

Narayan,<sup>1</sup> translated by Sreejith Varma

## The Clan Deity<sup>2</sup>

They lived halfway up the hill. The houses were built rather close together on even surfaces. Since the land belonged to no one in particular, no fences were erected. The dense forest and the menace of wild animals kept them from using the plains for cultivation. Matters like where to cultivate and how to protect crops were jointly decided by the villagers as individual cultivation and crop protection were quite impossible. And besides, was not the animal population more than that of humans on earth?

They used to gather under *Karal*, the rosewood tree, which stood tall in the middle of the ground, providing shade and breeze. The *karanavar*<sup>3</sup> and other important people who helped him had special seats – slightly elevated boulders. The last time they assembled was a couple of days back. It was very late when they reached a decision on ditches appropriate for cultivation and the possible ways to save crops from marauding animals.

The two young men who had come to sweep the place looked intently as they listened to the sound of *Karal* leaves ruffle in the wind. They were astonished to find a beautiful young woman sitting on the *karanavar*'s seat. No one else would sit there. The *karanavar* was the most respected and powerful person in the area and no one would disobey him.

Who was this woman who looked strange and unfamiliar, and with an insolent air about her? Thinking to themselves, "She shows no sign of having noticed us," they went towards her furiously. She was then wiping the blood off her wounds, groaning with pain as she did so. Her clothes were tattered and dirty. She looked like a victim of an assault or an attempted rape. Whatever it might be, it was not an excuse to insult the *karanavar*'s seat. The young men quibbled over what they should ask the strange woman.

When one of them ventured to manhandle her, the other man forbade him, "No." He reminded his friend of the clan's convention: "if you touched a woman who was not your sister, you would have to take her to wife, regardless of her age and even if she was an old hag or an adulteress! So, let us inform any of the local bigwigs. That would be the right thing to do now."

Those who arrived on the spot having heard the news saw the woman who occupied the *karanavar*'s seat, they were enraged. She was a woman, otherwise ... On seeing the *karanavar* followed by other dignitaries, the beautiful woman stood up respectfully. So, she did have some manners?

The *karanavar* looked at her intently and then asked her in a loud voice, so that others too could hear him, "*Kanni*,<sup>4</sup> what is your clan and

tribe? Why have you come here? How did you get wounded and your clothes all torn? Did any lechers ...? Speak!"

After listening patiently to all the questions, *Kanni* replied, "*Karanavar*, may you know that I am the youngest daughter of a clan chief and that I am ashamed to inform you that I am unsafe." Upon hearing this, the question, "What? What?" emanated from the gathered crowd.

"A tribal chief and his army attacked us twice. They, however, could not defeat us. But the vanquished became strong once again and they came back, with their deceit and new tricks, when we were guarding our crops. They looted women, animals and food grains and also burned down our huts. My father and my siblings were killed after a heroic fight. I could not even plant a gravestone in memory of them. Would the vanquished ever get a chance to plant gravestones anyway?" she asked.

"Well, that is true!" affirmed someone.

"I, who was captured alive by our enemies, was meant to be the concubine of the victor! It is the tribe's convention, isn't it? But, before the chief returned from the *kalavelvi*,<sup>5</sup> I got out befooling the guard. Then I sped fast, passing many forests and hills for dear life!" she said.

But the listeners were not convinced. Could this be true? "Didn't you know the tribal law that the enemies should be exterminated once they were defeated? You should have done that in the first place."

"If you don't believe me, you may kill me," snapped the woman.

"Killing a woman without a good reason? *Kanni*, we do not do such a thing!" the old men replied with disdain.

"What do you want from us?" the *karanavar* asked pointedly.

"Security," replied the woman.

"Oh?" No one was convinced by her story. The *karanavar* and other important men sat there looking at the fidgeting group. What if she has come to dig a grave for our clan? If we give her shelter, her enemy tribal chief will naturally turn against us. And if he comes to forcefully take her with him, do we have a right to stop him? But again, can we just allow someone trespassing on us? Moreover, there is no man alive in her clan who could join us in the fight.

As the debate went on, an old man reminded the *karanavar* and other important people, "We were once cursed that our clan will go extinct. You should not forget it."

The *karanavar*'s eyes moved across the faces of other dignitaries present. He saw that they were ogling the woman's body. They should be presently mating with her in their minds.

The old men reminded again, "The clan should be protected, even by discarding this unknown woman. That is the duty of the *karanavar*."

However, some of the leaders did not approve of the old men's opinion.

As they continued bickering, the *karanavar*, not being able to come up with an appropriate decision, turned to the group and said, "Justify your opinions!"

“But that opinion should not invite any danger,” an old man’s weak voice was heard again.

*Kanni* gave the old man a fiery look as if asking, “Not yet gone senile, who are you?” She then turned to the leaders and said, “Give me a shelter here. If someone comes to take me away by force, you should form an army and I will fight on the frontlines. May you know that I am immortal. Are you not brave men born to a well-known clan?”

The leaders, abandoning the *karanavar*, came together and whispered among themselves. They knew for a fact that the *karanavar* did not need a new female body; it concerned only them. Finally, the leaders advised the *karanavar* to do what he deemed appropriate.

“Where are the men in our clan if we cannot protect a woman who has run away for fear of her life?” The *karanavar*’s question stirred the group up.

They looked at one another and cried out in unison, “Respecting our clan’s conventions, let her stay here as *Kanni*!” The old men protested that the people were being imprudent. But the majority’s opinion became the decision.

People noticed that there was an extraordinary glow on *Kanni*’s face. The *karanavar* had instructed to provide her with whatever she needed. *Kanni* had a bath and, with a woman’s assistance, got dressed. An old woman served her food on a leaf which *Kanni* accepted. She tasted it with her fingers and was pleased.

Then, she addressed the assembled people, “I am pleased with your love and generosity. O hear! Those who brought things for me shall be known as the *illakkar*<sup>6</sup> of the same. Those who gave me the land to stand on shall be known as *Bhoodani*<sup>7</sup> *illakkar*. Since those who gave me oil and *mundu*<sup>8</sup> and those who gave me chain and bangles are siblings, their *illams* are related. They should not intermarry. From now onwards you should observe certain rules and conventions. A man should mate with only one woman and vice versa. The girl should have completed eighteen years of age to be an eligible mate and for the man, it is two years more than that of the girl. Mating is forbidden between the children of the same parents and also between the children of siblings. Young men should be skilful in using weapons....”

It was with a sense of an impending danger that the *karanavar* went to sleep. He woke up startled when he felt someone had called him.

Before him was a woman’s glowing figure that said: “Are you wondering who I am? Be not confused! I am your Clan Deity. The birth and even death of your people are only with my knowledge. Your clan will perish. Remember that your clan was cursed to go extinct! Other leaders have deserted you. I will test all of you again. You should propitiate me with offerings,” she said.

“Who cursed that my clan will perish? How did that happen?” muttered a frightened *karanavar*.

*Kanni* became a deity. She had a priest and a *vaithalikan*.<sup>9</sup> The *vaithalikan* announced her orders on her behalf. Those who thought that *Kanni* would share the joys and sorrows of the villagers were mistaken. Some of the selfish leaders started turning into unbelievers. They could not fulfil their wish to sleep with *Kanni*. They were thrown away even before they could touch her. After that, their desire never rekindled! Those who had such bad experiences called her a *durdevata*.<sup>10</sup>

Stating another reason to distance themselves from her, a few others said, “A deity? She is merely a woman who came from somewhere. If she slept with any man, she will become pregnant.”

The innocent and the weak in the clan were bewildered. When diseases spread they came running to the deity. “Save our lives from evil spirits and demons!” they begged.

The priest and the *vaithalikan* warned them: “The diseases will not go away. Deaths will occur again and again. Didn’t you disobey the deity and her priest? You should make atonement by propitiating the deity so that no bigger destruction might befall you!”

The first agricultural produce of the harvest was offered to the deity. Those who were able hunters brought good meat and liver while those who climbed palms and made liquor offered it to the deity. After the offerings were made, they shared them among themselves. They ate and drank and, immersed in a state of intoxication, asked for more. The nights were not long enough for celebrations! The villagers were no longer interested in their crops. The youth developed a certain contempt for their weapons. The cattle did not procreate or produce milk. Women gave birth to a number of fatherless children. The *karanavar* was not trusted or respected. The people fought with one another and kept their distance. The number of both believers and offerings at the temple began to dwindle. Everyone had heard the rumour that was going around in the society. The priest was corrupt, the *vaithalikan* a liar, and the *karanavar* colluded with them. The deity knew of nothing!

The fraudsters frowned on hearing the abuses and expressed their anger in the name of the deity. They crushed the dissent by piercing the eyes and cutting out the tongues of the protesters. The old people could only mumble that the truth would not triumph. Their bones were weak; so it was better to keep their mouths shut!

It was the time when there were no experts in martial arts. If there were any, they were no longer interested in carrying on with it. So the *karanavar* was unable to form an army and the enemies began encroaching on them. The innocent ones in the clan prayed to the deity to save them. The rest of them blamed and cursed the *karanavar*.

The *karanavar*, humiliated and helpless, cried out on the temple threshold: “*Kanni*, save our land and people from the enemies! Didn’t you give the word to the then *karanavar* that you would set out to fight when asked for help? Prove to us that you did not come to destroy our clan! Wear your armour and get ready quickly for the fight!”

Much time had elapsed, but there was no response. Was not the clan deity there anymore? The priest and the *vaithalikan* had long disappeared.

The old folk looked at the *karanavar* and said contemptuously, “Leave behind the old and the weak and form an army of the unskilled. Go out, fight the enemy and get yourself killed! At least, you will be relieved of all your sins!”

“After deciding on the venue and time, you asked people to run away. What a *karanavar* you are!” they continued abusing him.

“Don’t I have even a single man to stand by me?” Knowing that he was isolated enervated the *karanavar*. But soon he had a new vision: Those who stood by him were backstabbers who did harm to the clan under cover of the deity! They would not help him in a crisis.

When calmed down a little, he recalled again. There was already a curse that the clan would perish; it was inevitable. The deity did not do any injustice to us. She was just an omen. Like a lone tusker, the *karanavar* started walking. There was no sign of human activity anywhere. When he heard a ruckus some distance away, he rushed to the spot. He heard the hissing sound of flames and felt the hot, burning wind. The cattle ran helter-skelter, screaming loudly. The *karanavar* listened to it all in sheer amazement. There was not a wail of either a woman or a child. No weapons clashed nor any warriors screamed. No one attempted to put out the fire and no one responded to the enemy’s war cries. It was not at anyone’s suggestion that the people had left the place. Through their own experiences and by word of mouth they understood that times had changed. If you are sure of your defeat, run away for dear life!

When a sharp weapon pierced his chest, the *karanavar* let out a groan of pain and fell to the ground.

The search team was divided over the idol of the goddess which they found among the debris. The idol could be that of some god. It was a *king* who had come seeking shelter. Naked and wounded, he was running for his life, having been defeated in a battle. There is nothing to condemn in that.

We do not create history; we only correct history. So, what about the deity? She was a goddess, all right. There was a priest then also. He who offered his land could be acknowledged as big-hearted. But, who was *he*? He who did not even own the land? Have no idea!

Then, it must have been flowers for *puja*—not land—that he had offered. This idol which remains intact is just a piece of stone. Let it lie on earth facing downwards. Those who lived here were either forest-dwellers or hill people. And they imitated our ‘ancestors.’ Are you satisfied?

## Notes

1. Narayan (b. 1939) is a tribal fiction writer from Kerala, India, who writes in the Malayalam language. He is the recipient of the prestigious Kerala Sahitya Akademi award for his debut novel, *Kocharethi* (1998).
2. Narayan. "Kula Devata." *Pelamarutha*, DC Books, 2006, pp. 78-83.
3. The eldest male in a family who controlled its wealth. Here, also the clan chief.
4. Literally a 'virgin.'
5. 'Kalavelvi,' according to Narayan, is the marriage ceremony where the leader of the victorious tribe marries the wife/daughter of the leader of the defeated tribe.
6. 'Illam' is used to mean a family.
7. 'Bhoodani' is someone who offers land and 'illakkar' are those who belong to an 'illam.'
8. A length of cloth tied around the waist, which reaches quite below the knee.
9. 'Vaithalikan' is an oracle who announces the orders of the deity to the public.
10. Evil deity.