

On the night of July 20, 1969 when Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon, everyone in America and the developed world watched on TV. Television commentators and editorial writers proclaimed that five hundred years later those small steps taken by those two men would be remembered as the first steps that humans took in exploring the universe.

On the other side of the globe in Muvirundali, a small village in south India, it was already the next day, not very different from the previous one. The news of the lunar landing reached a few people over the All India Radio, for the rest of the folks it trickled down very slowly over days, weeks and months. The news spread by word of mouth, under Neem tree gatherings, small private women's clubs, shepherds' discussions and several other diverse forums so typical of such villages. There was no TV then; the few radios available were used mainly to listen to movie songs. News was considered relevant only to the unemployed or for the few with too much leisure.

That evening, Mr. Nayagam, the school teacher, who had heard the news over the radio, announced it to the students during the evening assembly. Then he advised the students to tell the news to their parents and others; which became one of the means through which the news spread.

The next day when the local newspaper arrived around 9:30 AM along with other mail, a small group of people gathered to read the news. The paper had printed the lunar landing on the second page; local political happenings occupied the first. It had a fuzzy photo of Armstrong standing next to the American flag on the lunar surface.

Like all mothers, Mathuram too tried to feed her toddler daughter, Kavitha

by showing her the moon. She sang a Tamil nursery rhyme.

Nilā Nilā Odi va

(Oh moon come running)

Nillamal Odi va

(And come without stopping)

Between the lines of the rhyme she would manage to feed small morsels of food: rice and lentil mashed into a gentle paste that would be agreeable to the baby.

That day for some reason the baby refused to eat. She cried, and jerked her head away when food was brought near her mouth. She asked for the moon, in her baby tongue.

“Niya konda”

The mother tried to find excuses, but nothing worked. Just then, Murugan, Mathuram’s nephew and a schoolboy, who was watching all this, came and talked to her.

“In the future you may be able to take her to the moon,” the boy said. Mathuram didn’t understand. Murugan told her about the lunar landing, as he had heard at school. While listening to the story the mother fed her child and the little one ate without much fuss. Maybe the boy’s presence had made the difference. Whatever it was, the mother was pleased with the boy and the news.

Housewives got their news through one of their own private channels. They were like private clubs; independent and autonomous. Membership ranged between five and ten. Every night, around eight o’clock, after dinner, when the cooking and cleaning was over, after young children had been tucked away in beds in their respective corners, after the men had stepped out into the street to smoke their beedies and make conversation or to go back to their work at their farms, the clubs met. It was their time to indulge in their own pursuits of leisure. After a

quick wash they would walk to their usual venue, mostly a minute away and within hearing distance from their homes.

Shenbagam, Bakkiyam, Rajam, Muthammal (called Muthu) and Esther met in Muthu's house. Muthu was the eldest and had the biggest house; she was also the unannounced leader of the group. One by one they would come, at their convenience, and sit around and chat a little bit until Muthu was ready, then they would all sit in the veranda, almost in a perfect circle, on a mat or just on the tile floor. Their subjects generally involved other women, men-women relationships, family fights and such other absorbing issues. That evening Muthu opened the discussions.

“Shenbagam, how is the new girl?”

Shenbagam began, and everyone brought their heads together. They discussed the daily drama that took place in Baskar and Vimala's family in hushed voices. Vimala didn't like to live in the village; and Baskar didn't want to go and live with his in-laws in the town, so there were arguments daily. That subject kept the group occupied for some time.

When they seemed to be running out of topics, Esther reluctantly mentioned the lunar landing by some white people. She was not sure if the group would show any interest in such an irrelevant topic. But surprisingly the group did show interest, so Esther told them about the trip to the moon and back by three American men.

Rajam, the only one who had completed high school in the group, criticized the American men for not including even one woman on the team.

While women exchanged their news at nights, gatherings of men didn't have to wait until dark. Whenever they had a free moment they gathered without any previous plans, under a tree, on stone benches or just on the street corners and

talked about whatever they liked. Unlike the women's groups these were not private clubs, anybody could join in and leave at anytime.

A group of young men were sitting on the stone benches across from the temple in the evening and their discussion turned to the lunar landing. One curious man spoke, "People say that some white men went to the moon and came back to earth alive. Is that true or false?" He asked Ramasamy.

Ramasamy had one year of college education to his credit. So he proudly explained the moon landing in detail as it appeared in the newspaper. Then he took out a photograph of Armstrong standing next to an American flag on the moon, cut out from a local newspaper. Some refused to believe that the figure standing next to the flag was a man. They questioned why did he not take off his mask and reveal his face for the photo at least. Ramasamy didn't know why the man was dressed the way he was.

Relief came in the form of Mr. Nayagam the teacher, as he walked by. They all threw away the beedies they were smoking, as a sign of respect, and Ramasamy asked the teacher. Mr. Nayagam was happy to explain. He described the moon's atmosphere, and lack of oxygen, the unknown fear of disease and poisonous gases and thus the need for a space suit.

After the teacher had left, a man asked, "If they have landed on the moon, will they build houses and block the light from the moon," he seemed a little concerned.

The group discussed the issue for some more time and dispersed as suddenly as it had come together.

People who did manual labor usually got their news at work. It was a Saturday morning, around eleven o'clock, and the sun was beginning to grow hot and the first signs of tiredness started appearing on the workers' faces. Lunch was

more than an hour away. Amongst them was Santhosam, also a worker but a woman of much experience in work and life, who decided to divert their attention. She called out to the farm owner's ten-year old son who was sitting under the tree pretending to supervise them.

“Hey, little Master, tell these people about the moon story.”

The little boy was shy and reluctant at first, but after some coaxing and cajoling from Santhosam he began to speak. He proudly told all the grown ups what he heard at school. When he finished, Lakshmi, a middle aged woman asked, “Is it really true that three white men went to the moon or is it a story?”

The boy seemed a little upset “It is true,” he stressed his words.

“Come on, he is telling us what he learned at school, we should be thankful to him,” supported Santhosam.

“I am just verifying,” replied Lakshmi.

“Yes, it is true. It is not a story,” the boy insisted. As if they had heard a wonder of wonders all the workers stopped their work, straightened their hips and looked at each other. After a minute's break they continued their work.

A seventy-three years old woman named, Deivanai, affectionately and respectfully called as Deivanai patti (grandma), didn't belong to any club, she was by herself, mourning the loss of her husband who had died a few months ago. She had stopped all social interaction with the rest of the world.

Deivanai remained oblivious to the facts about the lunar landing, until several weeks later, when her eleven-year old grandson mentioned it to her to cheer her up. At first the news of the lunar landing didn't seem to produce any excitement on her face; however the boy thought there was a slight sparkle in her eyes towards the end.

The next day she asked her grandson to tell her more about the lunar landing; when the boy finished telling all he knew she asked him more questions.

That day, daily life seemed to go on as usual in Muvirundali, when evening came the cows returned home, dogs barked, chicken were caught and housed in little wooden hen houses. Men smoked their beedies and talked under trees or on stone benches. Muthumal's women's club had just convened and started their gossip. Deivanai patti, who by now would have normally retired to her bed was sitting in the hall. She ate her dinner, quite an improvement over the previous few weeks. When the moon had risen above the houses and trees and was visible in the clear sky, she walked outside. She stepped carefully towards the short compound wall, put both her hands on the wall and looked at the moon. She didn't come back, even after several minutes, it seemed like she was studying the moon.

Her son and daughter-in-law noticed the changes in her since the day began. When she walked outside the house to moon gaze, her son covered her with a shawl to protect her from the cold breeze. They didn't know why she was watching the moon for so long. Was she looking for the Americans' foot prints or, for the flag they had left behind, they couldn't tell. They knew their father's death had affected her deeply and didn't know how to console her.

Deivani patti stood there, moon-gazing, for a long time. Men returned home from their discussions, woman ended their gossip sessions and went home. But she still stood there. When her legs could no longer support her, she walked back to her room. The next day her son put a chair outside for her so she could sit and watch the moon.

In the next few days that followed, there seemed to be some improvement in her state. She ate better, her face looked a bit more relaxed, but she didn't speak much. She seemed to be immersed in a long deep thought; whatever was the

subject of Patti's contemplation, her family members could not fathom. When nightfall came, she moon gazed as usual for several hours.

One evening, a week after she started moon-gazing, she stepped outside the house. She was holding her right hand to her stomach, it seemed like her sari was bundled up heavily there. She walked slowly with a slight stoop, not bothering to make eye contact with anyone on the way. The few people who saw her on the street greeted her, but she didn't look up. She walked on. They knew of her grief and didn't mind. When the postman saw her, he followed, staying close; to catch her, lest she stumbled. Children playing on the street stopped their play until she passed by, without anyone telling them.

Reaching her nephew's house, after a few minutes, she climbed the few stone steps carefully. She put one hand on the door frame and through the open door peered in.

Mr. Nayagam had just come back from school. When he saw his aunt he dropped what he was doing and rushed to her side and helped her come inside the house; all the while she was holding her stomach with one hand. Mr. Nayagam took his aunt inside and made her sit on a wooden cot with a soft mattress on it. He placed pillows on her sides for support. She sat at one end of the bed and held the side frame with one hand and leaned on the pillow, the other hand still clutching her stomach.

When she was seated and settled, Mr. Nayagam asked her in a gentle voice "Aunty, why did you have to walk all the way? If you had sent for me, I would have come." Deivani patti in her husky voice replied, "There are children there, I thought it would be a little quieter here. And, I needed the fresh air and the walk."

Mr. Nayagam's wife, Chinnamal who was in the kitchen, came up and greeted her Aunt Deivani, and asked her if she could bring her some tea. Deivani

patti nodded her head, so Chinnamal went back to the kitchen.

Mr. Nayagam knew his aunt had come to him with some specific objective in mind. So without waiting for her to open up, he asked her gently, "Aunty, you can tell me whatever you have come to tell me, without hesitation. Even though I am your nephew, you know I treat you like my mother, so please tell me."

Chinnamal brought a cup of tea, pulled a tall stool in front of Deivani patti and placed the tea cup gently on it. Deivani patti took a few sips of tea from the cup and prepared to talk. There was a spark in her eyes which quickly began to fill with tears but she controlled herself in time, so no tears rolled over her cheeks. Her lips trembled for a second, and then she asked, "Is it true that the Americans have gone to the moon?"

Mr. Nayagam was completely taken by surprise. Had she come all the way, at her age and her emotional state, to ask him about space science? "Yes, that is what I heard," he said. Just to please her, he continued, "Yes Aunty, why do you ask? Is there anything else you would like to know?"

She cleared her throat and slowly began again, "You are educated. You are a teacher and my beloved nephew that is why I am asking you." She had to take in a few deep breaths. Using the break Mr. Nayagam said, "Yes Aunty, please tell me, what ever you have on your mind."

She spoke, "Since your uncle died I have become a walking corpse. I can't live in a world without him." Mr. Nayagam tried to cheer her up, he said, "Aunty, I know Uncle was a great man and that the two of you were very close to each other." As he said this, memories flashed through his mind.

He remembered the time he accompanied her to a government office and they asked her her husband's name. Out of respect and as was the custom those days, she didn't want to tell his name. So she had asked young Nayagam to say it.

At the time, Nayagam was only an eight-year old boy, and had called his grandfather Grandpa, so he didn't know his name. Leading him through several witty questions and answers she made him say the word "Muthu" which meant pearl; and when that word was mentioned the government officer had quickly guessed it to be Muthiah.

He tried again to concentrate even though thoughts of his uncle and aunt's long lives kept coming to his mind. He continued from where he had left off, "I know you miss him. But think of the world before you: three children, many grandchildren, several nephews and nieces and their children. We all love you. We want you to live with us happily."

She nodded in agreement. She pressed both her lips together, the wrinkles in her face tightened and moved towards the middle making her face look smaller. She could not control herself any longer, tears rolled down from her eyes and down her face in a torrent. She cried out, "In sixty years I have never been away from him for more than a day."

Her mind flashed back to her childhood. She was only eight years old when she was married, so she stayed at her parents' home since she was so young. The dhobi, who washed their cloths, would say on her weekly visits, "I hope by the time I come back next week you would mature into a young lady, ready go to your husband's home." Little Deivanai would blush, cover her face and run inside. Finally when she was thirteen she moved to her husband's home.

Then she remembered her long and happy married life. It was like a fairy tale come true. Her husband was exceptionally nice to her. He loved her so much that in all their life together he would have spent only a few days away from her, and never more than a day at one time. It was well known that he gave up a promising business opportunity just to avoid going away from his wife. When her

thoughts settled a little, she spoke again.

“You know your uncle. He was such a nice man. Never hurt anybody. Always helped everyone, I am sure he would have gone to heaven,” she said and looked at Mr. Nayagam.

He was certain, if there was a heaven his uncle was there, so he said, “Of course, without any doubt.” But he didn’t understand why his aunt was suddenly talking about that.

After a pause that lasted several seconds, during which Mr. Nayagam intentionally didn’t speak so she could get a break, Deivanai patti spoke, “Do you know when the Americans are sending the next rocket to the moon?”

Taken by surprise, once again, he could not understand what the old lady had on her mind. Again, with all consideration for his aunt, he politely replied, “I really don’t know, Aunty. But I’ll try to find it out for you,” he wasn’t sure if he could get that information even if he tried.

Again after a short break, she put her hand into the folds of her sari and took out a bag. So that was why she was clutching her stomach all along, he thought. He watched as she put the bag on the bed and opened it with both hands. She put her hand inside and brought the contents out. As her hand came out, along with it came glittering, valuable jewelry. Mr. Nayagam was in a shock. Why had she brought so much jewelry, he wondered. She took them all out, her diamond necklace, gold chains, diamond ear rings, diamond nose studs, dozens of bangles with stones of various colors, and other jewelry. All bought by her husband. All tokens of love. She took them all out and displayed them before him, but he still couldn’t figure out, why?

“He, your uncle, bought all these for me. Now I have no use for them. Do you have any idea how much one could sell these for?” she asked him.

He had no idea about that either. But more than that he was wondering why she would want to sell them at all. He politely answered, "I really don't know Aunty."

She didn't seem to be worried by his answer, she looked at his eyes and said, "I know if there is anyone who could help me, it is you. Can you help me please?"

He still didn't know what she had in mind. But he didn't hesitate to answer. He said, "Aunty, if I could, I will do anything to help you. I would even give my life. Tell me how I can help you. Don't hesitate to ask me." He meant every word of it, then rose from his chair and walked closer to her as if to receive a written order from her.

She straightened her back, looked up and said, "I know you, but this may be hard. That is why I brought all these, to help in any way possible," she showed the jewelry displayed on the bed; and continued, "You can use all these, or keep them, but the next time the Americans go to the moon can you get me also a ticket?"

Mr. Nayagam was stunned; this was the last thing he was prepared for. His seventy-three years old aunt wanted to go to the moon and she was willing to do anything for it. He stood there like a statue, eyes wide and jaw dropped.

She looked at him and understood what the answer might be. Hopping against hope she tried to explain, but her face twisted and she was crying again and between her sobs she said, "Once I reach the heavens I am sure he will come and take me with him," she meant her husband. Then, Mr. Nayagam now understood the reason for all her questions and her actions.

He understood his aunt's love for her husband and the extent of her yearning to be with him. But the utter hopelessness of the situation affected him greatly. He knew nobody could help her. Tears began to pour from his eyes and wet his shirt. He took a step forward and hugged her with both arms. Their heads rested

on each others shoulders as they cried.

She understood that it was impossible; he didn't have to tell this to her. She cried even more. They stayed like that hugging and crying for a long time.

Chinnamal who came in was totally surprised. She had never seen her husband cry like that, not even when his own mother died. Not wanting to disturb them she stood there quietly.

They came to their senses when Ramu, Deivanai's son came in; they freed each other from their embrace, but their eyes were still wet. She knew it was over, there was no way. She got up to go home.

Mr. Nayagam walked with his aunt and cousin to their home. After returning, he sank in his chair, and didn't talk to his wife. He refused his dinner. Then after a long time he went to bed and fell asleep.

Early morning before dawn, his wife woke him up and delivered the news. His aunt had died in her sleep.

He was not surprised. He knew that since she couldn't go to her husband in body she had gone to him in spirit. He cried no more.