

THE STORM

By Parveen Talha

[Published in the Statesman dated 2nd October 1977]

It all started when Ganga Din came home drunk and was welcomed with a tight slap by his wife chunni. Before Ganga Din could react, Chunni was pulled to the ground by Ganga Din's father Sarju and his two wives and their innumerable progeny. All of them combined to give Chunni what she deserved for her unforgivable behaviour. The incident was an unprecedented one; it took no time to reach the ears of everyone who mattered in the mohalla. A crowd gathered outside Sarju's jhuggi to sympathize with him and his son and to advise them as to what action should be taken to nip the evil in the bud. Some suggested that Chunni should be sent back to her parents and Ganga Din should get a farkhati (Divorce). Such a girl should not be allowed to stay in the mohalla for, after all, bad habits spread like fire. There were other young girls and daughters-in-law, who could pick up these devilish traits.

"We cannot encourage such independence in our daughters. After all they have to get married and go to another house. The wisdom of a girl lies in her accepting her man's ways and living as he wants her to live," these words of wisdom poured from Banvari's lips. Banvari commanded great respect in the entire Bhangi Colony, since he had the coveted job of a sweeper at the Charbagh Railway Station. It was a Govt. Job and one which would provide him a pension, when he was too old to work. But people had other reasons also to respect him. He was a man of principles. And above all, he treated women as they should be treated. He never allowed them to sit on his head, as some of the younger men had the tendency to do. The limp in his wife's leg continued to remind people of this admirable trait in Banvari. Two years ago he beat his wife with a Lathi and fractured her ankle bone. Even Makhan Pahelvan's massaging did not join the bone which Banvari's lathi had set apart. She had no reason to complain either. After two whole months they were going to have meat in the house and the stupid woman started talking to her neighbour after putting the pan on the fire. She came back only when the meat was charred. Obviously then she had to pay for spoiling the one kilo of meat with her bones.

"Banvari Bhaiya is right", Lambo, Sarju's first wife and Ganga Din's mother agreed, looking at Sarju she said "go and push her into the hell she has come from; there is no place for her in this house." But Banvari stepped in again, "sending Chunni away will solve the problem only partially. It is the source of the evil which should be attacked if the evil has to be banished. Chunni was not born with these habits, she picked them up from someone, and I can guarantee that she has learnt these habits from this very neighbourhood." Everyone knew that Banvari was hinting at Ghengaran, who had come to live in these Bhangi quarters with her husband and large family and one other man, a couple of years ago. The entire crowd found in Banvari's words a reflection of their own ideas. They had resented Ghengaran's stay in their colony from the very beginning, not because she

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hailed from another part of Lucknow, but because of her strange ways. She was a peculiar woman indeed, the only one of her kind on the face of the globe. She lived openly with two men, her husband and her childhood paramour Girdhari, who was not even a sweeper by caste. For her wild ways everyone blamed her husband. The shameless wretch knew what was happening in his house but preferred to look the other way. As for Girdhari, no one in the entire Kallan Ki Lat Bhangi Colony, could reason as to what he saw in that dark, ugly, middle aged woman, with a large goitre on her neck. It was the goitre that gave her the name Ghengharan (Ghenga is hindi for goitre). One could only laugh to think that for this sharp tongued ugly woman, Girdhari had left his home and Biradari and taken to pulling a rickshaw for a livelihood. He lived openly with Ghengharan, gave her a ten Rupee note every day as well as a breakfast of Jalebi and milk. And God forbid, if ever there was one jalebi less for breakfast or one paisa less in the daily allowance. The whole mohalla was witness to the beating which Girdhari was subjected to on such occasions. It was indeed surprising how Girdhari never thought of paying her back in her own coin. He would only ask for mercy while uttering endearments. It was invariably her husband who would plead Girdhari's case, as Girdhari would, his, when Ghengharan's temper was focused on her husband. Obviously the people who lived around saw ugliness in this strange understanding between the trio. They spoke against her behind her back but no one could ever dare to question her on her life.

At this moment, when Banvari's words shifted the attention of the crowd from Chunni to Ghengharan, she was sitting on her large cot, as though the whole world belonged to her. The cot was half in her verandah and half on the road balancing itself over the drain in which her little son Ghaseete had just eased himself. Ghengharan was eating chat from a large leaf. She knew what had happened at her neighbour Sarju's, but she was not one who would ever waste time involving herself in other people's affairs! But suddenly she saw the crowd pushing towards her jhuggi and soon the elders among them had surrounded her cot. Her husband sensed the danger; he mingled with the crowd and disappeared. Girdhari, preferred to stand by the side of his mistress like a faithful dog. Ghengharan too smelt seriousness in the atmosphere. But by now she had faced many such crowds. The mohalla where she lived earlier had also given her similar threats. But she had left that house only when she had wanted. At this moment also, not a trace of nervousness touched her ebony face. She continued to eat the chat with as much gusto as she did before, while the crowd watched her slipping one golgappa after another into her mouth. The golgappas all devoured, it was the turn of the leaf which was acting as a plate. Only after licking the leaf clean did she address the people "What is it that you want," her voice was shrill but oozing with confidence. Half the crowd thought it wise to disperse. Some played it safe by standing at a distance. But Sarju

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and Banvari had the do-or-die look on their faces. Banvari had to prove that he could never be scared of a woman. Sarju and his family were of course the aggrieved.

“Look Ghengharan you will have to leave our mohalla, we cannot have a woman like you in Kallan Ki Lat.

“Kallan Ki Lat is not your father’s jagir. I shall not leave,” on such occasions Ghengharan preferred to be brief.

“Then we’ll call a Panchayat.”

“Do as you please.”

“We want to know who this man is.” – Sarju said pointing at Girdhari, “what is your relationship with him?”

“Yes we want to know” echoed the crowd.

Now this was asking for trouble. They should have been thankful that Ghengharan had been rather decent with them, as far as her language was concerned. Her normal speech was strewn with a variety of four letter words. “Haramiyon,” Ghengharan preferred to use the plural, for she did not want to spare anyone in the crowd. Her sharp eyes swept over every face in the gathering and then rested on the vocal leaders, “Who conferred upon you the right to ask me that question? Go to your father, the Sarpanch and tell him to ask me that question, if he can dare.”

The crowd could not stand the fire from Ghengharan’s eyes. They started dispersing. Even Sarju and Banvari left. But a panchayat was called and Ghengharan did attend it. A volley of questions was shot at her and she answered all of them unnerved. Finally the verdict of the Panchas came, “You will have to throw Girdhari out, and have nothing to do with him.”

“I shall not do it,” Ghengharan was firm.

“Then you shall have to leave your husband,” was the alternative offered.

“I shall not do that either, I have explained before. My husband has no place to go to, his health is failing him, he’ll never be able to find shelter,” Ghengharan gave her reasons for not accepting the second alternative.

“Then you’ll not be allowed to share Hukka Pani with this Biradari, you are excommunicated. One woman cannot live with two men. Moreover, a woman who beats her husband should be treated like a leper by this Samaj.” The panchayat’s verdict was final.

Ghengharan was rather happy to have nothing to do with the community which had done nothing good for her, but she decided to ask a parting question.

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“Sarpanch Ji, when are you excommunicating Sarju? Hasn't he also got two wives? What is more, both of them are sisters. And doesn't he beat them up whenever he likes?”

The community and the Panchas were outraged at the woman's impertinence.

“If you do not understand such a simple fact of life, then you don't deserve to live. Sarju has committed no sin, because he is a man. And then every man can correct his woman by scolding or beating her, if she needs correction?” Sarpanch Ji explained

“And men do not need any correction?” Ghengharan asked.

“Yes, they do, sometimes, but not from women”

“Why”, this one word from Ghengharan's mouth echoed and re-echoed. Even the atmosphere seemed desperate to hear the reply. But the Sarpanch was not going to answer silly questions put in by dirty women. They started packing up. Some of the elders also encouraged them to wind up.

“Is that a question? Sarpanch Sahib cannot waste time over such frivolous questions” Banvari chided Ghengharan.

But in the last five minutes there had been a stir among the ill clad women folk who were standing at a distance. And suddenly a frail voice rose from among the group.

“Don't get ready to go Huzoor, you have to do justice in my case. I want to know why Sarju should have beaten me every day, why did he bring another wife. He married my own sister. Why wasn't he ever punished? Why”. This 'why' was from Sarju's first wife Lambo. She was addressing the Sarpanch from behind her Ghunghat. There followed such a commotion among the men. Even Sarju and Banvari started getting palpitations. A commotion like this was never witnessed in Kallan Ki Lat Bhangi Colony, perhaps never in Lucknow. It was as though a storm was going to come.

Or had the storm already come!
