

The Rolling Wheels And The Thundering Sky...

All that started from here only...

Even after five to six years of her marriage Sugunabayi did not conceive. Vitthala, her husband was worried. Anxiety caught hold of both husband and wife as to... who would continue to light our house regularly in the nights in the future... who would get us mouthful of morsel in the late years of our old age... and who would pour a few drops of Ganges at the time of closure of our eyes...? They surrendered themselves to and worshipped the deities who ever suggested... and they faithfully observed the respective modes and methods of the rituals of worships of different deities to please them all...! Ultimately the devotion and penances observed in respect of their family deity, *Vitthoba* of *Pandharapura*, became fruitful and Sugunabayi gave birth to a male child... Vitthala argued, as the child is the benefaction of lord *Vitthoba* of *Pandharapura*, the child must be named after him... and we should call him Vitthoba... But, Sugunabayi proposed that the child should be named after his grandfather, that is, her father only... The arguments almost grew to the level of a quarrel... and you know who succeeds in the quarrels between husband and wife... Hoom... same thing happened now also... Vitthala had to be satisfied as the child would be named after his father in law...! On cradle ceremony the child was named as... Ranoji... Ranojee...

And now... the affairs of that Ranoji had come up to his marriage!

The bride was chosen... The father of the bride and an elder person from their village came to see Vitthala's household... They were satisfied and wrote a letter inviting Vitthala and Sugunabayi to come to their house and offer fruits to the girl and to perform *sakhara pudha*, betrothal, as per the traditions... Ranoji was about twenty two... moustaches were asserting their existence on his face. The circumstances were so that, Vitthala was so anxious about the marriage of Ranoji, that he would feel relieved if once this Ranoji got married, as early as possible... The bride's father, Narayanarao, sent a letter requesting... 'Regards to one and all ... and next... it has rained well in our village and sowing work is busily going on... Now the reason for writing this letter expressly is... in our house our *muduki*¹ is seriously ill and she is bedridden. She is very much intent to watch her granddaughter's marriage and she wants that it must be conducted before her death. Therefore it is our request to you that you please come as early as possible along with an elder of your village to complete the formalities of *vataghati*² and perform the *sakharapudha* ritual the same day... Please write a letter expressly to convey us the auspicious day of your arrival... Rest in person...'. Vitthala heard the letter read by a school boy, and became jubilant, thinking... 'eh... this mission has gone out very well...!' And Vitthala made the same school boy write the letter to reply his *bigaru*, the new relatives...

`...Regards to one and all... and later... that the rains here are not that good... sowing work is

1.Muduki, old woman, villagers also address their old aged mothers like this; 2.Vataghati, discussion regarding giving and taking between the bride and bridegroom parties

limping... And the reason to write this letter expressly is... We would be coming to your house on Friday, after fifteen days from today, with elders for *vataghati*... We would come prepared for *sakharapudha* also... If god Vitthoba's blessings persist and if every thing goes on well... we will celebrate the *sakharapudha* that very day... Rest all in person...'.

There were no new clothes to be stitched... The zeal for new clothes of the people was all over by the Ugadi festival only... There were a few old torn jackets and saris of women and shirts and dhotis of men for the repair... They were to be repaired by darning or by stitching by joining or by patching... Instead of sitting idle, Vitthala took these rags one by one for the repair and began to stitch on his sewing machine... The dhoties were mostly worn out and torn at the region of buttocks... the jackets were torn at the armpits, when the women raised their arms... And all of them were torn in their own pattern, independently... randomly... Vitthala after picking each rag would see how it got shredded and then would decide what mode of repair should be adapted... darning or joining or repairing by patching... and then would go ahead running his sewing machine... So far he repaired four rags... and now he took the fifth one... He felt as though his head was reeling... He uttered to himself, 'Hoom...! Disgusting people...! Mere bankrupts... all bankrupts! Putting patches over patches... darning and stitching them by joining...! What type of living it is...! This repairing the rags is the most disgusting thing...!' Feeling dejected, he threw away the rag in his hand and yawned with his wide opened mouth... Then he idly pulled the drawer of the sewing machine... There, that letter about *sakharapudha* of Ranya was lying... The sight of the letter immediately brought the memory of Ranoji, and Vitthala at once shouted, 'Ranya... yey Ranya...'. Sugunabayi in the kitchen enquiringly told, '*Kay pahije*... what do you want...?' Vitthala asked, 'Is Ranya not in the house...?' Sugunabayi told 'Ranoji has gone out... He left just now...'. Sugunabayi's permissive stand towards the irresponsible conduct of Ranoji enraged Vitthala... And he impulsively shouted... '*Ham Ham*... left just now... left just now... What else is there for that bastard besides wandering in the streets of the village... wandering like a pig for scatophagy...! And look...! We are fools... We are going to arrange marriage of such an irresponsible savage...!' Vitthala kept on howling for a while...

The remembrance of Ranoji always brought the feeling of savagery to Vitthala... He always felt as if pricked by a sharp spine in his mind by the remembrance of this Ranoji... He had become a persistent nuisance and was almost like a pestle to pound on Vitthala's head... Vitthala would accuse Sugunabayi of showering undue and unrestrained indulgence over Ranya... And he was convinced that it led Ranya to go astray to such an extent... But it was true of Vitthala also... Vitthala did not have any less fondness for his only son... When Ranya was going to school... he

would pick up his school bag and shouting to his mother `Yavva... I am going to school', and would run out of the house. But for months together, he never went to the school... He accompanied the girls and boys that went for herding cattle... He would go with them to this orchard or that grove... or to this pool of water or to that well for swimming... In the evening he would promptly return home at the hours of closure of the school... On his return Sugunabayi would fondly give him a large piece of jaggery and handful of groundnuts... And Vitthala sitting behind his sewing machine, would eagerly wait for his affectionate son to return... When Ranoji returned, and come to him, Vitthala would pull the drawer of the sewing machine, and give him a coin of one or two *annas*³, to purchase fried chickpeas in Shivappa's shop.

Once Ranoji's school teacher came to Vitthala for the repair of his dhoti... He, in order to show his concern towards Vitthala, or out of sincerity, said, `Why Vitthalarao... Your son Ranoji is not coming to school...? I think it must be almost more than a month... he did not show up in the school. Why... What is the matter...?' Then only the fraudulence of Ranoji was divulged... Vitthala showed a burst of artful rage. Sugunabayi readily came out to defend her son, and said, `Yey... he is still a child... too young to undertake his responsibility...'. Then she warded off Ranoji hiding him under her *seragu*⁴ of the sari, to the kitchen. There she gave him a piece of jaggery and a fond loud kiss on his cheek, hailing him `My *saradara*⁵...!'. And Vitthala also would not lag behind...! To the customers visiting him with their cloths for stitching or for repairing... he would braggartingly tell, `You know... our Ranya is a terrible bastard... He is an artful dodger I tell you!... Hoodwinking us, that he was going to school regularly... do you know what he has done...! he roamed behind that *pinjar*⁶ girl for the whole month...! Ha ha ha... I tell you... this rascal is really an artful bilker!' Yes whatever Ranoji did, it would appeal and amuse both Vitthala and Sugunabayi... If ever Ranoji stole a coin of four *annas* from the pocket of Vitthala's shirt to purchase fried dish from hotel... that would serve as an extreme amusement for Sugunabayi... and as if it were the *bala leela* of *Bhagavan Krishna* himself, she would enthusiastically narrate it to the womenfolk of neighborhood... And if ever he stole a coin of eight *annas* from the container of pepper or coriander powder in the kitchen, to purchase some sweetmeats from the shop of Guravva, that would be a hilarious act for Vitthala, and he would narrate it as a juicy episode of *Kurukshetra war of mahabharat* to his clients... and his laughter would reverberate to such a pitch as to reach Sugunabayi in the kitchen definitely...

This being so, and it continued in such manner...

The fond indulgences of Vitthala and Sugunabayi dragged the chariot of Ranoji astray... They were fully confident about their only son that he would secure four morsels of food for them in their old age... Years simply rolled by adding to the age of their son... and as he grew in age, the arena of his mischief was expanded like the flexible rubber... Once a girl brought a piece of printed cotton cloth to Vitthala, to get a blouse stitched for her... Ranoji promptly stole it and

3. Anna, a coin, one sixteenth of a rupee; 4. Seragu, the loose end of the sari; 5. Saradara, high level office bearer in kingdoms and desagati; 6. Pinjara, a sect of muslims whose profession is making cushion beds;

gave it to his girl friend of the cattle herding team... And see the fun... Should not that girl have a scrap of commonsense...! That foolish girl brought that cloth to this very Vitthala for stitching...! Vitthala recognized the cloth and searched for the piece of cloth brought to him by the girl... And as it should be... it was not found at all. Vitthala smelt the mischief and chided the girl... That girl was frightened and readily accepted that Ranoji gave it as a gift to her! Vitthala sent her away telling, 'Go quietly without making any fuss... You appear to be a clever girl...'. Later he asked Ranoji about this. Ranoji said, 'I sold it to her...!'. That very moment Vitthala understood about the severity, he and Sugunabayi had to face... He shouted as usual, accusing Sugunabayi as responsible for spoiling Ranoji... Sugunabayi silently listened to his accusations for a while, and then thinking enough is enough... She came out of the kitchen and retorted... '*Atta kay jhala...?* What happened now...?' Vitthala was astounded at her retort... and mimicking her words he continued to scream, '*Ham...? atta kay jhala... atta kay jhala...!* What more should he do than this...? Don't you find that he is still in his teens... and you are thinking it as a small thing...!' Sugunabayi shot her next retort... 'Don't worry... He is still a young boy... When he comes of age he gains sagacity...'. And Vitthala was dumbfounded...

Once again a similar situation occurred. Ranoji had thrashings of whip by somebody and came to the home and slept... Sugunabayi applied oil and steam warming to soothe his pain... Distress of Vitthala got multiplied... Attempting to convince Sugunabayi, he told her appeasingly... 'Look Suguna... I want him to get educated... I am aspiring him to become a *saheb*, you see!... A *saheb* that comes from the town driving his own car...'. The moment Vitthala started to tell about Ranoji, she was prepared to retort in defense of him... But what Vitthala started to tell now, dumbfounded her... and she felt as though she lost her tongue! She started to feel that the mellifluous dream narrated by Vitthala about Ranoji, was her own earnest desire also... lying latent in her conscience so far... since the birth of Ranoji! Now all of a sudden it came out of her, and stood before her only! Sugunabayi was thrown into a state of agitation in her mind... and she sat silently immersed in a terrible agony...

That night was all sleepless for Sugunabayi... She kept on rolling on the bed... In the early hours of morning she had a little somnolence... and in that brief phase also she got a dream about her son... Ranoji wearing a suit and boots, came driving in a car... He drove the car straight up to the platform in front of the entrance of the house... Sugunabayi was standing there at the entrance... She was feeling intently to bring *arati* to welcome Ranoji when he got down from the car... But instead, God alone knows why... she stopped him at the door and hauled his coat and shirt wildly...! Frightened by the strange dream, she woke up with a shriek... It was already morning... Sparrows were chirping outside... Folding her hands and closing the eyes, she prayed with devotion '*Vithoba... protect us*'... Then getting out of the bed, she started her household routines... While at work, she went twice to see whether Ranoji was awake... He was fully

wrapped within the blanket and was snoring. Deciding to wake him up, she prepared tea for him and brought it in a cup... She dragged the blanket and made him awake and get up... While he

7.*Bala, fond addressing a child*; 8.*Baba, father*

was drinking tea, Sugunabayi began to relate her rhapsody...

`Look *bala*⁷... You must think what would happen if you avoid the school and go on wandering like a vagabond... The boys of your age are already studying in high school... Do you know... your *baba*⁸ wants to you to go to bigger and bigger schools in Gokavi and Belagavi... He is dreaming about you... that you would become a big *saheb*... a big bungalow in the town and a car of your own... And, you see *bala*... I shall cook the dishes you desire...`.

When Sugunabayi was narrating and immersed in her rhapsody, Ranoji sitting before her, yawned thrice, opening his mouth so wide as to devour her only... `Aaaaa...!` `Aaaaa...!` Irritated Sugunabayi glared at him intently... Without caring her glaring, Ranoji asked her, `Yavva... and that Shivanya's sister Rami you know... they say... she has become grown up...! Shivanya said that tomorrow onwards she would not be sent for tending the cattle... and... and yavva... he says... his father is going to fix a boy for her and getting her married soon... Rami herself told it to me. And...`, it appeared as though Ranoji had something more to tell... but Sugunabayi exploded...! Shouting at him, `*Bhamatya*⁹...` she knocked him down and kicked on his back for minutes together... and then she rushed and appeared before Vitthala, sitting behind his sewing machine, smoking beedi... He was gloomy, enwrapped within a thick haze of smoke of his beedi... Stamping her foot, Sugunabayi stood in front of him, and exploded... `Look... look at your son... this Ranya... seducer of the world... ...`. As Sugunabayi went on in a trenchant harangue directed towards Ranoji, this Vitthala sat still gazing at her intently... as if he himself was roaring at Sugunabayi complaining against that Ranya...!

Still they waited with hope for another two years. No... nothing came out... The third standard was so dear to Ranoji, that he got stuck there only year after year... In fact, even that was the grace of the headmaster of the school, who got free sewing service from Vitthala... The teachers in the school were embarrassed to keep this sixteen year old boy in the primary school and that too in third standard! And moreover... there were a few complaints from the parents of girls studying in the sixth and seventh classes about the coquettish behavior of this *simpigara*¹⁰ Ranoji. The teachers began to advise Vitthalarao that it would be better to terminate Ranoji's schooling... But there was that dream of Vitthala you know...! He persisted with it for some more time... Ultimately, the critical time came and the couple had to decide... Then they consoled themselves... anyhow, there is this household vocation of sewing... Let him sit and pick up this vocation only... In the beginning let him learn to stitch button holes... and gradually let him acquire the skill of stitching half pants and shirts of boys and men, blouses, frocks and petticoats of girls and women... that would fetch him his bread... it would be quite enough to run his family... Let it be so... they thought... and Ranoji stopped going to school...

Now Ranoji would deliberately roam in the streets before the teachers with an inflated chest... In the earnest, he aspired... let these teachers say a word to me, I would shout at them in full... in full... two complete words! But any way... teachers are teachers you see...! They knew the -----

9.*Bhamatya*, a cheat or wicked fellow; 10.*Simpigya*, of tailoring community your

mettle of this Ranoji, and therefore, they never spoke a word to him... Vitthala and Sugunabayi thought Ranoji could acquire the skill of stitching easily... Vitthala enthusiastically called his son and said, 'Ranappa... come here... I will teach you how to stitch these button holes... look here...'. But Ranya would tell something and avoid that moment... This repeated for several times... and ultimately one day Ranya told his father point-blank...

'Yey... *baba*... don't pour such botherations of yours over my head... I don't want this wretched work of pulling the thread through the buttocks of a needle...'.
'*Ham*...! What...! Wretched work of pulling the thread through the buttocks of a needle...!'

Terrible vexation mounted on Vitthalarao... He let out his anger...
'You unscrupulous bastard... If I did not do this work of pulling thread through the buttocks of needle, what would have you eaten...? Then you had to eat dung only...'.
What Vitthalarao was telling... infact was all correct... but Ranoji had to be there to listen those words of his father... Isn't it? He had vanished before Vitthalarao began his tirade...

Vitthala and Sugunabayi thought with conviction that the fate of Ranoji would change for the better if he got married... Then they started looking for a girl for Ranoji... And without much delay, they accepted the first proposal of this girl they saw for him... And now it was progressed to the level of the auspicious event of *sakhara pudha*. They had to go to the bride's village on the Friday, just two days away... The day before they had to travel to the girl's village for *sakharapudha*, Sugunabayi told Ranoji 'Go and look your face in mirror... do you think Rukmini (the girl, fixed for Ranoji) likes this figure of yours...? You are looking like a *sudugada siddha*¹¹...! Go and have your hair cut...'. Ranoji promptly obliged his mother... He went to Mahadeva of *navalagi*¹² and got his hair trimmed... Sugunabayi then told... 'don't go to any well for swimming today... I shall get warm water for your bathing... Have your bath in the bath room only...'. That also he promptly obeyed... Vitthala purchased a *chamaka sari*¹³ on credit from *Shedaji's* shop. But Ranoji was not at all happy, and he was very critical about this matter... He grumbled... I am the only son to these and that Rukmini would be the only daughter in law to arrive at this house... Look at the face of the sari... this miser has purchased...! Had they purchased a better sari by paying some more money, would their house be submerged in the flood of poverty...! Ranoji expressed his displeasure before Sugunabayi. Sugunabayi thought... look this Ranya... that girl has not yet come to our house as his wife... this *bhamatya*... is already showing so much of infatuation towards her... now only... Who knows... how would he behave once that girl enters this house...! Sugunabayi became worried... Keeping that disgust for herself, she related a story to pacify Ranoji... 'It is not like that *bala*... Your *baba* actually wanted to purchase a costly sari... He told me so. 'I would purchase a costly silk sari for my daughter in

law...'. But you see *bala*... he has no money in his hands now... Infact, he requested the *shedaji*¹⁴ to give a silk sari on credit... And that *shedaji* told... such costly saris will not be given on credit... I can give you this *chamaka* sari on credit... On such conditions your *baba* had to purchase this sari only... You know... your *baba* was grumbling about that *shedaji*... does he think that we would run away with his sari without paying his debt... What to do *bala*... these are the days of rich people...!' Ranoji was not convinced by her story and his fretfulness continued... Sugunabayi was afraid that if ever Ranoji talked about the sari with Vitthala, an altercation might get ignited between the father and son ... Ranoji could pardon his parents only on one condition... Sugunabayi should pay him for that... and Sugunabayi paid him twenty rupees... her entire savings!

On Friday, early in the morning, along with an elderly person of the village, Vitthalarao, Sugunabayi and Ranoji boarded the bus... By noon they reached the village of the bride... The two parties sat along with the elders of both the villages and the *vataghati* was smoothly concluded. The elderly one that went with Vitthala told, '*Hum*...Vitthalarao... my responsibility is over. Now both of you are *beegaru*¹⁵... You can settle among yourselves the rest of the things... I have some work in Gokavi... I must move now'. He being of different caste, wouldn't eat in the house of *simpiga* community... Therefore, the girl's father told him just for formality's sake, '*Ya*... you could have gone tomorrow morning...'.

That evening only *sakharapudha*, ceremony was performed.

A colourful bed spread was spread on a cushion bed and two *loadu*¹⁶ (bolsters) were kept to recline upon their back... Ranoji and Rukmini were seated on this decorated bed... Ranoji sat with his back reclining upon the *loadu* in a regal style... The girl was sitting timidly by his side slightly bending forward with one leg folded and the knee raised... not reclining upon the *lodu*. Sugunabayi did *udi tumbisuva karya*¹⁷... She offered five varieties of fruits to the bride... Rukmini received them in the *seragu* spread on her lap. Then Sugunabayi presented the sari and blouse piece with five fistful of rice put over the blouse piece... These were also received in her *seragu* spread on her lap... Ranoji was enraptured all the while... but when Sugunabayi was offering the sari to the girl, he remained totally uninvolved and nonresponsive... Two women waved *arati*¹⁸ to the pair, to bride and bridegroom... Throughout these rituals Ranoji's eyes were roaming greedily over the body of Rukmini... He gazed at her as if he would swallow her through his eyes...! Conscious of Ranoji's stare, Rukmini shrank further, and sat pulling her *seragu* tightly to cover her breasts... On seeing the greedy roaming of Ranoji's eyes and the nervousness of Rukmini, her sisters made remarks which were both humorous and teasing Ranoji as well... These remarks caused a roar of laughter of the womenfolk in the hall... The women viewing complacently at Ranoji laughed heartily... Sugunabayi in her mind felt the sting of a wasp, and she told herself in mind... there in the home... this Ranya quarreled about the sari for this *cheluvi*¹⁹... and here he is looking with amorous immodesty at that *cheluvi*... look how he is

15.*Beegaru*, the two family members that have become relatives due to marriage between their offsprings; 16.*Loadu*, cylindrical pillows kept for the sitters to recline their back; 17.*Uditumbisuva karya*, offering fruits, sari and rice to the women under auspices of betrothal, marriage, at pregnancy and at cradle ceremony after delivery; 18.*Arati*, waving of lamps before bride and bridegroom as to exalt; 19.*Cheluvi*, girl of beauty.

glaring at her... he is doing as if he never saw a female in his life... She felt it very bad... but she feigned a hearty laughter with all other women surrounding her.

And this grandmother of Rukmini... mother of Narayanarao, was at her advanced age... perhaps in eighties... She was terribly asthmatic... They spread her bed along the wall, just opposite to that where they made the bride and bridegroom sit, so that she could see the pair and rituals clearly... She would intently glare at the pair for a minute or two, withholding all her breath and even withholding the blinking! And then... the very next minute, vigorous paroxysmal asthmatic attack would take over her... then she would lie on the bed topsy-turvy... with her face and chest down... And she would wheeze vigorously as if struggling for breath... it appeared that she was going to die the very next minute...!

She would open her toothless mouth as if to tell something... but due to insufficiency of breath she would shut her mouth without uttering a single word... After the rituals and *arati* were all over, the bride and bridegroom prostrated before that old woman... Whooping and wheezing only, she blessed them... and uttered something indistinctly and wiped off her tears... Narayanarao, and his brothers and their wives... all presumed that the *muduki* was grieved and felt sorry for her husband, for he could not witness this happy event of *sakharapudha* of his granddaughter...! They also feigned such feeling and wiped their eyes and nose...

When all these rituals and celebrations were over... somehow there prevailed an atmosphere which was an admixture of jubilation and grief...!

All that started from here only...

Vitthalarao woke up early in the morning... it might be four o'clock or so... It was still dark. He had felt a severe pain spreading in his entrails and there was growling sound throughout the tract... He taunted himself... What...! Is the food of these *beegaru*, not going to be assimilated in me...! He smiled to himself and tried to sleep again by changing the side... *Umhoom*... No... He could not tolerate... Inevitably he decided to go out to empty the bowels to get rid of his discomfort. He got up and picked the brass vessel kept filled with water at his bed side... He unhasped the door to go out... The wheezing old woman was not asleep... On hearing the sound of unhasping the door, she gathered her breath amid her wheezing and whooping only, and whispered in alarm... `whooh is it... *kon*²⁰... wwhooh..?'. The sudden trembling voice in the darkness frightened Vitthalarao... He took a long breath, controlled himself, and gaining his norm answered, `*Mee*²¹ *yamma*²²... mee Vitthalarao...' and went out.

It was still dark... He came to the mound where the people used to visit for defecation, on the outskirts of the village... He took out a beedi and match box from the pocket of his undershirt and lighted a beedi... The brief light of the matchstick showed a little area ahead, and that too for

20.Kon, Marathi word, meaning who is it; 21. Mee, Marathi word meaning 'I'; 22.Yamma, grandmother;

very short span of time... When the fire of the match stick extinguished, actually, the darkness became more dense in his eyes and around! He smoked the beedi, coughed and spat the phlegm... He went a few steps over the mound and kept the vessel down... Then adjusting his dhoti, he sat down for emptying his bowels... Soon on sitting there, he felt as if something pricked him from the front, in between his thighs. He thought there might be a thorny bush just before him and therefore he moved a step behind and positioned himself... He took out the match box and scratched a match stick... Before him... there was a coiled rope like creature, with black shining body... And its one end was held above the ground...! Vitthala felt as if a dense paste of darkness was suddenly smeared over his eyes... totally blindfolding him! Shouting 'Ayyayyo...' he sprang up and holding his dhoti, he ran towards the house... He hit the doors which opened with loud sound... and he fell down there just inside the doors, and started wailing... 'Ayyayyo... ayyayyo... I will die...ayyo... Narayanarao... I am dying...'. The frightened old woman who was under the asthma attack, suddenly got up and sat on the bed... Under the shock of Vitthala's sobs and wailing, she got relieved of her spasmodic attack, and breathing easily, she started to call all those in the house like the squawking of a parrot... 'Yeh Nanappa... Narayana... Narayana... come quickly. Something happened to Vitthalarao' 'Ye... Bhavane... awake your husband quickly... Vitthalarao is suffering from something' 'Yee Rukminee... look here... something has happened to your father in law... wake up your father quickly...'. Narayanarao was already by the side of Vitthalarao... Sugunabayi and others also rushed... Vitthala was rolling on the floor, suffering from intolerable burning sensation... 'It is burning... ayyo... can't tolerate... ayyo...Narayanarao... please do something... I am dying'. His dhoti at the back was all pasted with the feces and an intolerable stinking smell spread in the house... Sugunabayi sitting by his side, was horror struck, and she was trying to lay his head on her lap... 'What... kay jhalavo... what happened...?' she was asking in her wailing tone uninterruptedly... Narayana was unable to comprehend the situation without understanding the cause of Vitthala's suffering and wailing. He asked him continuously, 'What happened Vitthalarao...? Tell me what happened...?'. Vitthala was wriggling and rolling all the while... Under the spell of such intolerable burning sensation only, Vitthala stretched his left hand and held Ranoji's arm and pulled him nearer... Then he took out all the money and keys from the pocket of his undershirt and kept them in the palm of Ranoji... The *muduki* with her eased breathing told her son Narayana... 'Ye Nanappa... He went for emptying his bowel... And he is writhing after returning from there... see whether any creature has bitten him...'. Her warning increased the fright of Sugunabayi and she started lamenting pounding her chest... Narayana was also alarmed and asked... 'Vitthalarao... did any worm bite you...? May be some wasp or a scorpion... Don't worry... It will subside soon...'. Vitthala burst into new rush of sobs

and told... 'No no... it was a snake only... I will not survive Narayanarao... I shall die. Please look after my family... Ranoji is still an immature and inexperienced youth...'.
Frightened Nanappa went out and awakened the men in the neighbouring house for help... They said to bring the *snake charmer*²² in the neighboring village immediately... Nanappa took a

22. *Snake charmer, one who cures snake bite by chanting; 23. Kolaka mandala, a variety of snake*

bicycle and rushed towards that village... Here a few men carrying clubs and torches ran towards the mound where Vitthala visited for emptying his bowel... They were somehow sure that it can never be a snake bite... They had a strange logic of their own... See... just last night only he has celebrated *sakharapudha* of his son with all joy and jubilation... Under such circumstances, how could a snake bite the very father of the bridegroom...! After about an hour they returned... They found a snake there and killed it! Perhaps the snake had swallowed some rat or something... It was almost immobile and lying just by the side of the brass vessel Vitthala had carried with him. Sugunabayi's sobbing were increased to the sky. They assured Sugunabayi and said, 'Yeh... do not worry about that snake... It is not poisonous... it is just a *kolaka mandala*²³... No one dies by its bite... The body decays from the point of its bite... And there is medicine for that also... In Harugeri village there is a *desi vaidya*²⁴... He gives a strong medicine for this... If that medicine is taken there will be no decaying or anything... Tomorrow you should take him to Harugeri and get him the medicine...'. On hearing these words Sugunabayi felt a bit confident... And another person told her about the snake charmer also... 'Nanappa has gone to bring him... If he chants his *mantra*²⁵... it is the end of poison of any snake... Even the poison of king cobra gets neutralized by his *mantra*... Nanappa might come with him in no time...'. The hopes in Sugunabayi increased... Then she hurriedly went inside and brought a washed dhoti from her bag... All the men gathered there went out and the women folk moved inside... Rukmini's younger sister laughed for Vitthal's defecating in his dhoti... 'Kisack...!', and Rukmini's mother, Bhavani silenced her by pinching her arm and also signaling by winking her eyes...

The rolling of Vitthala on floor was still going on... He was wriggling his waist and legs in great pain... Sugunabayi with much efforts held Vitthala in one position and removed his dhoti that was dirtied... She wiped off the dirt attached to his body with the clean part of that dirtied dhoti... Then with great efforts she made him wear the other clean dhoti... After completing such herculean task, Sugunabayi wiped the sweat on her face by the sleeves of her blouse... She took the dirtied dhoti to the bathroom and kept it there to wash it later... She washed her hands and face... wiped the face with *seragu* and came before *Devara jagali*²⁶ in the house. She stood there and prayed 'Yappa Vitthoba... you are the only saviour... You only have to save us...' and then hurriedly returned to Vitthala... Perhaps, the pain of Vitthala were reduced... his rolling and wailing had almost subsided... Sugunabayi felt happy and asked him confidently, 'Is the burning sensation receding...?' Vitthala did not speak. Sugunabayi thought that he might be feeling sleepy. She took his hand in hers... She felt as though it was getting cold... Shocked Sugunabayi

24.Nati vaidya, native doctor who gives herbal medicines; 25.Mantra, a word or sound repeated to bring about a transformation or to achieve concentration; 26.Devara jagali, a recess in the wall or a small platform where the statues and photos of deities are placed and worshipped; 27.Guladali, chain of black beads interspersed with gold bowl like beads worn by women after marriage, it is considered as the symbol of husband

suddenly left his hand off... wiped her hands rubbing vigorously over her sari... and then again she took Vitthal's hand in hers... Same... it was as cold as the body of a snake...! Sugunabayi cried 'Ayyo yavva... you lord Vitthoba... you deceived me... you took away my *guladali*²⁷...' and lamenting loudly she fell on the body of Vitthala... Men that killed the snake told it was not a poisonous one...and it was just a *kolaka mandala*... Others told about the miraculous ability of the snake charmer who would be arriving shortly... Though all these were made known to Vitthala, he didn't believe them or what...! He left in haste...! Who knows... what hurry he had...?

The house that celebrated the jubilation of *sakhara pudha* the previous night was then immersed in grief and wailing due to a death! The old woman was squawking like a parrot 'Where is Nanappa...? Where Nanappa is gone...?' Sugunabayi was lamenting with sobs and wild cries. Womenfolk of that household and those from the neighboring houses and relatives also added to the sound of the grief. Amid all that crying and screeching, the old woman's screeches were not heard...

Narayanarao came along with the snake charmer... He threw the bicycle outside the house and shouting 'Vitthalarao... what have you done Vitthalarao...', rushed in and sat by the side of Vitthala's body... He took Vitthala's hand and held his fingers over the wrist to feel the pulse... Narayanarao dropped the hand and started to weep... The snake charmer who accompanied Narayanarao told consolingly... 'Hum... You Nanappa... get up. What if you yourself get lost in despair...! You are the *yajamana*... You have to do a lot of things now... Get up and think of the next...'. Narayanarao searchingly looked around and asked through his choked throat... 'Where is Ranoji rao...?'

Everybody there began to look around for Ranoji... Yes... he was here only... just the last minute... by my side only... here... ham...! here by his side only... But now... where did he go? Where did he go...? Somebody told he might have gone out for something... All started to speak about him in their undertones... Nanappa sent out boys to bring Ranojirao... Sugunabayi's right eye started twitch continuously, and she foresaw some calamity resulting due to this disappearance of Ranoji...

The boys in search of Ranoji went round in the village enquiring... A youth of twentytwo... betrothed just last night... my height only... Did you see... Do you know where he is...? Where did he go...? Where did he go...? Every one in the village searched everywhere in the village... And here Sugunabayi was wailing... 'You my son... Ranappa... Your baba has gone... He wanted to perform your marriage... he went without seeing it... He did not receive even a sip of *ganga jala* from your hand... He became so stern with you *yappa*... He left without discharging any obligation of yours, my son... Come now and perform your duties my son...'. Sugunabayi's

wailing song roved all along the street... reached to house from house... then it travelled to other streets and roads... bumping the walls of all the houses and echoing, this mother's wailing call travelled throughout that village...! Though it spread and reached to each and every corner of the village, it could never reach Ranojirao...! The wailing song of Sugunabayi and the call of all of Narayanarao and others, including Rukmini, his betrothed, could never reach Ranojirao...! It was simply because these calls of all dared to tread only in the streets of the village... they never tried to go anywhere beyond the village...! Poor miserable ones!

Sugunabayi was struck hard when it was ultimately understood that Ranoji ran off with the money handed over to him by Vitthala... Gradually it appeared to her mind that she foresaw what happened to her and her husband...! No... not her... but her husband... Vitthala foresaw what that Ranya would bring to them...! She thought... perhaps this Ranya came to us to recover the debts of our previous births! Now she was absolutely all alone... and the intensity of her wailing decreased! The escape of Ranoji was a terrible shock to Narayanarao also... He could not understand the sudden disappearance of Ranoji... 'What sort of a son he is...! He ran away when his father is lying dead here...!' He thought in disgust... is this Ranoji real son of these Vitthalarao and Sugunabayi? There must be some fraud in it... Whatever it may be... even if he is not the real son of these... they have fed him and brought him up know... Should not that benevolence be taken into account at least? Yes... he appears to be an irresponsible immoral bilker... His amorous behavior sitting by the side of Rukmini last night then appeared all for our liking... and we enjoyed it...! But now the same thing became the most irritating...! Unworthy rogue...! Breaking the marriage at this stage must be a boon for Rukmini... Narayana thought... Then he immediately started to find ways as to, how this woman crying and pounding her chest and the body of her dead husband should be got rid of as early as possible... While immersed in such thoughts also, he was responding to the people by feigning grief and laments... He slowly shed his feigned laments and became more and more dogmatic... Ultimately he told Sugunabayi, 'Hum... yakka...how if we sit in the grief like this... It is an unending one! Now look... it is already noon... Within no time it would be evening... This is an unnatural death... Such bodies start decomposing quickly... And your Ranoji...! He is found no where... Now we should arrange for quick transport of the body to your village...'. Sugunabayi was horrified by these words of Narayanarao... She felt drowned in deep distress... What should she do now... Should she go on lamenting, falling on the body of her dead husband... should she burst into sobs terrified by her responsibility of the future status of hers, including the immediate disposal of the dead body of Vitthala... or should she lament singing about her only son who ran away carrying all the money in the pocket of Vitthala's undershirt, leaving his dead father and wailing mother behind...! She was thrown in great perplexity and in deep disgusting loneliness...

Now she started lamenting more loudly... and Narayanarao became more alert... He thought this woman must be scheming to cling to me and put everything on my head... He called his wife aside, and whispered in her ears, and put fifty rupees in her hand... Bhawani then called

Sugunabayi and took her inside... She convincingly told Sugunabayi...`Look *yakka*... our old woman is seriously ill... My husband is worried about her... He thinks if this grief and wailing are prolonged... she would also collapse... Therefore the body of Vitthalarao should be lifted as early as possible... Nothing else... our old woman wants to see the marriage of her granddaughter... If she dies now due to these horrifying circumstances... we are worried about her *sadgati*²⁸... He has gone to bring the cart... and he gave this money... Take it...'. Sugunabayi resisted to take the money... But Bhawani, impetuously pushed the notes into Sugunabayi's blouse...

By about four o' clock Narayanarao brought a bullock cart, before the house... Its arrival suddenly multiplied Sugunabayi's burden of loneliness and her loud wailing got a bit less intense... Bhavani brought Sugunabayi's bag from inside and kept it on her lap... Memory of the dirtied dhoti kept in the bathroom haunted Sugunabayi for a while... It would have been useful for Ranoji... Suddenly the escape of Ranoji came to the surface of her mind... She cursed Ranoji... Look this god Vitthoba... he gave me such a rotten fruit... She again thought realizingly... what if I accuse this Vitthoba... It is my own *karma*²⁹... I must have offered rotten fruit to somebody in some of my previous births... And that might have brought me such a rotten son...! And she thought...let that dhoti lie there only...

Narayanarao came with two more people and told Sugunabayi... `*Hum*... get up *yakka*... Otherwise it would be dark...These are the days of rains and storms...'. He looked at the people that came with him... They lifted the body of Vitthala and carried it out to lay on the hay spread in the cart...

Narayana again came in and persuaded Sugunabayi... `*Hum*... come *yakka*...'. Sugunabayi seeing somewhere and weeping came out...`. All the women in the house followed her feigning great grief ... `*Ham*... Board the cart *yakka*...' Narayana insisted. Sugunabayi was hesitant... Narayanarao stared at her and told again... `*Hum*... quickly... It is already thundering in the sky... It may rain also... Be quick...'. Sugunabayi ultimately climbed by the spikes of the wheel and got into the cart... She sat by the side of the body of Vitthala... Narayana feigningly told...`*Yakka*... I shall come tomorrow morning... I have to arrange for the medicines of our *mudiki*...'. While Narayanarao was telling so, the man driving the cart shouted `*Hurre*...', and made the oxen to move hurriedly... By the sudden movement of the cart, Sugunabayi lost her balance... she hurriedly held the side support and got her lost balance... The bullock cart moved hurriedly making sound of the rolling wheels... `*gudu*... *gudu*...'

Now... Sugunabayi, would stare once at the thundering sky... and then she would gaze at the rolling wheels making the sound... and then she would timidly look at the corpse of the man who was her husband...

Entangled in all these... she almost forgot the compulsion on her... that... that she should weep and lament...!

28.Sadgati, moksha, liberation; 29.Karma, responsibility of the past deeds
