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Mother^{*}

A BLAST OF COLD WIND tore through her bones.

It was bitter cold. As if that wasn't enough, the slow winter rains had also started. Wrapping her thin sari tightly around her shoulders, Munni thought about the four chickens crouching under the wicker basket. They must be getting soaked by the drizzle coming in through the wickerwork. If they fell ill and died, it would be impossible to buy new ones to replace them.

With shivering hands she removed the thatched frame that served as the door and came out. The rain had, as it were, enveloped everything in a veil of thin muslin. The sun hadn't shown for quite a few days now. And on top of that, this sheet of rain! Then she suddenly realized her foolishness. Even ordinarily it was hard for her to keep track of days and months and dates. Now she even seemed to be forgetting mornings and evenings. She sighed wearily. The sun would have gone down anyway by now, even if it had been out today. It was night already; except that, yes, it wouldn't have been quite as sad and dark at the very first watch as it seemed. She lifted the cover of the basket and grabbed the chickens. The frightened birds didn't raise any cry of protest. Gathering all four with her arm and holding the cover of the basket in her armpit, she was about to turn back when she suddenly noticed a formless shape emerging from the darkness and drizzle. There was a sudden flash of light at the same time. For a moment she thought: Must be the fire-demon. But the demon, if Hindu, should be in the cremation grounds, and if Muslim, in the graveyard going around rolling its eyes making people lose their way. What has he got to do with the abode of the living! Here, as it is, they have plenty of demons of their own. Munni didn't feel afraid. She generally wouldn't be scared anyway. In the still of the night, she was living a lonely life on a piece of protruding land in the middle of the swirling Ganges. Other people lived there as well, but their huts were all far apart.

^{*}"Māñ," from *Āj* 68 (October 2010), pp. 7–19.

In between, there were farmlands, or wide, spread-out patches to grow vegetables. When evening fell, jackals howled and foxes making surreptitious noises lay in wait at the door for the chickens. Sometimes, a slithering green snake hung down like a rope from the guava tree in the courtyard. It would lift its neck and stare at Munni with its small, shiny, venomous, eyes. It never managed to scare her. She would pick up a small stick nearby and threaten it, "What are you going to take away now, eh? Do you have even more poison in you than Hersia?" In her view, her eight-year-old, polio-stricken son and her two five-year-old, half-dead, twin girls couldn't be of any use to the snake. Gathering her three children like little chicks under her feathers, she would run around contentedly foraging for sustenance for them and herself.

At 4:00 in the morning, when the sun wasn't even up yet, when in the murky darkness of the receding summer night or wrapped in a thick sheet of winter fog the Ganges still slept, the fishermen would draw their nets from the river and their boats would fill with wriggling, writhing fish. Then, with all the others, Munni would arrive with her basket. She would fill it up, pay for her merchandise, and by eight o'clock be ready to catch the boat to go across the river. Carrying the basket on her head, going from house to house, she would sell the fish and be back by two or half past. Along the way she would pick up the stuff needed for her household. Once in a while, a fish or two would be left unsold. Without worrying whether she could make any profit from it or not, she would often sell it to Hersia at a throwaway price. His wooden stall was located at the end of the wharf. He would flirt with her whenever she went by and offer her free tea, but never pay her the fair price for the fish she sold him. He knew that fish couldn't last very long, and a small businesswoman like Munni didn't have the capacity to bear much loss. That uneducated seller of fried and raw fish, plying his trade under the cover of his tea stall, was no less shrewd than the business executive of any multinational company.

By caste, Munni wasn't a fisherwoman, but having lived on this outcrop island for the past twelve or thirteen years and because of her husband's job of running the motorboat back and forth across the river, she was familiar only with the Ganges and the fish living in it. After getting married, she had come here in her fifteenth year. Even before that she had carried a lot of love in her heart for Mother Ganges and felt very devoted to her. That she would get a chance to live on her banks, she hadn't even imagined. And now, Mother Ganges was the only means of subsistence for her. With difficulty she had saved up a little money and bought some chickens so she would be able to feed the eggs to her

children. Her firstborn had died simply because he needed good food along with medication. Whenever she thought of him, a sharp pain shot through her. He was born within the first year of their marriage. What a great help he would have been if he were alive today, that eleven or twelve year old boy of hers!

The cold wind pierced her bones. She felt as if she was developing a fever, but then curiosity overcame the feeling of chill. Who was this coming her way taking long strides on this swooshing outcrop island where the freezing winds blowing from the Ganges had made even the jackals forget their howling and hide in their dens?

She saw yet another flash of light. “Munni! O’ Munni?” the approaching light called her by name.

She was startled. She rushed outside, completely forgetting the cold, the basket cover under her arm, and the chickens she was holding. She was amazed to see him.

“You, Master? Here, at this time? Come inside, please. It’s very cold.”

Around his tall, lean body he had, as usual, wrapped a dhoti, but instead of a thin shirt, this time he was wearing one fashioned from a coarse cotton cloth with full sleeves. On his head he had wrapped a thin cloth towel. This was his entire winter dress. (And many in the village did not even have that.)

“Need your permission to pass the night here under the overhang. Will leave in the morning,” he smiled, but his voice betrayed the sound of chattering teeth.

“Come inside, Master.”

“Inside?” he hesitated a little.

“Yes, Master. There’s too much wind out here.”

He followed her in, and Munni felt as if the angels had set foot in her house, or that Mother Ganges herself had assumed the shape of a human being and stepped into her hut. It was a great good fortune! She hurriedly put the cover of the basket in a corner and shoved the chickens under it. Then she began taking out some dry leaves and twigs of guava and some dung cakes from a sack.

“Don’t do anything special for me, Munni. I just needed a roof over my head for the night; couldn’t go on walking anymore.” Looking very tired, he took off the pouch hanging from his shoulder, put the flashlight in it and sat down with a thud, like a felled tree, right there on the dirt floor.

She felt deeply moved. “Don’t say any more. We can only give you what we have. Nothing more, nothing less.” She said it so simply that he was forced to be quiet.

“Master, your clothes are all wet,” she said as she searched for some-

thing. She had her back towards him.

How could she have any clothes that he might change into, so he turned a deaf ear to her observation, even though there was little he could have considered heavenly at that moment besides dry clothes, a dry body, and a dry place protected from the wind. (Every person had his own concept of heaven, conditioned perhaps by its own time and place.)

"I have a dhoti saved from my husband," she said, sensing the drift of his silence.

"That's fine. If my clothes dry by morning, I'll leave it here," he showed his willingness. That made Munni happy. She brought down a tin box from the cornice of the only room of her hut. Her husband had bought this from the Monday fair in Patna and had put a red, flowered sari in it. Munni didn't wear that sari anymore. She kept it safe in this tin box along with his only dhoti. Now only ... the bride who had the courage to marry her lame son would wear it. She would really be the one deserving it.

Hurriedly, Munni took out the dhoti before he changed his mind, and handing it over to him moved away. He put aside his wet clothes, tied half of the dhoti around his loins and wrapped the other half around his upper body. He must look like a Buddhist mendicant now. Thinking of that, a faint smile flashed across his lips.

The thick, coarse dhoti provided a lot of comfort. The joy of getting rid of the wet clothes and putting on dry ones was beyond words.

"May the good Lord be gracious to this kindhearted woman," he wished her well in his heart.

His pouch had love and good wishes aplenty for everyone, but these did not fill their stomachs or help them get rid of sickness. Nor did they bring Munni's husband back. The police had whisked him away after someone reported that he was involved in the smuggling of kattha¹ from Nepal. Never mind his return, after five-and-a-half years no one knew where he was or whether he was even alive. Could Munni ever forget how, for over a year, he (the man she called Master) had selflessly devoted his time to looking for her husband and getting him released? Finally, Munni had folded her own hands to him and said: "Lord, I have learned to be patient; Master, you too may let it go now. If I am destined to enjoy marital bliss, my husband will turn up on his own someday. If, on the other hand, the Almighty has washed away the vermilion of marital life from my forehead, then there is little anyone can do?"

¹Terra japonica; extract of the heartwood of the acacia tree, also known as catechu; used in the making of paan; in combination with lime, it gives paan its characteristic red coloring.

Her firstborn was sick even before her husband's imprisonment and the misfortunes which followed his arrest exacerbated the boy's illness. At that time Munni did not know the man she called Master too well, but one day he came to the door. Somebody had told him there was a sick child in that hut. Seeing the child, he became rather concerned. It was necessary to take him to the doctor, but the doctor would not be available until Wednesday. It was a Friday. The child needed not just medication but also good food. Simple medication wouldn't help, the man thought with regret. Holding the listless child in her lap, shedding tears, she had no means to provide enough food for even two times a day. She was carrying the twins, nearing the end of her term, and was herself in need of proper nutrition. But she was more concerned for her two older boys, especially the firstborn.

"Munni, I'll come back on Wednesday," he said. "Your child needs to be taken to the hospital." Then he took the pouch off his shoulder—the same pouch that always hung there, as it did today.

"Keep these," he said, putting his hand inside the pouch and taking out four duck eggs and six bananas. Two different people in the village had given these gifts to him. He handed all of them to the child. Munni could never forget the joy that came into the child's pale face and dulled eyes on seeing this windfall. Whenever the pain of the boy's demise troubled her, she recalled this glow of joy that had comforted her grieving heart like a gentle, cooling breeze. The child was very happy during the last two days of his life. He had left this world in a contented frame of mind. There was food in his stomach, and good food at that. On Wednesday when the man came to take him to the hospital, the winds had already blown away his ashes and his small, frail, half-burned body had vanished into the waters of the Ganges. But Munni put her head on the man's feet. "He ate those eggs very eagerly. Even extended his hand to give a banana to the younger boy. That was all because of your generosity. If he had gone from this world hungry, we would have suffered the rest of our lives." Her tears soaked his feet, but her grip on them was so strong that despite a million efforts to pull them away, she didn't let him go until she'd had her say.

That was when the man found out about her husband. He also heard from someone that due to some wrangling with Hersia, the latter had reported her husband to the police. Whether the report was true or false, it was hard to know. The smuggling of kattha and bidi leaves from Nepal was quite common. It was possible he just drove the motorboat and didn't know about the merchandise he was transporting or that he was implicated in smuggling. Anyway, whatever it was, he was a small fish swal-

lowed up by big ones. The man she called Master wasn't successful in getting him out, but Munni was grateful that someone at least thought about him and did something. When her second son contracted polio, it was this man who took him to the hospital and had the surgery performed. The hospital fitted the child with a prosthetic shoe and brace that reached up to his knee. He still limped, but looked much better than before when his gait resembled some grotesque, hopping creature. Munni's heart sank every time she saw him. She often thought: if the good Lord had to take one of His sons, why didn't He take this broken and damaged one? The sound one disappeared, while this one is still around. But now, as a result of all the efforts of this man, her son was able to handle his affairs easily and she was thinking of getting him an apprenticeship in some shop soon.

When the boy returned from the hospital, once again she had put her head on the man's feet. Idolatry and apostasy were not part of her vocabulary. Even if they were, their meanings were not part of her repertoire. The good Lord never came down Himself from the heavens. He always sent some human being to get things done, so whomever He sent was His avatar.

She lit a fire in the washbasin, lifted the basin, and carried it over to him. Then she poured two glasses of water into a large, crooked aluminum bowl to boil it with a piece of jaggery, some leaves of tulsi grown in her courtyard, and a few whole black peppercorns. When the water had come to a full boil, she poured this "tea" into two aluminum cups, and also sat down, holding her own cup. The aluminum bowl, scoured with Ganges sand, glinted like silver in the light of the low flames.

The good Lord is a great helper: if Munni's hut were not on his way, the man would have frozen to death. For him at this moment, even a thatched straw roof would have been enough, but the jaggery, which gave strength to his empty stomach, the tulsi leaves which filled his cold body with warmth, and the sharpness of the black pepper—every sip of the tea was ambrosia.

"Go to sleep now, Munni. It's very late," he said gently.

"People talk a lot about you. There were times when I too longed to sit with you."

"I know. And I also know what they talk about," he smiled.

"What do they talk about?"

"I'm tired of answering questions. Even then I run into someone who begins asking everything anew. Maybe you too want to know who I am, where I've come from, where my family is, how I manage my life, why I live here and so on—isn't that so?"

Artlessly, Munni nodded her head in agreement.

He laughed. “All right, you listen too. My parents are no longer living. They were still alive when I first arrived here. I have brothers and sisters, friends and acquaintances, but I’ve left them all far away.” He paused a little. There was a beloved as well, lamps of hope lit in her eyes, dreaming dreams of a future together. I turned her life upside down, left her behind too. This he did not tell Munni and picked up the story again.

“By turns, they all keep sending me money. That’s more than enough for my needs. I even save some to help others. I never extend my hand to anyone, yet I never sleep on an empty stomach. If any of you ever wants to give me something, I never refuse it. Sometimes a cowherd will give me a pot of milk or a housewife a kilo or half a kilo of some vegetable.”

“But that you share with others?”

“Only what is in excess of my own needs, or what I do not want. Only that. Just now, I absolutely needed your tulsī tea. I would not have shared that with anyone,” he said with a child’s innocent and mischievous smile.

Munni scratched her head. What is in excess of his needs and when— who knows? If anyone showed up even now, he’d surely offer him at least half a cup.

“And your . . . What about your family?”

“You people are my family. The four villages around here are my family.”

“Did you leave your children behind too?”

“There weren’t any.”

“What about your woman?”

“I didn’t have any. That’s why there were no children. But in these villages, where I work, all the children are mine. Even your children, Munni.”

Munni’s three children lay inside the quilt, sound asleep. She felt deeply moved. For a moment she remained silent. The freezing wind outside had become wilder, whistling like some witch and howling, bent on mischief and making waves in the tresses of Mother Ganges. “It’s very cold,” she said and was quiet for a while. Then she raised her eyes: “So, you never married?”

“Why are you asking so many questions today, Munni?”

“Today is the only time I’ve ever gotten to sit with you, Master.”

“So many times I’ve asked you not to address me as Master,” he said, a bit peevisly. “It’s true, I never married.” He’d better answer her or this silly fisherwoman would go on jabbering for a long time. His tone when he spoke was calm and gentle as usual.

So, he has never known the comfort of a woman. And, who knows, maybe many other comforts as well, the silly fisherwoman thought. He lives all alone in a bamboo-fenced hut. Boils rice and potatoes together in a pot. Washes his own thaali, his own clothes, goes around rattling his

bicycle. In his own land he must have owned an automobile; his appearance tells you he belongs to a noble family. But here ... I heard that once he was lying alone burning up with fever. By chance someone happened by—a young man from a Muslim family in some other nearby village—who took him away. I heard that he told him: don't make a big fuss if I die. Bury me in my hut in the clothes I'm wearing. There you'll find a notebook. If possible, let the folks on the address written in that notebook know, and that's all. Did Munni's own husband ever mention his address to anyone?

Thinking of her husband, she felt a pang in her heart, a merciless pang. Munni used to get the food ready when he returned. She would jump up to give him water from a spouted jug. They were never hard up when he was around, always able to put together at least a plain meal—but at least they ate at every mealtime. And then at night, there was that divine comfort of being with him under a thick sheet, in a bed of straw. She didn't even know if he was alive now. Perhaps no one had any address to send information about his death. But when he was around, he was quite happy. Whenever she felt a pang in her heart, she comforted herself by recalling that the two of them had spent a good life together. She gave him as much comfort as she was able. In the same way, her memories of her son were sweet. She was content that in the last two or two-and-a-half days of his life he had some good food to eat, even some fruit. If it hadn't happened, the memories would have burst her heart without putting any dressing on her wounds. She would still be writhing in pain and crying.

"Want me to massage your head? Finding it hard to sleep?" she asked, as she took the last sip of tea and put the empty cup down.

"You need to sleep yourself now. You have to leave early in the morning to buy fish. Go, go now," he said, admonishing her a bit.

He's still worrying about me, she thought. For a moment she stood there hesitating. Then she put some kindling in the basin and moving aside, slid herself crookedly under the quilt beside her children. She had already given her blanket over to him to use. Here, there were four of them under one quilt. In her attempt to keep her children covered, she would get uncovered herself time and again.

At about two, an intense feeling of cold awakened her fully. The wind was screaming hard as though a thousand female demons, rustling their skirts, were passing over the Ganges, or dissatisfied souls had risen up from the pyres burning along its banks. Mother Ganges herself seemed annoyed and irritated, as though still descending the mountainous slopes—fast, intense and terrifying—even though she was now flowing through

the land between the rivers. Munni, whom nothing could scare, was a little frightened at that moment. At what, she herself couldn't figure out. The snake, as though itself scared, had retreated inside the guava leaves, and a very chaste and pious man was asleep outside under the overhang. So then what was she afraid of?

A little perturbed, she went and stood close to where he was resting his head. The rise and fall of his breathing and his soft snores bespoke his deep sleep. After a while she sat down right there. The fire in the basin had gone out, but the ash still had embers hidden in it and felt warm. She poked it with a twig and sparks flew.

Wrapping herself again and again with the hem of her sari, thinning due to excessive wear, she sat there thinking for a while. Then she slid slowly under the blanket close to his body. A youthful body of twenty-eight, robust from hard work, taut like a stretched bow and glowing like the flame of a lamp.

The creation of Eve with Adam wasn't so purposeless after all.

"Master, don't leave the world without at least knowing this. Your soul will always be wandering about. This comfort ... whether you suffer consequences or not, at least know it once...."

He was awakened. Black and bright-eyed like a *robu* fish, the tall, thin, sturdy woman lay with her arms around his neck. Bells began to ring all around him ... tun, tun, tun ... of danger, of trouble, of some improbable prophecy, filled with music, but frightening ... his whole body was shaking like a skiff rocked by a storm.

Although Mahatma Buddha was a follower of ahimsa, if someone dropped a piece of meat in his begging-bowl, he never refused it.

But when, to lead him astray, the demon Maar sent his daughters wasn't the Buddha able to defeat them? Hadn't he overcome his desires completely?

Yes, but I am not a Mahatma, he thought, not even a Buddha. When did I achieve moksha? I haven't even gone out looking for it. But yes, if by serving mankind one can achieve it, then I might get it one day. And what did the yogis with the pierced ears think—that the comfort given by a woman was akin to the merging of atman [soul] with Parmatma [the Supreme Soul]? What harm would there be if I found out once what it was like, before I died? I have known the pleasure of alcohol, the satisfaction of a full meal, the joy of deep sleep, of a mother's lap, of a woman's love: I know what they all taste like. The only thing I have not known is a woman's body. Perhaps I haven't been able to overcome my desires fully yet, or these flames would not have flared up on this freezing cold night. By now I would have pushed this crawling, flailing fish back into the

Ganges.

The flames had flared up many times before as well. He was, after all, human. But he had doused them with the water of curses and disdain. And every time he had vowed to do penance by observing three day-long fasts, which were even more difficult than the fasts ordained for the Muslims in the sense that even after ending the fast he would not eat a full meal, oftentimes making do with just a boiled potato or a cucumber.

The latest actually happened quite recently.

This time it was the turn of the village on the other side of the outcrop island. He was taking a sick man back home after a visit to the hospital. There, at the water-well stood a new bride, Sunanda, recently wed and arrived in the village. To draw the water out, she had put one foot ahead of the other and stretched her body taut. She looked very pretty—her golden skin, the hue of ripe wheat, her feet neat and graceful, adorned with a single silver anklet. While pulling the bucket from the well, her whole body seemed to tremble. It appeared as if she wasn't used to drawing water from the well in her parents' house. Her sari was slipping off her body again and again. A little plump, her soft, supple body seemed to be spilling out of the blouse. His glance stopped briefly at her pretty feet and then slithered straight up to her neck. The tremor of her body was transferred to his own. Swearing at himself, he turned his eyes away, but he understood very well that the time his gaze had rested on her body was too long, that the duration of his stare was "inappropriate." His eyes were not just praising a beautiful creation of God ... they were a man admiring a woman. He imposed penance on himself because he had no satisfactory answers for the questions his conscience had been posing to him.

The fish looked at him again with her bright, black, kohl-laden eyes. Don't leave this world with thirst in your heart, ascetic! Learn what you do not know. Assure yourself that the baser self you've overpowered is really a very headstrong horse, impossible to rein in. Later on, you may go on patting yourself on the back, but at least this once ... just this once....

That moment did not give him leave to think another thought. It invaded him, just as the ineffectual Gandak River in Nepal, after the snow has melted, becomes murderous and invades the powerful Ganges, which in spite of all its rage and fury is obliged to twist and turn to accommodate and absorb Gandak within itself.

In the morning, when he woke up, he could not understand what it was that had happened. Was it a hallucination or a pleasant dream? With a feeling of dread his intelligence and understanding informed him that it was not a dream, but reality; and what was even more terrifying was that,

after clearing up the cobwebs of sleep, his heart and mind were experiencing a state of exhilaration. His body seemed to be succumbing to a rapturous pain. His soul had received some indelible marks. His heart was bursting. All his discipline, his austerity, was no longer of any avail, but it was pleasing to him.

Munni had woken before him. Even in this cold she had drawn water from the well and bathed. She had already put on tea to boil for him on the clay hearth. There was no feeling of embarrassment in her sedate eyes, no trace of sin. There was just contentment and a sense of peace. Her most beloved human being had come to her door and she had put whatever she had in his begging bowl—neither more nor less. She had placed a sweet potato roasted in hot ashes on a clay saucer and poured tea into an aluminum cup. He pushed aside the sweet potato and picked up the tea.

After finishing the tea, he stood up.

They came face to face in front of the door of the hut.

Munni folded her hands together. “I’ll never again ask you to stay, Lord. Don’t be afraid.”

“For the rest of my life, I shall do penance for last night by eating only one meal a day,” he said quietly. “But I am grateful to you, Mother Munni ... and shall always be.” Suddenly he bent down and touched her feet. “You’ll not need to worry about asking me to stay. I’m going away, leaving this area for good.”

And he disappeared quickly into that dark, smoky morning, damp and shivering from the cold. □

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan*