The Palindrome

Once upon a time in a village called Tenali, in South India lived a boy, Rama. He was a very clever and good- looking boy, but he got on everyone’s nerves. He was always playing pranks or making fun of people. He was quite irrelevant and would even mock the elders of the village. Now, elders who take themselves and their position seriously do not like to be made fun of. They decided something had to be done with Rama. They caught hold of Rama’s mother and warned her that her son would come to a sticky end if she did not take him in hand. He could not go around making a mockery of everything. They warned her if he went on like this he would be sent away from the village.

The poor lady did not know what to do! Rama did not take interest in any kind of occupation. After months of gentle reprimand and attempts at persuading Rama to turn over a new leaf, she got really fed up. She found a holy man who taught boys and sent Rama off to study with him. “Maybe he will teach you something useful,” she said. “Don’t come back till you have learnt enough to earn your living.”So Rama went off to study. Now he was actually quite good at his lessons. When his brain was occupied with something he even forgot to joke! His teacher was very pleased with him. One day the teacher told Rama, “I’ve taught you all I can. Now you must go out into the world and seek your fortune.”

“But,” said Rama, “I still do not know what I can do for a living! How will I face my mother?” His teacher then taught him a mantra and told him to recite it at the Kali temple three million times. “If you concentrate and recite it sincerely,” he said, “Kali with her thousand heads will reveal herself to you. If you remain unafraid you can ask her for a boon. Ask her to tell you what you must do.”The next day Rama got up early in the morning, bathed in the river and wore fresh new clothes. Then he went home to his mother and got her to make up a puja plate for him with a coconut , some bananas, betel leaves and nuts, joss-sticks, a string of sweet-smelling jasmine and a lump of fragrant camphor. He then set off to recite the mantra at the temple. He stood in front of the deity at the temple and began chanting the mantra. He concentrated so hard that he did not notice that it had turned dark or that the temple priest had locked up the shrine and gone home. When Rama had chanted it three million times, Kali revealed herself to him in all her glory. Rama looked at her in awe but he was quite unafraid. He moved his head from side to side as he tried to take in all her thousand heads. Kali seemed quite pleased to see a mortal who was so bold and unafraid. Suddenly a thought struck Rama and he burst into laughter. He laughed and laughed till tears streamed down his cheeks and he had to hold on to one of the pillars for support. Kali was stunned for a moment. She had never seen a mortal who was not only not terror-struck by her form but also had the temerity to laugh at her. She felt quite insulted and thundered, “You puny mortal! How dare you laugh at me? What do you find so funny?”

Rama tried to control himself and finally spoke between gusts of laughter. “I was just wondering,” he gasped. “What do you do when you have a cold? With one nose and two hands, we mortals find it so difficult. How on earth do you manage with a thousand runny noses?”The Goddess was furious. She threw up all her thousand heads and looked down haughtily at Rama. “Because you’ve dared to laugh at me,” she cursed, “you will earn your living as a jester- a vikatakavi. That is an interesting occupation, whichever way you say it! It’s a palindrome. Vi-ka-ta-ka-vi. It reads the same left to right or right to left!”

The Goddess was amazed at Rama’s wit that could see a joke even in a curse. She was a little mollified and said, “Since you have such a sense of humour you will be a jester at the court of the king and will make a name for yourself.”And that is exactly what happened. Rama went on to become Tenali Rama-jester to the king of Vijayanagar.