

Born to Die
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It is a village near Usilampatti in Tamilnadu with fertile fields extending till the horizon. It is inhabited by a few families belonging to different communities. There are Reddiars, the land-owners, Vanniars belonging to different economic classes and Dalits, mostly the laboring people, ill-paid and ill-treated by others as outcasts.

Lakshmi, a 15-year-old girl, had a happy time with her brothers and sisters in this village. Her parents owned a quarter of an acre where her father had constructed a hut for them to live in. Depending on the seasons, her family worked hard in their neighbouring fields of the Reddiars whose affluent status could not be contested by any other communities of the village. In truth, Lakshmi's family depended on the daily wages of her parents even though all the members of her family strove hard to harvest vegetables like onion, tomato, chilli and brinjal. Lakshmi's father carried these in a bullock cart to Usilampatti. Sometimes Lakshmi would put them into carry bags to sell – to the passengers in the buses that pass through her village.

There were schools and a hospital for the affluent majority. Nobody in her family had ever thought about going to school because of their hand-to-mouth existence. Communication with their neighbors hardly took place due to the distance between her hut and the other houses.

Her mother was an emaciated female sapped from successive deliveries. Many a time, she had argued with her husband not to force her to yield to him at night after having had ten deliveries, but in vain. Out of these only six could survive through the miserable past. The eleventh baby born to her mother in her hut had shattered Lakshmi's dreams for a happy married life with children.

On that day Lakshmi's father was away as usual. Her mother was so sluggish that she couldn't cook anything for the children. Lakshmi shouted at her: 'Hey Amma! Why are you lying on the bed? I am so hungry. Can't you cook something?'

Lakshmi's mother beckoned to her to convey that ragi porridge was getting ready in the pot. Lakshmi turned back to see the stove. The pot was on the mud-stove with three logs burnt to charcoal. All of a sudden, Lakshmi's mum could feel her eleventh child passing out to see the world. She spoke to Lakshmi feebly: 'Call someone for help'. Lakshmi ran out and screamed: 'Ganga akka, Ganga akka, please come. My mother is giving birth to a baby'. Unfortunately her voice couldn't reach Ganga akka whose house was a mile away from hers. She fidgeted and hurried inside the hut. She could see her infant sister covered with blood-clot. Luckily all the other kids were in the fields.

Her mother said: 'Lakshmi! Don't worry. We will manage. Come closer. Bring the scythe. Here ... this is how you should sever the umbilical cord. Cut it slowly with the scythe.'

Lakshmi blanched like a dead man while executing the orders of her mother. That was the first time she had seen the delivery pangs of her mother. Her attention was brought to reality by her mother: 'You little girl, Don't stand amazed! Rush ... bring a towel. Fast ... gently press my abdomen'. Lakshmi obeyed her but was on the verge of fainting at the sight of the slimy mass oozing out. In contrast, her mother

stood courageously and asked her to keep hot water ready for herself and the baby. Later she took bath, wore a saree and lay on the wooden cot with coir on the top.

Lakshmi's trembling hands cleaned the new-born and the splattered wastes. She ladled out the porridge and mixed a pinch of ginger powder, pepper and jaggery into it to protect her mother from cold. The younger ones who were curious to know the mystery of childbirth stood outside, with numerous thoughts. Lakshmi, though she puked upon seeing the whole process, had the perfect satisfaction of having seen the delivery of her own mother.

Her father came home from the town the next day. He chided his wife for giving birth to a female baby this time. Even her mother was not happy about it because she had expected a male baby. It is always an expensive affair with female children. At the time of their wedding, dowry has to be offered to the bridegroom with no guarantee for a safe future. The problem doesn't end with that. There are so many social evils that can't be bravely countered by a female in a lonely village like that. For these reasons Lakshmi's mother always wanted to beget males alone.

But the father had different thoughts. To him, another female child meant an added economic burden. The next night, Lakshmi happened to see her parents squatting in the dark under a banyan tree, conspiring to murder the new-born infant. She gasped on hearing her father's voice: 'Why should we wait? The child is ill-fated to die. Let me call the ayah tomorrow to give the child the milk of cactus. Don't be guilty about it because we are not murdering it ourselves.' Lakshmi's mother realized the necessity of her husband's idea and gave her acceptance through a heart-rending nod.

It took a few minutes for Lakshmi to conceive of her parents as murderers. She scurried to her father and pleaded: 'Appa, it is wrong to murder, even through someone else. Please, let her live.' He kicked her and swore to call the ayah the next day. Lakshmi felt helpless. She thought of running away with the baby to a distant land. But how can she survive without any man's help? None will come forward to marry her with a child, though not her own. Thinking about the innumerable ways of saving the baby, she fell asleep.

The ayah was sent word. She sat under the banyan tree that bore the carvings of the kids. The baby was handed to her by Lakshmi's father. Her mother was not courageous enough to see the whole process. The professional murderer sang:

'Did you come at an inauspicious time?
Sufferings are many if you are alive;
This ayah will lull you to an eternal sleep.

At this juncture the father moved away, fully assured of the infant's death. The ayah put two drops of cactus milk into the mouth of the baby. Soon the baby's body convulsed and the movement ceased abruptly. The ayah was paid well by her father and she left after the execution of the terrible job, with a sense of gratification.

The next day all the family members resumed their daily chores, except Lakshmi.