

## SrIrastu

It is a pleasant Sunday morning. I am sitting in my favourite recliner in the backyard, completely relaxed, with a coffee cup in one hand and the daily in the other. The gentle breeze, the chirps of the little birds, a devotional song rich in *swara* content from the nearby *Sivalayam* – what a perfect combination to take my mind away from the reality! I have immersed myself in the news, occasionally mouthing the *swaras* in tune with the song.

“OK, think of a night: Ammu wakes up suddenly after half a night of unbearable pain, unsettling thoughts and disturbed sleep. Her husband gets up, looks at her angrily, maybe gives her a tongue-full and goes and sleeps next to his mom. And, Ammu realises she has been weeping. Tell me whom does she think of then? Wouldn't it make any difference to you if, maybe, just maybe, she thinks about us and feels what she is going through could have been avoided if we had been more sensitive?”

THAT was my wife, Ramadevi. No wonder she is Valmiki's sister. Her outburst is about Ammulu, or Ammu, as she calls her. Ammulu is the kid my in-laws brought from their native place, four years back, when she was six, to help my wife with her daily chores. I have opposed it. My wife did too, at first. Nevertheless, her parents pressed saying the kid didn't have a life at home anyway. For some reason, which I don't understand now, we didn't fight back and the kid became a part of our life. Her parents took her home ten days back and they are now planning her marriage. The kid has no clue about it. My wife has been pushing me to talk them out of it.

I don't think I am insensitive; I just am more sensitive to the fact that we are strictly limited in our capacity to talk someone out of following an established custom. However, it does pain me a lot to see Ammulu getting married at such a tender age. She is a great kid. In the last four years, I have never seen her showing any interest in academics. She would never sit with my two boys when the teacher comes home for tuition. However, she is a gifted child when it comes to embroidery, painting, or making dolls with clay. Artisanship is probably in her blood. Her father is a potter. Our house is full of little idols she has made. Also, she is very good at horticulture. She has learned it from my wife.

“Govindarajulu sir, Valmiki sir said he wants to talk to you. He asked you to join him for a cup of coffee,” a ten-year old messenger delivered the news. “And, yeah, if he asks I told you this half an hour back,” he added and flew away.

'Valmiki' – if there is a single word in this universe that could instantly raise my hopes and reboot my morale when I am down with worldly problems, it is the one. Valmiki has been a great friend of mine for over three decades now. I call him my mentor though he never likes that word. He is also my brother-in-law. Ammulu is very close to him. At least once a day she goes to him and he tells her stories, plays violin for her or does gardening with her.

He is a great intellectual, a philosopher in real world terms. He doesn't believe in God but won't let anyone call him an atheist. I remember the answer he gave to someone who asked if he is an atheist. He said, “A theist is someone who believes in the presence of God. An atheist is someone who believes in the absence of God. I am neither.” I don't know if that person understood what Valmiki meant by it, but I did, after some substantial thinking. The presence or absence of God wouldn't influence the way Valmiki looks at the world, in any way. His behaviour shows it.

Whenever I go to Valmiki with a problem or an issue, it's almost always guaranteed that I would find a way out. Valmiki never prescribes solutions. His way of helping someone has always been making him 'think'. Three decades of close association with him made me competent enough to think properly, albeit with little assistance from him.

I have reached Valmiki's home after a ten-minute walk. He was playing violin in his portico. I went and sat a few feet away from him, silently. He has finished playing after a few minutes, looked at me in surprise and said, "Hey Govindarajulu, when did *you* come?"

I smiled in reply, took the violin from him and started playing *sa-pa-sa*. Valmiki sat relaxed and asked, "So, any update on Ammulu?"

"Well, I think it's fixed now. She's going to get married."

"And...what do you want to do about it?"

"I'm thinking...hmm...*nothing*. Ah, I wish I could get that Somanna to stop it. But why would he stop following an established custom just because *I* told him?"

Valmiki paused for a while and said, "A custom, a tradition or an ethical practice – you know Govinda, an *incentive* is what makes people follow any of them or deviate from them."

I heard it. I know it is the opener to a practical solution to Ammulu's problem. But I didn't raise my head, nor stopped playing. Instead, I said, "OK. You go get us some coffee and we'll talk when you come back." Then I lowered my voice and said to myself, "I've got some thinking to do."

He smiled and went inside. And, I started thinking. The length of each *swara* and the speed started varying symbolizing the status of my thinking.

"Incentive – do people always get an incentive to do or not do something? And, do people do or not do something only if they get an incentive? Let's see. Why *do* I read paper in the morning everyday? Because I like it and it eases me into my daily routine and, I want to know what is going on around me. OK, that's a start. There *is* an incentive. And, why *don't* I watch TV in the morning for the same news? Because I don't like people talking to me in the morning, the movie-related ads make me sick and my wife would come and change the channel to a morning serial. Wow. Peace of mind *is* a definite incentive.

"This is going great. OK, now let's see why my wife watches every single episode of those serials *and* the reruns every day. I don't know. Hmm...and, why does she talk so loud even when I am right next to her? I don't know. OK...why doesn't she workout, for at least half an hour a day? I don't know. OK. Let's just say her incentive is she likes being that way and move on."

I moved on and started thinking about things that I do know a bit about.

"Ramaswami teaches the same subject, mathematics, both in school and at home, in tuitions. The kids attending his tuitions score higher. The priest at the Sivalayam tends to be on time in the evening and not so much in the morning. Kids show relatively more enthusiasm to go to school on the day before the weekend than the day after. Dowry is a favourite custom of the groom's parents and not so much for their counterparts. The donations in a not-so-famous temple will be significantly lower than they are in a famous temple, of the *same God*. Caste conversion is almost unheard of, but conversion of religion is quite common."

And, so went my thinking.

"Somanna wants to follow the custom of child marriage because there is an incentive in it for him." Just like a kid who knows the answer to the teacher's question I said it loud, with all animation in my face, looking at Valmiki who was just coming, with coffee cups in his hands.

Valmiki offered a cup along with an encouraging smile and said, "Wow! That *is* nice. May I know what that incentive is?"

"Sure you can, but I want *you* to take the first stab at it. I'll work on my coffee meanwhile," I said with a teasing smile.

"Well, looking at his family, I can say there must be some pressure from his mother and maybe a little bit from his wife and, without a doubt, a great deal from his brother-in-law, Krishnamurthy. I wouldn't be surprised if he has decided to go ahead with the marriage only to pacify them. Peace of mind *is* a definite incentive. Isn't it?"

"It indeed is. It's funny you say that because I kind of ran into that conclusion myself when I was... well, never mind..." I paused for a while and continued. "Anyway, mother and wife I understand but why his brother-in-law?"

"Well, let's see. Tell me first: who markets the pottery made by Somanna and his wife?"

"Krishnamurthy, of course!"

"And, how many kids does Krishnamurthy have?"

"Two: a boy at eleven and a girl at six. That boy is the one marrying Ammulu; you know that right?"

"Yes, I know that. And, Ammulu has a younger brother; *you* know that right?"

"Yeah, so? You mean...uh-huh! So, you think Ammulu's brother is going to marry Krishnamurthy's daughter?"

"Only eventually!"

"Wow, so this is like a two-level lock-in. Each of them is consolidating his supply-chain and in turn growing stronger as a combined family. That's impressive!"

"Indeed! So tell me now: when they know what they are doing and, when they know what they are doing is right can we just go tell them they can't do it because the rest of the world thinks it's wrong?"

He knows my answer. My silence explained it better. After a while, he continued talking.

"The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929, several decades back. Everybody involved in a child marriage is punishable under the law. Mothers under the age of 15 are 3 times more likely to die because of pregnancy- and childbirth-related problems. We can't even measure the amount of domestic violence these poor kids go through. The social and economic opportunities are lost forever.

"It's not that people like Somanna and Krishnamurthy are totally unaware of these problems. It happens in their families, after all; to someone they love and care so much about. STILL almost 60% of the girls getting married in India are underage. Do you know why?"

"..."

"The social and economic situation that these families are in is *current*, something they are living in and experiencing right now. And, the health problems, the increased chances of death, the domestic violence and everything else are nothing but *concerns* about something that *might* happen in the *future*. And you know the present always matters the most."

"True. Agreed. So, I think, we now know that Somanna and his family have a logically strong incentive to go ahead with the marriage and that what's currently going on in their lives is more important than what might happen in the future, no matter what the history says."

"More or less. Now, tell me: how to get Ammulu out of this?"

I raised my head slowly, looked at him with a smile and started talking.

"You know, in our discussion so far, you have talked about Ammulu's family, their social and economic standing, the law of incentives, *and* the Indian Penal Code but you didn't say a word about Ammulu's role in this issue. I am sure it's anything but unintentional."

"Very well..."

"I have been thinking and I am beginning to believe that to be able to bring Ammulu out of this our focus should be on Ammulu, more than anything else. Am I right?"

"Right on. I think that's all you needed to know."

"Looks like I am all set."

"By all means. I think they will be surprised to see you too."

"Me too?"

"I was there yesterday."

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The Sun was about to set. I have reached Ammulu's place on my Luna. Their home is a mid-sized hut. Ammulu's grandmother, Musamma, was sitting in a corner, winnowing rice. Devudamma, Ammulu's mother, was cooking. Somanna and Krishnamurthy are a little away from the house, appearing to be in some argument. Somanna was the first to see me. He came rushing, wishing me with both his hands, with a smile on his face. Krishnamurthy wished me from distance and left.

"Namaste sir. I'm very happy to see you. Please come in," said Somanna, taking the Luna from my hands.

Devudamma got up in a hurry, wished me with both her hands and got me a chair from inside and then a glass of water. Musamma neither looked at me nor stopped winnowing. I sat in the chair, with Somanna and Devudamma standing on my either side, and started drinking the water.

"Valmiki sir came yesterday," said Somanna.

"Yeah, about that...what did he say to you?" I have asked, still wondering why Valmiki didn't tell me what he has said to them.

"He didn't talk much to us sir. He took Ammulu for a walk and left in about 20 minutes."

"That's more than what he needs," I said to myself and asked Somanna about Ammulu.

"She must be around sir. I'll go get her," said Devudamma.

Ammulu came running to me and stood holding my hand with a big smile on her face. I held her close affectionately and asked, "Are you playing with your friends? You look happy."

"Actually, she has been all moody since we brought her here sir. It's since yesterday evening she's looking cheerful and playing around," said Devudamma.

"Here Ammulu, take these sweets. Amma made them for you. And, here's a small assignment for you: see this rose? Amma asked you to stitch it on this piece of cloth. Here is your kit. She said she would give you a prize if you could do it in less than 1000 stitches." I gave the sweets and the embroidery kit to Ammulu and asked her to sit next to her grandmother and start working on it.

Ammulu jump-started on it. Devudamma got me some coffee and sat on the floor next to Somanna. I started talking, enjoying my coffee.

"So, Somanna, how are things? Have you planned on everything? When is the wedding? I don't see much going on here. Is everything OK between you and Krishnamurthy?"

"Krishnamurthy brought up a new issue sir. It's been giving us lot of headaches. The match between Ammulu and Suri has been fixed long back but we never talked about marrying his daughter to my son. Devudamma and I did think about that but we never discussed with him, as we didn't want to commit to anything. Recently he himself brought that topic. We told him we would discuss it later as we have been very busy planning this marriage right now. That's all. He got mad suddenly and started cursing us. He said we had some plans and we would marry our son to somebody else later. We tried to convince him. We even said we would sure marry our son to his daughter in a few years," said Somanna.

"He didn't agree sir. He said we wouldn't keep our word and demanded that that wedding should also take place now," added a visibly sad Devudamma.

I felt a little jolt inside. "This has become worse than I thought," I felt. "So, what did you say?" I asked Somanna hiding my emotions.

"I tried in all possible ways sir. I told him I would give him ten thousand rupees towards dowry for Ammulu. That's what I was telling him when you came. He didn't agree to that either and started cursing me again."

"And..."

"..."

"Please tell me you didn't yield to his demand."

"No sir, I didn't. Not yet. But I don't think we have a choice," he said looking at the ground.

It was a strong jolt this time. It took me a while to realise what I have just heard. Then I looked around. Ammulu has totally immersed herself in stitching. Musamma paused winnowing, just for a second. Devudamma is wiping her tears away and Somanna is still looking at the ground. I took a second and suddenly got up from my chair. Somanna and Devudamma got up too in a hurry to stop me. Somanna started talking.

"Sir, please don't leave. I know you won't approve of it. Please believe us, we don't like this either. We didn't expect things to end up this way. But we don't see an alternative. Please sit down sir. Please tell us what you want us to do."

He made me sit down and stood beside me, with his hands folded. I sighed, looked at both of them and started talking.

"Do you really want me to tell you what to do, Somanna? OK, here it is. Walk out. Walk out of it. He gave you a way. Use it."

"Sir, please don't think I'm being disrespectful, but do you realise what you are asking me to walk out of? Sir, this marriage is a chance to us, a chance to strengthen our social standing, a chance to consolidate our businesses, a chance to grow strong together. If I walk out of it now I'm willingly accepting an opportunity to remain weak."

"OK, tell me one thing Somanna: how can you grow strong together if each one of you is weak? Unity means strength. I agree. But where does that strength come from? Doesn't it come from the strength of the individuals who constitute the union? If each member of the union is there to derive strength out of it who is delivering it?"

"You are right. Using this marriage as a chance, you are strengthening your social standing. But don't forget: you are strengthening your *current* social standing. You are strengthening your *weakness*, only to remain weak, forever. You don't have to take my word for it. Check for yourself: didn't your father make use of such a chance? Didn't your grandfather too? How about your great-grandfather? What did it do to their social standing? How much did it enhance it?"

I could hear the heartbeat of Somanna. He was standing still; so was Devudamma. When I was about to resume, Ammulu came running with the finished design.

"Ayya, I have finished in less than 1000 stitches. See."

"Wow. This is looking awesome. You did it really fast. How many stitches?"

"Only 652."

"Again, Wow. You are amazing. Do you know amma told me she did it in 850 stitches? You beat her. Good job. She'll give you the prize when you come home. OK? Here...take this money and go buy something for yourself. This is a gift from me, OK?"

She looked at her parents triumphantly and ran away like a happy bird. She really did an amazing job. She didn't fill the petals on the sides, saving some stitches there. That gave the rose a three-dimensional look, making it look even beautiful. I showed it to her eager parents. Devudamma grabbed it enthusiastically and Somanna joined her.

I have waited for a minute, letting the happy parents enjoy their kid's creation, and started talking.

"See...this is skill, a symbol of strength. This is just one of her skills. That is how one grows stronger: by strengthening their strengths and weakening their weaknesses, not the other way around."

"Look, Somanna, please don't think I am being judgmental looking at things from my perspective. Do you know what Valmiki sir and I did all day today? We talked about you, about your family. We

have looked into the reasons why a child marriage takes place. We have analysed the social and economic background of a typical family, like yours. Only after properly understanding your situation did we understand that getting Ammulu married now is a step backward, several steps, in fact.

"Anyway, I am not going to talk you out of it, because I know I can't. I just have one question: Devudamma, remember when you were a kid...you were particularly good at something and loved doing it so much...had dreams about your future...thought so much was possible in life and, before you knew it you were married...had kids of your own...got yourself so busy with the present. Now, do you remember what you were good at? Do you remember what your dream was? Do you remember what you thought was possible in life? Tell me: do you know if your kid has a dream? DO YOU KNOW WHAT IS POSSIBLE IN HER LIFE?"

The puzzled expression in their faces indicated that I could get them to think - purpose of my trip. I have waited for a second and said, "Remember: what you think true is only your version of the truth."

Musalamma stopped winnowing and went inside.

After a couple of minutes, I was on my way back home on my Luna. In the rearview mirror, I saw Ammulu running towards me waving her hand. I felt a twisting pain in my heart. I have pulled over, looked back, waved back to her and asked her to go home. After a minute, I can still see her waving her hand, standing at the same spot.

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That night: Devudamma is lying on the bed, looking at the star-spangled sky. Somanna is sitting, with his back to her bed. Ammulu is sleeping, on her stomach, next to Devudamma. After four hours of thinking, Devudamma was still not able give proper shape to her feelings but she became sure about one thing: she wants her child's life to be different, in someway, somehow. She turned to Ammulu, kissed on her forehead, and affectionately put an arm around her, pulling her close. Ammulu woke up, looked at her mom, hugged her, and asked, "What are you thinking about amma...?" closing her eyes again.

Devudamma said slowly, "About you, dearest." Then paused for a second and asked, "Ammu, do you know what is possible in your life?" Somanna turned around, looked at Devudamma with clear understanding and then waited for Ammulu to answer, caressing her hair.

Ammulu opened her eyes, looked at both Devudamma and Somanna and said, "What I want is what is possible in my life."

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The evening before: Valmiki and Ammulu are walking along a narrow road looking at the sunset. Suddenly they both looked at each other and smiled. Valmiki asked, "Ammulu...do you want to listen to a story?"

"Yeah..."

"Several hundred years back a beautiful, good-hearted woman, named Akosua, used to live in Africa. She is a lonely girl without any money or support. Leading even an ordinary life becomes extremely difficult for her and she starts praying for God, for help, several years in a row, without food or sleep. One day, impressed by her long, sincere prayer, God appears to her and asks her to

make three wishes. She wishes for a life filled with happiness and a beautiful daughter. As her final wish, she tells Him that she went through a lot of pain in life and she wants no one born in her family to go through any sort of pain in their lives. God says He would grant that wish in part: on the thirteenth birthday of every girl born in her family, He would grant her one wish. The woman becomes happy and thanks God for His generosity.

"The girls born in the next six generations - Adjua, Abena, Akua, Abba, Afia, Ama – each wish for things like wealth, luxuries, pleasures, fame, beautiful kids, handsomest husbands and so on. However, none of them ends up living a happy life to the fullest. For instance, Adjua commits suicide becoming vexed with her monotonous lifestyle. Ama becomes a slave to bad habits and ruins her life and wealth. When the turn of Akosua, the girl born in seventh generation who was named after her ancestor, comes, there is no wealth left and she has to struggle hard to make her both ends meet. On her thirteenth birthday, she asks God why the history is repeating; why, despite His direct help, none of her ancestors lived a happy life and why she is still suffering. She tells Him she is not interested in leading a life similar to her ancestors and asks Him to grant her the wisdom to understand everything that is happening in this world, instead. God grants her wish.

"Akosua leads a long, happy life and passes on her wisdom to the next generations. God never needed to grant any wishes to her later generations.

"Do you know what God tells Akosua, Ammulu?"

"..."

"What you want is what happens in your life. Knowing what to want is the first step and striving to achieve it is the consequent journey, which spans a lifetime. If you don't know what you want, even God can't help you. If you do know what you want, you don't need God's help. You are naturally equipped to achieve it.

"Do you know what you want Ammulu?"

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Devudamma and Somanna looked at each other. Somanna asked, "Do you know what you want, Ammu?"

"I want to become an architect," said Ammulu, holding her head a little high.

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One month later:

"I try hard for four years, focusing on the *need* to go to school. It doesn't work. I say something to her parents, keeping the focus on *her*. It works. Of course, your brother's 'little talk' with her must also have something to do with it," I said to my wife with a smug smile on my face.

"Saying the right thing, to the right person, at the right time is the inherent quality of a wise man," she replied.

"Oh, thank you very much. That's a nice thing to say," I said, trying to be humble.

I know she was talking about Valmiki.

13 August 2006