

A Father At Last!

"DELICIOUS SMELL. It is coming up to the road," Damodar peeped in to the kitchen from the doorway and said with a smile playing around his lips.

Sebati was tempering a curry with her back towards him in the small kitchen where evening shadows had shrouded it with gray darkness. She turned round ladling the curry. The flame from the wood in the hearth silhouetted her longish face as she looked at him. Even though she was forty five, she still looked youthful, he thought.

"You have come early today," she said with a smile. "I came immediately after work. Today is the meeting of the Kotha Ghar (community house) about the temple."

Oh, yes! I had forgotten about it completely. This time the discussion would be the building of living quarters for the Mahanta (Monk), I suppose ?

"That is also there. The other is, a list of names should be prepared of the people who accept to sponsor sermons for *Dola* festival."

"I too feel like accepting a sermon this time. About how much would I have to spend?" Sebati asked removing the pot from the fire and wiping her hands on the cloth she was wearing.

"For the sermon at least fifty rupees would have to be given to the temple. Apart from that a Dhoti for the Mahanta preaching and refreshments.'

"My God! It would not be possible to get a sermon during Dola without spending hundred rupees. I don't have that much money," she shook her head.

"To tell you the truth, even if you go for a small visit to the temple, you must have to spend at least ten rupees to contribute to the various collection trays that are placed

around. Though the priests are offered free alms and refreshments later, when collections are made for various needs, can we just wipe our hands and wait?"

"Today you can not do anything without money. It is to obtain some money for the expenses of the temple that we make collection during Dola festivals".

"There is no point in talking. You are the right hand of the Mahanta, aren't you, Damodar Bhai ?" Sebati said smiling as she came out of the kitchen to the parlor and looked at the clock.

"Upon my mother! It's pass five thirty. The two children also would be coming now".

"With all this talking I too got late" said Damodar, going towards the well to have a wash. Sebati watched him going and then went towards the verandah.

The verandah of the house made of wattle and daub, plastered and white washed, was small. There were two chairs and a camp bed kept there. The shadow of the teak trees growing close to the house made the immediate surrounding darker. Sebati who went up to the short wall of the verandah looked out towards the road keenly

She could see buses and auto rickshaws packed with people plying on the road raising clouds of dust. People with weary faces who got down at the bus halts close-by were going to their homes taking strides. Among them were schoolchildren dressed in white, bent in, due to the weight of the bags they carried, walking wearily as if their legs could not carry them any further. Sebati watched them all patiently.

"Why are you still gazing at the road"? The two children would come now". Damodar said to calm her down while urging his wristwatch on his left hand and getting ready to leave the house.

Sebati looked at him. Though he was about fifty years old, he looked smart; she thought. Proportionately built Damodar had a slightly long face. He was of medium complexion. Due to dimples formed when he smiled, his face becomes especially pleasant. He had also kept a pencil fine moustache on his upper lip stylishly. Though he had lost much hair, he had combed the left outs in such a way that the loss was not very noticeable. When going out Damodar customarily wore a white Kurta with a matching black coat over it. He, who was a bachelor, came, as a lodger to Sebati's place about ten years ago when he got a job in Jagannath Spinning Mills. Sebati gave him lodging in her house because he was her aunt's son and hence not an outsider and because she would have nothing to fear when there was a male in the house. From then onwards he continued to live there like one of her own family looking after the welfare of Sebati and her two sisters.

"Here they come", Damodar said, seeing the two children getting over the stile and entering into the compound.

"Blood started coursing in my body only now." With a smile on her face, she went forward to meet them.

"Then I'll also get going?" Damodar said leaving the house.

"Uncle, where are you going?" The elder daughter asked as she entered the house.

"To the temple," he quickly replied.

"Come back without getting late, Ok?" the younger daughter said liltily.

"My stomach was on fire when you were getting late," Sebati said with a profusion of maternal affection as she accompanied the daughters into the house.

"Today the math's teacher taught for an extra hour than other days", Rosy said.

"Because of elder sister I too had to loaf about. I am very hungry, mother", Dosy said.

Sixteen year Rosy and fourteen year old Dosy, both attended extra tuition classes daily after school and return home just before dark.

"Mother, they say my birth certificate is not in the school. That's fine thing" Rosy exclaimed making a sour face.

"Who told you?"

"Our miss. When she was looking for the birth certificates of the children sitting for the board examination, mine was not there. You had given a small chit, mother, saying that you are removing it for some other purpose". Rosy said.

Sebati became embarrassed and agitated. She knew that she took back both certificates from the school.

"Miss, asked me to bring back the birth certificates before the end of the month. Otherwise, the application for the examination would not be sent. "Rosy grumbled. Sebati's face darkened as she listened. Because of the dim light of the kitchen, Rosy could not see the pain registered in her mother's face. Sebati watched Rosy and Dosy going to well with the bottle lamp, then came to the kitchen, and served them their dinner. After serving Damodar's share also, she allowed her own share to remain in the pots and pans. She came to the veranda and, sat on the short wall. However, the immediate surroundings of the house were blanketed in pitch darkness, because of the lamps lit on the road the darkness in front of the house was reduced little.

That uncertainty which she could not explain to anyone crushed her painfully. She felt great pressure off and on in her heart as if it was trying to squeeze her life out. How could she tell her daughters that both of them were illegitimate children? When she first obtained the birth certificates to admit the children to school, she had read them often. She could repeat from memory the questions asked there and the answers given.

Name of the mother - Sebati Behera

Were parents married - No?

Name of father - '

She had given her daughters her surname. According to the certificates, they have no father.

Yet, as with other children, she knows that her children' too have a father. Even though she was unmarried according to the laws of the land, before the God she was a married woman. Her children were the result of that. She heaved a deep sigh and looked about.

"You are in deep thought ... what's the matter?" Till Damodar came from the dark and spoke to her while entering the house, she didn't notice him.

"No ... just nothing ", she twisted in embarrassment.

"Can't be just nothing ... where are the two children?"

"Sleeping! have served your rice, Dama Bhai, why not eat first?"

"Can eat later." He came closer to her and peeped in to her face. The long face appeared to be longer. There was not even the slightest hint of a smile. The marks left by the tears that had run down the cheeks were still visible.

"Any problem?' he enquired somewhat impatiently. "No" she wiped her eyes.

"I can see that there is a problem. Let us hear it." he told her softly.

The surroundings were covered by darkness. An owl resting on the teak tree flew away hooting.

"The elder daughter's miss had asked her to bring the birth certificates to send her application for the examination."

"Is that a problem? You make an application to the hospital and get one down. I'll get it done tomorrow itself," Damodar spoke calmly.

"I have a birth certificate with me. However, how can I hand it over to this girl? According to the certificate she has no father," Sebati was writhing in pain as she murmured and exhaled a deep, long breath.

"Hum ...-so that is the question," Damodar said thoughtfully and nodded his head.

"Wasn't it in the Chowdhury's house that the elder girl was conceived?" He returned round and questioned her. "Raja Chowdhury put you in trouble and got away. You are still paying for being poor." There was pain mixed with anger in his voice. Sebati sighed again and looked at the distant sky veiled by the darkness of the night. The memories of Chowdhury house revived as she saw them in her mind's eye. She became orphaned with her mother's death and went to the Chowdhury's to work when she was just seven years or so old..

"Deviji, this girl is motherless and a destitute. I am handing her over to you because I cannot look after her. She has no strength still to do any work." She remembered her father telling the old mistress of Chowdhury very humbly.

"I understand Anadi, our daughter is also of Sebati's age. Let her be here. She will get food to eat and I will teach her household work. I will look after her. You don't be afraid."

"Very good, Madam."

The day father left, she cried bitterly. In a few days the old mistress's daughter, the little mistress, who was of her own age, became friendly with her and then she started to love that environment.

From his young days, the little master studied in a school in Bhubaneswar. Hence, he was coming to village only during the holidays. She remembered how she played with the little master and mistress during their young days. Nevertheless, as they matured a youthful love developed between herself and the young master. As she remembered it now a wonderful sensation overtook her. Her heart began to palpitate and her entire body became lifeless. She tried to control herself as she spoke.

"It is incorrect to say that also. Those days. I was a greenhorn. When the young master loved me, I loved him with all my heart. Who had thought that a thing like this would happen?"

"The old mistress knew your plight, didn't she?"

"Hun, The old lady and the young lady looked after me till the birth of the child. Later they sent word to father and sent me back to the village with the child. Even now, I am here due to the young woman's generosity. Even the old lady helps me still."

"Without learning a lesson from one mistake, like a great fool, you continued to associate the young gentleman till you got another child."

"No ... the second was from Sarbeswar Bhai in the village," she said looking aside.

"Our elder brother?" Damodar queried, being quite upset.

"Yes, when aunty heard that I was friendly with Sarbeswar Bhai, she got a bride for her son from the next village. By that time, I had already conceived the second one. Can't you see how the second one is just like Sarbeswar Bhai's pink like a jambu fruit?' She recalled the past devoid of any feelings. She had no regrets about her past dark life.

"Those days I too heard from here and there that the father of the second girl was our elder brother. Yet I did not go to investigate it. In addition those days I was working in Chowdwar." Damodar recalled.

"I have no regrets about myself. But it is about the shame these two growing girls would have to face that I feel sorry about, The elder girl is good at studies. Even if she passes well and gets employed people may try to run her down saying that she has no father. On the other hand her father is an aristocrat coming from Chowdhury ancestry.' She almost sobbed.

"There is no point in talking about them now. Both those fathers are family people now. Will they come to claim ownership saying that this is my child?" Damodar looked about restlessly. He felt a throbbing in his heart. He could visualize the faces of the two children who worship him daily before going to school. He thought for a while. The flapping of the wings of a bat leaving the teak tree could be heard. The monotonous silence that prevailed was broken by that "Sebati, if you like, I can be father to these children," he spoke hesitantly.

"How is that?" there was a touch of surprise in the tone and look.

"If we marry, I can give an affidavit that these two children are mine. Then I can give my name to the children. Later my name could be inserted in the birth certificate."

Sebati opened her eyes wide and looked at him "I can't load other people's sins on your shoulders, Dama Bhai," she murmured painfully.

"How can these girls be sin? Though they call me uncle, they treat me like a father. I too do not have any one. One day these girls would look after me. Therefore, if I can do something on behalf of the two girls that would be quite alright. On the other hand you are also not an outsider ... my own cousin."

But ...yet Sebati whispered hesitantly.

"Why do you say 'but yet'? Don't you like to go to the court and get married to me Sebati?" He looked at her face directly and questioned. I only spoke about a way the two children could face the world without getting insulted. Moreover, when we get married, it's good for you also."

"I can't even believe this ! You are a God, Damodar Bhai," she exclaimed being extremely happy.

"No Sebati, I am also a person made up of flesh and blood just like you", He looked at her longingly with a smile at the corner of his mouth, "on the other hand, for about ten years, both of us lived under the same roof not exactly like saints; let the girls to have a father at last." Placing his hand on her shoulder, he whispered in her ear with a mischievous smile, confirming that Sebati cuddled closer to him. Stars have just started coming out of the clouds. The cool breeze played the Sehnaï through the ears of green leaves of teak trees.