

THE WIDOW OF VRINDAVAN

SHE WOKE UP feeling dizzy. Waves of intense pain coursed through her body. Her wide-open, bloodshot eyes held a deep, stony stillness and the swell of unshed tears and horrible images oppressed her body. She rose slowly from the ground, trying desperately to cover herself with her tattered clothing. Staving off the waves of giddiness, she tried to figure out where she was. The room in which she found herself was dark and discoloured with smoke-stained walls and no windows, so there was no question of fresh air. There was just one door with a rusted hinge, its cracked shutter dangling. She was not sure whether it was open or shut. Trying to dispel the blankness from her mind she began the process of returning to herself. Still she could muster no immediate recollection of where she was. She dimly recalled a two day train journey with no idea of where it had brought her.

What place is this? What city? And why am I here? Not one letter or name lent itself to her mind.

She looked around and noticed a few bundled up shapes lying this way and that on the floor beside her. Who were these people? Sleeping right next to her was the tallish, dark woman of the night before; beside her was another, her body trembling from head to toe. Who are these women? How am I connected to them? She rummaged through the pitiful bundle with her which contained the four saris she possessed. But it wasn't a sari she was looking for. She was rummaging through the bundle for the blue notebook in which she

used to write now and then. The blue notebook, which was a chronicle of her experiences.

A wave of dizziness came over her again and she felt faint. Raising herself unsteadily from the floor, she leaned against the wall for a moment and then staggered to the door pushing it open and stepping outside. The fresh air revived her. She found herself in a long corridor that led to a courtyard with a water tap in one corner. The courtyard was littered with trash. The piles of garbage on the broken floor seemed to mock her. The corridor was empty but soon a woman emerged from nowhere, out of some mysterious corner, and going straight to the tap began to bathe under it. She straightened on seeing Tapasi.

‘Oho! It is you—the new arrival! You haven’t been spared by her, I can see.’ The woman snickered baring dirty teeth. Tapasi wondered how to respond to the woman. She felt as if she had just woken from a long, drugged sleep, as if she had been jolted awake from a relentless nightmare. And her body? Her body felt like a stick of sugarcane from which the last drops of juice had been squeezed.

She looked around and watched a clear blue dawn break over the tiled roof of the ramshackle building. She had not seen the morning in a long time. The sight of the sun peering from behind a tree energized her. There were other women at the tap now. They made room for her. ‘Come, take a bath,’ one of them said encouragingly. Wrapping her torn sari closer, Tapasi walked up to the water tap and doused her face. As her vision cleared she noticed that clumps of hair had been yanked out of her head, her arms were bruised blue and there were teeth marks, lesions and scratches all

over her body. Are these people cannibals? What place is this? What am I doing here?

Tapasi sat under the flowing tap. She did not care if the water was hot or cold, or what season it was. Wasn't it enough that her body was getting cleansed? There is something about water that not only cleanses the body but revitalizes it too.

The first bather returned dressed in a white sari bordered with black. 'Enough bathing now,' she said. 'You have used up too much water, the others have to bathe too.'

'Yes, of course.' Tapasi left the tap and started to take out a not too clean sari from her bundle when the woman handed her a coarse white sari with a black border, similar to the one she was wearing. 'Here, wear this.'

Pushing her wet hair off her forehead, Tapasi wiped her tresses with the torn sari she had taken off. Then, not knowing where to go, she crossed the veranda and entered a room. It was cold. Stale, musty air pervaded it. A low-powered bulb gave off a faint, dim light that seemed to mock the gloom. A few women stood around chatting among themselves. The black-skinned woman from the night before, the one who had lain next to her, stood facing them. She was talking loudly and her abrasive words were like hot, molten glass poured into Tapasi's ears. Her conduct of the night before flashed through Tapasi's mind. She took in the shaven heads and terrified faces of the other women and wondered if she was in hell. Are these people humans, cannibals, demons or some other species? Each pore of Tapasi's body exhorted her to retreat and run home. What will become

of me here? Is being a widow and being banished from my world not bad enough? Surely the thinking in my hometown is not that backward, surely my people don't have *such* stunted minds. But then why am I here? Tapasi touched a hand to her damp hair. Surrounded by so many women with shaven heads, her long hair made her stand out. Quickly she pulled her sari pallu over her head.

The women had lined up now and one of them was handing out glasses of tea. Tapasi too was handed a stainless steel tumbler of hot tea. She could not remember when she had had her last meal and gulped down the tea quickly. The women began to sing a bhajan.

'Mere to giridhar gopal doosra na koi.'

(Girdhar Gopal is my only true love)

The words of the song transported Tapasi to the Magh Mela of Bolepur. To the morning session of the music concert. And Jatin Da.

'Jaa ke sir mormukut mero pati soi.'

(The one who wears a peacock plume coronet is my husband).

Husband? thought Tapasi. What is this thing called 'husband'? What a filthy trick it had been. That man who called himself my 'husband', barged into my life when I'd been happily engrossed in school, with only a burning desire to learn more and make something of my life.

Her reverie was broken by a middle-aged woman who poked her with a stick. 'Hey stand straight!' she admonished. Then she opened a register of sorts and barked, 'What is your name?'

'Taposhi.'

‘Say “Tapasi” not “Taposhi”. I don’t know why you Bengali dames roll each word around in your mouths. Are you a widow, Tapasi?’

‘Yes.’ Tapasi wondered if she was a policewoman. She had never seen a policewoman before.

She entered her name in the register. Village—Bolepur, West Bengal. Husband’s name? What was his name? Oh, yes—Naren Majumdar. He’d died some time ago. How could he have lived anyway, in such poor health and with such an acute shortness of breath? She’d been a widow for a while now. She’d been married to him for a year, maybe two. Vermilion in the parting of her hair, a shell bangle on her arm, a coloured sari. That is all he’d given her though he’d given a lot more to Kaka in exchange for her. And what had she given him? Her body, her studies, her future and her dreams.

‘If you are a widow then how come they have not tonsured your hair yet? Come on, move forward. You better learn the rules and regulations of this place, you hear me?’

The bhajan ended. The women were each handed two rotis and a muddy looking cooked vegetable wrapped in paper. Hunger knows no discrimination. Tapasi’s fingers were accustomed to handling rice and she found it difficult to tackle the rotis, yet her appetite was stimulated. She could not remember when she had eaten last.

‘May I have some more?’ Tapasi put out her hand.

The collective whoop of laughter startled her. They were all looking at her. The baton-wielding senior glared at them. ‘Silence!’ she shouted. Then turning to Tapasi, she said, ‘You silly fool! This is all the food

you'll get each day. Move on, everybody. Time to go to the temple. Whose turn is it today?'

As the women began to file out of the room, one of them quietly placed half a roti on Tapasi's upturned palm and said gently, 'Here, eat it. And come with me. I'll explain everything to you.'

Tapasi shoved the roti into her mouth and wolfed it down. She had a drink of water from the tap and began to follow the others not knowing where she was going. As if only her shadow self, and not she, were moving. So where am I? Who am I? Taposhi? Or Tapasi?

Stepping out of the building, Tapasi read the board on the outer gate. 'Sri RadhaKrishna Vidhwa Ashram'. Radha and Krishna were lovers. An ashram for widows named after the divine lovers? Wasn't that incongruous? Jatin Da used to say, 'You ask too many questions. Your name should have been Prashna instead of Taposhi...Prashna, The one who asks Questions!'

Picking her way through a stinking narrow alley, she finally asked, 'What place is this?'

'It is Vrindavan. Don't you know?' The woman walking beside her said.

'Why am I here?'

‘It is the abode of God. Widows who reside here attain Paradise. Those who live here are absolved of the sins of all their past and future births.’

Tapasi looked at the filth all around and read the signboards on the streets and crossings. ‘Radha Krishna Chowk’, ‘Gokul Dham’, ‘Raghav Halwai’, ‘Badri Gaushala’. Guru Dada had told her that Paradise was the place where God resided. Could this be that place?

They stopped—the whole jingbang. The doors of the temple in front of them opened. Now they were all kneeling to touch their foreheads to the threshold of the temple which had been blunted by the touch and friction of countless heads over the decades. Now they were entering the temple. A chessboard courtyard stretched out before them. Tapasi felt giddy and the black and white tiles merged with each other.

They entered a large room where other women, dressed like them in white saris, were straightening up from the threadbare dhurries on the floor. The newcomers took their place. Tapasi was astonished by the exquisite beauty of the idols. Yes, I recognize them. Lord Krishna and Radhika. The idols were breathtaking. They’re the same as the Gods in the picture calendar in Dada’s house! A winsome couple with smiling faces, their figures inclining towards each other; a captivating attitude, an unsurpassable charm.

Dressed in yellow kurtas and white dhotis, a couple of pandits with tilaks of sandalwood paste and roli on their foreheads and a long tuft of hair dangling from their otherwise tonsured heads, bustled about the temple. They anointed the idols with milk, curd, honey, ghee, water and sandalwood paste amidst the chanting of

mantras. Then they bathed the idols with water from a huge vessel. After wiping the idols dry with a clean towel, the priests began to dress them. Decked in silver and gold jewellery and adorned with flowers, the enchanting idols seemed to smile serenely at the devotees. It was Tapasi's first exposure to so much beauty, to dresses and jewellery as splendid as these. She was captivated. She was reminded of the temple of Ma Kaliat Bolepur where she had never quite got a proper look at the idol of the Goddess because of its dazzling brilliance—indeed, it had been quite impossible for a frail girl like her to gaze intently at Ma Kali's idol. Of course she had worshipped idols of the Goddess, but those had been ones which had been created only to be immersed during the puja festival. Never had she seen such beauty nor been as enchanted as she was now.

Besides, Rakhal Kaka had had no truck with God. His entire existence revolved around a meal of jhol, bhat and salt followed by work—a tired body drenched in perspiration, and then drowned in toddy. She'd grown up unmindful of His presence, going about her household chores, attending school and curling up to sleep in a corner of the house at night. Her only exposure to God and the universe He'd created was through her books or the morning prayer, the *Vaitalik*, at school.

Other than this, she learnt about God through her conversations with Jatin Da and Kanika Didi. Jatin Da often said, '*Manusher monchay manuseri mon.*' (The human heart longs for human intimacy).

'And how about God?' She would ask.

‘God is a presence in whom we have faith. We don’t position our faith in the material world because it is tangible as well as changeable. But God is permanent. We all, including you Taposhi, are Hindus. All you should do is to have faith in God. Try to know him. God is wisdom to us.’

Kanika Didi would laugh at such conversations. She would say, ‘You make such sage utterances in front of a young girl like her! She is like an uncut rock that needs to be chiselled and polished.’

And now, sitting there in that temple it was as if the rock was melting by degrees. She remembered reading, ‘The earth, the sky and man are all contained in God.’ In which case the idols too were deities incarnate. Time past began to dissolve into time present. A wondrous entirely new feeling stirred her heart.

The spell was broken when the woman sitting next to her handed her a tiny pair of cymbals tied together with a piece of string. Flustered, Tapasi said, ‘But I don’t know how to play them!’ Her shrill protest echoed through the silence of the temple. People turned and stared at her. The black-skinned woman muttered something and scowled darkly. Terrified, Tapasi lost her voice and sat with her eyes closed. Then the musical instruments came alive and enveloped in the fragrance of burning incense the melodious chanting of mantras commenced. Tapasi tentatively struck the cymbals together.

Sri Radhey Gobinda man bhajle, Sri Radhey Gobinda.

The cymbals in her hand settled into the beat. A slight tremor played on her lips. The sequence of bhajans continued unbroken. Tapasi lost

herself in the music. She had a sense of something melting and evaporating within her. Oblivion gave her a feeling of even greater hollowness than the one she was accustomed to, as if she was not a body but an earthen pitcher, empty of all water. She lost all sense of time.

The women were getting up from their places. Still lightheaded, Tapasi had barely stood up when a woman snatched the cymbals from her hands and sat down in the place vacated by her. Her group came out of the temple just as another waiting outside began to enter the hall. Tapasi was tired. Her compatriots looked exhausted, almost half dead. She turned to look back and saw that the other party had already commenced their jaap of *Sri Radhey Gobinda*. She thought that the idol of Radha, sitting calmly earlier, was now smiling softly. The pearl drop in her nose ring seemed to sway gently. Why does God want to listen to His name being chanted all the time and that too from the tongues of these pathetic, crushed, broken and banished widows? Questions again, she thought, but more than questions, her body was in the grip of exhaustion. She was about to pass out when two women steadied her and helped her sit on the floor. She felt light. Can people hold up a shadow? When she opened her eyes, she saw the black-skinned woman sprinkling water on her face. She held the lota to her mouth and Tapasi drank thirstily from it.

What is your name? You are so weak. You faint again and again.'

'What is in a name?' ventured Tapasi.

‘Tell me now or I’ll ask you at night.’ The woman laughed crudely.

The night—that frightful night—flashed in front of Tapasi’s eyes. The long journey, over two days and nights, at the end of which a retainer of the Majumdar clan had pushed her through the door of the ashram and disappeared, had left her feeling hollow. She’d been hungry and thirsty and thoroughly fatigued. Unable to make sense of the recent upheavals in her life she had sat down helplessly. At length she’d stretched on the floor and, resting her head on the small bundle she was carrying, had fallen into a troubled sleep, only to be woken with a start, to the prickly feel of a pair of hands groping and fondling her. In the half darkness of the room she had seen a black woman bending over her. Her sari had been pushed up round her thighs and the woman was stretched over her like an evil spirit. Tapasi had shouted and screamed but the other women in the room had watched impassively. The teeth of the aggressor, accompanied by stinking saliva drooling from her mouth, bruised and stamped Tapasi’s body. It was difficult to believe that one woman could send another into such a state of physical resistance and protest that the latter lost consciousness.

Dark shadows of fear began to surround Tapasi once again. She felt a sinking sensation. As if she was drowning within herself. When she’d been on the train, a couple of women had told her that God resided in Kashi and Vrindavan. They’d said that these were holy places where widows found peace—where sins were washed away. Where they would attain salvation. That was why she was being sent to Vrindavan to pray and worship. So this is the seat of God? How

much more tyranny must I endure and for how long? She did not know.

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