

HELPLINE ANONYMOUS

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The phone was ringing.

Kesava Murthy received the call and said, "Helpline Anonymous here!"

"I called to report you about a case... shall I give you the details?"

He realized that the voice sounded like the voice of a middle aged woman and he said, "Tell me, madam".

She gave the details like the place, street and the door number and said, "There is a woman by name Tulasamma who is sitting outside the house and crying for a long time. Please see if you can help her."

Immediately he called his friend Govardhan, gave the details and started to that place. After four hours he came back and sat down in sofa fully exhausted.

"Is it because of problems related to work or to money that you are looking very disturbed once every week or ten days? I didn't ask you because I thought you would tell me," asked Gowthamy, Kesava Murthy's wife.

It was 8.30 am. Every day, both have breakfast together and go to their offices on separate vehicles. He has a motorbike and she has a scooter. Both work in the same bank but in different branches. They met each other in the bank, loved and got married. Though they were married for ten years, they had no kids as yet.

Finding the husband to be silent, she didn't want to pester him with more questions and so she completed her breakfast silently. By 9 am they started for their offices. He locked the house and told her that he would tell her about it that evening. They parted.

Gowthamy started the scooter worried what he would tell her. She thought it was a blessing to be busy. Once they were in the office, they would be busy till 7 pm. No other topic would interest them. It was probably because of this that someone remarked 'Work is Worship'.

"I used to think that I know something about life, people and society. But now I know- I know nothing for sure" said Kesava Murthy looking into his wife's eyes.

As is the routine, they had a light dinner and sat in opposite sofas in the living room. That was the time for watching hindi serials. They watch hindi serials for one hour, discuss the serials for half an hour and other issues for some more time and retire to bed at 10.30 pm.

That was a triple bed room flat given to them by the bank. Gowthamy decorated it with love and care but without too many things. She was also educating the maid Santamma's two children not worried about her lack of kids. She would buy them good clothes for every festival. She goes to their teachers to discuss their

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improvement in studies. Santamma has a fifteen year old son and a fourteen year old daughter. Santamma wants to send her son to Engineering and make her daughter a teacher. Reciprocating her feelings, even the kids study well.

Santamma lives in a slum area beside their apartment. Her husband Narayya drives an auto. He drinks once every two days. Once every four days, he beats his wife. Gowthamy called Narayya two or three times and admonished him. When he doesn't drink, he is his best self. He is humble and good. But when he is drunk, he becomes a personification of devil and he can't but beat his wife. In each street there is a brandi shop, even in Tirupati. "What is important for the Government- income or public health?" Gowthamy thought with pain in her heart. Finding that his wife was in deep thought, he switched the T.V on. Everything is normal-chat shows, serials... Mayabazar movie which in one movie channel, the popular song ' *Vivaha bojanambu*' song ... He increased the T.V volume.

Gowthamy came back to her senses and looked at her husband. He was looking at her fixedly. She moved closer to her husband.

"You were telling me something, but I went into my own world" She sounded apologetic.

"You can also take me to that world" he smiled and said.

"It is not such a great world. I am thinking of Santamma. Even today she came to work fully exhausted. By looking at her I knew what happened. Her drunk husband would have beaten her again".

"I think this is something very common in India" he quipped nonchalantly.

"May be...! It may be a common sight but each time I see her coming like that, I feel like lodging a complaint against Narayya. If I say that to Santamma, she starts weeping. She doesn't let a fly touch Narayya though he beats her black and blue. I don't know what love this is..." Her words are full of feelings of depression and sadness.

"Shall I tell you shocking news?" said Kesava Murthy looking in to her eyes.

"Tell me" she said unsure of what shocking news he would reveal.

"Just yesterday I came to know that there are sons who beat their mothers," said Kesava Murthy sadly.

"Really! We have generally heard about quarrels between wife and husband, and property problems but we have never heard about sons who beat their mothers." She said.

"Yesterday I met a woman named Tulasamma. Poor lady! She is already 70. It seems her son beats her at least once every month. He is her only son. He is educated in sastras and vedas. Yet, he does this way. What a fate! Sometimes I feel that it is the fault of the parents themselves. They won't think of their future, spend everything they have to educate their children, and get then married. Once they get the wings, they fly and they fly away... leaving the aged parents to their doom. Isn't it a shame! It seems Yaksha once asked Dharma Raju, 'What is the greatest wonder in the world?' He seems to have replied, 'Though man sees many people around him dying, he doesn't realize he will also have to die sometime soon but thinks he is immortal.' Isn't it foolish of parents not to plan for their old age though the world is full of youngsters who leave their parents to their doom?"

He looked at his wife. He was lost in thought. He shook her.

"You are lost in thought. Let's go and sleep". He rose from sofa.

"Sorry. Of late, I am becoming like this. You are telling me about Tulasamma. Please continue," she said.

He looked at the clock. It showed 11.00pm.

"No problem, tell me," she said.

"Tulasamma got married at a young age. That too it was a second marriage with a person ten years elder to her. Added to it, her husband had a concubine in their very next street. A son was born to her within two years. Irresponsible husband, his concubine, poverty, growing son... Adding to her problems, her husband passed away within ten years of her marriage. She sought help from her brothers. They had their own families to look after. Nobody came forward to help her. Good times dawned on her and she joined as a cook in a bungalow. She was given a room.

Owners promised to educate her son provided he studied well. She was ecstatic. She worked well and she was treated like a member of the family.

After years of struggle and suffering, she saw good days ahead. Her owners treated her with kindness. They helped him to complete graduation and got him placement as a salesman in a pharma company in Vijayawada. Within six months of joining the duty, he rented a small house and took her there.

The coming of the daughter-in-law changed the fortunes of Tulasamma once again. Even the daughter-in-law came from a lower middle class family like her. Yet, she was very mean in her approach. Within three months of her arrival, she ensured gap between the mother and the son. She was once again turned into a cook. When she was working in bungalow, she was treated with respect and kindness. Now in her own house, she had to work really hard, besides being met with derisive comments of daughter-in-law. She called her brother and asked him to join her in an old age home. She felt it was better to join her in an old age home. She felt it was better to cook in the old age home than in her house. He advised her against it because it would hurt the prestige of her son.

She told her brother that she was not worried about the prestige of her son because he himself was not worried about his own prestige. Her brother didn't agree with her.

That night... she had a slice of bread and a little bit of curry, drank a glass of butter milk and slept on the verandah. She felt someone touch her. She got up. She saw her son and daughter-in-law. Using lot of force, he started hitting his mother on her back. It took a lot of time for her to realize that it was not a dream. First she was surprised and she started crying. "My own son is beating me and that too in front of my daughter-in-law. And my daughter-in-law is laughing her heart out! Is it real or dream?" wondered Tulasamma.

After beating her on her back, he shouted, "You spoiled the curry by adding too much salt. I came home after a full day of hard work and you made sure that I don't have anything to eat."

The neighbors were surprised to see this odd behavior. Even they got accustomed to this behavior very soon. Once every week or ten days she would weep the whole night. Not able to see her suffer so much, one of her neighbors called me..." said Kesava Murthy. His voice was full of sadness and his face was lifeless.

"They called you... Why you? They should have called the police" said Gowthamy in surprise.

"Gowthamy, I wanted to tell you something for a long time. Govardhan and I together with three of our friends started a small organization to help the destitute like Tulasamma. We started it three months and named it Helpline Anonymous. There is an international organization called Alcoholic Anonymous. It runs without publicity, interviews and other hungama. People here help one another. Drinking habit, domestic violence, other bad habits... we can't share with others. It is good that they are maintained secretly. For example, many fights and quarrels between wife and husband, parents and their wards, between brothers don't reach the police station because the family's name will be at stake. The same way, the vices of family members are kept in secret. That's why we named our organization as Helpline Anonymous. No where will you publicity of our organization. If someone rings us up, we go there personally, speak to the victims and if they desire, we will join them in old age homes. We already made agreement with three old age homes.

We also ensure that we get them a job based on their skills and temperaments. That way they earn something and they are engaged." He stopped and looked at his wife. She was all ears.

"Though you are doing this much, why didn't you tell me? I am very upset..." said Gowthamy.

"Initially, we had our own doubts and so we didn't tell this to anyone, Gowthamy" he said.

"It is a very good initiative Murthy garu... I am really proud of you." She got up from sofa, sat beside him and put her hand in his. When she feels deep love for her husband she calls him 'Murthy garu'.

"Tell me in detail about your Helpline Anonymous. How many people are you helping right now? Tell me how people can contact you and about your sources of funding etc."

"I told you that five of us started the initiative. We invested two lakh rupees each and did fixed deposit of ten lakhs. Monthly we get around 8,000 as interest and that means we get about a lakh in interest per year. Twelve of our colleagues are donating rupees 500 per month. So in total we are getting around 14,000 rupees. Right now we are taking care of four people and we are paying 3000 rupees for each one to the old age homes. I spoke to a retail group and got them some work. One makes agarbathis, the other candles and the other makes appadams. The retail group packs them neatly and sells them in their shops. Each one

gets about 2000 rupees per month. More important than the money they earn, they get self-confidence and a strong reason to live. Small diseases took back seat and they became healthy.” Kesava Murthy was so happy when he was saying this. Gowthamy realized that he was enjoying the work he was doing. She moved closer to him and pulled him closer to her bosom.

The phone started ringing with the ringtone of the popular song ‘*Jayammu nischayammura bhayambu ledura*’. That is a sign that someone is calling Helpline Anonymous. Only a few friends, colleagues and their acquaintances know his number. Yet it rings at least once every week or ten days.

Wealth, selfishness, difficulties, loneliness... everything is on the rise in today’s society.

“Gowthamy, I have to go. The phone is ringing,” Kesava Murthy got up to take up the call.

“There is no dearth of good people in this country” thought Gowthamy to herself as she rose.
