

YOKE : A SHORT STORY BY JATIN BALA

**Translated from Bangla by Suranjana Banerjee and
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Madan Das, thin and lanky, looks like a man down under stress in life. He is an emaciated and longish face. Rather gaunt. The bones of his body can be counted easily. He has lost his hair due to prolonged fever. Lying sick in bed, he casts a despairing glance at his wife Shobha and laments in a feeble voice, ‘Shobha, I’m really unlucky. And with me you’ve had to bear a life of drudgery. It has been hard to meet the two ends of life. You’ve had to work hard all through the day. And also take care of our son. There is no end to your suffering. To make matters worse, I’m on the verge of leaving you forever. The hope that I had even this morning has now crashed. Just vanished. It’s all going to be over soon.’

‘Come on Shobha, don’t cry. Listen, listen, no one lives forever in this world. Everyone has to go someday. Sooner or later. Our son and all else is now all your responsibility. I’m not able to leave behind a single penny. I’ve nowhere to hide my sorrow. Forgive me, Shobha. I’m not able to leave you in peace. Our son is still with you. Protect him with all your might. He’s your sole reason to be alive. Your only resort.’

‘What now Shobha ...why is our Saral crying? What’s wrong with him?’

Wiping off her tears with one end of her sari, Shobha exclaims, ‘Don’t even ask...When danger hovers around, bad things come hand in hand! Since this morning, his body is getting warmer. I hope he just doesn’t run a fever?’

Thinking of his son, Madan Das’s feeble voice grows feebler. In his last days, when the transience of worldly life dawns on him as a hard reality, regret for things left to be done and remorse for past deeds fills his being, makes him feel all the more open and unabashed.

Hearing her husband speaking his mind, Shobha holds her son in tight embrace and begins to weep fervidly. All these days her husband’s reticence had hurt her maternal affection but she had never uttered a word. Now the sorrow just brims over. Placing her palm on her son’s forehead,

she urges, 'Son, let me see. Are you feeling too bad? Let me take you to a doctor!' Yet her heart seethed just to think of the money she'd need.

Naïve as he may be, Saral Das realizes that something is amiss from his father's illness and his mother's incessant wailing. He insists, '*Ma*, come and check – I'm not sick. *Baba*, you get well soon. See I'm fine.' With his arms round Shobha's neck, he caresses his mother.

On hearing his son's words, Madan Das begins to sob so hard that his already battered body rocks.

Three days later Madan Das died.

Two days have passed since then. Shobha Das hasn't eaten a morsel of rice. Hasn't gulped even a drop of water. Stretched on a layer of straw, her only son lay groaning with fever. These two days her only son hasn't opened his eyes. Hasn't glanced around. Her listless heart feels soothed when she raises Saral to her heart and holds him close to her bosom. The very next moment she lays him down on the bed of straw. She feels too unsettled. Her son is running high temperature! It just doesn't seem to get any better. How can a mother feel hungry and thirsty? Shobha gulps a little water but can't bring herself to swallow it. Her heart and mind are tossing in an ocean of anxiety. Uneasy that the worst may happen, Shobha feels unnerved.

A widow, a helpless woman, Shobha's suffering knows no end. In the last three years, she has surrendered two of her children to the water of the Ganges. And just few days back, even her husband passed away. Now her only anchor, her last resort, is her son Saral. He is in such a sorry state. Unlucky that she is, there aren't even dry twigs well within her reach that would console her a little. Tears trickle without a stop. Slapping her forehead she cries, 'Oh God, how longer will you torment me? Do you want to take him away? What wrong have I done my God that you are punishing me thus? My lord, please do not snatch this one from my lap. Save him. Cure him....'

Saral Das feels a little better late in the night. But a feverish feeling lingers on. If Shobha does not earn, they would have nothing to eat. She can't even leave her son behind. Shobha takes him

along when she goes to the field to cut grass. With a bundle of it, she goes to the market. Her son still accompanies her.

To coax him to stay put while she gets busy cutting grass, Shobha has got a sickle and a basket made for him.

Like his mother, Saral pulls out tufts of grass in the field. With great pride he announces, 'Ma-go, just see, with the sickle you've got for me, I have pulled out so many tufts of grass. Once I grow up, I'll come to the field all by myself, cut grass and sell it in the market. I'll bring home money. You will no longer have to worry!'

Overjoyed to hear her son's words, Shobha urges, 'Hey son, tell me what you'll buy for me with the money you get by selling grass? Tell me what you'll get for me?'

Excited by his mother's query, Saral promises, 'Ma-go, ma, for you I'll buy a red bordered sari and a red blouse. You'll look lovely!'

In the wee hours of the night Saral has another bout of high fever. His mother is listless with anxiety. The fever is just not getting any better. Every time Shobha gazes at her ailing son, her heart skips a beat. Memories of bygone days of happiness flashes before her eyes time and again. And her heart aches all the more. Shobha sits pale in the face.

Whosoever has seen Saral in Shobha's hands has exclaimed, 'Surely, some witch has cast an evil eye at the boy or else why would he be running such high temperature? Or else why would a sprightly boy as him come to this? It's certain that some witch has cast an evil eye. Shobha you better take your son to an exorcist. Ask him to chant incantations and ward off the evil spirit. Go, go to an exorcist. Take your son Shobha, take him to an exorcist.'

But who could have cast an evil eye on her son? Who could be the enemy of hapless widow like her? If only Shobha comes to know the name of the person, she'll dash to her feet! She'll place Saral in her lap. Wouldn't the latter's heart melt with sympathy? Just a little compassion would

she not have? How would Shobha save her only son? The very thought stiffens her senses. Her head reels. She runs from one house to the next. She asks many a question to a lot of people.

Everyone agrees that some witch has cast an evil eye on Shobha. Yet none can tell her the name. Despairing Shobha's grief and distress increases with every moment. Her heart can no longer contain the severe disappointment. It almost breaks open. What would Shobha do now? Whom would she ask! Pain rages through her heart and something stirs deep within her being...

II

At one corner of Dogachi village, stands a hut with a tiled roof. It's now past the wee hours of the night. A fire seethes in Shobha's grief stricken and anxiety ridden heart. In such distressing times, which God would she appease? She wonders which deity's *manot* she should observe to find respite! Her worries wreck her nerves. She's unable to decide. Weariness gets the better of her and she dozes off.

In a trance, she dreams – she sees her husband standing at her bedside, caressing their son and assuring her, 'Don't cry, Shobha. He'll be fine. Tomorrow you must go and offer a puja to Goddess Kali at the village temple.' With this her master, her husband disappears.

She opens her eyes soon after waking up. She has this feeling that her husband has come – soon there is no doubt about it. Her husband hasn't yet forgotten her – a ray of hope glistens in her heart with this realization. Her eyes are tearful for love of her husband and with respect for him. She takes her son in her arms and gazes at the sky. She prays, 'Oh Almighty, Oh Goddess, my son should get well soon! I'll offer a puja and also pay the fine. Please save my only son. Have pity on this widow, have pity on me. I'll pay the fine. I'll arrange the *bhog*. Ma, just save my son. Oh Goddess, Oh Ma, protect my son....'

Just then Saral opens his eyes and glances at his mother. He insists, 'Ma, I want to drink water. Give me water. I'd like to drink.' Shobha runs and soon returns with a bowl of water. She helps Saral sip. Saral feels better after quenching his thirst. He asks, 'Ma is it day or night?'

Shobha tells, 'Well, the chirping birds just announced the wee hours of the night. How are you feeling son? Are you feeling better, son?'

Saral assures, 'I'm feeling good. I'm fine now, isn't it?'

Caressing her son, Shobha prays, 'Oh Goddess, you've heard my prayers. You've cured my son. He should never be sick. Protect him O Goddess.' My dear son you'll be able to play with your friends tomorrow. So do you want to eat? Is there something special you want to eat? Tell me son, what would you like to eat?'

- Yes, ma. I'm quite hungry, Give me something to eat. Ma, I'll have *gajas*! Saral eagerly urged his mother.

Her son's odd request of letting him relish *gajas* perturbed Shobha's anxiety ridden mind. Placing her hand on his head, she cajoled, 'No dear....don't ask for *gajas*. It is not good for you now. Don't have *gajas*. If you want, I'll cook some rice for you. Son, have some rice. Don't demand *gajas* now!'

Saral insists, 'No ma, I won't have rice. I'll only eat *gajas*. Ma, give me some *gajas*.' He keeps on demanding *gaja*.

Blinded by affection for her ailing son, Shobha gives in to his capricious demands. She pulls down the pot of *gaja* hanging from a skewer jutting out of the roof of the hut. Digging in, Shobha hands a few *gajas* to her son, 'Here, now have these *gajas*.'

Saral savours the *gajas*. By then the eastern sky has begun to brighten. Shobha gazes at the sky and thanks the omnipotent goddess. She is about to close the lid of the pot of *gajas*. Just then a neighbor calls. Leaving the pot ajar, she struts off to open the door.

Finding the pot uncovered, Saral thrusts in his hand and brings out few more gajas. Ailing since the last few days, he suddenly feels hunger pangs and quickly devours the gajas.

III

Saral feels good for most of the day. Once or twice, he even walks across their tiny courtyard. He can't yet play with his friends. Nonetheless, he feels overjoyed to see them play.

Shobha feels that the worst is over. She is relieved. Saral is no longer feverish. In a day or two, as soon as she is able to put together some money, she'd go to the Kali temple.

It is winter now. Shobha does not realize how the hours fly by as she is busy sweeping and mopping and then in bathing and eating. In the evening, when Saral's fever runs high, Shobha feels scared. Immediately, ill feelings rage in her heart and anxieties seize control. She feels that Saral is suffering again because she has delayed the puja.

There is still some time to go before darkness descends. Laying Saral on the floor, Shobha begins to arrange all that would be needed for the puja. She collects flowers, *bel* leaves, *durba* grass and even few *tulsi* leaves from around the house. But she'd have to get sweets for Ma Kali's bhog that has to be distributed among the neighbours. Besides, she'll also need at least another two to three rupees for paying the Brahmin priest and for the fine. Without it, getting the puja done is next to impossible.

But Shobha has no money. Where would she get it? She runs to her neighbours to borrow the same. She ransacks the village for five rupees. But she doesn't get a penny. Unable to gather it, Shobha feels severely disappointed. She was hoping to get a paltry loan of five rupees. A bad time indeed as no one is ready to part with money as debt. Perhaps, even an ocean dries up when an unlucky person turns to it.

With heavy thoughts weighing on her mind when Shobha gazes at herself, something grips her attention – a pair of silver bangles that are still adorning her wrist. At last she takes it off and rushes to sell it to the village grocer.

Badal Mudi is the village grocer. He appears more like a bag of bones. He speaks clattering his teeth, puckering his dark deep set eyebrows and shaking the flat sides of his sharp nose. A spark of joy flashes in his cock eyes, as he announces, ‘I don’t not deal in gold and silver.’ Then he gets back to the work at hand. Turning around, he suggests, ‘You better go to a goldsmith. Then he turned once more to the work at hand.

Breaking down, a visibly helpless Shobha implores, ‘*Dada*, I don’t have much time. Just take these and give five rupees to me. *Dada*, this is not the time to ponder on loss and gain. *Dada*, just have pity on me and give me five rupees.’ Like any other battered helpless person, Shobha waits.

Badal Mudi is as sly as ever. Caressing his greying hairs twice and softening his voice, he mutters, ‘I can take these for five rupees. Not a penny more – I’ll not pay in advance nor shall I hold it back. You said, you need this badly...if you agree then hand it over to me or else take what is yours.’ Badal Mudi’s eyes glisten with a smile. He takes advantage of Shobha’s distress.

The yoke of blind superstition that has a firm grip on Shobha’s mind seems to have robbed her of the ability to make out what is right or wrong. She readily agrees, ‘Yes, yes, *dada*, of course, give me the money. I’ll sell these for five rupees. You better give me *batasha* worth one rupee and pay the rest in cash. Just hurry a little as I’ve left my ailing son alone at home. It’s for him that I’ll be offering a puja at the Kali temple.’

Selling off her bangles, *batasha* in hand, Shobha hastily runs home. Then she quickly arranges the rest of the stuff needed for a puja. Lifting her son in her arms and the *thali* for the puja in her hand, she heads as fast as she can in the direction of the Kali temple.

There is a large pond to the south of the village. Flanking it, one finds a huge banyan tree. And just beneath this banyan tree, there is a temple of Goddess *Kali*. The puja of Goddess *Kali* had begun well before her arrival. The *arati* was underway. About ten to fifteen ardent devotees of

Ma Kali were singing a hymn. She reached at this point holding the thali with batasha, flowers, bel and tulsi leaves neatly arranged on it and with her ailing son in her arms

Ananta Chakroborty, the Brahmin priest of *Ma Kali*'s temple has a pale face with two big eyes and a head as round as a ball. There is a vast bald patch on it. Unexpectedly finding Shobha standing in front of the temple, he twitches his eyebrows, arched like a waning moon and shrieks rather rudely, 'Hey you, you, why have you come here? What do you want?'

Hastily Shobha climbs on to the basement of the temple and speaks emphatically, '*Thakur*, I've observed a manot for Goddess *Kali*. So I've come to offer a puja to *Ma*....'

The Brahmin priest usually offers pujas on behalf of the high castes of the village but not for Sudras. Every morning and evening he performed these pujas.

Startled as if he has seen a venomous snake, the priest Ananta Chakroborty steps back and complains in a disgust laden voice, 'Hey, you are a *Sudra*. Will you enter the temple and defile everything! Just go away, go away! Stand at a distance!' With disgust and contempt written large on his face, the priest turns to the work at hand.

An old man from a high caste who lived in this very village taunts Shobha, 'Have you come to cleanse her with your touch? How dare you?'

Rendered immobile by such a vile attack, Shobha tries to be as polite as ever, '*Thakur*, I've come to touch *Ma*'s feet and offer a puja as for my manot. I'll just offer a puja. I've brought everything that you'll need. I had observed this manot for my ailing son. *Thakur*, I'll fall to her feet and pray for the well being of my only son!'

The Brahmin priest speaks in a scathing voice, spitting hatred, scorn and abuse at Shobha, 'Are you mad or what? You wanton woman you think you can touch *Ma*, you are so adamant! Being a *Sudra* you still want to offer a puja to *Ma Kali*! You've surely got lots of pluck!'

Shobha can't remember if she has come to this temple earlier. Shocked to her wits end, she does not stir. She sifts through the pervading darkness of her heart and tries to think of things to say,

‘Ma Kali is a mother to one and all. Thakur, even a sinner turns a new leaf after her *darshan!* And I have come to offer a puja for the manot I’ve observed. Thakur, why would my touch defile Ma Kali? I’m just another human being like all of you here...’

Ananta Chakraborty’s sharp gaze pierces right through their being. Hurling deep revulsion and disdain at Shobha and her son, puckering his lips, Ananta Chakraborty calls out, ‘Listen all of you, what this slut is saying! She is a Sudra and yet she dares to come to the Kali temple to offer a puja? Just leave the temple premises! Get out!’

Tears roll down Shobha’s cheeks and brims over the lines on her face. But ignoring the streak of anxiety that flashes in her mind and still hoping for good, she simply says, ‘I’ve come here with the hope of praying for my ailing son. I’ve brought money to pay for your services and for the fine. I’ll pray before Ma Kali for my son’s well being. My son is almost unconscious with fever. Thakur, please let me offer my prayers.’

By then, the rest finish their evening worship. Of them, one surges forward and threatens Shobha, ‘Hey you low born woman, go away from here. Go away, go away from here. If you don’t, I’ll hit you hard...’

Someone else adds from behind, ‘Why don’t we hurl her *thali* to the ground! There is so much violence in the world around us. If this slut is allowed to offer her puja, will the world survive! It’ll topple. Go, go away from here. If you don’t, I’ll pelt stones at you!’

Another taunts, ‘You bitch, you low born woman, what is it that you don’t understand! Go away! See what’s happening these days in this country....Sudras, untouchables are coming to the templetheir courage is increasing by the day.’

The temperature dips. Cold north winds blows. Wrapping her son in a cloth, Shobha stands shivering. All around her custodians of religion, devotees of Ma Kali are busy arguing about dharma and adharma, discussing caste system and the rising audacity of low borns. Her son coils in her arms. Soon he begins trembling in the cold. Shobha feels like dashing to Ma Kali’s feet. Is the Goddess a mother only to high castes! Ma Kali is there for all. Who are they to hold her

back? At second thoughts, she wonders if they'd really throw away her *thali*! It would be inauspicious for her son. Shobha steps back in her dilemma. She seems to have been incapacitated by the yoke of superstition round her neck.

Seeing her turn away, other devotees go home. Stealthily, Shobha walks up to the temple again. With utmost devotion, she sets her thali on the floor of the temple. There is a slight clattering noise.

Just then, the Brahmin priest storms out of the inner shrine with a shrill outcry, 'You sinner, you low born, you untouchable, do you want to taint the temple and the idol of Ma Kali? How dare you? You are not even scared of the living presence of Goddess Kali! Get out now, now, get out of here! Out of here!'

Before Ananta Chakroborty finishes, Shobha sinks down on the floor of the temple imploring, 'Thakur, I am very unlucky and my only son is unconscious with fever. Thakur, let me touch Ma's feet just once. I've brought money to pay for your service and for the fine. Thakur, let me go in and offer a puja before Ma. I've sold my bangles so as to pray for the well being of my son. Ma's ordered us to come here. She appeared in a dream and so I've come to offer a puja. I've come running. Let me fall to her feet once!' Then she begins to sob.

How could a Brahmin priest indulge in such an unprecedented act of sin? How could he allow a Sudra to touch Ma Kali? What if incensed Ma Kali unleashes hell on the village? With such thoughts raging through his mind, Ananta Chakroborty's anger knows no bounds. With hardened severity he reprimands Shobha, 'No, no, this can't be allowed to happen. You Sudra woman, you untouchable woman, you have no right to enter the temple. Go home, go and worship Ma Kali from there. Get out immediately!'

Shobha wonders if she could wet Ma Kali's feet with her tears, if she could lay her only son Saral at the Goddess's feet, wouldn't Ma have pity on her! The thought makes her listless. She decides that she can't delay it any further. She'll dash to mother's feet and bare her heart. Who

else but Ma Kali would protect her! With the yoke of superstition round her neck and her ailing son in her arms, she surges forward.

The Brahmin priest exclaims, 'Hey devotees of Ma, see what's happened? This Sudra woman has entered the shrine and defiled everything. Come here!'

Those who were on their way home, rush back. They find Shobha entering the shrine and hear the Brahmin priest shouting vehemently.

Soon few of them turn to her - start slapping, punching and kicking Shobha and her ailing son Saral.

Bio

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