

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

Short Story

By K. V. Dominic

Kaatturaja is the most sought out forest thief in Karnataka, India. As his name suggests he is the king of the forest. Six footed sturdy youth of thirty, he is ebony black with a twisted moustache on his ferocious face. In addition to thousands of costly trees he has stolen he has hunted many wild animals and even elephants for their tusks. The State government has offered ten lakh rupees for those who point out him to the corps. He has ambushed the forest guards several times but fortunately none was killed.

Kaatturaja is the illegitimate son of a tribal woman named Kanni. At the age of sixteen when Kanni was collecting firewood in the forest, two forest guards raped her and left. Though she reported the matter to her parents they were not dare enough to complain to the police station which was several kilometres away from their hut. Moreover it was a futile attempt to complain since tribal people's wails were never heeded by the government. Illiterate Kanni gave birth to a son and he lived among other tribal children of the forest as a bastard. Kanni was married to a youth when Kaatturaja was only two years old. Thus Kaatturaja lived with his grand-parents despised by all except his mother. Occasionally his mother visited him and presented him sweets and delicacies which he liked most. Kaatturaja grew up from teen age to youth fed by anger and revenge to the establishment and the world which discarded him as an outcast. The tribal people there lived in a very miserable condition. They didn't get any financial assistance from the government even though crores were allotted to them which were misappropriated and looted by the government officials. There were no hospitals, schools or even good roads for them. They survived on with what the Nature fed them through the forest—tubers, honey, fish from brooks, meat of small animals like rat, rabbit, wild boar etc. Kaatturaja was sent to a school in the nearby village and got primary education. This education opened his eyes and he learnt how his people were exploited by the government and forest mafia. Becoming a youth he decided to alleviate financial difficulties of his neighbourhood by working as a forest thief. He was helped by his friends there and started cutting costly trees of the forest—teak, sandalwood, rosewood, mahogany etc. and sold them to agents of timber merchants. They did it in the thick of forest where forest guards

seldom patrolled. It was the money they earned thus which were distributed to the poor families for various purposes such as purchasing dresses from the town, getting treatment for the sick etc. Kaatturaja never had any guilt of conscience for his illegal act but took it as a sweet revenge to the government for marginalising them.

5th June 2011. World Environment Day. Kaatturaja was all alone in the forest and was trying to axe a teak. Being their own day, the forest and its inhabitants were celebrating. Gentle breeze kissed and stroked all trees, birds and animals. One could sense the mirth of the Nature from the chirping of birds, laughing of leaves, mating calls and other happy cries of animals. The teak sensed the advent of its death and cried for help. Insensible to human beings the cry reached the ears of elephants grazing on a mound nearby.

“Isn’t it an alarming cry of a tree?” the tusker asked the cow elephants.

“True. We shall not allow any human being to trespass our dwelling place this special day,” the other elephants replied.

“Let’s charge then,” the tusker said. Kaatturaja lifted his axe to cut and the elephants rushed to him roaring. Frightened he shot up the tree like a rocket. The elephants stood beneath the tree waiting for his descent. The teak thanked the elephants through its rustling applause. Kaatturaja who has never been timid in his youth, started shivering. It seemed that the tree was talking to him:

“Dear friend, what harm have I done to you to instigate you to kill me? See how I became your saviour! What harm have this forest and its animals done to you? Haven’t you felled thousands of trees and hunted hundreds of animals? You and your people survive only because of our presence. Who will axe the branch he sits on? If you continue to destroy this forest, how and where will those elephants and other animals live?”

“I am sorry dear tree. Kindly forgive me,” Kaatturaja started weeping with clasped palms. He then spoke in loud voice to the entire forest: “In the name of this forest I promise you all that I will no more trouble you. Please pardon me for the crimes I have done. I will be your friend from this very moment and devote my life for the preservation of this forest.” His voice echoed in the forest and his conversion was welcomed by the entire forest with cheers. The

trees swayed and danced. Birds twittered. Animals cried in joy. The elephants standing below went back swinging their trunks in happiness.

With a sigh of relief Kaatturaja climbed down the tree and thanked it once again for saving his life. He went to his house, changed dress and went straight to the magistrate's office in the nearby town. He got permission to get into the magistrate's room.

He told the magistrate, "Honourable sir, I am Kaatturaja, the sought out forest thief. I have come to surrender. I would like to do penance for the crimes I have committed. You may arrest me."

The magistrate gave orders for his arrest. He told him, "It's a great thing that you have surrendered. You will be jailed now and inquest will be done. You can tell the court whatever you want when the trial comes."

Kaatturaja was sent to the district jail. As part of the inquest he was taken by the police to the forest several times. He admitted all charges against him and pointed out the places of the forest where he felled the trees. After a month he was brought to the court for the trial. The public prosecutor pleaded for the government and presented the crimes Kaatturaja has committed. Kaatturaja had no advocates to defend him and he accepted all the charges presented by the public prosecutor. The judge then asked Kaatturaja if he had anything to state or plead before the court.

Kaatturaja replied, "You honour, it is true that I have committed unpardonable crimes and did a lot of damage to the forest. I now sincerely feel that I should not have been so hostile to the forest and the environment. I should have abided to the laws of the government and supported it in its activities for the welfare of the people and the nature. You may punish me. But if the government is mercy enough I can devote the rest of my life for the conservation and preservation of the forest I have destroyed. The court may kindly believe my words that I will no more break the laws of the government but will support to the best of my ability all welfare projects. If you allow me I will make an action force in the forest with my friends and along with them volunteer for the preservation and conservation of the forest. We will not allow any intruders to exploit the forest anymore. As a penance for the crimes I have done we will plant thousands of trees in the forest and thus make it the best forest in the world."

The judge replied, “The court is happy to hear such good words from you. Taking your words for granted the court is giving you a light punishment for the innumerable crimes you have committed. You are going to be imprisoned for one year and it is test dose as to see if your conversion is genuine or not. If you prove your goodness of heart you will be released and then as you promised you can make the action force and serve the forest.”

Kaatturaja was imprisoned in the district jail and he was a model prisoner, favourite of the jail authorities as well as the fellow prisoners. He thus showed that he is a purified and sanctified being.

5th June 2012. World Environment Day. The court released Kaatturaja and allowed him to go back to the forest. The forest welcomed sanctified Kaatturaja clapping leaves. Gentle breeze stroked him. Birds sang his welcome music. Monkeys chattered and led him to the midst of forest. Elephants grazing on the meadow sensed his arrival and trumpeted. It was a grand homecoming for Kaatturaja. The forest accepted him as its saviour Raja.

As pledged and promised Kaatturaja made an action force with his friends. The team of energetic twenty youth started afforestation wherever barren lands were found. The forest guards had no duty at all since Kaatturaja’s team never allowed any trespassers to steal the forest. After two years the forest became a model to the world and the country nominated Kaatturaja and his team for the United Nations Forest for People Award.

Bio:

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