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02

THE STORY AND SORROW OF BHAGU AAI

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The memories of those days are still deeply etched in my heart. That small village of Joharapur… and in the southern quarter of the Mahar community lived an old woman, BhaguAai.

She was about seventy or eighty years old. Her back was bent, her face was full of deep wrinkles, but there was still a faint glow in her eyes. Her life was like an old patchwork quilt — torn and mended in many places, yet warm and comforting.

Bhagu Aai was a widow. Her two sons worked in the cotton mills of Navsari and Mumbai.

They came to the village only once or twice a year, usually during Diwali — dressed in city clothes, but their eyes showed little affection for their mother. She, however, would sit waiting for their arrival —

gazing at the cracked earthen pot by the door, as if her life too was dripping away, drop by drop, from that pot.

At that time, I was studying in the Jeevan Shikshan Mandir Joharapur Primary School. My childhood friend Tarachand Ghute and I used to play near Bhagu Aai's house. Her hut was dilapidated —

the thatched roof leaked, the walls were covered with mold, and inside lay a dry, empty life.

When the monsoon came, Tarachand and I used to keep metal vessels in our house to

catch the dripping rain water. But Bhagu Aai didn't even have vessels to place. Allshe owned were two small pots, one cracked earthen jar, and a rusted brass tumbler.

Every day she went around the village begging— a piece of bread, a little water, half a cup of tea — that was her daily meal.

Yet, in the midst of that poverty, her mind remained extraordinarily calm.

Every morning, just before sunrise, she would wake up. Her world consisted of the damp pot outside, a little dry soil on the floor, and the old quilt wrapped around her frail body. Shivering in the cold, she would pull the quilt tightly around herself, place it in a dark corner of the house, and then go out into the village to beg for food.

Her first stop was always at the Patil's mansion.

"Bai, may I get something to eat?" she would ask her voice soft yet humble.

Sometimes, someone would throw a piece of bread from the door; sometimes, the door would simply be shut in her face.

Once in a while, someone would shout, "Goaway, old woman! Don't come every day!"

But she never got angry. She would only say gently,

"May God bless you, Bai. If not from you, someone else will surely give."

By noon, she would return home slowly. Sitting in her hut, she would take out a hard, stale piece of bhakri from her tattered cloth bag—that was her sustenance, her reason to live. If someone nearby had made tea, she would softly ask,

"Please give me a little, child…my throat is dry."

If someone shared, she would hold the cracked cup in both hands and say, "May God bring happiness to your home."

And if someone refused, even with a laugh, she would not complain.

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In the afternoon, she would sit for a while on the porch of the Lakshmi Temple located near the community well in Maharwada.
There, under the huge neem tree's cool shade, she would eat her piece of bhakri and murmur a few words before the deity —
Perhaps spraying for her sons,
or may be thanking God for that day's food. The village children used to tease her:
"Bhagu Aai, sorceress! Bhagu Aai, witch!"
She never scolded them. She would only say quietly,
"You may call me a witch, my children, but don't ever make anyone cry." There was a strange compassion in those words —
as if she was pouring all her pain into them, yet turning that sorrow into blessings rather than tears.
Atnight, she would return to her crumbling hut. The heart inside was covered in a layer of ash. Sometimes she would stir that ash and whisper,
"Tomorrow, I'll find something again," and then fall asleep.
Even in darkness, her heart remained peaceful—as if she had made peace with her suffering.
Poverty had exhausted her body, but her spirit never broke.
Her face was always calm, her eyes holding an unextinguished light.
She seemed to teach us—
"Hunger may kill the body, but humanity must live on." My mother, Santu bai, cared for her deeply.
"Arjun, take this bhakri to Bhagu Aai," she used to say. "Mother, people say she's a witch!"
My mother would smile and reply,
"People get hungry, not ghosts. Go, give it to her."
With a pounding heart, I would go to Bhagu Aai's hut.
"Bhagu Aai, Mother sent this for you. There's some mutton today." She would fold her hands and say,
"May God bless your mother. You will become a great man, my child!" That sentence stayed with me forever.
But in the village, fear surrounded her name. "She's a witch."
"Lights glow in her hous eat night." "She does black magic."
Oneday, Tarachand and I decided to investigate. "Let's see her charms and spells today!"
We entered her house—dim light, the smell of damp earth, and a few round stones placed in a corner.
I froze.
Bhagu Aai appeared behind us and asked softly, "What are you looking at, Arjun?"
"What are these?" I asked. She smiled faintly and said,
"These are the stones of God, my child, not of a witch." In that moment, shame filled me.
For the first time, I realized—people often accuse others before even trying to understand them.
Time passed. Tarachand and I joined Chhatralay High school and its allied Sant Gadage Baba Boardingat Shevgaon. On weekends, when were turned to the village, I would see Bhagu Aai sitting in her yard lonely and melancholy.
"Oh, Santubai's Arjun has come? Studying well, aren't you?" "Yes, Bhagu Aai, it's my final year now."
"May God bless you," she would say.
Sometimes she would cry; sometimes she'd suddenly grow silent. The wrinkle son her face held the entire story of her life.
Her sons had given her very little. Occasionally, they sent a money order —but how long could that last?

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Whenever the postman's bicycle bell rang, she would rush to her door. "Is there anything for me today?"
"Not today, Bhagu Aai," he'd say.
She would go back inside, look at the cracked pot, and murmur to herself, "Maybe tomorrow."
Some women in the village disliked her deeply.
One day, a woman named Bajibai grab bed her by the hair and shouted, "Witch! Don't sit under our tree!"
Bhagu Aai screamed back,
"I have nothing, but your house will burn to ashes—you'll see!" Fear spread through the village after that.
A few months later, Bajibai's house actually caught fire. People whispered, "Bhagu Aai's curse came true."
I remained silent—a battle between fear and reason raging in my heart. Then came a tragedy.
My friend Keshav Ghute died in afire.
The villagers again said, "Bhagu Aai's curse."
I was in Class XI then— the day our S. S. C. Board results were announced. I had passed, but my heart was heavy with sorrow.
Looking at his lifeless body in Nityaseva Hospital on Paithan road, Shevgaon, I had tears in my eyes and only one question in my mind —
"Why are west ill trapped in these blind superstitions?"
Years later, his brother Madhav also went to his heavenly abode similarly.
A few months afterward, I joined New Arts College in Ahmednagar. I was in the second year of my college when one afternoon, a letter arrived —
"Bhagu Aai has passed away." My heart sank.
The next day was Saturday, I went to my village by bus.
Her hut at the edge of the Mahar quarter was now even more dilapidated.
The door was open. Inside—emptiness. In one corner lay her old quilt. I stood there silently.
Rain water dripped through the roof—as if the sky itself was mourning her. Softly, I whispered,
"BhaguAai, you were never a witch…you were an angel." Tears filled my eyes.
She had once told me,
"Arjun, man holds no magic in his hands—only love. That is the real power." Today, I am a teacher; I teach humanity.
But Bhagu Aai's words still live in my heart.
Bhagu Aai is gone, but her sorrow remains buried in the soil of our village.
She was not a witch—she was a truth, over flowing with humanity yet rejected by society.
Her life is a mirror—reflecting our numbness, our fear and our sinful silence.

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