

SAKINA – A PROFILE IN COURAGE AND FORBEARANCE

When one meets Sakina ,a tall, fair, middle aged woman with smiling eyes one is impressed with her gentle demeanor and her caring and helpful nature . She is very unlike the usual domestic help or maids we normally see . Besides her dignified bearing she is intelligent , resourceful and besides housekeeping and cooking she is knowledgeable about various herbal nature cures and experienced in growing different kinds of herbs and plants . What makes Sakina so different : what gives her such dignity and calm that singles her out ? Where ,When and How did she acquire all this knowledge . Her story -of struggles and sacrifices to bring up, educate and settle her children - which she narrated to Nasreen Fazalbhoj in whose house hold, located in an elitist enclave of Mumbai , she has been working for the past twenty five years, defines her as a woman of courage and forbearance .

Wistfully looking back , she muses “How does a girl who has no parents, no brother or sister, live her life? In my entire life I got no love from anyone. My parents died when I was small. My husband also died. I have had to manage my life by myself.”

Sakina came to Nasreen’s house in 1987 when her four children (two boys and two girls) were small and her husband unemployed . Today her sons and daughters are married and well settled .Her granddaughter , her eldest sons child is working in a Bank .And all this was achieved mainly through her efforts and sacrifices .

Sakina’s family came from the village in Konkan region of Maharashtra . Her father worked in the docks in Mumbai . She was born in Mumbai but when she was three years old and her brother Rehman was nine, she found that her mother was not around and she was told that she had died. She later learnt that her parents had got divorced . She was left in the village with her step grandmother and her brother was taken to Mumbai for studies . There was no question of taking her , a girl to Mumbai for schooling? But she seemed to be destined to come to the City as a consequence of tragic death of her brother and fathers mental condition after his son’s death .

Sakina breaks down describing the bizarre death series which took place :

“My uncle was a qawwal. He had come to the village as his wife had just given birth to a daughter. He was ill with typhoid, but he came to see her,. Unfortunately he got worse, and died. When the family was returning from the funeral a snake bit my brother who had come from Mumbai for his holidays, and the next day he died. My father’s sister – my phuphi had come to the village from Sawantwadi for the funeral – and her husband just tapped her on the head in fun, (mazaq) – and she too died. So there were three deaths in just that one month. This event created a great trauma and disorganization for the whole family.”

But she has pleasant memories of her step grandmother, with whom she was staying and who was very fond of her. Afraid that Sakina would also die, since so many deaths had taken place, she brought her to Mumbai where to make ends meet she washed vessels in different houses. As far as her father was concerned he had never bothered about her. She was so bitter about his indifference to her that when he died when she was a child it had no impact on her.

But she remembers the day when her life took a dramatic turn and she was separated from her grandmother. 'It happened when she was about seven.

A man from her village – Ali Mujawar - requested her step grandmother to take her out for a while – He took her to his house and made her work in his house and to look after his nine children. She was very unhappy and wanted to go back to her grandmother. She used to beg him to take her back but he would not do so. One day her father came to visit Ali Mujawar as he belonged to the same village and as had been informed that the girl working was his daughter – so he told his sister to take her to her house. Her phuphi(aunt) whom she did not recognize as she had last seen her when she was three came to fetch her. She begged her to take her to her grandmother. But when they went there they learnt from the neighbor that she was no more. Sakina had a terrible shock and as she relates it she breaks down weeping. She felt that she was virtually an orphan.

Life in her Phuphi house hold was hard : she also took a lot of work from her. Though they put her in school – where she studied till std2nd -. She was removed when her phuphi gave birth to a son, to look after him. Since she was intelligent her teacher had come and requested to send her to school – but her phuphi had refused. She was taught (by force and beating)to do all the housework, wash the clothes and buy the food for the house. .

Besides this harsh treatment, Sakina's grudge against her Phupu is that she also deprived her of her inheritance in her grandfather's property which was quite large. The land more than one acre with a dargah on it. But she has no access to it. Her Phupu did not have her name included in the inheritance as she did not wish to have any connection with the village. Her reason : Her first husband had died, leaving her with a small child. She had then married her husband's brother and she did not want her children to know this fact. Nor did her father's brother apprise her :They all colluded to keep her out.

At 14 her Phuphi got her married to her phupha's(aunts husbands) cousin brother who was 35 years old whom she had been addressing as chacha all along as she had no idea that she was going to be married to him. But she has no grievance against her husband and in-laws. "My husband and his family behaved well with me."

But the major problem in the marriage was that her husband had no regular income or job – he would substitute if someone was on leave some time. So she was taken to the village – and started doing farming with her husband's family. She did several things – tending buffaloes,

carrying sand and cement on her head to build the house, farming , planting sugar cane, peanuts, and other vegetables. Her husband and his family benefitted from her labors and were happy .

One memory she will never forget is the birth of her third child. After the baby was born her husband was supposed to come to fetch her but he did not. The hospital wanted to discharge her as they needed the bed, so she left the hospital.

“I did not have chappals, or even clothes for the baby. I waited till 5 o clock, when my husband or phuphi did not come I tied the baby in my sari, and set out. I discovered that I had no money in my purse – so I walked and walked after asking directions, I walked for four hours. I found Rs. 10 in my purse . When I reached the station I was so tired I started to cry. People were looking at me crying like this. I reached home at about 8 at night. My husband was surprised to see me and asked me how I came. I did not answer. I sent for some bread and made some tea for myself – black tea as there was no milk – and drank it and went to sleep. I did not talk at all. “

But she could not be silent for long .providing for the four children was difficult :trying to manage the house in Rs 90. .She fought with her husband to look for work . Finally through someone she knew he got a job in a mill. And he was able to bring more money home and she had about Rs. 300 per month to run the house and also send her children to school .

Though not educated she supervised the children’s homework in the evenings .Sitting with a stick she would tell her son –“you have to present your homework to your teacher – alright let me see how you read. He would sometimes ask me – is this right? I would not know – since I am not educated – so I would tell him, show me how you connect the two letters – he would try and connect, and I would say, yes, that is good, now tomorrow you show it for your teacher, ok? This way they never knew that I did not know how to read”.

But in 1984 the mills closed down. And then she had to start earning. She did all kinds of work in order to make two ends meet .She sold roasted corn, she sold chickoos; she even learned how to make soap and sell it. But she needed a regular income and one day when she met Niamuddin, a social worker she asked him to get some work. He suggested working in Nasreens household – but the children were small and she did not want to leave them for at least two years

But her daughters (who were in fourth and fifth standards respectively) gave her the courage to work and two years later when they were undergoing an acute financial crisis , the social worker called . She remembers that day when she had no money at all. Her friend who lived near by gave her Rs. 100 – with which she got Dal and chawal but before she could cook the children came home and started complaining that the food was not ready .When her husband also came and said that he wanted food – she got angry and said “you don’t bring even ten rupees and you want food. I picked up the vessel in which I had started to cook, but in my hurry dropped it. I started to cry in frustration and anger. Just then I got a message from the social worker asking me to come and see him – I went there and he said that the job he had spoken to

me about two years ago was again available – they needed someone and would I go. In anger I said I would take up the job. In anger I came here. I did not have money for the bus fare – I borrowed Rs. 20 from a neighbor and came. After ten days I asked for money to go home. Bai was not willing to give it – she was afraid that I would go and not come back. But I said that if you give the money I will definitely come back. If you don't give it I will definitely not come back. My children are in a very bad state. My salary was Rs. 250 at the time. She gave it – I took Rs. 100 and went home and bought 4 kilos rice, and one kilo dal and left it there returned the Rs. 20 to my neighbor and asked her to look after my children. The children did not want me to leave, my husband also said not to go. But I said I have given my word and I have to go. : That was in 1987”

When she looks back remembering the experiences and difficulties , she would not wish it on her worst enemy. But she is not bitter .She feels that if her earlier life was total darkness – it was not anyone's fault, it was her destiny. And she is grateful to God as after all the struggles and vicissitudes' her children are settled and her family and friends respect her.

But her story , of courage and forbearance also raises several questions : Could Sakina's life had been different if there were systems in place to take care of her : provide education and care ? To ensure that her childhood was not spent in such drudgery and deprivation ? Sakina was brave and resourceful : she was able to come out of it But one does not how many Sakinas are out there in this harsh world facing similar problems : What is happening to them ? .