

Malvika Mishra

Bhola

I always wake up when the Mangal Aarti starts at the Vishwanath Temple.

I felt the cool morning breeze caress my ears and I savored the silence. Who would believe that Dashwashmedh Ghaat could be so quiet. When I remember the number of people at the ghaats during the day; this moment of calm and silence seems surreal. The evenings are as crowded but instead of chaos, it brings calmness. As the evening sky turn from pink to pale golden and then to dark purple, people start arriving at the ghaats for the Ganga Aarti. And I stand at my usual spot at the top of the stairs to enjoy that painting of devotion and worship, every evening. I enjoy the panoramic scene of giant circling lamps, the small clouds of sweet smoke created by the incense burning in open thuribles and the reflection of several thousands of little lamps in the dark water of the Ganga. The beauty makes my eyes prick with all the brightness and glow and in these moments, I don't mind the people.

A cuckoo called out as she flew over the bank breaking the morning silence. I stared at the river, the black waters were turning grey, the sun will not be up for another hour. The head priest of the temple must have finished the aarti and waiting for me.

I tried getting up, I stretched my legs out and then supported my weight on them and then pulled myself erect. I am not too tall, but people often tell me, "Bhola, look at you, you are almost a bull!".

I don't want to think about people in these precious moments of silence. Thoughts start buzzing like annoying flies when I think about them. But, I can't escape them, can I? it's a wistful thinking, I live in Varanasi of all the cities in this world. I was born here, and I have seen thousands of people everyday of my life, people who flock the city in search of God, to worship and some even to die. I looked up and stared in the direction of Vishwanath Temple, the morning star twinkled right above the trident on the golden spire of the temple. I was named Bhola after him, the supreme one, who lives in that temple, the master of my master. People come to Kashi to worship Him, but I worship the God who looks like me. I believe he is the one who can understand me, the gate keeper to the Supreme Lord and his mount too. I bowed my head in reverence to Nandi.

As I lifted my head the bells tinkled. The head priest had put them around my neck last week on Mahasvivratri. He tied it up using a red thread and several beads and whispered, "Now you take care of it son, it's no ordinary bell, it's pure silver, not the fake germanium sold as silver these days." He then went on to put the vermilion mark on my head and offered me a laddu. One laddu? I looked at the plate he was holding, full of golden laddoos. He followed my eyes and then laughed and picked three more and stretched his palms for me. I had a violent thought of knocking the plate down with my head and then eating all the laddoos but we were standing at the temple's threshold. Even though the statue of Nandi faced the other side, I could feel his stone eyes watching me.

My sleeping neighbor turned over and coughed loudly. Sakharam and I share the same stretch of the ghaat. He has his corner and I have mine. He used his old Dhoti with several holes as a covering sheet, during winters he brings out his old blanket with several holes. I see his wild grey hair peeping from under the Dhoti stretched across his face. Every time he breathed in the thin fabric stuck to his nose and when he breathed out, that tiny stretch of fabric inflated. It was fun to watch but I soon got bored. He will sleep until

the first rays of the sun descend on the ghaats and poke his eyes through several holes of the sheet. I can't sleep that long, it's tiring, I take naps during the day though or just sit under some tree and chew on food.

I traced the path I took every day to reach the temple, the head priest waited for me with the Aarti thaal (plate). He put the vermilion on my head and circled the thaal in front of me thrice, the little lamp on the plate shifted a few centimeters to the right after every turn. I observe it everyday and wonder when it would decide to fall of the plate? The priest stretched his hand and a small "peda" sat on it. No laddoo? I was disappointed. I looked up to him and he smiled. He patted my head and said, "I know you love laddoos but a devotee offered 5kgs of peda today."

"5kgs and you are offering me one?" I smacked my lips and look at him again. He understood, and he held my ears and said, "Ok, come back in the afternoon, I will give you more." He took a banana from the plate and stuffed it in my mouth. He turned and went inside the temple and I sprawled on the floor and enjoy my breakfast.

Soon, the devotees would crowd the narrow alley of Vishwanath Gali and I would have no space to move. The sun was up, and the shopkeepers were now opening the shutters of their little shops. The flower sellers who also allowed devotees to leave their footwear outside their shops, the toy sellers, the colorful bangles and cosmetics sellers, the shops selling kutis, scarves and footwear to nomadic foreigners who dare to venture in these crowded alleys of Varanasi. It will all come alive in the next half an hour. The utter chaos, the smell of flowers, incense and hundreds of human bodies rubbing shoulders, the laughter of the young girls, the haggling between strangers and people who never ever left these alleys. It's a very lively place to be in and some days are quite entertaining.

I have my share of troubles and perks, I hate being touched but I love the sweets offered to me. When I was little, it puzzled me when people would touch my body and then touch their forehead in reverence but then I got used to it. Perhaps, they saw me in the

image of my master, perhaps faith needs a physical manifestation for that spiritual connection. And maybe it's true, after all that is how I found the feet where I wanted to offer my devotion.

Here comes the first rush, local women, for whom a dip in the Ganges and then a trip to the temple is not a thing they do once in years, it's a way of life. I know them, they all stay in the alleys adjacent to the temple. I spotted Govind's mother. She patted my back as she entered the temple. Govind must be still in bed, he will wake up when mother reaches home after the "darshan" at the temple and make him his morning tea. Govind's father was a priest who performed the rituals at the Ghaat. A tall, fair man with a quietness in his manners and speech but like every dormant volcano, he erupted on days and occasions chosen by him. Govind's father loved his son but hated the company he kept. How do I know this? He would often meet me on the ghaats, after finishing whatever rituals he performs for the "yajmaans". He would get up and start collecting the leftover offerings. His eyes would search for me and when they found me, he would stretch his hand with an apple, banana or sweetmeats. As I would lick his hand and eat, he would often repeat, "Bhola, son, you are so obedient, why can't my Govind be like you? I fear for his future? You are an incarnation of Nandi himself, ask Vishwanath Baba for a favor for my Govind. Ask him to grant my Govind some wisdom. This boy! Shiv Shiv!" And he would sway his little white cotton towel to drive the flies away.

I didn't quite understand his obsession with the future, perhaps parents worry about their children constantly but believe that the future holds some sort of relief. However, when present threatens that relief of future, they start worrying more, this time about the present and the cycle keeps continuing.

Lost in thoughts I crossed the "rabdi shop" without even looking at the huge pot of simmering milk placed right outside the shop. I stop at the shop every day to admire the dazzling white of the milk turn to pale golden as thick layers of cream formed on top of it. Somedays I would get lucky and the owner would pour some on a

leaf bowl and give it to me, on other days, he would just shoo me off. There was a pattern to it, Mondays and Thursdays were my lucky days and the rest of the week, I had to settle for just looking.

I reached the end of the alley and contemplated whether to return to the ghaat or to go looking for something to eat in the garbage corner on the other side of the street. Before I could make up my mind, I saw Govind with his group of friends, Jamaal, Zaheer, Raunak, Naresh, Paltu and others.

Jamaal and I never saw eye to eye. I hated him and no it's not something that sprung up one morning, it has been nurtured for a whole decade. I remember when we were all kids, not more than five or six, I was still big when compared to them, but Jamaal and his friends cornered me with bricks in their hands. In those tense moments I had decided, one rock in my direction and I shall charge on them.

Before they could do anything Govind came running calling out for Jamaal to stop. "We worship them, don't you know?" Govind said.

"And we eat them?" Zaheer replied as he wiped his running nose.

Govind looked at Jamaal and he threw the rock in his hand. His friends stood frozen for a few seconds before following suit.

"Only for you." Jamaal looked at Govind and said.

But, he did turn towards me and made a gesture of cutting my legs, and then smacked his lips indicating, they would taste very good. I wanted to use my horns and throw him off his legs and crush him with my hooves. It would have taken less than a minute to accomplish all this. But, little Govind walked up to me and took out a laddoo from the pockets of his pant and held it in front of my mouth. Sweets have been my weakness and once I smell them, everything else becomes a whole lot less important. I looked at Govind and opened my mouth. The motichoor laddu melted in my mouth and my eyes closed for a second in pleasure. When I opened

them, the boys had all disappeared and all I could hear was the slapping of the rubber slippers on the stone floor of the alley.

“Why is he following us now?” Jamaal spoke.

I started walking behind them, lost in thoughts.

“Forget about him, are we ready with everything?” Govind asked.

“Yes!” Jamaal spoke. “I got everything on the list. Where are you going to prepare the stuff?” He asked.

“The mango grove, behind the maidaan.” Govind spoke.

I was very curious. What are they going to do? What are they making, why aren't they doing it in their house? Is this what Govind's father keeps lamenting about? Is Govind in trouble? I decided I owed this to his father and so I walked behind them all the way.

Once they reached the grove, Govind looked around and pointed at a tree. “Under this one.” He said.

I was still confused but tired from all the walking, I folded my legs and sat on the dry muddy ground with a thud. Jamaal threw me a look and Zaheer slapped his forehead. I ignored them, I had to see what they were up to. You can never be sure about the young people these days, all I hope for them is to not make a bomb to blow us all up. I still had to go back to the temple for my promised laddoos.

Govind pulled out a clay stove from behind the tree and started making a fire. He was on his all four and blew with a pipe into the hot coals. Naresh arrived drenched in sweat, he carried a huge degchi on the cycle carrier.

“It's heavy.” He wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead and slumped on the ground in one big heap.

“Alright, so here are the spices and the chicken. Are you sure you know the recipe?” Jamaal looked at Govind and asked.

“You are looking at the next big chef of this country, I don’t need recipe, I will write one.” Govind puffed up his chest and said.

“Chef, huh! We’ll see.” Jamaal sat and lighted a cigarette while Zaheer pulled out a beer.

“And what if Pandit ji finds out that his brilliant son is not preparing to enter some prestigious engineering college but learning to become a cook?” Zaheer gulped down some beer and wiped the trickle with his sleeve.

“Chef and not some small time cook.” Govind replied as he threw an onion at him and gestured to chop the small heap lying on the plate.

And in that moment, I knew what they were doing. Govind is not supposed to be cooking or eating meat and Jamaal, Zaheer and others shouldn’t be drinking.

“What about him? When are we going to eat him?” Jamaal pointed towards me and asked.

“You better shut your mouth. You know times are changing. If an outsider hears it, you will be in deep trouble my friend.” Govind jested and they all laughed.

The sun was right above the trees and their banter bored me. I stretched my legs to get up when Jamaal said, “Leaving already Nandi Maharaj?”

Sometimes I just wish to end this for once and forever, a sway of head was enough to silence him for all eternity. Oh wait, did I mention, my very pointy horns can tear him to pieces in no time. But, I don’t give in to these cruel urges, they are just words after all, taunting, cruel, heartless but only words. I can’t succumb to words, what would Master say?

I left them to their business and walked back towards the temple in the afternoon heat with the sun riding my back. I stopped at the garbage corner to hunt for vegetables. The small vegetable vendors dump their old stuff by early afternoon, I was hoping to find

something to fill myself with. I wasn't disappointed, a not so old cauliflower, carrots, two hands of over ripe bananas. I had a feast.

I went back to the ghaat and sat under one of the big umbrellas. It was hot, but I was used to it, the best part was there were very few people around. Sakharam must be out there somewhere trying to earn his day's meal. Somedays he acted as a porter and somedays washed utensils at one of the Bhojnalayas in lieu of food. I have never heard him complain about anything in the last ten years, all the time I have known him. He drew quite a contrast to Pandit Jee, Govind's father. Sakharam is more like me, he earns his bread, praises God and sleeps like those dead bodies at Manikarnika ghaat. The only difference was I didn't have to earn my bread, I accepted whatever came my way, perhaps, it was the difference between a man and animal.

The Sun God was in no mood for mercy but like always, mother came to the rescue. Ganga, you truly are the only mother I have known. I thought as I breathed in the cool breeze coming from the river. The soft slushing sound lulled me to sleep and by the time I woke up, it was time for the evening aarti.

"Elections are inching closer. I hear there is a bandh tomorrow." I heard someone speak as they climbed the stairs of the ghaat.

Bandh, a closedown; again. I hated bandhs, it meant, the shops will not open, there will be no visitors at the temple and the vegetable market won't open. I might go hungry again. I cursed myself for not going back to the temple in the afternoon for my Pedas. I dare not enter the Vishwanath gali now, it must be teeming with people.

I came back to my spot and waited for Sakharam. He came back quite late and carried something wrapped in the newspaper. I eyed the newspaper and licked my mouth and nose.

"Idli...eat." He placed about ten idlis in front of me and sat next to them.

I set to work immediately. I loved them though I would have preferred something sweeter. After I was done, I looked at him with grateful eyes. I knew both of us might have to go hungry tomorrow. The sky turned purple and so did the water, the cool “Purvaiyya” the breeze from the east placed its fingers on my eyes and I fell asleep in no time.

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I woke up at my usual hour and wasted no time on the ghaat. I hurried towards the temple and hoped that the head priest would give me something more than a few sweetmeats. He was still performing the Aarti when I reached the gates of the temple. I waited outside, the temple was awfully quiet, even the regulars were missing. The head priest came out and performed the ritual, circled the plate with the lamp thrice, the lamp moved a few centimeters and then a put the vermilion on my forehead. I looked at the Puja plate and wondered where were the usual offering of fruits and sweets? The head priest picked up a couple of large mishri (sugar crystals) and looked at me apologetically.

“You will have to do with this son, today is not the day.” He said.

I shook my head in frustration and the bells tinkled.

“Come back in the evening. For now, you may find something outside the vegetable market.” He stroked my head in understanding and said.

I bit hard on those sugar crystals and absolute unadulterated sweetness filled my mouth. I was angry, but I enjoyed that momentary pleasure. But, it wasn’t enough, I will have to go check my garbage corner. I rushed out of the alley in full force and I could hear the strong rhythm of my own hooves, rushing past the closed shops and the occasional open ones.

I reached the garbage corner and as I had feared the shopkeepers had not dumped their unused vegetables today. The entire mandi (market) was shut, not even push kart sellers were around. A crow

croaked in disappointment as it flew over the garbage heap, I guess, nothing for him too. I found days old sour dough, skin of fruits, dry rubbish but nothing to eat. I decided to head back to the ghaat and wait for Sakharam to return from work. Perhaps he would get something in the evening.

I went back to the ghaat, filled my stomach with water from the river and found a cool shady place to settle down. The day seemed to crawl. I struggled to remember if there were so many flies on the ghaat every day or today was something special for they came in batches to trouble me. I could barely sit in peace for few minutes at a stretch. Finally, I was so exhausted that I dozed off, despite of them still hovering over my back and behind my ears.

When I did wake up, it was time for the evening aarti. There were only a few people, the priest wrapped it up rather quickly. Sakharam was still away and my stomach twisted itself in protest. I was ravenous, and I needed to eat something, quick. I felt weak as I pulled myself up in standing position, but I had to go look for food. I had neither patience nor energy to climb up the Vishwanath gullee and visit the temple. I did not want to risk eating sugar crystals again. The darkness enveloped the evening and the stars twinkled in the quiet Varanasi sky. I swear I could see some in my head. I headed towards the garbage corner and desperately hoped somebody threw something that I could eat.

As I approached, I saw the silhouette of someone walking towards the heap to dispose off something. I quickened my pace and walked up to the person and as I quietly accosted him, I saw myself staring at Jamaal. He had a black plastic bag in his hand and he was about to toss it on the garbage heap.

As he looked up he saw me and said, “Oh, Bhola, it’s you!”

I lead out a large sigh and shook my head. My eyes were fixed on the black plastic bag that he carried in his hand, I could smell jaggery.

Jamaal followed my eyes and realized what I had in mind. He stretched his hand away from his body and swayed his other hand in front of me signaling me to not move any further.

He said, “No Bhola, you can’t eat this, Govind has messed up this new recipe, it’s going to stick all over your teeth.”

But I, who was hungry since the night before, had stopped looking or listening to anything else. My whole focus was on that plastic bag and I felt an urgent churning in my stomach and the sweet smell of warm jaggery robbed me off my power to think. My legs followed my nose and I did not realize I had scared Jamaal, he threw the plastic bag and sprinted away in some dark alley. I found the bag and tore it with my teeth and opened my mouth wide and took a mouthful of whatever was inside that bag. The jaggery was warm but not liquid so my whole mouth was filled with the semi solid sticky jaggery while the rest of the plastic bag dangled at the tip of my nose. I shook my head vigorously, not knowing what else to do and the plastic bag now covered my nose. Even before the relief of finding food could fill me I was gasping for breath. I could not open my mouth to cry for help and so I grunted as hard as I could. And as I heard my distressed voice, complete panic gripped me and bellowed hard from the pit of my stomach and kept repeating it. I shook my head fast, sideways and upwards and downwards to get the plastic bag out but to no avail.

Within a few minutes I saw people gathering and in no time a small crowd surrounded me from all sides. The sun had gone down quite a while ago, but the streetlight was out. They all looked at me puzzled and kept asking each other what happened until someone pulled out a torch light and shone at me.

“It’s our Bhola.” Someone said and added, “There’s something stuck on his mouth.”

“I saw Jamaal give something to Bhola.” Someone else quipped in.

All I wanted was one of these morons to come and help me instead of dissecting the what, how and who of the situation.

I heard Govind's father's voice, "First rescue the poor animal. We will talk about this later."

As someone pulled the plastic bag away from my nose and pried it out of my mouth, I breathed again. I took big gulps of cool night air and as I lifted my head I saw Govind and Jamaal standing in front of me.

The crowd had spotted them earlier and the same voice which had dutifully informed the crowd that it was Jamaal who had fed me that plastic bag, spoke again.

"Jamaal is here, catch hold of him before he runs away. I have often seen him staring at Bhola with evil intentions clouding his eyes. Ask Govind, he knows, Jamaal wants to take Bhola to the butchers."

"Yes yes, let's teach them a lesson. It's about time the likes of him are reminded of their position in this city. If not now, then when? Another insane voice added.

I could sense the mood of the crowd, they were being stirred up to act, perhaps violently.

I looked at Govind, he bowed his head and took several steps in reverse. Why isn't he stopping them? I was confused. After all his secret was a huge price to pay for Jamaal's life.

The crowd was closing in and one man stepped forward to grab Jamaal's hand. I could no longer stand there and let this happen. I walked up and stood in front of Jamaal. I grunted softly warning them, but these morons interpreted it wrong again.

One of them said, "Today Lord Nandi is going to do justice. Bhola is going to take his own revenge."

Had I been a human, I would have slammed my head with both my hands at their foolishness but all I could do as a bull was to inhale sharply.

It took them a couple of minutes to understand I was shielding Jamaal. Pandit ji was the first one to notice.

“Move aside. Bhola is protecting Jamaal. He has done anything to harm the animal.” He instructed the crowd.

He came closer to me and examined my mouth.

“It’s jaggery.” He spoke softly.

“Govind, you took all the jaggery from the house in the afternoon, your mother was looking for some to put in the curd.” He addressed his son.

“Did you do this? Were you trying to kill the poor animal?” He asked his son again.

The crowd shifted its focus on to Govind and expected him to answer his small frail old man.

Govind crumpled under the pressure of so many eyes, “I was making a sweet. Jamaal has done nothing. It was a mistake, I burnt the jaggery and Jamaal just came to throw the bag but Bhola snatched it from his hands and.....”

“You were doing what? I thought you were out for the math tuitions.” Govind’s father exclaimed.

“Father, I do not want to study, I don’t want to become an engineer, I want to become a chef.” Govind finally found the courage to speak his truth.

Govind’s father opened his mouth to say something but no words came out. The crowd however began murmuring.

“Cook, a priest’s boy will cook.” Somebody spoke, and then one person laughed, and another joined and soon the rest of them joined in.

The crowd laughed, and I sighed relief.

Malvika Mishra completed a Fiction Writing workshop at the Princeton Adult School in 2016. She has been published online on prestigious writing platforms like Juggernaut and Readomania. Her debut novel "A Vintage Tale" is now available on all the leading online retail platforms.

As a writer Malvika blends in modern sensibilities with traditional storytelling formats, thus exploring literary fiction with a fresh perspective. She is a Vintage aficionado which also reflects in the genre she loves to write in-- Historical Fiction. After spending the last few years in USA, she now lives in Bangalore with her family.

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