

Tamarind History Part 4
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Length: 38:01

What is the scene that Gurudarshana mentions where we get the municipality, an insight into the municipality and how it functions, and we get the sense that it is a bit clumsily led. There is no proper decorum there is no professionalism visible in the way things are run within the four walls of the municipality. And it's very interesting how that space itself is acquired. The backstory to the process by which that place was acquired and who was the previous owner of it and who were the figures who were launched in it. And that in itself is pretty interesting. So, you can see the jump from a kind of a feudal way of life into a sort of democratic progress. So, that kind of shift is not very neatly done. There are problems in that transition. So you get the sense that this is not a very professional municipal council. There is lobbying, there is all kinds of favoritism, there are you know there are no rules being rigidly followed. So, that sense is being clearly received when we read that scene about the council.

And they try their best to disperse the crowd which is collected at the gates of that council. And they picked a particular person to do it because of his oratorical skills. He is very convincing and he disperses that crowd and they once again shout 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!' and they leave. And again the vestige of that past, the freedom struggle is still clinging in the minds of the people. I want to pick on one particular aspect- Mutha Pillai has arrived to have a chat with the president of the municipal council and when he has communicated his demands and he is about to leave he talks about the picture of the Maharaja. And 'Oh the picture of the Maharaja you mean?' 'That is the one.' 'We have had to put it in storage' and he wonders what will happen next. And they say eventually they will auction it and Mutha Pillai expresses his intent to purchase that picture. What is the significance of that demand? What is the significance? It is significant because this landlord, this man who owns a lot of property, wants to cling to, possess the symbols of the past. This past which is being kind of brushed aside by the progress of politics in terms of the growth of the democratic setup. So, he wants to get hold of that picture and he says that even if it is going to cost me a few rupees more than usual, then it is fine I will buy it. So, the symbol of the past is kind of associated with that particular movement.

And Gurudarshana also pointed about the way they kind of zero in on the scavengers. They easily find out that it is this set of people who have most possibly robbed the tamarind tree pods. And once again, the resentment comes to the surface. And what is being attacked is their desire for social climbing. They believe that these scavengers are going to replace figures, not just the municipal council president, Vallinayagam Pillai, Mutha Pillai and figures such as these. These landlords, they are worried, they are fearful of the rise of these set of underprivileged classes. So you see that coming through. ‘That is what happens when we just hand them the vote,’ he says ‘You have given them the vote to decide who is going to rule the people, and now they are getting ahead of themselves.’ This is on page 98. And again the demands of the scavengers are being treated with scorn on the part of Vallinayagam Pillai. So, they risk this fear of being displaced, that is coming through.

Now, a new figure is introduced in this particular chapter, a figure called Janardhanam. He is somebody who is very interesting. He is also known as Sathu, and Vallinayagam Pillai knows about this Sathu since his childhood. So, I want it to go back and read his story. It's a small narrative about his interest and the way he tries to achieve the attention of the society around him. Page 99. Janardhanam or Sathu, that is how he is called fondly by people who are very familiar with him. He studied to be a lawyer. Page 99. ‘“I finished my degree as fast as I could,” he would say. “That way I could protest and go to jail but this Gandhi he had already got us our independence. He cheated me. I am telling you he cheated me.”’.

What do you make of this, you know, rhetoric? It is a very very interesting rhetoric, he studies very hard, very quickly, he becomes a lawyer as soon as he could and suddenly there is independence dawning on this nation and he feels cheated. He feels cheated. ‘So, he hung out a board to practice law but no one would hire him. He even tried dragging them in. No chance. Anyone unlucky enough to be his client was sure to lose. Totally hopeless. If he argued for the plaintiff the defendant would win, no question. So, he changed course thinking he would give something else a try. Now, he is going after the scavengers trying to get his hands on them. He is so close, he is close with that guy Madaswamy, you’d think they were twins!’ Madaswamy is one of the scavengers. ‘The way they are running around together, you see the point I am making?’

It's a very interesting narrative. There is a mention of the freedom struggle. And what I am interested in here, what I want you to think about is what are his reasons, what are his reasons for

trying to participate in the independence struggle? What are his reasons for becoming a lawyer and what are his reasons for going after the scavengers? So, the motives are pretty complex here and pretty interesting. What do you think about his motives? The independence struggle itself becomes a domain, a stage where he could perform really well. Where his performance could be appreciated. We don't see any kind of idealistic trajectory motive behind his intentions to participate in the struggle. Likewise with the legal business, likewise perhaps with his relationship with the scavengers. He is kind of, kind of appropriating these scavengers so that he could kind of come out in shining glory and get all the accolades. So, the motives are problematic here. So this figure is mentioned by Vallinayagam Pillai as one of the figures who are supporting these underdogs, the scavengers.

And again on page 100. Once again, there is an attack on these scavengers. 'They're insisting on maternity leave. The women want tassels to decorate their brooms to make them stylish. Just a simple blouse and saree, no there has to be borders with lacing down the back and for who? Scavengers sweepers. They are the ones asking.' So, again they cannot tolerate the fact that these underdogs, these underprivileged classes are now demanding their rights. And again there is this massive fear of social climbing on the part of these lower class figures.

What is pretty interesting in this novel is also the fact that we do not really get the voice of the scavengers. We do not really get the voice of the scavenger women. We see them very briefly in chapter 5. We see them very very briefly and the movements we get of these scavenger women are about them appreciating a simple pleasure such as you know, consuming a tamarind pod. So, these are the moments that we get of these women as such. But on the other hand, we get a lot of the ideas, impressions, and voices of figures such as Muthai Pillai, Vallinayagam Pillai and all these landlords who have their say about, you know, the rise of these underprivileged classes. So, there is imbalance in terms of the voice given to these sections within the textual landscape. That is something which needs to be recognized.

So, once again I have told you about the significance a particular character or particular idea gets on the page. Textual space tells you a lot about the kind of influence that idea has. So, we need to kind of assess how much time is allotted, how much energy is expended on explaining their point of view. Then again we see the conflict between the ego of the municipality president and the police. The two systems are in conflict again. And there is also a kind of a suggestion that perhaps

the police could have had a hand in the theft of the tamarind pods and Vallinayagam Pillai says, “Are you crazy? We cannot let ideas like that escape our lips. Those thoughts need to stay secret.” And then, so we have as Gurudarshana pointed out, we have this municipality scene, the scene inside the council. And then we have Vallinayagam Pillai and the president having a conversation, unpacking the motives and worrying about the rise of these underdogs.

And then we have another scene, a totally different scene. It seems to be totally different but there are connections between the theft of the tamarind tree pods and this particular act of destruction. And that act of destruction is the sign which has been destroyed by someone, the sign belonging to a merchant called Abdul Khader.

So, that scene finishes up that chapter and Abdul Khader kind of quizzes his shop boys and tries to figure out who exactly has performed the act of destruction. And he very quickly comes to the conclusion that it must be Damu, the store owner who has a shop opposite. So, very quickly they know who is doing what. Once the tamarind tree pods are stolen, they easily come to know it must be the scavengers. Once Khader’s shop’s sign is destroyed, he knows that it must be Damu. So, they have preconceived notions of who is doing what so it’s a very small community and all the jealousies and envy and all these human problematics, human emotions are pretty visible and transparent to the members of that community.

There is something else I wanted to mention and that is on page 101. It is, there is a description of the sign. It is a pretty interesting description, maybe we can spend a bit of time on that.

‘The sign was custom made, tailored for the purposes of Abdul Khader’s shop and had cost something in the range of 2000 rupees.’ So it’s a pretty expensive object, meant to advertise the store and its products.

‘Not even two weeks had passed since it had been ordered from a company in Bombay and men from the company’s Chennai branch had come to install it.’ It is an innovation and Abdul Khader is at the cutting edge of marketing, so he brings that and installs in front of the shop. ‘As a matter of fact, no store in the district had anything like it,’ it is a novelty, just as the municipality park was a novelty. The park, which was established in the place of the casuarina grove. ‘As a matter of fact no other store in the entire district had anything like it. Once it was turned on, each letter lit up in sequence. All would go out at once and then the first letter would start to glow once more,

beginning the sequence again as the light jumped from letter to letter. On the day they installed the sign, the crowds who had come to see it go up filled the whole street. Almost every merchant in the bazar left his store to stand at the entrance and watch. It was Khader's joyous day, the treasured movement when he was recognized as the leading merchant in the district.' It was his moment of glory, his moment of triumph and success, and he derives it from that novelty, technological novelty which he gets from Bombay.

So, what is interesting in this scene is the fact that the establishment of this sign is a massive spectacle, just as the decimation of the casuarina grove was a spectacle for the population. So, they gather in front of this and enjoy it. You can see how one by one all the symbols of the past such as you know, a big branch of the tamarind tree, the tank itself and then the casuarina grove, they are being kind of slowly removed from the center of this small town; and instead we have these man made objects coming to occupy its moment of glory, its significance, and the crowds go gaga for it. So, that moment is also captured in this particular scene.

Student: So, today I will be summarizing chapter 8. This chapter actually talks about the lives of two significant characters. One is Abdul Khader and Gopala Iyer. The chapter opens with the elucidation of the Abdul Khader's family about his father who is overly pious, and how he ended up neglecting his duties.

And we can see the relationship that Abdul Khader had with that of his mother- how much he loved his mother. Then we can see that about his childhood, he had a very troubled childhood. You can even go to the extent that he came from a very broken family. He left home at the age of 11 with the motive of making tons of money and to provide whatever he can for his mother after earning so much. And it is also a form of taking revenge on his father for not providing him enough. At a very early age itself he understood that essential truth of life, that money is everything. I quote from the text he says no the author says "He recognized the God of money has more power than the rest of Gods combined." You can see that Abdul Khader is a very ambitious fellow. He is an opportunist and he schemed every move in his life very carefully. I would like to read out an excerpt from the text where you can see his character like what he really is.

"The way he saw it, every ambition in the world, every opportunity, situation, and crises simply revealed a scheme for making money. He was able to see it in a very first instant and brush off anything tangential. It all came from the first glance- opinions, actions, resolutions that refuse to

yield to defeat, judicious words, humility, and courage. He knew how to approach people without being awkward and he could forget them completely once he got what he wanted. He never tricked himself into thinking that principles were anything substantial. Then after doing a throng of odd jobs at the age of 22, he ended up in Vallinayagam Pillai's textile store, and there he decided to master a local trade and understand all the subtleties of that trade." At this juncture he meets Gopala Iyer who lures him to join the textile firm that he is about to start. "Gopala Iyer, like Abdul Khader, had problems with his father. Unlike Khader, he came from a rich family. He enlisted in the military solely for inducing pain in his father's and mother's life." His father was actually least perturbed by his threats of committing suicide and it is interesting to note what Abdul- no Gopala Iyer's father had to say when he said he is going to commit suicide. He said he is like "...he dispensed the whole affair declining that Gopala's horoscope gave no current indication of suicide."

It is so interesting to see how much emphasis they give on horoscope and they do not even take the threat of suicide of the face value. And after Gopala Iyer's return to the village he ended up inheriting everything following his father's death. Then for 5 or 6 years nobody he, after his return he wanted a wife definitely. So, for so many years nobody want, nobody was ready to present their daughters to him because he had inherited a lot of habits. Men did not want to talk to him and women loved the way he talked, so women wanted to be around him. But he did not have a good image in the village after his return. So, nobody wanted to give their daughters to him. But soon afterward what happens is that he gets married to a 15 year old girl. I would like to read an excerpt from page number 113. "Famine was grinding away at the country and women were a bargain. If you could count on having rice to eat you were extremely lucky. You've got a girl 15 years old, pretty as a parrot and you are going to hand her over to a bald guy in his forties?" they said to Ananda Ammal to which she replied, "If her marriage turns out well, he will live for a long time. If not she will have warm milk rice to eat when she wears a widow's veil and the veil will be made of silk." This section particularly talks about how female bodies are commodified and we can also look at the aspect of how war, famine and other social events directly link to women. Their emotions and feelings are utterly undermined. And I would like to talk about another instance from the same chapter in which Abdul Khader, he goes to a fair and he sees a woman, since he is rich he can afford to shell some money on the women he gets her. And it is so disheartening to see how that girl's mother drags her into this whole affair. And she is being exchanged for 50 rupees and

that girl doesn't have a say in this and she is extremely powerless. And then the chapter progresses further by talking about Abdul Khader's association with Gopala Iyer, how he cuts off and he talks about how Abdul Khader cuts off his ties with Vallinayagam Pillai.

Abdul Khader was initially working for Vallinayagam Pillai and Vallinayagam Pillai was like a father figure to him. But when it comes to money, when it comes to other, he was very resolute that he wanted to have a nice life, he wanted to become rich. So he just took that opportunity, so he despite everybody warning him saying that you must not take up the job, he took it. And even Vallinayagam Pillai was extremely sad because of that and then there is this episode which talks about the relationship between Gopala Iyer and Abdul Khader. Initially Gopala Iyer is extremely happy with Abdul Khader, but soon he starts to mistrust him and he is extremely jealous of the fact that Abdul Khader is the one who knows what is happening, actually happening in the firm.

So, he wants to reinstate his position as owner of the firm by taking up everything in his hands, but it ends up disastrous. Gopala Iyer's gift for getting things done as urgently and erratically as possible pushes him to debt as he bought merchandise on impulse with no sense of strategy. The chapter ends with Abdul Khader buying up Gopala Iyer's firm for himself and his dreams of becoming an owner is realized. The narrative explicates the breakdown of hierarchical social order, and it also emphasizes on the unpredictability of life. It is interesting to note the peripeteia at play in this chapter, there is a reversal of fortune when it comes to both the characters. For Abdul Khader it is from bad to good and for Gopala Iyer it is from good to bad. So you see, you can see that life is highly unpredictable, anything can happen any time.

And I would like to read another excerpt from the same chapter. Page number 124 in which we can see how peoples' attitudes change when something happens in somebody's life. This specially in focus with Gopala Iyer, when he loses everything when he loses all the money, we can see how people, the attitude of people changes.

So, I am going to read it. 'A few months later he started to pay the bills that had come in installments. In a desperate effort to keep some money in the bank and because he knew he could not afford to refuse a customer, he began to sell his merchandise for any price of it. Even so, one of his cheques was returned for insufficient funds. The news rippled through the enter warehouse district within half an hour. One after the other, wholesale agents started to arrive. For whatever reason, these agents had a quite a different cast to their faces now. Quite a different tone of voice.

These were men who had fawned over him, who had spoken to him in reverent tones. A hearty welcome while they were still on the steps, a bow at the entrance. And “Might I have your hand bag to take with me sir?” All gone. Men who used to come bearing banana-leaf parcels saying, “Try a new sweet, sir,” now said “What kind of man are you sir, what about your honour, your self-respect?” The banks had no sympathy, and not only refused to extend his credit but took him to court for outstanding debts plus interests.” So, with that this chapter ends. Thank you.

Professor: This chapter focuses on two figures, one is Abdul Khader and the other is Gopala Iyer. Gopala Iyer will be left by the wayside when we move on to the next chapter, but we will retain the character of Abdul Khader. He comes to greater prominence as this novel moves towards its conclusion.

So, as I said in the previous class we get a wide canvas, we get a big society, a cross section of society through the eyes of the narrator in the first half of the novel. But as the novel progresses, we stick to a few individual characters. And their complications, their problems in trade, in personality will kind of rush the ball to its, rush the narrative ball to its conclusion. So, you might want to think about why these particular individuals are picked to offer a criticism of life in society at that point of time. Why Abdul Khader, why not somebody else? So, all these questions you can ask as enlightened readers.

What is the message that is being delivered through a detailed description of the rise of Abdul Khader? It is a rags-to-riches story at this point in the novel for Abdul Khader. He was selling things by the roadside, he was a very very small seller, a hawker on the streets. And by the end of this chapter he becomes the owner of a big business, big textile company, a sizeable textile company and then he will rise further and further before he has his fall at the end of the novel.

So, Abdul Khader is a very very interesting character and Mridula you are quite right in pointing out that he comes from a broken family. Perhaps that is one of the major drives in him to make it big in terms of becoming successful as a very wealthy man. So, money is a major preoccupation with Abdul Khader. He wants a lot of money so that initially he wants to make his mother very comfortable and then he realizes that he just wants money for the sake of having money because money will open a lot of doors.

And there are, there is another preoccupation with Abdul Khader and that is women. So, one is money, the other is women. Beautiful women. He is obsessed with them, he sleeps around quite a bed, he purchases women and he is hung up on the idea of beauty. And even if he thinks of a marriage he thinks that only beautiful women should be given off in marriage. So, there is one particular idea that he expresses on page 110. "Just marrying a beautiful woman is not enough..." and even there just marrying a beautiful woman is not enough, "...a man also needs to know how to take care of her. How could his father's dull mind understand all that?" The implication is that his mother was very beautiful and she was not well-taken care of by the husband, but he believes in marrying only beautiful women.

So, when you read the following chapters you see his agony when he is forced to marry a very ugly woman and the complications which arise from that and unhappy marriage. So, he initially works in Vallinayagam Pillai's textile company as an employee and in this chapter we see echoes of Sundara Ramaswamy's 'Reflowering' as well. I am sure you remember that seminar reading that Gurudarshana gave you, and in that chapter too we in that seminar we see in that story we see how an employee tries to shift from one business to the other right. We have a blind teller there, who kind of moves to another store just to make it big or to get a lot of money. So, that kind of moving between different shops is a kind of a trend amongst employees.

Gopala Iyer is a very interesting character because he comes from a landed family. His father is very rich has a lot of property has a lot of money, but then due to personal reasons he is displeased with this parents, he runs off to the military signs up for signs up to be a soldier, and then he comes back home and he does not pick up from where his father left up, but instead he wants to start a business.

So, what does this tell us, this trajectory, what does this trajectory tell us? Things have changed, things have changed so much, lives are moving at a breakneck speed, there is war there is the break up of the old feudal system, and trade is becoming a major preoccupation amongst all these figures. So, when Gopala Iyer goes to Madurai to a shop he sees this character called Daulat Ram and he is fascinated. He is totally fascinated by Daulat Ram, that kind of fascination can be compared to the fascination that this narrator had with Damodara Aasan. Storytelling was a big magic, was a big attraction for this youth, the narrator who's narrating the story. And now Daulat Ram and his wealth, his command over the big shop becomes a massive attraction for Gopala Iyer. So on the

way back he decides that, oh yes, I am going to open a store, and I am going to lead a life like that merchant prince. So, you can see how all these descendants from the feudal system are now moving into the world of business. And in business as Mridula was pointing out, there are ups and downs. You go back and forth in terms of your fortunes in business and Gopala Iyer faces that, the brutal brunt of this low fortune in business. He loses out to a very very clever scheming manipulative and capable Abdul Khader. So, you see that happening in this particular chapter.

And but, what I said was interesting in this chapter, is the way that professions, occupations are being left behind, new professions, new occupations, new businesses are being picked up to see whether one can be successful in that. So, I am just going to read here and there to give you an idea of the attraction that trade has. So this is 114, to Gopala Iyer went to buy his wedding clothes at a Sindhi's shop in Madurai and he meets with Daulatram, the owner, '...at leisure on a big cushion sofa. An electric ceiling fan whirled overhead, while Daulat Ram chewed on a huge cigar. A fine gold chain dangled from his neck over his unbuttoned jibba. Both his eyes were streaked with red. Gopala Iyer knew very well why his eyes were so red, even so the man had a composure that made it seem as if he might really have just had an oil bath and was out there just to sit and relax.' He was drunk the last night, so Gopala Iyer knows that but Daulat Ram does not seem to kind of quail under that idea that he was drunk the last night, he is still very powerful.

'Carefully measured words, carefully measured actions, eyes never stopped examining every corner of the store.' And it further tells, you know, what kind of power and influence and control he has over everybody. 'A child starts to cry and he looks over to a youngster, gives a brief thrust with his chin and the boy runs outside to return with a packet of biscuits. Gopala Iyer felt that he could sit there all day just watching him.' He is entralling, and this guy is enthralled. Gopala is enthralled by the powers displayed by this merchant prince. And again it reminds us of the scene where all these young boys were sitting at the feet of Damodra Asan enthralled by all the stories he has to tell them. So, and he says he is a king, this guy. And the same idea is used previously too, during the auction scene, when Mutha Pillai does some very smart auctioning tricks and then everybody says that he is a monster, he is a God, he is a king. So, you can see how success at making money is one of the key fascinations in this story alongside the fascination the power that stories have, two things, trade and storytelling.

So, Gopala Iyer wants to kind of get that kind of power and he leaves behind the old ways of making money, old ways of making money through land, though thriving the land. And there is one other point that I want to point out which is the passage that earlier Mridula was talking about in terms of Ananda Ammal and her desire to get her daughter married to Gopala Iyer. "If her marriage turns out well, he will live for a long time. If not she will have warm milk rice to eat while she wears the widow's veil and the veil will be made of silk."

What is the sub text? "If the marriage turns out well, he will live for a long time. If not, she will have warm milk rice to eat while she wears the widow's veil." What is the sub text? Go back a few, go back to the first chapter. Page 6. "Doesn't the smell remind you of the smell that new clothes have when you take them out of a palm fiber box after they have been stored there for a long time?" Awe swept over all faces as Aasan described what the boys had experienced. "It was this, you see, that bitch gave to her own husband to kill him. Can women really have the heart for something like that?"

What is the sub text now? So, again if you compare all these ideas it becomes very suggestive. If that guy treats her well, yes he will live, if that guy doesn't treat her well then, she will live a very luxurious happy life without him. So, what I'm trying to get at is, the rendering of femininity, the rendering of the female identity in this novel. Again that's one of the major thematic areas that I want to focus on. One as I said, is about storytelling. The other is of the money involved in businesses. Because business occupies the mind of this particular novel. Business is a major preoccupation. The other is women- how they are represented, what function do they serve, how much of a catalyst these women are in complicating everyday affairs?

So, all these three trajectories are very very crucial, and there is one more which we have talked about which is class, social climbing. That is also again a major sub-text: the rise of the underprivileged to threaten the privilege, the vested interest of the powerful. So, these are some of the major themes that energize this novel. And I would like to say this is not a very very sophisticated novel in this regard, but it is a novel which lays bare, which makes it easy for us to understand the various conflicting trajectories which kind of underpin our society, the structural society, which is represented in literature.

So, it is mirroring that, it is mirroring that society in a very very skewed manner. Not in a very perfect way, because we get narratives only from certain sections of the population not from others.

And that is very visible when you compare the voice of these landed men, voice of these big businessmen. And we realize that we do not get the voice of other figures such as women. And whenever we do get the very small glimpses you know they do not seem to be representative but they seem to be stereotypes, cliched renderings.