

## Walking With The Ducks

It is the week following Onam, the culmination of harvest in the season of *Chingam*. We sit on a cement bench in our village home, under the *padipara* - the welcoming roof covering of Mangalore tiles at the entrance, a fifty yards from the house itself. The rains have been good this year and, though Onam has come and gone, the harvest is only beginning, a rather unusual occurrence.

In the distance, we hear what sound like ducks, a noisy sort of chatter, a collective cackling monologue. Ducks! I have never seen ducks here before and this isn't the season for wild bird migration. But then, I had never visited Palakkad in end-August.....

We run out from under the cooling shade of *padipara*, into the open where the morning sun is far from relenting, and turn the corner to see them in their tens, probably a couple of hundred in all, being herded along the mud road by a wizened fellow and his two assiduous dogs of uncertain breed. As the animated procession passes by, they pay no attention whatsoever to us, the ducks pottering along with that old-lady gait of theirs, the old man with his herding stick and disinterested attitude and the dogs, the sole bearers, or so it seems, of the flag of responsibility.

My daughter and I join the procession, a few feet behind the old man. My daughter, as usual, is full of questions - where are they going, why, when will they reach their destination, why ducks, why the dogs..... I gently numb her into silence by suggesting that the old man may particularly dislike inquisitive children (adults being exempted) and might convert them into ducks. The real reason, of course, is that I know none of these answers myself and am about as curious as she is.

I introduce myself to the old man and point out our home. In our village, that one gesture is enough to tell him all about my past, present and, often enough, my future, since everyone obviously knows everyone else, yet this fellow seems least interested. Probably not from this village, I think, and his rough Malayalam, interspersed with words from some dialect, strengthens this view.

"Where are you going?" I ask.

"To a field there," he says, pointing his finger in the general direction of the South.

"But why are you taking the ducks with you?" I ask.

"It's a rice field," he says, as if that explained everything.

What will the ducks do there?

"They will swim in the water," he says.

"So do you pay the field owner to allow your ducks to swim in the water,?" I ask incredulously.

"No, no, no. *He pays me*, he says.

Why? Asks my daughter, who's forgotten that she should not be inquisitive.

"Because the ducks, while swimming turn the soil in the field and fertilise it. Besides they relish the insects that would otherwise eat the crop up."

"Is that all that you do then with your ducks?" I ask, though I am a vegetarian.

He does not clearly understand the question. He thinks for a bit and nods. "Yes," he says in some puzzlement, "that's all I need to do."

"Around the year?"

"No, only during the two harvests seasons which last for about half the year, when I take the ducks from field to field, every day. The rest of the year I wander from place to place.....with my family, ducks and dogs."

"But why do you need so many?" I ask.

"Maybe I don't. A long time ago, I only had two. But they breed well...."

"You never sell the ducks for meat?"

For the first time, he turns and looks at me in the eye. "Would you eat your daughter?" he asks, his face breaking out into a smile.

Delving into the recesses of his dirty shirt, he fishes out a feather and gives it to my admiring daughter.

We bid farewell, stand and watch this motley bunch of irregulars waddle away into the distance under an increasingly irascible sun. I only hope that some things in this World - the garrulous ducks, the dogs, the emotionless old man - will never ever change.

I hope that my daughter and I would walk the ducks again in a fifty years.

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