

Dhanalakshmi

Sri Sriramana¹

(Translated By Venigalla Komala)

I was studying in eighth class. Seetharamanjanelu was my class as well as bench mate. He was a hefty boy with dark shiny complexion. With his well-pressed silk clothes, a watch, two gold rings, always money in his pocket, the perfume he used and the green Hambar cycle he rode, he looked a hero to us and we all were a bit jealous of him. Apart from all his luxury he had another plus point. A childless business man - Eswarayya, a distant relative - adopted him. Eswarayya fell ill and thought he was dying and his last wish was to witness the marriage of his adopted son. Hence Seetharamanjanelu got married to Dhanalakshmi. She was in third class in our school. He was the only married student in our school.

Surprisingly Eswarayya recovered from death-bed and started looking after his business again. He was happy and thought that Seetharamanjanelu brought him luck.

But hasty marriage was irksome to Ramanjanelu though it gave him adult look. He suspected that other students were making fun of him behind his back. He rarely spoke to anyone. I was free with him, though others maintained distance from him. Sometimes I did home work for him. In return he allowed me to ride his shining cycle – a few rounds in the play ground. I considered it a privilege to ride that grand cycle.

One day in our science class the teacher asked Ramanjanelu to describe parts of an egg. He answered - 'shell outside, and chick inside'. The teacher got irritated and ordered him to stand upon the bench. His face was flesh with anger. Adding insult to injury Dhanalakshmi came running to our class and asked Ramanjaneyulu for a pencil. The whole class laughed loudly which scared her and she ran back with her anklet bells jingling. She was prettily dressed in silk Lehanga and blouse. She wore a ruby necklace. She looked like a decked doll.

The teacher was about to continue the lesson on egg. Ramanjanelu jumped furiously off the bench and went to cycle stand, sat on his Hambar there itself. While riding out, he rang the bell three times in front of our class room. The teacher was shocked and asked the class leader to 'collect that rascal's books and leave them in the staff room.'

Ramanjanelu behaved rashly because he felt humiliated. Otherwise he was a quiet student.

After that incident Ramanjanelu was never seen in the school. Even Dhanalakshmi left the school permanently.

Eswarayya didn't object Ramanjanelu's decision. Moreover he thought that the boy would learn trade secrets – loss and profit - by sitting in the shop.

With Ramanjanelu's discontinuation of studies I lost the chance of riding his Hambar Cycle. I was hoping to get a cycle to go to junior college after my tenth pass. But by then our high school was upgraded to a junior college. By the time I came to Degree College, our junior college became a degree College. With my minimum pass marks I joined the college. My dream of getting a cycle of my own was never fulfilled.

In fact I wished to discontinue my studies inspired by Ramanjanelu. But my father was not as understanding as Eswarayya. He gave me a strict warning saying, "they have business and we have nothing. If you don't study you have to beg on streets."

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Eswarayya breathed his last. After his death the bitter reality dawned on Ramanjanelu that the four workers in the shop had been stealing money from the business leaving it in debts. After clearing the debts the shop had to be closed – Twenty year old Ramanjanelu and Seventeen year Dhanalakshmi were left with nothing except Eswarayya's family name.

One day I met Ramanjanelu in the main Bazaar. He requested me to go to his house along with him. I followed him. His house consisted of a single room with an attached tin shed in front.

He informed Dhanalakshmi about my presence there. She offered me a seat and said that she wanted to talk to me about some issue. Her behavior and talk showed maturity.

She said, "Annayya (elder brother) you must be knowing our situation. We are left on the street suddenly. Don't know what to do. You know your friend better. He holds me responsible for discontinuation of his studies. I tell him God, who provides food for ants will surely show us some way. He thinks that I am a burden to him. He offers to work as a sales boy in somebody's shop. After all he is the adopted son of Eswarayya."

Ramanjanelu asked her to come to the point instead of beating around the brush.

She continued, "Here in this Varandah we planned to start a flour (pulverizing) mill. It is first of its kind here. Hence I hope the business will surely pickup. I heard – machine costs ten thousand rupees. I can manage that much amount by selling my jewellery. We need three more thousand for electric fittings. We will fall short of those three thousand. I request you to go to Mill Company in Vijayawada along with your friend. As he doesn't speak more than a word or two, you please convince Mill Company owners to accept those three thousand in installments." I assured her that Mill Company would accept installment payment.

Within a week flour machine was fixed. Our village is slowly turning into a town. The flour machine became popular in a short while. Dhanalakshmi had learnt its operation along with small repairs needed time and again.

The machine ran twelve hours a day. Customers brought rice, broken rice, wheat, black gram, green gram etc. for pulverizing. In a month Dhanamma stocked all those items in her house. Customers bought them there and also paid for grinding. She paid installments to the company in full. The Company fixed a separate machine for turmeric powder.

By every evening a container was filled with coins – day's income of the machine. She used to feel happy calling the money SreeMahalakshmi. She used to count the change into ten rupee packets and sold that money to hotels

and other shop people. She charged 10 rupees out of each hundred. Early morning while cleaning the shed she used to collect all sorts of flour from the floor along with road dust. She called it bath powder (Sunnipindi) and made packets of it. Five fistfuls in each packet and sold a packet a rupee. They called it DhanasreeSunnipindi. She got pouches made with actress Vanisree's picture and an ad – 'DhanaSreeSunnipindi' is made with various medicinal herbs to enhance skin glow.

Dhanalakshmi got her jewellery made again. She gave birth to a boy. She named him Eswar. People Started calling her Dhanamma (rich lady).

She advised her husband to start a regular grocery store as they earned money which could be invested to further their business. She said, "because of the flour machine our house has become the centre. You can have full time work and earn money at the same time."

He filled the shop with all sorts of food items and once again he became a shop owner.

She further suggested that he should sell all sorts of spices along with other condiments not available in other shops. Then they could compete with bigger shop owners. As usual Ramanjanelu didn't favour her suggestion at first but implemented it ultimately.

They set the shop right late in the night and slept there only. The neighbourhood woke up every morning with flour mill sound.

People realized that along with money Ramanjanelu was getting bold.

I completed B.Ed. and joined as a teacher in my old school with a consolidated pay of thousand a month. My elders fixed my marriage. Shakuntala – the bride to be was in her final year B.A.. Though I wanted to wait till she completed her degree, our people didn't listen to me. In our wedding invitations along with Shakuntala's name B.A. was printed in brackets. All our relatives attended my marriage. Shankuntala's B.A. never crossed the brackets as she failed in the examination. She happily settled down as the mother of two kids, reading borrowed novels, weekly magazines and watching T.V. serials were her hobbies. Neither my job nor my salary pleased her. But life went on without much hitch.

I used to buy all my groceries from Ramanjanelu's shop. Dhanamma used to tell me freely what was happening in the shop and around. One day when I went there some heated argument was going on between the couple.

He was shouting at her, "Do you think you are Indira Gandhi. If you don't control your mouth you will see the

consequences. You are not the only intelligent person.”

When she saw me she said, “Annayyayou be the judge and decide whether I did anything wrong. Because of the sound of the machine I speak loudly, is that a crime?” I was hesitating to talk, he hissed, ‘Don’t Change the topic. If you have any respect to your husband you would not have behaved like that in the night”.

She said, “What was wrong? Being in business one must be prepared to take risks. In the midnight Mr.Naidu came to the shop to buy Sonthi (Dry, hard ginger) for some medicinal purpose. This man blatantly said - ‘we don’t have it’. I got up, looked for Sonthi and gave it to Mr. Naidu. This man verbally abused me the rest of the night saying that I belittled him in front of a gentleman. He feels himself generous and I am money minded.” She started crying.

She added, “He called me a burden. Now he blames me.”

He asked her to shut her mouth. I didn’t know how to respond to them in that situation. But from that time Mr. Naidu began to buy his groceries from Dhanamma’s shop. Ramanjanelu had to swallow his defeat.

Ramanjanelu very politely requested me whether I could help with business correspondence and accounts in the shop spending an hour daily after the school were closed. He offered to pay Rs.300 a month or groceries worth that amount every month. Dhanamma asked me to opt for groceries – that I needed every month. Before I could think or say anything they fixed my part-time job in their shop.

Each evening after school I spent an hour in their shop doing business related writing correspondence. On every 1st of the month they used to send full grocery stuff minus sunnipindi to my house.

My wife didn’t like my clerical job in the shop. But I felt ease in my money matters.

One evening I had to spend more time in the shop with extra work. When I was leaving, Dhanamma gave me one packet of jasmynes for my wife and a few Jilebis (sweet) for my kids saying that I did not know how to enjoy even simple pleasures.

My wife commented, “This is over-time compensation. Your sister is very intelligent. Ask her to write a book on trade secrets. It can be prescribed as a text book to the Business Management Students.”

Whenever I told her that I would return home late that particular evening she used to joke that she would get jasmynes and children Jilebis. I used to take it easy as jokes would not feed anybody.

With Dhanamma’s suggestion a tour to Bhadrachalam was

arranged. Forty tourists paid hundred each for travel, food etc,. The bus was loaded with groceries and two cooks were engaged. For me and my wife the trip was free. Dhanamma got 200 coconuts and other veneration (puja) items – turmeric, Kumkum and incense sticks to be sold at the temple to other tourists. With holy dip in rivers Krishna and Godavari, visiting Kanaka Durgamma and Sree Rama temples, three days trip was satisfactorily concluded and we all returned well home safely.

In return journey Dhanamma and Ramanjanelu bought soap nuts, brooms etc., as they were cheap there. They could be sold in the shop to a higher price. They benefitted in two ways. Visited holy place and brought back business to their shop.

My bracket B.A. wife remarked, “They made a lot of profit in this tour. They spent groceries from their own shop, sold coconuts and brought back things cheaply available there. Ask them to arrange next trip to Tirupati and SreeKalahasti. They can buy there tamarind which is very cheap there, can gain on it by selling it to a better price here in their shop.” What my wife did not know was that the trip to Tirupati was already planned.

They earned money through the grocery shop and flour mill. They bought a big shop in the main bazaar. But continued business in the old shop only as it proved lucky for them. The sound of flour mill was like music to their ears. They built two rooms, one upon the other original single room. The house looked like a chimney from outside.

A fertilizer company offered agency to Ramanjanelu as their big room was still empty. He did not want it saying that they would have to invest a lot of money on it.

Dhanamma encouraged him to accept the agency saying, “We have money. We would get commission on fertilizer sales. That is like getting interest on our investment. We can sell fertilizers to the farmers on loan and buy grains in whole sale during the harvest season and sell it in retail. We don’t have to pay rent to the shop. We get decent return on our money.” He said that he understood her point.

Hence ‘Eswar Agency’ started in main Bazaar. To look after agency business he appointed our retired science master (one who punished him in eighth class) as he was in need of some earning.

Fertilizer business was on its peak. I was the overall adviser in their business matters. Suddenly there came a national calamity when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was killed. The nation plunged in darkness. Life in every aspect came to a standstill. Transportation suffered. Two Urea wagons meant for ‘Eswar Agency’ was misdirected to Bandra instead of to Andhra in Vijayawada Junction. With repeated phone calls to station master the wagons could be traced after a

month. Two lorry loads of urea came to the shop. It was peak season for fertilizers. Urea rate went up unimaginably. It was sold before it went to shop. They made a profit of one lakh rupees on urea sale.

I was happy for their gain, though I was worried before, when urea wagons were misplaced. I remarked, "Good, the urea rate went up. If it went low we would have met with terrible loss." They coolly said, "We were assured that we can claim damages from the railways." It took some time for me to understand their strategy. People with higher education could not match these two people – I thought.

Dhanamma said that they were lucky. She took out a heavy gold chain and requested me to go to Vijayawada and deliver it to the station master for his help regarding urea. "If Ramanjanelu goes there people would question him in many ways". She gave me station master's address; he lived not far from the station.

A half acre land at the entrance of our village was put up for sale. The land owner needed cash for his daughter's wedding and he quoted one lakh sale price. Dhanamma put forth the proposal of buying it. Ramanjaneyulu lost his temper and shouted at her, "Have you lost your mind? The land has a big pit in the centre. What can we do with it?" She insisted on buying the land and asked him to listen to her carefully. He said he would not listen. Moreover he said the low land could be used only to bury her.

But Dhanamma managed to convince him. He said that he would offer seventy thousand and not a paisa more than that. The final settlement was done for seventy two thousand and the land was registered on Dhanamma's name. The village people praised Ramanjanelu for buying good land cheaply.

Dhanamma also praised him saying, 'he has brains. He looked quiet but he is capable. Because he didn't budge an inch from the price he offered. He made a profit of almost twenty five thousand.' Ramanjaneyulu heard her and felt that she recognized his worth. He felt extremely happy.

They put up roof on pillars in that low land. It became a godown, for the fertilizers. Lorries could straight go into the godowns and unload. Many people appreciated Ramanjanelu's idea. Dhanamma followed the traditional ritual with a lemon to ward off the evil eye on her husband.

One day after Ramanjanelu left for fertilizer shop, Dhanamma said to me, "Annayya, your friend is very happy these days." I complimented him saying that he bought the land cheaply and converted the low land into a godown. She was not happy about my remark. She opened up her mind to me and said, "He is jealous of me saying that mine is upper hand in all matters". He purposely accuses me, "I have everything but no peace in life. So, I adjust myself to

the situation to make life peaceful." I did not follow what she actually tried to tell me. She continued, "It is a secret Annayya. I paid to the landowner twenty five thousand without his knowledge. Otherwise he would not have sold the land to us. I raised the cash through chit fund bidding. Your friend said that the land would only be useful to bury me. The godown idea was mine. But I gave all credit to him for his image in public. But he was happy with the credit I entrusted him with."

Then EswarBabu came in demanding ten rupees from her. She while commenting that he always needed tens and twenty fives, started counting the coins. He said irritably, "only note". She gave it to him and sent him away. She continued, "He is in 8th class. I am scared that he might follow his father's footsteps in studies."

I said, "What did we achieve by studying and what did he lose by not studying".

But she opposed my comment and said, "EswarBabu should pursue his studies. His father is selling salt and Tamarind. But Eswar should sell a, b, c, d. There is no better business than education." She further went on, "His father's pampering may leave him a spoiled brat. He says that we have business. It is enough for him, if Eswar looks after their business. Annayya, please look for a good school for Eswar. If he remains here he would be good for nothing. I know your friend will surely oppose my proposal but I can manage him somehow. Please help me regarding Eswar's studies.

That morning when we were all in the shop EswarBabu came in and wanted twenty five rupees. Dhanamma said, "I will give you whatever you want, but you have to study well". She quoted Purana story, "Devikamma's eighth child will be a threat to Kamsa's life. Like that there is dangerous tradition in our family of discontinuing studies, be careful."

Ramanjanelu looked at her angrily but gave a hundred rupee note to Eswarayya. She wanted to know why he needed money. He replied that he would buy books. She joked, "your father's books are still in the school. See whether you could make use of them." Science master and myself had to control our smile and look away.

Ramanjaneyulu got very furious. He looked at Dhanamma like a wounded tiger. After awhile his composer came back and he came to me saying, "Eswarayya should be sent to some good residential school. Here he would be spoiled by lady's pampering. Please enquire about a good school. Money is no problem. We can spend any amount." He stood up straight and gave a look as though his decision was final. Dhanamma gave a sigh of relief as her plan was successful.

Why did I select this story for translation?

Mr. Sreeramana is a great story writer in Telugu. He touches all aspects of our society – good and bad - in his stories. In this story – Dhanalakshmi, he gave importance to her intelligence, timely sense and her business acumen. Ours is a male dominated society. Her husband Ramanjaneyulu

opposes her in every proposal she makes, his thoughts are negative. But his attitude does not damper her determination. She works hard to establish her place in this society. Both had no good education, But she proves upper hand in all matters but gives the credit to her husband to