"How Man Got the Groove in His Back"
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Traditional Story From Popular Legend of Manikkavasagar as Told by Jagan Iswaran

There is a Hindu story describing how man got the groove in his back that runs the length of his spine. If you look at any other vertebrate besides man, you will notice that their spine is always level with their back, but in man this isn't so, his spine lies under a groove in his back that seems as if it were meant to divide his body in half. This is the story of how man got this groove.

There is a grand river in the state of Chola (A Tamil kingdom in South India) and many thousands of years ago there was a terrible flood that caused great damage to this kingdom. As a result, the King of Chola ordered that a great wall be built by the citizens to prevent further flooding. Since the kind was such a busy man, he told his minister to immediately set about the task of assigning jobs to the citizens, and that he wanted the wall to be completed by nightfall.

It just so happened that the minister was a very unscrupulous and iron-hearted man, and when he assigned the jobs he gave every citizens (man, woman or child) an equal amount of work to do - regardless of age or capability. Among these citizens was an old woman named Senmanaselvi who cooked doughnuts for a living. She was a frail, weak and very ill woman with only a few weeks to live, and yet she was given the same amount of work to do as an able bodied man - how unfair!! All of the citizens went to work quickly - except poor Senmanaselvi who sat beneath the shade of a Mango tree despairing over how she could get her portion of the wall built. She knew that the king would make his rounds at nightfall and if her work wasn't done the punishment would be severe. She looked hopelessly on.

Deciding that she couldn't do the work, Senmanaselvi went to a nearby temple to worship where she left her problem at Lord Ganesha's feet. Having done this, she began to pray fervently to Lord Siva to assist her in some manner so that her share could also be built. After a long, intense, devoted worship, she turned to leave the

temple and as she reached the street she saw a very young, but extremely strong laborer who was obviously not from that kingdom. He was singing and shouting in a loud voice, "Kooli, Kooli" (I'm for hire). Senmanaselvi's hopes rose as she approached the laborer to explain her position to him. Being such a kindhearted person, the laborer realized that she was in dire need of his service; so he was soon employed by Senmanaselvi to build her share of the wall. He was only too glad to be of assistance and promised to do a good job and that he would work quickly and be done before nightfall. In return she promised to make him doughnuts to eat while he worked. Satisfied that the laborer would complete her work, Senmanaselvi went home with a peaceful mind.

Meanwhile, the laborer went to the site where the wall was being built and saw all of the citizens hard at work. He too began to work, but he had a strange way of doing his share; first he would take some earth, put it in place, then add some water and then start dancing a jig around the spot. Having done this, he would eat a doughnut and go to sleep under the shade of a tree, he continued in this manner until nightfall began to approach. There was barely any daylight left when all of the citizens were done, and there was one portion that wasn't built - Senmanaselvi's portion.

Who should be approaching but the king accompanied by his ministers. He began to inspect the wall and when he reached the portion that wasn't built, he demanded to know who had been assigned to built it. The citizens frightfully pointed out that it was the laborer who lay sleeping under the tree. The king angrily told his minister to wake up this lazy man. Having done so, the laborer rose and looked at the king who demanded to know why he hadn't done any work. The man offered no satisfactory reply and just smiled at the king. At this point in time, Senmanaselvi appeared and explained that it was she who was given that portion to build and since she couldn't have possibly done the work, she had hired the laborer. The king became very furious and was obviously upset. He ordered his minister to flog the man until he learned a good lesson. The minister walked quickly toward the laborer with his terrible whip in hand and told the man to turn his back toward him. He then aimed a forceful lash at the man, but low and behold, as soon as the minister's whip alighted on the center of the man's back, the man completely vanished! Instead the lash, which was meant for a lazy laborer was immediately and painfully felt by the king and all who were present.

All of them realized what had happened - it was Siva who took the form of a laborer to test man's compassion. The king automatically dismissed the minister for he knew this had happened because the minister, in his foolishness, had assigned

the same amount of work an able-bodied man could do to a poor weak dying woman. The lash had left an indelible mark on the back of all mankind.

Moral: Being in authority does not mean you can act unfairly.

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