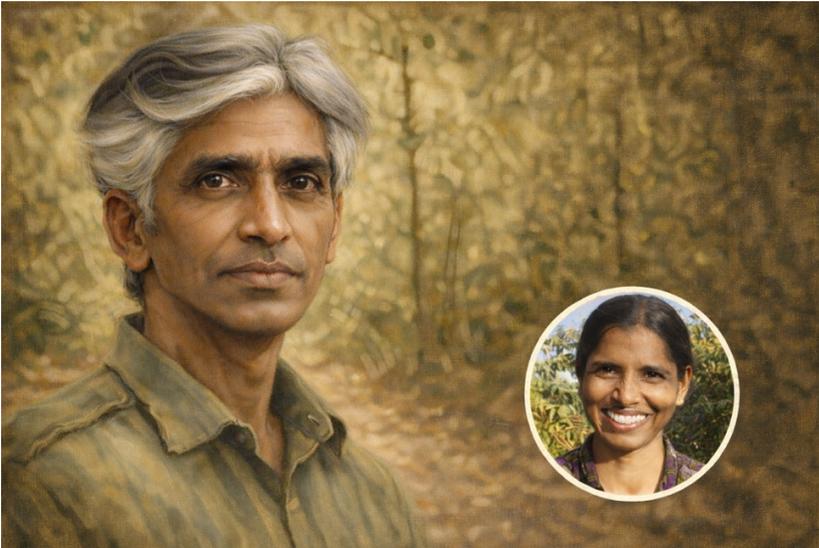


# STEEL FORTRESS

- Written by Renuka aka Midko



*AI-generated image of “Padkal Swamy,” the protagonist of this story; in the inset, Renuka, the story’s writer.*

## Before You Read This Story

***An introduction in memory of the two brave revolutionaries — Raju***

On 5 February 2026, near Podewada village in the Maad area of Gadchiroli district, Indian security forces including C-60

commandos carried out a cordon-and-search operation in which seven Maoist revolutionaries, including three women, were killed. One among them was Loketi Chander, the leader of that guerrilla unit. **This is his story.**

At the time of his death, he was around 60 years old. Many people in Telangana may not know who Loketi Chander was, but the name *Padkal Swamy* is widely familiar—although Padkal was not his native village, and Swamy was not his given name. Nearly 33 years ago, in Padkal village of the then undivided Nizamabad district of Telangana, the police attacked the Sirnapalli guerrilla squad, which had taken shelter in a house. Loketi Chander was the only person to escape alive from that attack. The operation continued for 24 hours, and all five of his comrades were martyred. At that time, he was the commander of the squad, operating under the name Swamy.

From that day—1993—until 2026, he provided leadership to the revolutionary movement at different levels across Telangana, and in the Bastar and Gadchiroli regions of Dandakaranya. He played a key role in securing several military victories for the people’s war. More than that, he brought his entire family into the movement. His wife, Sulochana; his daughter, Lavanya; and his son, Ramesh—all four worked in different capacities in Dandakaranya. A few years ago, Comrade Sulochana died due to illness. His daughter was arrested and is now languishing in a prison in Chhattisgarh state. His son recently came out of the movement.

Comrade Loketi Chander, a member of the Dandakaranya Special Zonal Committee, worked mainly under the names “Ravi” and “Prabhakar”. Towards the end of 2025, when two senior leaders, Sonu and Satish, decided to hand over all weapons to the enemy in the name of a temporary suspension of armed struggle—and deceitfully attempted to mould the entire cadre to suit their conspiracy—it was Loketi Chander who stood firm and resisted this move with determination and conviction.

With unwavering faith in the people, in the path of people’s war, and in the ultimate victory of the revolution, Loketi Chander lived until his final breath. This is the story he narrated to Renuka (Midko) in 2007. In fact, when the incident itself occurred in 1993, it was narrated to Renuka in great detail by her then leader, the martyr Padmakka. That was a time when Renuka herself was only beginning to take shape as a revolutionary and a writer.

**Speaking at one place about the background to writing this story, Renuka said:**

*“This is exactly what Ravanna—brother Ravi—told me, as it was. There is nothing fictional in it. Even the language, the tone, and the expressions are largely his own. Giving it the form of a story is the only thing I did. After writing it, I read it out to him first, before anyone else. While reading, I did not look at his face even once. I could not. When I finished and looked up at his face in the dim light of that evening, tears were streaming down his cheeks.*

*After that, he broke down and cried uncontrollably for a long time. I could not stop my own tears either.”*

Today, the protagonist of this story—Loketi Chander, also known as Padkal Swamy—is no more. Nor is Renuka, who gave his extraordinary courage an immortal form through her pen. On 31 March 2025, the enemy killed her in a fake encounter. Both of them lived—and died—until their final breath for the revolution they believed in.

That revolution may today be facing enormous difficulties. It may be in retreat. But the history he created through his courage and determination 33 years ago, and the legacy of ideals that the protagonist of this story and its writer have left behind through their martyrdom, can never be erased.

Now, read on—the story of **Steel Fortress**.

# **STEEL FORTRESS**

- Written by Renuka *aka* Midko

Rajavva walked along with a plastic tumbler of water in her right hand, as though she were on her way to the fields to relieve herself. She was around fifty years old with almost half her hair turning grey. She was of dark complexion, with her tall frame matching her body size.

A little distance behind her walked Swamy. He was a thin and short man who appeared to be about thirty years old. He wore a shirt and wrapped a *dhoti* around his waist. He had no slippers on his feet. A *gongadi*<sup>1</sup> was draped over his head, and on top of it, he balanced a sack. He looked like a farmer. He puffed on a beedi, releasing the smoke into the air.

Just then, two women came walking from the opposite direction, talking among themselves. Rajavva stopped in her tracks. Seeing her stop, Swamy hesitated for a second, unsure whether to stop or not. Within ten steps, he passed by Rajavva. After ten more steps, Swamy came to the intersection of two lanes. He wasn't sure of which one to take. Should he stop? He picked the closest lane, thinking it better to keep walking than hesitate. But he didn't realise it led straight to someone's house. Before he knew it, he was almost at their doorstep.

Sensing a stranger approaching their house, the man from inside called out, "Who's that coming this way?"

Hearing this, Rajavva shouted from behind, "Hey! You're going the wrong way!" Without another word, she started walking again. Swamy turned back and followed her.

Turning their heads from the lanes they walked through, they could see groups of policemen in all the thoroughfares. They quietly passed through all those lanes. After crossing all of them, they reached fields of maize. Rajavva turned into one of the fields. Swamy followed her.

After walking for three or four minutes through the field, Rajavva stopped. She looked in Swamy's direction, taking a deep breath. Her gaze, glowing with happiness and satisfaction, fell on him. That same expression was reflected on Swamy's face, too.

"Now keep going straight along this path, son,"

Her voice, filled with emotion, touched his heart. He took the sack off his head and handed it to her. Then he removed the *gongadi* and said,

"I won't need this anymore, *Amma*<sup>2</sup>," and placed it in her hands.

"I'm going now, *Amma*. We'll meet again."

His voice was choked with gratitude that he couldn't express in words. It showed in his eyes, his face, and every bit of him.

"Go safely, child! And don't forget what I told you."

"I won't forget, *Amma*. Next time we meet, we'll call your son-in-law, and talk," he said and walked on, faster now.

Rjavva watched him leaving for a few moments, then emptied the water from the tumbler and turned back. Swamy walked swiftly through the field and came out. He paused for a moment, scanning all around with his eyes. There was no sign of danger within sight. Taking a deep breath, he continued walking again.

The surroundings looked blurry to him, as though dust had clouded his eyes. His ears were ringing. His whole body ached with minor wounds and burning pain. His mouth was bitter, he felt nauseous. Yet he kept walking quickly without paying heed to anything.

Was he alive? Had he really made it out of a perilous situation? He still couldn't believe it.

Once again, he looked around. The village was far behind now. He was closer to the forest. The dry grass and the trees and the familiar surroundings seemed to be reaching out with open arms to embrace him upon his rebirth.

"I am alive. I could make it out." This time, he believed it for sure. He took a deep breath, this time with joy. He had narrowly escaped from the jaws of death that had stretched towards him at every step. A flicker of pride crossed his mind as he thought of the enemy's defeat.

But the very next moment, a strange delusion overtook him. He paused momentarily and looked around, hoping to find his comrades.

No one! There was no one!!

He came out of that delusion. He was the only one left. He was the only one who survived. An unbearable sorrow engulfed him.

Despite sorrow weighing on him heavily, he continued to walk fast.

Yes, he alone remained. He alone survived. He alone managed to escape the trap the enemy had carefully laid.

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'Let's all pack up and move out now,' said Swamy, addressing his squad members.

'It's dark, but people are still moving around quite a bit,' said Gopi, carefully peeking through the window. 'Let's pack and be ready. As soon as the crowd thins out a bit more, we will leave,' said Swamy, lowering himself to the floor near his kit. Agreeing with their commander's words, everyone lowered themselves with their kits and got ready. Intending to leave early, all of them had finished dinner by seven.

After getting ready, Swamy went to the window and looked outside.

'Looks like people are still moving around a lot,' he muttered to himself.

He was in a hurry to get out of the house. He had already sent the two militia comrades out to bring the mines that evening. "They would have brought the mines. We have to fit them tonight. If we delay leaving this shelter, we won't have enough

time to install the mines. Tomorrow, we have to engage in the ambush," he thought.

Three days earlier, the police had carried out an 'encounter' at Bairapur in the Bansuwada area. In response, Swamy's squad decided to carry out an ambush on the roadside two and a half kilometres from Padkal village. That's why the squad came to Padkal.

'Swamy *Anna*<sup>3</sup>, we both will go down to wash our faces,' said Vijaya. 'Alright. Check carefully to see if anyone's around outside. Come back quickly,' Swamy said. With that, Vijaya and Lalitha went out. 'I'll also go downstairs and wash my face,' said Prabhakar. He was the squad's deputy commander. Swamy nodded in agreement, and Prabhakar, too, went out. None of the three carried their guns.

The house in which the squad took shelter had a wide open space as soon as one entered through the street-facing door. There was a two-storeyed terrace house to the left of the open area and a two-roomed outhouse to its right. The two rooms of the outhouse were side by side, with doors opening into the open space. One of the rooms, adjoining the street wall, was used to store rice, pulses, salt, and other items – sort of a store room. The other room was the kitchen.

The ground floor of the terrace house had two spacious rooms, one behind the other. The front room had a door not directly in the middle but slightly to the side—opposite the store room next to the kitchen. The upper floor had two similar rooms, one

behind the other. In front of the kitchen was a small well. Stairs near the well led to the upper floor. The stairs led to a sit-out like open space, into which the door of the upstairs front room opened. This door is not located in the centre of the room, but stood directly above the door in the ground floor. Next to the door, facing the open space was a window. There was another window in the room facing the street. There were two connecting doors from the front room to the rear room.

The entire Sirnapalli squad comprising of six squad members and two militia members that had reached the house at dawn that day, stayed in the front room upstairs since the place was quite spacious. The two militia members had gone out earlier in the evening. The three squad members who had gone downstairs were washing their faces near the well. Just then, the street-facing doors were suddenly flung open, and the police, in alert positions, stormed in.

Noticing the police, Vijaya and Lalitha instinctively ran towards the kitchen. The police chased them and caught them right away. Prabhakar, however, dashed upstairs towards the room, trying to shut the door and bolt it from inside. But that door had no bolt. Even as he rushed in, the police opened fire and came running upstairs. They began firing at the door from the open area in front of the room.

Hearing the gunfire, the three comrades inside—Swamy, Kranti, and Gopi—alertly picked up their guns and moved into prone positions. Cautioning Prabhakar, who was trying to shut and bolt the door, Swamy shouted, 'Bullets will come through the door!

Move to the side!' Immediately, Prabhakar stepped aside. Whether the police kicked or pushed the door, but it flung open. Bullets started pouring in through the doors and windows. From inside, the guerrillas too began returning fire.

'Throw grenades from the windows!' Swamy told Prabhakar. Prabhakar immediately threw two grenades—one through the window beside the door into the terrace open space and the other through the window facing the street below. But neither of them exploded.

After that, all four of them fired continuously for about fifteen minutes. But the room they were in had no proper cover, and bullets were coming in through both windows and doors. So, the chances of continuing resistance from that room were slim. It didn't seem like a safe spot to hold their ground. Swamy felt the two connecting doors leading to the rear room might serve as better cover. Compared to this room, that one seemed a bit more secure.

Sensing they couldn't delay any longer, Swamy immediately ordered his comrades to retreat into the inner room. He and Prabhakar moved to the left side door and used it as a cover while Gopi and Kranti took positions on the right side door using it as a cover . They continued their resistance from those positions.

The firing started around 7:30 in the evening and continued until at least 9 o'clock. As the guerrillas showed no signs of slowing down in their resistance, the police began trying various tactics.

They climbed the staircase beside the first-floor door and went to the second floor.

Some of the farming families that have terraced houses leave a small opening with a width of around one or two feet in the roof. This opening allows them to push the grains dried on the terrace directly into the grain storage room below, saving them the labour of carrying it down in baskets. This terrace had four such openings—two above each room. If the terrace were divided into four equal parts, each would have one of these openings at its centre. The police spotted these openings.

Police dropped four grenades simultaneously through the four openings. The sound of the grenades exploding simultaneously deafened the four guerrillas. Since they were in prone positions, none of them suffered fatal injuries, but they were all wounded. Their faces and arms were bruised. The skin on their bodies was scraped and torn in many places. "Hear that? They're throwing grenades," said Kranti, instinctively pressing one ear to the floor while covering the other with his hand. Before they could recover, another round of grenades exploded right next to them with a terrifying noise.

The room had stacks of paddy bags and piles of pots in two corners. "Everyone take cover behind the bags. Otherwise, these grenades will finish us," said Swamy. Immediately, they all crawled and moved behind the stacks of bags for cover. The police didn't stop at grenades. They also threw smoke bombs and released tear gas through the openings. They even inserted

their guns through the openings and began firing bullets in auto mode, sweeping in circles.

At the same time, bullets continued to stream in from the front room windows and doors. The deafening blast of the grenades seemed to be tearing their eardrums apart. Their eyes burned from the smoke, and tears streamed down their faces. Their entire bodies felt like they were on fire. The smoke made them cough and sneeze uncontrollably suffocating them and leaving them gasping for breath. None of them had the time or opportunity to consider what kind of a critical situation they were in. The room the guerrillas were currently in had only one window, which was directly opposite the door that Swamy and Prabhakar were covering.

Struggling to breathe, some comrades started moving towards the window to get some air.

"Comrades, don't go near the window. There's a chance of incoming fire. It's okay to breathe less, but if you go near the window, you'll get killed," Swamy warned them. Although the room's light was still on, the entire area was filled with smoke and had turned hazy. Despite the suffocating smoke, despite the torture wracking their bodies, not a single comrade's resolve to resist wavered. So, their resistance continued.

The ceiling above the second floor was made of cement, but the roof of the ground floor—meaning the floor of the upper level—was not made of cement. Over wooden beams and rafters, mud was plastered and covered with a cement coating. Due to the constant grenade blasts from the openings above, the cement

coating of the floor began to peel off, the wooden planks loosened, and holes appeared in the floor—directly below the openings above, measuring about two to three feet wide.

Because of those holes, the grenades thrown by the police started falling straight into the lower rooms and exploding there. As a result, the guerrillas escaped the suffering caused by the deafening noise of the explosions, the burning of their eyes due to smoke, and the stinging grenade fragments that could have pierced their bodies. In the meanwhile, sounds started coming from the centre of the upper ceiling.

Looking up in that direction, Swamy said, "Are they setting up an LMG (Light Machine Gun) on auto fire? Are they drilling into the ceiling? It looks like they're planning to make a hole. Let's open fire in that direction—come on, quickly!" And then Swamy began firing towards the ceiling. The remaining three also began firing in that direction, forcing the police to call off their attempt.

"Did you see? When we fire, they fall back," said Prabhakar. Even in the smoky, dim atmosphere, Swamy could see a quiet pride in Prabhakar's eyes. Soon after, the police began digging along the wall on the left side of the room—right next to where Prabhakar was positioned.

"They're digging over here," Prabhakar said. "If they dig through that side, we'll have no cover. Let's fire in that direction," Swamy said, quickly shifting into a better firing position. Prabhakar also changed his firing arc, and both began firing toward the wall. The digging stopped immediately.

It was around half past midnight. The entire village was holding its breath in silence. No one had even a wink of sleep. Since the firing began, all the villagers stayed put inside their homes. The police had threatened that anyone who came outside would be shot.

From the moment the firing started, additional forces kept arriving in batches. The police had taken over every alley, lane, rooftop, and terrace surrounding the house where the battle was happening. They set up massive mercury lights in various spots.

The two women guerrillas and the family who had given shelter to the squad were all in police custody. The guerrillas upstairs could clearly hear their cries and screams as they were being tortured by the police.

The situation inside was tense. "What's going to happen? How will this end? Can we escape? Is that even possible? Are we all going to die here?" Thoughts like these raced through Swamy's mind amid the relentless gunfire. Most likely, his three comrades were having similar thoughts.

Swamy steeled his heart. Whatever has to happen, will happen. But we must fight until the last breath. He firmed his resolve and looked at his comrades. He felt that they, too, shared the same unshakable determination.

The firing and explosions continued without pause. The police didn't rely on ordinary gunfire anymore. They kept the LMGs on auto-fire, and the shooting didn't stop till the magazines ran out. Only while reloading the magazines was there a slight pause in firing.

Despite deploying overwhelming numbers, launching repeated assaults, and expending hundreds of grenades and thousands of bullets, the police still couldn't break the resistance of just four fighters. The police officers felt humiliated as their efforts failed. Now, they scrambled for new tactics.

To the right of the house and in front of the house, there were terraced houses. The police set up LMGs on both terraces. From the front terrace, they began firing through the window of the front room facing the street. From the right side terrace, they started firing through the window in the back room.

By then, comrades were in the prone position, targeting the doors and windows of the front room. Suddenly, bullets from the back window tore through, striking the back of Prabhakar's head.

"Swamy *anna*, I'm dying," said Prabhakar, his head drooping down. Swamy called out his name and pulled him close. He was stunned at the sight of blood gushing from Prabhakar's head and didn't know what to do. Kranti and Gopi also turned their heads, looking anxiously toward Prabhakar. "To all of you, Lal Salaam! Long live the revolution!" Prabhakar said, his face pressed to the ground. His words were clear even amidst the storm of LMG fire.

The three remaining comrades watched helplessly. "Long live the revolution! Long live the revolution!" Prabhakar kept rasping. To Swamy, it felt as if Prabhakar was desperately shouting those slogans, knowing he may never get another chance. Even in death's iron grip, he was dreaming only of revolution. The three comrades bore witness to his heroism.

Prabhakar was just twenty three, the only son of his parents. At an age meant for fun and play, he chose the path of struggle. While still studying the Intermediate (10+2) course, Prabhakar became a guerrilla. He was always one step ahead when it came to hard work. There was no trace of fear, worry, or sorrow in his voice even at the cusp of dying so abruptly at such a young age. What defines a full life? Is it living for a hundred years? Does the length of life determine its fullness? Or is it the essence of life? His voice, filled with a certain satisfaction and the spirit of revolution, suggested the latter. After three or four minutes, the slogans stopped. Only a faint moaning could be heard. The three of them knew Prabhakar was slipping closer to death.

Swamy, still in a prone position next to him, couldn't even sit up and take his comrade into his arms during his final moments as the bullets kept flying through the windows. Gopi and Kranti couldn't get up either from their positions to hold their fallen comrade's hand one last time. They couldn't even raise their heads or glance in his direction because of the relentless hail of bullets. That cruel war left no room for even a final goodbye.

After another minute, Prabhakar even stopped moaning. His youthful life had reached its end. And yet, there was no

possibility of mourning for him. Swallowing the pain and remembering his duty, Swamy said, 'Prabhakar has become a martyr. Only we are left. It might also be difficult for us to get out of this situation alive. But whatever happens, none of us should lose heart. We must fight till the end. You both cover that door, I'll cover this one. Any policeman who steps inside should not leave alive. There's heavy firing from these windows. I'll go to that corner. You both also stay carefully in your covers.' Even while giving instructions, he crawled cautiously through the rain of bullets, passing Prabhakar's dead body, and reached the corner.

That corner was beside the window, so the police couldn't fire directly into it. Kranti was at another corner. Gopi was crouched between the two, hiding behind sacks of rice close to the wall. That spot also had cover, so he was able to stay there. After a while Swamy said in a low voice, 'The police are firing like crazy. If we fire in reply to their firing, we'll run out of bullets soon. So, we'll stop the firing. Only if we see them trying to enter inside the rooms, we'll fire on them and not till then.' After that, from about half-past midnight to around 2-3 a.m., there was no firing from the three guerillas. This made the police wonder if those inside were still alive or already dead.

By half past midnight, the Superintendent of Police of the district (SP) also arrived. He personally gave orders to start the next round of action. Since there was no firing from inside, he instructed the police positioned around the room to advance inside. But no one seemed willing to step in. Around 2 a.m., the

cries and wails of Vijaya and Lalitha were heard near the staircase downstairs.

'*Anna!* Looks like they're bringing the *akkas*<sup>4</sup> inside,' said Kranti.

'Go on then... Go in and check, you bitches!' the police cursed loudly.

'Looks like they won't come to see for themselves, they are pushing the *akkas* instead,' said Gopi.

'Sir, we can't stand, we are feeling too dizzy. We are having blackouts and unable to see anything Sir, we can't climb the stairs, Sir,' Lalitha and Vijaya's tearful voices sounded pitiful to the three of them.

'*Anna*, they must've beaten the *Akkas* badly, tortured them cruelly,' Kranti's voice was heavy with sorrow.

'When they fall into the hands of the police, won't they do that? Wouldn't they torture them?' Gopi's voice carried the same pain.

Swamy couldn't put his pain into words. He remained silent.

Since Vijaya and Lalitha could not walk, it looked like they were dragged back.

In the meantime, the police began digging from below near the side of Swamy's corner. If they could break through there, they'd be able to fire at the corner where Swamy was positioned. To

stop their efforts, the comrades fired in that direction again. The police stopped digging after that. Suddenly, Kranti said, '*Anna*, my rifle bolt isn't working, I'm unable to load it.' He was holding a .303 rifle. 'Take Prabhakar's rifle,' said Swamy, and pushed Prabhakar's .303 rifle towards them. After some time, the firing shattered the bulbs in both rooms, and everything plunged into darkness.

Once again, the police attempted to dig through the wall. The guerrillas fired in that direction again, and the police gave up their attempt once more. This time, Swamy's SLR rifle jammed and he felt lost and helpless. Without a gun, how could he fight? Kranti and Gopi both had rifles. Should he ask one of them and take a weapon? But in such an intense battle, having one's own weapon gives one a lot of confidence. How could he take a rifle from them in such a situation? They were capable fighters too... All these thoughts kept running through his mind. He felt utterly helpless as if he'd lost his limbs. Then he suddenly remembered—Vijaya and Lalitha's rifles. Had they taken them down or left them here? He wasn't sure. '*Vijaya akka*, *Lalitha akka*—did they take the rifles downstairs or leave them here?' Swamy asked Kranti and Gopi. 'I don't know, *Anna*. I didn't see,' both of them replied.

'Let's just check once; it might be useful,' he said, slowly crawling into the front room. Feeling his way through the darkness, he found two guns propped against the wall. One was a 410 Musket, and the other a double-barrel gun, but neither had their ammunition pouches. Since the pouches are always tied to the waist, he assumed they were still with them. Swamy took both

guns and returned to his position. Among them, only the 410 was loaded. He took that and went to his position. But what kind of self-confidence can a single bullet give?

Once again, they had to open fire when they felt the police were trying to dig through the wall. That one bullet was used up. Swamy became unarmed again. What could he do? His heart filled with frustration. 'Kranti, give me that defective rifle of yours, let's check what's wrong with it,' he said, and took that gun. No matter how hard he tried, the bolt wouldn't move. Finally, he hit it hard. Somehow, the jammed bolt got fixed and Swamy managed to load the rifle.

After that, there was no firing from inside for almost an hour. Once again, the SP ordered the police to go inside and check, but none of the policemen dared follow the order. Again, the police brought Vijaya and Lalitha along. 'Go on... go up and see...' they cursed them which were clearly audible inside.

'I'm too weak to stay on my feet Sir. I see only dark circles in front of my eyes Sir ,' came the tearful, trembling voices of the two women, which deeply pained all three. Once again, the police took them back.

It was nearing dawn—about four in the morning. The SP, in a fit of rage, abused the policemen and shouted at them to go inside and check. Left with no other option, the police began advancing into the room focusing large lights inside. Their figures were clearly visible in the light. Four or five of them entered. As soon

as they moved toward the centre of the room, Swamy took aim and fired at the policeman who was ahead of the others.

With just that one shot, the man screamed, "Ah!" and fell to the ground. The police immediately switched off the lights. 'Mohinuddin! Mohinuddin!' they called out to the fallen man twice. But there was no response, no movement or sound from the fallen policeman.

Meanwhile, Kranti and Gopi also fired through the door before them.

Unable to remain there any longer, the police carried the body and ran out.

'Swamy *anna*, looks like one of them died,' Gopi said with a small sense of satisfaction, feeling it was revenge for Prabhakar's death.

'Yes, he's dead,' Swamy replied.

'Did they take the body?' asked Kranti.

'I don't know... suddenly it went dark, so I'm not sure. But it looks like the police did take it,' Swamy said.

Then, from downstairs, came the sounds of firing and the agonised screams of Vijaya and Lalitha.

'*Anna*... it's the *Akkas*...' Gopi couldn't complete the sentence.

Realising what had happened below, their hearts were gripped with sorrow. For some time, they were lost in the memories of Vijaya and Lalitha.

Lalitha was born and brought up in this very village Padkal. She came from a poor Dalit family. After her marriage and the birth of her son, she joined the movement along with her partner. Her comrade and husband, Saleem (Prasad), who was a district committee member, died a heroic death the previous year fighting bravely against the enemy ambush on the Bichkunda squad. Swallowing her grief with a strong heart, she stood even more firmly in the movement.

Vijaya had studied up to fourth class. Even within the squad, she studied with great interest. She liked discussing what she read. She worked hard and was an ideal in all respects.

Lalitha's figure — with long, dark face and of medium build — and Vijaya's figure — tall, fair-skinned, with a round face — flashed vividly in front of their eyes.

Thus that night of bloodshed, horror, and terror passed, and morning came. But the police firing didn't stop. The guerrillas, however, stayed alert, guns ready, and prepared to shoot when necessary.

Around seven-thirty or eight, the firing and explosions eased up a bit. Those inside had no clue what was going on outside. Suddenly, they heard the sound of walls being dug up from

below. 'It looks like they're digging from underneath, maybe to plant bombs to blow up the house,' Swamy thought. Kranti cautiously came out of the cover to see what was happening. Between the two doors, there was a shelf in the wall that was built with just one row of bricks. Because of that when grenades were thrown at night, a palm-sized hole had formed in it. Kranti crawled to the shelf, got up, and peered through the hole.

From that spot, at an angle of forty-five degrees, he could see the doorway of the front room. Looking through that doorway, he could also see part of the terrace and the sunshade built toward the street side. On that sunshade, he could see a policeman sitting with an LMG, his head turned backwards and looking at the street.

Kranti said in a low voice, "Swamy *anna*, I see a policeman."

At once, Swamy crawled from beside Prabhakar's dead body towards the shelf. Slowly rising, he peeped out through the hole. He too saw the policeman clearly. Immediately, he moved into a kneeling position and aimed his already loaded rifle— at the policeman's chest. In the very next moment, the bullet from his gun tore through the policeman's chest. Swamy and Kranti both clearly saw the man screaming and falling backwards into the street with the LMG (light machine gun) in hand. His cap, however, fell down on the terrace.

Soon after, a fresh round of gunfire and explosions erupted from the police side but, not a single bullet was fired in return by the guerillas.

The firing continued for about half an hour and then stopped. Hearing loud voices, all three of them pricked up their ears. "I am the DIG (Deputy Inspector General) speaking. All of you must surrender. We've planted bombs all around the house. Don't die needlessly. Don't throw your lives away."

"The DIG himself is here," said Gopi, glancing at Swamy. Swamy nodded. "Don't waste your lives. We won't kill you. We won't file any cases against you. We won't do anything. Just surrender. Leave your weapons inside, raise your hands, and come out," the voice kept repeating.

DIG's efforts were not in vain. Like a traveller who unknowingly walks into a tiger's trap drawn by the lure of gold, Kranti fell for the DIG's ploy. "Swamy *anna*, I'll go out. I'd rather take my chances outside than die for sure inside. If I get out, maybe I can return to the party later. But staying in here is a sure death," he said, forcing his words out while his eyes remained fixed on the ground.

Swamy hadn't expected such words.

Still recovering from the shock, he said, "How can you believe his words? Even the people who gave us food are being harassed and killed. Do you think they'll spare someone like you at a time like this? Why walk straight into the enemy's hands and die a painful death of torture? Let's stay here and fight as long as we can and die like warriors. But don't surrender to the enemy."

Didn't we come into the party ready to die? How can we fear death now?"

His words gave Kranti pause.

But the DIG kept shouting, over and over. "We won't harm you. No cases, no jail. Surrender now or we'll blow up the house in a while. Don't lose your lives for nothing."

"Swamy *anna*, maybe what he's saying is true. I'll go," said Kranti.

"He'll say anything. What's there in just saying it? They are mere words. Don't believe him, Kranti."

"I don't know... I just can't stay here anymore. I'm going," Kranti said quietly but with firm resolve. Swamy tried once again to convince him.

Kranti walked into the trap like a moth to a flame, blinded by the promise of freedom.

Kranti removed his gun and the pouch of bullets and placed them on the floor.. He didn't look at Gopi, who was right beside him nor did he look at Swamy, who was a little further away. He didn't even glance at the brave soldier Prabhakar's fallen body. With tears in his eyes, head lowered, he slowly walked towards the front room.

From there, he shouted, crying, "Sir, I'm coming out. Please don't shoot me, Sir." A few moments of silence followed. "Are you coming from the ground floor or from upstairs?" came the

question. "Looks like they think we're on both floors," Gopi commented. Still thinking about Kranti, Swamy let out a soft "Hmm." "I'm coming from upstairs, Sir. Don't shoot, Sir," Kranti cried again. "If you've got any weapons or bombs, leave them inside and come out with your hands raised." "I'll do just that, sir," he said and moved towards the door with his hands raised. Just as he was about to step out, a sudden burst of gunfire was released in his direction.

Kranti would have collapsed there if he had taken another step forward. But the police's momentary impatience caused them to fire too early. Because of that slight miscalculation, Kranti dodged death by a hair's breadth and fell back into the rear room. "You were right, Swamy *anna*... these scoundrels were going to kill me," he said, in shock.

"You were wrong to believe him, Kranti. Now you understand, don't you? You were about to die, all thanks to believing the enemy's words. We live or die, while fighting. Come, pick up your rifle. Let's fight until our last breath and take down as many of them as possible," Swamy said. He felt happy that Kranti had a clear understanding of the reality now.

Kranti returned to the cover.

"We fired by mistake. We won't shoot this time. Trust us. Please come out again," the DIG began once more, speaking honeyed words. About half an hour later, Kranti began to waver again like before. "*Anna*, he said they shot by mistake earlier. He might not shoot this time. I'll go," he said. "You saw for yourself what he

did, didn't you? He won't let you go. He'll kill you. Don't trust him," Swamy said firmly. "Even if we stay inside, we're going to die anyway. If I go out, there's a chance I might survive," Kranti said. "What are you saying, *Anna*? You just saw what happened," Gopi said in amazement. "He's claiming it's really a mistake," Kranti mumbled. Frustrated by trying to convince him, Swamy finally said, "It's your wish, Kranti. What more can we say?"

"Sir, I told you I'll come out. Even when I was coming out with my hands up, they opened fire. You say you won't kill us, but you're firing to kill us, Sir," Kranti shouted from inside. "No one should fire. No one should fire. Come out now. No one will shoot. I've given orders, haven't I? No one will fire," said the DIG. Kranti placed his gun down, stood up, lowered his head, raised his hands, and stepped outside. This time, the police didn't shoot.

After Kranti went into their custody, the police fully understood the situation inside.

"Swamy! Gopi! How long will you two keep fighting? Surrender now. Otherwise, we've planted bombs around the house. We'll blow it up," shouted not just the DIG but many different police voices.

Hearing the police threats, both Swamy and Gopi were filled with rage. "You, sons of dogs! Do you think threatening us with bombs will scare us? We're ready to die. There's no bravery in planting bombs. If you've got guts, come inside!" Swamy screamed. "You, cowards! If you've got courage, come outside!" The patience and decency the police had been pretending to show until then disappeared and their true nature came out.

"You're nothing but lapdogs guarding the landlords. Who's going to listen to you?" Gopi too shouted.

After a few minutes of back-and-forth shouting and abuse, perhaps the police realised that these two were not going to surrender. They might have thought they could convince them through Kranti. "Swamy *Anna*, they've planted bombs all around the house. They're going to blow them up. Don't die unnecessarily like this. They didn't harm me. You both come out too," Kranti pleaded from outside. "We're not cowards like you. If we die, we'll die right here. There's no way we'll surrender like you did," came the strong reply in two voices.

Seeing there's no use, the police fell silent.

A little while later, Swamy heard something at a nearby hole in the roof above and looked up.

Gelatin sticks arranged in the form of marigold flowers were fit in the hole. "They're going to blow it up. If they do, the opening will become wider, and there will be no cover above. What should we do?" Swamy thought. "I'll shoot it myself before they blow it up, so that everything will fall down," he thought, making a wrong estimation. As the idea came, he stepped out from behind cover, held his gun upward, aimed directly at the "marigold", and fired. Boom! It exploded with a tremendous noise.

He felt as if something heavy struck him. The gun flew out of his hands. An unbearable heat enveloped him. His eyes went blind with the brightness. Dust and grit covered his face and hands.

For almost five minutes, he stood there motionless, unable to move. When he recovered a little and looked up, he saw that the roof above had been blown away over an expanse of a yard. He immediately rolled aside. Due to the force of the explosion, even the police who were on the roof must have been thrown away, and it must have taken them a while to recover. Otherwise, it would have been Swamy's end if they had looked in through that hole. When Swamy searched for his gun that had fallen from his hand he saw that its barrel had bent backwards and curled due to the explosion.

Then Swamy picked up the gun that Kranti had left behind when he surrendered.

From that moment, the police attack intensified many times over. Auto-fire rained from all directions. Bombs were being thrown madly from the holes in the roof. They tied big bombs with ropes and dropped them inside through the large hole, causing massive explosions.

Even so, the big gunny sacks in the room continued to shield the two of them. Hit by bullets and bombs, the sacks too were torn and the clay pots broke, causing the grains to scatter all over. Unable to breathe properly, both of them became restless. Their throats were parched from the smoke. With no other option, they drank their own urine. Five or six hours passed thus.

Around three in the afternoon, a bullet struck Gopi's right elbow and shattered the bone. He started bleeding heavily and was in a lot of pain. More importantly, he was no longer in a position to fire his gun and he sank into despair. "Swamy *Anna*, I'm going to

die anyway. If not that, we'll be captured by them alive. If that happens, they'll torture us. Why fall into their hands? I want to just shoot myself and die." Hearing such unexpected words, Swamy quickly turned to look at Gopi. Gopi's face clearly showed the agony he was in. Clenching his teeth, he was obviously trying his best to bear the pain.

Swamy looked at him with sympathy and said, "Don't think like that, Gopi. We must fight the enemy until our last breath. Look—despite being surrounded by so many enemies and despite such intense firing, we managed to hold them off and killed two of them. Who knows, maybe we still have a chance to kill some more. So, we must try to stay alive." "What chances do we have now? I can't even fire my weapon in this condition. I am unable to bear this pain anymore. If I fall into their hands, they'll subject me to brutal torture. You heard how the two *Akkas* screamed in pain, unable to bear their torture. If anyway I am going to die, isn't it better if I die on my own terms?" Gopi said as he tried to place the gun to his chest with his left hand. His face reflected a grim resolve, indicating the firmness of a final act.

Swamy moved closer, gently pushed the gun aside and said, "Yes, Gopi, if we fall into their hands, they will torture us. But we have to face that, too. Even if they catch us and kill us, we should raise our slogans till the end and die with spirit. A death like that will inspire the people. But dying by our own hands will not. Please, don't do such a thing." It was extremely hard for Swamy to even speak—amidst the deafening sounds of bullets and explosions, with his body feeling as if on fire and his tongue parched. Still, Swamy tried to persuade his comrade, who had

fought heroically and fiercely for nearly twenty hours, not to commit suicide.

Even Swamy had no hope that they would survive by somehow crossing the fine line between life and death. That's why he couldn't even bring himself to say words like "we might survive." But he was anxious that Gopi should not waste the final opportunity to inflict loss on the enemy by committing suicide. Yet, Gopi's thoughts seemed firmly fixed on suicide. When he made another attempt, Swamy once again snatched the gun away.

Swamy was in a terrible situation—on the one hand, trying to dissuade Gopi, and on the other, staying on high alert against the enemy. Because now, he was the only one who could still fire back at the enemy. With bullets and bombs raining down uncontrollably, he couldn't keep an eye on Gopi every moment. After a while, Swamy got the feeling that Gopi had given up the thought of suicide because of his words of advice. A short while later, he heard the sound of a bullet being fired, and Swamy turned his gaze away from the door towards where the sound had come. Gopi had committed suicide.

Leaning against the wall where he sat, Gopi had placed the double-barrelled gun to his chest and pulled the trigger with his toe. Not a sound came from his mouth. Blood spurted from his chest and soaked his entire face. Within seconds, his life was gone. His lifeless body remained slumped against the wall in the same position.

Swamy closed his eyes, unable to bear the sight. "Oh comrade, what have you done?" he thought his heart heavy with sorrow.

Gopi was a Dalit boy who studied up to Intermediate. His broad face was always lit up with a wide smile. He mingled well with everyone. He didn't get demoralised even when caught in a terrifying and dreadful enemy attack. He fought back bravely. Though his senior Kranti surrendered in the middle of the battle, Gopi didn't waver at all. As long as he could hold a weapon, he kept fighting. "Freedom is greater than life. I don't care if I lose my life, but I will not become a prisoner to the enemy and lose my freedom," said Chandrashekhar Azad<sup>4</sup>—and just like him, Gopi too became a martyr.

Now, only Swamy remained.

Two comrades were captured alive, subjected to severe torture and then killed. Another comrade fought heroically until his last drop of blood and died giving revolutionary slogans till the end. Kranti, shocked by the horror of it all, lost touch with reality and succumbed to delusion. Gopi, who fought heroically till the end, chose to end his life out of despair when he could no longer fight back. Swamy had to bear the pain of losing all his comrades in less than a day —each in a different way within a matter of hours.

All these events were draining every bit of his inner energy, turning his body into a lifeless log of wood. However, one thing keeping his spirit alive was his strong resolve not to let the enemy have an easy victory. In spite of not having food, water,

sleep, or even clean air to breathe, this determination alone gave him the strength to carry on.

It was nearing four in the evening. Realising that the guerrillas were hiding in the room at the back, the police began burning its floor i.e. the wooden beams and planks that made up the underside of the floor. Swamy could feel the rising heat and smoke coming up from below.

He couldn't move to the front room, because of the intense firing there. Pondering what to do, he reached the door behind which Gopi and Kranti had taken cover. Bending down slightly, he peered from the door into the room.

The body of the police man who died from his firing during the night was no longer there. Swamy ascertained they must have taken away the body. Just then, an AK-47 lying over there caught his attention. Its belt was clearly visible. But only half of the gun could be seen. The debris from the bombing and the thick dust had covered the other half of it. "How can I retrieve it?" he thought, glancing around. His gaze fell upon a bamboo pole tied to the ceiling to hang things in the very room he was in. At once, he grabbed the pole with his hands. He bent slightly, carefully inserted the pole through the door towards the belt of the AK, and then pulled it back. Within a minute, the AK was in his hands. When he checked, the magazine was fully loaded with bullets.. Swamy was unable to stay any longer in the room at the back as the heat had become unbearable and he felt that if he stayed there any longer, he would suffocate and be scorched to death.

So he slowly came to the front room and took a position beside the window, using the wall as cover.

The AK in his hands ignited a blaze of thoughts. Alone, he couldn't resist much longer. They might burn down the house, demolish it. He could burn alive or he might get caught or, as it happened to Gopi, he might get shot in the hands which would prevent him from being able to retaliate. So, if he ran up to the terrace and fired at the police surrounding the place till the magazine became empty, a few of them might die. Then, even if he dies, he would take some of them with him. His thoughts continued along this line for a while. After some time, a new idea occurred to him — "Is there not a sliver of chance to escape?"

Instead of going to the rooftop, perhaps if he could somehow reach the street-side entrance, he could run through the street firing at the police stationed in the street. That way, he might eliminate a few policemen and if possible, he may manage to escape. In any case, going out of the house would only offer a chance either to survive or to kill the police. Staying inside would not offer any opportunity at all. Tormented by such conflicting thoughts, he was finally inclined towards escape. His mind then began searching for possibilities towards that.

As darkness began to fall, his eyes, scanning here and there for an escape route, fell on a roll of broad cotton tape hanging from a wooden peg nearby. The moment he saw it, his thoughts for escape started taking shape. He slowly took the roll and returned to the back room. He walked to a hole in the room formed by the grenades thrown earlier.

By then, the fires that the police had started earlier had died down, so the heat wasn't unbearable. He tied the roll of cotton tape to a beam of timber that was visible through that hole. After taking one last look at the bodies of his two fallen comrades, he gripped the cotton tape and slid down through the hole into the room below. As soon as he landed, he pressed himself against the wall and observed his surroundings. By then, it had turned completely dark. This meant it had been more than twenty-four hours since the police attack began.

As he scanned the surroundings, he noticed that the wall on the street-facing side of the room had been blasted by bombs. Where the wall was blasted, there were bricks scattered and strewn on either side of two yards of the wall. There were no police near the shattered wall. When he peeked out cautiously, he could see a group of policemen near the street gate on the left side. There were also groups of policemen on the terrace opposite. However, on the right side, no police were visible.

He gave up the idea of going out through the street gate and decided instead to leap out into the street from the broken remains of the wall itself.

Forgetting hunger, thirst, the burning pain in his body, and all the agony, he gathered whatever strength he had left. He slung the gun over his shoulder, placed one leg on the broken wall, and, with a sudden leap, jumped into the street. Even as he jumped, he turned slightly to the right. Aiming behind him towards the

police group near the street gate, he kept firing his gun resting on his shoulder while he sprinted ahead with lightning speed.

Shocked by the sudden turn of events, the policemen stationed on the streets and on the roof tops that were lit up by mercury lights, stood frozen for a moment. Then they came to their senses and started firing behind him as he ran.

Swamy, too, fired at the police in the street and occasionally at those on the rooftops. Diving through alleys and ducking into corners, he ran until he reached one end of the village. Now, in just a few moments, he would have crossed the village and reached the outskirts.

But the entire village was surrounded by police. At present, a group of police men was stationed just outside the village, directly opposite the street he was running in. Seeing him running in their direction, all the policemen opened fire on him.

As bullets came from straight ahead, he couldn't go any further in that direction. Swiftly, he turned back and, darting through alleys and lanes, he ran until he nearly reached the centre of the village. By then, he had been running for ten to fifteen minutes. Since police were stationed everywhere in groups with lights set up at various spots, he felt it was no longer wise to keep running. Just then, he noticed a cattle shed and went into it. He stood still for a while to get back his breath. Then he saw a haystack in the shed. Immediately, he climbed on top of it, moved some hay aside, got inside, and covered himself again with the hay.

He stayed like that until around half past midnight. The dry hay was producing unbearable heat and his throat was burning. His mouth had gone so parched that even saliva wasn't coming. 'If I don't drink water immediately, I'll die before the police kill me,' he thought. He knew all the doors would be bolted at midnight, so he decided to go to someone's house and try to get some water either from their bathroom or from the pots outside. He got up from the haystack, came out of the shed, and walked towards a house nearby, hoping there might be a bathroom. As he moved about, the dogs near the house started barking loudly. It was a house belonging to a big family of the shepherd's caste. The dogs' barking woke up almost everyone.

'Who is it? Who is it?' they asked as they opened the door and stepped outside.

Swamy immediately approached them and said, "Please don't make a fuss. I'm Swamy. I escaped from the police firing. I'm very thirsty. Could you please give me some water?" Everyone stared at him under the lamp's light. Though Swamy didn't recognise them, they had seen him several times before during meetings. The matriarch of the house, Rajavva, immediately brought him some water. He drank the water in gulps, filling his stomach. He returned the empty vessel to her, saying, "I can't leave right now. The village is surrounded by police. So, I'll take off this uniform and gun, wear regular clothes, and stay here in your house. Somehow, you have to shelter me."

His words caused concern among the family members.

Rajavva's elder son said, 'It's painful to see you like this *Anna*, but by tomorrow, the police might search every house.'

'Oh, my son! Not one or two, but there are hundreds of police men. If they find out you're staying in our house, they won't spare you, us, our house or our children,' Rajavva said, worried.

Swamy realised that sheltering him in any house wasn't a simple matter of courage with police all over the village and due to an atmosphere of battle built up since the previous night.

'Alright, I'll go now. But don't tell anyone I came this way,' he said and walked out. He went a little distance, wondering if he could go out of the village through another street. But even there, lights were glowing, and police were present. He turned back cautiously without being seen by the police. He concluded that it was impossible to escape immediately and returned to the same cattle shed and lay under the haystack again. 'How long can I hide in this haystack? They'll surely figure out I'm still in the village. Tomorrow, they might search every house, every shed, every haystack...' he mused.

Just then, he remembered an incident narrated by Comrade Murali (Koyyuru martyr<sup>6</sup>). In one village, when the police were hunting down a Sangham leader, the villagers saved him by hiding him in a dung heap. That memory brought to mind the rubbish heap he had seen near the shepherds' house earlier. Rajavva's daughters-in-law rolled beedis. The leftover tobacco leaves and waste were all piled high in the rubbish heap in front of the house.

Before dawn, around four, Swamy quietly exited the haystack and went to the rubbish heap. He cleared away enough rubbish from one side to fit a person and made a sort of trench. Then he lay down flat in it, placed his gun beside him, and began to cover himself with the rubbish—his feet first, then his stomach, chest, and shoulders. Finally, he pulled the rubbish over his face, exposing only one hand to keep it from falling.

He remained like that until about seven in the morning. At around that time, he heard the sounds of someone washing the dishes near the rubbish heap. Wastewater from washing the utensils was being thrown onto the heap. The water splashed and fell right on Swamy's face. He had been lying still without moving for nearly three hours. His back was completely numb and his arms and legs were stiff.

He was finding it increasingly difficult to remain still.

'If I move even a little, the heap will shift. If it moves, the person washing the dishes will notice. If they spot me, who knows what will happen? They were already terrified last night. If they ask me to leave, I'll have nowhere to go. Since it's morning, if I walk through the street, the police will surely see me...' different thoughts surged through his mind. Still, he couldn't stop himself from moving. He shifted slightly to one side. Immediately, he heard Rajavva's loud voice shouting, "Oh no! There's something in this dung heap!" He also heard the sound of a metal vessel falling. It sounded as if she ran a few steps away, too.

From the house, he could hear people saying, 'What is it? What's going on?' It seemed to him that everyone was coming out of the house.

Afraid that if he kept sitting there longer, the commotion would grow and attract the attention of the people in the street, he quickly got up, brushed off the rubbish stuck to him, and said, "*Amma*, please don't make a fuss. It's me. I came here last night. I wanted to leave, but the whole village was surrounded by police. I couldn't go anywhere, so I hid here." Everyone from the house who gathered there began to stare at him, lost for words. Even the small children were staring silently.

He continued before they could recover from the shock, 'The police are all over the village, around every corner. Right now, I have no way to escape. Let me hide in your house just for today. I will find some way to leave during the night. Please protect me just for today. We are not living for ourselves. It is for others. Only you can protect us,' Swamy said.

One of Rajavva's sons immediately said, 'Alright, get up and come inside.' But Rajavva said, 'Ayyo if these monsters come to know, they'll kill you. They'll kill us too. Please, son, don't come into the house.' Another of Rajavva's sons said, 'Where will he go now, *Amma*? Let him stay.'

'No, my son... There are small children and toddlers in the house. They will kill everyone...' The fear in a mother's heart that something might happen to her children was clearly evident in her words.

There was some argument between the mother and her sons. In the end, even the sons couldn't convince their mother. Realising their mother would never agree, one of the sons came to Swamy and said, 'You get up from here *Anna*. We'll take you to another house.'

Swamy, afraid that the neighbours might hear everything if the discussion continued longer, quickly got up from the rubbish heap. He went into the house again, asked for water and drank it. 'Even going to another house is difficult now, so I'll hide in the shed. Please don't tell anyone. All the children have seen me anyway. Make sure even they don't say anything,' he said, pointing towards the shed where he had stayed the previous night.

Everyone looked at his blood-soaked clothes and the wounds on his face, body, and hands with sympathy. 'Don't go into the shed *Anna*,' said one of Rajavva's sons. 'The people living in that house over there have gone to town, so the house is locked up. If you climb the wall and go in, you will find a shed beside the house. If you hide in that shed, nobody will suspect anything since the house is locked," he said, pointing towards the house across the street.

Everyone, including Rajavva, agreed that it would be better if he stayed there. Even Swamy felt it was a good idea. As he nodded in agreement, Rajavva's sons placed two slim wooden planks slanting against the wall of the opposite house. Swamy climbed

the wall using the planks and got down into the shed. They had taken care to make sure no one else saw this.

Inside the shed, there was a pile of hay in a corner. Swamy made space for himself within the pile, lay down and covered himself with the hay.

Four or five hours passed very heavily.

Around noon, he heard Rajavva calling out 'son, son' from near the wall. Saying 'yes,' he rose from the hay and came to the wall. But the wall was high, so he couldn't see Rajavva on the other side. Looking around, he spotted a bullock cart's wheel. He rolled it near the wall and leaned it against it. Climbing up, he rested his head over the wall, looked down towards Rajavva's side and gently asked, 'What is it, *Amma*?' 'Why, son, I called you so many times. You didn't respond.' 'Oh, no! Did you call that many times? My hearing's gone dull, *Amma*... I couldn't hear properly.' 'What kind of trouble have you all got into, son? What suffering, son... You're sacrificing your lives for others. But look at how the police have mercilessly killed young women and men still in the prime of their lives. I just saw it with my own eyes, son,' she said with deep sorrow.

'You saw them, *Amma*?' Swamy asked, his voice filled with anxiety. 'I saw them, son. The police said they'd show us the dead bodies if we brought some firewood. I said I would also see and took two bundles of firewood. Oh child, your own people... there were two women and three men, all of them so young.' Before she could finish her words, Swamy interrupted, 'Three?

Were there three men?' 'Yes, son, there were. Oh, how much trouble and hardships all of you endured for the sake of people and what did the people do to prevent them from being killed...'  
Her voice broke as she spoke.

Then, quickly gathering herself, she said, 'Don't come out into the light, son. The whole village is swarming with police. I went upto the fields just to see and there are police there too. They are all around the village and it doesn't look like they will leave today they put up tents and are sitting under them, eating happily. I'll come now and then and tell you what's happening. But you stay safe, child. Who knows when you ate last...? Here, eat this cucumber, child. It will stop your thirst for a while,' she said. She placed the cucumber in his hands, and looking around carefully, she went back into her house.

Getting down from the bullock cart wheel, he walked back towards the hay stacks. He thought, 'So they killed even Kranti... in any case, why wouldn't they kill him? How did Kranti believe them? How did he fall into illusions? He used to be such an idealist! He could endure so much hardship!'

Swamy felt as if Kranti with his tall frame and dark, long face was standing before him.

Prabhakar, Kranti, and Gopi were all of the same age. All of them had studied till tenth or intermediate and all of them were idealistic. Vijaya and Lalitha, too, were equally committed and principled. What a great team! How could it all vanish in just one day?

How did this happen? This question troubled him even during the terrifying carnage of the previous day and it started bothering him again.

As the squad reached the village before dawn two days before, an old man named Pentala Gangireddy came out to attend the call of nature. He had seen them then. He was slightly opposed to the party. As he had seen them from a distance, they assumed he hadn't clearly recognised them as the squad. Prabhakar and Gopi decided to act like the police, so they went and spoke to him in Hindi and returned.

But what if he'd suspected they were indeed from the squad? Could he have passed on the information to the police? Swamy had wondered many times. When they reached the shelter house, the squad had to call out multiple times because the people inside were in deep sleep. Did anyone hear us back then? That, thought too occurred to him multiple times. A small mistake somewhere had led to such a huge loss. All his squad comrades were killed. He alone remained but would he also survive?

Rajavva said there are still hundreds of police all around the village. Would he be able to escape? Would he have the chance to carry forward the ideals of his comrades? Would he get the opportunity to repay the debt of their blood? He sat there holding the cucumber in his hand, lost in thought. Suddenly, he snapped out of it. 'No, I must stay alert. The police could come at any moment,' he reminded himself.

He opened the magazine of the rifle to check how many bullets were left. Only one was in the magazine, and another was loaded in the chamber.

A wave of helplessness washed over him.

Rajavva's voice rang out again, 'Son, oh son!' He got up on the cart's wheel and peeked at her. "Here, my son, eat this food," she said, handing him a bundle of rice. She also gave him a tumbler of drinking water. Receiving them without much interest, he asked, "Are the police still around, *amma*?" "Yes, my son. They're burning the dead bodies. Don't stay here tonight. They now know you're still in the village. They're saying they'll search house to house. If they find you, they'll kill you. And they'll kill us too. Leave before it gets dark," she said.

"You only told me the whole village is swarming with police—how can I leave now, *amma*?"

"Oh, yesterday you've escaped the big encirclement and made it through. Is it really difficult for you to escape from here and reach the outskirts? You can definitely make it out of here, in fact you will be caught if you stay here..."

Even at that difficult moment, Swamy found her words amusing. "How much faith the people have in the bravery of revolutionaries," he thought.

He said, "Alright," took the food and water, and walked back to the haystack. He didn't argue with Rajavva, but he still felt that escaping that night wouldn't be possible. He cannot even fire at the police and escape, because his gun had only two bullets. How many more days will the police stay? Maybe they'll leave tomorrow. So if he just hid here for tonight, he'd be safe. This wasn't a tiny hamlet — it had over five hundred houses. How many houses and their attached sheds could they possibly search?

Such were his thoughts.

He didn't even think about opening the food bundle. Occasionally, he sipped water from the tumbler to wet his throat. Before nightfall, Rajavva came twice more to pass on information about the police. It was night now. He remained alert, sitting throughout the night.

Dawn broke.

It was about seven in the morning when he heard someone washing the dishes near the front yard of Rajavva's house. "It must be her. Maybe this is the last chance to speak with her," he thought, climbing up the cart wheel. Yes, it was Rajavva washing the dishes.

"*Amma!*" he called loudly enough for her to hear.

She turned around in surprise. "Oh, my child, you didn't leave last night? The police searched every house on that side. Today, they're coming this way. They'll kill you. And they'll kill us, too,"

she said as she walked closer. "You are only saying *Amma* that the whole village is full of police. Tell me, how can I leave?"

'Let's do one thing. You bring me a shirt, a *dhoti*, and a *gongadi*. I'll wear those clothes and go. I can't leave the house in this uniform," he said, voicing the plan he'd been weighing all night. She accepted his idea and brought him the clothes.

He dressed in a shirt and dhoti, hid his regular clothes and gun among the haystacks, jumped over the wall and entered Rajavva's house. "If I just wrap a *gongadi* and go, people might suspect. Give me a bag of pesticide, I will pretend that I am going to the fields" he said. "There's no pesticide bag, my child."

"Then at least give me some seeds in a bag, so it looks like I'm going to field," he said.

Agreeing, she tied up some seeds in a bundle and gave it to him. He took it and, without delay, went to Rajavva's daughters-in-law who were rolling beedis and asked them for a few beedis. He asked for a matchbox, too. Though he didn't have the habit of smoking, his intention was to disguise himself better by puffing on a beedi, so that the smoke from it would partially cover his face and make it harder to recognise him.

Wrapping himself in the *gongadi*, holding the seeds bag on his head, beedi in mouth, he stepped into the courtyard and took a few steps. "My son, my son!" she called out again. Turning back, he saw her beckoning him inside. Once he entered, she said, "Son, we're in trouble. Please help us. When my son-in-law

needed money, I took a loan from someone and gave it to him. He promised to repay, but now he's refusing—and worse, he's demanding more. If I don't give it, he's threatening to abandon my daughter. Could you speak to him and settle this?"

The same woman who had asked yesterday, "Why are you taking all these troubles?" is now asking him to solve her troubles. Swamy forgot about his own situation for a while and got absorbed in hers. "Alright, *Amma*. When I come the next time, we'll call your son-in-law and speak to him. Don't worry," he said, responding to her just like he always did with anyone's problem.

The next moment, he became aware of his own danger again. "How am I promising like this? Am I really going to survive? Will I really be able to solve her problem? Where is this confidence coming from? It is this very faith of the people that is guiding the revolutionary movement," he thought.

He stood up, said, "I'll be going, *amma*," and stepped out again. "My son!" she called again. He took two steps back. "If you go this way, there'll be paddy fields for a long stretch. Escaping through them will be tough. But if you go that way, you'll enter maize fields. Once inside, you can hide and escape more easily," she said, pointing out directions with her hands.

Moved by her concern for his safety, he said, "Alright, *amma*," and started walking in that direction.

After four or five steps, again, she called again, "My son, my son!"

He turned around.

'No, son. You don't know the paths here. How can you go alone? I'll act like I'm going to the fields to answer nature's call. You follow me. Once I get you to the maize fields, you can escape," she said, hurriedly filling the mug with water and walking ahead.

He looked at her in awe.

Police were stationed in every street and corner, they surrounded the whole village. Yet, she crafted a plan to get him out safely, and she was ready to execute it herself. She knew well what could happen if the plan failed. Having born and raised on Telangana soil, she had heard countless stories of people tortured, jailed, and even killed just for feeding or giving shelter to the revolutionaries.

The family that gave shelter to the revolutionaries just two days ago were still being tortured by the police.. She had seen their condition with her own eyes. Yet, she bravely took up the responsibility of saving a revolutionary's life. She had become his pilot.

This is why people are considered the steel fortress for the revolution, he thought.

"Now, I have no worries. This steel fortress will definitely protect me," Swamy thought as he followed her.

*(This is based on Comrade Swamy's narration about the 1993 Padkal encounter.)*

*(Dedicated to all the mothers who protect and shelter the warriors of people's war within their homes, especially to this mother, Rajavva.)*

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*Translation of "Ukkukota", first published in Arunatara in November 2008, and later compiled in Renuka's recently published anthology 'Midko – The Firefly'.*

***Translated by Vimal***

**Notes:**

1. **Gongadi** – a coarse woollen blanket.
2. **Amma** – mother in Telugu language.
3. **Anna** – Elder brother in Telugu; commonly used among guerrillas to refer to a senior male comrade
4. **Akka** – Elder sister in Telugu; commonly used among guerrillas to refer to a female comrade, irrespective her age and seniority.

5. **Chandrasekhar Azad - Indian freedom fighter.** He died on 27 February 1931 while fighting soldiers of the British colonialist regime who surrounded him in a park in Allahabad. Before his death, he managed to kill three enemy soldiers and then shot himself with the last bullet in his pistol so as not to be captured alive by the British.
  
6. **Koyyuru martyr** - Central Committee members of the then CPI (M-L) [Peoples War] party - Seelam Naresh (aka Murali), A. Santosh Reddy (aka Mahesh) and Nalla Adi Reddy (aka Shyam) - were caught alive in Bangalore through a covert operation and later killed in a fake encounter in Koyyuru forest on 2nd December 1999.

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