

Thata's Betrayal



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Meghana has two passions in life. One is for anonymous art and architecture, which is her field of study. Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright are her role models not just in the field of architecture, but in life too. Her other passion is writing about things she observes in everyday life. Meghana lives in Irvine, California.

It really broke my heart when *Thata* (mother's father) decided that the rightful heir to his name and home was his grandson, and not me, his granddaughter. Only because he was a man and I was a woman! *Thata* and *Ajji* (mother's mother) had no sons – their only children were my mother and her older sister. My mother herself had no sons. The only male progeny that *Thata* had was my aunt's son.

Thata

Shri Bindacharya Havanoor (1905-1992) of Dharwad was a highly regarded and revered Sanskrit scholar (*Vidwamsa*), and received several recognitions in his field. He had read, and recited *Sudha Grantha* to several of his disciples. He was also known as a *Dashagranthi vidwamsa* for reading ten prominent Sanskrit granthas. He was a regular at the Sanskrit Sammelans held in places like Tirupati and Hyderabad. He also contributed extensively to the Sanskrit magazine *Shri Sudha*. Every Saturday, he organized a meeting for Sanskrit scholars in and around the city to discuss Sanskrit literature. He was also a close friend and trusted disciple of the Swamiji of Uttaradhi Mutt of Bangalore. He toured with the Mutt troop sometimes during *Chaturmas* (Sacred four months of the year). His life was dedicated to the enrichment of Sanskrit language and literature. His vast collection of rare Sanskrit books and granthas was donated to Uttaradi Mutt in 1992 after his death.

I am not from a family that is biased against girls. In our family, wombs of prospective mothers were not screened to decide if the baby would be a welcome member of the family. Nor do I come from a family that choked the newborn girl on husk to save her from the ungrateful world that had nothing good in store for her.

To the contrary, women in my family were treated as avatars of Laxmi and Durga, and given every opportunity a boy could get. My mother is a highly educated woman herself, born and brought up in *Thatha's* house. *Thatha* believed that women should be educated so that they could lead a dignified life.

Thata was proud of my education and my grades. When I wrote my first letter to him in Sanskrit, he proudly replied to me in Sanskrit. And he sent me a gift of some of his Sanskrit books, along with a box of Dharwad *Pedhas*. Not everyone got the gift of *Pedhas* from *Thatha*. It was only reserved for the best of his students, or for academic excellence by his grandchildren. He would show my Sanskrit letters to everyone he knew and tell them that I had inherited his literary genes. When I showed him my report cards, he would shower heaps of praise! Yes, he would fill me with pride when he told my parents to provide me everything they could for my education. He did not want them to marry me off early, like my aunt,

because I had the potential of being a high achiever. "Become an IAS officer when you grow up," he would always tell me.

But, before I could truly enjoy the moment, he would add a regretful comment such as, "If only my daughter had had another son." Or, "If this girl was born a boy, things would have been different." It was Thatha and people like him who made me feel underprivileged and undervalued for being a girl who is destined to end up caring for someone else's name and family than her own parents and grandparents.

My cousin sisters did not fight Thatha's attitude towards the girls in his family. My parents also didn't care much. They all accepted Thatha for what he was. Whenever I complained to my mother that I was unhappy that Thatha was forever harping about boys, she would tell me to just ignore an old man who had not changed when the world around him changed. "That was the way people of his generation thought," she would say. Sometimes she would tell me that Thatha had similar things to her when she got started studying for her MA in Literature. She had just ignored it, she said.

It was just me who felt the need to be recognized by Thatha as a person as good or better than his grandson, my cousin. I wanted Thatha to tell people, "Look at my granddaughter! She is the one who inherited my genes. She is the one who will uphold our family's name. I feel proud to be her grandfather." And say it without any 'ifs' or 'buts'.

My mother would tell me that even though Thatha craved for a grandson, he was more than content with having me in his life. But, it didn't feel right to me.

As Thatha had only one grandson, his wife was Thatha's only granddaughter-in-law. She managed to convince Thatha and my mother that as the sole granddaughter-in-law, she was the right person to light a lamp in the house every night in Thatha's name, and preserve the name of his family and family home. She was the right person because Thatha's other granddaughters and I would marry someone chosen by our parents, and not carry his name. Worse, we would sell Thatha's house for profit later, if that is what our husbands and in-laws – who had no sentimental attachment to Thatha's home – wanted.

As expected, my cousin sisters did not fight this suggestion. I wanted to fight but not because the property was valuable. I wanted to make sure that all of Thatha's grandchildren had equal rights. I would need my mother's support to succeed in this fight. But, my mother did not like the idea of a dispute. She treasures emotional bonds and family harmony more than materialistic pleasures of life. So, she agreed to let her sister's son and daughter-in-law have complete rights to live in Thatha's house. I had to keep quiet, much against my wish.

Before he passed away, Thatha made it clear that he wanted his grandson to have his house, the grand daughter-in-law to water the tulsi plant that Ajji worshipped every morning, and his great-grand children – yet to come – to play in the backyard where varieties of jasmine and mango trees grew. By this time, I did not care much. Neither did my cousin sisters. Perhaps, age had matured me. Because Thatha had not left a formal will, all the family members signed no-objection certificates for the deal.

All of us moved on with our lives.

Five years later, a bulldozer came to Thata's house. The jasmine creeper that Ajji had planted, the jasmine creeper that gave snow-white flowers for Ajji's snow-white hair was pulled out by its roots. The Tulsi plant that Ajji worshipped every morning all her life was planted in an old and rusty bucket. The big pedestal right at the entrance was broken into tiny pieces.

Thata's grandson and granddaughter-in-law demolished the old-fashioned house they had inherited and built a row of houses in its place. Gone were the promises of lighting a lamp in the pooja room, or not letting the Tulsi plant shrink. Gone was the backyard where my mother and my aunt spent time playing, where my cousin sisters and I would sit in the evenings and talk about all things under the sun.

It was all over. Thata's home had just become a material possession that the inheritors had claimed it would never become.

With Mother's day approaching, my husband asked me if I wanted to buy Thata's house and gift it to my mother as a memory of her father. I said that Thata's picture was all we needed, and would ever need for his memory. The place that had housed all the memories of my mother's childhood was already gone, making it just another investment property. There was no reading room in the house with a small *Krishnajina* (deerskin that Brahmins use to sit and read religious books) and a small table lamp. There were no longer any wall-cabinets stacked with Thata's books, with his handwritten notes on them.

Now, the Tulsi seeds that my mother brought from Ajji's Tulsi plant spread their fragrance all over my mother's house, every morning and every evening. That's all the blessings my mother and I want from her parents. Perhaps that was the only blessing Thatha meant to give wholeheartedly to the women of the house.

But, I cannot help thinking this. If somehow, in his afterlife, Thata had heard the news of his house being sold so soon after his passing away, would he have tossed and turned in frustration, and perhaps repented making a gender-biased decision? ❖

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