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## Ari Varutada

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Where did my idea originate?  
I mentally knock my forehead

Hm,

Out wafts a faint memory

A childhood one

Me in *taravadu*

There's *kattanchaaya* in a steel glass  
And there's it in a flat-edged steel bowl:  
*ari varutada!*

We faced a rare situation

No snacks to nibble with tea

Not that it hadn't happened before

Having set personal records

In finishing great amounts of snacks

A 'justified' indulgence for my scholarly full-nighters

Often selfishly finishing whole packets

Not keeping a single bite for *Amma*

No, today with the fridge looking solemnly half-empty

And the dining table spick-and-span

Today held no possibility

Of heading to the local store

To stave off the insistent hankering

No, today held no such possibility

Today and tomorrow

And the coming few weeks

That is when I suggested to *Amma*,

“Let us fry raw rice”

She was pleasantly surprised

Taken aback simultaneously—

By the *grihanathan's* resourcefulness

And in the falling to humility in the resourcefulness

*Maaman* had called today

And asked to speak to me—

Another rare occurrence

His tone was unhindered today

Unhindered by time and concerns of time—

A rare occurrence third

I told we had had *ari varutada*

He laughed out loudly.

It's like a cracker bursting

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A single cracker bursting  
 Bursting suddenly—  
 This particular laugh of his  
 Carrying through  
 A thorough enjoyment of the subject of humour  
 I remembered a photo from his wedding album  
 Him in his white shirt  
 His head thrown back in this same laughter.  
 On the phone,  
 I could imagine the glow on *Maaman's* face

Today's news froze me  
 Numbing me for moments  
 Not the rising Corona deaths  
 But two reports, two images:  
 Migrant labourers hosed with disinfectant  
 And six *Musahar* children eating grass  
 The children's image hit me harder  
 But I did wonder—  
 How did the photograph occur?  
 At the very exact moment?  
 Reports challenged the veracity of this one  
 The grass in actuality argued to be *akhri daal*  
 Another sensationalising report?  
 At the unabashed cost of a community's dignity  
 No other children but *Musahar*  
 And nothing else but grass!!

But why did that image hit me harder?  
 Yes, another memory wafted out  
 Memory of a memory narrated  
*Acchan* in his childhood  
 A hungry day  
 No one at home  
 And nothing at home  
 So forsaken by hunger  
 That he marched to the *pinakku* sack  
 And had a fistful

I do not doubt the veracity of this event  
 For in this generational memory I hold  
 I can feel *Acchan's* shame  
 And see the jest in others' eyes  
 As they came to know what the boy had done  
 The jest in *Amma's* eyes as she narrated the memory to me

The jest in *Maaman's* voice as he heard of today's *ari varutadu*

This jest,  
 I know its exact point of pleasure  
 It is of crossing the line  
 It is of making it across  
 It is of forgetting the journey made  
 It is of the safe vantage point  
 That allows a view below  
 It is of my ability  
 To march down the local store  
 Whenever I hanker for a packet of *Kurkure*  
 It is of the ability of the reporter  
 To make a 'report' on the *Musahar* children  
 It is of the ghastly shock,  
 The readers of this report feel  
 The ability of these readers to feel the ghastly shock  
 Their affordability of guilt  
 My affordability of guilt

But in this memory  
 I feel no linearity of shame  
 Continuing in me  
 The 30-year old me, however,  
 Feels a strange hankering loss  
 I wish I could go back to that moment  
 The moment little *Acchan* put the fistful in his mouth  
 And the shame crept upon his face  
 I wish I could run to him  
 A little me  
 In my white *petticoat*  
 And white-ribboned pig-tails  
 I wish I could run to him  
 And put my little hand on his cheek  
 And say, "It's nothing to be ashamed of."  
 And then sit with him  
 Our legs bobbing down the porch  
 A flat-edged steel bowl between us  
 Happily sharing the *ari varutadu*.

-X-X-X-

Ari Varutada: Fried raw rice, used to be consumed as a snack  
 Taravadu: Ancestral house  
 Kattanchaaya: Black tea  
 Amma: Mother

Grihanathan: Head of household

Maaman: Maternal uncle

Musahar: A Dalit community belonging to the eastern Indian Gangetic plain

Akhri dal: A type of lentil that can be eaten raw

Acchan: Father

Pinakku: Cow fodder

Kurkure: Cornpuffs mass-produced by PepsiCo

Petticoat: Here, a white pinafore-like garment worn by girls, mostly underneath frocks