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Features, Books

The Sickle & the Scalpel

Volga and Vasanth Kannabiran

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Translated from Telugu by Vasanth Kannabiran, Volga's The Sickle & The Scalpel (Orient Blackswan, 2022) is a novel based on the extraordinary life and times of Dr Komarraju Atchamamba (1906–1964) — one of the first doctors in the country, member of the Communist Party of India, and a pioneer for women's emancipation in Andhra. Capturing the period of social reform in pre-independence Andhra, through the freedom struggle, it foregrounds the rise of the modern Indian woman and her struggle for rights and recognition, alongside the rise of communism and the Left in the newly formed nation.

Sharadamba, the protagonist, born into a wealthy brahmin family, Annapurna, a farmer's daughter, and Vishalakshi, a devadasi's daughter, are childhood friends, who grow up to perceive modernity and tradition differently. Their divergent paths crisscross and conflict as their lives are propelled and shaped by cataclysms of change — social, political, historical — as the nation struggles to free itself, and each of these women strives to negotiate these changes for herself and others, and, despite everything, remain friends.

In a fast-paced narrative, punctuated by upheavals like the Satyagraha, two World Wars, the Bengal famine, Gandhi's assassination and the Telangana people's struggle, it is the quest for freedom, the dream of an equal and just world for all, and the end of domination across caste, class and gender that animate the real-life characters who march through history.

The following is an excerpt from the book.

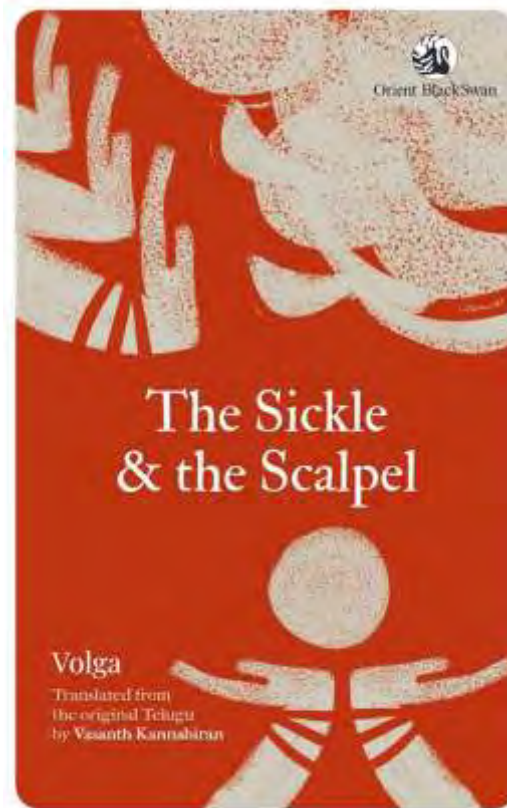


Image courtesy Orient Blackswan, 2022

There were two girls in Sharadamba's class. Vishalakshi was from a Devadasi family and Dhanalakshmi from a Brahmin priest's family, a huge family burdened with growing numbers of children and rising debt. Within four days of Sharadamba joining, Annapurna, a girl from a farmer's family, also joined. The four became friends. They went to school and left together.

Vishalakshi would come to the Brahmin Street where Dhanalakshmi would join her. The two would go to Sharadamba's and she would be waiting at the street corner. The three would then go to the East Street and Annapurna would join them. As the four of them walked to school the neighbours would watch in awe. This was the first time that girls were going to school in that village. It was well known that Rama Rao was passionate about an English education for his daughter. Besides, they were wealthy. They could afford to do what they pleased. No one bothered about Vishalakshi. But none of the Brahmins in the village liked the idea of Dhanalakshmi going to school. They would screw up their faces and make snide remarks to her mother to vent their anger. They would also mutter about Annapurna.

The four girls would troop into the Headmaster's room. After the bell rang and the boys were all seated, they would follow the teacher into class and sit on one side. After class, they would follow the teacher out and sit in the Headmaster's room till all the boys had left. Then they would leave together and go home. The first two years they just went back home after school. From the fifth standard on they would all first go to Sharadamba's house, play for an hour or so, chat and then go home. Sharadamba's house had a big yard. There were mangoes, guavas, and *sapota* trees in plenty. And many flowering plants. The girls would play as long as they wanted to, pluck jasmines and *champaka* flowers and weave garlands. Subbamma would give them roasted gram, jaggery, beaten rice, *upma* and other snacks to eat every day. After eating their fill the three girls would wend their way home. They all went to bed eager for the morning so they could go to school again.

When Rama Rao was home, he would tell Sharadamba many things about science and history. She would listen open-mouthed and repeat it all to her friends whether she understood or not. When they asked her questions and she did not have the answers she would say, "I will ask my father and tell you." When he returned again from Madras there would be more new things to share.

"My father will let me study to be a doctor," Sharadamba would tell them every day. Dhanalakshmi would look at her longingly. Once in a while she would say, "Wouldn't it be nice if I too could become a doctor?"

"Why don't we all become doctors?" Sharadamba looked at the other three.

Vishalakshi said nervously, "Oh, I don't want to be a doctor! I would rather play and sing. I am scared. I can't bear disease and pain!"

Annapurna also wrinkled up her nose.

But Sharadamba did not lose heart. She said, "All right. The two of us will become doctors and give you two medicines."

All four of them would laugh and play doctor-patient for a while.

One day, about four months before the end of the fifth class, Dhanalakshmi did not come to school. Her three friends felt lost. After school they went straight to her house. Annapurna and Vishalakshi could not enter the house of a Brahmin. Sharadamba went in and brought her out.

Dhanalakshmi's mother Kotamma followed them and said laughing, "Your friend's marriage has been settled. Now you can't play games."

The three looked at Dhanalakshmi in surprise.

"The groom's people came to see me. So I couldn't come to school," she said shyly.

"Is the groom handsome?" asked Vishalakshi eagerly.

"The groom didn't come," Dhanalakshmi said innocently.

"Then won't you come to school anymore?" Sharadamba asked worriedly.

"How can I come if I am to be married? Would you?"

The three looked at each other's faces.

"But you said you would study medicine," Sharadamba said, feeling betrayed.

"How can I study after getting married? Would you study medicine without getting married?" Dhanalakshmi asked quietly.

Sharadamba was furious. "I won't get married! I will become a doctor."

The three looked at her astonished. Dhanalakshmi fell into thought. After a brief silence she said softly, "My father cannot educate me. These people like me and want the match. They don't want a dowry. They will bear all the wedding expenses. They will also get my brother a job. So I must marry. I can't escape. But I am quite happy."

Forcing the melancholy she felt away from her face Dhanalakshmi smiled weakly.

Her mother brought four lumps of jaggery. Stuffing their mouths they briefly forgot their worries in the sweetness.

This is an excerpt from Volga's *The Sickle & the Scalpel*, Translated from the original Telugu by Vasanth Kannabiran and published by Orient Blackswan. Republished here with permission from the publisher.

Volga is the pen name of Popuri Lalitha Kumari, a leading Telugu writer, poet and one of the most influential figures in contemporary Telugu literature who introduced a feminist perspective into the literary political discourse of Andhra Pradesh. She is the author of award-winning works, including the novels *Sveccha* (1987) and *Vimuktha* (2015); a short story collection *Prayogam* (1995); and *Mahilavaranam/Womanscape* (2001), a co-edited volume with Vasanth Kannabiran, Kalpana Kannabiran and Bharath Bhushan, that documents the lives of women who shaped the history of Andhra Pradesh. Her works have been widely translated and read in many Indian languages.

Vasanth Kannabiran is a veteran civil and women's rights activist, and a loved and well-known teacher, writer and translator. Her recent published works include *My Life is a Song: Gaddar's Anthems for the Revolution* (2021); *Softly Dies a Lake* (2020), a translation of Akkineni Kutumbarao's autobiographical novel *Kolleti Jadamu*; *Taken at the Flood: A Memoir of a Political Life* (2019); and *A Grief to Bury: Memories of Love, Work and Loss* (2011).