

SHYAM K. BHAT, M.D.

Dr. Bhat is Assistant Professor in the Medicine/Psychiatry Division, Department of Internal Medicine at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine, Springfield (sbhat2@siu.edu).

Simple Fools

Ten years ago, as an intern, I was sent to a small village about 60 miles from Mangalore for a mandatory "rural posting." It was a foreign world and I, a young and relatively affluent city-dwelling fellow, thought that the month was a terrible imposition. One evening, I was walking around the village market and came across a small shack where tea was sold. A group of old men were gathered around a rickety table. They looked at me curiously as I ordered a cup of tea in broken Kannada, the vernacular language.

"You are from the city, eh?" one old man asked me.

I nodded.

"No one is happy in the city, no, thatha?" one of the other men said. It was more of a statement than a question.

The old man nodded and invited me to sit down with them. "Come on, young man," he said. "Let me tell you a story."

That evening, as I sipped a cup of incredibly sweet and strong tea under the light of a kerosene lantern, with the ubiquitous moths flitting around the lamp and the smell of jasmine from the nearby flower seller filling the cool air, the man told us this story. To me, 10 years later and thousands of miles from that village, it still seems relevant and meaningful, even profound.

Or maybe I am just being nostalgic. You decide.

T. G. Chellappa Rajagopal was his full name, but everyone called him Chella. He lived just down the road and owned 2 acres of land, where he grew cashew nuts and rice. His father had done the same, and his father's father had also done the same, waking up at dawn to tend to the crops, shouting at the few laborers, watering the trees, and then, during the harvest season, hiring a truck to take dried nuts to the village market to sell for a pittance.

His neighbor, Ramaswamy, owned a similar farm and occasionally the two of them would meet and talk about such things as the weather and the latest gossip from the village.

"How is everything, Chella?" Ramaswamy said one day, "Rain might not come this time, I think."

Chellappa nodded but looked out into the distance. Of late, he was wondering if this was all there was to life. He was 25, and, if his parents had been alive, they would've been looking for a girl from a decent family for him. As it was, his father's younger brother, who lived in the city, had already sent word that it was time for Chella to settle down.

Ramu, a few years older, was already married and had one son. Ramu's life, as far as Chella was concerned, seemed to be going the way of everyone else's—marriage, children, grandchildren, occasionally nagging wife, worries about the weather, and then, ultimately, death.

What was the point? Chella wondered.

"I am thinking of getting a job in the city, Ramu," Chella said suddenly. He wasn't sure why he said this. He hadn't really given it much thought, but now it seemed like a good idea, as if in saying it, he had opened up a world previously closed to him.

Ramu laughed loudly. "Very funny, very funny," he said slapping his thigh, guffawing, and shaking his head.

Chella was irritated; he was not sure why. "You fool," he said suddenly, standing up. "If you want to live like this, go ahead. I am leaving. Enough of this nonsense."

Ramu stopped laughing, and looked at Chella with a shocked expression. "You are serious, Chella? What will you do, man? We only have a BA degree, don't forget, and that too from Kumbla college. Who will give you a job? What will you do in the city? No one will marry you, and you will be making at most a 1,000 rupees—"

Chella cut him off. Ramu was his friend. They had grown up together here in the village, had explored the woods as boys, eaten wild berries, learned how to cultivate the soil, but Ramu had always been contented with this life, unwilling to explore. When they joined the college at Kumbla, Chella had first realized that his life in the village was no more than a triviality.

When they would watch a movie at the village theater, Ramu would whistle and clap with innocent glee, but Chella would look at the images and wonder what it would be like to live in the city, with all the chaos and the glitter and promise.

So, while Chella would feel like he was being left out of something bigger, Ramu was quite happy to stare at the images on the screen, as an observer and not as a participant: to him, those images were a window into another universe, fascinating and enjoyable, but not really part of his world.

Ramu's reaction to Chella's desire to go out into the world then was not unexpected, but it was still irritating.

"You stay here, and do what you want," Chella said. "I am going to live my life like a man, not a dumb animal."

Chella sold his land, and a month later, he was gone.

Years passed. Life went on in the village. Ramu continued his farming, he had 2 more children, both girls, and he had to work hard to save money for their weddings.

Occasionally, when he sat out on his veranda with a beedi and coffee, he wondered what had happened to Chella. But most evenings, he would not think about too much other than his crops and the weather. Occasionally, Ramu would secretly watch scantily clad fashion models on his new television, marveling at their bodies, but also wondering how any father could let his daughter parade like this in front of strangers.

Chella, meanwhile, had worked hard in Mangalore. In his first job, as a clerk in a small finance company, he had impressed his superiors with his dedication and intelligence. He was promoted twice, then transferred to Bangalore, where he eventually started his own real estate company.

Within 10 years, Chella had become a rich man. He bought a palatial house in Indiranagar, became a member of the golf club, and married a convent-educated girl, who worked part time in an NGO. They threw lavish parties and often appeared on page 3 of the local newspaper, a sign of having arrived on the Bangalore social scene.

Along the way, Chella learned to speak English well. He polished his accent, purged every trace of the vernacular from his diction. To hear him talk to his Rotary club friends, a whiskey in hand and a cigar in another, wearing his Raymond suit, one would have never guessed that Chellappa Rajagopal was from a small village.

His children went to an international school, for which Chella paid more than he had ever earned in an entire year as a farmer.

But by the time he was 50, Chella began to wonder, Is this all there is to life? A colleague of his died of a heart attack, another left his wife for a younger woman. It seemed harder and harder for Chella now to remember not to lapse into his Kannada accent. When he ate dinner at home with his wife and children, he felt like a guest, like an actor playing a role, and not a real human being.

One evening, instead of his customary shirt and trousers, he decided to wear a *lungi*, just as he used to back in the village. His wife looked at him aghast. "What are you doing?" she said. "The Mehtas are coming home for dinner tonight. You look like such a villager. Please wear something nice."

The next morning Chella took a flight to Mangalore and then hired a taxi to take him back to his village. Maybe,

he thought, once he saw Ramu's plight and the miserable way people lived there, he would be thankful for his achievements.

When he got there, it was like he'd never left. Ramu was sitting on the veranda, smoking a beedi. It was humid and hot, and as always, the loud noise of insects—crickets, dragonflies, mosquitoes—filled the air.

He could see Ramu squinting, wondering who was coming to visit at this time of the evening.

The house looked no different, with the green of the moss on the walls, the slightly dirty tiles of the roof. The only sign of progress was a large dish antenna on the roof.

"Who is that? Chella? Is that you?" Ramu exclaimed. He stared at Chella for a second and then said, "*Yeno*, Chella? What a surprise! Come in, come in. Savithri, see who's come," he shouted. Ramu and his wife welcomed Chella so heartily, that somehow, he felt guilty for ever having left.

After dinner that night, he and Ramu sat out on the veranda. Ramu seemed quieter than Chella remembered, and he struggled to make conversation, to try to find something to say. What did they ever talk about all those years ago? Chella could not remember how they'd ever been friends. He felt uncomfortable and nervously lit one of those beedis.

Ramu, on the other hand, seemed at ease. "So, how is the city, Chella?" he asked.

"Good, good. You should come and visit," he replied, although he did not mean it.

They sat there in silence, with Ramu making the occasional comment about the weather and Chella telling him about his business.

It seemed so different from his conversation with his golf friends. There, it seemed, someone was always waiting for their turn to speak, and there were few gaps in conversation. People in his social circle laughed loudly, talked quickly, and had a lot to say.

But here, when Chella spoke, Ramu just listened. He didn't comment, did not apparently feel the need to contribute to the conversation. He also seemed curiously unapologetic about asking the most basic questions. "They have tall buildings there now, no?" or "I have heard that there are bars in Bangalore, and women are going there alone and dancing. Is this true?"

Ramu also didn't seem to feel the need to say anything remotely interesting or funny. Now he was boring Chella with more conversation about the weather. "Rains were good this year and so the market—"

"Are you happy?" Chella interrupted.

"Happy?" Ramu looked puzzled by the question. He smiled shyly, seemingly embarrassed by this turn in the conversation. "Oh, I don't know, Chella. We don't think about all that."

The next morning, Chella said bye and walked to his taxi. Ramu and his wife stood at the door, waving a cheerful goodbye. Thank God I left, Chella thought. These people have no interest in the world beyond their little farm and their little lives.

And as for happiness, they don't even think about it at all. Such fools they are, Chella thought.

Such simple fools. ♦