

A Journey of Love by God's Own Children

*(Translation of a travelogue on **Odanadi's** 'Gramada-edege' Cycle Jatha that appeared in Andolana on 18/05/2005 based on inputs provided by Ramesh Doddamani and pictures by Nethra Raju when the Jatha was still in progress. Translation by Kamal Gopinath)*

Blurb:

They are God's Own Children. Mother's love or father's care, they have not known. These orphans whose world hitherto was Odanadi Hostel are now on a trip to the villages and bosom on nature, in search of their roots. For the last 20 days, these 27 children have been on the road, on their bicycles. Of the 27, twenty are girls. And they are emerging richer with each experience by the minute on this unique Expedition.

The Story

A mother of seven, she grew old and frail dreaming of grandchildren playing on her laps. Her dreams were shattered when all deserted her, making away with all that she had saved for them. And then, she sighted the children of Odanadi cycling toward her. A veritable group of angels they were for those aging eyes, hungry for love.

"Come, little ones. Come."

- The grandma of the village could not hold back as emotions welled up in her eyes. Her voice quivered with unquenched love. Her mind willed over her frail body, and she served the meal of her life for the children.

"And look! You are so dirty!"

- She admonished some and set about giving them a good bath. She pleaded and preened at their hair.

She bathed them in love, pure and unadulterated.

The children, all orphaned by fate, responded. They filled their hearts and souls, empty quivers and pockets of vacuum as they were; with cartloads of love. And then it was story time as the grandma began to unravel the untold stories of village life.

"When I was of your age....."

- Shh..... The children were all ears. For, they had not been among those fortunate enough to have grown up through stories told by their own grandmothers. Neither had they experienced mother's love or tasted love on father's lap. At that moment, a new world of love was opening up before them, and all sat transfixed on the village grandma, transported to that ethereal world.

And then it was time to go, onward to another village. Parting was difficult, both for the grandma and the children. Severing the bond of love formed over few hours was indeed painful.

"All of you stay with me. I take care of you all. Please do not go".

- The old woman wailed. Tears welled up in the eyes of the children. Never had they felt so 'wanted' before.

But, leave they had to and the expedition continued. Then, it was meal time again. The children stopped at the village they came by next. 'Knock. Knock.' Door of a village household opened. The family had just cooked its meal.

"Come, we have just cooked just for you".

- The lady of the house wasted no time and soon meals were served.

"Please join us"

- The children pleaded.

"No, we have just finished our meal. Please enjoy yourself".

- So saying, the lady declined and served all that was cooked to the children on expedition. The children savoured a fine meal and were all set to leave after thanking the lady of the house, when young voices from within hollered at their mother they were hungry.

'The lady has just served what she had cooked for her family to us!!!!'

- Odanadi's children whispered among themselves. Tears of gratitude welled up in their eyes. They were experiencing something hitherto unfelt.

A village mother sacrificing the family meal for them!

- Suddenly, the world was so very beautiful.

It is a summer expedition unlike none before. Once on the road, there was no specific destination or any set goals to be achieved. Cycling around 15 to 20 kms a day, over steep climbs and down the swinging drops, the children conquered hills and valleys, nook and nary, crevices and rocks, and villages and waste lands. Come nightfall, they camped at the village they came by. Yes...it is an expedition with a difference.

But then again, the children of the expedition are different too. All orphans, who have never tasted family. Love, be it paternal or maternal, is alien to them. They have spent most of their childhood in the hostel run by Odanadi. And now, they are on a journey to their roots.

Today is the 20th day at the expedition for this team of 27 children. Each moment has been a learning curve for them. And every experience is new, for did not have any pre-conceived notions about the world. Life in villages, village folk, Adivasi, flora and fauna of forests and grasslands, owners of coffee estates and so on..... Slowly, the canvas that is our society is unfolding before them. Young minds that were shrunk and small have suddenly exploded. A plain black and white world has suddenly colourful and magnificent.

An expedition is born

Summer camps were a regular feature at Odanadi. At these camps, over the years, residents have been trained in different art forms and encouraged to give performances on stage. Plans were afoot for a similar camp this year, when everything suddenly came unstuck.

How many from far flung villages could reach the city to watch these performances? And then, what about the expenses involved in conducting such camps? It needed nothing less than Rs.30 to Rs.35, 000! So, why not throw the world open to the residents, demolishing the four walls within which they were trained and told what to do? Why not throw the world at their feet and have they making their own choices? And lo! The 'Gramada- Edege' Bicycle Expedition was born!

Okay, but, what about the bicycles? It was then the turn of Shashikala Madame, a well wisher of Odanadi, to step up and be counted. A teacher by profession, she arranged for the bicycles through her students. 'After all, you are not going to use them during holidays anyway', she had convinced them. And thus, the bicycles became that of the children on expedition.

Fine! Now, what should be the character of the expedition? 'Go to the people,' this refrain attributed to Communist China's founder Mao which Odanadi firmly believed in using as a tool to learning came to mind. But, then if everything, food and et al, is arranged and the expedition self-contained in itself, from where is the learning going to happen? Where is the need for the expedition to interact with people?

Odanadi family went back to the drawing boards along with the children. Soon, regulations were in place. It was decided that the expedition will not cook its own meal unless it was imperative. Second, no food would be bought from hotels. Third, nearly always, the expedition will solicit food from the villages they pass through. Fourth, the children on expedition will spend all nights, to the extent possible, in houses within the villages where they halt for the night, at the rate of two persons in each house. Thus, when the expedition got underway, the children had set off virtually penniless and without any food packs!

On the Roads

A whole world of new experiences unfolded before the cycle on expedition from the very first day. If some villagers wanted to know the caste to which individual children belonged, the children found that in some households the families were barely eking out a living with virtually nothing to eat. While some children enjoyed princely meals in one household complete with chicken and mutton curry, others had to be content with gruel in another household.

But, nearly everywhere, the children put on simple thumb rule before members of each household. *'Do not cook anything special for us. Just serve us what you eat'*. This enabled each child on the expedition experience the prosperity/poverty in the households that came their way and share this with each other along the course of the expedition. Every meal, in a sense, was a lesson in itself and every meal spoke to the expedition on one aspect of life or the other.

Whenever the opportunity presented itself, the expedition spent nights in the verandahs of evening schools. And therein they gathered experiences by the million. They had a grand seat to with televisions, music & phones from houses with electricity *Vs* houses without electricity with school going children pouring over books through kerosene lamps in the courtyard in the same village; the ruckus in the households of drunks with terrified women and children running out every now and then *Vs* households where peace reigned supreme; and houses which remained dark, come day or night.

For the records, this expedition of love was flagged off on April 18, 2005, by Mysore Deputy Commissioner. Cycling via the Hunsur Road, the first villages the children reached were Bilikere and Mallinathapura.

At each village they reached thereafter and whenever they were hungry, the children announced they were orphans depending on the help of the villagers for the day. The children in their own different ways explain they were on a journey seeking love, to groups of villagers they came by. If the villagers were kind and

offered them food, they accepted the same. If they did not respond, the children split in different groups went from household to household with the same plea. On some occasions, the lady of the household shooed them away taking them to beggars. But, eventually, the children were fed in one household or the other.

All these were new experiences for the children on expedition. Though some children were crestfallen at the bitter experience of being turned down or shooed away from some households, enthusiasm increased as days went by as each experience rejection and love in turn from different households in different villages. The children soon gathered courage and began to respond spontaneously to problems and situations they came across in different villages.

On one such occasion in a village, the children heard somebody crying out loudly from a hut. The children ran toward the hut to help. They found a young lady mercilessly raining blows on a helpless old woman lying on the ground with a plate of food near her head. The children intervened and asked the young lady to stop. But, the young lady was unrelenting and continued with the beating. To their dismay they found the young lady was beating none other than her own mother and that, she, like the three other offspring of the old lady, mercilessly beat the old lady whenever she writhes in pain unwell. Many children on the expedition were moved to tears at the plight of the old woman and exasperated at the helplessness they were in to do something for the succour of the suffering aged lady.

When Stanly/Parashu were punished

The expedition was in for another experience when they reached a village Hegde Mane in Madkeri, Kodagu district. When the expedition reached Hegde Mane, the villagers were celebrating the local harvest festival. According to the traditions of the village, all those who reached the village before the festival commenced were to be treated as guests, while all those who reached after the commencement of the festival were 'untouchables' along with all those who came into contact with them, as they do not augur well for the village.

Fortunately for the expedition, the cyclists reached the village before the celebrations commenced and they were welcomed as guests and treated well. However, Odanadi Directors Stanly and Parashuram who reached the village to inquire the well being of those on expedition reached the village only after the festival commenced. A young cyclist, gleeful at seeing her mentor after a long gap, ran toward them and embraced them. Consequently, the young girl alongwith Stanly and Parashuram had to suffer being treated as outcastes that day while the rest of the expedition party enjoyed the festival and the royal treatment that went with it. It was a queer moment and rare experience for the Odanadi Cyclists to

find their own dear directors being ‘punished’ while they themselves were treated royally.

But, it is the experience of visits to the Adivasi Jenukuruba Colonies both within and outside the forests that is etched deeply in the minds of the cyclists. So far the expedition has touched five Adivasi colonies. The warmth with which the forest dwellers received them in all these colonies is heartwarming. No child was turned away from the doors by any Adivasi. The Adivasi warmly shared their food of rice, soups made of greens and tubers without any inhibition.

Children on expedition will never forget the sight of petrified Adivasi kids running away and climbing up the trees on seeing the expedition moving toward their colony. But, it is another fact that the children expedition, befriended these Adivasi children the very same day, combed their hair and pleated them, and played with them to win a place in those young hearts nurtured by the spirits of the forests.

On Love & Nature

But, the expedition is not just a story of the cyclists and the people they met. The trekking of Pushpagiri hills in Kodagu helped them experience nature in different hues, apart from having close encounters with other incarnations of nature during the expedition itself. This apart, the cyclists who had just heard of leeches experienced them first hand during the trek. And then it was a heavenly experience for them to find a tree all lit up and illuminated by the night flies. ‘Look! There is the Christmas tree,’ the children had shouted in unison.

Rivers and rivulets, hills and hillocks, forests and trees, sky and the rolling clouds, and darkness and light – if these were merely at the conceptual levels before the expedition, today the cyclists are richer by the experience of them all and with memories close to their hearts. These are now truly a part of their childhood.

But, it is the words of a young village girl, married off to unending chores at her in-laws place while she was just a child that still echoes and reverberates in the minds of all the cyclists. “*Look, do not become like me. Do not get married when you are still a child*”, the young girl had told the cyclists, while sharing her grief with them.

The expedition is far from complete. The journey of love has some more days to go. It will be three or four days more before cyclists return to base at Odanadi. Ask them then what is love and affection. We did not come across a single person who did not treat us with love and affection, they will say. We were met with love

everywhere and love is everywhere in the world, they will argue. What more can one ask for? Is there anything beyond?

Ends