



WEED- PLUCKER
WOMEN
EDASSERI

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There, in the centre of that vast paddy field a group of poor women are seen stooping in a row. They are plucking weeds by hand. Water in the field is murky and the freezing cold is biting their ankles. The sky, laden with dark clouds is getting denser and darkness is descending on earth, although it is getting noon time. West wind is blowing unobstructed with all its might across that open stretch of land. Each gush of wind undulate the tender paddy plants; but it also inflicts unbearable pain in the ears of those pathetic women.

It will be raining any moment now. Those who are having falcate umbrellas¹ would shrink inside them and continue their work staying within a new "horizon". What about those who don't have an umbrella? They will not run away seeking shelter from rain. Nor will they stand shivering or leave their work. They will not even wince. They brave the heavy rain that lashes out and continue with their work. The roaring raindrops may be piercing their back, but they don't care. Their bodies are frozen, souls benumbed.

Whenever they feel monotonous, they start singing in chorus. Ballads of heroes of bygone days; songs from the north²! For them, this is like chanting the 'hymn of strength'. Their voices turn croaky due to bitter cold; and their singing creeps up like a wail into the vast expanse of the sky. But the group-song gladdens and enthuses them. Their physical self might be immersed knee-deep in muddy and freezing waters but the songs help their souls soar to the splendours of a very distant past. There, they mentally dwell in the enchanting castles of prosperity, bravery and love created by the poet. That is the only bliss in their life!

These hapless women have to work in these adverse conditions for eight to nine hours a day. Incessant work! If they want to, they can take a short respite from work for their meals. But, most of the times they don't even take that. It seems they have entrusted that 'work' with others, with those fortunate few born in this world only to enjoy the fruits of these people's labour; with those lords who have stored pickles to regain appetite and a few medicinal powders to overcome indigestion caused due to gulping down the fruits of labour of these hapless women, year after year. And they do so when these women are not even having bare thin Congee (rice gruel) to appease their hunger while working. When the most lethargic of those people toss and turn in their velvet beds and then shift back to arm chairs to play cards to kill time, these weedy women work in the paddy fields in the freezing cold, starving. The wicked of those people do the pleasure ride on the necks of these women dying in suffocation; on these women who take upon themselves the pains of the entire world. And these women, with their dry throats, do not wish to bargain with biting hunger even for a moment. And thus, they dedicate each second in their life before "Karma". And for what purpose are they doing all these? Why should a human soul toil for nine hours a day braving the wind and rain? It is for this reward of just one Anna and three Paise a day (nine paise of the present day)! It is the prevailing rate of daily wages for them!

As the light of the lanterns in the local shops, which were lit before dusk brighten to its full luminance, you can see images of these skeletons, rain soaked and drained, hurriedly slithering to their huts. At that time they will be carrying a few things with them. A little rice tied to their dhoti, small packets of salt and chilli held in the hand, an old conical tin can with a little kerosene in it. And a few more essentials that one could buy out of the day's meagre earnings! Then, during the hurried walk back home, they will be whispering to each other -



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which can be heard as a sob - about their domestic issues that call for immediate attention:
"..Look here girl. ..my son is laid up with fever for seventh day... even today I have not enough money for buying the medicines prescribed by the Vydya³....."

"...They will be waiting there ravenously. What will I do with these scanty items...?"

".....Even this will be over within no time. Then what to do.....?"

".....What a heavy rain! my legs are cramped"

These voices which are mere blabbering to a bystander fade into the darkness after turning the corner of the alley.

But this means that all these souls who are sacrificing their lives in the paddy fields working in the torrential rain are not mere individuals; each one has a family behind!

Very recently our legislative assembly has given the final clarification on the question as to "who is the real farmer?" Accordingly, "Farmer" is neither the owner of the land nor the intermediary but the tenant. Everyone has decided that those 'real farmers' need be protected. Efforts are already being made to absolve them from financial liabilities. That's very good! Even when the conditions of these tenants improve, the plight of these poor women will not change. This is because these people who do the real farming are not farmers as per the law of the land!

For the farmers, traders and workshop owners, in their pursuit to prosperity, the labourers are just two legged animals who allow them free ride on their back! During farming season they go to the paddy fields; when there is work in the factory they go there. When no work? Then they will sit at home and starve! These people get corroded in the farms, plantations and factories little by little.

When will our nation focus its attention on this horrid issue?

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Translated by Edasseri Trust Team

Notes:

1. Falcate umbrellas are made of local palm leaves. It covers the crouching farm worker fully. Once inside, only the concave hemispherical umbrella will be visible with its circular edge appearing like the horizon.
2. Reference is to the large of songs under the genre "Vadakkan Pattu" (Songs from North Kerala) which are simple songs of love, affection, valour and feuds. These songs are traditional favourites of the farm labour in Kerala.
3. Local doctor, usually a practitioner of ayurveda.