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Ranga's Marriage



Masti Venkatesha Iyengar

Ranga, the accountant's son, is one of the rare breed among the village folk who has been to the city to pursue his studies. When he returns to his village from the city of Bangalore, the crowds mill around his house to see whether he has changed or not. His ideas about marriage are now quite different—or are they?

WHEN you see this title, some of you may ask, “Ranga's Marriage?” Why not “Ranganatha Vivaha” or “Ranganatha Vijaya?” Well, yes. I know I could have used some other mouth-filling one like “Jagannatha Vijaya” or “Girija Kalyana.” But then, this is not about Jagannatha's victory or Girija's wedding. It's about our own Ranga's marriage and hence no fancy title. Hosahalli is our village. You must have heard of it. No? What a pity! But it is not your fault. There is no mention of it in any geography book. Those sahibs in England, writing in English, probably do not know that such a place exists, and so make no mention of it. Our own people too forget about it. You know how it is—they are like a flock of sheep. One sheep walks into a pit, the rest blindly follow it. When both, the sahibs in England and our own geographers, have not referred to it, you can not expect the poor cartographer to remember to put it on the map, can you? And so there is not even the shadow of our village on any map.

Sorry, I started somewhere and then went off in another direction. If the state of Mysore is to Bharatavarsha what the



sweet *karigadabu*¹ is to a festive meal, then Hosahalli is to Mysore State what the filling is to the *karigadabu*. What I have said is absolutely true, believe me. I will not object to your questioning it but I will stick to my opinion. I am not the only one who speaks glowingly of Hosahalli. We have a doctor in our place. His name is Gundabhatta. He agrees with me. He has been to quite a few places. No, not England. If anyone asks him whether he has been there, he says, "No, *annayya*², I have left that to you. Running around like a flea-pestered dog, is not for me. I have seen a few places in my time, though." As a matter of fact, he has seen many.

We have some mango trees in our village. Come visit us, and I will give you a raw mango from one of them. Do not eat it. Just take a bite. The sourness is sure to go straight to your *brahmarandhra*³. I once took one such fruit home and a chutney was made out of it. All of us ate it. The cough we suffered from, after that! It was when I went for the cough medicine, that the doctor told me about the special quality of the fruit.

Just as the mango is special, so is everything else around our village. We have a creeper growing in the ever-so-fine water of the village pond. Its flowers are a feast to behold. Get two leaves from the creeper when you go to the pond for your bath, and you will not have to worry about not having leaves on which to serve the afternoon meal. You will say I am rambling. It is always like that when the subject of our village comes up. But enough. If any one of you would like to visit us, drop me a line. I will let you know where Hosahalli is and what things are like here. The best way of getting to know a place is to visit it, don't you agree?

What I am going to tell you is something that happened ten years ago. We did not have many people who knew English, then. Our village accountant was the first one who had enough courage to send his son to Bangalore to study. It is different now. There are many who know English. During the holidays, you come across them on every street, talking in English. Those days, we did not speak in English, nor did we bring in English words while talking

¹ a South Indian fried sweet filled with coconut and sugar

² (in Kannada) a respectful term for an elder

³ (in Kannada) the soft part in a child's head where skull bones join later. Here, used as an idiomatic expression to convey the extreme potency of sourness.



in Kannada. What has happened is disgraceful, believe me. The other day, I was in Rama Rao's house when they bought a bundle of firewood. Rama Rao's son came out to pay for it. He asked the woman, "How much should I give you?" "Four pice," she said. The boy told her he did not have any "change", and asked her to come the next morning. The poor woman did not understand the English word "change" and went away muttering to herself. I too did not know. Later, when I went to Ranga's house and asked him, I understood what it meant.

This priceless commodity, the English language, was not so widespread in our village a decade ago. That was why Ranga's homecoming was a great event. People rushed to his doorstep announcing, "The accountant's son has come," "The boy who had gone to Bangalore for his studies is here, it seems," and "Come, Ranga is here. Let's go and have a look."

Attracted by the crowd, I too went and stood in the courtyard and asked, "Why have all these people come? There's no performing monkey here."

A boy, a fellow without any brains, said, loud enough for everyone to hear, "What are you doing here, then?" A youngster, immature and without any manners. Thinking that all these things were now of the past, I kept quiet.

Seeing so many people there, Ranga came out with a smile on his face. Had we all gone inside, the place would have turned into what people call the Black Hole of Calcutta. Thank God it did not. Everyone was surprised to see that Ranga was the same as he had been six months ago, when he had first left our village. An old lady who was near him, ran her hand over his chest, looked into his eyes and said, "The *janewara*⁴ is still there. He hasn't lost his caste." She went away soon after that. Ranga laughed.

Once they realised that Ranga still had the same hands, legs, eyes and nose, the crowd melted away, like a lump of sugar in a child's mouth. I continued to stand there. After everyone had gone, I asked, "How are you, Rangappa? Is everything well with you?" It was only then that Ranga noticed me. He came near me and did a *namaskara* respectfully, saying, "I am all right, with your blessings."

I must draw your attention to this aspect of Ranga's character. He knew when it would be to his advantage to talk to someone

⁴ (in Kannada) the sacred thread worn by Brahmins



and rightly assessed people's worth. As for his *namaskara* to me, he did not do it like any present-day boy — with his head up towards the sun, standing stiff like a pole without joints, jerking his body as if it was either a wand or a walking stick. Nor did he merely fold his hands. He bent low to touch my feet. "May you get married soon," I said, blessing him. After exchanging a few pleasantries, I left.

That afternoon, when I was resting, Ranga came to my house with a couple of oranges in his hand. A generous, considerate fellow. It would be a fine thing to have him marry, settle down and be of service to society, I thought.

For a while we talked about this and that. Then I came to the point. "Rangappa, when do you plan to get married?"

"I am not going to get married now," he said.

"Why not?"

"I need to find the right girl. I know an officer who got married only six months ago. He is about thirty and his wife is twenty-five, I am told. They will be able to talk lovingly to each other. Let's say I married a very young girl. She may take my words spoken in love as words spoken in anger. Recently, a troupe in Bangalore staged the play *Shakuntala*. There is no question of Dushyantha falling in love with Shakuntala if she were young, like the present-day brides, is there? What would have happened to Kalidasa's play? If one gets married, it should be to a girl who is mature. Otherwise, one should remain a bachelor. That's why I am not marrying now."

"Is there any other reason?"

"A man should marry a girl he admires. What we have now are arranged marriages. How can one admire a girl with milk stains on one side of her face and wetness on the other, or so young that she doesn't even know how to bite her fingers?"

"One a neem fruit, the other, a bittergourd."

"Exactly!" Ranga said, laughing.

I was distressed that the boy who I thought would make a good husband, had decided to remain a bachelor. After chatting for a little longer, Ranga left. I made up my mind right then, that I would get him married.

Rama Rao's niece, a pretty girl of eleven, had come to stay with him. She was from a big town, so she knew how to play the veena and the harmonium. She also had a sweet voice. Both



her parents had died, and her uncle had brought her home. Ranga was just the boy for her, and she, the most suitable bride for him.

Since I was a frequent visitor to Rama Rao's place, the girl was quite free with me. I completely forgot to mention her name! Ratna, it was. The very next morning I went to their house and told Rama Rao's wife, "I'll send some buttermilk for you. Ask Ratna to fetch it."

Ratna came. It was a Friday, so she was wearing a grand saree. I told her to sit in my room and requested her to sing a song. I sent for Ranga. While she was singing the song—*Krishnamurthy, in front of my eyes*—Ranga reached the door. He stopped at the threshold. He did not want the singing to stop, but was curious to see the singer. Carefully, he peeped in. The light coming into the room was blocked. Ratna looked up and seeing a stranger there, abruptly stopped.

Suppose you buy the best quality mango. You eat it slowly, savouring its peel, before biting into the juicy flesh. You do not want to waste any part of it. Before you take another bite, the fruit slips out of your hand and falls to the ground. How do you feel? Ranga's face showed the same disappointment when the singing stopped.

"You sent for me?" he asked as he came in and sat on a chair.

Ratna stood at a distance, her head lowered. Ranga repeatedly glanced at her. Once, our eyes met, and he looked very embarrassed. No one spoke for a long while.

"It was my coming in that stopped the singing. Let me leave."

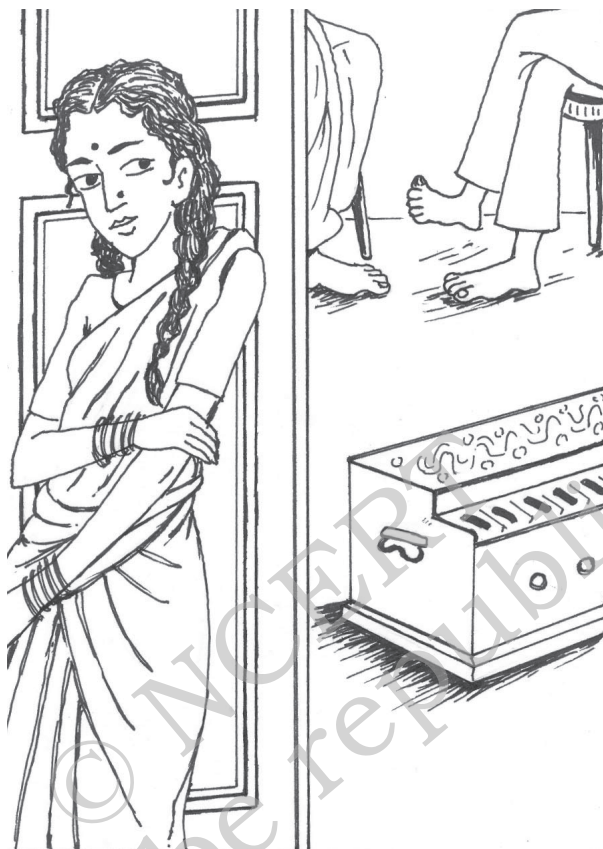
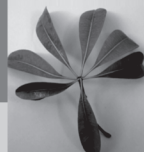
Words, mere words! The fellow said he would leave but did not make a move. How can one expect words to match actions in these days of Kaliyuga?

Ratna ran inside, overcome by shyness.

After a while, Ranga asked, "Who is that girl, swami?"

"Who's that inside?" the lion wanted to know. The he-goat who had taken shelter in the temple replied, "Does it matter who I am? I am a poor animal who has already eaten nine lions. I have vowed to eat one more. Tell me, are you male or female?" The lion fled the place in fear, it seems.

Like the he-goat, I said, "What does it matter to either of us who she is? I'm already married and you aren't the marrying kind."



Very hopefully, he asked, "She isn't married, then?" His voice did not betray his excitement but I knew it was there.

"She was married a year ago."

His face shrivelled like a roasted brinjal. After a while, Ranga left, saying, "I must go, I have work at home."

I went to our Shastri the next morning and told him, "Keep everything ready to read the stars. I'll come later." I tutored him in all that I wanted him to say.

I found no change in Ranga when I met him that afternoon. "What's the matter? You seem to be lost in thought," I said.

"Nothing, nothing's wrong, believe me."

"Headache? Come, let's go and see a doctor."



"I have no headache. I'm my usual self."

"I went through the same thing when the process of choosing a girl for me was going on. But I don't think that that could be a reason for your present condition."

Ranga stared at me.

"Come, let's go and see Shastri," I suggested. "We will find out whether Guru and Shani are favourable for you or not."

Ranga accompanied me without any protest. As soon as Shastri saw me, he exclaimed, "What a surprise, Shyama! Haven't seen you for a long time."

Shyama is none other than your servant, the narrator of this tale.

I got angry and shouted, "What? Only this morning..." Shastri completed my sentence, "You finished all your work and are now free to visit me." Had he not done so, I would have ruined our plan by bursting like grains that are kept in the sun to dry. I was extremely careful of what I said afterwards.

Shastri turned to Ranga. "When did the young son of our accountant clerk come home? What can I do for him? It's very rarely that he visits us."

"Take out your paraphernalia. Our Rangappa seems to have something on his mind. Can you tell us what's worrying him? Shall we put your science of astrology to the test?"

There was authority in my voice as I spoke to Shastri. He took out two sheets of paper, some *cowries* and a book of *palmyra* leaves, saying, "Ours is an ancient science, *ayya*. There's a story to it... But I won't tell you that story now. This is not a *harikatha* which allows you to tell a story within a story... You may get bored. I'll tell it to you some other time."

Shastri moved his lips fast as he counted on his fingers and then asked, "What's your star?" Ranga didn't know. "Never mind," Shastri indicated with a shake of his head. He did some more calculations before saying in a serious tone, "It's about a girl."

I had been controlling my laughter all this while. But now I burst out laughing. I turned to Ranga. "Exactly what I had said."

"Who is the girl?" It was your humble servant who asked the question.

Shastri thought for a while before replying, "She probably has the name of something found in the ocean."

"Kamala?"

"Maybe."



"Could it be Pachchi, moss?"

"Must it be moss if it's not Kamala? Why not pearl or ratna, the precious stone?"

"Ratna? The girl in Rama Rao's house is Ratna. Tell me, is there any chance of our negotiations bearing fruit?"

"Definitely," he said, after thinking for some time.

There was surprise on Ranga's face. And some happiness. I noticed it.

"But that girl is married..." I said. Then I turned to him. His face had fallen.

"I don't know all that. There may be some other girl who is suitable. I only told you what our *shastra* indicated," Shastri said.

We left the place. On the way, we passed by Rama Rao's house. Ratna was standing at the door. I went in alone and came out a minute later.

"Surprising. This girl isn't married, it seems. Someone told me the other day that she was. What Shastri told us has turned out to be true after all! But Rangappa, I can't believe that you have been thinking of her. Swear on the name of Madhavacharya⁵ and tell me, is it true what Shastri said?"

I do not know whether anyone else would have been direct. Ranga admitted, "There's greater truth in that *shastra* than we imagine. What he said is absolutely true."

Shastri was at the well when I went there that evening. I said, "So Shastrigale, you repeated everything I had taught you without giving rise to any suspicion. What a marvellous *shastra* yours is!" He didn't like it at all.

"What are you saying? What you said to me was what I could have found out myself from the *shastras*. Don't forget, I developed on the hints you had given me."

Tell me, is this what a decent man says?

Rangappa had come the other day to invite me for dinner. "What's the occasion?" I asked.

"It's Shyama's birthday. He is three."

"It's not a nice name — Shyama," I said. "I'm like a dark piece of oil-cake. Why did you have to give that golden child of yours such a name? What a childish couple you are, Ratna and you! I

⁵ an exponent of Vedantic philosophy from South India



know, I know, it is the English custom of naming the child after someone you like... Your wife is eight months pregnant now. Who's there to help your mother to cook?"

"My sister has come with her."

I went there for dinner. Shyama rushed to me when I walked in and put his arms round my legs. I kissed him on his cheek and placed a ring on his tiny little finger.

Allow me to take leave of you, reader. I am always here, ready to serve you.

You were not bored, I hope?

READING WITH INSIGHT

1. Comment on the influence of English — the language and the way of life — on Indian life as reflected in the story. What is the narrator's attitude to English?
2. Astrologers' perceptions are based more on hearsay and conjecture than what they learn from the study of the stars. Comment with reference to the story.
3. Indian society has moved a long way from the way the marriage is arranged in the story. Discuss.
4. What kind of a person do you think the narrator is?