

BUDDHISAGAR

Kathmandu

Saturday

Sister and I arrived beside the fig tree near Mamata Didi's house. The house was quiet. In the cow shed beside the gate, white froth came from the buffalo's mouth as it chewed. The birds who were preening their wings in the branches of the fig tree flew up when they heard our footsteps.

Crossing the two wooden bars laid across the gateway, we entered the yard. Its damp surface was covered by a thin layer of moss, spread out like a bedsheet. The green creeper of a bitter gourd was climbing up a dried-out trellis to one side.

It was dark inside the threshold and we crept inside like thieves. The fire had gone out in the fireplace. A large dirty aluminium pot sat on top of it, probably containing gruel for the buffalo. Above the fireplace there was a row of boxes of oil, salt and spice, and a pile of red chillis. The walls and rafters were covered in soot. In the corner to the left a bed was piled in a heap, folded back towards its head. In the corner to the right were a spade, an axe and a sickle. Directly above the axe hung a large cucumber, ripe and brown. A bamboo ladder climbed up from beside the fireplace. Some dim light filtered in at the point where it reached the attic.

'Mamata?', Sister called, directing her voice towards the top of the ladder.

'Huh?' a low voice came from above.

Sister climbed up, stretching her calves and taking care not to bang her head on the rafters. I followed her.

Lord!

Mamata Didi was lying on her back staring up at the thatched roof, under a dirty quilt that was patched in places. Her dishevelled hair was tied back in a bunch and her face was as yellow as the setting sun in winter. Her eyes were sunken, and their whites were yellow too.

Mamata Didi hadn't been seen for a week. There had been some rumours that she had gone to the forest to gather fodder and had come back feeling ill. She must have been attacked by a *masaan* ghost, the rumours said.

They said that something jumped right out at her as she passed a saal tree that was thick with leaves on the way back from the forest. Her body ached from the soles of her feet to the top of her head, and that night she was racked with fever. She shook like a shaman, they said, and her teeth chattered.

Sister sat at her head, and I sat at her feet. Sister put her hand on her head and asked, 'Have you eaten anything?'

'I can't even eat rice.'

'Will you eat some grapes?' Sister pulled the grapes she had brought from home from the pocket of her skirt.

She placed some of the fat grapes in Mamata Didi's trembling hand and Mamata put them in her mouth. They burst there and their juice dribbled out to wet her flaking lips. She wiped it away with the back of her hand. Did a cold draught get in through an opening in the quilt, or what was it? She moved a little and wrapped both sides of the quilt around herself, covering her back. When the quilt opened a little I saw that she was wearing a blue shirt, and that her body was all dried up like a creeper trellis.

'It's just because it's so cold' said Mamata Didi, her teeth chattering with cold.

'Would you like some tea, shall I make some?' asked Sister.

'No.' Mamata Didi became tearful. 'Am I going to die, or what is it?'

Parvati choked back her tears.

'I'll tell Father,' I said. 'Father will make you well.'

Sister bent down to Mamata Didi's face.

In a weak voice, Mamata Didi asked her, 'Write a letter to Maldidi, would you, telling her I'm ill?'

'Yes.'

When they came home, Mamata Didi's father and mother saw our sandals in the doorway right away. Her mother called up from below, 'Who's up there, huh? Come down!'

'I'll sneak in again tomorrow' said Sister, hurrying down.

'Mamata Didi, get well soon,' I said, my face turning tearful.

Mamata Didi smiled, wiping her tears, but it seemed to me that she was crying all the more.

When he had heard everything from Parvati that evening, Father guessed what the disease was. 'It sounds like meningitis.'

'Ba, go and see her tomorrow,' Sister said.

Father didn't say anything more, he just sat there with his eyes shut and his eyelashes trembling slightly.

Early the next day, before he left for Katasé, Father leaned his bicycle up under the fodder fig tree and stood there for a moment, thinking. Then he went into Mamata Didi's yard. I was following him, without letting him know. I hid near the tree and watched.

Mamata Didi's father was plaiting a tethering rope. Father went up and stood beside him. He knew that Father was there, but he pretended not to. He just glanced once at Father, then pulled the half-finished tether tight.

'How is Mamata Didi?' Father asked him.

'I don't know. Why, has something happened to her?'

'She's sick.'

Suddenly the mother came flying out of the house, and shouted, 'You don't need to do anything, don't come here trying to be like one of the family.'

'Let me just take a look at her.'

'You'll look at her, will you? I don't know how many people have died after you've looked at them! Go away from here! You take people's fields like a snake, you're bloated with greed!'

'Will you never listen to reason?' Father's legs were shaking. 'Your daughter is dying. Aren't you ashamed?'

'And now you talk about shame? Don't you know when your dhoti's slipped off? My daughter is the Lord's responsibility. What good do you think you can do?'

Father said nothing more, but just came out. I ran away. He stood under the fodder fig tree again for a moment, then he picked his bicycle up and slammed it down onto the ground in anger.

That night a shaman was jumping around in Mamata Didi's yard. I was so afraid of the shaman's loud cries I couldn't even sleep.

'We should send word to Mamata's sisters,' Father said at midnight. 'Her parents are going to kill her if all they are going to do is summon the shamans to dance.'

'Ba, I'll take her medicine when I go tomorrow,' Sister whispered, her breath dry. 'I'll give to her secretly.'

Father glanced at Sister strangely.

Father went to Katasé first thing the next day.

At a quarter past eight Sister and I were hurriedly eating our rice before leaving for school when suddenly a conch sounded in Mamata Didi's house. Birds left the branches of the trees and flew south as the sound of the conch was heard around the whole of Matera.

We stopped eating, our hands froze.

Sister ran outside like a wind storm, knocking the plate that was resting on her knees to the ground. I followed her, perplexed. At the edge of our yard, Mother stood craning her neck like an egret to peer over at Mamata Didi's house. Her soot-covered hands were shaking slightly.

'Mother!' suddenly Sister let out a scream.

Mother's legs trembled and she lost her balance. She sat down in the porch and chewed her lip. Then Sister burst into tears and ran towards Mamata Didi's house like a lunatic. As she reached the cow shed I ran out after her too. By the time I reached the fodder fig tree I had become fearful and my lips were dry.

In Mamata Didi's yard a crowd of silent people were standing in a circle, hanging their heads. Standing on a high field ridge, Lamichane Budha was blowing an upturned conch shell, turning it towards the sky and straining the veins in his throat.

Sister had reached the edge of the crowd but she was finding it hard to make her way inside it. I reached the roots of the fodder fig tree, where lines of red ants were entering. I climbed up the tree and squatted on a horizontal branch, like a sick dove.

Mamata Didi's mother was lying on her face on the front step of the house, screaming. The astrologer's wife sat beside her, holding her head in her hands, and next to her were some women I didn't know. My eyes smarted with a burning sensation and a tiny sob came out of me. Mamata Didi was at the centre of the circle of people, lying on her back. Her eyes were shut, the same blue shirt was on her body, and her hair was tied back in a single bunch. Her round, fair face was peaceful and her plump cheeks had become sunken. Suddenly someone covered her face with a white cloth. Somebody else, I don't know who, dragged in some green leafy bamboos. Two people placed Mamata Didi on the ground that the astrologer's wife had just painted with fresh mud. As she was lifted up and set down again, Mamata Didi's head dangled down.

People had heard the sound of the conch and were coming from all around, from Lamichane Basti, from Achami Basti, from Tharu Gaun, hurrying across the fields. The crowd kept growing. Parvati came out of the crowd, choking back her tears. Achami Budha, who was standing to one side, seemed to be chiding her. Sister stood by the cow shed, in which there was no buffalo now.

Both of the bamboos were bound together like a ladder. A Tharu who had just arrived on a bicycle handed a parcel to Mamata Didi's father. After a moment of confusion, he gave the parcel to the astrologer, who unfurled the length of white cloth like a waistband and attached poles along its length to create the 'Way'. Eight or nine people grasped the poles, as if they were taking hold of flags, and the cloth stretched a long way.

Lamichane Budha went ahead, blowing the conch. The people who were holding the Way followed him. The 'Way of Cloth' stretched from the main road towards the Amauri Khola. Covered in yellow cloth, Mamata Didi was lifted abruptly – as if on a ladder to an upside down residence. One of the people bearing her was Magar Uncle, but the others I did not know.

The white Way had already gone ahead of us. When it was time to take Mamata Didi away, her mother screamed once as if her breast would be torn open, and fell to the ground. As for our mother, she stood a little way off near a lac tree, wiping her tears from time to time with the shawl she was wearing.

No one would allow Parvati to follow. They said a girl should not join a funeral procession. I came down from the fodder fig tree and took up behind the line of people who were walking along with their heads bowed. I was the last in line, but I could smell the ghee that was being burned at the head of the procession.

The people at Pal Bazaar stood and stared, watching the funeral procession as it passed. Some of them whispered to each other.

A lot of dust flew up when the procession reached the Amauri Khola. Next to the bridge, Bhagiram was standing in the dust with an unfinished fan hanging from his left hand. When I reached his side he was mumbling in distress, 'Bandeivi took her, Bandevi took her.' Then the old man joined the procession too.

After it had crossed the Amauri Khola the white Way turned sharply into the forest from the saal saplings.

‘Children, do not come any further’ someone said, taking my arm. ‘In the jungle the *masaan* will come upon you.’

I stopped there but I went on watching as the dark forest slowly swallowed the procession of mourners. Bhagiram, who was following along behind, was hidden by the saal saplings. I stood on the bank of the Amauri Khola for as long as the sound of the conch could be heard echoing in the distant forest,

Father got the news on his way home: Mamata Didi had gone and would never return. Getting down from his bicycle, he quietly placed a polythene bag in the porch. It contained bottles of medicine for Mamata Didi. Father sat until late in a dark corner of the upper floor. When we came home his eyes were red.

‘She should not have died so young’, Father told Mother from a choking throat. ‘Mamata has gone, leaving the whole village crying, and I couldn’t even attend the funeral.’

After that Father sat in silence until late, twisting the radio’s nose. For a long time he stared at the cluster fig tree. Mother too sat gazing at Mamata Didi’s house until well after nightfall.

‘Come upstairs’ Father called.

‘I feel as if she might suddenly turn up here.’ Mother wiped away her tears with the end of her sari. ‘It’s always the good people that Death takes away, *thukka!*’

Sister lay on her bed as if she had fainted, sobbing from time to time. I could not sleep all night. Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw Mamata Didi’s smile.

The next day there was a school holiday. Mamata Didi was no longer there to utter her response to roll number 31, Class 6. I went to Pal Bazaar in the afternoon, and there too all the talk was of Mamata Didi.

‘A ghost took her away’, one was blaming himself. ‘It was an inauspicious time and a ghost came looking.’

‘She died for lack of medicine’, another said.

I couldn’t stay long at Pal Bazaar listening to such things. The rice that was scattered on the road while they were taking Mamata Didi away yesterday was still there. I went home walking from field terrace to field terrace so that I wouldn’t have to see it. I didn’t have the courage to go via Mamata Didi’s house.

That evening, I was in the yard when Magar Uncle, who had been wandering aimlessly around in the fields, came towards our house. His eyes were red and his sandals and legs were smeared with mud. Saliva oozed from the corners of his mouth and his body smelled very bad. He didn’t speak to me but just sat on the front step. Sister came back from the cow shed, stinking with her hands covered in dung. Mother came out of the kitchen with her eyes full of smoke.

‘You’re really drunk today’ Mother said dully.

Magar Uncle did not reply. He just twisted his head from side to side like a bull in a cow shed and pulled a sour face.

‘Sister, I am a sinner’ Magar Uncle suddenly murmured. ‘My sin cannot be washed away.’

‘Why, what have you done?’

Magar Uncle told us. He had dug the pit in which Mamata Didi was to be buried. Once he had dug the pit he felt tired, so he went to rest under a nearby saal tree. Just a moment later the people who were dragging Mamata Didi towards the pit arrived noisily, and the pit was surrounded by the crowd. Magar Uncle ran to its edge. When he saw Mamata Didi in the pit his head span, he said. He became so dizzy he had to sit down. By the time he regained his senses they had buried Mamata Didi under the soil.

‘Do you know what, Sister?’ Magar Uncle could not suppress a choking sob. ‘She was still breathing a little.’

That night Father's eyes were red. 'This is a place of ignorant sinners!' he thundered.

'That's enough, don't make such a noise!' Mother grasped his hand.

Father was standing on the edge of our yard. Since he came home from Katasé he hadn't even washed his hands and feet. Mother had told him right away what Magar Uncle had said.

'Buried alive!' Father shouted with even greater force.

Sister had been in bed with a fever all day and now she appeared on the balcony, her cheeks streaked with tears.

'All these people of Matera are dead to me now,' Father's voice became tearful. 'One day they'll bury my own children alive too, *thu!*'

He didn't even eat his meal that night, but sat for several hours twiddling the radio's nose. It was the first time I had seen my father so angry. Frightened, I pretended to sleep. Eventually I fell asleep but I was woken by the sound of whispering at midnight to see a lantern burning near the head of my parents' bed. Mother was applying a wet bandage to Father's forehead. After she had left a piece of cloth on his forehead for a moment she would dip the rag in water again.

'I told you not to shout so much, not to think too much' she said quietly. 'And now your head aches.'

Father did not reply.

'Is that better?' Mother asked after a moment.

'A little better'. Father swallowed hard.

I lay on my side, watching Father on the next bed without him knowing. His breath sounded like the flowing waters of the Amauri Khola.

I felt all around the bed with my hands, but the cat that had been sleeping there until recently was nowhere to be found.

Sister and I returned to school two days later. Sister wept three times on the way to school, remembering Mamata Didi.

At the third bell I was dropping off to sleep with my face on my desk.

'Hey Brisha Bahadur, go outside' said Sir.

I looked towards the door and saw Sister standing there with a tearful face. I went out, my head hung low.

'Come on, let's go home' Sister told me.

I was puzzled. 'Come on, na? I have a fever.'

I went back into the classroom. I looked at Sir, and he indicated that I could go. On the way home Sister did not say a word, but just walked ahead, with me following behind. At about two o'clock we reached the Amauri Khola and Sister stopped dead. On the far side of the river was the dense saal forest. Sister caught hold of my hand and said 'Let's go there!'

'I won't go there, I won't!' I said, shaking my hand free of hers.

Sister caught hold of my hand once more and said quietly, 'Let's go once, can't we? Just once!'

Sister's tearful face won me over. I waded across to the other side through the knee-deep water covered with patches of scum. Sister followed me, wetting the hem of her skirt. A narrow winding path took us deep into the forest. Woodpeckers were pecking the trees, *thvaak thvaak*. Shaking with fear, we were swishing our way through the forest, which was filled with desolation and silence. *Khatryākka* – a squirrel ran into a bush. The extensive branches of the saal trees, thick with leaves, blocked the sun like an umbrella. Only from time to time could a blade of sunshine be seen descending to the foot of a tree. I felt weaker and weaker.

'Come on. It must be close by now.'

In the forest there were neither cowherds nor cattle, but a sweet sound like a cowherd's song was still hanging in the air. A short distance away a langur climbed up a tall saal tree, spinning its tail in a circle. It plunged from one branch to the next.

At last we saw it. 'There's the grave, over there' said Sister, pointing.

I looked where she had pointed. Goosebumps rose up from my skin, as if ants were walking all over my body—that's what it's like when I'm scared. The soil that had been dug up was just the same nine days later, probably because it hadn't rained. Between us and the grave an animal had dropped some dung. On the grave there lay some broken red bangles and a dusty bunch of red ribbons, all tangled together.

I had imagined that Mamata Didi might have emerged from the grave and might be sitting beside it, spreading out her hair, but she was nowhere to be seen. Sister couldn't hold back her tears.

'Mamata, don't forget me, d'you hear?' she said, and she sat down by the grave and wept. I cried too. 'Let's go now Sister' I said, tugging at her arm.

And we ran home, faster than the wind, as if we were being chased by a cobra with tonsils full of green poison.

The next day Sister missed school again with a fever, and I didn't go either. Towards afternoon Sister suddenly came screaming out of her room. Mother and I were drinking tea in the porch and we were startled.

'What's wrong?' Mother exclaimed.

'Mamata is sitting in the temple!' Sister ran downstairs, spreading out her tangled hair. She stood out in the yard, her legs really shaking.

'Hey, go inside and see what's there' Mother turned to me.

All the strength drained from my body.

'Go on, you're strong!' Mother gave me a little courage.

I climbed upstairs, my legs shaking. It was thickly dark in the corner where Santoshi Mata resided. A cold chill spread through my heart. I shut my eyes and kicked blindly in the dark, and the temple inside the carton fell to the ground. I picked it up so that it hung from my hand like a dead mouse, and flung it down into the yard from the upper floor. The carton collapsed and the packet of incense burst. Sunlight illuminated the picture of Santoshi Mata, and we saw that she was smiling. Mother gathered up everything that had fallen into the yard—the picture of Santoshi Mata, the incense, the bell— and stuffed it into a sack.

'Go and let the Amauri Khola wash it away' she said, and I ran off towards the river, carrying the sack.

'She's like this because she's become weak' Father said that evening. 'She just cries all night and day.'

'I tell her to stop looking at Mamata's photo, but she won't', Mother said. 'All day long she stares at the photo. It must remind her, and she cries and cries.'

Sister started crying again.

The next morning, Father was looking at the photo too. I got up with a long yawn, whereupon, *lau!* Father started to cut up the photo with some scissors. I just stared. Father regarded the two cut pieces of the photo for a moment.

I got down from my bed.

'Come here' Father summoned me, holding out one piece of the photo. I took it and saw Mamata Didi smiling. In the photo she had been standing beside us, but Father had cut her out of it.

'Go' said Father. 'Go and quietly throw it into the Amauri Khola. Otherwise your sister will just keep looking at it and crying.'

I put the piece of photo into the pockets of my shorts, quietly descended the ladder, and ran as fast I could towards the Amauri Khola.

Frist Nepali Edition: 2010

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