

The Blue Bird and The Prison

"SABITA! SEE the time wench! Your worship has also ended. Still the bus to *Godipada* didn't come. Today someone has made a mistake. Either the radio was mistaken or else the bus driver.' Sabita who recognized Puhan uncle's voice took another peep at the mirror and turned round to go to the parlor to see the time. Due to the moisture in the hair, her hips and back were both wet. She came into the house after bathing in the well near the Mango tree in the back garden only a few moments before Puhan uncle spoke. It was customary for Sabita to bath every morning.

Puhan uncle was seventy years old. His only pastime was reading poems in leaflets sold at the bus stand. Sabita thought that his lust had still not ceased. She looked at the wall clock placed in the hall while thinking of Puhan uncle's lothario tendencies. He tethers the cow in the garden at night. Early in the morning he unties it and brings it to the well after Sabita had poured two or three buckets of water on to her body.

"Drink ... drink you sinner," Puhan uncle tells the cow. Sabita remembered how he used to stroke its head as if to show his affection to it and how the cow licks Puhan uncle's shirt in return. Why he addresses the cow as a 'sinner' was a puzzle to her. She fills the bucket used to draw the water and places it at the edge of the well-apron. 'Then the cow laps up to the water, Chacha, Chacha, Chacha, Chacha', with its eyes bulging. The two big-eyes that could be seen over the rim of the bucket made Sabita happy

Puhan uncle releases the cow from the rope only after Sabita finishes bathing. Till then he holds the rope and allows it to feed on the grass in the coppice, a little beyond the well or the luxuriantly growing paddy-like tall grass near the stream. When she returns after the bath, the cow too, released from the rope, would follow her like Puhan uncle's own shadow. After she enters the house, the cow would stand outside in the garden looking in the direction of the house as if in sympathy. It recognizes the sound of the bucket and goes along the path towards the gate only after it hears the bucket being placed in the kitchen floor,

Sabita next puts the wet clothes out on the line to dry. Entering the house again she goes straight to the windowsill to take one out of the three or four fancy combs placed there. She flicks the droplets of water from her hair and listens to the radio. While combing her hair the Bhajan program would be over. Then the news will start. After a little while Puhan uncle's voice was heard again as if he was trying to break the spell cast by Sabita over him.

"Sabita ... see the time woman!

Puhan uncle waits near the coconut tree with the bag ready to go to the *bazaar* and Sabita places fifteen or twenty rupees in his hand while mentioning the time and the items he has to bring from there.

It was not more than two months now since Sabita had been residing in the new house. The Mangala estate is a coconut land of sixty-seven acres facing the Nayagarh-Dasapalla road. Forty acres in the upper division of the estate belonged to Mr. Jayant Biswal. The balance twenty-seven acres belonged to his brother-in-law Devraj, an Ayurvedic physician specializing in the treatment of ulcers. Sabita's parents and her younger brother lived in the upper division of the old bungalow. Sabita's father was the chief watchman of both the upper and lower divisions. There were guards in other smaller farms but there was no guard at Mangala estate because Jayant Biswal was a miser, someone had said before. In manning, cutting of trenches, growing of cover crops and other similar matters, advice was given by Mr. Satyanarayan, the estate agent. He came to the state about twice a month in a Fiat car. Many believed that Jayant Biswal built the new bungalow in the estate for Mr. Satyanarayan's use. However, immediately after completing of the house when Sabita came in to occupy it, they were all taken by surprise.

About three or four years, earlier Sabita had got married to a driver from Khurda, but they remained as husband and wife for less than a year. She came back as a widow from there to live with her parents in the old bungalow for a while. Winning Jayant Biswal's heart was her first victory in the estate. Getting a brand new tiled house was her second victory.

Mr. Biswal comes to the estate on the last Friday of every month and the salaries of estate workers were paid on the last Sunday. Immediately after paying the salaries, he used to leave the estate for the town. From Friday to Sunday, Sabita looked after him, prepared his food and drink and arranged the clothes he should wear. After coming to settle down in the new house Sabita's behavior changed. She wore new clothes frequently. She kept the garden and the surrounding clean. Occasionally she would hire a cart and visit relations in the Solapata village. The meema-ooh: flowed through the village

Her aunty had a block of paddy land bordering the bank of Kusumi River. Sabita had a great liking to bathe in streams and rivers and she went to her aunt's house with the intention of bathing in the Kusumi River. Like Sabita many men and women came from great distances to bath in Kusumi.

Bathing in the well near the mango tree every morning and bathing in Kusumi once or twice a month became part of her life. - There was no greater happiness than that for her.

Puhan uncle's behavior caused a subtle happiness in her. Sabita knew that Puhan uncle watched her when she bathed and derived some gratification, out of it. She felt that his behavior was something like a tribute to her great love of bathing. Like the cool water of the well, Puhan uncle and the cow that drinks water from the bathing bucket were all entwined in her life. To Puhan uncle who asked the time everyday, she told it happily. At that time she felt that she was a mistress and Puhan uncle is a servant.

After about an hour Puhan uncle returned that day from bazaar.

"The fancy shop owner is a black marketer! He charged four rupees for the pocket of hair pins," he said, giving the packet of hairpins and the red bag full of provisions to Sabita. Watching Sabita carrying the bag in, he said, "my bundle of *beedis* is also in the bag.' She turned round to look and stopped on the doorstep,' I do not smoke beedies... neither does Biswal babu, "Sabita said with a smiling face.

"Oh, yes, today is Friday. Why the boss come yet? The mail bus too went," Puhan uncle said looking towards the garden gate and the main road.

The road was empty and desolate. A blue bird was perched on the lion's head on the gate pillar. A dry branch of a coconut tree crashed down disturbing the peaceful silence of the garden.

"Biswa babu's son's wedding celebrations... they must be busy these days. "Sabita said.

"That wedding can't be these days, wench. I was asked not to sell the plantains but to cut and ripen them. If the wedding was close by they would have been removed.' Sabita felt small because of what Puhan uncle said. She took the bag of provisions and entered the house.

"Biswal babu must be ill, "she commented when she returned with the empty bag to hand it over to Puhan uncle.

"Yes, yes. He suffers from asthma", he added.

She looked towards the road. Then too the road was empty. The sound of a lorry at a great distance was heard faintly. Puhan uncle's cow was gazing near the gate. Sabita felt forlon. Puhan uncle too went away. Two weaver birds flew across the garden and settled on the fence.

Sabita returned to the house and switched the radio on. Several advertisements went on, one after the other. She switched it off again then and went back to the garden.

She felt lazy to cook lunch. Therefore, she thought, she would get down a lunch packet from the nearby hotel at the junction. There, the food was tasty. If an extra two rupees was paid, they send a piece of fish too.

Until nightfall, she expected Biswal babu's arrival. When the evening news broadcast too ended, she lit the lamp in the house and stepped in to the compound. Three buses went one behind the other, fast and soon afterwards, the dark finally shrouded the entire road.

She heard the beating of bullock bells far away. Listening awhile, she realized that it was the bell sound coming from the Siva Temple. She saw in her mind's eye the scene around the temple. There were paddy fields right around it. Some say that due to the negligence of the former head-priest of the temple, the fields had to

be abandoned. The new priest was from Biswal babu's village. Now the temple has prospered. The surroundings have become more beautiful because most of the paddy fields too were being worked.

The next day too Biswal Babu did not come to the estate. Sabita felt a great loneliness. She came back after the early morning bathe and without combing her wet hair lay down in bed. In a short time, the pillow and the mat both were wet. She heard the tinkling of the bells hung around the neck of Puhan uncle's cow from the direction of the garden.

Sunday also dawned. That was payday in the estate. By ten or eleven O' clock, men who had come for their salaries were squatting in various parts of the compound expectantly. As Biswal babu had not come yet, their faces were gloomy. The fire that was generated by anger was seen in the eyes of one or two.

Sabita went to the doorstep now and then and looked at the people in the garden. On one occasion when she came to the doorsteps, Ratan who worked the tiller in the estate cleaved his throat. Sabita smiled at him. On another occasion too when she went there Ratan did the same again. She was pleased by that, and her face wreathed in a broad smile. His facial features attracted her. Ratan had worn a shirt on that day and the shirt covered his broad shoulders. She saw the twisted copper bangle on one wrist and the white steel ring he had on the finger. Slowly a restlessness entered into her mind.

Up to now Sabita had her hair let down falling on to her back. She now went before a mirror and plaited it into two braids. Then her attractive forehead took the shape of a half moon more maskedly. When she went to the doorsteps, again Ratan was seated on the short wall of the verandah. When he saw the change in Sabita, he smiled. He smiled broadly. She thought his smile was quite pleasant.

"Sabita-di, get me a glass of water," he requested, looking at her face and her full bust alternately. Because of that request, she became very happy. She went to the kitchen and filling a glass of water from the pot, brought it to Ratan. He took the glass with great care.

"The water is very tasty Isn't it from the well near the banyan tree?" he asked to Sabita..

"How do you know?" she asked in wonder.

"Why don't I know" he said, laughing and looking at Puhān uncle who was in the garden then, as if teasing him. She immediately understood why he laughed. Her heart started to beat faster. She felt as if a secret she had been guarding all these days had been revealed.

At about twelve O' clock Mr. Satyanarayan's car entered the estate. All were surprised and looked in that direction. "Mr. Satyanarayan would do something about this," Ratan said for every one to hear. Mr. Satyanarayan got down from the car and looked at the people gathered in the garden. He had a belligerent and arrogant look.

"Bring a table and chair," he said, looking at Sabita as he entered the house and wiped his feet in the doormat. Ratan quickly entered the house and brought a chair to the verandah. Mr. Satyanarayan placed some files on the table and sat down in the chair. "Mr. Biswal is ill. He is admitted to a private nursing home in Bhubaneswar," he said, looking at Sabita who was near the door. Then he got ready to pay the salaries.

"Have you bought stamps?" he questioned the man in the garden looking at them as if contemptuously.

"On other days, Mr Biswal brings the stamps," Ratan replied.

"There is no stamp that I bought", Mr Satyanarayan said. He got up from the chair and putting his hand in his trouser took out a *fifty-rupee* note. "Twenty stamps" He said, giving it to Sabita, Ratan took the money from her and went to the junction post office on the bicycle.

"When Mr Biswal comes he would pay the correct salaries. Today I will pay everyone a round figure. Anything paid in excess would be deducted from the next month's salary. If paid less, the deficit would be made good in next month, Understood?" Mr Satyanarayan Asked

That day everyone was paid at the rate of five hundred. Only Sabita didn't get any money

Sabita again felt very lonely. Ratan's Smiling eyes were drawn in her mind deliberately. The thought that Mr Biswal would not come ran all over her mind and body. She felt as if she she was suddenly released from chains that had bound her. She thought Mr. Biswal would not come for a long time. She took a new red bag and went to the market. From shops at the junction, she bought the newspaper devoted to cinema news and a packet of incense sticks. She then came out of the shop and looked in the direction of the post office. She knew that Ratan usually hung around there.

When she returned to the estate, it was dark. Because she didn't meet Ratan, she was quite satisfied. But the thought that Biswal babu would not be coming filled her heart with peculiar happiness. She walked slowly towards the house. Puhan Uncle was in the garden as if waiting to reprimand her for her tardiness. A motorcycle was parked there. With great curiosity, she quickened her footsteps.

"Mr. Pravat, Biswal Babu's son, has come", Puhan uncle said coming forward in a hurry.

Sabita entered the house in trepidation. She knew that nothing like this had happened before.

"Tomorrow the coconuts would be plucked in the estate," Puhan uncle said from outside as if to indicate that nothing out of the ordinary had occurred.

Sabita stopped in the verandah and looked towards the office room. Realizing that there was no one in, she peeped. The room was dark. A short-sleeved white shirt was hung on the clothes pegs. She heard through the deep silence prevailing in the garden, someone bathing at the well near the banyan tree. She went to the parlor quickly and lit the lamp with the chimney. She brought it into the room and placed it on the tea poy. The entire room was lit up instantly. She looked into the mirror that was hung there and visualized Mr. Pravat's handsome features.

