

## Editorial Comments

Samrat Sengupta

The current issue of *Sanglap* carries the translation of the Hindi writer Mamta Kalia's story, "Aapki Chhoti Larki," as "Your Younger Daughter." It focuses on the internal hierarchies and dynamics of power that exist within an Indian family and interrupts the idea of a prelapsarian state of innocence associated with Indian childhood. It is a story which also shows the structural violence against women within the family where women are not only victims but, through their perpetual circuit of oppression, often naturalise the socially accepted gender roles to become perpetrators by imposing such roles on younger and more vulnerable women. The story is about Turna/Tuniya Sahae, who is a girl in her early teens and is shown to be thoroughly exploited by her parents to perform domestic work. Her mother is seen to be already overworked by doing cooking and other household chores and needs the support of her domestic help, Collins, and younger daughter, Turna. The expected roles of women in the family become more laborious due to the caste rules, and we note how the domestic help Collins could perform all household chores except cooking because of her lower caste status. Turna's mother not only exploits Turna's labour and keeps her away from all kinds of childlike enjoyment but also fails to understand her adolescent sexual precarity, and we observe that when a neighbour makes an obscene remark to Turna as she goes to collect water. The story shows Turna's father as a learned man who is into literature and cinema but is more absorbed in his own world of literary discussions and friendly gatherings than caring for the female members of his family. Turna's college-going *didi* (elder sister) is celebrated in the family as an exceptional woman who is supposedly more modern and devoted to studying literature and philosophy and achieves good grades and awards. Therefore, she is spared from all domestic work and, as a result, turns self-centred and insensitive. Despite being a woman, her status in the family is like that of an elder son, with whom the parents have a lot of expectations and pride. The story is important to show such implicit violence during childhood is capable of lowering the self-esteem of a girl. The story shows how Indian parents are often blinded by a certain idea of academic success and undervalue different qualities and interests that may exist in one of their children, who is not a significant achiever. The story is significant as a critique of Indian society and the institution of the family often hailed as sacred and unquestionable.

## Translator's Note

Mamta Kalia enters the living room of her artistically furnished house. She settles on the sofa and flashes an endearing smile at me. This is my second meeting with her. She is incredibly unassuming for a bilingual writer who has traversed the literary path for more than five decades. Her marriage to the eminent Hindi writer Ravindra Kalia, she says, has been one of the impetuses behind her choosing to write in Hindi. Kalia's entire creative corpus speaks much less of her as a person than her anecdotes do. She conveys her anti-essentialist views to me without using a single cryptic jargon and emphasises that utility only comes when futility is shown.

Over the years, the story "Aapki Chhoti Larki" has become synonymous with the author, who perspicuously explains various attempts made at translating it. Bereft of intellectual affectations, the story is the naïve plea of the younger daughter of the family, who is always rebuffed, shunned and admonished in favour of her elder sister or *didi*. On being asked what makes this story different, Kalia informs that stories pivoted on sibling inequality are inadvertently related to gender, where parental favouritism towards the male child fosters a feeling of inadequacy and jealousy in the female child. The story "Aapki Chhoti Larki" is a scathing attack on this presumption as it has two girls, the younger of whom is always overshadowed by the accomplishments of the elder one. The perpetual admiration of the elder sister by the parents leaves the younger one in dejection and self-doubt. The story

successfully lays bare the role of elders, especially parents, in shaping the self-perception of a child in her formative years. The narrative encourages elders to refrain from unhealthy comparisons between/among siblings and reflect on their individual strengths.

It has been sincerely tried to welcome the original story in the creative haven of a foreign language. However, certain culture specifics that do not have a direct equivalent in English had to be translated within the lexical limits. Furthermore, various translation techniques like approximation and foreignisation have been employed to translate figures of speech, idiomatic expressions, compound words, and dialectical flavour. This translation is a thorough appreciation of the original story and also a humble effort to make it accessible to non-Hindi speakers without disrupting the essence of the original.

### **Your Younger Daughter**

An English translation of “Aapki Chhoti Larki” by Mamta Kalia

[Translated by Dr. Shweta Tiwari]

“Tuniya, rush and post the letter.”

“Tuniya, serve cold water.”

“I have put milk on the gas for boiling. Stay nearby, Tunno. You don’t have to do anything. Just turn off the gas when the milk begins to boil.”

Tuniya runs the whole day. She completes her homework after coming back from school, eats a little bit and soon after, starts running unlimited errands. Tuniya is responsible for all household chores, from tough to simple. Tuniya will fetch wood from the market; Tuniya will water the plants; Tuniya will give medicines to mummy; Tuniya will bring in clothes that were put out for drying outside; Tuniya will open the door ten times and close it ten times. Tuniya alone will go to the neighbour aunty to collect the bowl sent to her fifteen days ago. Only she is bold enough to plainly say, “Aunty, give that bowl back; the one in which we gave you *sarson saag*.”

Only Tuniya will go to get ice from Keravala Madam upon the sudden arrival of guests. Who else could dare to coax that impudent woman into taking ice out of her refrigerator?

Tuniya is thirteen but looks eleven. She does not like to drink milk or eat eggs. She has a tender frame; a waist so slim that the skirt of the school uniform almost slips away. The shirt comes out even if she takes a short run. That is why she has to wear a belt or needs at least three loops to hook her skirt. She has to get ready for school properly, wear a tie, and wear shoes that shine too. Otherwise, Tuniya lacks the patience to dress up pleasantly. She wears whatever she can lay her hands on. Everyone’s hair in the house is trimmed, including mummy’s, didi’s, and even Colleen’s. Colleen comes in the morning and evening, dusts the house, irons the clothes and makes arrangements for cooking. She is not asked to cook. Mummy says the food would be polluted if she cooks. Tuniya can barely understand how things get polluted. It is okay if Colleen kneads the dough or chops the vegetables, but her tempering the same vegetable and baking chapatis makes it polluted. Colleen is very fashionable. She has told with puckered brows that had her father not been so greedy for alcohol, she would have never gone out to work, that too in several houses.

Colleen goes to three houses. Colleen applies so much powder on her face that neighbour Devraj has named her ‘Powder and Company’. Colleen wears a high-hem frock and high heels. Her body seems to be protruding at many angles. She goes to church every Sunday and to the movies every Saturday. Sometimes, she has a new clip in her hair and,

sometimes, a new handkerchief in the pocket of her skirt. When the next-door nursemaid Mary asks her, "Where did you buy it from?" Colleen rolls her eyes and says, "My boyfriend gave it..."

Tuniya does not like Colleen. She thinks Colleen is not a good girl. The things that enrage Tuniya make Colleen cackle. She is always in a frolicking mood. She does not understand anything except fashion and films. She enacts the story of a film while narrating it whether anyone listens to it or not. Her flamboyance is not liked by Tuniya. She has told mummy many times, "Why don't you depose her?" but every time, mummy ends the discussion on the same note, "Tunno, you get ready and leave for school early in the morning. Baby does not get time. I am the one who is left. So, it must be clearly understood that I cannot do so much work. If Colleen did not help, I would die."

Mummy somehow brings the question of life and death to every petty thing. When Madhuri aunty came from Jabalpur and wanted to take Tuniya with her during the vacation, mummy said, "Oh no! I cannot send away Tuniya. Colleen is already on leave, and you want to take her too. I cannot do all the work. I will be dead."

Madhuri aunty returned alone, though Tuniya had craved to go with her. How would Jabalpur be, she had thought in her mind. She had read about Bhedaghat in her book. She wanted to go there and match how much truth the books really speak. But how could she let her mother die!

It is for mummy that she runs around the whole day. She also does so many of those works that she completely loathes, like calling papa from Pal sir's house, fetching water from Dr. Jagatiyani's house on the lower floor when the pipeline is closed, purchasing onions and potatoes from the market, and returning the articles to the shop if mummy did not like them. Mummy would ask her to get an array of assorted items, then find fault in the purchases, "You have paid ten paise extra for the soap, take the bar back to Vohra and say, we don't want the soap. Is some stealing going on? Just charging any amount as per his whims. Tunno, you have grown up but still do not have the brains to purchase fine ginger. This ginger is worthless, so knotty! These days, almond-like ginger is available."

Now, how would Tuniya know what an almond-like ginger was? For her, ginger is a bland thing, both in appearance and taste. Is it so easy to first purchase and then return an item? One begins to sweat, besides looking like a cartoon.

In the afternoon of a holiday, the house was completely out of water. Mummy promptly said, "Tuniya fill a small bucket of water from downstairs so that at least tea can be prepared."

Dr. Jagatiyani also has a hand pump and a tap. Due to a lower floor, they always have water supply all the time. Doctor and Mrs. Jagatiyani go to their clinic every morning. They return at around two-thirty or three in the afternoon. On coming back, they eat and sleep after switching on the air conditioner. The housekeeping is solely done by their servant Ramji. He answers the phone, opens the door when the call bell is rung, cleans the car and cooks food. When Doctor Sahib and Mrs. Jagatiyani are in the clinic in the evening, Ramji watches T.V. This is his everyday routine. He calls T.V. as T.B. He recognises every announcer. He gave everyone a name: 'First class', 'Second class', 'Workable' and 'Crumbling'.

That day, as Tuniya reached downstairs with a small brass bucket, Doctor Sahib's backdoor was open. Tuniya went straight inside. She opened the tap, but there was no water. Then, she used the hand pump. It was dry, too. Just then, Ramji came out of the kitchen, "There is no water today, all over."

Tuniya had just stretched her hand to once again open the tap that Ramji gesticulated towards his pyjamas, obscenely smiled, and said, "Fill it from here."

Tuniya could not understand anything, but she screamed and anxiously ran away from whatever she saw. Who could have cared to pick up the bucket?

Running wildly, Tuniya entered her house on the third floor; mummy scowled at her, "You did not get the water; now you will not get the evening tea. Nobody wants to work these days. And there's Colleen — another one who makes a face if anything is said to her. And you have your own idiosyncrasies. I am the one who must do everything and die for you all." Tuniya's mind was so disgusted and perturbed that she wanted to do something, but mummy's relentless blabbering antagonised her. She seemed least bothered about why Tuniya did not get the water. She was only concerned about getting her work done. Otherwise, she was always ready to die.

"And where have you thrown the bucket? At least speak up. Enough of this brazenness. Her wrists twist in getting back the empty bucket. When I was your age, I used to do a headstand if my mother gestured so."

It started all over again, her and her times. Now, this record would not stop any time soon. She would narrate her experiences right from chopping a wood to a head. Mummy squashed a snake slithering at grandmother's headboard; mummy helped Loheyvali in locating her gold waist ornament — she spotted the thieves who were trying to break into the house. She also took care of grandmother during her illness. How should Tuniya say that doing all this is easy compared to going downstairs again and looking at that dirty thing, that too for a bucket?

Mummy does not do this with *didi*. *Didi* does not do any of her work, but still, mummy never grumbles in front of her. She does not go to purchase onions and potatoes from the market; she is not sent to Dr. Jagatiyani to fetch water, and she never stands in the queue to pay the electricity bill. *Didi* wakes up at eight in the morning. As soon as she wakes up, she starts ordering around, "Colleen, boil water for my shower. Mummy prepares potato toast for me. Tuniya find the *dupatta* of this *kurta*."

*Didi* goes to take a shower, and the entire house gets so busy with the work related to her college that it is as if she is going to the army. Mummy runs to the door to hand over her watch and handkerchief. *Didi* does not even say thank you. She only casts a queen-like glance at everyone and struts away. She goes to college alone, but it seems as if four groups are walking ahead of her, and four are at the back. *Didi* crosses the road splendidly, challenging the taxis and cars. Who could dare to ask *didi*, "Hey you! Has your father got this road constructed? Have you left the pedestrian crossing for the partridges?"

Tuniya knows that when *didi* sets out for college, half a dozen boys from the colony leave their houses at the same time. They disperse here and there, one near the bridge, one at the crossroads, and another at the bus stop. *Didi* is their heroine. Someone had seen her dancing on the stage of the college, and poof! Someone had heard her speak in a debate, and he was dashed! Someone is crazy about *didi's* walk, and another one about her hair. Bacchu holds his chest as he sings, "My ashes will fly to call you my beloved..." Abu has been failing in L.L.B. for the last two years. *Didi* does not look at anyone. After giving a boastful flip to her neck, she stands at the bus stop as if the carriage of Buckingham Palace is going to arrive for her.

In fact, one day, it arrived — the prince of Rajgarh's car. *Didi* was standing at the bus stop when a chocolate-coloured car abruptly halted in front of her. The prince was driving

himself. With absolute courtesy, he said, "Miss Sahae, I, too, am going to the college. May I have the pleasure of dropping you off!"

*Didi* glanced at him and said, "Sorry, I don't know who you are."

The prince hung his head and drove off. He did not go to college. He was so piqued that on the same day, he left not just the college but the city, too.

Tuniya is very proud of her sister. She can ask Tuniya for any work, and Tuniya will do it. She clips *didī's* nails. She washes her handkerchief, combs her hair, and tidies her room. Tuniya was very tired that day. She had to make five trips to the market. *Didi*, too, had some work to do in the market. She had to get her maxi from the tailor. *Didi* pulled out a small bunch of pearl flowers from her hair and gave it to Tuniya. Tuniya forgot her exhaustion out of happiness. Gazing at the flowers, she went to the tailor and got the maxi. Her legs pained a lot, but the flowers were so beautiful.

Often, *didī* thrusts her Philosophy book into Tuniya's hands and lies down. This is *didī's* favourite way to study. Tuniya reads out everything from Kant and Hegel to Monism. *Didi* is very sharp-minded. She memorises everything after hearing it only once. This is how *didī* learns her part in a drama. Tuniya also learns the dialogue with *didī*. "The mother said, "They went away. Each one of them went away. I birthed six sons, and all six went away. Now I will sleep; I will sleep peacefully. I did not sleep even for one day after I got married. My life was spent in prayers, sometimes for this one and sometimes for that one. I prayed to this God today and fasted for that one tomorrow. Now, everyone has gone away. What harm can lakhs of storms do to me now? What business with the sea do I have now? Even if, in the name of food, there is just a dry rotten fish in the house, why should I worry? For whom should I care? I will spread my legs and sleep soundly."

*Didi* acts marvellously in this play by J. M. Synge. The eyes of every spectator in the hall are welled with tears. Tuniya has seen it herself. This is *didī's* speciality. Make her Dilbahar Begum or an old granny; she makes the characters stand alive. That is why she does not value her director. The director of the play *Antony and Cleopatra* by the 'English Association' is the Coorgi boy, Jimmy. *Didi* does not pay any heed to him. *Didi* says, 'she will speak the dialogues of Cleopatra as per her wish'. The professor gave up and said, "She is a born Cleopatra. Let her handle the character." *Didi* is applauded at the college's annual function. The chief guest gives ten awards to *didī*, one after the other. In addition, she gets a certificate for getting the highest score in English, Hindi, Philosophy, and Language. Also for singing, dancing, and acting. She also wins one award for her personality and another one for oration.

*Didi* won the table tennis shield, and she got a special award for that, too. *Didi* finds it against her stateliness to go to the stage again and again. *Didi* stands in the wings and hands over her awards to a devotee student. She gets out, receives the award from the chief guest, and returns to the wings. Everyone in the hall listens to her name with great envy. They wait for her glimpse. *Didi* is in no hurry. She is never anxious while going to the stage.

Tuniya, too, gets awards in her school. But she gets so nervous that reaching up to the principal becomes difficult. In nervousness, 'thank you' never comes out of her mouth; her tongue sticks to the roof of her mouth and dries up, and her hands shiver frantically. Those are the faces she meets daily, but Tuniya gets petrified. *Didi* is not agitated at all. The chief guest may be a complete outsider, but *didī* accepts the award from his hand in such a style that it is as if she is not receiving but giving it.

Tuniya also sits with the audience, clapping. As many times *didī's* name is called, Tuniya feels she is growing in stature. She wishes to get up on her seat and clap loudly. Her mind teaches her patience and manners.

After the function, Tuniya returned home with *didì*. The bus stop was at some distance from the college. *Didì* held a few awards, and Tuniya held the others.

Tuniya was feeling as if she had won them. After all, she made *didì* memorise the dialogues of the plays, and she read out to *didì* lessons from Philosophy, Hindi, and English.

Again and again, somebody or the other was congratulating *didì*. That's when a bunch of four boys came and congratulated *didì*. Then, a short one from them said, "Miss Sahae, we have placed a bet; Raj Kakkar says that this girl with you is your sister. I say it is not possible at all. To blather is Raj's old habit. But I will not let him talk against your grandeur. You tell the truth. We have placed a bet on ice cream.

*Didì* replied with utter carelessness, "She is my sister, Turna Sahae."

The faces of the boys were stunned. They steadfastly scrutinised Tuniya as if children were watching a zebra in a zoo.

Raj Kakkar rolled up his sleeves in a winner's style, "See, my news cannot be wrong. Isn't it a blast!"

The short boy uttered in a desperate tone. "Is she your real sister Miss Sahae?"

"O yes," *didì* said, laughing.

"Of the same mother?"

"Yes and of the same father." *Didì* joked from her side and everybody started laughing.

Tuniya felt like crying for the first time. Such uncouth boys. What disgusting jokes they crack! Is it something to bet on? She has come to college with *didì* many times. She is obviously her sister, not a peon.

She did not say anything, but tears wandered in her mind like a blind person. Who has the time to look at her? Someone is patting *didì's* back; the other is kissing her face. Papa proudly told *didì*, "You are my brainy daughter. Well done!"

Mummy immediately sent Tuniya to the market to get *laddus*. *Laddus* will be distributed in the neighbourhood. *Didì* has received awards, after all. Everyone's children study in the same college, but nobody gets so many awards.

Tuniya went from home to home for hours, number seven, number eight, number nine. Kairavala, Jagatiyani, Dwivedi, Alam Khan. She rang the call bell, and the door opened, "Namaste, aunty, my *didì* came first in everything this year too. Mummy has sent sweets. Namaste."

Papa lifted Tuniya's school cups from the radio, placed them on the shelf, and embellished them with *didì's* big cups. The room began to sparkle. New cups shine so well. The photographer will come tomorrow. *Didì's* photos will be clicked.

When Tuniya lay on her bed that night, she involuntarily began to weep. It was not clear to her why she was crying, but the tears kept on flowing. Sleep left her due to continuous crying.

Tuniya tiptoed to the bathroom. She looked at her face in the mirror there.

No, it was not so bad that it could not be tolerated. Her hair is longer and softer than *didī*'s. Her skin is bright, too. Then why did those boys say that she is no one to her sister? And even if the boys misbehaved, should *didī* not have rebuked them? Couldn't she have proudly taken her hand in hers and said, "Look, she is my sister, my younger sister, can't you see?"

What should Tuniya do to look like her *didī*'s sister? Should she hang a board from her neck, put her face in the flour sack, or scrape off her skin like a peel?

Tuniya was reminded of the red skirt amidst this fretting, because of which she was battered. *Didi* had to perform in a solo dance competition at the Townhall. A new red skirt, blouse and drape were customised for it. *Didi* had gone to the market to purchase red hair tassels and brooch. The tailor came and gave *didī*'s costume. The new red costume enticed Tuniya in such a way that she could not control herself. Just out of curiosity, she took off her frock and wore the skirt and the drape. She had covered her head and was about to put a decorative dot on her forehead when *didī* returned.

Tuniya's blood ran cold. O God, *didī* saw it. What will happen now?

*Didi* was furious. "You ruined my costume. Tell me, why?" *Didi* shook her.

"*Didi* I didn't ruin it, here, I will take it off."

*Didi* sat down to cry, "Uu-uu-uu, I will not wear this costume now. It has become dirty."

Mummy did not say anything to *didī*. She just thrashed Tuniya, who was responsible for dirtying *didī*'s costume.

Tuniya, for weeks, kept on thinking that the costume could quickly become so dirty that *didī*'s dance was marred; she did not get the award and lost one of her anklets on her way back home.

Since then, Tuniya promised not to touch any of *didī*'s dresses. Not even a handkerchief. *Didi* should not be saddened.

After a night of anxiety, Tuniya decided that she would not pay any attention to the mischief of the boys. She will solely focus on her studies. She will never go to *didī*'s college. Mummy asks, not even then.

Tuniya had a very good day at school. She got 'very good' in English, and 'good' in drawing. Out of happiness, the remaining periods also passed by soon. Now came Mathematics period, Hodivala sir's class. Boys and girls get maximum punishment in this class. Boys get overwhelmingly flogged. Long, slender cane travels in Hodivala sir's class. Boys taking whoosh-whoosh of the cane on their palms do not cry, but their lips are squeezed. Tuniya's body shudders when she hears the sound 'whoosh-whoosh'.

The girls are not beaten. They get the punishment of staying back after school and writing lesson 'detention'. What sense does it make? The mistake was made in a sum in mathematics, and the punishment received was to write 'Our Human Structure' nine times. Tuniya never got this punishment. But the ones who did are, after all, her friends; she knows that their middle finger turns blue from writing.

Tuniya's sums are never wrong, but she does not like sir's behaviour; when students are solving the sum, Hodivala sir rests his back on the window and keeps looking at everyone

hawk-eyed — “No cheating.” After being done with the boys, they come to the girls. Saying, “Let me see, missy baba, what have you done,” he examines each missy baba’s sum. One of his hands continuously keeps moving on the back of the girl, from the shoulders to the waist portion. He is especially amiable towards burly, mushy girls, but girls are intimidated by him. Elder girls murmur among themselves about this, but nobody opens her mouth out of fear.

All of Tuniya’s sums are always right. Maybe that is why sir does not flitter around her, hastily puts a ‘right’ and moves ahead. Two to four times, Tuniya even solved those questions that sir was unable to answer.

Saturday morning, papa got the living room cleaned. Only Tuniya could clean his living room. Colleen has no sense whatsoever. She regards even important papers as waste and throws them in the dustbin. The whole world knows that papers are papa’s life. She knows why every letter and every newspaper has been kept. Mummy is exasperated by this cleanliness drive. She says the time taken to clean the entire house is needed to clean only this living room. Cleaning each paperweight, wiping, pushing pins in the pincushion, and beautifully organising the books in the rack, where does she have the time for all this? But Tuniya is not bored. She calls this work a duet between the broom and the dust cloth.

The sheet of the mattress spread on the floor was changed. The books were properly arranged. The washed radio cover and tablecloth were outspread. A very renowned litterateur was going to come. Tuniya asked, “Papa, is his foot going to be even bigger than the one who came last time?”

“Don’t say nonsensical things,” papa growled. Last time, too, an eminent litterateur came to his house. His footprint was left on the bedsheet. That blurred footprint in the centre of the white bedsheet looked quite odd. Oh, my goodness, Tuniya had thought, such a big foot. She could fit in two to three feet of hers in this. She had thought then that a big litterateur has not only a big brain but a big foot, too.

But papa cannot tolerate any perversity. Everything should be clean in the house. Duly enter the room, say *Namaste*, keep the tea and leave. If poetry recitation is going on in the room or a serious discussion, never interrupt. If you wish to listen to it, sit quietly.

Tuniya is not oblivious to the world of books. Books are very dear to her. She reads anything and everything that comes in front of her. This litterateur who is about to come — Muktidoot *ji* — she has read his novel too. She has a fervent desire in her mind to see him. Tuniya wants to know how he understands someone’s inner thoughts so easily and well. Has he got a stethoscope like a doctor?

One more thing that Tuniya does not understand is that a litterateur is not considered great even after writing fifty books and the other becomes great by writing merely one book. Papa explains a little bit, and then utters his perpetual remark, “You are too young right now.”

Tuniya is not so young. Her heart and mind are filled with thousands of questions. Why, why, why? Mostly artists and litterateurs come to her house. The people who come here are diverse. Once, an artist came with three hundred rupees in their pocket and immense hope. He wanted to struggle in the film industry. He looked so innocent on his face. He stayed in their house for months, in this living room. Every morning, he used to set out with his bag on his shoulder and supplicated to the doorkeepers from one studio to the other. He used to return in the night wearied and demoralised, and papa used to make him eat with himself and moralise him at length.

He went on again the next morning. After three and a half months of incessant trying, he got a role in a film of a goon standing at the bus stop who empties people’s pockets by



flashing a knife and then kisses the knife and weirdly laughs, “Ha ha ha ha!” When he used to rehearse the kissing of the knife and a hysterical laugh, Tuniya used to leave the room. She didn’t know why, but she felt that this role was a humiliation for the artist. After that, he played a goon in all the films. Within two years, he became a popular villain in the film industry, and purchased a flat in Juhu. He then got married and refused to recognise papa.

Papa did not care much. Neither did he feel hurt nor insulted. He searched for a few more companions. But mummy kept on blabbering, “Till the time he could not arrange two square meals, he was tied to our necks. Today, when both bread and butter were arranged, he has turned away his eyes. When will he have the discretion? Oh, stop this liberality, at least now. Nobody is concerned about the other in today’s world. What did you get by suffering for others?”

Papa did not complain even once. He lent five to fifty rupees to just so many people but never got them back. Mummy had put this in writing in the house expense register for years, then accepted defeat and left writing it. Papa said, “What is there to bicker about? Whole life is a give and take.”

Mummy said, “For you, your entire life is a give and take.”

Mummy was easily angered. She used to somehow find problems even in good things. There was a new tenant in Number 21, Mr. Pae. That day, his daughter Vinaya was playing with a few girls on the front lawn. Tuniya reached, too. Everyone skipped rope and played I spy together. As soon as Tuniya returned home, their mother called for an explanation, “Whom did you ask before going?”

“Why didn’t you change clothes? Did you see the clothes of other girls. They were looking like fairies.”

“You will disgrace us.”

“See how the whole evening is spoilt!” Mother’s scolding is unbearable, and mother scolds the most. She does not even give time to cry or feel sad after scolding. She ruins her own health.

Then starts papa’s chain of advice, “How many times has it been said Tunno, don’t let mummy fret, her blood pressure rises.”

“You don’t care about mummy, Tuniya. Move, give her glucose in water.”

“Take mummy to Dr. Ganguly in the evening.”

The doctor checks mummy’s blood pressure and gives the medicine. Tuniya is filled with extreme remorse. She is the one to be scolded and feel bad; only she accompanies her to the doctor; she is the one who says sorry. Nobody cares about anything. No one answered this question of Tuniya’s: whose blood pressure must be checked — the one who scolded, or the one who got scolded?

Completely aloof of these nuisances, *didi* is running in a different direction. Almost every evening, some show or another run. After the show, *didi* comes back home, removes her make up, changes clothes, and lies on the bed with closed eyes. Papa and mummy come at regular intervals and look at her. When she falls asleep, papa gently switches off the light and says, “Baby is too strained. Give her an apple every day.”

Tuniya wants to share everything with *didid*. Yesterday, Tuniya told her about the big litterateur who was going to come today. *Didid* had said, “Oh, I would have heard him talk but what should I do, a new rehearsal is beginning from tomorrow. The lead role is mine.”

Papa is very excited from the morning. The novel and anthology of Muktidoot is being revised. Red pencil marks are being put in different places; an intense debate has to be done with Muktidoot *ji*. Tuniya is also reading along. The ambience of this room is unique. While sitting here, the mind is engrossed in books. It remembers neither time nor work.

Just then, mummy came and said, “Tuniya, let’s go to the Saturday market to fetch things.”

Tuniya’s enthusiasm froze.

Saturday market means stinking piles of dried fish, hustle and bustle of the market, sunlight, sweat, dust, crazy carry bags, onions and potatoes, wheat, rice, spice, leafy vegetables, sour leafy greens and a rickety rickshaw. Tuniya is dead sacred of this rickshaw.

First of all, see mummy negotiate the prices at each and every shop and not say a word; just stand there holding the carry bag. When mummy is satisfied, take the items. Keep staring at the weighing scale if the vegetable seller is prodding it with a stick. Mummy will buy the month’s ration from the Saturday market with the same cleverness. Then she will book a cheap rickshaw with her skills. She has two mandatory conditions while booking a rickshaw. The rickshaw should be cheap, and the rickshaw puller should be polite. Mummy is too annoyed with people who squabble. As soon she gets on the rickshaw, she will keep a bag of tomatoes or an oil container on the side seat and say, “Tuniya, you sit at the bottom. Lest the tomatoes be squashed, or the oil gets leaked. There is no weld in the container. It is only a matter of small distance.”

If there were no tomatoes or oil with her, then some neighbour of Colleen would surely be seen by mummy. Mummy would load her too on the rickshaw with herself and say, “Tunno, you sit in the corner, here near my feet. No, sister, you don’t take the trouble. Our daughter is very simple; she will sit wherever asked and stand wherever asked. What’s with the children? They will be as you keep them.

Tuniya did not want to sit like this. How embarrassed she feels! If a school friend or a teacher saw her, so many jokes would be passed on about her. She studies in the eighth standard. She is not a kid. Is she the maid of the house that she must sit near the feet? If mummy is so fond of carrying the neighbours, why does she not book two rickshaws?

When Tuniya sits like this, her underwear begins to show from the front. At least Tuniya feels her underwear is visible; in fact, the whole world knows that it is visible. How can Tuniya say shame-shame? Her frock is not long enough to be pulled forward. Mummy’s slipper is pricking from the back, and this problem from the front!

Tuniya gets very bored with this pattern of the Saturday market. Upon this, it is surprising that mummy calls it a deviation. Now, on reaching home and keeping the bags, Tuniya says she is going to Pinhaj Daji at number seventeen, so mummy will chide her and say, “Sit quietly! You have just come back from an outing, not *papad* rolling. Nobody’s mind lies in the house. I must do whatever is to be done — all alone, and I must die.”

Mummy does not pause for a long time after she once begins to talk. She halts and keeps on talking on the same subject. The lentil packets are being emptied into the jar. Lecture begins. Wheat is being filled in the canister; the lecture is still on. Slowly and steadily, this will change into an experiential statement. Tuniya will follow mummy in a way that makes it seem

as if both are tied to a string. If mummy turns, she will also turn; if mummy bends, she will bend too.

Mummy said in exasperation once again, “You don’t listen, it will get sunnier. Get up fast.”

Papa lifted his eyes from the book and said vociferously, “Why do you start wrangling early in the morning? Do you even know anything apart from flour and lentils? Tuniya will not go. Such a prominent litterateur is coming. He can be here any time. Who will make tea here? If you want to go, take Colleen with you.”

After casting a sharp glance at papa and Tuniya, Mummy left.

Papa the Great! Tuniya was overjoyed. What a precarious escape from Saturday market for her and a ruse for Colleen. She had just finished her work and was preparing to leave. That is why she saved herself from everyone’s sight and stole a flower from the flower vase to put in her hair. Tuniya knows everything. When she will be made to sit on the plank of the rickshaw, her splendour will disappear.

She was relieved somehow. Now, when papa says she will make such a first-class, that even Muktidoot *ji* will be surprised. Ground lentil is already kept; she would make fritters.

No, why would *didi* help? She has not even woken up till now. She will wake up, get ready, and get engrossed in dancing. The twenty-fifth show of her play was over only yesterday. A new rehearsal will begin today.

Muktidoot *ji* came one hour late from the decided time — like a miracle. Dressed in a pristine white khadi *kurta-pyjama*. He started laughing ha-ha as soon as he came. Papa was very happy. Muktidoot *ji* first gave him an interesting lecture on the visionlessness of the officers and then gave examples of weird ones. Thank God papa heard it without getting irritated. No one can trust them; at one moment, papa turns into an officer, at another, a literature lover. Once, papa got angry at an informal remark from a poet, and he started talking through his puckered brows. Mr. Poet called papa a failed human being, whereas papa considered himself highly successful.

But Muktidoot *ji* is, first of all, papa’s age, and he has a different way of talking. Tuniya is astonished. Papa had said that Muktidoot *ji* neither has a job nor a business. But how gratified and unbothered by anything he was; a king-like demeanour, echoing voice, enchanting way of smoking, and such cordiality he had. He did not eat anything, but he praised the tea while drinking it and asked, “Who made it, your wife?”

“No, Tuniya, she is my younger daughter Turna, she is very bright in studies and at making tea too.”

“Ha-ha-ha,” Muktidoot *ji* laughed. “This girl will be very successful. In fact, I say the one who can prepare good tea can do the most difficult jobs of the world.”

Just then, *didi* entered the room. She looked so fresh in a white saree and blouse, like a flower. Rohini Bhatay asks all the students to come dressed in white clothes.

*Didi* greeted Muktidoot *ji* and said to papa, “Papa, I have to reach at exactly 11 AM for Rohini Bhatay’s class.”

“Okay you may go,” Papa said.

Just then, Mrs. Raheja came from number four. Despite Tuniya's saying that Mummy had gone to the market, she came to the kitchen to see her and then sat in the living room.

At that time, a debate between papa and Muktidoot *ji* was going on about whether popularity could be a parameter for classic literature. Muktidoot *ji* associated popularity with saleability while papa with human beings. He was again and again citing the popular portions of *Ramacharitmanas*.

Muktidoot *ji* said, "*Ramacharitmanas* is not popular due to its literariness but religious arguments."

Mrs. Raheja sat for some time, scratching her one heel with the other. Then she said, "Tuniya I have prepared *idli* bater if you give the mould so *idli* would be prepared quickly."

Now, she came to the point. Why does Raheja Aunty make so many excuses? As she entered, she should have said that she had come for the mould. How would she know who is sitting in the living room right now? Really, Tuniya feels surprised. All the women of the colony are similar — they apply makeup in the morning, think about eating and drinking all the time, sleep in the afternoon, watch T.V. in the evening and announce in the night, "Today I am too tired." Tuniya does not want to become like this at all. She wants to be like Muktidoot *ji*. She feels only litterateurs can find answers to important questions of life.

Muktidoot *ji* wanted to know if Madhav Mishra still stayed in that colony.

"He does", papa informed, "He is sad nowadays. He does not go anywhere. Recently his wife passed away."

"Suddenly?"

"No, she had cancer."

"I have forgotten his house; I came there once about eight years ago. Which number is it?"

"One hundred and eight. Away from this block, at the turn of the third lane there are quarters, there."

"Where?"

"Tuniya will tell you, she knows. Tuniya baby, take Muktidoot *ji* to Madhav Mishraji's house." Papa said.

"But I will have one more cup of tea after returning."

"Oh, sure." Papa's smile brightened. What else does papa want? His mind is made for welcoming and hospitality. If he is allowed, then he will sit with open doors all day and all night, waiting for visitors. His hunger and thirst are tied to friends. If there is no one to eat with him, he will not remember to eat till 3 o'clock. If someone comes, he would feel hungry from 12 o'clock onwards.

Tuniya did not delay at all. She immediately put on her slippers and went off with Muktidoot *ji*. My goodness, he is so tall, like a palm tree. If one was to look at him while talking, then there would be sprains in the neck.

Muktidoot *ji* saw Tuniya was almost running with him while walking. He slowed his pace. He asked, "Wasn't she your sister?"

"How do you know?"

"Oh, she resembles you so much."

Maybe Tuniya has misheard, or Muktidoot *ji* has said something wrong.

"Everybody says that she does not resemble me at all."

"It resembles a lot. Do you know Turna, God has the best printing press? A human cannot create that impact even after lakhs of attempts that God can. Just like books are published, all the same, similarly God block prints the nose and face of every family. That is why people say, "Oh baby, your nose looks exactly like your grandmother; your laugh reminds us of your aunt." God is a good sculptor."

Ha-ha, Muktidoot *ji* laughed at his own statement. Words immediately came out of Tuniya's mouth, "Do you believe in God?"

"Why, did you feel that the number of theists is declining?"

"I don't know, once papa had said as people are getting educated, their faith in God is shaking."

"This is what papa said, what do you say?"

"I too feel the same."

"No, papa feels like that, therefore you feel that. Dear Tuniya think independently, can faith in God ever disappear from our country? If I keep a useless stone smeared in *sindoor* at the centre of the crossroads and put two flowers on it, you would see how much faith we people have. Nine out of ten people would stop there, bow their head, offer flowers and fruits. This is called faith."

"Or superstition."

"No trust. By the way there is a very fine difference between trust and superstition. You are too young right now. Otherwise, I would have explained it to you."

It was the same thing all over again. Being young has become a scourge. Everything was clearly understood, and then the break came; you are too young right now. Muktidoot *ji* is a guest at this point; otherwise, Tuniya would have asked, "What do young people have to do to be older? Do they have to stand on their head?"

Muktidoot *ji* looked at her carefully, "Tired?"

"No", Tuniya shook her neck.

"What is the name of your school?"

"How do you go so far?"

Here comes Madhav Mishra's house.

Mishra *ji* is at home.

Tuniya's job is done.

She would leave.

Now, Muktidoot *ji* would be engrossed in talking to Mishra *ji*. Both of them are litterateurs and both talkative. Tuniya knows Muktidoot *ji* would not remember which class she studied in, how she went to school, what the name of the school was. Everybody asks kids these things, and everybody forgets. There is a friend of papa who asks her name every single time and always forgets it.

Papa's thought is that Muktidoot *ji* must also be fed after tea. Why not? It is 12 o'clock, and it will be 1:00-1:30 PM by the time they have tea.

Mummy is not back from the Saturday market. She would blabber after coming, "He has started with his parties again. If you were so interested in hosting parties you should have married a chef. She would have sat near the hearth the whole day. Come back from the market in such scorching heat and then toil to death around the gas stove."

Tuniya would make something before she arrived. But what? She does not know how to cook anything except gravy potatoes. Had *didi* been there, she would have flattered her into preparing *paneer*. *Paneer* potato gravy would have been cooked. But *didi* has left for the rehearsal.

Let it be; Tuniya will prepare the basic recipe she knows. She will not say 'no' to papa; if it turns out to be unappetising, she will say sorry. She will prepare plenty of salad. Chutney and pickles are already there. She will give it. Sweets, papa will order.

She will not leave any work for mummy. First of all, mummy will return in a tired state. Secondly, she will feel angry. If mummy likes, then Tuniya can prepare food for the whole family on a holiday. But liking is the main issue. Mummy does not like the food cooked by anyone else. Mummy has deposed many servants. One used to cook thick chapatis, and the other used to make watery gravy. She did not like one's way of cleaning and the other's sleight of hand. Mummy cooks delicious food, but to train someone is not her cup of tea. She gets frustrated.

Muktidoot *ji* came. He drank tea first. Papa forced him to eat. He calmly agreed to stay.

Tuniya made the arrangements all alone. She was speedily serving hot chapatis. She was not feeling any discomfort. Muktidoot *ji* comes after long intervals.

"Your daughter has a very good voice. Why don't you take her for a radio audition?" Muktidoot *ji* asked.

Papa began to tell with enthusiasm and pride, "She does not have time for the radio. The artists who are proven to be incompetent on stage or on TV go to the radio. Radio is for the third category of talent. She is a known stage artist. She has a show almost every day. In fact, once she also got an offer for films. It was from a very renowned producer. But as you already know, she has to go to college, too. She is always at the top of her class as well.

"Who, this Tuniya?"

"She is a nincompoop, does not know anything. That was my elder daughter, Papiha."

“No, Sahae sahib, I am talking about her, your younger daughter. She has a cultured voice. It is quite rare these days.

While fetching chapatti, Tuniya heard, “Your younger daughter...”

Tuniya could not believe it. Only *didi* has been applauded in this house. Clapping has echoed when *didi* has sung; congratulations have been received on *didi*'s dance. *Didi*'s certificates have been framed. *Didi* is great. Someone should ask Tuniya who *didi* is.

While getting a jug of water, Muktidoot *ji*'s voice fell on Tuniya's ears, “Sahae sahib, you can understand the complete personality of a person from his voice. The voice of an honest and guileless person originates from the navel, collides with the chest and comes out of the throat as a document of the collective culture. The voice of your younger daughter has all of this. Her voice is a complete chance in itself.”

Each part of Tuniya's body jangled like a sitar. Is it true? Is he saying all this for her? Oh, he jokes a lot. But he is not laughing. He does not seem to be in a joking mood. He is speaking seriously. Why would such a big litterateur lie? Maybe it is a lie. He may be making her happy or flattering papa, but he does not look like a flatterer.

She hardly spoke in front of him. He is the one who kept on talking. Did he extract this gem from those little obscure answers? Tuniya had thought that he must have regarded her as foolish and hence did not talk much.

Papa forwarded the plate of sweets in front of him while nodding his neck. Papa began his family eulogy, “Everybody's voice is very good in our family. My father's voice was also very good. When he used to sing the Ramayan, the whole colony used to come to listen to it. It used to get difficult to manage the crowd. Papiha has the best voice. Ah! If she would have been here, I would have asked her to sing.”

Tuniya is not at all concerned about this family saga. Now, the family members can ask her one lakh times to prepare tea, fetch water, and chop vegetables; nothing will bother her. What a wealth she got today! This little sentence is dancing in her ear like a *Thumri*, “Your younger daughter... your younger daughter.”

### Glossary

- a) **Sarson saag** — A nutritious curry made of mustard leaves.
- b) **Dupatta** — A long fabric worn by women of the Indian subcontinent to cover their chest and head. It is typically worn with a long shirt and tight trousers.
- c) **Laddu** — A small and round traditional Indian sweet.
- d) **Namaste** — A customary way of greeting in the Indian subcontinent and some parts of Southeast Asia in which a person's palms are joined together.
- e) **Ji** — a term of respect used along with a person's name or title in the Indian subcontinent.
- f) **Kurta-pyjama** — A traditional attire worn by men in the Indian subcontinent.
- g) **Thumri** — A vocal genre of Indian classical music.

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