

The bullock cart salesman in Mysore



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Venkataramana Shetty – I have changed his first name – was perhaps middle aged when I was born. In those days, in Mysore, in our community – and probably elsewhere in India, too – there was no way a child like me could talk to an outsider like Venkataramana. But he was so active in our *mohalla*, and the older members of the family and community would talk about him, and I would hear their discussions. My father did not like him, but my maternal grandfather liked him. Sometimes they talked about Venkataramana.

Shettys are from a community whose *Dharma* is to take to business as their profession. This is as per the tenets of the Hindu caste system (*Varnashrama Dharma*). Following this, in those days, most Shettys were engaged in business, big or small as per their ability from a young age.

In any case, in the 1940s, higher education was not a feasible option for most people in the Princely State of Mysore because there were very few educational institutions of higher education. Many taluk headquarters had one or two institutions up to 10th class only. For college education, a student had to go to a District headquarters. Even most District headquarters did not have science colleges – only arts colleges. Even Mysore, the seat of the Rajah, had only an Arts Colleges for higher education up to 1950s. A student had to go to Bangalore to have higher education in science, engineering, or other high quality occupational studies. Further, the employment and earning opportunities also were not very attractive, except for exceptionally good students.

The Shetty community was well knit. They helped one another in running their businesses. It was easy to get loans and goods on credit from among themselves. The modern banking industry was nascent, and there was very little chance of an average trader getting any sort of a loan from any bank. That was another inducement to get in to business as early as possible.

Venkataramana Shetty had accepted that the conventional views of his community about education and business. In those days, the Shetty community members rarely studied beyond 8th class. Going beyond that was considered foolish, as that would make the individual miss opportunity to make money for all those youthful years one spent in the school and college. A trader could make a comfortable living buying and selling essential commodities, without enduring the difficulties present in manufacturing. Consequently, in Princely Mysore, a Shetty rarely ventured outside trading: he bought something in one place and sold in another place where there was a good demand for it. The essentials one had to acquire from education were to learn reading, writing and arithmetic – just enough to carry on a business. Beyond this, what use was the education?

Venkataramana Shetty was a travelling shopkeeper. His bullock cart was his shop. He sold household and agricultural brass and copper vessels, and also some aluminium vessels and tools. He would go round the district from one *santhe* (shandy) to another, or from one *parishe* (annual temple car festival of a town) to another to sell his goods. A *parishe* would last for seven to ten days, and villagers from far and wide would come for paying obeisance to the deity, for entertainment and making purchases for the fields and their houses. As soon as the monsoon (*Ashad*) was over, he would set forth on his bullock cart with an assistant, laden with goods for sale. They travelled around till their goods were sold out, and returned laden with goods, such as coconuts and oilseeds, that they had bought at low prices for sale in Mysore city.

He travelled almost two hundred and fifty days in a year. People said he was born with *chakras* (round swirls) in all his toes. It was believed that people who had more number of *chakras* than *shankas* (swirls of the shape of a conch) in their toes never stayed at one place and were always on the move. When asked whether he liked to travel, he did not give a straight answer. He said it was his fate that he had to travel to make ends meet. People who did not like him said there were other reasons also. Some said his domineering wife was the reason. Because of her domineering and quarrelsome nature, he preferred to be away more number of days than was necessary. Others attributed it to his moral turpitude and womanizing. They said he had a lover in some ports of call.

Whatever be the reason for his travels, there is no doubt that he played an important role in rural–urban commerce. There were many others like him. Some sold mill made cloth in the shandys. Some carried films to touring cinema houses, which had set up their tents in the more prosperous villages. These travelling cinema houses also went from one *parishe* to another. They also undertook some errands for neighbours and friends. Communication links were poor; the postal system, and sometimes telegrams, were the only link between a town and villages in its hinterland. Hence, the travelling salesmen were much sought after in the community.

Shetty was of average height and build, dark and weather beaten. He always wore a nine yard *panche* (cloth made generally of cotton, muslin or silk), which was perhaps white when it was bought. The *panche* which went round his waist and then in between his legs and tied down to another part of the cloth at the waist. The two parts of the cloth appeared as tubes through which the legs emerged exposing the ankle. He wore a shirt and then a black coat, which was rarely ironed, over it. A black cap with oil stains at the rim covered the head. On his forehead there would a red mark of vermilion, a straight line starting from eyebrows level to hairline. The mark indicated that he was a devotee of Lord Venkateshwara, who resided on top of seven hills at Tirupathi.

He had a large family. A child was born every two years or so, balanced by deaths at regular intervals due to diseases common then, such as malaria, cholera, plague, and dysentery. Most houses of those days had large plots surrounding them. Mysore was emerging from conservancy system of sanitation. So a front road and a back lane for manually carrying the night soil was the norm. Middle class houses had a small built space abutting the road. The construction was usually brick work in mud, wooden trusses and Mangalore tiled roof. It had a front verandah, which served as an office cum assembly cum business space. It was also the place where friends from other castes were received and entertained. A small short teak door in the centre led to two rooms, one on each side, a wood stove kitchen on one side, an independent bath with an attached open to sky Indian toilet on the side opposite to kitchen. There was a large open backyard, where he kept his cart and bullocks.

The cart man, who accompanied Shetty on all his travels, lived in a small dingy enclosure near the rear *oni* (lane). The cart man was a man-Friday for Shetty. He looked after the cart and the bullocks, fed them regularly, washed them when required or ordered, got shoes for them, loaded and unloaded the wares, assisted in setting the shop and sales, and also acted as a watchman when required.

Shetty's arrival back home from a trading expedition was a big event. People expecting bargains would visit him to buy the products of their choice such as coconuts, oil seeds, lentils, ayurvedic herbs, talismans, and what not, the well-known products of surrounding towns and villages. Then, there would be people who were searching for suitable brides and bridegrooms from their own castes for their own grownup children. The locality was at the fringe of the city, and most residents were first generation migrants from neighbouring villages and towns. They had still links with those places and marriage alliances from there were most desired. Many preferred to seek advice/help from known people there specially *Vaids* (medicine men). They also called on him. Once he had attended to all those things, and cleared most of the goods he had brought, he would rest for a few days.

It was during those days that a large crowd of friends and gossipers would gather around to listen to him. He had innumerable tales, many involving miracles, ghosts, sensational murders involving land disputes, creepy tales, illicit affairs, etc. It appeared that he had a never-ending store of stories. Sometimes it would be in the veranda of his house and sometimes at the place nearby, platform built around a peepul tree (the bo tree) at the centre of the road. Such platforms, called *Katte*, were common in towns and villages of Mysore, where elders and hangers-on usually met. Peepul, a large tropical tree with a thick foliage which extended 40 to 60ft around, was considered holy and it was believed that atmosphere below it tranquil.

In those days, we children would not find any place to play on the road there. We would be shooed away as being noisy. This would force us to the *maidan* (open space) around the primary school, which was a little distance away. And careful parents who wanted their children somewhere around within their sight would not allow them to go there. This curtailed our freedom to remain outdoors. We greatly resented Shetty's stay and prayed for his early departure.

The genes of the business class, combined years of travel to various parts of the district, meeting an assortment of customers, and negotiating the deals had made him skilled in the art of attracting listeners. He would dramatize an incident, spicing the narration with similes from mythology, folk tales and day-to-day recent incidents. It was believed that the activities of ghosts and brahma *rakshasas* (evil people) would increase days closer to *Amavasya* (new moon phase). Mysore bordered Malnad, and forests were only a few miles away. There was no electricity in those days, and once the night fell it was pitch dark except for an occasional *panju* (a small log around which a cotton rag soaked in oil is wound; the oil is lit to provide light) or hurricane lantern carried by someone. So every dark shadow was a potential ghost.

During the new moon days, he would narrate ghost stories, if necessary introducing himself as one of the victims. In all this, he always kept gain for his business as the objective. At the end of the day, he would be the gainer, sometimes a new deal, sometimes a new customer, or, if nothing else, an admirer.

A person who would mix business with these activities tends to have some people who talk favourably of him and others who talk ill of him. My father was of a religious bent of mind and preferred the company of *sadhus* and *harikatha* (tales of Gods and Goddesses told with a mix of text and songs) narrators. He did not like gossip. So, my father considered Shetty a dishonest man given to boasting and cheating. On the other hand, those who were benefitted by striking of a good alliance or a cure for an illness swore by him. My maternal grandfather, whenever he was in town, would look forward to Shetty's return.

Grandpa had his own stock of stories about ghosts, *Panjurlis*, *yakshas*, etc. South Kanara, his home district, had a tradition of invoking and worshipping *Bhutas* (beings akin to ghosts), and asking boons from them.

Shetty's wife disliked these gatherings immensely. Perhaps, she was from a well-placed family, and considered these crowd-gathering activities as a nuisance. She felt he was going out of the way to help

others while neglecting his family and wife. She would employ every known method to try to break the assembly.

I think slightly before 1934 (when I was born), motorized trucks had appeared in Mysore. Shetty, shrewd as he was, had observed that this new machine would ring the death knell for vocations like his. Whenever he could, he would point out at a passing truck and say that this invention of the ‘white man’ would ultimately deal a fatal blow to bullock cart travelling salesmen. He would say time was not far when no one would engage a bullock cart or a horse carriage to transport men and goods. People would take a ride to city in truck or bus to buy their needs, see movies, and eat out. Goods of daily need would also be transported by these machines. The prices would be come down. There would be no waiting required. He would take a deep breath, look towards the heavens, and say, “I hope I shall not be there to see that day.”

The beginning of World War II accelerated the introduction of transport vehicles. My parents moved to a better location in the city shortly thereafter, and my father passed away soon after that. We lost touch with the locality where we used to live. Years later I heard my grandfather saying that he had visited that area. He said lots of changes had taken place there. I also heard him say that Shetty, it seems, had expired in a keep’s house in one of the villages. There were rumours that a rival lover in the village had strangled him in sleep but no one was sure. And his wife, along with her family, had shifted to Kolar, her father’s place.

Post World War II, there was literally a big revolution in the mode of transport. Many older vocations, like Shetty’s, died right away. Touring cinemas continued perhaps up to the 1970s because of the costs of building a cinema theatre. In my life, I have seen the automobile population go from a handful in a town to thousands that most city people have ceased to walk, except as an exercise for physical fitness. ❖

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