

IKRAMULLAH

Mother—The Queen^{*}

FOUR OR FIVE YOUNG GIRLS sat straddling the exposed roots of an acacia tree trying to cook rice in a tiny earthen pot on a pit fashioned from bricks. Their eyes were streaming and their noses were runny from the smoke. They had nearly blown out their brains trying to get the fire going, but after finally kindling a feeble flame the fire had gone out. So, once again they had begun blowing into the smoke. Ash flew up and fell on their loose, tangled hair and on the earthen pot. A middle-aged woman and her bashful seventeen-year-old daughter, carrying basins in their hands, passed them by. The older woman couldn't help asking, "Why, in God's name, are you in such a rush to get this stinging smoke in your eyes? Don't you know you're going to live with the same smoke and the same helpless eyes for the rest of your lives?"

"Auntie," they shouted back, "we're cooking rice for our doll's wedding."

"Go ahead, kill yourselves! Has anyone ever learned from someone else's advice?" And sitting down by the edge of the pond, mother and daughter began picking up handfuls of black, wet clay and filling their basins with it. A number of women sat demurely along another edge of the pond, self-conscious about their soaking wet clothes, fearful that their bodies might be seen through them; but since they were together in a group and had taken as much care as it was possible to take, they were talking animatedly and even laughing.

The large pond had spread beyond the mud-houses built in the shallows on the outskirts of the village, forming a gentle arc for a whole kilometer along the entire width of the settlement. Looking like glow-worms, tiny, pale-gold acacia blossoms, which had fallen from the trees that grew in a long row beside the pond, lay everywhere on the bank. The thick, coarse bark of the acacias had turned a shiny black after

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absorbing the moisture of the monsoons. The sun's heat made them exude a strong odor that became mixed with the mild fragrance of the blossoms and hung heavily in the hot, humid air. You could almost touch and feel it. On the side of the pond that faced the village, farmers were busy plowing the fields, and their voices, goading the oxen—"Dhat, dhat, keep moving, you"—could occasionally be heard on this side. Two farmers standing face-to-face holding a huge leather-covered wicker basket by the strings attached to its ends, were drawing water from the pond to irrigate the paddy-field. Two boys were attempting to catch fish using a loincloth as a net. Since there wasn't much traffic on this side of the pond, you could, in the bright daylight, see far down into the clean, transparent, greenish water. Tiny tadpoles darted about from one side to another as if trying to escape some dire emergency, although they were only looking for food. The vegetation growing at the bottom of the pond swayed gently. There were dark islands of green moss here and there, and on one side there was a small patch of lotus flowers. Near the village side of the pond a whole herd of water buffaloes sat submerged in the water with their eyes closed and their noses sticking out. All along the bank, groups of excited children were playing their boisterous games. A turret, built out of brick and lime, which had now become moldy and black, stood on a small island in the middle of the pond. This was the *samadh* (memorial), the cremation site, of the Mother Queen. It had been there forever—an emblem of death, as certain and unavoidable as death itself.

A short distance from the women who were filling their basins with clay, sat a young boy, all alone, making clay figurines on top of a large, heavy piece of dry wood. Three or four clay oxen were already standing on the wood—complete with humps, tails and horns. In the hot sun, drops of perspiration fell from the tip of his nose, but he was so immersed in his work that he was oblivious to everything else.

Putting aside their basins, now filled with clay, the mother and daughter rinsed their hands in the pond and went over to join the women washing clothes.

One woman asked, "Hey Bhaago, are you thinking of plastering your roofs in the rainy season?"

"Of course not. This clay is for the fire pits."

Bhaago asked, "Any word about who murdered Ishari?"

"Ah, poor Ishari! Who knows who killed her? The poor soul, she didn't have much to do with anybody in the village. All she ever did was sit at home and recite the Ramayana, except maybe going out once a day to visit the temple to touch the ground with her forehead. Why would anyone want to kill her?"

“Too much wealth isn’t a blessing either, you know. I hear she had ten seers of gold. You can guess yourself how much silver she must have had, and how much cash. Perhaps thousands. Whoever robbed her murdered her afterwards.”

One woman said, “I went over there in the morning after I heard the news. A huge crowd was standing around. The thieves had pulled out every piece of clothing she had stored in her trunks and had thrown it in the courtyard. Ishari was lying there, dead, her face buried in that mound of silk. Her white hair was soaked in blood. The wretches had smashed her head with lathis.”

“Mother,” Bhaago’s daughter said, “was Ishari the same hoary old lady who walked with the help of a lathi? The one who had the two-story brick house near the homes of the Sindhu farmers?”

“Yes, exactly. Hers was the biggest of the houses owned by the seths of the village. They were a family of moneylenders, dealing in hundreds of thousands, but when the government banned usury their business also went under. All their relatives left the village and went to the big cities to set up various other businesses. But Ishari and her husband were old and they had no children, so they stuck around. Eight or ten years ago the old man died. After that Ishari couldn’t have gone anywhere alone. I understand the old man has a nephew who’s also a big seth living in some city. Perhaps now he’ll come to take away whatever’s left of her wealth.”

One woman said, “Ishari didn’t have any children or close relatives. What did she need so much wealth for? If she had given it to charity with her own hands she would be better off now in the hereafter. All her wealth was going to go to her husband’s nephew anyway; it wasn’t going to be of any use to her. She lost her life for nothing.”

“Not everybody is fortunate enough to be able to carry out acts of charity. There was only one person who ever went to Ishari’s house—Shanti, the barber’s wife. She sometimes ran errands for her. Whether or not Ishari gave anything to her from time to time, nobody knows for sure.”

“She may have, but giving away a few seers of grain or some used clothing isn’t really charity, is it?” one young woman asked.

“Auntie, people come from everywhere to make vows at the Mother Queen’s *samadh* in hopes of having children. Some of those hopes must have been fulfilled; that’s why they keep coming. Didn’t Ishari ever try these things in order to conceive?”

Wrapping a wet towel around herself, the old woman replied, “Daughter, in her time she must have done whatever she could. In such situations a person tries everything possible, but the Mother Queen doesn’t listen to everyone’s entreaties. Of course, there’s one method which I

hear never fails, but it's hard and heartless and not within everybody's means. It can only be done if some skillful, learned brahmin agrees to go along, not otherwise." She called her younger daughter-in-law over and said, "Jeet, my girl, see if my shirt and shalwar are dry yet. I'm tired of sitting curled up like this."

The young woman then asked impatiently, "Auntie, please tell me right away what that method is. My brother has been married five years now and we've done everything we can, but my sister-in-law hasn't conceived."

One woman who was using a wooden paddle to beat the washing that lay on a stone slab paused and said, as if complaining, "Ishari's dead, so now the police are going to install themselves in the village. Lord knows for how many months we'll all be made miserable. Don't you remember when there was that feud going on between Sher Singh and Ram Singh's gangs and one man from each side was killed? The police stayed in the village for six months. People starved. All the so-called bigwigs in the village ate humble pie and quietly sent their children to other villages to stay with their in-laws until the next harvest."

The old woman, who had been listening attentively, remarked, "You're so right, Sant Kaur. The innocent villagers are neither the killers nor the victims of the killers, yet they'll be the ones to suffer again. Buckets full of milk will be sent for the police, and our children will be left thirsting for a drop; maunds of grain will be delivered to them; chickens and baskets full of eggs will be plundered from our households and taken to the headman's courtyard. The workers will be forced to toil without even getting paid for it; the standing crops will dry up from lack of water and the ripe ones will be picked clean by crows and such."

The young woman addressed her, "Let's pray for a better turn of events; why predict such doom and gloom! The last time was different: the whole village was involved in that fray. That's why the police stayed for six months. But this time just one woman has been quietly murdered. The matter won't drag on. And, in any case, whatever is to happen will happen. Our worrying won't change it. Auntie, tell me how my brother can have children, please."

"Yes, what will be will be," said the old woman. "And, anyway, we're all in this together; one person's misery will be no greater than the other's. So, listen, I'm going to tell you the method but I know neither you nor your brother could go through with it." Pointing towards the girls who were cooking for the doll's wedding, she said, "Ishari was a new bride in the village when this happened. The old headman of the village had been married for two years, but his young wife hadn't had any children yet. A brahmin told the headman's wife that if she could find, in some house, an

only son whom the brahmin could himself sacrifice on the Mother Queen's *samadh* while reciting the boy's life mantra, and if the headman's wife could then bathe herself standing over the dead body, there was no way her wish would be denied. It so happened that a cobbler by the name of Nand used to live in the village. He had a five- or six-year-old son, an only child and a very strong, sturdy boy. When the headman's wife got the chance she had the boy picked up. Then, on the darkest night of the month, a little after midnight, she and the brahmin carried the boy to the *samadh*. While chanting the boy's mantra, the brahmin decapitated him with one stroke of the sword. Then the headman's wife removed every shred of clothing from her body, and without any hesitation or embarrassment, bathed herself standing upright over the corpse. The brahmin went on reciting the mantra. When she was finished bathing and the brahmin was finished reciting, five human heads, one after the other, appeared on the surface of the pond, saying, 'We're coming. We're coming.' And, in fact, the headman's wife had five children, one after the other. At first the cobbler and his wife went about the streets of the village crying and begging for help, but no one listened to them. Then suddenly they became quiet, looking bewildered, and within six months they were dead. Now tell me, could your brother and sister-in-law take a life in order to have children? And even if they could, where nowadays would they find a capable brahmin like the ones in the old days?"

"Oh, no, no. They're better off childless than committing crimes to get them. We aren't very rich either. There's no big landholding that'll go out of the family if there are no children."

"Come Preeto, let's go," Bhaago told her daughter. "If we keep listening to their stories we'll end up staying here until it's evening." She helped lift up her daughter's basin onto her head and the girl then began walking towards home swaying her hips. The mother looked around for someone to help her lift her own basin and noticed the boy who was making clay figurines. By now he had molded six oxen of various sizes and placed them on top of the piece of wood, and he was busy shaping the seventh. Bhaago called him over, "Jaggoo, help me with this basin." The boy turned a deaf ear to her call and went on working. Then she spoke sharply, "Are you coming over here, or do you want me to come there and give you a smack?" Jaggoo immediately abandoned what he was doing and went running over to her. He quickly helped place the basin on her head and went back to his work. Bhaago mumbled to herself as she walked home, "Nobody in this world listens anymore if you ask politely."

Meanwhile the young girls were now holding half-cooked rice in their

palms and they were enjoying eating it. One of them said, "Do you know what? The water around the *samadh* is the deepest—it goes all the way down to the seventh depth and that's where the Mother Queen's palace is. There she sits on her golden throne wearing her golden crown, and the courtesans of paradise fan her the way the Granth Sahib is fanned in the Sikh temple. The Mother Queen chose to be burned alive with her husband on his bier; she went out of this world a chaste woman. That's why she's so exalted and glorious in the next world."

"Why did she ask to be burned with her dead husband?" the other girls wanted to know.

"I'll tell you," one of the girls offered to explain. "Long ago a king used to rule this village. Mother—the Queen—was his wife. The King and Queen loved each other very much. It so happened that one day the King went hunting in the forest with his vizier. While the King was occupied with pursuing his prey, thoughts of treachery entered the vizier's heart. Prompted by a desire to usurp the throne and seize the kingdom, he aimed and shot an arrow at the King's back. The arrow went right through the King's chest. He fell from his horse and died on the spot.

"When the Mother Queen heard what had happened she mounted a horse, placed the ten- or twelve-year-old Prince on another horse, and came out of the palace. She gathered her subjects together and told them that the vizier had become a traitor, that he had spilled the blood of the very man whom he had vowed to defend with his own life, and was attempting to take over the kingdom which he had been duty-bound to manage. 'If you join with me,' she said, 'I vow to fulfill the three obligations which religion now enjoins on me. First, I must behead the vizier; then I must carry out the coronation of the Prince, putting the tilak on his forehead and seating him on his father's throne; and, finally, I must prepare for sati—burning myself in the fire that will cremate the dead King, for I cannot imagine myself living without my husband.'

"Thousands of people voiced their support and followed her, taking whatever weapons they could lay their hands on. The determined Mother Queen did exactly as she had promised. By afternoon she had beheaded the vizier and fed the pieces of his body to the dogs and vultures. She had also had the King's body carried from the forest into the palace. Then she summoned the brahmins and saw to the investiture of her son, and, before sundown, she was sitting on the pile of firewood, with the dead King's head in her lap, ready to be burned with him. All of her subjects, the courtiers, the priests, the brahmins, and the new King stood around her, their hands folded together, begging her not to go through with self-immolation, for both the King and the kingdom still needed her. But she

did not heed anyone's pleas and ordered the King to light the fire. He would not dare to disobey his mother. Soon the flames reached the sky and consumed both the Queen and the dead King. In the pile of ashes that was left, it was impossible to separate the King's ashes from the Queen's.

"The funeral pyre on which the dead King and the living Queen had been cremated stood where the *samadh* stands now. The new King buried the remains of his parents on that spot and had the *samadh* built over it. What's astonishing is that although both the King's and the Queen's ashes are buried there, the place is known only as the Mother Queen's *samadh*; no one remembers the King anymore. Even now, on the darkest night of the month, when the whole world is asleep, the Mother Queen, sitting on her throne, returns from the deep to her *samadh*. Then it becomes so bright that it seems to be daytime. After that the goddess Parvati comes down and the Mother Queen touches the goddess's feet in greeting. Before returning to her abode in the heavens the goddess blesses the Mother Queen, and the Mother Queen returns to the deep."

After she finished telling this story, the girls returned to their rice. One of them said, "On the darkest night this month I'm going to stay awake the whole night and see what happens."

The girl who had told the story said, "Not everybody is lucky enough to see it. My mother told me that her mother once witnessed the whole thing. But you know what? My grandmother was a very pious woman. She was forever reciting the holy books and she had memorized parts of the Granth Sahib. At night she didn't sleep, she just sat and prayed. Guru Nanak Devji Maharaj once even appeared to her in a dream." Again the girls were lost in wonder and astonishment.

Five uniformed policemen on foot, followed by a thanedar, their officer-in-charge, appeared on the edge of the pond. Everyone was startled. Everything stopped in its tracks, even the plows moving in the fields on the other side of the pond. The farmers, their hands shading their eyes, stood on tiptoe trying to watch the police enter the village once again with their usual show of might and grandeur. What had happened many times before was about to happen yet again. Coming out from among the crops, the policemen walked along the edge of the pond past the six girls. They walked slowly and proudly; it seemed as if they were in no hurry to get anywhere. The young girls watched them with terrified eyes. The policemen knew that everyone around was frightened to see them. They were quiet, not watching anything in particular, or talking to anyone, or even looking at anyone, but the dread of their presence had trapped everyone in its long tentacles like an octopus. Even though they were innocent,

everyone felt guilty around these uniformed men. Of course, that was the effect the policemen wanted to have. After the thanedar and his men had passed by the women, Sant Kaur said, "Look, the ones you've all been waiting for so long are here." The young woman whispered into the old lady's ears, "Auntie, this thanedar isn't the one who was here the last time. This one looks like a gentleman."

"Daughter, you recognize them by their uniforms, not their faces. Whoever puts on a uniform becomes like all the others in uniform. There's no distinction between the angels and devils among them. Just wait to hear the screams coming from the headman's courtyard on this gentleman's orders."

"Oh, Lord! I hope they don't start beating up on the villagers. No one knows who committed the crime, but they'll disgrace everybody they can lay their hands on. How are the villagers to blame for what was done by some thieves and robbers? What could we have done?"

"But daughter, it was the villagers' obligation to safeguard Ishari and her jewelry. Didn't we all know that she was a woman living alone in that huge empty house with a lot of cash and gold, and that she could become the victim of someone driven by greed? And isn't that exactly what happened? Daughter, to fulfill one's obligations sometimes a person pays with his life, as the Mother Queen did. She killed the vizier before sunset, enthroned her son, and then, in the presence of all her subjects, after fulfilling all her obligations, she even had herself burned along with her husband's body. Now that's the way a person honors his moral obligations. We don't even understand yet what our obligations are; how are we going to honor them? Well, then, the police will just keep coming to our village and setting themselves up here, and we'll have to go on suffering."

The Mother Queen's *samadh* was as silent as ever. At first the boys abandoned their various games and just watched the uniformed men attentively, but soon, keeping a suitable distance between themselves and the police, they began walking behind them into the village like trained animals. The women put on their still damp clothes and hastily began gathering their things together. The girls ran towards their houses. The boy fashioning clay figures removed the clay sticking to his hands and, after taking one last look at his creations, began walking behind the others.

The farmers began herding their water buffaloes out of the pond. When one group of animals blocked the policemen's way, the herdsman began beating up on them with his lathi in confusion and alarm, driving half the animals into the village and the rest back into the pond. He wanted to clear the way for the police as quickly as possible. Suddenly, strong gusts of wind started blowing, the waves rose and broke against

the bank. The acacias arched like drawn bows. Dark clouds appeared and quickly covered the whole sky. Having walked the entire length of the pond, the policemen, and the boys behind them, turned the corner and headed towards the village. The whole area was now deserted. The doll's tiny red dress, looking like a bloodstain, was bobbing up and down on the waves. Standing exposed on the piece of wood, the seven clay oxen, complete with their humps, horns and tails, began dissolving in the pelting rain and were reduced to seven indistinguishable lumps of clay. In the middle of the pond, full of life, stood the only image of death—the Mother Queen's *samadh*. Perhaps it was waiting for the blood of a strong, healthy child, another cobbler's son. □

—*Translated by Faruq Hassan*