



My eyes were opened during the storm of freedom. When I look back in time I often think what an unparalleled experience it was to be grown up in the melting pot of emotions surrounding India's Freedom Movement.

As a child I was often bewildered at what I regarded to be two conflicting ideas, on one hand we were fighting the Sahibs, however on numerous occasions some of the Sahib friends were regular visitors to our home and had conversation with my grandfather. As I grew up, my grandfather patiently explained to me that the ongoing disagreement was not with the Sahibs themselves but with the ruling government.

One of my most memorable childhood memories was seeing Gandhiji in person. He was one of the most charismatic persons I have ever met. I remember feeling moved and awe struck with his presence amidst us.

Delving into the faded pages of history has taken me no less than fifteen years, gathering information from every source thinkable. My journey enabled me to experience the ambience of those times and go through all the emotions associated with them.

My only regret is that Ramalingam's personal account of the freedom struggle had never been recorded by us, but on the other hand we are fortunate to have the account in his wife Pillamma's voice and words.



HE LET GANDHI INTO HIS  
LIFE



## Dedication

My grandparents told me that no good work is done alone. The freedom of India was achieved by the struggle and sacrifices of thousands of Indians all over the country. Similarly many citizens of Berhampur sacrificed their lives to free the country from the colonial rule and in time went into oblivion and were forgotten by the people of Berhampur. I sincerely wish to dedicate this biography ***“He Let Gandhi into His Life”*** of Pandit W.V.V.B. Ramalingam, a freedom fighter of Berhampur to the memory of every freedom fighter of the town Berhampur, Ganjam District, Orissa.



Janaki Sastry

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HE LET GANDHI INTO  
HIS LIFE

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*"It's easy to stand in the crowd but it takes courage to stand alone."*

Mahatma Gandhi



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# 1

## The Big Move

In everybody's life, one unexpected event can turn your life into complete turmoil and shove you into a path of no return. Be it deliberate, be it planned, or be it the play of Fate, it can never be undone. As the river always flows forward, so in life there is no turning back. Often disasters enter into lives unaware, misfortunes strike without warning, and destiny plays mischief, just for its own fun. The victim helplessly watches his life drift away right from under his feet.

If you happened to be a traditional and an obedient wife in those days, there was no escape but to go along with the tide of life. Pillamma never forgot the day when her life dragged her into a completely new avenue. She became a mute spectator to the events that took shape in front of her without her prior knowledge or consent.

The family hadn't yet adjusted to the episode of Ramalingam's resignation when the master of the house, fondly known as 'Masterji' to all, made the sudden announcement that shook the entire family to its roots.

It was the second day in the month of March 1922 when Ramalingam, the eldest son of the family, the guardian of his extended family, announced in his calm and cool manner that he was leaving home. There wasn't any advance notice given or any time to prepare for the big move that involved his permanent separation from the extended family to which he was mentally, morally, and dutifully tied. He made his announcement casually in a candid manner, without exhibiting any emotions, soon after the family had their lunch.

If ever 'casual' was the apt word for his announcement that would be utterly wrong. He blasted his announcement more like a bombshell. The initial reaction from the family was of sheer shock, followed by panic and an unknown fright. Already two bullock-carts and a *Tonga* stood waiting outside the smaller of the two houses, which was attached to the big house where his whole extended family lived together. The two houses had a connecting door from the kitchen. Otherwise, the two houses of two different sizes were independent properties. But their back garden was one, with a common well. All the vendors and workers and servants used the back door and entered the main house from the garden. The smaller of the two houses was used by the eldest son, Ramalingam, and his family. He had his vast library and office in his quarters where he had conference with his staff and friends without interruption.

The whole family had a common kitchen where the meals were prepared for the whole family. Ramalingam preferred to eat his lunch separately, served by his wife, as it was the only time they had some privacy. In the evenings he had his meal with the whole family in the dining hall of the main house. In his presence the children of the family and his two younger brothers behaved

immaculately. They ate their food in silence and in haste to 'escape' from the watchful eye of the Masterji.

Ramalingam insisted that the whole family should be present at evening mealtime, but such rules did not suit his youngest brother, Balaram, who was an outgoing person and spent a lot of time out with his friends. He hated discipline but all the same, like everybody else, he respected his eldest brother and followed the family rules. In view of the considerable age difference between Ramalingam and his two younger brothers, he became more of a father figure than a big brother to them.

Ramalingam realised that the females and the servants in his home worked hard. He told his brothers that they should have their dinner on time so that the servants could have theirs soon after. The men could go out after mealtime. Perhaps due to his professional character the Masterji believed in explaining his rules rather than ordering his family and as such the family followed them without any qualms. His logic was just and nobody at home could deny it. Unlike in some families, in Ramalingam's house even the servants had the same food as the family did, and in return the servants worked wholeheartedly and always showed their loyalty to the family.

Ramalingam had a habit of going on long walks after the evening meal, and returned home late at night. His walks put terror in the hearts of the youngsters and students. If any young person stood loitering after dark at the Barracks ground, Ramalingam would advise them to go home and study. Many of the young lads never waited to be told, since as soon as they saw Masterji at a distance they knew their 'playtime' was over. As a rule, the girls had no permission from their families to stay out after sunset.

Some men of the town spent a lot of time in the Park, across the Ramalingam-Tank, on the banks of the temple, listening to the radio and to the news that was broadcasted on the tannoy. The Park was a hot arena for discussions on the latest political issues. A few elderly men relaxed in one corner of the Park, musing about their lives and their families. The Park had different corners for different issues, but all the same discipline was maintained by all visitors to the Park. Most men felt it was a privilege to go there and mingle with the elite of the town. No female ever entered the Park alone or even accompanied by their men. There was a strict segregation between men and women, although women had their freedom to mingle with other females.

When Ramalingam returned from his rounds, he read for a while until his wife returned to the bedroom after completing her domestic duties. As the eldest of the three daughters-in-law of the family it was her duty to sort out all the domestic chores before she retired for the night. In an extended family women never had much rest. Although Ramalingam had separate quarters from the rest of the family, his wife and his three children spent their time with their cousins, uncles, and aunts in the big house and were thoroughly pampered by their grandmother. All in all it was a happy family, set up to the envy of many.

Recently, since Ramalingam had resigned from his job and become involved in political unrest, the tension in the family had developed gradually and the silent cracks began to show outwardly. None of them could confront the master of the family, so they took out their anger and frustration on his wife, Pillamma,



who listened to their concerns, their taunting and pleading, with the serenity of a saint. Like them she, too, had no control over the present situation. Pillamma had no say in her husband's resolution and she accepted that her place was to be in his shadow.

On that fateful day, after lunch he started packing his books and the servants began to stack the boxes carefully in the bullock-carts

"Are you going somewhere, son?" asked his mother politely. She could boss anyone at home but when she was in her eldest son's presence, she was extremely polite and soft-spoken. Perhaps years of conditioning to respect the master of the house made her behave so meekly in her eldest son's presence.

Once again Ramalingam repeated his announcement that he was leaving home. The women began to wail and cry and the two brothers stood by the door with their heads hung low. They had no guts to protest openly. Ramalingam approached his brothers and handed over a legal document to both of them, in effect the ownership of the property. He had signed off the two houses to his two brothers; the family home to the second son, Jagappa, and the smaller house to his youngest brother, Balaram. Stunned and bewildered they watched him with tears in their eyes. Their mother tried to change Ramalingam's mind by saying that it wasn't an auspicious time to move house but she failed to convince him. Ramalingam had made up his mind, and no astrological calculations and no amount of tears from his beloved family could change his mind.

"Mother is going to live with me," he told the family. Once again the crying, wailing, and protesting began in earnest.

"I don't want to go anywhere. I'm staying here, right here!" Mother proclaimed and to show her protest was serious, she pulled her veil down over her shaved head she sat down on the floor with her legs and arms crossed and began to weep.

Ramalingam was not the one to get into any debate. He asked Jagappa to look after their mother and declared that Jagappa was now the head of the family. He promised to visit the family as often as he could.

As the bewildered family watched the scene with dazed eyes, Masterji got into the Tonga with his wife and three children. Apart from him, everybody was in tears. The neighbours gathered in the street and on their verandas to watch the free spectacle. Ramalingam's mother kept wailing, often adjusting her veil down her smooth shaven head and begged him not to go, and his brothers stood there like statues and wondered what had happened to their brother to make him leave home so suddenly.

The crowd began to speculate, at which they excelled. They let their imagination run wild.

"I think that old woman with her big mouth must have tortured Pillamma. How long can any husband tolerate it?"

"I don't think so, if you must know her mother-in-law is very fond of Pillamma. But it's true she didn't like her when she was barren."

Even after having three healthy children, including a son, Pillamma could never shed her tag of 'barren woman'. The women in the society never let anyone forget their past. They broached it at every available opportunity, and took pleasure in belittling their fellow females. Their approach was always

cunning. Often they would visit a troubled family to sympathise with them, but soon with the slyness of a fox they stabbed them with their sharp tongues and departed with a smirk on their faces. The victimised family often felt drained out after the visits of their sympathisers.

One kind woman stood up for Pillamma and reminded them that she was now a mother of three, including a son. But on that occasion the women did not pursue the barren issue any further as men were present there. Bitching and belittling often took place behind the backs of men and most of the time men were ignorant of 'women's matters', as they coined it.

"No use blaming anyone when our Masterji makes up his mind, can anybody change it? Don't you know, even the Maharaja of the college couldn't make him withdraw his resignation," one onlooker remarked, with a smile on his face. It turned to a smirk as he lifted his collar up and glanced at the crowd, for giving them the inside information he got from his friend Balaram, the youngest son of the family.

The crowd was not ready to accept that the drama was all that simple. They speculated that something serious might have happened at home front for Ramalingam to take such a drastic step. A few of the women felt that Pillamma must have had a sneaky hand in the matter and remarked that she hid her wickedness tactfully behind her politeness and smiles. Another one pointed out that even Pillamma was in tears leaving home.

But some of them felt that Pillamma was pretending to be sorry to gain their sympathy. Their speculations and counter-speculations continued as the bullock-carts were being loaded. Finally majority of the women present there concluded that Pillamma was to be blamed for that family break-up. An odd few people felt that Ramalingam had lost his mind. He had first resigned from his plum job and now he left his ancestral home for good. The house-moving had become a hot issue of the town and an excellent topic for gossip. Suddenly, a wise cracker came out with his own theory: he declared that as Masterji was no longer the earning member, the family had thrown him and his wife and children into the street. There were as many opinions as there were mouths. The citizens' tongues wagged endlessly.

Some of their comments reached the mother's ears and saddened her more. Attacks and counter-attacks, comments and criticisms flourished in town like nobody's business. The bystanders had their fill of gossip for days to come. As always, they were united in their attacks for a while, but soon they began to quarrel among themselves about their personal virtues and faults. After every public attack of any victim, the people inevitably quarrelled among themselves, some to establish their superiority and others to show their integrity. They quibbled to show to the society that they were beyond reproach.

Pillamma and the family took their first steps in a rented house in Birakaveedhi not far away from the family home in the Temple Street. Efficiently, Pillamma arranged the house with the few belongings she had managed to bring with her. Her new neighbours dropped in one by one to welcome the new family into their street.

After dark, Balaram, the youngest brother, visited the new home, carrying a gunny bag. He entered the house from the back door as Ramalingam was in conference with some people on the veranda. As a rule, Balaram avoided his elder brother and went to Vadina, his sister-in-law for any help. She treated him like a younger brother.

“Vadina, mother has sent this for you. You forgot to carry any kitchen utensils.”

“Why bother? Let your brother starve, for all I care.”

“You know you don’t mean that, Vadina. What about the children? Are you going to starve them too?”

She gave way to tears. “Balaram, I don’t understand your brother. Here I feel like a fish out of water. How am I supposed to live here all alone?”

Balaram informed her that the situation was worse at home, and Mother never stopped crying. On top of that, women came round blaming Pillamma for all this. Mother told them to go away. He was afraid that the women would go out and bad-mouth his Mother. He fretted that from every possible angle the whole family was at a loss. Balaram promised to visit them every day and told Vadina that he would do all her errands. The Town School where he taught was just across the street. He assured Pillamma that she was not alone and how much the family loved her.

His assurance eased her troubled mind; she stopped crying and managed to bring a smile on her face.

“Vadina, did brother tell you why he moved out so suddenly?”

“No Balaram, he never gave me any opportunity to talk. You saw him ... it’s not even been a few hours since we came here. Already his followers have followed him here. There is no reprieve from them.”

After he left she made a quick meal with the few rations that were there in the gunny bag and fed her children. The next day Balaram had done her shopping for her. He visited her every day in the lunch break at his school or in the evenings.

It was a few days later that she picked up her courage and confronted her husband about the move.

“Sir, what happens to our house there?”

“What house? We’ve got no house now.”

“I mean the house we lived in until now.”

“That is not ours anymore. I’ve given the two houses to my two brothers. Jagappa will live in the house he was in and Balaram in the house where we lived.”

“What about us and our children? Don’t they need a roof too?”

“Is the roof all you want? Look—this house is big enough for us and our children. Soon Komalam will get married and go away with her husband, and then there will be only us two and two little ones. Surely we can cope here, can’t we?”

Pillamma was not satisfied with his replies. She insisted that her own children also had a right to their grandfather’s property. In his calm voice he tried to explain to her that he had made his choice not based on rights but on justice. Pillamma reminded him that as a father he was doing injustice to his

only son. She felt that his two brothers should give them some money in lieu of the free property they had gained, so that they could buy a small house for themselves, and that would be some justice for her son. She made a strong emotional appeal on behalf of her three-month-old baby son and launched into tears again.

Ramalingam first comforted her and then put forward his thoughts. "My life partner, my best friend, please calm down. Our understanding goes a long way from the age of your being eight. Do you remember those golden days? Let me explain, I need your full support now. To be honest, nobody asked me for the property."

He told her that was the right thing to do under the circumstances. He told her he had taken a bold step and resigned from his job against everybody's wishes. As Gandhiji said, nobody knew how long this struggle for freedom would last. Maybe it would never end.

"Under these conditions I can't let my brothers suffer for my actions. In this path of freedom we may lose everything and our entire lives are at stake in this battle. That is my choice and you are standing by me as you always do. But do I have the right to jeopardise my brother's lives because of me or for me? They see me as their father, they give me the respect I don't deserve, they regard me immensely, and they would never go against me. If I didn't give them any property, they wouldn't grudge. I'm certain that willingly my brothers would sacrifice their lives for me."

He became emotional and tried to hide it from his wife. She was pleased to see that even the mighty Masterji had some emotions left in him. He understood her smile and told her that he was not heartless. But now he was duty-bound and took the leap into the sacrificial fire willingly.

"No, you are not heartless, just stubborn as a mule," laughed Pillamma.

He laughed with her.

"That's my girl. Calling your husband names is a sin ... do you know that?"

"It's not name-calling ... I'm merely stating the simple facts, sir."

"Agreed."

He laughed again. She insisted on knowing more facts. He put forward his thoughts that had made him give away the property to his two brothers. He talked about the privileged childhood he had and how he was raised like a prince. He was educated at the best college in the country, in Madras. He told her of the luxuries he had as a child and at Madras, with servants and a cook to look after him. He was never short of money. His father spent lavishly to make his son a real *sahib*.

Ramalingam recalled how the show was all over when his father died very young, and penniless. He told his wife the facts she already knew, that he had to pay off all his father's debts and shift from Chatrapur to Berhampur.

He told Pillamma that his two young brothers never experienced the luxuries he had. They had basic education in the town. Ramalingam as the elder brother felt it was very just to let his two younger brothers have a piece of their father's property to make their lives better. He concluded his statement saying that his brothers deserved the houses they now had not by right alone but as a gift from him and his wife.

Pillamma listened to his statement and made no comment. Her silence unbalanced him. He needed her support in all his decisions. He valued her good will and her friendship.

“My dear wife, try to understand me. There are two houses and three brothers. I had a good start in life and they needed it too. Sadly it wasn’t to be.”

He took a deep breath, remembering the vanity in which his father had indulged in his life time. He told her that if ever they needed help his brothers would certainly stand by them. He once again reminded his wife that his involvement in this freedom struggle could be a long journey of no return, and its effect would certainly fall on them too, for just being his brothers. He told Pillamma that one of the reasons to leave the family home was to protect his mother and brothers from the after-effects of his involvement in the freedom movement. Moreover, he wanted his brothers to make their own lives in their own way.

For a long time, quietness weighed the place. Pillamma went into deep thinking. He waited for her reaction. He was certain that she understood his logic in leaving the family home. But Pillamma listened to his logic with tears streaming down her face. It was hard to say whether the tears were of joy or of pride for her husband’s justice, or tears of sadness for not possessing any property.

“Sir, as the eldest son, it’s your duty to look after your mother. Go and bring her here, sir.”

“No, my wife, mother would not want to leave her husband’s house. Let her stay where she is happy. She feels comfortable with Jagappa. We’re not far off, are we? We can meet them every day.”

Pillamma never complained again about the property. And in their long life together they never purchased a house of their own, and Ramalingam never owned any property of his own.

He left home, discarding all comforts, and never tried to recoup them in his lifetime. That momentous decisiveness had sealed their fate and their unknown future forever and there was no turning back for the couple.

Ramalingam’s resolution was firm. He left his past within the walls of his ancestral home and stepped onto the road to nowhere, there was no path in vicinity but in his mind his destination was towards freedom, the freedom of his country. He had already adopted a simple, ascetic way of life, wearing *Khadi* and exchanging his boots for simple sandals. He was oblivious to his surroundings, unaware of the dawn or oblivious of the setting sun. The evening sun cast long shadows behind him.

Pillamma dutifully took shelter in his shadow and took steps forward, wishing and hoping that they would eventually reach their destination.



**Prof Ramalingam, 1918**

## The Police Raid

The great change in Ramalingam's life had all started in early 1921 after Gandhiji's visit to Berhampur. He addressed a large gathering at the Barracks ground about non-cooperation with the British Government. Gandhiji's ardent speech had inspired a considerable number of people in the audience:

**"I have been travelling from one end of the country to the other to see whether the country has evolved the national spirit, whether at the altar of the nation it is ready to dedicate its riches, children, its all, if it was ready to make the initiatory sacrifice. Is the country ready? Are parents ready to sacrifice literary education of their children for the sake of the country? The schools and colleges are really a factory for turning out clerks for government. If the parents are not ready for the sacrifice, if the title-holders are not ready to give up their titles, *Swaraj* is very nearly impossibility. No nation being under another nation can accept gifts and kick at the responsibility attaching to those gifts, imposed by the conquering nation. Immediately the conquered country realised instinctively that any gift which might come to it is not for the benefit of the conquered, but for the benefit of the conqueror. That moment it should reject every form of voluntary assistance to it. These are the fundamental essentials of success in the struggle for the independence of the country whether within the Empire or without the Empire."**

His emotional speech made his audience stop and think about the future of their country. Gandhiji continued to impress his audience with his 'boycott theory' of the non-cooperation with the government. Gandhiji felt that explaining his ideas to the public openly would be the best way to achieve his goals of freedom, the *swaraj* of the country. Gandhiji needed public support and their participation in the struggle for freedom.

Initially the public weren't all that sure about the boycott. Unperturbed, Gandhiji toured round the country addressing the public. He told the doubters of the boycott his views about it candidly:

**"There are many other points about boycott, I would reiterate two things. It will mean that non-cooperation must commence at the top, and if the best minds of the country refuse to associate with that Government, I promise that the Government's eyes will be opened. The condition is that those who refrain will not go to sleep, but move from one end of the country to the other and bring every grievance to the notice not of Government but of the public and, if my programme is carried out, the Congress will be going on growing from year to year and give public expression to those grievances, so that the volume of wrong, ever increasing as it rolls, will**

**inflame the great nation and enable it to harbour, to conserve all its anger and its heat and transmute it into irresistible energy.”**

His emotional oration inspired many youngsters as well as adults from every field of life.

The programme and policies of the non-cooperation movement that was adopted at the promotion of Swadeshi and a boycott of foreign-made articles, surrender of honorary posts and titles, rejection of official Durbars, progressive rejection by lawyers of British courts, boycott of elections appointing new Councils, refusal by clerks and soldiers to serve for the Government, and boycott of Government-run and state-assisted schools began to take shape. The progress gained momentum. It taught the subdued Indians fearlessness.

Soon Gandhiji's patriotic zeal gripped the entire nation. The weapon of passive resistance, or *Satyagraha*, that Gandhiji gave to the nation, emerged as the greatest asset of the Indians. He reminded the public that **“Non-cooperation is a measure of discipline and sacrifice and it demands patience and respect for opposite views. And unless we are able to evolve a spirit of mutual toleration for diametrically opposite views, non-cooperation is impossibility.”**

Although he stirred an immediate enthusiasm among the public, the inspiration Gandhiji created dwindled away soon, to his disappointment. People were reluctant to give up their titles or their luxuries. Losing a government job meant starving and their families would suffer. Already Ramalingam had given up his job, and titles he never cared or craved for. He led the movement from the front by setting fine examples. He had as many followers in this as he had an equal amount, perhaps more against him. Some people felt that it would be foolish to forego a comfortable life style for a cause that might never end successfully. Those who did not agree with Gandhiji's non-violence programme sniggered at those national songs that began to emerge everywhere in local languages. Some people ridiculed the leaders of the town who promoted them as if they were the ace war missiles. British cavalry trotted along the Barracks grounds of Berhampur town without intervening with the public. Every evening families relaxed in the open air of the Barracks ground and their children entertained them with the national songs to the amusement of some and to the ridicule of others.

Another request Gandhiji made to Indians was to boycott government schools. As a good measure, Masterji Ramalingam, who led the town's people from the front, withdrew his nine-year-old daughter, Komalam, from the Town School, ending her formal education. Pillamma objected strongly but at the same time followed her husband's wishes. For her, education was the prime priority. Pillamma compromised with the situation and sent Komalam to be educated by a private tutor, Chalmayyagaru, who lived nearby. Being very intelligent, Komalam continued her education with her tutor. She was her tutor's pride and joy.

Komalam spent her spare time learning embroidery, crochet, and sewing. She also had singing lessons from a local woman teacher and played Harmonium. She had a sweet voice to enhance her charming character. Komalam was loved by all, and she made her mark on everybody she met, not



because of her father but because of her kindness and good manners and very good looks. When people complimented Komalam, her father gave all the credit to his wife, who had raised Komalam to be a delightful young girl. He was proud of his daughter, and none of his other children could ever take her place.

Gandhiji's visit and his speeches gave tremendous impetus to the freedom movement. Soon the Congress movement was popularised by his followers. It was a kind of dynamism which was not known before in the vast land of India. Some more volunteers from all professional fields joined the freedom movement. Masterji Ramalingam was an ace speaker and he inspired many of them.

The law courts began to work slowly. There wasn't a complete boycott of government institutions but there was enough to slow down the running of the Government. Gradually it turned out to be a go-slow movement.

The speeches of the Masterji did stir the conscience of many. The stream of thinking, the stream of self-realisation, and the stream of conscious awareness of the 'slavery' under British rule began to seep slowly into their hearts. The stream began to gain momentum steadily and before long it became like a river. Once a river starts flowing it never stops until it reaches its destination. The Sea of Freedom waited for the river to reach her.

It had been four months since Masterji Ramalingam's family settled at Birakaveedhi, leaving their ancestral home to his mother and the extended family.

His involvement with the freedom movement became his mission, and he had no time to spend with his family. But every evening he visited his mother to ask about her welfare.

The front room and the veranda of his rented house became his office, and his followers and some eminent people of the town met there regularly to discuss the movement and strategies. In turn, all followed the strategies of their national leader from the top.

The police kept a vigil on Masterji. His mother was extremely concerned for her son and similarly she was worried about her other two sons, as they too had connection with her revolutionary son Ramalingam. Balaram, the youngest son of the family was the go-between for the two families. He visited his 'Vadina' everyday, always entering the house by the back door, like the women and servants did. His mother was torn between the two families, but she did what she thought was right to safeguard her two sons first, and prohibited them from visiting their elder brother. But Balaram had his own mind. He visited his favourite sister-in-law and spent some time with the children, doing small errands for the family.

Masterji Ramalingam along with his ardent followers marched through the town, urging people to observe non-cooperation. They distributed pamphlets of Gandhiji's speeches translated into local languages of Telugu and Oriya. Masterji promoted *Khadi*, the hand-woven cloth which he had already adopted, and *Charkas*, the spinning wheels.

Gandhiji tackled the British in the textile industry. In those days, in India it was a crime to spin cotton into yarn and to weave yarn into cloth. All cotton was exported to the mills in England. The British Government felt that Masterji

Ramalingam was instigating the people, and ordered the police to confiscate all 'illegal' literature from his office, which order they followed straight away.

The news of the police raid was spread to every corner of the town. Suddenly the most revered Masterji Ramalingam was seen as a common criminal. The very fact that the police ever knocked on his door was beyond their comprehension. They felt that a police raid was held to disgrace the honour of their Masterji. In fact, the police went to the house and talked to Masterji politely before entering his premises. Masterji realised that they were only following their orders, and without any protest left the house and stood in the street while the police conducted their duty. They ransacked his office and took some papers and books, and saluted Masterji politely before they left.

When his wife Pillamma saw the police in the house, stunned Pillamma watched them in fear and fright. She took her three children into the bedroom and shut the door behind her. After some time when her husband opened the door, she came out like a mouse from a hole. She was surprised to see him so calm.

"Are they still here?" she asked with great concern.

"No, my dear. They did their duty and left."

"Why did they come here? Why didn't you stop them?" She was enraged, but helpless tears streamed down her face.

"You are being unnecessarily emotional. There is nothing to worry about, it's all part of the game," he said, trying to make light of the matter.

"Sir, for you everything is a joke! I died of shame and fear when the police entered our home."

"Sorry, my wife, I know it's not a joke. But be prepared ... it's only the beginning. Try to understand the gravity of the situation. We may have many more raids. Nobody knows what the Government is thinking, nor are we aware of what their next move will be. But it's expected. Surely we can't expect the Government not to react, can we? Until now they ruled without any interruptions from us. This is as much a shock to them as it is to us. That's why Gandhiji asked us to be prepared for the worse reaction."

"I'm so scared."

"Don't be afraid. Now there is no turning back. Do you remember the old saying? A drowning man doesn't care about the depth of the water."

She expressed her concern for the welfare of her children. The children were bewildered and frightened to see the police raid the office.

"I assure you, nothing will happen to them. The Government is playing games with Gandhiji and his followers. But they are not going to hurt our children. They still possess their English decency. I met a lot of them at college and at work and still have some good English friends. They are just normal people like us. You too have met some sahibs, are they bad? This game of chess is going to continue as if it is played between two gentlemen. Let's see who makes the last move." He uttered those words with stern determination and walked out.

Masterji kept his inner thoughts within himself. There was no precedence in the current situation, no role models, nothing to hang on to, or anything to follow but the sheer guts of Gandhiji, who wanted to play the game without

metal weaponry. He wanted to fight with his mettle, with the bullets of words encoded with his statements. Gandhiji's cunning and intelligence were unparalleled. The intellectual citizens of the country understood him and were ready to sacrifice their lives for the cause. They all believed that one day it would certainly materialise. When that glorious day would come about was beyond anybody's comprehension.

As soon as her husband went out, Pillamma took her three children and arrived at the door of Atta, her mother-in-law who lived in their ancestral home, round the corner in the adjacent street. She wanted to cry her heart out to her family to ease her troubled mind, to get some assurances from them. A shoulder to cry on was all she longed for.

Pillamma felt that her husband was taking no notice of her agony. He did not indulge in comforting her, and instead he told her to face the situation without fear and without much expectation. Pillamma felt so lonely and she needed her family to comfort her and give her some assurance of what even she had no concept. The entire situation was beyond her comprehension. Pillamma trembled with fear of the unknown ogre that lurked around the corner. Her first concern was for her children and how to protect them from the storm of this 'freedom' movement.

As she anticipated, the whole family was mourning. The children sat in a corner, like statues. There was no frolicking among them, nor could their laughter be heard. In fact, the now silent house gave the creeps to Pillamma.

It was her young girl, Komalam, who took the initiative to ease the tension, which she often did under any situation. She ran to her cousins and hugged them, and then the children started playing happily. Hearing the children's laughter, Atta and the others in the family came to the front room. Pillamma hugged her Atta and wept like a child. Atta comforted her as well as she could. Together the whole extended family cried and condemned the police raid as obnoxious. They were all charged emotionally, profuse sympathetic words were exchanged between them, and they vowed to put a stop to it all.

Atta complained that she couldn't go to the Temple as before, as all the neighbourhood did was to discuss and dissected her and her family because of the police raid. Atta complained that her eldest son had brought disgrace to the whole family. Instead of maintaining the family's prestige, he became the cause of their distress.

The humiliation of the situation, and the rebuff from the society was too much for the old lady to endure. During her husband's reign, whatever his other personal life had been, he had maintained his dignity and earned respect for his family. The family was honoured by their fellow beings, they were respected by the society, and they were invited to all social functions as chief guests. Atta reflected on her glorious past and compared it to her eldest son's reign. She couldn't accept Ramalingam's callous behaviour. If she could, she would have put a stop to all that nonsense.

"Do you know, Vadina, I had no courage to go to school today. How can I face the staff? What would they say? I won't be able to bear it if anyone talks ill of our family. I won't be able to tolerate it if they insult our big brother," the boisterous youngest brother Balaram said, blurting out his anger and agony in

the same tirade with a clenched fist which he punched in the air several times as he spoke towards the unknown opponent.

“Yes, Vadina, no patients have come to me today,” moaned the second brother, Jagappa, who ran his Ayurvedic clinic from home.

“There is a *Puja* at the opposite house, but nobody came to invite us! I saw the group of women go to every house to invite; as they passed our house they put their heads down and hastily walked ahead. Don’t you think they have deliberately excluded us from their society?” Tears rolled down second daughter-in-law Venu’s face, which she made no attempts to hide.

In those days it was customary for women to go in a group to invite guests personally to the functions held at home. Sometimes they would have a band-party to lead them, as some families showed their opulence at every stage of their life, even while inviting guests to their functions.

Pillamma had no words to console Venu, who was generally a quiet person who never exhibited her emotions to the family. Pillamma was consumed with guilt for causing so much pain to the family. She felt responsible for their worries, but made no remarks and remained silent.

“This is only the beginning! Soon we could be ostracised and they will throw us out of our town. Is this what I want to see in my last days?” cried Atta, wiping her tears with her sari and quickly adjusted her veil that slipped from her clean-shaven head. As per customs and as a widow she shaved her head and covered it with the end of her sari.

Pillamma found herself in a predicament. She knew they were not accusing her directly but they were hurt beyond any comfort. She found herself in a real pickle. She had gone there for comfort and ended up comforting them. With a positive mind Pillamma assured Atta that they would never be ostracised. But Atta felt that there was no reprieve for the whole family and told Pillamma that they were all cursed and doomed forever.

“Atta, it’s not all that bad,” said Pillamma. “There are many other men in town who have also joined the movement.”

“What movement, Pillamma? It’s no use – it’s us who will be moving out soon.” She found it unbearable to face the public denunciation.

“The non-cooperation march is just a one-off,” Pillamma said, and told Atta that the police raids also happened in several other homes.

“That won’t restore our prestige back, would it, Pillamma? Once the prestige is smeared with black tar even a complete whitewash would not remove it, it leaves its traces forever. We are doomed eternally.”

“It’s not all that bad Atta, the police were very clean and there were no smears. They first politely saluted Masterji and took his permission before entering the house.” Pillamma tried to make the raid look decent and honourable.

“I am surprised at you. How can you support your husband, how can you be so serene? Can’t you put some sense into him? If you ask me, it’s all your fault. You could have stopped him from marching in town. A woman who couldn’t control her husband is not worth calling a wife.” Her bitter anger and frustration now turned to Pillamma.

Pillamma let her cast her frustration upon her—she was used to Atta's outbursts that flared up from time to time, but they were only like soap bubbles, either quickly blown away or burst out. When she became calm again, Atta showered profuse affection on Pillamma. Over the years Pillamma had learned not to argue with her Atta, especially when she was in such a mood. She waited for the storm to ride over which she knew would happen sooner than later. As the eldest daughter-in-law she took her duties seriously and learned to cope with everyday tiffs with a gentle smile.

Jagappa came to his Vadina's rescue, and asked his mother not to blame her. Balaram reminded his mother that she as a mother could have controlled her eldest son as she controlled the rest of the family.

"See, who is talking? If you're that brave to face society then why did you not go to school today, son?" retorted Atta angrily at her son.

"Oh, that ... just like that, today, I took a day off to be with you all crying women and support you." He tried to ease the situation in his usual jolly manner.

"Indeed, what a supporting young man you turned out to be. But let's see you face your brother and speak your mind to him directly," challenged his young wife. "Look, Balaram, your big brother is coming. Show your bravery!" taunted his mother, readjusting her veil on her shaven head. Balaram opened the door for his big brother and quietly disappeared from the family 'conference', and Jagappa followed him behind. With the two sons hiding away from their big brother, Atta resolved to silence and kept quiet. Ramalingam inquired about the welfare of each member of the family before leaving the house with his wife and children.

As usual, Komalam held her father's hand and walked proudly with him. Pillamma carried the baby in her arms and Saroja clung on to her mother's sari. The family walked with their heads held high, Komalam chatting away with her father, while Pillamma and her second daughter Saroja followed them.

Suddenly, as they entered their street Birakaveedhi, Pillamma noticed a group of people rushing towards them. She cringed in fear and clasped the baby tight in her arms. Frightened little Saroja hid behind her mother. Unaware of the crowd ahead, her husband and Komalam marched on, laughing and joking.

As they passed, people bowed their heads and greeted their leader politely. A few young men came forward and touched their Masterji's feet and took his blessings. They all talked non-stop about yesterday's march and vowed to continue it until their demands were fulfilled. As the group walked along with the family, a few women came out of their homes to wish Masterji and his family well. Pillamma watched them in dismay ... these were the same women who had made snide remarks at her the day before were now welcoming her husband as a hero. She tried to understand their mentality but was glad they had not excluded her and her children from the neighbourhood. Pillamma couldn't logically deduce the reason for their sudden change of attitude.

When they reached home they found a large gunny bag on their veranda. One of the women said a policeman had left it there. One young man opened the bag in front of all. To their surprise, it was full of Ramalingam's books and papers.

"The Sahibs could do nothing to our Masterji," remarked one.

“*Masterji ki Jai!*” (Glory to Masterji!) hailed one young man, and the slogans of national chants reached sky high- ‘*Jai Gandhiji!*’ ‘*Jai Bharatmata!*’, the people cried with emotion. A few young men carried the books into the house and arranged them in the shelves.

Pillamma entered the house by the back door with her children while Masterji busied himself with his followers in the front room, and their meeting carried on well into the late night. Pillamma slept rather peacefully that night, after enduring those turbulent few days earlier. There were no more repercussions of the previous day’s police raid on their house.

Later on she learned that when the police returned the books, they said sorry to have raided the house, apologised, and asked for forgiveness as they had no choice but to follow the orders of their chief. Pillamma’s life began to settle down to a semi-normal comfort, although from time to time she heard a woman or two snigger at her for being a criminal’s wife. Normally she would tell her husband about it, but decided not to trouble him with her own worries. She decided to support him in his cause and not to burden him with her own problems. She had become accustomed to the labels that people attached to her; first she was a barren woman and now a criminal’s wife! British government gave titles to their loyal subjects whereas those women dished out titles for free. Pillamma laughed at her situation!

The few hours her husband spent at home were precious for her and the children; he was a devoted father. She heard women’s sniggers, listened to their gossips, and witnessed some women’s misbehaviour towards her when she attended some women’s functions. She took it all in her stride and gulped them without any complaint.

The women had a unique style to attack her. Whenever she attended a function one of the women would make the initial remark, saying that Pillamma had no shame to come into public. Another would say that she would rather die of shame than appear in public if the police ever raided her house. One woman told the group how her husband had prohibited her from mixing with the criminal’s family. Another said that sahibs were watching everybody and there was more trouble on the horizon.

“It’s best to keep out of trouble. It’s no joke provoking the sahibs, they will punish and they are justified to do so,” said one woman, expressing her wisdom.

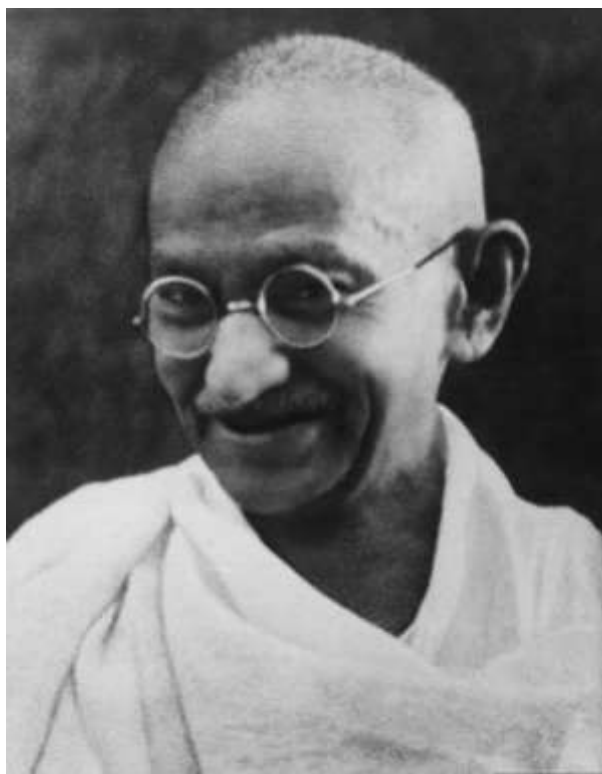
“He may give any name to whatever he does, but it’s simply veiling the truth. Masterji is no less than a criminal, if I dare say,” one haughty woman remarked aloud, and looked at Pillamma. As Pillamma showed no reaction, their comments took a direct attack on her.

“What’s your explanation, madam? Do you think your husband is a criminal?” challenged one woman, staring Pillamma in the face. Pillamma ignored her and approached the group and wished them. Her composure disquieted them. They looked at each other and smiled feebly, and then began to converse with Pillamma as if she was a long-lost friend. Pillamma learned to adjust to such farces and learned to exist in the society like a brave woman or a brave freedom fighter.

Gradually Pillamma began to understand the nature of some people, what they said to her face, and what they really felt about her, were not necessarily

one and the same thing. She adopted her smile as her silent weapon to face and tolerate the society in its raw form. Strangely enough, Pillamma also had a strong following on her own merit. Her intelligence, her kindness, and her support to the destitute women earned her the respect she deserved. She took the compliments and criticisms with the same attitude, just as two phases of life, and learned to exist among both her friends and enemies without fear and concern. For every evil there is a remedy, and her good friend Mangamma stood by her like a protecting wall.

Pillamma kept her life and her troubles away from her husband. She wasn't sure if he was aware of the rebuffs she was facing in the society or not. Neither of them mentioned their worries to each other. Pillamma resigned herself to confront the insults and rejections on her own, and save her husband from her burden. When he retired at night, Ramalingam was exhausted both physically and mentally. His mind was strong and his determination was rock hard, but his body was not used to the hardships he was facing. Only Pillamma knew how tenderly he was raised and what a comfortable and luxurious life he had enjoyed until now. Now he was pursuing the movement with his strong willpower. He showed signs of tiredness when he returned home. She took care of him like a mother, and tended to him with all her love and devotion. In her heart of hearts, she began to worship him as a hero.



**Gandhi, 1920**

### 3

## Non-Cooperation Movement, 1922

Initially it was hard to say whether the Non-Cooperation Movement was one hundred per cent successful or not. Some people were reluctant to give up their titles or their luxuries. Their basic needs of everyday existence compelled them to deviate from the call of Gandhiji. They felt that it would be foolish to forgo a comfortable lifestyle for a cause that might never end successfully. This pessimism of the public could not deter the aims of Gandhiji or his ardent followers. Throughout the country his principles were observed by many Indians.

The press tried hard to publicise how the Non-Cooperation Movement had failed. Gandhiji reacted to it in his own tranquil manner.

**“We are spiritual beings, going through Human Experiences, and today’s moment becomes tomorrow’s memory.”**

Seeing his undeterred progress of the movement, the press took a different angle and portrayed him as a saint playing on the sentiments of the people, to which he strongly objected.

**“I’m neither a Saint nor a Politician,” said Gandhi, elucidating his position, “I seem to take part in politics, but this is only because politics today strangle us like the coils of a serpent out of which one cannot slip whatever one tries. I desire, therefore, to wrestle with the serpent.”**

The press found him dangerous when he was provoked. He replied in such a way that made the Government seem as a monster. To be on the safe side, the Government for a while banned the press, but anyhow, the information and the speeches of Gandhiji reached the public very well. The beggars, wandering *fakirs*, street singers, and travelling people became the pigeon-carriers. The banning of the press failed utterly. Throughout the country national songs echoed national feelings. In some places singing those national songs in public places was prohibited. Music is the soul of the heart. Outside in public places the songs were banned but they gained momentum in no time, and even the children began to sing them at the Barrack’s ground, at homes, and in the streets without fear or care. Umpteen lyricists and then singers sprouted up everywhere. The recording companies began to promote those national songs in local languages. The songs and the singing had a medicinal effect on people and a strange lull ruled the places. People became calm as their children sang sweetly, and the adults found them soothing. The revolutionists found the songs inspiring. The same lyrics produced a different effect on different people; inspiration to some and soothing to a few, awakening in many to a strange phenomenon that had never sprouted before. The concept of ‘freedom’ began to sprout in their hearts without their knowledge. The seeds of freedom became established in the soil of India and they waited for the monsoon to wake them from their hibernation.



Gandhiji understood the British mechanism well, so he tactfully tackled the textile industry. At that time, since it was a crime to spin cotton into yarn and weave it into cloth in India, he popularised the *Charka*, the spinning wheel, and the public adopted it easily and thus the British relented. Suddenly, the local *Khadi Bhandar* (the Khadi shop) picked up trade and supplied the demands of the public for more *Khadi* clothes and Gandhi-caps. The young and the old cottoned on to the new fashion of sparkling white Gandhi-caps. At every meeting, at every gathering, at most functions people attended wearing this headwear, so much so that at a few weddings they were even distributed as a gift. Whether they believed in the freedom movement or not, the fashion of Gandhi-caps became the latest trend. Some of Ramalingam's European friends wore them when they met him, but Ramalingam never wore one himself. Perhaps he was not fashion-conscious! But the *Khadi* clothes did not manage to reach the top of fashion—their coarse material and the lack of colour failed to woo the fashion-conscious public.

Young Komalam had her own dreams. She listened to the stories of great women of India, like Jhaansi ki Rani, Rani Padmini, Gargi, and the great mathematician Leelavati, and wished to be clever like them. Komalam wanted to grow up and do a lot for her country. Her mother often told her how Dr Margaret Bhore had given her life, so she longed to be a doctor and serve her people. She kept her dreams within her dreams and obeyed her father's wishes, making no complaint when she was removed from the school. She kept herself occupied with learning all that was available in those days, including astronomy and astrology. Like her father, Komalam excelled in mathematics. She was loved by all, and she made a lasting impression on everybody she met—not because of her father, but on her own credit.

More volunteers from all professional fields joined the freedom movement

Gandhiji said: **“Hunger is the argument that is driving India to the spinning wheel. The attainment of the *Swaraj*, our freedom, is possible only by the revival of the spinning wheel. A plea for the spinning wheel is a plea for recognising the dignity of labour.”**

The *Charka* became a popular toy for the rich and an instrument for the poor and needy. Pillamma encouraged women in the neighbourhood to spin, and they gathered on her veranda to spin the *Charkas*. Soon such group activity became popular and Komalam entertained and inspired the women singing national songs. *Charka* songs became popular. *Charkas* of all sizes flooded the market; it gave the carpenters an income that they had lacked until then. The spinning was fun. For a few it became a fashion statement and a prestige matter in high society and at the same time the *Charka* became an inducement for the ardent flowers of the 'freedom'.

On 31 July 1922, Gandhiji called the nation to start a total boycott. He asked Indians to burn all foreign clothes. Resign from Government employment! Refuse to pay taxes! Forsake British titles!

The country's response to Gandhiji's call was not unanimous or quick. The public differed from Gandhiji. Some felt it was not necessary to take such a drastic move. Gandhiji was challenged about his call by his own people and the

media bombarded him with questions. The wise man answered them in simple terms.

He urged the use of *Khadi* and Indian material as an alternative to those shipped from Britain. Gandhiji asked to burn all foreign clothes, discard them for good, and replace them with *Khadi* material. Once he had made a statement, Gandhiji never wavered from it; instead he continued to promote his ideas with vigour. He was certain that the public would eventually understand his methods.

Although the moment started with some inhibition, soon the bonfires spread all over the land. Ramalingam lit a bonfire at the Barracks ground. For the first time, his wife, Pillamma, came out into the public to participate in the *Swadeshi* (domestic product) spirit. At other times she remained in his shadow and never tried to eclipse him. Pillamma carried her bundle of clothes on her head like a *Dhobi* woman, a washer woman, to the amusement of some and to the admiration of many. Her followers, carrying their bundles of clothes on their heads, marched through the streets in a procession followed by Komalam and her young friends. The children of the town sang national songs all the way to the Barracks ground. There, amidst loud cheers and some faint boos, the women tossed their clothes one by one into the bonfire. The police stood at a distance and watched them, but they did not interfere as they had no orders to do so. The active women's movement took its initial roots there and then quite voluntarily. From that day onwards women played a key role in the freedom movement in the town. It gained momentum day after day.

Masterji and his fellow freedom fighters went from village to village and promoted the idea of discarding foreign clothes, adopting *Khadi*, and promoting the spinning wheel. In the villages, the *Charka* took on without any problem.

To counteract, the Government, who knew the crux of the weakness of the villagers, distributed free liquor to them and some poor people even in towns accepted the free booze without any qualms. Now the congressmen had another problem to resolve. They sought the help of the women's brigade to raid on liquor shops and divert their men from drinking with some success.

The press challenged Gandhiji on this new revolution. They criticised him as a foolish man who burned his own home. He was beyond any criticism.

**"In burning my foreign clothes I burn my shame,"** pronounced Gandhiji.

"Surely, sir, instead of burning the clothes, why not give them to the poor? So many Indians roam naked in the streets," sneered one European journalist.

Gandhiji was not perturbed at his comment. He replied in his cool manner, **"It would be wrong to give this material to the poor, for the poor, too, have a sense of honour."**

"Burning is a crime, a crime against the Government. Do you encourage crime, Mr Gandhi?" The journalist continued to attack him.

**"The materials were not burned as an expression of hatred for England, but as a sign of India's determination to break with the past. Indians have been ruined by the English factories by taking away work from India."**

"Sir, you are instigating people against the Government. Is it a deliberate plan?"

**"May I remind you that the British expedition began proclaiming 'trade and not territory'? Now Britain has crippled the weaving industry in**

**India. It has accumulated wealth, waged wars, monopolised trade, and established their rule over India. These *Swadeshi* measures are not against the methods but against the measures,”** Gandhiji replied.

Gandhiji reminded Indians that ‘spinning’ was a national duty and asked them to adapt *Khadi* as the State dress. He reminded Indians:

**“‘Fire’ was symbolic of transformation of impotent hatred into conscious self-pity. The pity we’ve been tolerating for aeons under a foreign rule.”** His message reached every corner of the land by his ardent supporters.

For his involvement in burning the foreign clothes and instigating the public against the Government, Ramalingam was sent to one year RI the Rigorous Imprisonment at Berhampur Central Jail in 1922. It was his first imprisonment. Along with him, Malladi Krishna Murty, V.V. Giri, and Pullela Sitaramayaa from Ichapur were also arrested.

Sometimes the social stigma was too much for Pillamma to bear. Even in later years, the memory of that fatal day of her husband’s arrest haunted her from time to time. Her husband had been arrested in full view of the public. While he walked to the jail with his head held high, with shackles on his wrists, she retreated into her house with her head hung very low. The comments of the people around her echoed in her head continuously. As ever, the people—both men and women—threw vicious comments at her. They blamed her for her husband’s arrest. Pillamma was disheartened by the critiques and kept her mouth shut.

One young man came forward to support his guru, Ramalingam: “What did Gandhiji say? **‘Jail is not jail at all, particularly when the whole of India is a prison.’** Wow! What a statement. He knows how to defy the sahibs.”

“It’s alright for you men to talk big. Did any one of you foolishly act to get jailed?” challenged one woman of some considerable age.

“Madam, we are ready to fight for our freedom. That’s for sure.” He stood there thrusting his bulged chest forward and a few more boys imitated him.

“Boys, you haven’t seen the world. Poor Pillamma has to cope with three children on her own. I feel so sorry for her.”

The public’s comments often became personal and cruel. They laughed hysterically, saying that perhaps Masterji preferred to be in jail than be with his wife. But a few women stood firm to support Pillamma. They debated openly on Pillamma’s doorstep. Their cutting remarks did make Pillamma’s heart bleed, yet she remained silent.

Pillamma heard them alright, but her senses became numb, and she failed to think of her future. Her eldest daughter, Komalam, wiped her tears and went into the kitchen to heat up some milk for her mother. By the time she returned with a glass of milk she found that her mother had fainted on the floor, and her little brother lay in her lap. She picked him up and put him in his cot. Komalam sat by her mother, wiped her face with a wet cloth, and fanned her gently. When she opened her eyes she hugged her daughter and both of them cried, sharing their sorrow and their helplessness of the situation.

To add salt to the wound, Ramalingam was also fined six hundred rupees. If he did not pay it up, his sentence would be extended. The society around Pillamma was not as broadminded as the politicians. Her husband’s

imprisonment itself had brought disgrace to the whole family and to their relatives. Nobody wanted to be associated with the fallen family and kept their distance.

People began to gossip. Their gossip and their sneers and sniggers were too much to tolerate for Masterji's extended family. Day and night Ramalingam's mother cursed her existence. The members of his extended family were afraid to step outside in case they got arrested or rebuked by the society. Atta kept Balaram away from Town School where he was a teacher. She was equally worried for Pillamma and her children. The two families were imprisoned in their own homes from the society. Those who wanted to support the family were afraid of the constant police vigil in front of Pillamma's house.

The two families of Ramalingam in two different streets were housebound. After ten days the police watch was lifted. Balaram went to assist his Vadina. She told him of the fine, but sadly none of them had any ready cash with them. She pawned her gold with a goldsmith in the neighbourhood to arrange the six hundred rupees, but Balaram was afraid to go to the court to pay it. Chalmayyagaru, Komalam's tutor went and fetched the police inspector who knew Masterji's family very well. After his duty, the policeman went in plain clothes to Pillamma as a family friend. She requested him to deposit the fine at the court and he paid it in full, thus not increasing the sentence. There were never any bad vibes between the police and Pillamma's family. Masterji insisted that the police should do their duty, sincerely and should put their friendships and family ties aside.

Once the police vigil was lifted, Pillamma's friends began to visit her again. Some of them showed real friendship while many taunted at her plight as if they took great delight in her tragedy. Pillamma became immune to those unwelcoming words. She listened to them with immense patience and learnt to endure their taunts without tears. She saved all her tears for her bedroom where she drenched her sorrows into her pillow after her children had gone to bed.

One kind woman suggested that now Pillamma should put a stop to all her husband's activities. Straightaway other women blamed Pillamma for escalating the situation go bad by carrying the bundle of clothes like a *Dhobi* woman to the Barracks bonfire and tossed the clothes into the bonfire.

"Consider yourself lucky, the police could have easily arrested you for burning clothes," remarked one woman, as if she was disappointed that Pillamma got free.

"Pillamma if you must know you made a spectacle of yourself carrying the bundle on your head like a washer woman."

"You are a *Brahmin* woman and you have violated your caste acting like a *Dhobi* woman. You disgraced us by your behaviour."

"It was a sure sign of doom," moaned an elderly woman. As a conclusion, the critics pronounced that Pillamma had to pay a price for her folly and took immense delight in seeing Pillamma's stooped body. Pillamma put one foot in her doorway and fainted. The elderly woman nursed her while others continued to wag their tongues. They said that by her foolish charade Pillamma had also jeopardised her daughter Komalam's future. Now, as the daughter of a jailed man, a criminal, they said that no groom would come forward to marry her and

she would remain a spinster all her life. Another said that any young man would consider himself to be fortunate to marry the virtuous Komalam. As the group of women debated about the future of Komalam, Pillamma heard them all but did not react.

Komalam found the whole situation intolerable. She slipped out from the back door and fetched the family's well-wisher, Mangamma, her aunt. By the time she arrived the women had tortured Pillamma mentally to their hearts' content and left the house.

After a month Pillamma was allowed to visit her husband in jail for five minutes. He told her that from now on she was in charge of the family and he bestowed upon her all the rights to make decisions for the family, and asked her to be a father and mother for their three children. He had given her the unwritten power of attorney for the welfare of the family. He told her that the imprisonment was only a start and there would be many more. He talked and she listened and returned home with a strong determination in her mind. If nothing else, Pillamma had pride within her and she was not prepared to bow in front of anybody at any time. She took a forward step to cope without her husband for the next twelve months.

After two weeks her mother-in-law sent for her. The women hugged each other and cried, and that eased their agony to some extent. Atta told her that the police kept a vigil on them too. She asked Pillamma and the children to come and stay with them until her son returned from the jail. But Pillamma refused, saying that her presence with them might bring more trouble to her two young brothers-in-law and the family, and her eldest son had left home for their safety. She told Atta that she could never go against her husbands' wishes, not even in his absence. But as usual Balaram kept visiting the family during his lunch break. Often the visits of Pillamma's mother gave her some moral support. As per tradition, Pillamma's mother could not stay with her daughter.

The days dragged by and gradually Pillamma resumed her normal duty. In the afternoon women went to her as before to listen to her read from the Holy book Ramayana to them. When some of them tried to rake her wounds she would divert the topic to the scripture she was reading to them. Pillamma was not one to cry in front of others. What she despised most was their pity. Sometimes she opened her heart to her nine-year-old daughter Komalam and was resolved to the situation. Her husband had warned her that the fight for freedom might never end and there would be many sacrifices that he and his family had to make. Pillamma supported his mission but at the same time she wished to have had a normal life with her husband and children. Now that this was never to be, she had reconciled herself to her situation mentally. In his absence she lived with the memories of his ardent love for her and the children. Time kept moving at its own speed, and so did Pillamma's life.

Pillamma opened her heart to her best friend, Mangamma, and told her about her concern for Komalam's marriage. That evening after dark, Mangamma sent her personal *Tonga*. Pillamma took her three children and went to her in-law's house. They slipped in unnoticed by the neighbours. There was no vigilante in the street, either by the police or the neighbours. Pillamma shared her worries about Komalam's marriage with Atta. Her Atta assured her that she

would find a suitable groom for Komalam. After the evening meal she returned home with her children in the same *Tonga* under the veil of darkness.

Masterji's jailing continued to have adverse effect on the whole family in two streets. They were ruthlessly ostracised and were deliberately forgotten at social functions. The two families had no invitations for any social functions; the conservative society had excluded them without any qualms. Those women whose men were employed in the Government avoided keeping any connections with Pillamma's family. They were afraid to upset the sahibs by keeping contact with Masterji's family, as they felt such connections would be an insult to the sahibs. Sahibs spelled out clearly to their loyal employees their disapproval of Pillamma's family. Like a mushroom, a cloud of fear loomed over the town. Everybody dreaded who would become the next target of the Government.

After two months Mangamma invited Pillamma and her Atta to a social function at her place. But as soon as they arrived the other guests objected and wanted to leave the function. But Mangamma put some sense into them and requested them to support their friend in her time of need. The function went off well, but with a strange strained atmosphere. Mangamma was a wealthy and prominent woman of the society and none of them had the courage to go against her. She broke the ice of the boycott amicably.

Gradually the social prohibition on Pillamma was lifted by the neighbourhood but a few stubborn and adamant women kept themselves aloof. Pillamma took it all in her own stride with a gentle smile on her face. Her life returned to the semi-normal. As the months elapsed, the fear had ebbed away.

Time kept moving at its own speed, and so did Pillamma's life, progressing slowly with the weight of social disgrace upon her head and with the absence of her beloved husband, carrying the responsibility of raising three children on her own. She waited for his release, and longed to resume a normal family as before.

Unfortunately that was never to be. We can live on our past memories but can never repeat them as before. There is only a debut appearance of the drama of life and there are no repeats and never replicates it. Life cannot be carbon copied it makes its image once and disappears in time. The tide of freedom carried her along with her children towards their unknown future. All she could do was to go along with the flow, hoping and wishing that they would all reach the shore one day. That hope alone gave her the strength to continue to live for the future, the family's glorious future that she dreamed of.



**Gandhi & Charka**

## 4.

### **Sixteen months before. The Curtain Rises & the Drama begins!**

It was noon on that significant Monday morning in the year of 1920. A town on the eastern coast of India was quiet, the sky was clear without any clouds; the whole town of Berhampur was hiding indoors, some at workplaces, children at schools, and women in their homes to avoid the blazing sun of the midday. Unknown to the residents, a dark cloud was looming over yonder. Pillamma, the wife of Ramalingam, prepared the lunch, and adjusted the dinner seat, a mahogany wooden low stool called *Peeta* with four short legs decked with silver motifs on the edges. She placed a double-sided two-in-one silver dinner plate in front of the *Peeta* and she smiled to herself sweetly and discretely. She knew exactly how her husband liked his dinner plate to be placed, just half an inch away from the *Peeta*, to enable him to sit comfortably on it and reach the dinner plate without stretching forward.

The silver dinner plate, about fourteen inches diameter was unique, with reversible sides. It was specially made for her wedding and was a gift from her late uncle. On one side in the centre was the image of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, and on the other side was Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge. Her husband preferred the Lakshmi, alias Nidhi, side of his plate—in privacy he called his wife, ‘My Nidhi!’, or ‘my wealth’—and when he finished his lunch she would turn it over and eat her food on the same plate with the Saraswati image on view. Her thirst for knowledge was never-ending.

Pillamma was a woman who believed in traditions and followed them meticulously and thus never dined with her husband. Her husband wanted her to sit next to him and eat food at the same time, but he understood and respected her sentiments. His wife was duty-bound and respected the family traditions in which a wife was never equal to her husband. He was the eldest son of the family and so Pillamma, being the eldest daughter-in-law, had to maintain the family traditions. They were aware of their responsibilities, and they both conducted them with dignity and diligence.

Pillamma became a good role model for her two younger sisters-in-law. They respected and also strangely feared her unnecessarily. They were eager to impress her. Between the three daughters-in-law there was a strange bond. There was plenty of love; there was immense affection, and also a deep understanding. The other two looked up to Pillamma. They would have loved to be as clever as she was, and they would have loved to be well educated like her. All the same, they were content with performing their womanly duties to the fullest, and efficiently. Pillamma went into her bedroom and placed the silk *dhoti* and shawl on the four-poster bed. Her husband first changed from his three-piece suit into his silk *dhoti* and shawl before dining. She placed another three-piece suit of