, Sita was a wise and courageous girl. Her long hair and almond shaped eyes, her swirling skirt and blouse, all added up to her simple grace and charm. Her best friend was her pet cow, Kaveri.

Sita loved Kaveri like her own sister. Right from the day she was brought into Sita's stable as a day-old calf, Sita fed, bathed and cared for her. Ever since they had been inseparable. Sita was now in the cowshed playing with her pet. "Kaveri, do you know where I am going today?" she asked her.

Kaveri the cow shook its head as if to ask, "Where?"

"I am going to my friend Gomathi's house in the evening. She has been inviting me for a long time now. It seems her house is very large and beautiful. I will come back and tell you more," promised Sita.

That evening Sita set out for Gomathi’s house. The house was situated in the middle of a huge coconut grove. A narrow tar road led the visitors up to the
house. The grove was cool and inviting. Sita knew that Gomathi was rich, but she was not prepared for this kind of opulence where one had to walk for thirty minutes through a grove to reach the house. Sita gasped in surprise when she arrived at Gomathi’s mansion. So beautiful was the house, with its shiny red floors, glowing brass lamps and bright chandeliers burning with wicks soaked in ghee. The imposing bungalow seemed like a figment of a dream. Every piece of furniture was made of teak and there were large bureaus bearing huge mirrors on them. There was a veena near the puja room, which belonged to Gomathi’s great-great-grandmother. Gomathi invited the gasping Sita inside and the girls sat on the swing, polished to mirror-like perfection. The head cook came in carrying hot adirasam, murukku and cool coconut water.

Gomathi and Sita happily munched the delicious snacks and chatted away about their teachers, friends and pets when Gomathi’s father came in from the inner room. Gomathi and Sita immediately got down from the swing and stood aside respectfully. Gomathi’s father, Pannai Paramasivam, was a powerful landlord of Dravidapuram and the richest man in the district. He was also one of the kindest. He had many duties and was a busy man. Gomathi waited until her father left in the canopied bullock cart.

Once the jingle of the bullocks’ bells faded, Gomathi motioned Sita to follow her. Gomathi went into one of the inner rooms of the house, a huge hall filled with all kinds of furniture and vessels handed down to her father through eight or nine generations. There were huge cauldrons in which one could cook
for a hundred people and long mats on which twenty-five people could sit in a row. The room also had small stools, luxurious chairs, nutcrackers and other small silver ware.

The riches in the room took Sita aback. The antiques had a dull sheen about them, which comes only with slow aging. The carvings were minute and fine. The vessels were all in brass, copper or silver so finely polished that Sita’s very reflection shone on the items. Sita was left breathless by the sheer beauty of the collection.

Gomathi laughed. “If you are taken aback by this, what will you say when you see the Nilavarai?”

“What is a Nilavarai?” asked Sita curiously.

“Well. Why don’t you split the word like this? Nilam+Arai. Nilam means land or earth and Arai means room. Now do you understand?” asked Gomathi, her eyes smiling.

“It means room in the land? But all rooms are on the land...Oh! wait! wait! Okay, give me one more clue,” begged Sita.

“All right. The Nilavarai is in this room,” said Gomathi with a twinkle in her eye.

“In this room? A room within a room?” gasped Sita and quickly began to think.

“If the room is within this room then it has to be in the loft or underground. Oh yes! Now I know,” cried Sita.

“Nilavarai is a room beneath the ground or the Nilam. So the Nilavarai is beneath this room, isn’t it?” Sita sounded excited.

“You guessed it!” shouted Gomathi, equally thrilled at Sita’s discovery.
"Let us go into the Nilavarai," suggested Gomathi to the awestruck Sita. "But, before that, please remember, nobody should know that we visited the Nilavarai. None should know about this—not my parents, not your parents, not the servants, not anybody. Don't even tell Kaveri," said Gomathi with utmost seriousness.

"I promise," said Sita, eager to see the Nilavarai and what it might contain.

Gomathi hurriedly closed the door of the big room. She didn't want any of the servants to know about the Nilavarai. With Sita's help she moved some heavy furniture to one side of the room. Then she began to remove the nails which pinned down an intricately embroidered carpet to the wooden floor. The rest of the house had floors in red oxide, gleaming and shining like a stretch of shimmering evening sky. Gomathi expertly pulled out the nails using the reverse side of the hammer. She seemed to have done this many times before.

As if to answer Sita's unspoken question Gomathi said, "I have been to the Nilavarai many times before. But always without my father's knowledge."

After pulling out the nails and moving the carpet, Gomathia expertly arranged the furniture around the trap door so that nobody would know of the door leading underground even if they happened to peep in. The latch of the trap door opened without a sound. Gomathi asked Sita to step down carefully and take the stairs leading to the room underground. Sita cautiously put her right foot forward and gingerly proceeded to go down the steep stairs. Gomathi followed and closed the trap door silently behind her.
Both Sita and Gomathi were thrilled and excited to bits. Once their feet touched the ground, both danced a small jig! Gomathi rushed to light a few lamps and in a minute the entire chamber was brightly lit.

Sita gasped in surprise. The room looked like a King’s treasury. There were a whole lot of costly silver and gold items. What Sita had seen in the rooms above was nothing compared to this. There were yards and yards of silken robes and saris with golden thread work. Costly paintings and murals adorned the walls, while intricately carved sculptures stood here and there. Cauldrons, vases and vessels lay around in plenty.

Most of the items in the Nilavarai were antiques that belonged to Gomathi’s ancestors. They were all carefully packed in glass cases. In one corner of the room lay a pile of gold coins which sent Sita into a dizzy spin.

Gomathi laughed seeing Sita’s expression. "But these are not made of real gold," she said. "They are merely copper coins dipped in gold. Come, I will show you real gold." And Gomathi led Sita to a spot in the corner of the room. There she pulled out a case with a lock. Gomathi quickly hopped onto a chair and put her hand on a niche in the low ceiling and pulled out a small rod. Using it she opened the case and immediately returned the rod to the niche.

Gomathi covered Sita’s eyes from behind and said musically "tat-ta-tan" and unclasped her hands from Sita’s eyes to show what the case held. Sita stood still—She could not believe what she saw. The case overflowed with gems and diamonds and gold coins sparkling like clusters of stars. When Sita found her
voice, it was to squeal with delight.

"Oh, my God! I have never seen so many gems and diamonds in my life," she cried.

"Look at this diamond. It is called the Kannika diamond. It belonged to my great-grandmother Kannikambal. It is the biggest and the costliest gem in all of Dravidapuram. Isn't it beautiful?" Gomathi asked.

In reply Sita held Gomathi's hands and twirled in happiness. The merry-go-round had to end abruptly when they heard knocks from above.

"That must be Subbiah with tiffin for us. We have to go upstairs now," said Gomathi.

Quickly, Gomathi and Sita clambered up the stairs. But horror of horrors! In their hurry they forgot to lock the case containing the precious gems and the invaluable Kannika diamond. Gomathi shut the trap door and moved the furniture back even while calling out to Subbiah that they were coming after winding up their play. Very excitedly did the two girls partake of their meal.

Little did they realize that their brave expedition into the Nilavarai was going to cause much tears and sadness later.

Vengai meets Ambuli

Deenu, a young handsome boy of twelve appeared to be in a great hurry. Anxiety and fear filled his eyes. He was clutching a paper in his hand.

"What is wrong, Deenu?" shouted many on the way.

Ut Deenu did not wait to explain his tearing hurry.
He ran up a cobbled path and knocked on a wooden door opening into a small hut with lime-washed walls and dung-smeared floor.

"Where is Vengai?" Deenu gasped to the old lady who opened the door.

Vengai came into the room and was surprised to see Deenu huffing and puffing as if he had run a mile.

"What happened?" asked Vengai.

"Vengai, big trouble! Big trouble!" cried Deenu.

"Look at this!" he said and extended the poster with Vengai and Ambuli's pictures along with the news about the cash prize they carried. Deenu was one of the few members of the Vanaraksha tribe who could read and write.

"Who has drawn my picture and who is this other man?" asked Vengai, tensing up to the situation.

"Vengai, you have been portrayed as a notorious forest bandit. Maybe it is the handiwork of the officer whose finger you cut. The other man here is Ambuli. The poster says he is a murderer. There is a large cash prize on both your heads. Oh! Vengai, they have made you infamous!" cried Deenu and broke down.

Vengai pulled the boy close to him and stroked his hair. Vengai was thinking fast. His life was in danger.

'The people of Vrali Malai know that I am innocent. Yet, I should not endanger their lives by staying here. But where can I go? What am I going to do,' Vengai was worried.

The old lady came in carrying a purse full of money. She handed it to Vengai and said, "Vengai, please keep this. You have been like a son to me. Go into the Vrali forest. Our Goddess will protect you. I will send Deenu now and then to get news from you."
Now hurry!” the old lady urged.

Vengai was filled with gratitude. Years ago this old lady had taken Vengai into her fold when his father died of snakebite. She had been the mother Vengai never had. All that Vengai knew, be it fishing or tending cattle, or surviving the dangers of a wild forest, was what the old lady had taught him. She had guided him and instilled in him strong values like honesty, helpfulness and generosity of spirit.

In spite of leading an upright life, Vengai was forced, now, to go into the forest like a despicable bandit. Vengai was overcome with anger and humiliation. But it was not the time to indulge in self-pity. It was time to act. Vengai hurriedly packed the few clothes he had. He picked out a short knife, a set of bow and arrows and a long knife. The old lady brought in a roll of rope, a packet of nails and a hammer, some canvas and a pair of sturdy shoes. Vengai tied them into a bundle, took a staff to ward off small animals in the forest and set out. Before leaving, he drew Deenu and the old lady in a close hug and whispered goodbye to them. Opening the door, Vengai left for the forest without looking back. The boy and the old lady stood waving tearfully.

Vengai remembered to take the poster from Deenu. He carefully tucked it under his waist belt. Vengai was curious about Ambuli. ‘Why would the police link him to a murderer? Did they want to increase the nature of the punishment that awaited him? Should he have allowed Rothling to get away with killing a few snakes and harming the sandalwood trees which were like Gods to them?’

NO! shouted a voice from inside Vengai. It was the
tribe’s belief that trees, animals, birds and insects, however small, were all significant creations of God.

Walking at a steady pace, Vengai soon reached the forest deeps. He paused to catch his breath. He could hear the babble of a brook nearby.

'It must be the Neerodai river,' thought Vengai. He had really come a long way. Vengai climbed a tree to ascertain the source of the sound. Sure enough, he saw the water falling in silvery cascades from a small Vrali hillock. Vengai climbed down and walked to the Neerodai river. Its crystal clear water sparkled like diamonds. The river shimmered like a silvery fabric in the midday sun. Vengai washed in the river and rested on a huge boulder. In his hurry to escape into the forest he had not remembered to pack any food. But Vengai was not one to lose his cool. He unwrapped the bundle and produced the fishing rod. Searching amidst the muddy bank of the river, Vengai caught an earthworm and prepared a bait for the fish. In less than a minute the rod was ready—bait and all. Vengai threw in the bait and leaned back. He waited for almost fifteen minutes but nothing happened. Out of sheer boredom, Vengai decided to take another look at the poster. Vengai was awestruck by the intensity he saw in Ambuli’s eyes. It was as if the sun and the moon’s orbs had descended on his eyes. Ambuli had a wide forehead, denoting high intellect and mental stamina. Vengai was lost in admiration and curiosity about this handsome man when he felt a tug. Vengai hurriedly tucked the poster in his waist belt and got up to haul the catch. Vengai pulled and to his surprise, the fish seemed to pull with equal gusto in the opposite direction. Vengai
was not one to give in. From his side of the boulder Vengai pulled with all his might. The fish seemed to match or even better Vengai’s strength.

"COME ON!" Vengai heard someone grunt loudly from the other side of the boulder.

"Who is that?" Vengai demanded, getting suspicious immediately.

"Aha! Who is this hiding behind the boulder like a coward?” asked a majestic voice. A man emerged from the other side. It was none other than Ambuli. He was as fair as Vengai was dark.

Vengai was dumbstruck to find Ambuli there, even though Ambuli did not recognize Vengai as he had not seen the poster yet. Vengai felt a tug at the end of his fishing rope and pulled it. A fish emerged but it had two hooks in its mouth.

Ambuli and Vengai’s baits had entwined and the huge river fish had taken both the worms in its mouth. Now whom did the fish belong to?

Vengai hauled the fish onto the shore and began to remove the hooks from its mouth.

"The fish is mine. I have caught it to feed a wild cat yonder,” said Ambuli.

"The fish belongs to me,” said Vengai with an air of finality.

"Let us find out," said Ambuli and moved menacingly towards Vengai.

Vengai patted the fish dry, tossed it aside near the boulder and rose to face the challenge. Quite suddenly Ambuli pranced forward and grabbed Vengai by his shoulder. In reply Vengai thrust his hands on Ambuli’s chest and tried to push him down. Soon both were locked arm-in-arm in a well-matched struggle. Ambuli
combated intelligently while Vengai used his strength and fighting skills. Ambuli was strong but could not match Vengai’s quick movements and deft strokes. For a while, Ambuli countered every move of Vengai’s. He even managed to land a few blows on Vengai’s chin, head and knees, but it did not deter Vengai who was merely in the game of tiring Ambuli out. With one fine blow right on Ambuli’s chest, Vengai threw Ambuli to the ground and pinned him down with his knee and fist. At that moment Vengai’s waistband loosened and out rolled the poster. It fell open displaying both their pictures. Ambuli stared at the poster, wide-eyed with surprise.

"Who are you?" asked Ambuli, turning to Vengai.
"My name is Vengai. Dear Ambuli," replied Vengai, smiling.

They both got to their feet dusting their clothes and head scarves. The sense of animosity suddenly faded away giving place to a feeling of amity between the two. Ambuli grabbed the poster and read it.

"Are you really a forest bandit?" asked Ambuli.
"Are you really a murderer?" countered Vengai and both of them laughed.

"I am not a bandit," said Vengai answering Ambuli’s question and proceeded to tell him about Rothling’s disastrous visit to Vrali Malai and how he had taken revenge for pulling the trigger on countless snakes.

"You did well," said Ambuli with a smile on his lips.

"I have never heard of you before. I am not a robber. I have been linked with you to increase my punishment, I suppose," said Vengai a little regretfully.

Ambuli laughed a high-pitched laugh.
"So you feel ashamed being linked with me? Ha! Ha! Ha! So be it!" said Ambuli, staring at the poster and taking in its contents. "But now you have no choice. Even if you don't stick to me, nobody would believe you. We stand a better chance of eluding the police by being together," added Ambuli.

"What is your crime?" asked Vengai wondering if Ambuli was also falsely implicated in the crimes.

"I sliced off a police inspector's head," said Ambuli.

"Why?" asked Vengai, startled by Ambuli's casual way of replying.

Ambuli looked around. The place where they sat was open and unsafe. They would be spotted easily.

"Let us go someplace where we will not be seen," said Ambuli and lead the way to a hidden cave on the Vrali Malai hillock. Ambuli seemed to be as familiar with the Vrali Malai forest as Vengai was.

Ambuli had a swift light step. In spite of his heavy build he was surprisingly lithe and nimble-footed. By the time the sun reached the western sky, Ambuli had also reached the cave. He picked up a dry branch and quickly cleaned the place. Depositing their belongings, he signalled Vengai to follow him.

"This is the dwikarna cave. Dwikarna means two ears. This cave opens up at the other side of the mountain. It is as if the mountain has two ears. You can enter here and emerge on the other side of the mountain where the cave ends. In the middle there is a huge boulder. You can cross it and get onto the other side."

Vengai noticed that Ambuli was not disclosing anything about himself. Vengai decided to wait until Ambuli felt comfortable enough to talk. Ambuli sat
down on a clean spot and opened the food packet consisting of idlis smeared with ghee and red chilli powder mixed with coconut. He offered half of it to Vengai. Both wolfed down the food hungrily. After a long drink from the canvas pouch, the two lay back with their eyes closed. It had been a long, unnatural day filled with odd happenings. Vengai thought of Deenu and the old lady. 'Would he ever see them again?' he wondered, sadly.

He looked at Ambuli. The handsome man's bright eyes were fixed on some distant spot as if he was meditating with his eyes open. Ambuli did not blink for a long while, yet his eyes did not water one bit. And quite suddenly, shattering the silence, Ambuli said, "Vengai, I shall tell you my story. Now listen."

A letter arrives

"Gomathi, I have something to show you," announced Sita excitedly.

"I too have something to tell you," said Gomathi. "Come, let us walk home together," suggested Sita, when her eyes fell on the posters of Vengai and Ambuli on a wall nearby. 'I wonder who these two men are,' she thought. 'Let me take a closer look.'

As she approached the wall, Gomathi squealed, "Sita, they are dreaded bandits! Why do you want to read about them?"

Sita laughed, "Why are you so scared? You should know about them, only then can you recognize them if you come across them! What do you think?"

"I will neither see them nor recognize them even if
I know who they are/’ replied Gomathi.
Sita laughed aloud and read the poster about
Vengai the forest bandit and Ambuli the murderer.
An involuntary shudder shook her body.
"Sita, I want to tell you something,” said Gomathi.
"Yes, what is it?"
"My marriage has been fixed," said Gomathi.
"What?" cried Sita in horror.
"I am to be married to Neelakanda zamindar’s son,
Venu. The date is yet to be finalized but the match is
fixed,” said Gomathi.
"Oh, my God!” cried Sita.
Sita’s thoughts immediately flew to her aunt,
Balambal, who was married off when she was hardly
eight. Her wedding took place amidst great pomp
and ceremony. Massive wedding pandals stretched
across two streets. Hundreds of guests poured in for
the marriage, which went on for five days. Cashews
and almonds floated in the kheer. Polis, balushahi, adi-
rasam... You name the sweet and it was there on the
leaf. People chewed on the memory of her marriage
for days after the wedding. But ultimately what
happened to Bala? Her husband drowned while
crossing the Neerodai river and Bala, now a widow,
was back with Sita’s family. She wore a white sari and
led a lonely, frustrating life. ‘Can one risk one’s life
by saying yes to marriage at such an early age?’
 wondered Sita with great concern.

"Have you told your father that you don’t want to
be married?” asked Sita.
Gomathi kept quiet, unable to answer that question.
Sita led Gomathi to a tree yonder and made her sit
under it. “All right, I’ll show you something
interesting/’ said Sita and removed a newspaper from her school bag.

"Have you heard of Subramania Bharati?" asked Sita.

"Yes, the poet who is also a freedom fighter?" asked Gomathi.

"Yes! He wrote a song ‘Odi vilayadu papal’ which says children should devote themselves to study in the morning and play by the evening. I quite liked the song. But my father who heard the song remarked jokingly that I could sing and play as long as I was with him, not after I was married. What my father stated jovially makes me fear what lies in store for me. And now you say your marriage is fixed!"

Sita paused. She looked troubled. Gomathi waited for her to continue.

"I wrote to Bharati’s paper, India, asking, ‘If children are married at the age of eight, ten and twelve, where is the leisure to play or the mindset to study and be happy?’" said Sita.

"How clever of you!" exclaimed Gomathi with great admiration.

"See? He has not only published my letter but has also praised my forthrightness. I hope to be a newspaper reporter someday," said Sita, showing Gomathi the section where her letter was published.

"How I wish I could be brave and strong like you in a situation like this. What shall I do now? How can I go against my father’s words?" cried Gomathi.

"The first step is not to cry. We’ll come up with some idea. The wedding date is not fixed yet. Before that something positive is bound to happen. Don’t worry," soothed Sita.
"See, Bharati has sent me one rupee for contributing that letter and he has asked me to buy sweets with the money. Come, I'll buy you your favourite jalebi at the Lala's shop," said Sita and led Gomathi, who had now cheered up visibly, to the sweetmeat shop.

Meanwhile, Rothling was learning to wield the spoon and pen without his forefinger. It had not been too difficult. What was difficult was explaining to his colleagues and friends how he lost the finger. It would be disgraceful to tell them that a mere native had chopped off his finger. It would be equally unheroic to say that he had cut his finger while cutting vegetables! So Rothling concocted a superb story. He narrated how he had gone riding into the forest and was attacked by wild dogs. Battling them he had lost one forefinger but had otherwise succeeded in vanquishing the animals and escaping unhurt. Each time Rothling repeated the crazy story about the wild dogs, it fuelled his ire against Vengai.

There was no news about Vengai or Ambuli whatsoever. The public had not been forthcoming in their response to bring the thugs to book probably because no raids, dacoities or murder had happened to rouse the rage of the mob.

'If Vengai or Ambuli do not commit crimes, then crimes have to be attributed to them,' thought Rothling deviously. While musing on his evil scheme, he got a sudden brainwave and immediately summoned the Dubashi, the official translator.

"Yes, Sir," said the translator.
"By the way, who is the richest man here in Nemam?" asked Rothling.
"Pannai Paramasivam, Sir," the translator replied.
"He has hundreds of acres of paddy fields and numerous coconut and mango groves. People say he has an entire room stacked with silver, gold and precious stones though nobody has actually set eyes on them. Cows, horses, groves, gold, you name it and Pannai Paramasivam has them in plenty. He has a daughter named Gomathi. I hear they are planning a grand wedding for her shortly," informed the translator.
"How old is the girl?" asked Rothling.
"Around ten or twelve," said the translator.
"What kind of people are these who get children married off at such a tender age? Anyway, that's besides the point," said Rothling and paused before he resumed... "Ahem! I have received news that Ambuli and Vengai, the dreaded bandits, are going to strike at Pannai's house. I wish to warn this good man in advance and ask him to safeguard his wealth," said Rothling, convincingly.
"Poor Pannai! Shall I go and inform him about the impending danger?" asked the translator.
"NO! That would be too childish," said Rothling. "If the information is false, then the police would be made the laughing stock. I have a better idea. Bring me a pen and a sheet of paper."

But before the translator departed from the room, Rothling called out sternly, "Hey you! Beware! This information is between you and me only. If anybody else gets to know of this, you will face my wrath. Get it?" boomed Rothling.
"Yes, Sir! No, Sir! I mean...Yes, Sir!" stuttered the translator and left in a hurry.

Meanwhile, Rothling sat deep in thought, composing in his mind the letter he was going to dictate. The translator returned and waited expectantly. Rothling started to dictate the note in English which the translator simultaneously translated into the native Tamil language. He wrote:

\[ \text{fai Shiva Shakti!} \]
\[ \text{A WARNING!} \]

We will strike at your house on new moon day. If anybody is present during our raid, they shall all be killed. If you plan to remove the valuables, then we shall wreak vengeance by burning the house down or by returning to kill your near ones.

Signed: VENGAI & AMBULI

Rothling found it hard to suppress his excitement but somewhat maintained his poise in front of the translator.

Rothling cleared his voice and announced: "This is what we have received by way of intelligence report. I don't want the police to be involved at this stage as the information might be false. Just post this letter and let us see how the Pannai responds. If he seeks police protection we will offer it. But I warn you, not a word to anyone about this letter," warned Rothling.

"Yes, Sir! On my honour I promise...S...Sir," stammered the translator.
Ambuli tells his story

While Rothling plotted how to implicate Ambuli and Vengai in darker crimes, Ambuli was at the dwikarna cave narrating his story to Vengai...

"My name is Jambulingam. I belong to the village of Nemili in Dravidapuram. I am called Ambuli after the moon because it is believed that the Moon God has blessed me with strange powers."

"What powers?" asked Vengai.

"I will tell you. My father is a priest. From him I learnt the Vedas and other sacred mantras. I was earning my living by conducting holy ceremonies and other rites. At an appropriate time, my parents found a suitable girl for me in the neighbouring village of Paththamadai. A few days before the wedding, we put together bullock and cart and set out. Reaching the bride's village would take at least five days. The caravan consisted of my parents and other close relatives. We left in a group of five-six carts and made reasonable progress each day. At dusk we freed the bullocks to let them graze while the women cooked in the open and served us food. The men performed their daily sandhya and worked at putting up the makeshift tents for the night's rest.

"I remember it was the auspicious day of the full moon. I stood waist deep in water worshipping the setting sun when I heard the call of a strange bird. 'Am..boo..lili...Am..boo..lili...Am..boo..lili...'. the bird seemed to call. I followed the direction from whence came the voice. I just walked across the river, unmindful of its depth and not heeding my father's warnings or my mother's pleas that it was dangerous.
to cross the river while it was on the rise, I reached the other bank and walked into the thicket in the direction of the voice. 'Am..boo..lii...Am..boo..lii...Am..boo..lii...'. the bird called.

"I reached the foot of a large tree, which housed innumerable birds and snakes. There were countless bugs and beetles living on its bark. Small saplings thrived in its shade. I looked up to see the moon shimmering in-between the branches; the sky seemed to have settled on the tree top. I have heard that Gautam Buddha got his enlightenment on a full moon day under a tree. I too received enlightenment, though of a different kind, on the ominous full moon day under that great tree which held so much life in it. 'Am..boo..lii...Am..boo..lii...Am..boo..lii...'. came the voice again and I looked up closely to see what bird called me thus. At that instant the moon's rays coursing through the tree touched me, bathing me in its wholesome light. I felt a power, a great healing power descend on me, a special kind of energy diffusing into me a vigour, which blessed me with the capacity to heal the ill. I looked all around me. The trees, birds and the entire environ seemed to lisp my name...Ambuli, Ambuli, Ambuli.

"I walked back to the camp, a new man. My father saw the difference in my stride. Awestruck, he described me as the moon on earth. My father believed me when I said that I had received special knowledge of healing from the Moon God himself. He said the moon was in the ascendant when I was born and it was appropriate that the great Lord of the Moon had renamed me Ambuli on the Pournami or full moon day. For others it was difficult to reason
this out. They thought me insane. To those nonbelievers I had this to say: 'The first man who believed that human beings could swim like fish was thought mad. The first man who believed that a round object called the wheel could drag loads ten times its weight was considered insane. And the man who discovered agriculture was dismissed as a lunatic. Likewise this Ambuli who has received powers from the Moon God will also be considered mad until time proves you all wrong.'

"Yet, many believed that I had lost my mind. But my parents had unflinching faith in me and went by every word I said. They agreed that the Gods had indeed deigned to grant me special powers for a higher purpose. They even felt proud and happy to have a son like me until I broke the news that I didn't want to be married. When I communicated my decision to stay a Brahmachari, a celibate, and serve the people, my parents broke down and cursed the Gods who had put such mad ideas into my head.

"What will we tell the girl's family?' they mourned. My mother particularly took it upon herself to convince me to marry. But I refused to change my mind. Just as I walked across to console my mother, one of our bullocks bellowed loudly. I rushed to the bullock while others followed. I was there just in time to see a venomous snake slithering away. The bullock was foaming at the mouth succumbing to the potent poison the viper had injected. I looked at the luminous moon which now had a coil of black cloud around it, quite like a serpent with a raised hood. It seemed like a signal from the Gods. I bent down and picked up the bullocks' leg and inhaled deeply. While
exhaling in one breath I chanted a verse from the Atharva Veda which began to bail out the poison from the animal's system. In less than a minute the foaming stopped and the bullock was back on its feet. It rushed to seize a mouthful of grass. People around me were astounded. So was I. I had mastered only three Vedas—Rig, Sama and Yajur, under my father. How then did I chant a verse from the Atharva Veda?

"Now my parents were convinced that I was indeed chosen to heal man and animal alike and they agreed to cancel my wedding and return to our village, Nemili. A few relatives headed for the bride's house to explain the situation to them. Word soon spread about my newfound power. Many thronged my house for a cure. I began to treat the young and old, rich and poor, upper and lower caste alike, much to my father's displeasure. First, he objected to my treating people for free. But even giving free treatment became acceptable when he saw me going into the houses of the lower castes and the untouchables to attend on them."

Ambuli stopped here to ask Vengai.

"Do you know about the untouchables?" he asked.

"I have heard about them, but don't know much. You see, in our Vanaraksha tribe, we don't have caste differences. Who is an untouchable really?" asked Vengai.

"The untouchables are considered the lowest in the caste system, while the Brahmins rank as the highest. The untouchables clean our toilets, carry waste and remove garbage. They keep the villages clean and free from terrible diseases. But the upper castes are so cruel to them..." Ambuli choked on his words.
Tears filled his eyes. Vengai waited until Ambuli regained his composure and continued...

"Since these people did such menial jobs, in polluting and unclean settings, they seem as polluted people and therefore considered untouchables. The untouchables have almost no rights in the society. People behave harshly towards them. Their houses are distanced from the rest and they are not allowed to touch anybody. They cannot enter the house of the upper castes nor can they step into a temple. Why, they are not even allowed to use the same wells as others. At public functions they are compelled to sit at a distance. In some places the attitude towards them is even more severe. A mere contact with their shadow is seen as polluting. And there are lots and lots of people like Bhegan who ill-treat the untouchables, beat them and spit on them for no particular reason," said Ambuli, shaking with anger.

For a while both Vengai and Ambuli remained silent. They were deeply disturbed by the plight of the untouchables. Ambuli cleared his throat and continued...

"My father, a staunch Brahmin, could not tolerate my stepping into the lower castes' street. Worse, going into their houses to give medication and care!

"My father began to shun me. People stopped inviting me to conduct ceremonies and rituals, which were my only source of earning. My father's position as the chief priest began to be endangered because of my activities. Other priests condemned my father for allowing me to interact with the lower castes. Fearing ostracization, my father drove me out of the house."
“I built a shack in the outskirts of the forests and began a new life. Wild roots, fruits and water from the nearby brook became my staple diet. People still flocked to me for treatment. Women belonging to the upper caste secretly came to me, often at night, for cures. In my free time I began to study the political scene of our region. You may dislike the British for your own reasons but they don’t entertain our caste system. There is no upper caste or lower caste among them. Also, they don’t believe or encourage superstitions. I began to learn more about the Britishers. I also began to learn English from a White doctor who befriended me. Till he left for England, I was a regular guest at his house. I learnt many of their customs and beliefs. The doctor was dumbstruck by my curing powers. Life was quite peaceful until I heard about the Inspector who was ill-treating the lower caste. One day, Muthu, an untouchable boy came to me with severe wounds. He said the Inspector had attacked him. I treated the boy and immediately set out to meet the Inspector. I warned him that if he did not stop such atrocity I could put a spell on him that would leave him decapitated for life. No sooner had I said it than I felt the energy of the Moon God seep into me. I don’t remember what happened next. Now there are stories going around that I had sliced off his head. Perhaps it is true. Maybe the Moon God used me as an instrument to punish the cruel Inspector. I don’t know. But I have to accept responsibility for his death. Now I am fleeing the police,” concluded Ambuli.

Vengai remained quiet for a long time. Then he gingerly removed the poster from his waist belt and
handed it to Ambuli. Ambuli read it again and wondered how fate had brought them together.

The enemies prepare

Great confusion and commotion erupted in Pannai Paramasivam’s house when the warning note arrived. The shocking news sent shivers down everyone’s spine. Gomathi was besides herself with worry. Had Sita divulged the secret about the Nilavarai to others? Why this sudden attack on her father’s property?

The house was buzzing with activity. Numerous people were floating in and out of the house. Gomathi’s father was too apprehensive to go and check his valuables in the Nilavarai. A kind of unbreakable tension filled the air. Coconut water flowed freely while all spoke about the impending danger. Fresh rumours flew thick and fast across the region about the arrival of the warning. Everybody waited with bated breath to see what decision the richest man, Pannai Paramasivam, would take.

Deenu was running fast across the woody thicket, unmindful of the prickly shrubs and thorny undergrowth tearing at his legs. He looked like a gazelle in flight. Deenu had to reach the news to Vengai quickly. Rumours were building up that Vengai and his team of fifty armed dacoits were going to arrive on horseback to rob Pannai’s house. The police were also beginning to escort the Pannai everywhere. This had to be communicated to Vengai who was in mid-forest and cut off from all news.

After Deenu left, Vengai and Ambuli sat clutching
the Sudesa Mitran newspaper helplessly. Who but the spiteful Rothling could have started these rumours! As such they were in the midst of the dangerous Vrali forest, surviving on mere roots, honey and wild fruits. They had no weapons other than the two knives Vengai carried. Gathering food everyday was by itself a major task. Vengai hunted down small animals while Ambuli subsisted on vegetarian foods. They could not cultivate anything, as they had to be on the move constantly to evade the police. Given the situation, how could they venture to rob one of the most powerful men in the region? Vengai and Ambuli felt stumped by this unfortunate turn of events.

"We cannot keep quiet and lie low after such propaganda..." Vengai was the first to speak. "What do you think we should do?" asked Ambuli. "Let us strike at the appointed hour at the appointed place," said Vengai. "But how will it affect Rothling? Our objective is to fix him so that he doesn't try these cheap tricks again," said Ambuli. "You are right! We should make a fool of him so that he does not dream of messing up with us again. Listen to my plan," said Vengai and the two put their heads together to plot their modus operandi.

After talking in low whispers for a long time, Vengai and Ambuli threw up their heads and laughed heartily. Ambuli guffawed till his stomach ached. Vengai laughed so hard that he feared his sides might split open. Tears flowed from their eyes. It was really weeks since they had had a good laugh. It made them feel light and happy. A new sense of camaraderie
permeated the air. A closer bond of friendship blossomed between them.

"That laugh did us good, no?" asked Ambuli.
"Yes," said Vengai happily.

"Now to advocate our plan. We will go in different directions, get the things we need and meet at the _dwikarna_ cave. I would need the following—rotten fruits, vegetables, carcass of any dead animal, animal wastes, water, and finally a vessel to heat up all this stuff to concoct the most pungent, noxious and foul-smelling liquid ever," said Ambuli and again the two began to laugh so loudly that the entire forest reverberated with a happiness unfelt before.

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Back in Nemam, Rothling, at the Pannai’s request, was paying him a visit to check on the security aspect. Rothling was very impressed with Paramasivam’s bungalow and its grandeur. He expected the two thugs to strike definitely. 'Let them come and fall into my trap,' thought Rothling and laughed. 'Even if they don't strike, I would have succeeded in creating terror in the minds of the people,' he pacified himself.

He was taken aback by the richness of the Pannai’s property. The main hall with its courtyard could easily seat some hundred people. The brass lamps shone like mirrors. The pillars were of pure teak and every photograph was framed in gold. There was a large chandelier which could hold a hundred lamps. The womenfolk were all decked in fine silk and blazing jewellery. Their hair was entwined with flowers.

Rothling’s plan had worked well. The dubious warning had set the entire village agog with rumours and anxiety. The Pannai Paramasivam had sought
police protection and Rothling was there with his force to plan protective measures. After all, weren’t they dealing with two dreaded thugs who were at large?

'Well! Well! What a nice place to rob!' thought Rothling, when a servant came in with tender coconut water from one of their groves. *

Sipping the cool water Rothling asked, "Do you keep your valuables in a bank or..?"

"No, Sir!" said the Pannai. Then stepping a little closer he whispered, "I will show you."

Unsuspecting his true nature, the gullible Pannai led Rothling into the hall which held the Nilavarai with all its valuables, family heirloom and other riches. Then he announced to all present: "The officer and I are going to be in consultation behind closed doors. I do not want any disturbance." The Pannai shut the door behind him and secured it with lock and key.

When Rothling moved ahead to seat himself on a chair, the Pannai respectfully motioned him to stay near the wall and quietly began to strip the carpet off the floor much to Rothling’s amazement. The Pannai then set all the chairs, teapoy and other furniture aside and opened the door on the floor. Rothling was flabber-gasted to see such an ingenious idea to safeguard one’s treasures. The Pannai beckoned Rothling to step into the Nilavarai. Rothling was dumbstruck when he saw the spread of jewels, caskets of gems, chests bursting with valuables, boxes filled with silk and other exquisite finery. The Pannai was brimming with pride. He was bursting with happiness at his chance to display all the wealth to Rothling. Pannai Paramasivam opened each box, safe and chest to display its contents.
"This," said the Pannai proudly showing off a sickle with gems embedded on its handle, "belonged to my grandfather’s grandfather."

"And this diamond necklace was worn by my mother and before her, by my grandmother, and so on. Now this will go to my daughter, Gomathi, when she gets married," said the Pannai.

"All this silk and other varieties of silk belonged to my father and forefathers. I have kept them as a souvenir. They contain pure gold zari. Even in those days each sari, each dhoti, must have costed around Rs. 1000 to make," said the Pannai.

Just then somebody knocked from above, much to Pannai Paramasivam’s dismay.

"I wonder who it is," said the Pannai a little angrily.

Rothling suggested in a reassuring tone, "Let us go up. I am sure your valuables will be very safe down here."

The Pannai agreed instantly. But what he did not notice was that the case containing the most precious of jewels, the Kannika diamond, was left open by Gomathi and Sita on their last trip to the Nilavarai. Seizing the opportunity, Rothling slipped the huge diamond into his pocket when the Pannai was not looking. Then they both left the Nilavarai and climbed the stairs leading to the room above. Meanwhile, the knocking continued.

"Who is it?" asked the Pannai angrily, "I said I didn’t want to be disturbed."

"It is the police. They want to talk to the Sir inside, and immediately," said a timid voice from outside which probably belonged to some servant.

"Yes, I am coming!" called out Rothling who
was eager to escape with the diamond.

"Sir! Please wait till I put the furniture back and nail the carpet or my secret will be out/' begged the Pannai.

"Why! of course I will wait. Nobody should know about this underground hideout. No robber can find this place. However, I will give you full protection, but you must be on guard too/' said Rothling while the Pannai hurriedly moved the furniture back in its original place.

When Rothling left the farmhouse, Paramasivam was proud that not only had a big official visited his house, he had also partaken of coconut water from his grove and was impressed with his Nilavarai. Little did he realize that in the bargain he had lost one of his most valuable possessions!

**Vengai and Ambuli strike**

The house was stock still when Vengai and Ambuli stepped in. A cat silently tiptoed across the room.

'Haughty just like its owner,' thought Vengai. The house looked immaculately clean and luxurious with its high curtains, plush seating arrangements and pictures on the wall. Books and papers were all in order. The chairs and the glass-topped tables were polished to perfection. The beds were made and a jug of water waited by the bedside. All vases had fresh flowers and there were small indoor plants in brass vessels.

Getting into the house had been pretty much easy. There was not a single policeman in sight. 'They must
be all busy guarding Pannai Paramasivam's house,' thought Ambuli and Vengai.

Breaking the lock had been child's play. Probably the owner had thought no thief would dare to step into a policeman's house!

Vengai and Ambuli leisurely strolled through the empty house. The kitchen shone with its spick and span vessels. The reading table in the study held sheafs of white paper and bottles of red and blue inks. The table in the dining room was set for one. From the bowl of fruits on the table, Ambuli helped himself to a banana and tossed a chikku to Vengai who began munching on it heartily. It was long since Vengai and Ambuli had eaten good homemade food. So they went into the kitchen and randomly opened the containers to see what they held. There was mashed potatoes spiced with cloves and cardamoms, a bowl of vegetable soup, rice mixed with almond sauce and lots of bread, butter and preserves. The storeroom itself was well stocked with salted foods, pickles, bread, rusks, biscuits, rice, vegetables, fruits, juices and what not.

"Ambuli, will you please pass me your sack?" asked Vengai.

"Why should we waste our sack. Take one from the storeroom itself," said Ambuli.

"That is a good idea," said Vengai and pulled out a sack from one of the top draws. Ambuli held the sack open and Vengai began to shove the food items into the sack. The two cleaned out the entire storeroom in a jiffy. Next, they stepped into the kitchen and began to push all the containers out of the racks into the sack. In went salt, pepper, spices, oil, sauces,
jams, knives, spoons and some vessels. Once the sacks were full, Vengai and Ambuli tied them up neatly and set them aside.

"Vengai, let us explore the wardrobe and see if we can help ourselves to some clothes and bed linen," said Ambuli.

"Yes! It gets too cold in the nights in the forest. Let us take some blankets. But the bag should not become too heavy. We have to be careful on that account," said Vengai.

The two stepped into the bedroom and opened the wardrobe. White shirts hung on one side of the bureau and trousers on the other. Vengai and Ambuli stuffed a large bag with clothes, blankets and bed linen. They even pulled out the sheets from the bed. Job done, Vengai and Ambuli placed the three sacks by the door and began their other more important work. After all they were here to teach Rothling a lesson.

"Jai Shakthi! Para Shakthi!" shouted Ambuli and smashed the glass top of the dining table. Next he broke the arms and legs of all the chairs with an axe he had brought along. Vengai pulled down books from the shelves and poured red and blue ink over them.

"Save just one plain sheet of paper for me!" shouted Ambuli while breaking the china figurines in the showcase. Then he added in a warning tone, "We must hurry up. It is late, the police might be here any minute. We have already made too much noise."

"Quick, let us finish with the rest of the rooms," said Vengai and the two continued their onslaught.

The bedroom had two safes.

"Should we check this out?" asked Vengai.

It was the safe in which Rothling kept the diamond
snitched from Pannai Paramasivam's Nilavarai.

"No! Anyway we don't intend to steal anything. Why should we break open the safe? It is only a waste of time. Let it be/' said Ambuli and returned to his back-breaking work.

"I think we should take a look/' insisted Vengai.

Using a skeleton key Vengai nimbly opened the safe and almost shrieked with shock. For there lay, right before his eyes, the biggest, shiniest diamond he had ever seen. Hearing Vengai's cry, Ambuli hurried to his side. "What is a mere officer doing with such a huge diamond?" he gasped.

"I am sure this guy is up to no good," said Vengai and closed the safe.

"Forget about it. Let us finish our work," they chorused smilingly, getting on with their work.

They broke the beds, tore up curtains, pulled out books from shelves, overturned chairs and tables. They stashed towels into the toilets clogging them. They broke up pipes and lights and littered the house with all sorts of debris. When enough mess was made, Ambuli gingerly opened a pouch and gleefully sprinkled the awfully pungent potion he had so carefully prepared. A noxious and unbearable smell filled the air almost immediately. The house began to stink like a pigsty.

Vengai and Ambuli prepared to leave. Before leaving, Ambuli wrote a letter to Rothling in perfect English and left it on the table for him to see.

Vengai and Ambuli wrapped themselves in black blankets partially covering their faces with it, so that none recognized them. On their way back, the two stopped to donate food and clothes from the two
sacks to the poor and needy. The third sack, they kept for their use. Vengai and Ambuli split the contents of the third sack into the first two sacks so that carrying them was easier. They took the path which would lead them through the houses of the lower castes. If they entered the streets where the upper caste lived, they could get into trouble.

Soon they were out of the residential areas. Vengai and Ambuli hurried across the fields when they suddenly heard the bellow of a cow. Ambuli turned with the intuitiveness of a healer.

"The cow is in pain," said Ambuli.

Rushing to the cow, Ambuli seized its horns and pressed its head to the ground to make its movements less violent. But the animal continued to bellow in pain. Ambuli looked around to see what had caused the cow pain when he spotted some weeds where the cow stood.

"Oh, God! The cow has consumed poisonous parthenium," gasped Ambuli. "If I don't treat the cow right away, it will die," he added.

"Then why don't you treat it? Aren't you a blessed healer?" urged Vengai.

"Unfortunately, we need some herbs to make him expel the poison. Shall we take the cow with us? I know it will slow our progress, but I cannot leave the animal to die here," said Ambuli.

Vengai was at a loss. Dragging a sick animal along was no mean task. But it looked like Ambuli would stay on to treat the animal even at the cost of his own life. Vengai quickly made a decision. "Ambuli, let us take the cow with us and fast," he said.

Ambuli held the rope tied around the cow's neck
and began to drag the animal when they heard a voice from afar. "Hey, stop! Where are you taking Kaveri?"
the voice shouted.

It was Sita, running and shouting after the two dark figures who were stealing her pet.

"We don't have time to explain things. If we leave the cow here, it will die. Let us move fast." Ambuli hissed and pulled the cow's tail to make it run.

"Kaveri...Kaveri... Help! Someone is stealing my cow, someone is stealing my cow..." Sita cried out, even while the two men and the cow ran with amazing speed and disappeared into the region of the Vrali forest.

Sita sat on the field and cried aloud. "Why isn't there anyone to help me? Will people sit up only if it is the Pannai's house that is going to be raided? My cow! My precious cow! Dragged away by some thugs. Oh, Kaveri! what will I do without you? Why did you agree to go with them?" Sita wailed long and hard. Little did she realize that she should in fact have been indebted to the two men who had just done her a great favour.

Where is Sita?

"Appa, Kaveri has been stolen!" cried Sita, rushing into her house.

"What are you saying?" shouted Kanniappan, Sita's father.

"Two people dragged Kaveri away while she was grazing in the field. I ran after them but they were too fast for me," replied Sita and broke down.
"It is all right. It is all right/" said Kanniyappan soothingly. "We will find Kaveri. Those thugs cannot hide her for long." Heart of heart Kanniyappan hoped.

"Anyway if there is one bad news, there is one good news, too," said Kanniyappan, trying to distract Sita. But Sita was lost in thought, worrying about Kaveri and how she was faring in the hands of the robbers.

Kanniyappan repeated himself. "If there is bad news, there is good news as well."

"What good news?" asked Sita in-between tears.

"Aha! Your marriage has been fixed, my dear," said Kanniyappan happily.

"What?" cried Sita in horror.

"Your marriage has been fixed with Maruda Muthu of the next village. He is a carpenter, good-looking and well mannered. We have arranged for the wedding to be held in the month of purattasi," said Kanniyappan, brimming with joy.

Sita was woebegone. Though it was a custom in their village to marry off girls at a young age, she could never accept the logic behind the same. She was only ten years after all. Marriage would mean discontinuing school, taking on huge responsibilities and not being able to pursue her dream of becoming a reporter in a national newspaper. It would mean moving out of her parents' household and adjusting to new people, to a new way of living...as the daughter-in-law of people she had never seen or met before. Above all, she would not even be allowed to play like other children of her age. In a nutshell, it would be the end of her childhood.

And, what was worse, if the boy died of some
disease or accident, she would be condemned to a life of widowhood forever, irrespective of how young she was. And to think that her father was actually happy about getting her married!

How much a marriage entailed! It would mean shedding skirts and blouses to wear only saris. You cannot eat whenever you want. One had to wait until all the male members of the household, including the husband, had eaten. Marriage also meant bearing a child before one reached an appropriate age. It would mean slaving in the kitchen from dawn to dusk. Above all, a daughter-in-law couldn't see her parents whenever she wanted. She would have to seek her in-laws concurrence before doing so.

'Oh, God! How can I, a mere ten-year-old, ever think of leaving my mother? Don't I need her? Who will wash my hair? Who will I hug when it thunders and showers?' wondered Sita with tears in her eyes.

'Look at Komala in agraharam. She got married when she was twelve. A year later, her husband died of cholera. Now she has tonsured her head, removed her bangles and earrings and wears only saffron-coloured saris. And the poor thing is all of fourteen years! She was such a good student at school, excelling in sports and music. Now she has strict restrictions about going and coming. She can eat only one square meal a day because she is a widow. For dinner she has to eat only fruits. Must I also throw away my life by risking marriage? Never!' vowed Sita vehemently to herself. 'First I lose my beloved Kaveri, now this!' thought Sita and shuddered. 'Who will understand my plight?'

'I will try and talk to him,' decided Sita. She wiped
her tears and stepped out of the room. Clearing her voice she spoke: "Appa, I don't want to be married!"

"Shut up, you wretch!" her father responded as a reflex. Then cooling down a bit, he spoke a little more kindly. "Why, Child, come here. I will explain," he said. "What is wrong with Maruda Muthu? His family is good and he is a nice boy himself. You will be happy there," said Sita's father.

Sita stared vacantly at her father. He would never understand. He was so soaked in tradition and customs that he failed to realize that it was a big blunder to marry off girls when they were yet children. Sita looked at her mother hoping for some support. But did she ever have the freedom to express her opinion on any matter?

Sita's mother had herself come into the household when she was merely twelve years of age. Ever since she had been slaving in the kitchen and the fields, dedicating her life to the family. She was frail and did not speak much. Her eyes too spoke of lost dreams. She loved Sita a great deal and always whispered, "You must study well. You should not end up like me." But now her voice was muted, she made no protest. Sita had no one to support her. If Kaveri were there, she would have buried her head in her neck and asked for counsel. Gomathi, her best friend, would not be able to help her either, as she herself was trapped in a marriage proposal.

Sita decided it was futile to talk with her father. The next thing he would do if she refused to comply was to beat her. And beat her he would till she accepted out of fear. Some things seemed to be written on stone, like the practice of child marriage and it
would take a sledge-hammer of a force to splinter the stone.

Sita retired to bed refusing dinner. She sat huddled in a corner staring wistfully at her school bag and books. Suddenly overcome by grief, Sita began to weep hard. Sobs racked her body. She cried for everything. For Kaveri, her school, her friends, herself and her mother. The whole night Sita sat in the corner weeping. Her parents left her alone thinking that a good cry through the night would make her reconcile to the situation. But little did they know that Sita was a girl of grit and determination. She was not one to be cowed by any situation.

The little girl wept till her eyes blurred. In the wee hours of dawn, a solution came to Sita's mind. Nobody was going to separate her from her Kaveri or her dreams. Sita got up and quietly emptied her school bag. Arranging her books in a neat pile, she picked up a notebook and pencil. Next, she removed one set of clothes from the bureau soundlessly and put it inside her school bag along with the notebook and pencil. From the bedding, she extracted a black blanket and wrapped it round her head and shoulders. Now she was ready. Picking up the bag, she noiselessly tiptoed to the back door. In an hour or so it would be daybreak, so Sita had to make good her escape before people in the house stirred.

Sita quietly opened the back door and stepped out. The air was cool and fresh. Some birds were already awake and the crickets were chattering in the fields. Sita took a deep breath and began to tear across the fields which opened up behind her house.

Sita ran to the place where Kaveri stood grazing
the previous night. She hoped the footprints were fresh. Sure enough Sita spotted two sets of human footprints and one of a cow. Sita sank to the ground, weeping. 'Oh, Kaveri, how I miss you! Where are you? Lead me to you! I have left my parents and now I don't even have you,' cried Sita. Just then a mynah squawked above her head and flew towards the Vrali forest. It momentarily distracted Sita from her sorrow. She saw the bird disappear into the forest when a thought struck her.

'Why not go into the Vrali forest? That would make a good hiding place. Nobody would think of looking for a small girl in a forest. I will go there,' decided Sita and began to sprint in the direction of the forest. She had to make good time, as people from her community would start searching for her the moment dawn broke and realized her escape.

'I will not stop until I reach mid-forest. I will not get married. I won't let anyone find me and take me back home,' Sita vowed vehemently.

Meanwhile, Kaveri was grazing peacefully in a clearing in the forest. Kaveri had felt sick in the stomach the previous night. But Ambuli's magic mixture of special herbs made her vomit all the poisonous parthenium. Now she felt healthy enough to graze.

Kaveri found grazing in the forest strange. It was very different from the domestic scene of fields and meadows she was used to in the village. The grass was surely greener and tastier here, but odd sounds of wild beasts kept coming, making her shudder with fear.

Kaveri wondered where Sita was. It was she who
fed her the first blade of grass for the day. It was Sita who gave her a bath in the pond and plied her with oilcakes and water mixed with salted husk. Not to say that the two men who had brought her from the fields had not cared for her well! Now they had led her to this clearing where the lush grass grew. The only thing missing to make the scene entirely happy was Sita.

Meanwhile, Vengai and Ambuli were returning from their daily hunt for roots, fruits and other edible leaves. They saw Kaveri grazing peacefully in the same place they had left her. Both Ambuli and Vengai had not ventured very far from where Kaveri was grazing as they did not want her to fall a prey to any wild animal.

"I wonder what she is called," said Ambuli. "That little girl who chased us must be very upset over her lost cow. But we had no time to explain why we were taking her."

"Yes. She must be so upset," agreed Vengai.

"What were those weeds the cow ate? I have never heard the name before," said Vengai who otherwise was quite familiar with plants and their properties.

"They are the dreaded parthenium weeds. As you know, I work extensively with herbs for my cures. I found these weeds in my village, thriving near a pond polluted by wastes from a tanner's shop. They just grow wild but our people are yet to take notice of them," said Ambuli.

"Are they poisonous to humans?" asked Vengai.

"Yes, of course! The parthenium weeds are dangerous and harmful to both human beings and livestock, though many don't know it yet. The weed
can make your skin break out into severe infection and cause breathing problems in both men and animals. The parthenium flowers usually burst forth with the onset of rain. That is when the poison mingles with air, spreading the infection real fast," said Ambuli shuddering involuntarily.

"What can cure it?" asked Vengai.

"I am still working on the cure. If the weeds spread out wildly into the villages, they can cause great havoc," said Ambuli.

Thus, chatting away, Ambuli and Vengai reached the clearing where Kaveri grazed. Ambuli lovingly patted Kaveri when a harsh voice rasped from behind, "Take your hands off my cow!"

It was Sita. She had run all the way from her village into the forest. On the way, thorns had pricked her feet, bramble bushes had torn her clothes and low branches had scratched her face. Sita bled but she plodded on, courageously. Nobody would believe that a young girl could brave the dangers of a forest as wild as the Vrali. And dangerous it was! A snake slinked past Sita and she screamed in horror. As an echo came the shrieks of the monkeys from the trees and a distant roar of a lion. Terrified, Sita began to cry. Now what was worse? Coming to the forest or getting married?

Getting married was worse than being in the forest decided Sita firmly and immediately felt better.

She had come a long distance running and walking before she spotted the clearing in the forest. Even from afar she was able to recognize the cow as Kaveri. Just as she rushed to Kaveri’s side, the two thugs stepped in from the other side. One of them even had
the cheek to place his hand on Kaveri's neck. The thief he was! Sita could not take it.

"Take your hands off my cow," she ordered.

"Oh! It is that girl who chased us in the field!" said Vengai, terribly surprised.

"Why, Child? Have you braved the forest just for the sake of your cow?" asked Ambuli, patting the cow's head kindly.

"I asked you to take your hands off my cow, you thief!" shouted Sita and reached for the nearest stone. Quite suddenly she flung it at Ambuli, angry that it was he who had dragged her Kaveri away.

"Ouch!" cried Ambuli as the stone found its mark on his forehead and it began to bleed.

"You chit of a girl!" said Ambuli, walking towards Sita who retraced her steps in fear.

In a quick movement, Ambuli lifted Sita and hurled her high in the air like a baby and caught her on the descent. That seemed to leave Sita a little subdued. Taking her by the shoulder, Ambuli led her to the foot of a large tree and seated her there.

"Now listen, Child! We did not steal your cow," said Ambuli.

Sita merely glared at him.

"Your cow...what's-her-name...had eaten some poisonous weeds called parthenium. If I had left her there, she would have died. If I had remained to treat her, I would be dead by now. So I did what was best for both. We, Vengai and I, just brought her with us and treated her. Now that she is all right, you may take her back to your village. We were anyway planning to free her near your fields someday when it was safe," concluded Ambuli.
"I'm not going back to my village," said Sita firmly.
"Why?!!" chorused Vengai and Ambuli together.
"My parents have fixed my marriage. I am only ten years of age. I want to study and grow up to become a famous reporter in a newspaper. I will not marry," Sita sounded firm in her decision.
"Well said," chorused the two.
"You have saved my Kaveri. I cannot thank you enough. Anybody who has risked their lives to save a cow must be good at heart. So I have a request. May I stay here with you?" pleaded Sita.
"Here? With us?" asked Ambuli and laughed.
"The police have launched a huge manhunt for us. We are supposed to be forest brigands who torment the innocent. And a little girl like you wants to stay with us?" laughed Vengai.
"Yes, I want to be here. If you don't let me stay with you, then I will take Kaveri with me and go deeper into the forest and try to live there. Let wild animals eat me, I don't care," said Sita, which made both Vengai and Ambuli burst into a hearty laughter.
"Hear, hear! We have a brave girl with us who would rather die than go back home to be married. You are not scared to stay with bandits, huh? Okay, then you may stay with us," said Vengai and Ambuli.
So began Sita's new life in the Vrali Malai forest.

Turmoil in three houses

"The Kannika diamond is gone!" wailed Pannai Paramasivam.
"Oh, God!" many voices in the household cried in
shock. Nobody paused to think for a moment that the dreaded robbers had not struck at their house at all. Not a fly or mosquito had gone past the security that night.

"That diamond is worth atleast a lakh of rupees. My father, his father and before him his grandfather had possessed this diamond for generations. "Oh! how am I going to make good this loss?" moaned the Pannai. Everybody around him began to weep and cry aloud. It was Gomathi who first spoke up.

"Appa, but the robbers never came/' she said.

Suddenly the exclamations died down. Then someone from the crowd suggested, "Ambuli is said to be a wizard. He has supernatural powers. Maybe he stole the diamond from a distance and fled."

"Just shut up, you fool!" boomed the Pannai and asked the crowd to disperse. He needed to be alone to think.

Pannai Paramasivam was a rational man who did not believe the rumours about Ambuli being a wizard. The Pannai began to go over the activities of the day. He had gone into the Nilavarai with Rothling for a security check. There was nobody in the Nilavarai the other day except him and Rothling. 'And how could Rothling have taken the diamond when I was there by his side all the while?' wondered the Pannai. 'In fact I did not even open the pouch which contained the diamonds,' the Pannai thought aloud.

"Appa! I think it is that officer who stole it. You showed him the Nilavarai, didn’t you?" asked Gomathi in a whisper wanting to help her father, yet scared to tell him that she and Sita had also been to the Nilavarai.
"No, Child! The officer must be a good man, or he would not have taken a personal interest in our case. Why don't you take rest? You must be so tired after all this excitemtent," said the Pannai extra tenderly as Gomathi was shortly going to be married.

Gomathi was sure that it was Rothling who had stolen the gem, but who would believe her. It was quite possible that her father had been momentarily distracted when Rothling found the opportunity to slip the diamond into his pocket. Gomathi, however, did not press this view on her father too much. She didn't want her father to get even the mildest of suspicion that she had been in the Nilavarai. Once that truth emerged, all hell would break loose. So Gomathi just bided her time while the people around her wept over the theft of the invaluable diamond.

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Back in Sita's house, a storm was brewing.
"Sita is missing," cried Kanniappan.
"My child is lost. Where could she have gone?" wailed Sita's mother.
"She was telling me that two people had dragged her cow away. Is it possible that the same two thugs kidnapped her in the dead of night, fearing Sita might identify them?" wondered Balambal, Sita's widowed aunt.
"Yes! That is a possibility. What shall I do now?" cried Sita's mother.

Kanniappan could not bear the thought of his daughter being in the clutches of two dreaded gangsters. He felt so alone and helpless. Suddenly, he felt the urge to have people by his side to share his grief. On an impulse Kanniappan ran out of his
house shouting, "The gangsters have kidnapped my daughter! Sita is missing! She has been kidnapped!"

Soon a large crowd of sympathisers surrounded Kanniyappan. Kanniyappan related how the two thieves had dragged Kaveri from the field and how Sita had identified them as Vengai and Ambuli from the posters (this part was Kanniyappan's own addition). And fearing that Sita might inform the police, the gangsters who had originally come to steal from the Pannai's house, instead had left with Sita and her cow.

Kanniyappan's story seemed very credible and completely true to the onlookers. "Let us inform the police. They will take action and rescue your daughter from the thugs," someone suggested.

It seemed a practical idea to Kanniyappan who immediately left for the police station.

Meanwhile, Rothling was riding back home utterly satisfied that the villagers were now totally in fear of Vengai and Ambuli. It did not matter that they had not shown up at the Pannai's house. Putting the fear in people's mind was more important.

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When Rothling's coach turned into the street where his house stood, an unusual smell greeted him.

"Yuck! Yech! What kind of smell is this? What do people do to create such foul smells?" muttered Rothling. As he approached his house the putrid smell grew stronger and stronger, so much so that Rothling had to cover his nose with a handkerchief. When he opened the gate of his house, he immediately knew something was seriously wrong.

Rothling stepped inside only to find the entire place
in shambles. Everything was either broken or damaged. Above all there was this stench, this horrible stench, which seemed to claw out his entire digestive system. Quite unexpectedly, Rothling vomited. Retching and coughing, Rothling was about to step out when he spotted a letter on the broken table. Grabbing it, he rushed out of the house unable to stand the nasty smell even a second longer. Once he was out in the open, he read the letter under the street light:

Dear Rothling,

Never have we seen a more fragrant or neater house than yours! We wish to thank you for the food and clothes you have generously donated to the poor and the needy. If case you are short of clothes, they will gladly lend you some. Next time make sure to stock some cashews and almonds too. And please buy some dhotis and kurtas, as they are more suitable for our climate. We have taken great care to leave the house as we found it.

Yours truly,
Vengai and Ambuli

"Why, those devils!" sputtered Rothling too angry to speak. Pocketing the paper and mouthing obscenities, Rothling headed for the police station to register a complaint. At the station there were two others, the Pannai and Kanniyappan, waiting to lodge their complaints. All three met to register their protest against their common enemies, Vengai and Ambuli.
A new plan

"What will you eat, Sita?" asked Vengai.

"What do you have?" enquired Sita, knowing quite well that here one would not get what one would normally eat at home.

"What a nice child you are, Sita! Children of your age would fuss so much over food and here you are in the middle of the forest, ready to eat whatever we offer," said Ambuli, appreciatively.

The three sat down to eat fruits and honey collected at different times. When night fell, they retired to Dwikarna cave after tying Kavefi at the mouth of the cave. Vengai and Ambuli took turns in the night to watch over Kaveri so that she came to no harm from wild animals of Vrali forest.

It was nearly a week since Sita came into the forest. Though initially she was wary of the two men whom the world portrayed as gangsters, she slowly began to realize that they were kind people. She saw how well they had taken care of Kaveri. For a week now, Sita had been eating wild fruits and roots. Sometimes Vengai and Ambuli went hungry in order to give Sita a larger share of the food they gathered. Often she craved for home-cooked food, but controlled her urge, as it was more important to stay in the forest than risk going back home to be married.

As the three retired to their straw beds, Sita felt a tight pull in her lower abdomen. "Ooh!" she whined.

"What happened, Sita?" asked Vengai, sitting up.

"Nothing, just go back to sleep, Tiger," she said. Sita had begun to call Vengai 'Tiger' after hearing his brave exploits.
The pull in the stomach happened again and it was harder this time.

"Ah!" cried Sita again.

"Something is wrong/" said Ambuli, getting out of bed. He expertly examined Sita's stomach. "The poor child has severe indigestion. She is not accustomed to eating raw foods," he told Vengai. Then he quickly crushed some herbs and mixed them with water. Helping Sita sit up he asked her to drink the concoction. "You will be all right soon," he said, patting her head. "Vengai, tomorrow one of us should go into the town and get some soft foods for her. She needs to take well-cooked food for the next five days atleast," suggested Ambuli.

"I will go," said Vengai and the two of them retired.

The next morning Vengai prepared to set out for the town. He had to disguise himself as the police and public alike were on the lookout for him. Vengai secured his matted locks into a tight bun atop his head. Next, he used a long piece of cloth to tie a turban round his head. But his face was still recognizable with its long beard and curly moustache. Untying the knife from his waistband, Vengai proceeded to shave off his wild, facial growth.

"Is he doing all this for me?" asked Sita feeling somewhat guilty.

"So what? We anyway need to know what the police are upto. It is important that we go into the town and keep our ears open. It is best that Vengai goes now," replied Ambuli.

Even after shaving off the beard, Vengai felt that some shrewd onlookers might recognize him. So he thought awhile.
"I have an idea/" spoke Vengai smiling as he began to pick clothes from the sack they had brought from Rothling’s house. Vengai sorted the clothes and tied them into a tight bundle. Next he inserted the bundle into his shirt and adjusted it in such a way that it looked like a fat paunch.

"Ha, Ha, ha!" laughed Sita and Ambjili when they saw Vengai with his new stomach.

Then taking out some ink, Vengai drew a big mole on his right cheek.

"Do I look different now?" asked Vengai.

"You look like a shaved, turbaned, fat stomached tiger," said Sita and they all laughed.

Vengai set out and soon reached the town.

The market was buzzing with activity. In one corner, someone stood making a speech. The loud speakers were blaring:

"We, the Hindus as a race, are children's children. We are born of parents who were married as children. Fie on us! Will an educated society ever encourage child marriage? Every house has a sister, daughter mother or aunt who has become a child widow. Yet, do we learn?"

Vengai paused to hear the speech delivered by a young man with fire in his eyes. The banner above his head read Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. A small crowd of people stood listening to the idealistic young man with great interest. But a larger number were moving away from the podium, feeling ill at ease to even hear what the man was saying.

'Why is our society practising the evil of child marriage?' wondered Vengai. He thought of Sita and couldn't help admiring her wisdom and bravery. But
what about other children? How many of them would have the grit and determination of Sita? 'So many poor children are condemned to marriage by their parents/ thought Vengai as he walked along to the food stalls to buy soft foods for the gutsy Sita.

Vengai noticed that there was lot of unrest in the market and people seemed to be busy discussing something.

"What is the matter, Brother?" Vengai asked the shopkeeper, while gingerly removing money from the pouch tied to his waist. He had to be careful not to disturb his false stomach.

"Which world do you belong to?" demanded the shopkeeper.

"Why, what happened?" asked Vengai.

"The wretched bandits struck last week at Pannai Paramasivam's house and stole the diamond, a valuable family heirloom. Not just that, they also abducted Kanniyappan's daughter, Sita, who was soon to be married. They even dragged away her cow for its meat. What is the world coming to, I say? It is the era of the evil. What can poor innocent people like us do?" sighed the shopkeeper as he turned to the other customers.

Vengai was dumbstruck. He could not believe that all cases of theft and lost children had been foisted on him and Ambuli. Neither had they stolen the diamond nor had they abducted Sita. The only truth in this entire thing was that they had dragged Kaveri away, and that too, in a bid to save her and not slaughter her.

Vengai needed to know more. He walked to another shop and bought five different newspapers to show Ambuli when he got back.
"What, Brother, how much news do you want to read?" joked the shopkeeper.

Vengai merely smiled and said nothing. Sitting under a tree, Vengai began to ponder over the situation. 'Ambuli and I are thought of as gangsters. It will be a mammoth task to clear our names. People in Dravidapuram fear and dread us. So why not cash in on the same to bring them good? Why not use the fear in people’s minds to reform them?’ he thought.

Vengai wished Ambuli and Sita were with him to give him more ideas on how to prevent children from being married off early. He wanted to return to Dwikarna cave fast and get started on a plan to protect the future of the children of Dravidapuram. But before that he needed to buy a few things. Vengai counted out the money he had in his purse. He bought sufficient soft foods for Sita. While hoisting the food bag onto his shoulder, Vengai spotted a bird vendor.

'What a nice idea it would be to gift Sita a lovely parakeet? Won't that make her happy?’ thought Vengai and approached the vendor who was a gypsy. Numerous birds were up for sale in bamboo cages. Sparrows, doves, pigeons, parakeets, cuckoos, love-birds, cocks, hens, ducks... There was even an exotic peacock for sale. The bird was stealing everybody’s attention. Vengai approached the gypsy and asked, “How much do you charge for your birds? They all look so dull and tired.”

"Mmm? How dare you say that! I have scouted all over the Vrali forest and caught the best of birds and trained them. These are home pigeons which can fly many miles a day to carry your letters. Look at my hens, they lay upto four eggs a day, and my cuckoos,
their song is as sweet as Subramania Bharati’s poetry,” said the gypsy proudly.

“What about your parakeets? Are they deaf and dumb?” Vengai teased him.

“Ay! You with a fat stomach! Keep quiet. They are unique parakeets that can pick out fortune cards and predict by the scent of men. Astrologers come and buy my parrots for two rupees each. What do you think? Make your buy or make a move,” said the gypsy angrily.

Vengai decided this was the kind of parakeet he wanted, but he wanted a good bargain. So he cajoled, “Come on, I cannot give two rupees for a parakeet!”

“They are Vrali Malai birds. Two rupees or nothing at all,” said the gypsy sternly.

“All right I will give you two rupees, but you should also give your beads and the colourful turban you are wearing,” said Vengai.

After a lot of coaxing and convincing, Vengai was able to make the gypsy part with his turban, his beads, a cage for the parakeet and some fortune-telling cards, all for two rupees. Vengai offered the gypsy a piece of sweetmeat as a parting gift before leaving for the Dwikarna cave. On the way he also bought a small hand drum called udukkai, which went dudum dum dum, dudum, dum dum.

The sun was beginning to set. Vengai hurried to their hideout with all the goodies for Sita. He knew Sita and Ambuli would have retired by now after tying Kaveri at the mouth of the cave. He was eager to share with them his decision to help the society. The parakeet, bright green in colour with a fiery red nose, squawked from within the cage.
"I shall call you Varnam," said Vengai to the parakeet softly.
"Varnam...Varnam...Varnam...Varnam," repeated the bird happily, peering at its new master.
Vengai soon reached the forest.
"Sita, Sita," said a parakeet's voice.
Sita looked here and there wildly wondering who was calling out to her.
"Sita, Sita," said the voice again.
"Who is it?" Sita blurted nervously.
Vengai emerged from behind the tree laughing.
"Scared, are you?" he asked Sita, showing her the little bird.
"Oh! A parakeet. How beautiful!" exclaimed Sita.
"I have named it Varnam. It means colour. Hope you like the name," said Vengai.
"How nice!" exclaimed Sita and rushed into the cave to tell Ambuli. Before that she introduced Varnam to Kaveri who was grazing outside the cave.
Ambuli came out of the cave.
"Thank God! you are back. We were getting really worried. Now tell me, have you got food for this child?" he asked.
"Yes. Sita, come and have your dinner. You can play with Varnam later. It is going to stay with us," said Vengai, unwrapping the bundle.
He handed Sita some boiled snacks and a side dish.
"Will you eat?" Vengai asked Ambuli who refused.
"Won't you eat?" Ambuli asked Vengai who refused. Both of them were saving the cooked food for Sita but neither wanted to say it openly lest Sita felt hurt.
"Ambuli, I want to talk to you," said Vengai and led him to a spot out of Sita's earshot.
Sita meanwhile spread out the newspapers that Vengai had bought and scanned them for important news. Vengai was involved in a serious discussion with Ambuli.

"Ambuli, that we are going to be punished for the crimes we never committed has become obvious. The town is again wild with news that it is we who abducted Sita and it is we who stole a diamond called the Kannika diamond from the Pannai’s house. Anyway, all this is besides the point. Today, I heard a man talking at the market place about the evils of child marriage. And if by misfortune the child becomes a widow, nobody even considers getting her married again. Education is not given to women and they don’t have any means of earning their living. All their life they are doomed to live the life of a slave and a servant. Just look at Sita. How happy she is! She dreams of becoming a reporter in a national daily. Can you imagine a child being married off so early? Ambuli, what I want to tell you is this—we have been implicated in many crimes for which we are bound to be punished. Before that, why don’t we do something which will free our society of ills like child marriage? Let us change some lives before we are punished for crimes we never committed. We cannot have Sita with us forever. It is too dangerous. We have to find a solution for her. Along with that, let us find a solution for our society, too."

"Well said, Vengai," appreciated Ambuli and added, "I am here for murdering a police officer who was ruthless to untouchables. Yet there are many others who still ill-treat the poor lower castes. Ever since I have come into hiding I have done nothing to
free our society of this evil. I am indeed proud of your noble intentions. As you say, our days are numbered. Let us make ourselves useful to the society before we are sought out and punished."

"Let us come up with a plan," said Vengai, bending closer to Ambuli, when a loud voice came from behind: "Please listen to my idea."

They turned to see Sita standing with Varnam in one hand and Kaveri on the other side.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed Vengai and Ambuli.

"So you have been listening to our talk. We will not leave you, Kaveri or Varnam out of anything. We are partners in making this Vrali Malai region, this entire Dravidapuram, a better place to live in," chorused Ambuli and Vengai. They sat together and discussed their ideas and Sita’s plans till late into the night.

The next day, in the morning, Vengai and Sita were busy plotting their course of action. It was decided that Vengai, Sita, Kaveri and Varnam would set out together and tackle the problem of child marriage, while Ambuli would work independently to eradicate the evil of untouchability.

Vengai drew the map of Dravidapuram and marked the areas they would cover. Sita was discussing with Ambuli: "Ambuli, yesterday I was going through the papers and one news item said that the Viceroy Malcolm Raleigh is going to participate in the grand Ramanavmi fair at my village, Nemam."

"Oh! is that true?" asked Ambuli.

"Yes. Now is it true that the Viceroy Malcolms have a lot of power to bring changes in the society?" asked Sita.

"Sure! The Viceroys are appointed by the Queen
of England herself and they are invested with the powers by the British Crown. They rule our country on behalf of the Queen of England and are also known as Governor-Generals/’ informed Ambuli.

"I see," said Sita and sank into silence. After a significant pause she said, "Ambuli, the second part of my plan is also ready now. Can you fetch the material for the first part of our plan?" she asked.

"Sure. I need some herbs for my part of the plan, too," said Ambuli and set off into the forest to collect precious herbs. Ambuli carried a small sickle, a pouch with several compartments to segregate and put the herbs in and a staff to ward off small animals.

After Ambuli left, Sita spent time playing with Varnam. At the back of her mind, she was meticulously planning a suitable course of action. "Try reciting this poem," said Sita and sang:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Valli Devi Subram-manian} \\
\text{Small n valiant, Tall-n-virulent} \\
\text{Valli Devi Subram-manian} \\
\text{Big-n adamant, nice-n-covenant!}
\end{align*}
\]

But Varnam merely said:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Jhanaka Jhanaka Jan Jan} \\
\text{Dhanaka Dhanaka Dan Dan} \\
\text{Bhanaka Bhanaka Ban Ban!}
\end{align*}
\]

Sita laughed and said, "Is this what your gypsy owner taught you? So you will not learn my poem? Okay, now come on, you recite your poem to me," and immediately Varnam repeated the last three lines in its squeaky voice and Sita recited them joyfully:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Jhanaka Jhanaka Jan Jan} \\
\text{Dhanaka Dhanaka Dan Dan} \\
\text{Bhanaka Bhanaka Ban Ban!}
\end{align*}
\]
Listening to the song, Kaveri cheerfully moved her head and Sita swirled in happiness.

"Sita!" Vengai called out.

"Yes?" Sita responded.

"The map of Dravidapuram you asked me to draw is ready. Do you want to take a look and discuss your plan?" asked Vengai.

"Yes, I am coming," replied Sita and added, "from now on your name is Kovalan, Kaveri’s name is Ganga and my name will be Sundar."

"Why?" screamed Vengai, delightedly.

"Because tomorrow the four of us are going into the town to start executing our plan. Are you ready?" asked Sita.

"Yes, yes! I am more than ready. But why the change of names? What are we going to do?" asked breathlessly.

"I will tell you. But you must wait. Ambuli has gone to fetch the material needed for the first part of my plan. The second part is slowly crystallizing in my mind," said Sita.

"Oh! I can’t wait for Ambuli to get back!" shouted Vengai impatiently, forever ready to help children like Sita.

"Come on, girls," shouted Vengai and together, Sita, Kaveri and he did a small jig with Varnam singing:

\textit{Jhanaka Jhanaka Jan Jan Dhanaka Dhanaka Dan Dan Bhanaka Bhanaka Ban Ban!}

Vengai and Sita impatiently waited for Ambuli. But it was nearly noon when Ambuli returned.

"Tomorrow is the auspicious new moon day. Let us start implementing our plans from tomorrow," said Ambuli.
"Have you brought what we need?" asked Sita.
"Yes! First bathe Kaveri in the Neerodai river while I get the dyes ready/’ said Ambuli.

Vengai was curious to know what the plan was about, but proceeded to the river with Kaveri without asking any questions.

Ambuli removed the vegetables and other herbs he had gathered in the forest and began to prepare the vegetable dyes. Blue, red, orange, green, pink—the bright hues emerged under Ambuli’s skilful fingers.

Kaveri came out of the river white as milk.
"Sita, now I am going to paint these dyes on Kaveri. As per your plan, I am going to transform Kaveri into the 'boom-boom' cow that says 'yes' or 'no' to questions by shaking its head," said Ambuli.

"Aha! So Kaveri is going to become the special boom-boom cow!" said Vengai.

"Sita has hatched a plan to help children like herself who are forced into marriage," said Ambuli.
"I would be only too happy to be a part of the plan," said Vengai.

"Tomorrow we will proceed to the town of Dravidapuram dressed as fortune-tellers. We will try to gather information about children whose marriages have been fixed. We will stop these marriages somehow. You will come dressed as my companion and I will come disguised as a fortune-teller," explained Sita to Vengai. "Varnam will help us by picking out fortune cards from which we can read the future, and Kaveri will be the special boom-boom cow," she added.

"But does Kaveri know how to shake its head
as in 'yes' or 'no'?" asked Vengai.

"Of course. Now just watch," replied Sita and proceeded to question Kaveri.

"Kaveri, tell us, do you like the design Ambuli is now painting on you?" asked Sita.

Kaveri vigorously shook its head sideways in a 'no' and they all laughed.

"What about you, Ambuli?" asked Vengai.

"My plan begins tomorrow as well. We will part ways, but let us meet in the Dwikarna cave next amavasya, before sunset. Till then, may luck be with all of us," said Ambuli and went into the cave to formulate his part of the plan.

**Kovalan and Sundar**

    Good times are here!
    Good times are here!
    If there is a girl in this house
    Show her to me,
    I will tell about her wedding,
    I will tell about her husband, Dumundumdumdum...

went the udkkai and the fortune-teller continued...

    If there is a boy in this house
    Show him to me,
    I will tell about his wedding,
    I will tell about his wife,
    Good times are here!
    Good times are here!

A small crowd gathered around the little fortune-teller and his bearded companion who had a big
mole on his right cheek and a fat paunch. The fortune-teller looked lithe and attractive, wearing a red turban and colourful beads round his neck. The little boy who called himself Sundar was holding a parakeet in his left hand and a pack of fortune cards in his right.

"Good times are arriving, Good times are arriving!" the man who called himself Kovalan echoed the words of Sundar.

"Kovalan, can you see any young brides in this crowd?" asked Sundar.

"Tell them that Sundar from Vanthiyapuram is here to tell their fortune," said Sundar.

Two young girls around seven and eight years of age stepped forward.

"Aha! Here are my beautiful girls ready to be married," said Sundar joyfully and ushered them to the shade of a tree.

"What are your names?" asked Sundar.

"Sugandi and Vasantha," they replied.

"Are you the only two girls here in this small township who are to be married?" asked Sundar.

"No, in the next street Kumuda and lake house - Malarkodi are also going to be married," they answered together.

The name of Malarkodi rung a bell in Sundar’s mind. ‘Was it the same Malarkodi whom she had met at her aunt’s wedding and became friendly with?’ wondered Sundar and asked, "Can you ask Malarkodi to come and meet us? We have some very special news for her. In exchange for this good deed, I will predict your future free of cost." And Sundar proceeded to instruct Varnam to draw from the fortune cards.
"Ahem..." clearing his throat Sundar began, "I see a bright future for you. Good education, good health and..." Sundar paused here because he found that both Vasantha and Sugandi were fervently praying for something with closed eyes. They were muttering something under their breath.

Sundar bent forward to hear what they were whispering. Both Vasantha and Sugandi had the same prayer on their lips: "God, please let the fortune-teller say that we won't be married off so soon. Please we don't want to be married at such an early age..."

Sundar smiled. He had heard just what he wanted to hear. So Sundar now knew what to say. "I foresee a happy future. You will both study well, you will remain healthy and...'."

"What, what?" pestered the girls anxiously because the fortune-teller had stopped abruptly.

"I have a little bit of bad news for both you girls," said Sundar.

"What, what?" repeated the girls.

"Er...your marriages might get postponed. To a later date, when you girls are much older," said Sundar and paused, "now isn't that bad news for you?" he asked.

Sugandi and Vasantha jumped up clapping.

"But that is exactly what we want!" they squealed and immediately looked crestfallen. "But how is it possible? Our marriages have been fixed for the coming month.."

"Trust me. My words will come true," assured Sundar and sent the two girls to fetch Malarkodi.

Soon they came back with a chirpy-looking girl. Her brother Viswam tagged along.
"My fortune cards tell me you are both going to be married soon," said Sundar.
"Yes," both Viswam and Malarkodi sighed.
"I wish to talk to Malarkodi alone," said Sundar and Vengai took the others away to regale them with his clever games.
"Malarkodi, do you have a friend called Sita in the village of Nemam?" asked Sundar.
"Yes. I met her at a wedding. She is my good friend. I hear she is getting married, too," sighed Malarkodi and immediately perked up, "but how do you know I am Sita’s friend?"
"Ah! You forget that I am a master fortune-teller," said Sundar, mischievously.
Malarkodi looked at Sundar disbelievingly and whispered slowly, "You look familiar."
Sundar laughed and drew closer to Malarkodi. "Hold your breath. I am not Sundar the fortune-teller, I am Sita in disguise."
"What?" screamed Malarkodi in shock, drawing others’ attention.
"Hush, hush!" ordered Sundar and awkwardly smiled at the onlookers who paused in their work to see what the commotion was about.
"It is nothing. I merely told Malarkodi she is going to have half a dozen children, that is why she cried in shock," said Sundar with a guilty smile.
The onlookers laughed and turned to their work.
"I am sorry," whispered Malarkodi, "but what are you doing, dressed like this?" she asked.
"I have run away from home to escape marriage. I have two friends, Vengai and Ambuli. With their help, I’m trying to save children like us who are forced into
marriage. Do you want to help me and escape marrying young?” Sundar asked in a hurried whisper.

“What are you doing with dreaded bandits like Vengai and Ambuli? Do you think I have not heard about them?” asked Malarkodi, terror writ large on her face.

"Ssh! I will explain later. But believe me when I say they are good souls. Will you help me or not?” asked Sundar.

Malarkodi’s face clouded but only very briefly. Then, as if she had come to a decision, she spoke firmly, "I will do what you ask me to do. Tell me how I can help."

"You must come to the Ramanavami fair to be held in my village a fortnight from now. Try to bring as many friends as possible. Bring your brother, Viswam, too. Make sure you stay in my village till the day the Viceroy visits us. I will explain the rest once you arrive there. Do you understand?” Sundar asked.

"Yes. The Ramanavami fair at Nemam. I have to be there with as many children as possible. Fine, I will be there,” assured Malarkodi and hurried back home, excited that her marriage was going to be stopped.

After Malarkodi left, Sundar and Kovalan hit the road again with Varnam and Kaveri in tow. There were many people on the road who stopped them to enquire about their future. Kovalan and Sundar opened their fortune cards. They made Varnam pick out a card. Sundar thought on his feet, concocted some fine story and delivered one verdict or the other about the enquirer’s future. Kovalan and Sundar made sure that their predictions were positive and optimistic.

Many others arrived to put questions to the cow.
One young man asked, "Will I find the treasure I am looking for?"
And Ganga shook her head saying 'yes'.
"Will I marry a third time?" asked an old man who already had two young wives.
And Ganga furiously shook a 'no'.
So the questions and fortune-telling continued. By the evening the fortune-tellers had earned a small amount of money.
Vengai and Sita stopped to eat at an old woman's hut. The hut was surrounded by strange plants.
"I have never seen these strange-looking plants before," remarked Sita.
"These are the poisonous partheniums that Ambuli was telling me about," said Vengai, recognizing the weeds. "Kaveri had eaten some of these and that's why we had to drag her along to cure her."
"Wretched plants!" said Sita and uprooted a weed in anger.
"That is no use! The weeds always grow back," said a voice. It was the old woman who had given them shelter for the night.
"I have tried burning them down, I have tried uprooting them. But the adamant weeds always grow back. They simply crowd my garden, killing other plants," said the old woman.
'Hmmm!' wondered Sita and retired to bed.
"Remember don't take the turban off even while you are sleeping. You are a boy and your name is Sundar. Don't ever forget that," warned Vengai, adjusting his false stomach.
"You be careful with your stomach. It looks ready to fall," said Sita and both laughed heartily.
The next morning, the old woman was preparing the bath water in the backyard. At a distance sat Sita powdering some cassia seeds the woman wanted for a herbal preparation. Meanwhile, a sudden gust of wind blew the cassia powder into the burning stove. A rush of smoke emanated from the stove. When the smoke subsided, Sita noticed something.

"Vengai, guess what, I found out something!" she called out excitedly.

"I am Kovalan. Never forget that," warned Vengai.

"Sorry! Kovalan, I found out something," Sita called out again.

"Later, later! Tell me some other time. We must be quick and leave now," hurried Vengai and the twosome set off again.

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While Vengai and Sita prepared for an exciting adventure ahead, a great furore was brewing in the nearby village of Sunnambupatti.

"A great Swamiji has arrived. He is under the banyan tree," announced some three-four people running across the streets.

"He made Cheelu's eye sore disappear in a trice," shouted a few others.

In the village of Sunnambupatti where only fairs and festivals brought in an air of excitement, the entry of a bearded, saffron clad Swamiji created ripples of excitement. The Swamiji was seated under the shade of the banyan tree. His countenance was peaceful and his smile elevating. He spoke in soft tones and had a kind word for everyone.

"Do not quarrel with your wife, she is your better half," he advised irate husbands.
"Children are like Gods. Treat them with love and respect/" he told the parents.
"Treat your husband kindly. Doesn't he labour like a bull in the hot sun to feed you and your children?" he addressed the wives.
"Come and tell me your ailments. Let me see if the Gods wish to cure you through me/" said the Swamiji to the crowd assembled in front of him.
Some said they had groaning knees while many others said fevers kept visiting them every fortnight. Some said the winters gave them the shivers while a few others said the shivers came and went whenever the Neerodai river was on the rise. The Swamiji gave everybody a patient ear and handed out this herb and that concoction with appropriate therapeutic words.
"What is your name?" asked a small child bravely.
The Swamiji smiled and replied, "Chandrananda."
"Where are you from?" asked someone else.
"I come from the banks of the Ganga, the great river. I have come with a message. I have come to give you a new lease of life," said Chandrananda.
"What? What new thing is going to happen to us?" chorused the curious crowd.
"Wait! All in good time," said Chandrananda and retired for the day.
The Swamiji ate sparsely. He accepted only fruits and vegetables and drank only goat's milk. He woke up at the break of dawn, finished his ablutions in the Neerodai river and sat for his daily meditations at the stroke of five. People found him in deep contemplation when they came round to see him later in the morning. In the evening, the Swamiji narrated stories and fables to children. Even the elders began
to gather round him after nightfall to listen to his moral stories. It was only a matter of time before the Swamiji became an indispensable part of Sunnambupatti. The villagers sought solutions to everyday problems and confided in him. The trust he had built in the hearts of the people was so great that they began to sing praises of him. People from far and near came to seek solace from him. They all respected and loved him.

Within a span of a couple of weeks, Swamiji's name had spread far and wide into the regions of Dravidapuram. Word went around that Swami Chandrananda had cured hundreds of people and restored peace of mind to thousands with his soothing words. Many flocked to his side. Children looked forward to his stories in the evenings.

One morning, Chandrananda did not return from his daily bath. When he did not return to the banyan tree even by late morning, people went in search of him. They found him seated on a stone on the banks of the Neerodai river gazing deeply into the waters.

The small gathering waited patiently for him to break his silence. They waited for an hour, two hours, three, four... the hours ticked by, not a word came from the Swamiji's mouth. He did not return even to narrate stories to the children that night. By the next morning, the news had spread like wild fire that the Swamiji was on the banks of the Neerodai and would not speak or eat. People pressed their heads to his feet begging him to break his silence and tell them what was wrong. People of all castes gathered in separate groups and implored him to break his silence but the Swamiji continued to stare at the waters without speaking a single word.
Two days passed, yet the Swamiji did not move from the riverbank nor did he eat, talk or sleep. The people began to get worried. Rumours about an impending disaster spread by word of mouth.

On the third day, at daybreak, when people woke up to leave for the fields to attend to their daily duties, they found the Swamiji back under the banyan tree. A cry of jubilation rocked the village. People pounded him with their questions:

"Swamiji, why were you silent?"
"Why wouldn't you talk to us?"
"Is something bad going to happen?"

So the questions flew. But the saffron clad Swamiji did not open his mouth. Again, the assembled people were frantic with worry that indeed some havoc was going to strike the village.

After a long silence the Swamiji spoke: "My dear children, do you all have trust in me?"
"Yes," chorused the group.
"Do you believe my words?"
"Yes, Swamiji," everybody answered.
"Will you listen to me?" he asked them.
"What are you saying? Of course, we will listen to you," they all said eagerly.
"A great catastrophe will befall Dravidapuram if you don't listen to my words," warned the Swamiji.
"Oh!" A big cry went up in the crowd.
"Swamiji, tell us what we should do? We are willing to give our lives," a few in the crowd spoke loudly while others murmured their assent.

"You don't have to give up your lives, it will simply suffice if you use your common sense and the goodness of your heart," said the Swamiji.
"We will," said the crowd.

"Yesterday, the Moon God spoke to me. He asked me to tell mankind that just as there is only one sun and one moon common to all, there is only one God. And we are all children of that one God. There is no need for any discrimination within us by way of caste, creed and religion," said Swami Chandrananda.

There was a slight rustle in the crowd. It looked like the assembled lot weren’t as enthusiastic about doing anything for their Swamiji anymore.

The Swamiji noticed the shift in attention but continued all the same... "The great God wants us to be united as his children. He told me that there should be no more discrimination or disparity between us. There is no distinction between a Brahmin and an untouchable..."

The moment Swamiji said this there was a huge voice of dissent in the crowd. Some murmured quietly while the majority felt bold enough to object openly

"Has the Swamiji gone mad?"

"What does he think of himself? Are Brahmins and untouchables equals? Fie on him!"

"Swamiji could have asked us for anything else but this!"

Many such statements flew around but Chandrananda did not pay attention to any of these. He had anticipated this response. The caste system was something so ingrained in people that any change whatsoever was unthinkable for them.

Swami Chandrananda cleared his throat loudly and the crowd fell silent:

"The great God told me that as a sign of your unity
the so-called untouchables shall take a procession with torches into the agraharam, the Brahmin streets. The Brahmins shall wait for them with a pot of water. The untouchables shall bring salt from their kitchens and in exchange for water give the fistful of salt to the Brahmins. A kitchen is the place where all the elements of fire, air, water and earth unite to feed us energy. So, when commodities from the kitchen are exchanged, it implies inter-changing and mingling of energies. The following day, the Brahmins and people from other communities will take a procession into the streets of the untouchables and offer them salt in exchange for water heralding a new unity between them. This is not just for the people of Sunnambupatti, but for the entire population of Dravidapuram. If the people of Dravidapuram fail to do so, a great pestilence will befall them."
Speaking thus, Swami Chandrananda retreated into a vow of silence.

There was a sudden uproar in the village of Sunnambupatti. People who once prostrated before the Swamiji now carried sticks to attack him. Some well-meaning people contained the assaulted, warning them of dire consequences if they harmed a messenger of God.

The following days newspapers like Sudesa Mitran, India, Anandabodhini and Chakravarthini carried articles about the Swamiji and his radical message. The editorial in India stated: "Let the pestilence strike. Only then will our foolish people realize that there is no such thing as caste."

Subramania Bharati came incognito and embraced
Chandrananda. He congratulated him for his lofty thoughts and for communicating the wish of the Lord.

A small group of faithful supporters got together and guarded the Swamiji day and night from people waiting to attack him. Press reporters thronged the village but the Swamiji refused to be photographed. Some went back commenting that the Swamiji looked very familiar.

A week went by. Neither the untouchables nor the upper community made any move to take out the procession. The upper castes felt it was utter sacrilege to even consider going anywhere near the streets of the untouchables. On the other hand the untouchables felt scared and unsure to step into the streets of the upper castes. Inspite of Swami Chandrananda delivering the verdict of God and holding out the warning of a great pestilence, nobody dared to break age-old traditions. The whole of Dravidapuram waited for some kind of action from the tiny hamlet where the Swamiji had set foot.

A day passed. Two days passed...still nothing happened. The tiny village meanwhile experienced intermittent showers. Thunder and lightning descended like a bad omen on the tiny hamlet. Then it happened.

On the third day Rangan, the village priest, felt a slight itch on his lower arms and he began to scratch. Then his neighbour felt itchy and he began to scratch, too. Within minutes, everyone in the agraharam was itching and scratching.

The pestilence had struck. Children, women, men, the young and the old, the rich and the poor, all scratched alike. It was really unbearable. People
could neither eat nor sleep. Their daily tasks lay unattended. Children cried incessantly unable to bear the irritation. Mothers did not know how to pacify their children. Even animals developed the strange itch and bellowed pitifully.

Through all this Chandrananda sat unperturbed. No itch touched him. He went about his daily tasks peacefully as ever before. Some people fell at his feet and begged forgiveness. But the Swamiji who was on a vow of silence merely opened his hands to the sky to indicate that it was the will of God. Some people evacuated the village but their itching did not stop.

Despite the suffering, none budged to take out the procession. The upper castes were adamant that they would not mingle with the lower castes.

A week passed after the onset of the pestilence. Women and children begged their menfolk to take out the procession. Some men relented but a majority of the orthodox claimed, "We would rather die than walk into the streets of the untouchable."

The following day, the pestilence struck the peripheral part of the village where the untouchables' quarters lay. They began to itch and scratch like the people of the upper caste community. Cries of "Swamiji, please remove this curse," rented the air. People couldn't sit or stand. Such was the severity of the epidemic. It plagued every home, street and person. Many came and fell at the feet of Swami Chandrananda, but he refused to offer solace. Gesticulating with his hands he communicated that people should either listen to the words of God or suffer. People wept and wailed but to no avail. The
itching and the scratching continued without respite.

While Sunnanambupatti was suffering the onslaught of the pestilence, in the neighbouring village Vengai and Sita, disguised as Kovalan and Sundar, had collected nearly one hundred and fifty names and addresses of children whose marriages had been fixed. Sita needed to know how many children were being married off that year for her to carry out her plan perfectly. Now, they decided to proceed to the village which had been struck by the pestilence.

“What if we contract the itching illness as well?” Sita was worried.

“We won’t stay there for long, we will just pass through the village. They say people are not even able to eat or sleep. That being the case, nobody would be thinking of marriage. Our task would be over very fast,” said Vengai.

“The amavasya day is just ten days away. We should finish our task and proceed to the Dwikarna cave,” reminded Sita.

“There are very few villages which we have not covered so far. We will finish our target in the next ten days and go back to the cave,” replied Vengai and both headed in the direction of the affected village.

At Sunnambupatti, meanwhile, there was utter chaos in the streets where the untouchables resided.

“Come on, let us walk into the agraharam for we have nothing to lose. Let them kill us if they have to. We cannot see our children suffer like this,” cried the bolder ones.

“Yes, come on! One and all! Bring a pot full of water
each one of you. We cannot see our children suffer like this," shouted the womenfolk in one voice.

Even before any decision was taken, the mothers rushed into their kitchens and came back with a pot of water.

"Let Sunnambupatti be a path breaker. Come, let us all join the procession," cried the women.

The children clung to their mother's saris and waited for something to happen. The menfolk saw defiance on the faces of their women. They rushed into the houses and lit a torch each. Quite spontaneously a huge procession made its way from the untouchables' street.

As the caravan of people approached the streets of the Brahmin there was an uproar in the agraharam. Everybody went inside their house and locked themselves in. Undeterred the procession continued and stopped in front of the first house. A person spoke:

"We are here with a pot full of water, please give us salt from your kitchen. Let the pestilence end. Our children are suffering."

To which a voice from within the house answered: "I would rather see my child die than give you salt from my kitchen."

So the procession moved and stopped at the next house and then the next, repeating the request. By the time the procession had moved to the third house, something was happening. A couple was having a heated argument. "I cannot see my child suffer. I want the pestilence to end. Please allow me to give the salt," shouted the woman.

"No, you will not!" shouted the man.
"I will," said the woman.

Before the man realized what was happening, the woman came out and gave a fistful of salt to the waiting untouchable, grabbed his potful of water and rushed inside. A huge cheer went up in the crowd and they applauded the woman for her bravery.

The other women in the _agraharam_ were inspired by her example. They too picked up salt from their kitchen and rushed out to receive the untouchables. Everybody was eager to see the pestilence end.

In the entire _agraharam_ only a handful of people stayed away who did not want to become a part of this historic moment. Such a happening was unheard of. Awed by the importance of the moment, many shed tears of penance.

"Too much has happened."
"Let us undo the past."
"May the pestilence end," cried the people.

"Tomorrow it is our turn to take a procession into the streets of the untouchables. Let us do so without much ado," shouted some in the _agraharam_.

While this was going on, Sita and Vengai reached the village of Sunnambupatti. They saw the great exchange taking place. Sita was excited. As they crossed the banyan tree where the Swamiji sat, Sita couldn't help taking a second look at the great man who made this movement possible.

Sita looked closely and whispered to Vengai, "Do you recognize our Swamiji?"

Vengai peered intently and almost yelled in surprise. "Oh, my God! It is our Ambuli!"

They both approached the Swamiji who was in deep meditation and respectfully saluted him.
"Salutations to you, Oh, Swamiji!"

The Swamiji opened his eyes and was shocked for a minute. But he recovered immediately. "Bless you, my children," he said with laughter in his voice.

All three of them, Sita, Vengai and Ambuli were very excited to see each other after so many days. Understanding the desire to speak, the Swamiji motioned the two of them to follow him.

Vengai tethered Kaveri to the tree under which the Swamiji sat and left Varnam with her for company. The three of them headed for the river. The Swamiji made sure there was no one around before he spoke.

"How are you?" he asked.

"We have been doing well. We have collected the names of more than a hundred people whose marriages have been fixed. We are ready to carry out the second part of the plan. What about you? There are stories running around about a Swamiji. We never thought it would be you. We were curious to see the Swamiji and that is why we came here," said Vengai.

"I have also not done too badly for myself. I have made people of Sunnambupatti break the caste barrier. Today the untouchables have taken out the procession, I am sure the Brahmins would do the same tomorrow," said Ambuli.

"But how did you manage to bring about the pestilence?" asked Sita.

"Before I ventured to take on the guise of a Swamiji, I had scouted the villages of Dravidapuram for clues on how to bring about a transformation in the name of God. That is when I noticed that there has been an upsurge in the growth of the poisonous parthenium."
Vengai and Sita gasped.
"Since the plants were mostly in the outskirts, none really noticed them. But I knew that once the rains set in, the poisonous parthenium flowers would burst causing terrible skin infections in both man and animal. I used the hand of nature to serve my purpose," smiled Ambuli.

"Now that people have changed, how do you propose to stop the epidemic?" asked Vengai.
A streak of worry creased Ambuli’s face.
"Not to worry!" yelled Sita in delight.
Vengai and Ambuli turned to her in surprise.
"Vengai, didn’t I tell you the other day I had found something at the old woman’s house in Malarkodi’s village?" asked Sita.
"Yes, you did and I told you I shall hear about it later. What was it?" asked Vengai a little impatiently.
"That morning, by mistake, a handful of cassia seeds flew into the burning stove and a thick smoke emanated from it..." began Sita.
"I remember that..."interrupted Vengai.
"Well...behind the stove there were some parthenium plants which the old woman said she could not get rid of. When the cassia seeds smoked, the plants just withered and reduced to ashes. I am sure the dreaded parthenium is allergic to cassia seeds," said Sita with great excitement.

"Hurrah! That’s what I wanted to know! A natural pesticide for the poisonous weed!" exclaimed Ambuli. "You did it, Sita! You are a miracle worker! Now I know how to control the epidemic. Thank you so much!" cried Ambuli, happily.

"I shall now perform a yagna saying it is to appease
the Gods. Alongwith the firewood and ghee, I shall throw in sufficient amounts of cassia seeds. The smoke will destroy the weeds and soothe the skin rashes. I shall also give holy ash mixed with cassia seeds as prasad and ask the people to apply it on their body. They will all be cured soon," said Ambuli.

"Great!" exclaimed Sita and Vengai.

The three of them now headed back to the shade of the banyan tree happy to have found a solution.

Newspaper reports

Sudesa Mitran carried a full-length story on the happenings in the tiny hamlet of Sunnambupatti.

"Nothing short of a miracle has happened in the village of Sunnambupatti and this might be the heralding of many such miracles, thanks to Swami Chandrananda. When our correspondents visited the village a couple of days ago, there prevailed a sense of defiance where people of both upper and lower caste preferred to face the pestilence rather than take out the procession. But yesterday, the lower castes made the first move. Some Brahmins did not respond to their request, but many others did. The following day, the upper caste people, in a historical moment, entered the streets of the untouchables. To commemorate the extraordinary act, the Swamiji performed a peace sacrifice to thank the Gods and distributed holy ash as prasad. And lo! like magic, the pestilence vanished the very next day. Remembering the Swamiji’s words that the pestilence would return if they reverted to their old ways of living, the people
of Sunnambupatti seem to have turned over a new leaf. May they remain so."

Another editorial splashed the news that Swamiji had now moved out of Sunnambupatti and taken abode in the next village of Athipatti. "Hope the miracle worker continues to weave his magic around Dravidapuram/" said the editorial in Chakravarthini.

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Meanwhile, Sita and Vengai returned to Dwikarna cave. Sita sat with the list of names carefully compiled by them. The duo, after bathing in the Neerodai, took their afternoon meal. Vengai left to fetch Kaveri who was grazing in the clearing. Varnam was having a brief nap. There were nearly one hundred and fifty names of girls and boys who were to be married within a span of five to six months. The youngest of them was around four years of age and the oldest was twelve.

Sita shuddered. "I hope I can stop these marriages."

Just then Vengai returned with Kaveri and tied her to a tree at the mouth of the cave.

"Shall we start work, Sita?" asked Vengai.

"Yes," said Sita.

"What do you plan to do?" asked Vengai.

"First I have to bring Gomathi here," said Sita.

"What?" asked Vengai.

"I need my friend Gomathi’s help. She is also about to be married. Gomathi doesn’t want to be married, but is too timid to oppose her father or run away like me. I have a plan. Now, listen," and Sita whispered something into Venagi’s ears whose face brightened on hearing Sita’s words.

"But Vengai, if I bring Gomathi into the forest, people may misconstrue again that it is you and
Ambuli who are behind the disappearance of Gomathi," worried Sita.

Vengai laughed, "That does not matter, Sita. What is more important is to stop child marriages."

Moved by Vengai’s generosity, Sita gave him a quick hug. A few days later, a boy clad in a turban and dhoti tucked in-between his legs stood near the gate of Gomathi’s coconut grove. A cart passed out of the gate. The boy spotted Gomathi’s father leaving for the day. Immediately Sundar, the boy, darted inside and kept running with his head low, making sure that the servants did not spot him. Sundar ran noiselessly until he reached Gomathi’s house situated in the middle of the grove. As it was still very early in the morning, there wasn’t much activity in the house. Sundar waited under the window-sill partly hiding behind the potted plants until he heard Gomathi’s footsteps.

Gomathi emerged out of the house carrying a bowl of grains to feed the birds.

"Gomathi, pssst!" hissed Sundar.

"Who? What?" swirled Gomathi, quite startled.

"Gomu, here, look under the window-sill. It is me, Sita," said Sundar.

"Sita!" exclaimed Gomathi, recognizing her. "What are you doing dressed like a boy?" she asked.

"I will tell you later. Now you must come with me," urged Sita.

"Where and why?" asked Gomathi in a whisper.

Sita pulled Gomathi behind the plants. "Is your marriage still going to take place?" asked Sita.

"Yes! Appa is very adamant about it," said Gomathi, looking woebegone.
"Gomathi! You come with me now. I'll bring you back tomorrow morning safely. And be very sure that your wedding will not take place," said Sita.

"No! I'm scared. I'm not coming," said Gomathi.

"Gomu, do you trust me or not?" asked Sita.

"Yes, I do," said Gomathi.

"Do you want your marriage stopped or not?"

"Yes, I want it stopped," Gomathi replied.

"If you love me and trust me, and if you want your marriage stopped, then follow me," urged Sita.

Gomathi thought for a while. She thought of the dreary life that awaited her if she got married and the option Sita had given her. She was filled with fear about both the prospects. As Gomathi dilly-dallied, Sita prodded her, "Hurry, we don't have much time. We must leave before it is late."

"I'll go," said Gomathi with a sudden confidence.

And they ran. And how! They ran like deer fleeing a stalking tiger. Sita dragged Gomathi across the groves and streets, praying that none recognized them. Hiding and bending, the pair tore across fields, houses and compound walls. They passed through streets, which would eventually connect them to the Vrali forest.

"Once we reach the forest, we would be safe. None can spot us there," said Sita.

Soon both were inside the forest. Sita carefully led Gomathi threw the dense forest, asking her to avoid treading on thorns. A minute or two of walking deeper into the forest and they would join Vengai who would be waiting for them under a tree.

She saw Vengai resting against the tree. Hearing their footsteps, he emerged from behind.
“Good! You have brought your friend. Did anybody see you?” asked Vengai.

“No! We made it safely,” said Sita.

Gomathi was staring intently at Vengai and suddenly she spluttered, “Aren’t you the dreaded Vrali bandit, Vengai? I have seen your face on the poster,” she shouted. “This man is a thief. He stole the Kannika diamond from our house,” yelled Gomathi and started to sob, partly out of fear and partly out of sorrow.

Sita sat next to her and patted her back. “Vengai is not a robber. He did not steal anything. Let me tell you what happened...” and Sita proceeded to tell her Vengai’s story. “That day, Vengai was busy saving Kaveri. Vengai never went anywhere near your house, believe me,” concluded Sita.

“Then who stole the Kannika diamond?” wondered Gomathi aloud when Vengai remembered the diamond in Rothling’s safe.

“Can you describe the diamond?” asked Vengai.

“It is a diamond as large as the size of my palm. It is so shiny that it can light up the darkest of rooms. It is a family heirloom. Oh! it is such a beautiful diamond,” cried Gomathi.

“I also saw it in Gomathi’s Nilavarai,” added Sita.

“Wait! I have seen it too! I saw it in Rothling’s safe. But how did it get there?” asked Vengai.

“The officer came to my house for a security check. My father showed him the Nilavarai,” said Gomathi.

“Aha! So Rothling is the culprit. Clever thief! He stole the diamond and shifted the blame onto us!” spewed Vengai. “It is safe in his locker. We will find a way to expose him and return the diamond to your
father," assured Vengai. "Meanwhile, you don't say anything about this to anybody, all right?"

"All right," promised Gomathi.

"Come, let us go," said Vengai and the three set off on foot to the Dwikarna cave.

That night, Gomathi and Sita laughed and talked a lot. Happily they ate the dinner that Vengai had prepared for them.

Meanwhile, Gomathi's house was plunged in sorrow. Nobody had seen Gomathi leave the house. 'How could a girl just vanish into thin air?' they wondered.

Pannai Paramasivam was heart-broken. What with the upcoming marriage and the girl gone missing! He rushed to the police station and lodged a complaint. A fear of the forest brigand, Vengai, gripped the village as the news spread. Everybody assumed that it was Vengai who had abducted Gomathi. Parents herded their children inside the house and kept watch.

Kanniyappan, Sita's father, let out a huge wail. "First my daughter, now Gomathi. What are the police doing?" he cried.

The entire village of Nemam was shocked at Vengai's temerity. He had dared to abduct the daughter of the most powerful person in the village. The villagers scattered in different directions looking out for Gomathi and calling out her name. But none dared to venture into the thickets of the Vrali forest fearing wild animals and poisonous bushes. The villagers spent the entire night combing the adjoining villages for the landlord's lost daughter.

Deep in the Vrali forest, the girls were sitting round
a fire, lit to ward off the night’s cold. They were happily munching salted peanuts that Vengai had steamed for them.

Sita showed Gomathi the names of the children who were to be married in the coming months. Gomathi recognized many names in the list. They were either her classmates or friends, or distant cousins. After all, Dravidapuram was a close-knit community.

"How do I help?" asked Gomathi.

"You must gather at least thirty boys and girls from this list and get them to attend the Ramanavami fair to be held in our village," said Sita and added, "my friend Malarkodi has promised to bring another thirty to forty children to the fair. I will explain the rest when I return home after the new moon day."

Gomathi agreed.

"Tomorrow, at daybreak, we will start from here and leave you at a safe place outside the forest from where you can go back to your house," said Vengai. "You must tell your parents and everyone else that it was I, Vengai, who abducted you from the house. If they ask you for details about how I came and carried you away, just tell them that you had fainted and hence don’t know anything. Don’t tell them that I live in the forest or that Sita is with me. Say that you were kept blindfolded throughout your stay," instructed Vengai. "Meanwhile, I will make sure your diamond is returned and the true culprit is caught."

With that Vengai got up to make the beds for the girls.

The next morning, Sita dressed as Sundar led Gomathi to a safe spot where the forests ended and fields began. "Remember all that Vengai said," reminded Sita.
Before parting, the two girls hugged and whispered goodbyes. Sundar ran back into the forest and Gomathi proceeded to her house.

Rothling sat drumming the table with his four fingers. Enough had happened. Vengai was now a dreaded thug in Dravidapuram. If he were to be captured now, the punishment would be large enough to avenge his lost finger. The theft of the Kannika diamond, the abductions of the girls, Sita and Gomathi, were all huge offences. Sentences for these would put away Vengai for a long, long time. Now was the time to act. If he did not take action now, the people would lose faith and the higher authorities might start questioning him. Rothling sat down to prepare a master plan to capture the bandit hiding in the hearts of the Vrali forest.

Swamiji disappears

Swami Chandrananda was completing his ninth day in the village of Sarithrapoondi, which was stubbornly resisting change. On his way to Sarithrapoondi, the Swamiji had passed through many villages carrying the message of God, urging people to shed their caste differences. Many villages submitted to God’s will without protest, mainly because they had heard about the severity of the pestilence. But the people of Sarithrapoondi were a tough lot. They were into their eighth day of pesti-lence and they didn’t seem to budge. Sarithrapoondi was one of those villages, so entrenched in their old ways and traditional beliefs
that they preferred the pestilence to mingling with the untouchables. For seven days the deadly disease raged affecting men, women, children and beasts. And for seven days the village withstood the onslaught. On the eighth day their will began to thaw. Some sections of men and women began to parade the streets calling out to other people to end the pestilence by taking out the procession.

The Swamiji sat back and watched. Once he was successful in ridding the villagers of caste differences, he would disappear. The incidence of villagers in Dravidapuram gradually changing their mindset were steadily on the rise and the news was attracting the newspapers in a major way. Avoiding reporters and photographers was getting to be more and more difficult and riskier. If the Swamiji's true identity was exposed, then the people would relapse to their old ways. The change would last only as long as people believed that it was Swamiji, the messenger of God, who brought about these transformations.

Ambuli sat in deep thought musing over how to remove himself from the scene while keeping alive the message. 'I have been lucky till now. The people and the newspapers have not recognized me yet. I must disappear fast. Even if I am caught, I must be arrested as Ambuli and not Swamiji,' thought Chandrananda.

On the eleventh day the village of Sarithrapoondi was restored to peace following the procession taken out by both the upper castes and the lower castes and the performance of the peace sacrifice by Swamiji. That evening, the tired but happy people gathered under the banyan tree to hear the soothing words of the Swamiji.
"Why did you trouble us with this pestilence?" asked one person.

"I did not bring about the disease, Son. It is an act of God. If you don't listen to His message of love and brotherhood, the pestilence would most definitely return," replied the Swamiji. Then he narrated some stories and parables with moral value to the children and adults gathered. Before retiring, the Swamiji said, "God is beckoning me to his fold. I have to leave now. Four days from now, I shall perform a yagna for the peace and well being of the entire Dravidapuram. The yagna or sacrifice will placate and neutralise the effect of the pestilence which has raged for many weeks over several villages. At the end of the yagna I shall attain the feet of God," finished the Swamiji.

"Oh, no!" wailed the people in chorus. "Please don't leave us," they all cried.

"Children, my time has come. We shall all gather one kilometre from the border of the Vrali forest four days from now for the sacrifice. I would need firewood, ghee, flowers and fruits for the offering," said the Swamiji.

"I shall also need bricks and some fresh plastering lime. Do not forget the bricks and the lime," reiterated the Swamiji before retiring for the day.

For the next four days, none saw the Swamiji after eight in the evening. He had told them that he had to meditate in absolute silence to prepare for the great yagna. So the people left him in peace.

On the day of the great sacrifice, hundreds of people proceeded en masse to the patch one kilometre from the border of the forest. People carried
flowers, fruits, firewood and sweetmeats to offer to
the Fire God. Many others brought bricks and lime.

The Swamiji sat before the sacrificial pit arranging
the wood he had collected from the forest nearby. On
one side stood rows of bricks and a large vessel of
cementing lime. The Swamiji invoked the Gods with
holy chants.

People arrived in hordes and encircled the
sacrificial pit. The priests in the gathering joined the
Swamiji in invoking the Gods with hymns. Many
more arrived from the neighbouring hamlets and
mingled with the crowd. Gradually the fire rose to a
height of seven feet and crackled above the din of
the chants. As the invocations grew louder, the entire
area was filled with a pleasant fragrance. The Swamiji
fed the fire with sandal sticks and aromatic herbs.

As the fire raged and grew in height, an uneasy
heat built up in the area around the sacrificial pit.
The smoke from the pit stung the crowd’s eyes and
visibility became poor. The people could only hear
the Swamiji’s vibrant voice reciting the hymns. The
Swamiji fed more and more ghee and firewood into
the fire until the flames seemed to touch the skies.

The Swamiji spoke to the flames in Sanskrit: "Oh
God of fire, accept me, hide me in your smoke, conceal
me, help me, Oh God of fire. Remove me from here," he said. To the gathering, the Swamiji spoke in a
resonating voice: "I shall now attain God’s feet. I shall
invoke the name of the great mother Parashakthi and
mingle with the elements. You good people live in
peace and remember God’s dictum of living together
without caste differences. If anybody dares to disobey
His words, the pestilence would descend again, never
to leave. No remedy would be granted. So beware. And once you stop hearing my voice, each one of you, pick up a brick and start laying it around the pit to make a *samadhi* for me. Remember, the *samadhi* must be completed before the flames in the pit die down. Now will you do it?” he asked.

"Yes, we will, Swamiji!” said some, while many others cried, "why are you leaving us?"

"Be prepared to build the *samadhi* as soon as my voice diminishes," said the Swamiji.

The fire rose higher and higher. The smoke choked people's throats. The voice of the Swamiji began to dim gradually and then, it stopped entirely. The priests who were closest to the pit looked for him through the thick smoke. He was nowhere to be seen.

"The Swamiji has mingled with the elements and reached the feet of God!” cried the priests.

As if on cue, people rushed forward with the bricks. One by one they laid the bricks. Then they smeared the cementing lime and plastered the structure. The Swamiji's final wish began to take shape as the *samadhi* emerged gradually. Tears stung everybody’s eyes. Within a span of half-an-hour, the *samadhi* was completed and the flames were submerged within.

People stood around the *samadhi* in mournful silence. They remembered Swamiji’s stories, soothing words and fond admonishments. Both young and old wept openly. After a long time the crowd dispersed, vowing to live in peace and togetherness.

At a spot two kilometres from the sacrificial pit, Ambuli emerged from a tunnel and walked into the forest deeps.
The police attack

Five units of armed policemen headed by an able commander were all set to depart from the villages of Pathamadai, Nemeli, Sunnambupatti, Athipatti and Sarithrapoondi and proceed into the Vrali Malai forest. These five villages were situated in the directions of East, West, North, South and Northwest from the Vrali Malai forest. Hence a penetration from all these directions into the thick forest would enable easy combing of the entire forest. Rothling was to head one of the units. For the entire day, the units would march across the forest towards the Vrali Malai mountain range, where they suspected the bandits, Vengai and Ambuli, were hidden. The interrogation of the little girl, Gomathi, revealed nothing. The girl kept reiterating that Vengai kept her blindfolded throughout and she knew nothing more.

The forest was plunged in darkness. Vengai, Ambuli and Sita were seated at the Dwikarna cave around a campfire to dispel darkness and the cold.

"How did you escape?" Vengai asked Ambuli.

"When the smoke from the sacrificial fire began to sting people's eyes, I slid into the tunnel that I had dug near the pit, crawled through it, and emerged a few metres away from the Vrali forest. Disappearing into the forest was easy after that," said Ambuli.

"But won't people find the tunnel?" asked Sita.

"No, they have built the samadhi around the sacrificial pit and the entrance of the tunnel lies beneath it. Nobody will ever find it. Also, I took care to close the forest end of the tunnel with dirt and soil," said Ambuli and paused before continuing,
"now my duty to the society is over. I have cured them of discrimination. The people of Dravidapuram are living in peace and togetherness. I don't care if I am captured and punished."

"Don't talk like this," said Sita and Vengai together. "The Moon God in me says that trouble is near. We have to be on guard. The time for Sita to leave us and return to her parents has arrived," said Ambuli.

"What are you saying? Are you suggesting that we are going to be captured? What do you see, Ambuli? I know that on new moon days you get premonitory visions. Tell me, what do you see?" urged Vengai.

Ambuli went into deep thought. His brows knit in concentration as he focussed on the visions that floated in front of his eyes: "Vengai, tomorrow at daybreak, we set out with Sita, Kaveri and Varnam. We will leave her near those streets she is familiar with. Then we have to hide ourselves in the Vrali forest. I sense danger. The police are on the lookout for us. At no cost should the police find out the Dwikarna cave. It is our best hideout," said Ambuli.

Soon the three retired to bed. The next day Sita was to leave for her house with Varnam and Kaveri. Soft muffled sobs were heard in the darkness.

"Child, why are you crying?" asked Ambuli, gently. "You are my best friends. How can I leave you?" sobbed Sita.

The bandits had treated her with so much tenderness and care. Ambuli held Sita affectionately. Vengai whispered to her, "Sita, we will always remain best friends." And they all fell asleep, under the dark, moonless sky.
The units assembled in the outskirts of the Vrali forest to begin their march towards the centre of the forest. Each group had a tribal for a guide as it was an unknown and dangerous terrain. In three days and three nights’ time, the units hoped to reach mid-forest where the Vrali mountain range sprawled like a majestic eagle. The march began at daybreak and the units gravitated towards the Vrali Malai range like minute iron files to a magnet. Deer, cows and other animals ran here and there hearing the heavy footsteps of the uniformed men.

Meanwhile Vengai, Ambuli and Sita were travelling in the opposite direction. They moved from the mountain of Vrali Malai towards the village of Nemam. Sita’s eyes were red with tears. She could not bear to be parted from her best friends.

Ambuli was carrying Varnam’s cage in one hand and holding Sita’s hand by the other. Vengai followed, leading Kaveri.

"Whatever will happen to both of you?" enquired Sita, crying.

"Don’t cry, Child. We will face the consequences. It is very important that you don’t get involved in this. Don’t tell anyone that you helped us in our missions. And particularly, don’t tell anyone that Swami Chandrananda is Ambuli. Just attempt to convince everybody that you were kept in a dark place all the time, hence you know very little. Is that clear?" asked Ambuli.

“Yes,” replied Sita.

"Yes!” repeated Varnam. The parrot was an unusual bird with the rarest of abilities. It could not only repeat small words but trace the movement of people.
The parrot had often helped Sita track Vengai and Ambuli when they went deep into the forests.

As they approached the edge of the forest, Vengai, Ambuli and Sita heard the heavy footsteps of men.

"I think it is the police on the lookout for us. What do we do now?" asked Vengai.

"How are we going to reach Sita to the fields so that she can get home safely?" wondered Ambuli.

"Please leave me here. I am accustomed to the ways of the jungle. I will reach home safely. After which, I shall send Varnam with a note tied to its feet to keep you informed about me," said Sita,

"No, Sita, you are a small girl, we cannot leave you here," said a worried Vengai and Ambuli.

"I insist," said Sita and took Varnam's cage in one hand and Kaveri's rope by the other. "Please take care of yourselves. I will be safe, I will send Varnam with a message very soon," assured Sita.

Though concerned, Vengai and Ambuli knew they had to move fast to make good their escape into the forest to evade the hands of the police. They bid good-bye to Sita and quickly merged with the vegetation.

Vengai sat perched on a high tree laughing. He felt like a monkey. Sensing some movement of running feet, the units had come very close to capturing him. They had also heard some muffled voices.

With a rush of energy, the uniformed men darted forward, only to be scared away by slithering snakes and poisonous bushes, giving Vengai the much needed lead to escape from the periphery of the jungle into its depth. The men could not match Vengai’s pace, as they were not agile or brave enough to dodge even small dangers. By mid-afternoon,
Vengai needed to rest. Spotting a tall tree laced with wild creepers and thick climbers, Vengai climbed the tree, sure that it would conceal him from the people who were on their trail.

As decided earlier, Ambuli and Vengai had parted ways to gain a better chance of escape. Now Ambuli was moving westward. He had no intention of escaping. Ambuli walked on into the forest, unafraid.

Sita headed to her house with a heavy heart. She was sad to leave the forest which had fed her, protected her, and found for her two loving friends. With Varnam in one hand and Kaveri in another, Sita plodded on, wondering how she would help her friends and how she would execute the second part of her plan.

The Ramanavami fair

It was three days since Sita had returned home. Her parents were overwhelmed and overjoyed. They wept in happiness. They called in their neighbours and distributed sweets to celebrate Sita's safe return. Kanniyappan, Sita's father, left for the police station to report that his daughter had returned. The entire police station was bursting with hectic activity, so much so that the return of Sita was not given its due importance. The Viceroy was to arrive in five days' time. The entire police force was working hard for the inspection.

"Sir, my daughter Sita is back, I have come to report that," said Kanniyappan humbly.
"Very well. We will make a note. Rothling Sir has gone into the forest to catch the notorious bandits. Come back a few days later and talk to him," said the constable.

The Viceroy, Sir Malcolm Raleigh, was calling upon the villagers of Nemam to participate in the Ramanavami festival. A huge drama troupe was arriving from a distant village to perform the famous Krishna Vishwaroopam drama during the Ramanavami fair. The actors would wear masks painted a deep green and red. Their costumes were grand and the songs lilting. Days after the performance, the entire village would hum the tunes sung by the troupe. Every year, the season of Ramanavami, observed to celebrate the birthday of Lord Rama, brought in a feeling of great festivity, joy and splendour. This year, it was extra special as the Viceroy was going to watch the drama along with the public. To honour him, the venue for the performance was changed to a larger space. Usually the drama was held at the temple, but this year anticipating a huge crowd, the venue was shifted to the huge open ground near the temple.

Makeshift stalls, merry go-rounds, games and food stalls sprung up in and around the ground. Children ate and played merrily while their parents shopped for knick-knacks. People from other villages were pouring into the tiny hamlet. The locals allowed visitors from the neighbouring villages to find shelter in their verandahs and balconies. Community kitchens were set up and the local temple organized free food for distribution. There was a feeling of peace, joy and togetherness in the air. There was a
smile on every lip. Only Sita was sad. She was worried about the well being of Vengai and Ambuli.

Everyday Sita scanned the newspapers for news about Vengai and Ambuli. Five units, the report said, were combing the forest for the bandits. Sita dreaded the day when Vengai and Ambuli would be captured.

"Oh, Kaveri!" said Sita sadly and buried her face in the cow's neck. Slowly an idea formed in Sita's head. Sitting up briskly, she took Varnam out of its cage and spoke to it: "Varnam, will you carry a message to Vengai and Ambuli. They are in the Vrali forest. Carry this note for me."

She then tied a piece of paper to Varnam's feet who left in search of Vengai.

That over, Sita proceeded to Gomathi's house. As planned Gomathi and Sita waited near the temple grounds for a few other people.

"Do you think they will make it?" asked Gomathi.

"They won't fail us," assured Sita.

Soon they saw four figures approaching them. It was Malarkodi, her brother Viswam, and her friends Vasantha and Sugandi. Excitedly they introduced themselves to Gomathi and informed that other children would be joining them soon.

"However, let us try to collect the support of a few more children to add to the numbers," suggested Sita and everyone agreed.

They all left for the ground where children from various villages had gathered to play.

"Today, let us play the game of tiger and the goat," announced Sita and the entire group of children responded eagerly.

The group of children played for a long time until
they all dropped to the ground in sheer exhaustion.

"How many of you here wish to play like this for a long, long time and not get married?" asked Sita after resting a bit.

All of them put up their hands.

"Then we all have to cooperate with each other and follow my plan. Will you all do that?" asked Sita.

"Yes, we will," said the children.

"Now listen, on the day of Sri Ramanavami, when the Krishna Vishwaroopam is taking place, we have to..." and Sita whispered instructions into the ears of all present.

"Remember, this has to be a safely guarded secret. Every evening we will discuss how to execute our plan. Meanwhile do not let anyone know of our plans. There will be other children, friends of Gomathi and Malarkodi, who will be joining us as well," said Sita.

The children left for their homes excitedly, discussing the strategy to escape marriage at such a young age. Children from other villages left for the choultry where they were put up until the end of the Ramanavami fair.

That night Varnam was back. Sita first fed it some birdseeds and water. After Varnam recovered from the long flight, Sita gently removed the note from Vengai which read:

"I’ll be there to execute our new plan. Don’t worry about me. Ambuli might surrender to the police as he feels the prisoners need a healer amidst them."

"Oh, Ambuli!" cried Sita. "You wish to be captured so that you could cure other prisoners in the jail? How noble of you," wept Sita.

That night Sita stayed awake for a long time going
over the master plan in her mind. Early next morning, Sita sent Varnam with a message for Ambuli:

"Dear Ambuli, if you are captured, tell the police that Vengai is dead. Tell them Vengai drowned in the Neerodai river."

Varnam flew into the Vrali forest with the message. Ambuli sat under a banyan tree in the Vrali forest looking up at the sky through the branches. The police were making very slow progress, as the terrain was an unfamiliar and a dangerous one. 'How long should I wait for them to capture me? The prisoners in the jail need me,' thought Ambuli.

At that very moment, Varnam landed on Ambuli's shoulders much to his surprise and joy. Ambuli read Sita's message.

Ambuli closed his eyes for a minute pondering over the message and its impact. It was clear to him that the time for his capture had arrived. The police would never find him in the thick woods. Better that he presented himself before them. Ambuli began his walk towards the police camp, situated a few kilometres away.

... At daybreak Rothling heard someone call out his name. He emerged from his tent to find a man resplendent like the moon standing before him. The man introduced himself as Ambuli and stated that he wished to surrender to the police. Rothling could not believe his luck. The policemen were losing their morale as they found it difficult to penetrate the jungle. It was Rothling's stubbornness which had kept the operation alive. Now one of the bandits had actually come forward to surrender!
Rothling was exultant. "And where is that crook, Vengai, your accomplice?"

"He is dead," replied Ambuli.

"What? Vengai is dead?" screamed Rothling.

"Yes, he is dead," repeated Ambuli, calmly.

"How?" shouted Rothling, disappointed that Vengai had died before he could wreak his vengeance on him.

"Vengai tried to cross the Neerodai while it was on the rise and drowned," said Ambuli, very gently.

"Awful! Awful!" swore Rothling.

But Rothling was not one to believe Ambuli’s words. He had his own doubts. Yet if Vengai was truly dead then he and all the units might just be on a wild goose chase. Moreover, the Viceroy was arriving in a few days time and he had to be present at the headquarters to receive him. After regaining his composure, Rothling issued orders for Ambuli to be arrested and a few of the units to be withdrawn.

"Let the units from East and West finish their operation and return in a day or two," ordered Rothling and prepared to leave.

...

Back in the village, Sita attended to her daily tasks and waited for the important person to arrive.

Around eleven that morning, a man with a big mole on his right cheek, dressed in a white turban and dhoti stood before Sita’s house. He had a big paunch, too. Sita recognized him immediately. It was Vengai.

"Oh, Mother! I have come to attend the Ramanavami fair. The choultry is full. Can you give me some place in your shed? I shall leave soon after the Krishna Vishwaroopam drama is over," beseeched the man dressed in white.
Kanniyappan, Sita's father, came out of the house and assessed the man. Numerous people were pouring into the village from all over for the fair. Everybody in the village was offering a place to the guests. Kanniyappan thought for a minute and then said, "Okay, you may share the shed with our cow, Kaveri."

"Thank you so much, Oh, generous Lord!" said Vengai, bowing humbly.

Sita was besides herself with excitement. Her first part of the plan had worked.

"What is your name?" Kanniyappan asked the man who was moving towards the cowshed.

"Kovalan, Oh, Master!" said Vengai.

Sita went into the cowshed with Vengai and whispered, "Come to the ground by the temple at six in the evening," and left hurriedly, before anybody noticed her talking to the newly arrived guest.

It was the day prior to the staging of the Krishna Visw aroopam. The drama had been a huge success in all the villages. An excerpt from the Mahabharata, the play revolved around the scenes where Lord Krishna goes to Duryodhana's court as a messenger of peace. Evil Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, plots to kill Krishna by making a special chair for him. The chair is placed over a huge pit filled with snakes, scorpions, bees and men armed with knives. The idea was, that once Krishna sat on the chair, it would collapse, landing him into the pit to be killed by the snakes, scorpions and other poisonous creatures present there. But, aware of Duryodhana's evil plans, Lord Krishna assumes the Vishw aroopam, a massive form as big as the universe, before sitting on the chair,
to show Duryodhana and the world who he truly was! What can mere scorpions and snakes do when Krishna is as big as the universe itself!

This Krishna Vishwaroopam was a great hit wherever it was staged and the actor who played Krishna was also very popular. The passionate way in which he performed, made people believe that Lord Krishna himself had descended on him to speak through him.

A huge chair was built for the Vishwaroopam to sit on. People excitedly inspected the chair and the pit beneath. They waited eagerly for the play to be staged.

A few yards away from the pit stood a group of children and a man dressed in white. He was entertaining them with his magic tricks. He could make a stone disappear from the ground and make it appear in another boy's pocket. He made small birds appear from his bag. Not just that, he could vanish and appear from the pit on which stood the Vishwaroopam chair. The magician could make himself walk tall, matching the height of a palm tree by walking on stilts.

The children clapped with joy and disbelief. But the man was no magician. He was Vengai who had learnt the tricks from Ambuli during his stay in the forest. There was nothing magical about these tricks. They were simple scientific ruses. The simplest of these illusions was the disappearing act, which Vengai had learnt from Ambuli. The idea was to create some diversion. While the people's attention was diverted, the performer of the trick would make his exit by way of a pit or a tunnel and appear elsewhere. Vengai was perfecting this disappearing
act, which was part of the master plan.

Sita was meanwhile garnering support from the children from other villages who had become her friends. Gomathi and Malarkodi together had gathered around sixty of their friends, cousins and classmates in the same age group as theirs. In all, there were around hundred children to help Sita carry out her plan to prevent child marriages. All the children were committed to a vow of secrecy. The hundred-odd children were more than eager to keep mum and see the plan through, as none of them wanted to be married and sent away from their parent’s place or, be made to drop out of school.

Sita followed the newspapers carefully to learn of the Viceroy’s itinerary. The papers described the Viceroy as a man of good intentions and high moral values.

The Viceroy was to arrive at the village of Nemam to be present for the Krishna Vishwaroopam play. The police officer, Rothling, would also be present. Rothling was described in glorious terms by the papers as the buster of the bandit ring which had terrorized the region of Dravidapuram for so long. The captured bandit, Ambuli, was transferred to the dreaded Sirai prison known for its inhumane conditions. The other bandit, Vengai, was believed to be dead by the papers and the people of Dravidapuram. Feeling safe, the entire Dravidapuram public assembled at Nemam to celebrate the Ramanavami fair. That was all that Sita needed. She wanted the entire population of Dravidapuram assembled in one spot for her plan to be effective.

Sita explained the master plan to her friends in great detail and encouraged them to be brave. They were
all prepared and eager to carry out the plan. Now all they had to do was to wait for the day of Ramanavami when the play would be staged in the presence of the Viceroy.

The finale

Varnam was flying to the Sirai prison with a message for Ambuli. Darting through the bars of the prison, Varnam perched on Ambuli’s shoulders.

"Varnam, how is Sita?" asked Ambuli, softly.

Ambuli was treating a sore eye of a fellow prisoner. Ever since he had arrived in the Sirai prison, Ambuli had treated many ill people. His healing powers restored the health of many and he was already a much-loved man among the Sirai inmates.

"Ambuli, how are you? Vengai is with me. I am worried about you," read Sita’s message.

Ambuli laughed gently. He was touched by Sita’s concern. He replied thus:

"Sita I am going to be deported to the Indukaan islands after the trial. I am happy where I am, treating and helping the needy. Be happy and ask Vengai to escape from the police and return to his tribe."

Out flew Varnam carrying the message. Ambuli turned to attend to the patient’s sore eye.

Vengai and Sita wept a little after hearing that Ambuli was to be deported to the Indukaan islands. But they felt reassured by his words that he was happy where he was, treating and helping the needy.

"Ambuli is expecting you to return to the tribe," said Sita.
"Yes, but only after our plan succeeds," Vengai was adamant.

... 

The evening of the play arrived. The actors were high-strung, preparing for the big event. Some of the actors were exercising their voices while laying out their costumes. An old man was skilfully working on the masks. Some of the actors were rehearsing their songs. Snatches of the song were sung by one and picked up by another to finish with a flourish. Some whistled, some hummed. Everybody seemed happy and content.

Sita hovered around the area where the actors rested. A small hut was built for them near the stage, a green room of sorts, where they could dress, change and rest. Sita waited for an opportune moment when the hut would be empty for her to slip in.

When the artists came out to bask under the sun, Sita seized the chance and slipped into the hut. Inside, there were huge boxes filled with dresses. This *therrukooththu* troupe was an itinerant one which travelled from one place to another performing plays to earn a living. The boxes were filled with clothes, utensils and other utilities. Sita examined the cases when she heard someone coming. She quickly hid behind one of the huge crates. One of the actors came in to open a box from which he removed a costume and left the room. That was the box she was looking for. Sita got up with a jump from her hiding place and peered into the box containing the costumes. Without wasting much time, Sita quickly grabbed a dress, headgear and a mask and rushed out. She ran until she reached the ground where Vengai waited for her.
"Vengai!" Sita panted, "I have brought a dress for you. Now please play your part well. We children will wait for you at the ground while the parents and other people are busy watching the play," said Sita.

Vengai hid the dress in his bag and retired beneath a tree to rehearse his part.

Just before sunset, Sita gathered all the children who had now become her friends and spoke to them. "Friends," she began, "I have spoken to you about Vengai. He has risked his reputation to protect our interests. He is not a bandit. He did not steal the Kannika diamond, neither did he abduct me or Gomathi. His main intention is to prevent parents from getting children like us married. He is here to help me with my plan. Our futures will be secure if we carry out the plan well. Let us go over the plan once again. We will assemble here, in this very place when the Krishna Vishwaroopam scene takes place. Vengai will arrive in our midst after completing his part. After that we have to protect him and help him escape into the forest. All right?" asked Sita, and the group chorused, "Yes."

The sun was fast sinking behind the Vrali Malai mountain range. Petromax lights lit up the huge ground. The women oiled their tresses and decorated them with jasmine flowers. Silks rustled and a faint scent mixed in the air. The girls wore colourful skirts and the boys their best dresses. Respected elders and officials sat on the benches while the rest of the crowd scattered in a circle around the stage. The Viceroy was to arrive any minute now. The policemen were standing guard, keeping the crowd in check. A band of musicians were ready with their instruments,
geared to play a welcome tune the moment the Viceroy's chariot came within sight. A delicious aroma from the food stalls filled the air. The children tugged at their mother's saris begging to buy them sweetmeats and bhajjis.

There was a lot of laughter, anticipation and tension in the atmosphere when suddenly a gunshot rent the air. All the people paused in their activities and stood still. Somebody in the crowd shouted, "The Viceroy is arriving."

Taking the cue, the band began to play its welcome tune. An excited chatter broke out in the crowd. The policemen stood in rapt attention. As the Viceroy's chariot passed them, the policemen stiffly saluted him. Rothling followed the chariot on horseback. As soon as the chariot reached the area near the stage, the Viceroy stepped out and was received by the village headmen. With due respect, the Viceroy was ushered to his seat. One of the headmen offered the Viceroy a platter of fried delicacies and a glass of chilled coconut water which the Viceroy accepted, though reluctantly.

The play began and a silence fell on the crowd. The sutradhara came in first and invoked lord Ganesha. As he sang the invocation, many people in the crowd joined in. Everybody waited expectantly for the scene when Lord Krishna would assume the Vishwaroopam and sit on the huge chair above the deadly pit.

The play proceeded well and soon came the scene when Lord Krishna entered Duryodhana's court. Everybody waited with bated breath. Duryodhana had just finished saying, "I shall not give even a needle point of land. Let the war decide who gets what."
The elders in Duryodhana’s court offered a chair to Lord Krishna. The crowd tensed up. Some even stopped breathing. Lord Krishna sat on the chair offered to him. A screech went up in the crowd as the chair collapsed and down went Lord Krishna into the pit. There was absolute silence. Everybody waited with bated breath for the colossal figure to emerge. A deep growl emanated from the pit. Slowly a crown emerged, followed by two long arms of about five metres each, then came the huge torso and out came the colossal form standing thirty feet high. The crowd gasped and the Viceroy whistled in surprise. Never had the Vishwaroopam been so magnificent or so huge. It seemed like the Vishwaroopam was touching the sky. In the previous years, the Vishwaroopam was only eight feet high, but this time it seemed to touch the stars. People clapped their cheeks in a reverent gesture; some lit camphor and many prostrated before the Vishwaroopam. The thirty feet figure gave a deep growl. It seemed unearthly and not at all like the actors’ voice: "You people of Dravidapuram..' the voice thundered, "you have committed an evil, a sacrilege against children who are like Gods."

A shout went up in the crowd. "What have we done?” asked many people sensing that it was not the usual actor who had assumed the Vishwaroopam. It seemed to them that God himself had descended to speak through this gigantic figure. "You foolish people have been marrying off your children at the tender age of eight, ten and twelve. It is a sin against God. Anybody who practices this, will be punished by me," roared the voice.

"I have already removed some of your children
from you. They shall be returned to you if you promise not to get them married so young/' boomed the voice.

The crowd went into a frenzy. Soon their worst fears were confirmed. It was true, quite a few of the children were missing. Their mothers shrieked with fear while the fathers began to run helter-skelter looking for their children.

The policemen shuddered with fear and awe. The Viceroy looked confused for a minute before calling out, "Capture that man! He is a fraud."

Rothling dashed forward. But the huge figure disappeared into the pit as if by magic.

Meanwhile, the parents were shouting and crying for their children. The crowd en masse moved to the grounds near the temple as if drawn by some strange power. Sure enough, they saw their children standing in a large and tight circle in the middle of the ground. Just as the parents ran forward to pick up their children, a huge figure emanated in the middle of the children. It was the Vishwaroopam again which stood in their midst. The moon shone brightly. It seemed as though the almighty had arrived to protect the children.

The parents again lurched forward to grab their children, but a cry went up: "Stop!" It was the cry of a hundred children who had spoken in one voice.

Meanwhile the assembled crowd saw a lone figure of a child scramble up the heights of the Vishwaroopam. In the moonlight, they watched with bated breath as the child clambered up the gigantic height, when suddenly the huge hand of the Vishwaroopam lunged forward and grabbed the
figure seated upon the tall structure. The crowd let out a gasp, but the child did not seem scared. The huge Krishna swooped the child and hoisted her onto its enormous shoulders.

The child was none other than Sita. Perched high, she spoke loudly for all to hear:

"Until you promise not to get us married at this young age we will not return home. We will leave the village with this Vishwaroopam Krishna who has promised to protect and nourish us."

Sita’s parents went into a dizzy spin. 'What if their child fell of that great height?'

"Somebody save her," they croaked, their voices getting choked in their throats.

"What kind of cockamamie is this?" shouted the Viceroy. "He is no God. That man is a thug who is holding the children in terror. Policemen, march forward and capture him!" instructed the Viceroy.

"Stop!" cried the children.

"We will not allow you to come near us!" Sita shouted in a vibrant voice.

The Vishwaroopam spoke in a booming voice.

"Viceroy! You think I am a fraud? Please let me tell you something. That man, Rothling, standing right next to you, is a lowly thief. He is the one who has stolen the headman Pannai’s Kannika diamond. At this very moment, it is lying in his safe."

"No!" shouted Rothling in response. "I have not stolen anything."

But the Viceroy had now warmed up to the situation. He summoned two policemen and ordered Rothling to hand over the keys to his safe.

Rothling spluttered with anger. "Sir, you believe
this fraud? You really think I could have stolen a diamond? I am innocent," stammered Rothling.

"Everybody is guilty until proved innocent," said the Viceroy.

Gomathi's father, Pannai Paramasivam, immediately sensed that it was the appropriate time to break the news that Ambuli and Vengai had never struck his house.

"Sir, I wish to tell you something," said the Pannai, seizing the opportunity.

"Yes?"

"The bandits never struck at my house. Rothling and I were the last persons to visit the Nilavarai, my treasury," confessed the Pannai.

The translator who was amongst the crowd also felt encouraged to step forward and say, "Sir, it was not Vengai and Ambuli who wrote the letter to the Pannai threatening to rob his house. It was Rothling who dictated the letter in English and commanded me to translate it into Tamil and post it to the Pannai."

"So, Rothling is indeed suspect. Let the policemen come back," said the Viceroy sternly.

The huge figure roared in satisfaction and the gathering went into a silence again.

Sita clung to her perch atop the Vishvaroopam and addressed the crowd:

"We, the children of Dravidapuram, do not want to live with parents who wish to get us married so early. We wish to study, pursue higher education and be of use to the society. We cannot sacrifice our childhood by marrying so young. We want our parents to make a vow that they will think of our marriages only when we are older and at an age appropriate for marriage."
Otherwise, we will all leave with this Vishwaroopam who promises to protect and care for us. Are they willing to accede to our condition?” demanded Sita.

There was pindrop silence. The parents were at a loss. Nobody felt brave enough to make a commitment. That is when the Viceroy felt he had to take the situation in his hands. He stepped forward and declared in a firm, authoritarian voice:

"Children of Dravidapuram, I make a commitment to you on behalf of your parents that you shall not be married at an early age. At this very moment I pass an Act declaring child marriage as illegal and a crime against the government. Parents who disobey this rule shall be punished severely. Henceforth, I ban child marriages in the entire region of Dravidapuram."

A huge cheer went up in the children’s quarters.

The Vishwaroopam spoke: "You are indeed a noble man, Oh, Viceroy! I bless you."

Meanwhile the policemen returned with the Kannika diamond shining in their hands like a bright lamp.

"My Kannika diamond!" yelled the Pannai with great relief.

The Viceroy was besides himself with anger.

"Rothling, you have brought great disgrace to the government by stooping so low. I order your immediate deportation back to your country where you shall be subject to trial and punishment."

Rothling shook with anger. Not only had his careful planning to avenge Vengai come to nought, but he was also to be deported.

"Policemen, move forward and arrest that fraud!" shouted Rothling in a fit of anger, forgetting that he was no longer an officer.
The Viceroy commanded, "Bring that tall man to me, I have to see who he is?"

At that moment, the large Vishwaroopam spoke: "I came here to protect the children of Dravidapuram. My task here is done. None can capture me. Come on...come on...catch me if you can," the looming figure challenged.

The policemen rushed forward with guns.
"Don’t shoot, there are children here," yelled the parents and the Viceroy.

The policemen dropped their guns to the ground and ran forward to capture the tall man and bring the children back. But the children were ready. Sita had prepared them for such a situation.

The children rushed forward and pushed the approaching policemen. Some of them pulled the policemen’s feet, stumbling them. Some poked sticks in the policemen’s ribs and backs and some did a jig in front of them to distract them.

This diversion provided the cover for the huge, looming figure to collapse into an ordinary man and rise as the dreaded bandit, Vengai. But, in the dark, none could recognize him. Along with the huge figure, Sita landed safely and ran to join the rest of the children in stalling the policemen.

"I shall always be around to help the children of Dravidapuram whenever they need me," said Vengai and vanished.

Only the children knew how he had escaped. But they had resolved to keep it a secret. They kept up their game of stumbling and stalling the policemen until they were sure that Vengai had escaped. The policemen searched in vain.
From far, far away, the people and children heard a triumphant roar, which resonated through the Vrali forest. Vengai had gone back to his kingdom.

Happy that their plan had succeeded, the children lifted Sita on their shoulders and swirled in joy.

"Three cheers for the brave girl, Sita!" they shouted.

The hundred children gathered around Sita and thanked her profusely for helping them escape marriage at such an early age.

"Jai-jai to Sita," the children shouted.

Malarkodi, Vasantha, Sugandi, Gomathi and Viswam danced joyfully. Their plan had succeeded. They were now free to study and pursue their dreams. Thanks to their friend, Sita.

The Viceroy walked towards the children. He congratulated Sita and commended her bravery. Press reporters who were present to cover the Ramanavami festival now thronged around Sita waiting to interview her. Sita and the hundred children were photographed with the Viceroy, to be splashed in all the newspapers the following day.

"What do you want to become?" the chief reporter interviewed Sita, the heroine of the day.

"I want to be a reporter," answered Sita bravely.

"Oh! You are intelligent, brave and very honest. You will make an excellent reporter. You are welcome to join our paper after you finish your studies," said the chief reporter.

The children shouted a loud hurrah. Sita jumped with joy while her parents watched her with brimming pride. And the people of Dravidapuram looked on astonished at what the children had achieved!
Epilogue

Rothling is deported to England and granted a punishment of two years in prison for misuse of office.

Ambuli is taken to Indukaan islands to spend fourteen years there as punishment for the murder of Bhegan the police inspector. He continues his healing activities in the prison and helps hundreds of ill prisoners.

Vengai returns to Dwikarna cave and makes a home out of it. He helps the Vanaraksha tribe in leading a better life.

The region of Dravidapuram lives happily in peace and togetherness. They no longer fear that the pestilence would strike again.

Sita and Gomathi go back to school.

Sita continues to communicate with Vengai regularly through Varnam.
A naive ten-year-old.
Two proclaimed bandits.
A cow. A parrot.
Hardly an alliance to speak of.
Yet, when they get together, their camaraderie moves heaven and earth! Well...almost...
A novel set in the old, old days when girls were married at eight, when caste differences were very much rampant, when the Moon God sent down healing powers, when the political scenario was not quite homely...
Amidst this superstitious, high-low environment, bred personal vendetta.
The result, a high-end drama with a befitting finale!