

The Shadow of the Tree

Sometimes the leaves appeared green, sometimes silvery. Feet slipped over the sparse, tough grass where leaves had fallen. And the sunlight dappled the shadows below through the high branches. Across this tracery, the silence stretched tight, waiting to be touched into memory. It had been her tree always.

Bhagwati sat under it, savouring the moment. Light shifted over her grey hair which disappeared under her **odhni**. The telegram had arrived this morning. It had been so long in the coming. She couldn't assimilate it. She nestled closer to the tree.

Babulal had worked at the post office quite some miles away. To the east. She was only seven years old when she was married to him. He was twelve then. And then the years passed. She had heard that he got this job at the post office. He brought the letters sometimes to the village and once in a while he even brought a telegram. The Sarpanch spoke to him with his arm around his shoulders. Just imagine!

It was time for the **gauna** and she was brought to this village when she was fourteen. It was frightening. There was his mother and Kaka and Kaka's two sons. And, of course, Narain baba. She never did make out how Narain baba was related. He just was. Babulal came when he got leave, because though the distance was not great, there was no road. The desert sands lay heavy, dragging at one's feet. Babulal made life worth waiting for. He always laughed and inevitably brought her bangles and some sweets.

There was work at home and on the two and a half bighas of land too. Besides, the cattle and the goat had to be looked after too. Kaka and his boys had the adjoining plot and they helped Bhagwati with her patch too. Narain baba helped too. He had been with Babulal's father, looking after the cattle and doing things for him. He was a little slow and spent his leisure sleeping on the **chabutara** at the house. That is, if he was not regaling someone with old stories over his **chillum**. Babulal sat there when he came, adding stories of the post office. It was an idyllic growing up!

There was a wedding at Beeru's house. His sister's. The baraat was to come from Daurel village. After the wedding there was to be a **bhoj**, a great feast at which the whole village would turn up. Such a bustle was on! People rushed around carrying things, working, laughing, chattering like mynahs, getting under each others' feet and into each others' hair. Tempers frayed. The smell of wet earth and newly-plastered cow-dung blended with the fragrance of flowers and food, henna and incense. Snatches of music floated on the air as the older women sang suggestive songs teasing the bride-to-be, ditties drowned by the sudden long-drawn-out notes of the **shehnai** accompanied by the **nagada** stationed at the door.

Babulal had come home for the wedding. He had been running a light fever and, what with that and the wedding, The Post Master Sahib had been kind enough to give him leave. In fact, Master sahib himself was to come for the wedding too! Babulal was well now, and was busy running around helping Beeru with the guests. Then, when all was silent, he and Beeru sat down to their dinner. Kaka was there to serve them. Narain baba sat replete, picking his teeth and singing snippets from the wedding ditties.

Suddenly there was a furore as Babulal gasped for air and toppled over. Within moments, pandemonium reigned. Beeru and others rushed Babulal to Vaidji's house. Narain baba ran for Bhagwati and Amma.

"Kya hua? Kya hua? What happened?"

"Call Vaidji. Call Sarpanchji."

"No! Let's take Babu there."

"Where? He's at Vaidji's already."

"Arre, Babu ki ma! Amma! Come! Come soon! Your son! Something has happened!"

"He is saying something! What is he saying?"

"What did he say? What happened?"

Babulal whispered as Vaidji, making futile noises, Beeru, Narain baba, Sarpanchji and others clustered around him.

Amma and Bhagwati came running through the darkness. Babulal whispered, "Kaka? Why, Kaka? Why did you do this? I did you no harm. Kaka.....?" And it was over.

Bhagwati sat under the tree. Perhaps the soul of Babulal was somewhere near it. In it? They had sat here under it, where she sometimes brought his food for him, so they could talk. **Roti** with onions or **saag** or mangoes. Now they called her the ill-omened one. The tree accepted her. It spoke to her, it wept and whispered and shared the passing of the years.

They brought Babulal home. Sarpanchji called the Darogaji and Vaidji. Everyone sat around and spoke in whispers. Their faces were grim. Kaka and his sons were taken away in a jeep. There was no one to perform the last rites. And then Narain baba hesitantly asked if he may..... And so.....

It was the year of Independence. Everyone spoke about it. She wondered what it was? Was it like the **mela** that came to the village perhaps?

"Freedom? From what? For what?" Bhagwati was bewildered as she watched a lot of families coming and going. There had been a court case. Narain baba went to the town,

coming back tired and silent. Kaka and his boys, he said, were in jail. What is a jail, she wondered. For two and a half bighas, which they did not get.

The years passed. Amma passed away. Bhagwati's face looked like the parched and furrowed land.

"Bhagwati **bitiya**." That was Narain baba. Only he called her **bitiya** now. "Sarpanchji is here. Come out."

She stood at the door waiting, with the **odhni** wrapped tight around her.

"Sarpanchji says you should ask for a pension, bitiya."

"What's that, baba?"

"Money for Babulal's work. He says **Sarkar** has ordered that everyone should get pension if they have done **sarkari** work."

"But he is not here any more?"

"No, but you will get it as his wife. His widow."

"Oh. You know best, baba. You decide."

And so the search began for documents. Letters to the Post Master. From the Post Master. Court papers. Leave applications. Visits to the post office while people searched for papers and books. Meeting people. Baba would go to the town again and return, saying, "Not yet, not yet. It'll take time, they say."

Six long years. Today the telegram arrived. They read it out to her. Baba will go with her to the town.

"Babulalji," she told the tree. "You cast a long shadow."

She squinted through the heat haze as she watched the man running towards her over the fields. Was it Babu? Or her son, Surja?

The tree was old. The sunlight dappled the freshly turned earth through the leaves.