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## A Sacrifice to the Goddess of Smallpox

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Venkayya felt the burning forehead of his young daughter. He had prayed fervently all afternoon, and still the fever mounted. The angry red spots on the child's face and body left no doubt that she had smallpox. Would she die like so many other children in the village? Did God really care? Or would giving one *paisa* to the goddess Misamma spare her life? Should he listen to his younger brothers and give in to the village pressure? What did the Bible mean when it said that a Christian should have no other gods but God?

Venkayya's problems began when a plague of smallpox came to Muchintala, a small village south of Hyderabad, in South India. The village elders called the government doctor; he distributed medicines and gave shots, but these had little effect on the disease. When a number of children died, the elders called the village diviner to determine the reason for the plague. He announced that Misamma, the goddess of smallpox who lived in a rock under a tree outside the village, was angry with the village. The villagers had offered her only two goats instead of the usual water buffalo at her festival five years before. Since then no feast had been held, and Misamma expected a sacrifice from the village every three or four years.

When the elders heard this, they hastily made arrangements for a water-buffalo sacrifice. Messengers were sent to every house in the village to gather donations to purchase the animal, since every household was expected to contribute something to satisfy the goddess.

When a messenger came to the house where Venkayya and his two younger brothers lived, Venkayya told the man that he and his brothers

had become Christians three years earlier, so they could not make a contribution for the sacrifice. It was against their religious beliefs.

The messenger reported this to the high-caste elders, who became very angry. How could anyone in the village, especially an "untouchable" such as Venkayya, disobey their orders? They summoned Venkayya and demanded an explanation. He told them that he and his brothers had become Christians, and that Christians worshiped no gods but the God of the Bible. He would take care of them.

The elders said that they did not object if Venkayya and his family worshiped the Christian God. Everyone had a right to worship his or her own god (*ishta devata*). But this was something different. Misamma was not a god like Rama, Allah, or the Christian God, who live in the heavens. She was only an earthly spirit who lived near their village. If the village did not keep her satisfied, she would continue to plague the children. Everyone in the village had to contribute something or she would be displeased. Besides, giving her something to eat was not worship. Even the Muslims, who worship only one god, gave money to buy the water buffalo so that their children would not die.

When Venkayya told the elders that a Christian could not offer a sacrifice, even to local spirits, they grew more angry. It was all right, they said, if he killed his own children by refusing to make the sacrifice, but he was to blame if other children in the village died. Moreover, he was disobeying the village elders, and that was an unforgivable offense. To show their authority and pressure him to change his mind, the elders placed Venkayya, his brothers, and their families under a village ban. No one in the village could talk to them, sell them goods, or marry their children—or he or she, too, would come under the ban.

The next week was difficult for the new Christians. They had to walk to the next village to buy food. Because they were forbidden to go to their caste well, the women had to fetch water from the stream a half-mile outside of town.

When more children died, the elders summoned Venkayya and told him that if he did not contribute a few *paisa* (cents) for the offering, they would bar him from working his fields. Again Venkayya held fast to his convictions.

The following week was unbearable. The young men of the village prevented Venkayya and his brothers from irrigating their pitifully small rice fields. Under the hot sun, the paddy began to wilt. If something was not done soon, there would be no harvest and nothing to live on next year.

Finally, Rangayya and Pullayya, Venkayya's younger brothers, came to him and said, "We must give in to the pressures of the elders or we will all die. God will understand if we give them a few *paisa*. We will

tell him we did not give it as an offering to the spirit—but as a tax demanded by the village elders. Besides, Misamma is not a goddess living in the heavens. She is only a local godling living in a rock. Offering her a sacrifice is not worship. It is only food to placate her anger. It is like giving something to a belligerent official to keep the peace.”

Four days later, his own little daughter came down with the dread disease that was taking so many in the village. Venkayya began to doubt his own judgment, so he went to see the missionary living forty miles away. The missionary prayed for the child and exhorted Venkayya to stand firm in his refusal to contribute to the sacrifice.

Today, he and the family had prayed all afternoon, but God seemed so far away. The medicine the doctor gave him made little difference to the girl's rising fever. Was he wrong in refusing to contribute even a few *paisa* to the elders? Clearly, local spirits like Misamma were not gods like Jehovah. Was it wrong, therefore, to feed them to keep them happy? They were little different from the officials who made life hard for everyone in the village and needed to be placated with gifts. Maybe the missionary was wrong. He really did not understand the village or the local spirits. Why couldn't he, as a father, pray for God's healing of his child, and give a *paisa* for the sacrifice at the same time?

As night came, Venkayya looked at his wife as she pleaded with God for the life of her child. Would God heal the little girl? And if God did not, what would he say when villagers scoffed at his God? Maybe his brothers were right. Maybe he should go to the village headman and give him one *paisa* to help buy a water buffalo for Misamma. Then his daughter might live. And even if she did not, he would not be blamed for the deaths of other children. Then he could work the fields and his family live in the village in peace.