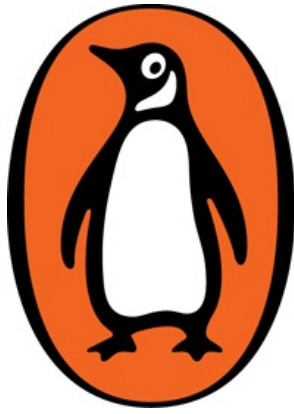


SUDHA MURTY

THE OLD MAN
AND HIS GOD

*Discovering
the Spirit
of India*





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THE OLD MAN AND HIS GOD

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About the Author

Sudha Murty was born in 1950 in Shiggaon in north Karnataka. An M.Tech in Computer Science, she teaches Computer Science to postgraduate students. She is also the chairperson of the Infosys Foundation. A prolific writer in English and Kannada, she has written nine novels, four technical books, three travelogues, one collection of short stories and two collections of non-fiction pieces, including *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read and Other Stories* (Puffin 2004). Her books have been translated into all the major Indian languages and have sold over 150,000 copies.

*For Infosys Foundation, that has shown me a world
beyond, with immense gratitude*

Preface

I have now written two collections of my real-life experiences which many say they have enjoyed reading. This is my third. All the experiences mentioned here are real, though the names have been changed in some places. People often ask me how it is that so many interesting things happen only to me. To them I reply that in life's journey we all meet strange people and undergo so many experiences that touch us and sometimes even change us. If you have a sensitive mind and record your observations regularly, you will see your life too is a vast storehouse of stories.

Of course there are some incidents here which happened to me because of the people I met during my work or in my travels. In all the cases I have taken care to take the permission of the people I have written about.

I have often wondered what it is about these experiences that has been appreciated by readers in all corners of the country. I have come to the conclusion that it is because they are told simply and are all true. After all, there is something within all of us that attracts us to the truth. I have tried to hold up a mirror to the lives of the people of our country and attempted to trace that spirit within us which makes us uniquely Indian.

I have dedicated this book to the Infosys Foundation. For many, the foundation is a charitable organization, a branch of a rich company. But for me, it is something closest to my heart. Initially I was a mother to it. I was there from the day it came into existence. Somewhere along the line, it has become the mother and I the child. Holding its hands, I have journeyed many miles, faced praise and criticism. It has been an integral part of my life. We have never abandoned each other.

There are many people who have worked with me in the long journey that a book undergoes from the time it leaves the writer's desk. I would like to thank them all. I want to thank Sudeshna Shome Ghosh of Penguin India, for her efforts, without which the book would not have been published.

The royalty proceeds from this book will go to charity.

November 2005
Sudha Murty
Bangalore



1

The Old Man and His God

A few years back, I was travelling in the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. It was getting dark, and due to a depression over the Bay of Bengal, it was raining heavily. The roads were overflowing with water and my driver stopped the car near a village. ‘There is no way we can proceed further in this rain,’ said the driver. ‘Why don’t you look for shelter somewhere nearby rather than sit in the car?’

Stranded in an unknown place among unknown people, I was a bit worried. Nevertheless, I retrieved my umbrella and marched out into the pelting rain. I started walking towards the tiny village, whose name I cannot recall now. There was no electricity and it was a trial walking in the darkness and the rain. In the distance I could just make out the shape of a small temple. I decided it would be an ideal place to take shelter, so I made my way to it. Halfway there, the rain started coming down even more fiercely and the strong wind blew my umbrella away, leaving me completely drenched. I reached the temple soaking wet. As soon as I entered, I heard an elderly person’s voice calling out to me. Though I cannot speak Tamil, I could make out the concern in the voice. In the course of my travels, I have come to realize that voices from the heart can be understood irrespective of the language they speak.

I peered into the darkness of the temple and saw an old man of about eighty. Standing next to him was an equally old lady in a traditional nine-yard cotton sari. She said something to him and then approached me with a worn but clean towel in her hand. As I wiped my face and head I noticed that the man was blind. It was obvious from their surroundings that they were very poor. The Shiva

temple, where I now stood, was simple with the minimum of ostentation in its decorations. The Shivalinga was bare except for a bilwa leaf on top. The only light came from a single oil lamp. In that flickering light a sense of calm overcame me and I felt myself closer to god than ever before.

In halting Tamil, I asked the man to perform the evening mangalarati, which he did with love and dedication. When he finished, I placed a hundred-rupee note as the dakshina.

He touched the note and pulled away his hand, looking uncomfortable. Politely he said, 'Amma, I can make out that the note is not for ten rupees, the most we usually receive. Whoever you may be, in a temple, your devotion is important, not your money. Even our ancestors have said that a devotee should give as much as he or she can afford to. To me you are a devotee of Shiva, like everyone else who comes here. Please take back this money.'

I was taken aback. I did not know how to react. I looked at the man's wife expecting her to argue with him and urge him to take the money, but she just stood quietly. Often, in many households, a wife encourages the man's greediness. Here, it was the opposite. She was endorsing her husband's views. So I sat down with them, and with the wind and rain whipping up a frenzy outside, we talked about our lives. I asked them about themselves, their life in the village temple and whether they had anyone to look after them.

Finally I said, 'Both of you are old. You don't have any children to look after your everyday needs. In old age one requires more medicines than groceries. This village is far from any of the towns in the district. Can I suggest something to you?'

At that time, we had started an old-age pension scheme and I thought, looking at their worn-out but clean clothes, they would be the ideal candidates for it.

This time the wife spoke up, 'Please do tell, child.'

'I will send you some money. Keep it in a nationalized bank or post office. The interest on that can be used for your monthly needs. If there is a medical emergency you can use the capital.'

The old man smiled on hearing my words and his face lit up brighter than the lamp.

'You sound much younger than us. You are still foolish. Why do I need money in this great old age? Lord Shiva is also known as Vaidyanathan. He is the Mahavaidya, or great doctor. This village we live in has many kind people. I perform the pooja and they give me rice in return. If either of us is unwell, the local doctor gives us medicines. Our wants are very few. Why would I accept money from an unknown person? If I keep this money in the bank, like you are telling me to, someone will come to know and may harass us. Why should I take

on these worries? You are a kind person to offer help to two unknown old people. But we are content; let us live as we always have. We don't need anything more.'

Just then the electricity came back and a bright light lit up the temple. For the first time I saw the couple properly. I could clearly see the peace and happiness on their faces. They were the first people I met who refused help in spite of their obvious need. I did not agree with everything he had just said, but it was clear to me that his contentment had brought him peace. Such an attitude may not let you progress fast, but after a certain period in life it is required. Perhaps this world with its many stresses and strains has much to learn from an old couple in a forgettable corner of India.



4

The Way You Look at It

A few years ago, I was travelling to a village in Karnataka on some work. I had got delayed and it was getting dark. There were no lights on the road and I was anxious to get to my destination. As we neared the outskirts of the village, the beams of the car's headlights picked out some shrubs on the side of the road. They were thorny shrubs and to my astonishment I saw many women coming out from behind them, shyly covering their heads, each with a tin box in hand. I realized they had gone there to attend to nature's call.

Soon I reached the village headman, Veerappa's house. He was a wealthy man and had arranged an elaborate dinner for me, with many courses including a few different types of sweets. The food was delicious, but my mind was not in enjoying it. I could not get the image of the women skulking out from behind the shrubs out of my mind.

When at last dinner was over, I asked to meet the cook. She was an elderly lady called Sharanamma. She was very shy and talked to me in a low voice. I wanted to know her better, so I said, 'The food was excellent. Can I give you something in return?'

Shyly she replied, 'Amma, I have heard you do a lot of work for poor people. If possible can you build some public toilets for the women of this village? Life is very difficult for us. Unlike men, we cannot go for our toilet in the day. Like thieves we have to wait till it is dark, then we have to go behind bushes, that too in groups. Whenever a vehicle passes us on the main road and the car's lights fall on us we feel ashamed. And if ever we are unwell and need to go in the middle of the night then heaven help us. This is particularly traumatic for the

young girls. We all would be very happy if you could do something about this.’

I was amazed at Sharanamma’s sense of responsibility towards her community. I turned to Veerappa and said it was a shame that the headmen of the village had not thought it important that their women should answer nature’s call with dignity and in privacy. It is a basic right that should be available to every human being. Finally I told him, ‘I am ready to build these toilets for the village if you will maintain them well.’ Veerappa, already ashamed after my tirade, readily agreed.

Thus started our foundation’s work to build public toilets in the countryside and in key areas in Bangalore. In India people are usually enthusiastic about building temples, mosques and gurdwaras, but no one thinks it important to build something as essential as a toilet. Perhaps because there is no *punya* attached to it.

The toilets that we built in Bangalore were pay-and-use ones. Though many people objected to having to pay, this was one way we could ensure their cleanliness and proper maintenance .

One day, I went to visit the first toilet, near a busy bus-stand in the city. It was an unplanned visit and I stood behind two women as they waited to go in. They looked like working women and regular commuters on one of the buses. Suddenly I heard them mention my name. ‘This Sudha Murty is a really mean lady. When she has spent so much money constructing this, why has she made it pay-and-use?’ The other one replied. ‘You are right. You don’t know about her. I have heard from people that she has built many toilets in Bangalore and she is running some trust with the help of toilet money. She must be making a huge profit.’

I was shocked at their words. Even if one tries to do something to improve a city’s civic life, people make all kinds of strange comments. For a while I was upset. Then I cooled down and told myself that people may say whatever they like, but I had to do what I had decided on. I know that the public toilets have benefitted many like Sharanamma. What she had perceived to be an act of necessity for the village women, was looked at here by these two women, as a business venture.

After all, life is the way you look at it.



7

An Officegoer's Dilemma In the numerous software companies setting up office in Bangalore, the issue of corporate social responsibility is being increasingly taken seriously. I was once invited to speak on this to the employees of one such company. Like most other offices this one too resembled a five star hotel, with its marble and granite floors, chandeliers, paintings on the walls, the housekeepers sweeping and mopping incessantly and an extremely polite front office.

I usually follow my talks with a question-answer session. I consider that the litmus test of how well my talk has been received. I have a theory that if people do not ask questions after the lecture, then it must have been either so good that no one has anything more to say, or so bad that no one has understood a single word and hence is quiet!

This time, when the questions were being asked, I thought I saw Shanti among the audience. When she saw me looking at her she waved. As always, I was happy to see her. I have known Shanti ever since she was a student in my college. She is one of those people who seem to have boundless energy, always ready to talk and exchange views. She was also very conscious of her social responsibilities, and I know had contributed a portion of her salary to charity from the time she started working.

from the time she started working.

When the talk came to an end and everyone started dispersing, I waited for Shanti to come up to me. 'Hello Shanti, how are you?' I was expecting her usual chirpy answer. Instead, I was greeted with a low, sad reply. I was taken aback. 'Shanti, what is the matter? Did you fight with your husband? Don't worry. If husband and wife do not fight then they cannot be called a couple. It is part of the deal. Come on cheer up.' I joked to ease her tension.

In the same low tone Shanti said, 'No Madam, that is not the reason.'

'Then is your project deadline approaching and you have not completed it? Shanti, I have always told you that in the software industry the deadline needs to be kept in mind and therefore project management is very essential. I still vaguely remember that you had got highest marks in that. Are you not practising what you learnt in college?'

'That is not the problem. I have completed my project a little bit ahead of time.'

'Then what is worrying you?'

But Shanti did not want to talk there, instead she took me to her cabin. As we walked I noticed many other employees wishing her. By the time we reached her cabin I felt proud that my student was now the boss. The cabin was very well furnished and Shanti closed the blinds before settling down to talk. We each had a cup of coffee and slowly she started confiding in me.

'Madam, I am very unhappy in this job. To an outsider it might appear that I have the perfect job. I get an excellent salary, my timings are flexible and the office is very close to my house. I do not have to put up with the stress of rush-hour traffic. I am leading a very good team where each person is committed to the work. But my problem is my boss. She is terrible. She has nothing but harsh words for me. I have not heard a single positive remark from her in the three years I have spent here. If I do a good job, she says someone else could have done it in half the time, and heaven help me if something ever goes wrong and things get delayed. She refuses to understand that sometimes things happen which are beyond my control.

'Suppose I am travelling to Bombay, she will deliberately schedule a meeting at ten-thirty in the morning, even though she knows my flight is supposed to land only at ten. With the traffic it is impossible for me to reach the office in half an hour. By the time I reach she would have finished all the important discussions. I work so hard, sometimes staying back the entire night to complete my work before the deadline, but still she says, "you could have been better." Madam it is impossible to satisfy her.'

'Calm down Shanti. Maybe your boss is the kind of person who is never satisfied with anything that is her nature and you cannot change that. You have

satisfied with anything, that is her nature and you cannot change that. You have to accept her the way she is. You cannot choose your boss.'

'I really don't feel like working with such a person. At times I feel like quitting. With my experience it would not be difficult to get a better job, but I like this company, my team members and the work I am doing. Why should I leave just for the sake of one person?'

'Have you told your higher managers about the situation?'

'I did. But she is the key person in a number of projects and they don't want to lose her.'

'Give it some time. Perhaps slowly she will understand you and the hard work you are putting in.'

Offering her such words of comfort I left the office. When I did not hear from her again after that I assumed Shanti had solved her problem one way or the other. A couple of years passed and one day I was in Jayanagar market, in Bangalore, buying vegetables.

Long back, Jayanagar was a paradise for all middle-class people. But now, staying here has become a very costly affair. The prices of almost everything have shot up and bargaining is strictly looked down upon. The vegetable sellers are so confident of getting their exorbitant prices that they usually refuse to budge even if one ventures to argue.

That day, I was debating heatedly with the shopkeeper who was asking for Rs 10 for one cucumber. I was actually enjoying the skill with which the man was putting forth his arguments. Neither of us was willing to yield even a paisa to the other person.

Suddenly I heard a voice behind me, 'Good evening Madam. How are you?'

It was Shanti, holding a baby by one hand and a basket of fruits and vegetables in another. She had put on a little bit of weight but I instantly saw the old sparkle back in her eyes .

'Hello Shanti! When did you have the baby?' I asked.

'A year ago.'

'You are looking so cheerful, I am very happy for you Shanti.'

'Madam, now I am happy both at home and at work.'

'That is wonderful. How is your boss? Has she changed?'

Shanti took me aside and said, 'She finally got transferred to another office in the city. My new boss is fantastic. Now I really look forward to going to office. If we ever have a disagreement he immediately talks to me and clears the issue. He is always motivating us by appreciating the effort we are putting in. As a result we have performed much better than expected. If we ever have to stay back late into the night, he too stays late. The teamwork and camaraderie is wonderful now. When I was pregnant he kept telling me to take it easy and work

from home if I wanted to, but I insisted on going to office till the day before I delivered the baby.’

‘This is great news Shanti. It reminds me of the song “*Man vahi, darpan vahi, na jane sab kuch naya naya . . .*”

‘Oh Madam, you are incorrigible.’

Both of us had a hearty laugh standing there in front of the vegetable stall. Then Shanti said, ‘Because of our new boss each person is happy working there and feels proud to be part of the team.’

‘Yes Shanti, this is something I have learnt over the years—with good attitude you can create a heaven around you, and a good leader can bring about remarkable changes in a team.’



14

A Foreigner, Always

Gautam Buddha was born 2,500 years ago as Prince Siddharth in Lumbini, in present-day Nepal. Throughout his lifetime he crisscrossed the subcontinent spreading his message of peace, tolerance and the righteous path. Shravasthi, Rajagraha, Sarnath, Boddh Gaya, Kushinagar are some of the places he visited and which became important centres of Buddhism. Though he imparted most of his teachings in India, in the ensuing centuries, Buddhism spread all over the world. Today, Sri Lanka, Japan, Korea, Thailand are some countries where Buddhism is flourishing. And in the Indian subcontinent too, there are places which retain strong links with Buddhist history.

Nearly twenty-five kilometers from Islamabad, there is a sleepy town called Takshila. At one time, it was the site of the world's oldest university, and an important centre of Buddhist learning. King Ashoka, the great patron of Buddhism, built many viharas here where scholars discussed philosophy and religion for centuries. Hiuen Tsang described the glory and beauty of Takshila in his writings.

Now, all that remains of that bustling university are the ruins. The Pakistan government has converted part of it into a museum, where one can see splendid works of art including heads of Buddha statues which have been excavated, jewels and panels depicting the life of Buddha. For anyone interested in Buddhism and its history, this museum is a place that has to be seen.

Recently I visited Pakistan for the first time. Though I was there on some other work, I had decided long back that if ever I got the chance to visit Pakistan, I would go to Takshila. I landed in Islamabad with many of the usual

preconceived notions about the country in my mind. But soon I saw that women were moving about freely and not always in burqas! The sumptuous meal of channa bhatura, alu paratha and jalebi that our host had prepared for us made us feel more at home. I spent some time shopping for clothes and again, the bazaars and shops were not too different from ours, and we ended up buying the latest bargains. Our taxi driver was humming what turned out to be the latest Hindi film number when I heard him closely. And like in our country, there was a delay in the flight I was to take. So it was not surprising that I found myself feeling quite comfortable.

The next day, I set off for Takshila with a French group. We got a bit delayed in reaching the museum and the curator, perhaps guessing our keen desire to see the exhibits said, 'It is nearing closing time. Why don't you all go in and start looking around, I will explain everything. Your tour organizer can get your tickets meanwhile from the counter.' This seemed like a good idea to all of us and we were soon absorbed in looking at the wonderful articles on display. For me it was additionally moving as I was fulfilling a long-cherished desire. I was seeing parts of our history which I had only read about in books come alive. After a detailed tour, the curator led us outside. There, for the first time, I noticed the ticket window. The rates were Rs 200 for foreigners and Rs 25 for locals. When the organizer handed me my ticket counterfoil I realized I was holding one for Rs 200. Thinking there had been some mistake I went up to the man at the ticket window. 'I understand your reasons for charging more from foreigners as you need all the funds you can get for the upkeep of the museum,' I said. 'But why are you charging me Rs 200? I am from India. This place is as much a part of my heritage as yours.'

The man looked unmoved. In a firm voice he replied, 'You are an Indian and therefore a foreigner.'

The words struck me deeply. I realized, in spite of the similarities in our dress, language, food and even love for Bollywood movies, Partition had divided us forever. It had made us strangers in each other's lands and even in a place like that ancient university town, the Buddha's words of love and tolerance were not enough to bring us together. The Rs 200 ticket brought me crashing back to reality!



22

India, the Holy Land

Maya was a simple young lady who lived in the Tibetan settlement in the outskirts of Mundugod, near Hubli in north Karnataka. She used to teach the Tibetan language to the children in the camp, so they would not forget their roots. She was smart and hard working.

My father was a doctor working in Hubli and he occasionally visited that settlement. If any of the Tibetans wanted further treatment, they would visit my father at the Government Hospital in Hubli. Maya too started visiting my father when she was expecting her first child.

Over the months she became quite friendly with all of us. Whenever she came to the hospital she would pay us a visit too. My mother would invite her for a meal and we would spend some time chatting.

In the beginning, we would be in awe of her and stare at her almost-white skin, dove eyes, the little flat nose and her two long, thin plaits. Slowly we accepted her as a friend and she graduated to become my knitting teacher. Her visits were sessions of knitting, chatting and talking about her life in the camp and back in her country for which she still yearned. Maya would describe her homeland to us with great affection, nostalgia and at times, with tears in her eyes.

‘Tibetans are simple people. We are all Buddhists but our Buddhism is of a different kind. It is called Vajrayana. There’s been a lot of influence from India, particularly Bengal, in our country and religious practices. Even our script resembles Bengali.’

Her words filled me with a sense of wonder about this exotic land called Tibet

and I would pester her to tell me more about that country. One day we started talking about the Dalai Lama.

‘What is the meaning of Dalai Lama?’ I asked.

‘It means “ocean of knowledge”. Ours is a unique country where religious heads have ruled for 500 years. We believe in rebirth and that each Dalai Lama is an incarnation of the previous one. The present Dalai Lama is the fourteenth . . . You know, India is the holy land of Buddha. Historically, we have always respected India. There is a nice story about how Buddhism came to Tibet through India . . .’

I could not wait to hear about this!

‘Long ago there was a king in Tibet who was kidnapped by his enemies. They demanded a ransom of gold, equal to the weight of the king. When the imprisoned king heard this, he somehow sent word to his son, “Don’t waste any gold to get me back. Instead, spend that money to bring good learned Buddhist monks from India. With their help, open many schools and monasteries so that our people can live in peace and gain knowledge”.’

Months passed and Maya delivered a baby. After that our meetings became less frequent. But she succeeded in awakening within me a curiosity about Tibet and a great respect for Buddhism

Recently I got a chance to visit Tibet and memories of Maya filled my mind. I knew I would be seeing a Tibet filled with Chinese but nevertheless I was keen to go. Among the places I wanted to see was a Buddha temple at Yerlong valley which she had described to me.

When I finally reached the valley, it was past midday. There was a cold wind blowing though the sun was shining brightly. The Brahmaputra was flowing like a stream here, nothing like the raging torrent in Assam. Snow-capped mountains circled the valley and there was absolute silence all around.

The monastery at Yerlong is supposed to be a famous pilgrimage spot, but I could see only a handful of people in the entire place. After seeing everything inside I sat down on the steps and observed the serene beauty of the place.

I noticed an old woman accompanied by a young man walking into the monastery. The woman was very old, her face was wrinkled and she walked slowly and weakly. She was wearing the traditional Tibetan dress and her hair was plaited. The young man on the other hand was dressed in the usual modern manner, in tight jeans and a body-hugging t-shirt. The woman started circumambulating the monastery using her stick for support while the man sat down on the steps like me.

When she finished, I realized the old lady was staring at me. Then she said something to the young man in Tibetan. She looked tired by the end of her ritual

and sat down on the steps. She said something to her companion again but he took little notice of her. So she slowly picked up her stick and came towards me. She sat down near me, took my hands and saying something, she gently raised my hands to her eyes and then kissed them. Before I could say anything, she got up and started to walk away. But I noticed she was smiling, as if she had achieved a longheld desire. I realized there was a wetness where her eyes had touched my hand.

Now the young boy reluctantly came up to me and apologised. ‘Please forgive my grandmother,’ he said. ‘She is from a village in the interior part of Tibet. She has never ventured out of her village. This is the first time she has come to Yerlong. I beg your pardon for her behaviour.’

He was talking to me in English with an Indian accent.

‘How come you speak English like us?’ I asked in surprise.

‘My name is KeTsang. I was in India for five years. I studied at Loyola College in Chennai. Now I run a restaurant in Lhasa. People here like Indian food and movies. I accompanied my grandmother for her pilgrimage. She was thanking you.’

‘But for what? I have not done anything for her!’

‘That is true, but your country has. It has sheltered our Dalai Lama for so many years. He is a living God to us, particularly to the older generation. We all respect the Dalai Lama, but due to political reasons, we cannot express it in public. You might have seen that there isn’t a single photo of his in any public place in the whole of Lhasa. He is the fourteenth, but we have paintings, statues and pictures only up to the thirteenth.’

I still did not understand the old lady’s gesture. The grandson explained, ‘She said, “I am an old lady and don’t know how long I will live. If I don’t thank you before I die, I will never attain peace. Let anyone punish me for this, it does not matter. It is a gift that I met an Indian today and was able to thank you for sheltering our Dalai Lama. Yours is truly a compassionate land.”’

Her words eerily echoed Maya’s from many years back. I could only look down at the wet spot on my hand and smile.



23

Mother's Love

I was once invited to speak on motherhood at a seminar. It was a well-attended seminar and people from different walks of life had gathered. Some were medical practitioners, others were from orphanages, adoption agencies, and NGOs. Religious heads, successful mothers (the definition of which, according to the organizers, were those whose children had done well in life and earned lots of money), young mothers, all were there.

There were numerous stalls selling baby products, books on motherhood, on how to handle adolescents *etc.* The speakers were good and most of the time they spoke from the heart about their experiences. The media was present in full force, clicking away photos of celebrities. Since this had been organized by the social welfare department, there were many government officials and a big gathering of students too.

When my turn came, I started narrating an incident that I had been witness to many years ago.

Manjula was a cook in a friend, Dr Arati's house. Manjula's husband was a good-for-nothing. She had five children and when she became pregnant for the sixth time, she decided to get it aborted. She also decided to get a tubectomy done .

Dr Arati, however, came up with a different idea. Her sister was rich but childless and wanted to adopt a newborn baby. She was desperately searching for one, so Arati gave a suggestion.

'Manjula, instead of aborting the baby, why don't you deliver it, and irrespective of the gender, my sister will adopt it. She does not even stay in this

city so you won't need to see the baby's face ever. She will adopt it legally and help you with the education of your remaining children too. This child, which is now unwanted, will be brought up well with lots of love. Think it over, the decision is yours and I will not insist.'

Manjula thought for a couple of days and finally agreed to the proposal. In a few months she delivered a baby girl. Dr Arati's sister also arrived that day after completing all the formalities. It had been decided that she would take the baby a day after it was born. But when the time came to hand over the child, Manjula refused to give her away. Her breasts were now full of milk and the baby had started feeding. She pressed the baby against her weak body and started crying, 'I agree that I am very poor. Even if I get a handful of rice, I will share that with this baby. But I cannot part with her. She is so tiny and so completely dependent on me. I am breaking my promise but I cannot live without my child. Please pardon me.'

Arati and her sister were naturally upset. They had prepared themselves to welcome this baby to their family. But seeing Manjula weep, they realized that motherhood may not always answer to the logic of agreements.

I concluded my speech saying that many times I have seen a mother is ready to sacrifice anything for her children. Motherhood is a natural instinct. Our culture glorifies it and a mother is held in great respect, over anybody else. I was rewarded with great applause. I too was satisfied with my speech.

I stepped down from the podium, and saw Meera standing near by. She was blind and taught orphans in a blind school. She was representing her school at the seminar. I knew her fairly well because I visited her school often. I went up to her and said, 'Meera how are you?' She was quiet for a minute. 'I am fine, Madam. Can you do me a favour?'

'Tell me what is it?'

'Ahmed Ismail was supposed to pick me up and drop me to my school. But just now he called up on my cellphone and said that he is stuck in a traffic jam and will take more time. Can you drop me to my school?' Ahmed Ismail was a trustee of the blind school.

Meera's school was on my way to the office and so I agreed immediately. In the car, I noticed she was very quiet and so started the conversation.

'Meera, how was the seminar today? Did you like my lecture?'

I was expecting the usual polite answer, saying it was very good.

But Meera answered, 'I didn't like your lecture. Sorry for being so blunt, but life is not always like that.'

I was taken aback. I wanted to know the reason behind it and asked her, 'Tell me Meera. Why did you say that? What I narrated was a true incident and not a

story. Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction.’

Meera sighed, ‘Yes, sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. That is really what I wanted to tell you. Let me tell you another story. There was once a five-year-old girl who was half-blind. Both her parents were labourers. The girl would complain often that she could not see clearly, but they would say that was because she wasn’t eating properly and they would take her to the doctor when they managed to collect some money. One day, they finally took her to the doctor. He told them the girl needed an operation which cost a lot of money, else she would go blind slowly. The parents discussed something between themselves and took her to a bus-stand. They gave her a packet of biscuits and told her, “Child, eat the biscuits and we will be back in five minutes.”

‘For the first time in her life the child had got an entire packet of biscuits for herself. She was overjoyed and sat down to enjoy them. With her half blind eyes she could just make out her mother’s torn red sari pallu disappear in the crowd. The day wore on, it started getting colder and she realized that it was getting dark. The packet of biscuits was over long back. She was alone, helpless and scared. She started calling for her parents and searched in vain for them, trying to spot the torn red pallu.’

‘What happened after that?’

‘The child continued to search for her parents, sleeping wherever she got a place. One day, a kind-hearted man saw her pitiable condition and took her to the blind school. The child could not give any address or name by which they could trace the parents. He requested the matron that in case any parent came forward to claim the child, they could hand her over after examining them. But nobody came looking for her. The child waited for her mother for several years, till one day she gave up all hope.’

I turned to Meera to see she was crying and I realized so was I. Even though I knew the answer in my heart, I asked her, ‘Meera, how did you know all these details about that child?’

Through her tears, she replied, ‘Because I was that half-blind child. Now, tell me, how could my mother leave me like that? She deceived me with a pack of biscuits. What happened to the motherhood that you spoke so strongly about? Is poverty more powerful than motherhood?’

I did not have any answer for her, but could only hold her hand in my own. I realized that there were as many kinds of mothers as there are people on this earth, and poverty can lead to acts of great desperation.

Even today, if I happen to see a woman on the road wearing a red sari, I think of Meera and her experience of motherhood.



25

May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Children

I was on my way to the railway station. I had the nine o'clock Bangalore-Hubli Kittur Express to catch. Halfway to the station our car stopped. There was a huge traffic jam. There was no way we could move either forward or reverse the car. I sat and watched helplessly as a few two-wheelers scraped past the car through a narrow gap. Finally I asked my driver what the matter was. Traffic jams are not uncommon but this was something unusual. He got out of the car and said the road ahead was blocked by some people holding a communal harmony meet. I now realized it was perhaps impossible to get to the station. The papers had reported about the meeting and had warned that the roads would be blocked for some time. The car was moved into a bylane and seeing there was no way I could try and make my way back home, I decided to join the crowd and listen to the speeches.

From a distance, I could see the dais. There were various religious heads sitting on a row of chairs on the stage. An elderly gentleman stood next to me and commented loudly, 'All this is just a drama. In India, everything is decided on the basis of caste and community. Even our elections are dictated by them. Whoever comes to power thinks only of the betterment of his community. It is easy to give speeches but in practical life they forget everything.'

Just then a middle-aged lady started speaking into the mike. From the way she was speaking, so confidently, it was apparent that she was used to giving speeches and had the gift of the gab. Her analogies were quite convincing. 'When you eat a meal, do you eat only chapattis or rice? No, you also need a vegetable, a dal and some curd. The tastes of the dishes vary, but only when they

are put together do you get a wholesome meal. Similarly different communities need to live together in harmony and build a strong country . . .' etc. 'It is a nice speech but who follows all this in real life?' the gentleman next to me commented.

'Why do you say that?' I had to ask finally. He looked at me, surprised at my unexpected question, then answered, 'Because my family has suffered a lot. My son did not get a job as he was not from the right community, my daughter was transferred as her boss wanted to replace her with someone from his own community. It is everywhere. Wherever you go, the first thing people want to know is which caste or religion you belong to.'

The woman was still talking on the podium. 'What is her name?' I asked.

'She is Ambabhavani, a gifted speaker from Tamil Nadu.'

Her name rang a bell somewhere in my mind and suddenly I was transported away from the jostling crowds and the loud speeches. I was in a time long past with my paternal grandmother, Amba Bai.

Amba Bai was affectionately called Ambakka or Ambakka Aai by everyone in the village. She spent her whole life in one little village, Savalagi, near Bijapur in north Karnataka. Like most other women of her generation she had never stepped into a school. She was married early and spent her life fulfilling the responsibilities of looking after a large family. She was widowed early and I always remember seeing her with a shaven head, wearing a red sari, the pallu covering her head always, as was the tradition in the then orthodox Brahmin society. She lived till she was eighty-nine and in her whole life she knew only the worlds of her ten children, forty grandchildren, her village and the fields.

Since we were farmers she owned large mudhouses with cows, horses and buffaloes. There was a large granary and big trees that cooled the house during the hot summers. There were rows of cacti planted just outside the house. They kept out the mosquitoes, we were told. Ajji (that's what we called Amba Bai) looked after the fields and the farmers with a passion. In fact, I don't recall her ever spending too much time in the kitchen making pickles or sweets like other grandmothers. She would be up early and after her bath spend some time doing her daily puja. She would make some jowar rotis and a vegetable, and then head out to the fields. She would spend time there talking to the farmers about the seeds they had got, the state of the well or the health of their cattle. Her other passion in life was to help the women of the village deliver their babies.

Though I did not realize this till I was a teenager, Ajji was most unlike an orthodox Brahmin widow. She was very much for women's education, family planning and had much to say about the way society treated widows.

Those days there were few facilities available to the villages. There were a

handful of medical colleges and not every taluk had a government hospital. In this scenario women who had borne children were the only help to others during childbirth. My grandmother was one of them. She was very proud of the fact that she had delivered ten perfectly healthy children, all of whom survived. And in turn, she would help others during their delivery irrespective of caste or community. She always had a word of advice or a handy tip for the various pregnant women of the village.

I would often hear various such nuggets from her. ‘Savitri, be careful. Don’t lift heavy articles. Eat well and drink more milk.’

‘Peerambi, you have had two miscarriages. Be careful this time. Eat lots of vegetables and fruits. You should be careful but don’t sit idle. Pregnancy is not a disease. You should be active. Do some light work. Send your husband Hussain Saab to my house. I will give some sambar powder. My daughter-in-law prepares it very well.’

Of course not everyone appreciated her advising them. One such person was Shakuntala Desai, who had stayed in the city for some time and had gone to school. ‘What does Ambakka know about these things?’ she would comment loudly, ‘Has she ever gone to school or read a medical book? She is not a doctor.’

But Ajji would be least bothered by these comments. She would only laugh and say, ‘Let that Shakuntala get pregnant. I will deliver the baby. My four decades of experience is better than any book!’

My father’s job took us to various towns to live in, but we always came to Ajji’s village during the holidays. They were joyous days and we would enjoy ourselves thoroughly.

Once, when we were at the village, there was a wedding in the neighbouring village. Ajji always refused to attend these social gatherings. That time, I too decided to stay back with her and one night there was only Ajji, me and our helper Dyamappa in that large house.

It was an unusually cold, moonless winter night in December. It was pitch dark outside. Ajji and I were sleeping together. Dyamappa had spread his bed on the front veranda and was fast asleep. For the first time that night, I saw Ajji remove her pallu from her head and the wisps of grey hair on her head. She touched them and said, ‘Society has some such cruel customs. Would you believe that I once had thick long plaits hanging down my back? How I loved my hair and what a source of envy it was for the other girls! But the day your grandfather died, no one even asked my permission before chopping off that beautiful hair. I cried as much for my hair as for my husband. No one understood my grief. Tell me, if a wife dies, does the widower keep his head shaved for the

rest of his life? No, within no time he is ready to be a groom again and bring home another bride! ’

At that age, I could not understand her pain, but now, when I recall her words, I realize how helpless she must have felt.

After sometime she changed her topic. ‘Our Peerambi is due anytime. I think it will be tonight. It is a moonless night after all. Peerambi is good and pious, but she is so shy, I am sure she will not say anything to anyone till the pain becomes unbearable. I have been praying for her safe delivery to our family deity Kallolli Venkatesha and also at the Peer Saab Darga in Bijapur. Everyone wants sons, but I do hope there is a girl this time. Daughters care for parents wherever they are. Any woman can do a man’s job but a man cannot do a woman’s job. After your Ajja’s death, am I not looking after the entire farming? Akkavva, always remember women have more patience and common sense. If only men realized that . . . ’

Ajji had so many grandchildren she found it hard to remember all their names. So she would call all her granddaughters Akkavva and grandsons Bala.

As Ajji rambled on into the night, there was a knock on the door. Instinctively Ajji said, ‘That must be Hussain.’ And indeed it was. Ajji covered her head again and forgetting her griefs about widowhood, she asked quickly, ‘Is Peerambi in labour?’

‘Yes, she has had the pains since this evening.’

‘And you are telling me now? You don’t understand how precious time is when a woman is in labour. Let us go now. Don’t waste any more time.’

She started giving instructions to Hussain and Dyamappa simultaneously .

‘Hussain, cut the cactus, take a few sprigs of neem. Dyamappa, you light two big lanterns . . .

‘Akkavva, you stay at home. Dyamappa will be with you. I have to hurry now.’

She was gathering some things from her room and putting them into her wooden carry-box. By that time, the huge Dyamappa, with his large white turban on his head and massive moustaches appeared at the door bearing two lanterns. In the pitch darkness he made a terrifying picture and immediately brought to my mind the Ravana in the Ramayana play I had seen recently. There was no way I was going to stay alone in the house with him! I insisted I wanted to go with Ajji.

Ajji was impatient. ‘Akkavva, don’t be adamant. After all, you are a teenage girl now. You should not see these things. I will leave you at your friend Girija’s house.’ But like any other teenager, I was adamant and would not budge from my decision.

Finally Ajji gave up. She went to the main room and said a quick prayer and

Finally Ajji gave up. She went to the puja room, said a quick prayer and locked the house behind her. Four of us set off in pitch darkness to Hussain saab's house. Hussain lead first with a lantern, Ajji, with me clutching on to her hand, followed and Dyamappa brought up the rear, carrying the other lantern.

We made our way across the village. Ajji walked with ease while I stumbled beside her. It was cold and I did not know the way. All the time Ajji kept up a constant stream of instructions for Hussain and Dyamappa.

'Hussain, when we reach, fill the large drums with water. Dyamappa will help you. Boil some water. Burn some coal. Put all the chickens and lambs in the shed. See that they don't come wandering around . . .'

Finally we reached Hussain's house. Peerambi's cries of pain could be heard coming from inside.

Hussain and Peerambi lived alone. They were poor farm labourers who worked on daily wages. Their neighbour Mehboob Bi was there, attending to Peerambi. Seeing Ajji she looked relieved. 'Now there is nothing to worry. Ambakka aai has come.'

Ajji washed her feet and hands and went inside the room with her paraphernalia, slamming the doors and windows shut behind her. Outside on the wooden bench, Hussain and Dyamappa sat awaiting further instructions from Ajji. I was curious to find out what would happen next.

Inside, I could hear Ajji speaking affectionately to Peerambi. 'Don't worry. Delivery is not an impossible thing. I have given birth to ten children. Just cooperate and I will help you. Pray to God to give you strength. Don't lose courage . . .'

In between, she opened the window partly and told Hussain, 'I want some turmeric powder. I can't search in your house. Get it from Mehboob Bi's house. Dyamappa, give me one more big bowl of boiling water. Hussain, take a new cane tray, clean it with turmeric water and pass it inside. Dyamappa, I want some more burning coal . . .'

The pious gentle Ajji was a dictator now!

The next few hours were punctuated by Peerambi's anguished cries and Ajji's patient, consoling words, while Hussain sat outside tense and Dyamappa nonchalantly smoked a bidi. The night got dark and then it started getting lighter and lighter. The cock, locked in its coop, crowed and with the rising sun we heard the sounds of a baby's crying.

Ajji opened one window pane and announced, 'Hussain, you are blessed with a son. He looks just like your father Mohammed Saab. Peerambi had a tough time but God is kind. Mother and child are both safe and healthy.'

S-l-a-a-m . . . the door shut again. But this time outside we grinned at each other in joy. Hussain knelt down and said a prayer of thanks. Then he jumped up

and knocked on the door, wanting to see the baby. It remained shut. Ajji was not entertaining any visitors till she was done.

‘Your clothes are dirty,’ she shouted from inside. ‘First have a bath, wear clean clothes and then come in, otherwise you will infect the baby and mother.’

Hussain rushed to the bathroom, which was just a thatched partition and poured buckets of clean water from the well on himself.

Even after he rushed in, I could hear only Ajji’s voice. ‘Peerambi, my work is over. I have to rush home. Today is my husband’s death ceremony. There are many rituals to be completed. The priests will arrive any time and I have to help them. I will leave now and if you want anything, send word through Hussain.

‘Peerambi, to a woman, delivering a baby is like going to the deathbed and waking up again. Be careful. Mehboob Bi, please keep Peerambi’s room clean. Don’t put any new clothes on the baby. They will hurt him. Wrap him in an old clean dhoti. Don’t kiss the baby on his lips. Don’t show the baby to everybody. Don’t keep touching him. Boil the drinking water and immerse an iron ladle in that. Peerambi should drink only that water. I will send a pot of home made ghee and soft rice and rasam for Peerambi to eat . . . Now I have to go. Bheemappa is supposed to come and clean the garden today. If I am late, he will run away . . .’

By now she had allowed the window to be opened. I peeped in and saw the tired but joyous face of Peerambi and a tiny, chubby version of Mohammed Saab, Hussain’s father, asleep on the cane tray. The neem leaves were hanging, the cactus was kept in a corner and the fragrance of the *lobana* had filled the entire room. Ajji also looked tired and there was sweat on her forehead. But she was cleaning her accessories vigorously in the hot water and wiping them before placing them carefully back in her wooden box.

Just as we were about to leave, Hussain bent down and touched Ajji’s feet. In a choked voice he said, ‘Ambakka aai, I do not know how to thank you. We are poor and cannot give you anything. But I can thank you sincerely from the bottom of my heart. You are a mother of a hundred children. You have blessed my son by bringing him into this world. He will never stray from the correct path.’

Ajji touched him on his shoulder and raised him. There were tears in her eyes too. She wiped them and said, ‘Hussain, God only wants us to help each other in difficult times. Peerambi is after all like another Akkavva to me.’

By now the sun was up and I followed Ajji back home without stumbling. Dyamappa was strolling lazily far behind us. One doubt was worrying me and I had to clear it. ‘Ajji, you have given birth only to ten children. Why did Hussain say you are a mother of hundred?’

Ajji smiled and adjusting the pallu that was slipping off her head because of

her brisk walk, she said, 'Yes. I have given birth only to ten children but these hands have brought out a hundred children in our village. Akkavva, I will pray that you become the mother of a hundred children, irrespective of the number you yourself give birth to.'



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