Mullawan Mayi Escaped and Will Get Revenge from the King

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The narrow-gauge train does not stop at Mullawan Mayi. Of course, someone watching might think it slows down when it reaches that three or four hundred yard long strip of land. But that would be a mistake. The train stops about two miles from there at Mullawan Khas. It may well be that at Mullawan Mayi the train begins to prepare for stopping. It always blows its whistle when it reaches that level strip – two short sounds, then a long, high-pitched one. People say it's invoking Mullawan Mayi's name, its neck raised skyward, taking a long, deep breath.

Mullawan Khas is the official name. Mullawan Mayi, too, is not that place's original name. The Mullawan Mayi of today, or its dilapidated ruins, is where Mullawan had established her settlement. That place now is devastated, its door frames torn up, it's razed mud walls holding their black, rotting, bamboo poles; and not too far from there, on the other side, the main building, too, is just a heap of crushed walls and scattered bricks.

People say that milk-giving beasts never wander among those ruins. Yet on Monday evenings, outside the ruins, on the level land right next to the railroad tracks, a group of women gathers. They remain there until after the sun sets, then they scatter, each in her own direction.

Every Monday, when the sun begins to set, the women slowly become visible out of the mysterious haze caused by the dust and the trees in the vicinity. They all sing the same song. But for a long time, instead of the song, the area there is filled with the buzz of indistinct, wild sounds, as if the wind were hissing, caught in a clump of bamboo, or as if a snake charmer were blowing his flute.

The song of the women floats in from a number of directions and gathers on a very small platform built on the middle of that flat strip of land.

It's a strange song:

Usoor Dahnuv wrote Sheetala Mayi a letter,
I will marry thee.
Sheetala Mayi sent a letter to Usoor Dahnuv,
I shall destroy thee, if thou shouldst try.
Usoor Dahnuv came with an army
of forty-nine horse and fifty elephant.
The Goddess held her sword and shield.
Fighting ferociously, the Goddess entered the temple.
Usoor died. O glorious Goddess, O Sheetala Mayi . . .

The women sing, in a high key, but each at her own tempo. So it's not at all

like choral singing. Far off somewhere hordes of swords always clashing against each other: that's what it sounds like. As twilight ends, this sword-clashing sound begins to dissipate, and until the last woman disappears, the sound that's like the whistling of the wind in the bamboo can still be heard.

It's possible that someone like me thinks every village is a little unusual, but Mullawan is certainly so; it can't be called natural at all. I found the nights there quite a bit darker than elsewhere, almost congealed. And the people were dried up and silent, like oil lamps without their oil.

I realize now that Rameshwar babu must have had the same constitution as all the other villagers. I had always thought he was just laconic. He rarely spoke more than just a few words. Even in heated meetings of the Executive or the National Committee, he uttered a sentence or two only when it was absolutely necessary. Often I've taken long trips with him, but I never found him eager for conversation.

He was Vice President of the National Union and the Director of the Local Union of Level-Four Workers. His members had blind faith in him. Once he had been pressed to make a speech at one of the members' meetings. I still remember that speech, because he used only four short sentences.

Suddenly I realized why he was so reticent. The environment instilled it in him.

Lying on his cot, this time, too, he was just as laconic. All morning he had spoken only three times, in sentences that, as usual, were more like signals than expressions. When I came, he greeted me from his supine position and then

asked, “All well there?”

I briefly told him the status of the Union. He listened, silently. Nothing else.

Despite the weakness apparent on his face from being beaten like a thick sheet of copper by a man in a hurry with a marked mallett, his tight grin was there as usual. He saw me fidgeting and asked slowly, “Hot?”

It was hot there. Since the air didn’t move, it was stuffy, and I felt a little uncomfortable. Nonetheless, I tried as hard as I could not to let it show.

This was the third time I had come to Mullawan, without any plan to do so. All three trips had occurred more or less on the spur of the moment. If I believed in fate, however, by now I would have certainly been convinced that Mullawan Mayi had had a hand in the arrangement of them.

The first time I came to Mullawan Khas was for the wedding of Rameshwar babu’s daughter. In my entire life I had never witnessed such a quiet and sad ceremony. No effort at all had been made to decorate the place or provide extra lights. The only thing that indicated there was a wedding were too small clay oil lamps on some swallowwort leaves, each placed on either side of the outer door. And there wasn’t a note of music of any kind whatsoever.

I wanted to watch the wedding ceremony, and for that it was necessary to stay awake all night. Rameshwar, though, was convinced that, being a city-dweller, I wouldn’t be able to stay awake like that, and being accustomed to a ceiling fan, I wouldn’t be able to sleep there without a breeze. In his few words he decided courteously, but irrevocably, that after dinner I would go to sleep. It was impossible to stop him. A new, handwoven sheet was spread on a cot for me.

And the pillow was there, covered by the sheet. My habit, when sleeping, is to lie on my side and use the pillow doubled over. I pulled the sheet back off the pillow. They had purposely covered it with the sheet. It wasn't very clean. I covered it up just as it was and lay down. Then a man came, stood at the head of the cot, and began to wave a fan for me. I wasn't pleased, but my objection had no effect on him. It was clear he would never disobey an order from Rameshwar.

Due to the presence of that stranger fanning me, and because of the disgusting state of the pillow, sleep did not come easily.

In the web of stars glistening brightly in the dark blue sky, tiny bats were flying and tumbling. When I was a boy, I used to throw a cloth up toward bats that were flying like that, and one of them would pounce upon it and come down trapped in it.

When I knew I wouldn't be able to fall asleep for a while, I began feeling uneasy, so I tried to occupy my mind with other things. The silence engraved on Rameshwar's face was on everyone's face throughout Mullawan. Yet below, in some corner of the house, without the usual accompaniment of drum and finger cymbals, some women were singing a most unusual song in strange, hushed, and sad faces:

Eat, eat, eat yogurt and rice.
Thy daughter shall take leave
at the first watch of night.
O Mother mine, always didst thou feed Brother
with much happiness, and in anger

didst thou give me to eat. O Mother mine,
Brother and I were born at one and the same time,
and as one we played, but to Brother you granted
Father's kingdom, to me a husband so far away.
O Mother mine, now happily eat yogurt and rice.

While listening to such a sorrowful song in the midst of such an oppressive silence, I must have fallen asleep for a while, for when I looked skyward a second time, the stars seem to be covered with haze. And below, there was only the sound of a pot being scoured. The man at the head of the cot was standing there as before, fanning me.

I felt an itching and burning sensation on my ankles and around my toes. A lot of mosquitoes had probably taken advantage of my drowsiness.

What I had thought was haze spread out over the stars was in fact the first glimmer of dawn. The itching became too much. I sat up.

The man at the head of the cot stopped waving the fan, looked at me, and then went downstairs.

At that time Rameshwar was in fact eating yogurt and rice and, contrary to his nature, with much relish. His daughter had already departed. But during the night?

Except for some small, soiled rugs, some flower petals, some pots scattered around on the veranda, and a few fresh clay oil lamps, there was no sign at all a wedding had taken place there — no arch, no altar, and no gas lamps. Everything had taken place in the light of a few lanterns now dead cold.

As the daylight grew, I was bubbling with questions about this peculiar wedding ritual. Despite my shyness, I asked Rameshwar babu a number of questions in order to learn more about what had happened. Many of my questions depended on each other, and he listened to all of them at once, and as always, he looked right at me and grinned the whole time. Then, in his Morse-code-like manner, he gave a very unsatisfactory response.

A cruel custom had been current for a time in Mullawan. After her wedding, every girl from Mullawan had to spend her wedding night with the King. No one knows how long the King thus kept receiving the sedan chair. Once, though, one girl suddenly refused. In a battle with the King's army, the groom and his party were slain, and the newly-wed girl committed sattee.

Because of that girl's curse, the royal family was destroyed. Since those days, the villagers began the custom of marrying their daughters quietly, almost stealthily.

"You believe all this, too?" I asked in response, trying to hold down my own amazement.

"Yes."

"But now there's no King!"

In response he looked at me as always with that tight grin of his, and that was all. I don't know why, but for several days after that, I always felt uneasy looking at Rameshwar babu, as if I were wandering in a strange jungle. Or perhaps something else.

My second trip to Mullawan occurred under very bad circumstances. Those

days our Union was in serious trouble. Some people had set up a parallel organization, and a sign of its success was that the Government had begun discussing the workers' problems with them. In opposition to this, we had decided to picket and hold a large demonstration at the home of the Minister. Three days before the demonstration, Rameshwar babu had disappeared. I didn't express it, but I felt that non-Union matters were involved in his absence. Rameshwar was not only our greatest strength, he was our self-confidence as well. But there was nothing I could do. The demonstration had to go on.

At the exact moment when we began chanting the first slogan before the Minister's home, and when I had become so nervous that I was about to go into a rage, Rameshwar showed up.

He immediately became so busy I was unable to inquire about his absence. Among the preparations that the people had forgotten was to set up a raised platform from which the leaders could give their speeches. While the first slogans were being chanted, Rameshwar babu put two bicycles together, and with some boards and short sticks he made a usable platform.

When the demonstration was over, I took the very first opportunity to confront him: "Where have you been for three days? Everything here was falling apart!"

Rameshwar didn't answer. He just looked at me with his thin smile, an engraving on a stone, and pointed to a car across the street. Beside myself, and glaring at him, I asked, "What's there?"

"Must go."

"Must go where? What's the problem?"

My questions were useless. He wasn't going to say anything else. When he pointed the second time, all I could do was go and sit in the car across the street. I knew the driver; he was the Union Secretary. The car, though, was not one of the department's. I thought an accident may have happened to a worker in the powerhouse, but the car didn't go to the powerhouse. It went around behind the District Hospital and it stopped across from a small, rather isolated building — the morgue. Then all my inferences proved to be entirely wrong, and it was my turn to be ashamed.

Rameshwar's wife had been pregnant. During the birth, some complications had arisen, so he had brought her to the hospital. But there, too, they could do nothing for her. She died along with the baby, and that morning, instead of taking her back to Mullawan, Rameshwar had put her in the morgue. Because of all this, he was a little late for the demonstration.

Can you imagine a husband like that, one who is attached to his family and yet leaves his wife in the morgue so that he can take part in a demonstration, and his face doesn't crack a bit? And when you criticize him for being late, he puts on his usual, stony grin and acts ashamed in order to satisfy you? A man like that is terrifying. For several days after that, I was haunted by the sight of him in the entryway to the morgue, carefully wrapping his wife's body in a white shroud.

That stony grin continued to adhere to Rameshwar babu's face while the car made its way with the corpse to Mullawan and while preparations were made for the cremation, but when he lit the funeral pyre, that smile suddenly disappeared. The light of the sun at that time had become a yellowish black. In that smoky

light and the glow of the funeral pyre, I noticed that Rameshwar babu's stony smile had vanished, and in its place was something like a fistful of ashes, as if a haystack had burned down and just the ashes were left, glimmering but colorless. It was a frightening experience to witness the vanishing of that petrified grin. You, too, would have felt for a moment as if that grin of Rameshwar's had absconded, and while he was lighting his wife's funeral pyre, it was elsewhere setting fire to something.

That had been my second trip to Mullawan. That time I was unable to go to Mullawan Mayi. There wasn't time. After the death of Rameshwar babu's wife, the stillness in Mullawan grew even greater. The next day wasn't a Monday, but as I was going to the station to catch the train, I noticed that a group of women was ripping apart the withered layers of silence and was gathering, singing:

Usoor Dahnuv wrote Sheetala Mayi a letter,
I will marry thee —
Usoor Dahnuv came with an army
of forty-nine horse and fifty elephant —
Sheetala Mayi held her sword and shield —

Is this Rameshwar babu's disappeared grin?

Sheetala Mayi held her sword and shield —

Is this that petrified grin that broke the surface and slowly emerged, bringing with it the buzz of indistinct, wild sounds surrounding the mysterious haze of the

dust in the nearby trees? It was as if it were not singing at all but coils of twisted rope about to be thrown up onto invisible fortress walls. And then by means of those ropes, swords and shields were going to scale the battlements . . .

Usoor Dahnuv came with an army
of forty-nine horse and fifty elephant.
The Goddess held her sword and shield —

Mullawan Mayi, too, had disappeared. Like Rameshwar babu's grin, when he lit his wife's funeral pyre. Usoor Dahnuv had come with forty-nine horse and fifty elephant. They lifted up Mullawan Mayi's sedan chair. With the sedan chair went the groom on a skinny horse, a sword at his waist, and wearing a plumed turban. Just then Usoor Dahnuv came.

"Hey, you bearers, you sons of bitches! Turn the sedan chair in that direction, to the women's quarters!" ordered King Suryabhan Singh's horseman. Petrified, the bearers stared, and the villagers ran away in a panic.

The soldier shouted again, "Don't you know? It's the King's order!"

As a lioness came out of a vine-covered cave, Mullawan Mayi ripped apart the sedan chair's curtain and stepped out. From inside her red chunar sari that hung down to her ankles, sparks seemed to fly. "Who says the sedan chair will go to the royal women's quarters? It'll go straight forward."

As it should. Why should it go to the women's quarters? the groom decided. Don't I get any respect here?

The commanding officer roared at his soldiers, "The cheek of the bitch! Grab

her and drag her to the harem!"

The soldiers rushed forth. Across from them was the wedding party and the groom. They fought with swords and staves. As soon as the forty-nine horse and fifty elephant contingents of Usoor Dahnuv were able to decapitate the groom and his twelve companions, Mullawan Mayi had already taken her seat in the sizzling funeral pyre. The commander screamed, "Get her out of there immediately!"

Mullawan Mayi roared, "Don't lay a hand on me! Whoever touches me shall turn into stone! And tell King Suryabhan Singh his line shall be destroyed." Fiercely the fire burned. The flames leaped and jabbed, like so many swords dancing.

Fighting ferociously, the Goddess entered the temple. Her terrorizing curse remained.

King Suryabhan Singh listened to everything while lying comfortably on his throne in the women's quarters. He spit paan juice into a spittoon, and preening back his long mustache, he laughed so long and hard that tears came into his red eyes.

The next day, the King rode out in his best ceremonial dress and said, "Today my horse shall pee on that woman's funeral pyre."

Like a conqueror, he rode among the villages. In the afternoon he came out of the fields of sugarcane to the place where, in a large pit in the ground, brown sugar was being boiled up in large vats. As he stood there by the side of the pit, his horse reared suddenly, and the King fell right into a vat of boiling, raw sugar.

When they pulled King Suryabhan Singh out of the vat with the help of wooden planks, the large, burping bubbles were belching out smoke.

The next week, the King's son was found dead in his bed. His body was all blue. In his quilt was a small, vermilion snake. People said that Mullawan Mayi had ripped off a piece of her red sari and thrown it there, and it had transformed into a snake.

The women of Mullawan Khas believe that Mullawan Mayi in fact did not die that day on the funeral pyre. She only seemed to burn, whereas in fact she disappeared, in order to punish the King.

Mullawan Mayi had vanished. Like Rameshwar babu's grin. Another time I saw that grin disappear, in the very same way.

The summer days were particularly oppressive. We had closed the windows as far as we could, using the little light that was left to prepare our contract proposal. Just then Rameshwar arrived. As soon as he came in, he tried to accustom his eyes to the darkness, so that he could find me.

"Welcome, Rameshwar babu." I noticed him first. "Our demands have been prepared. Please show them to Ganga Ram, too."

Ganga Ram was a strange man. He always found some aspect of one of our demands with which he disagreed violently. After his research, he would make a lot of noise and threaten to destroy the Union. Always, we had to make a supreme effort to convince him. Yet despite that, he helped us in Union activities more than anyone. I sometimes thought that he was more important than any of us.

Rameshwar hesitated briefly and then said, "Ganga Ram died. Get up, let's

go."

"What? What happened to Ganga Ram?"

Rameshwar didn't answer. He turned toward the door and said, "Come on, let's go."

To ask any more questions would be futile. We descended the stairs. A car stood near the main entrance. Rameshwar opened the car door and stood there.

An accident had occurred in the powerhouse. Ganga Ram had come into contact with a dangerous high-voltage line and was electrocuted. The current had made a hole in one of his shoes and thereby entered the ground. He was dead before anyone knew what had happened. His corpse had been taken to the morgue, and his already half-mad wife was sitting on the steps outside the building, her three quiet, little children around her.

Rameshwar took Ganga Ram's wife home, and then he and I went to the hospital.

It was already evening by the time we returned. The Secretary of the Government Electricity Board was standing on the stairs, waiting for us – perhaps for quite a while.

Then I realized that the car we had gone in was the Secretary's. It was clear that he had probably screamed at the way his car had been taken away, because even though it was just closing time for the Board's office, total silence reigned.

Had I gotten out of the car first, the situation, perhaps, wouldn't have become so messy. Rameshwar got out first, wearing a stolen khaki uniform. I thought the Secretary might harp more on the uniform than on the fact that Rameshwar

was getting out of his car. In a high voice he screamed, “Where did you get the audacity to go off in my car?”

Till now that petrified grin had remained on his face, but then I saw that grin, like an unstoppable, agile, furtive guerilla, slip away. Taking firm ground, Rameshwar’s diminutive body trembled a little. He stared at the Secretary for a few seconds, while he searched for words, and then in his stiff voice he said, “I’ll torch it all! You! Your car! The office! The Board! I’ll torch it! With the fire in my heart. . .”

It seemed the Secretary quickly realized the seriousness of the situation because his open mouth all of a sudden closed. By then, four companions and I had gotten out of the car. I don’t know how, but before Rameshwar could finish saying so many words, scores of fourth-class uniforms had appeared.

The Secretary was informed of the accident. He had hoped to suppress the workers’ first provocation by taking a hard line on this unauthorized use of his car.

I squeezed Rameshwar’s shoulder and led him inside. His body was burning, and he was breathing fast. He sat down, leaned his head against the back of the chair, and closed his eyes.

After a while he probably fell asleep, or he may have fainted because of the excitement.

Later, when he awoke, that grin was there, as prompt as ever.

We were then feeling the effects of Ganga Ram’s absence. It seemed like hundreds of the Union’s papers were lost. The other things in our office seemed

scattered irretrievably, and many of the people who had worked for the Union vanished. We had to fight against this lack of manpower for a number of days. Meanwhile, another jolt struck the national organization. We were notified that in order to determine the question of the other, parallel union there would be an inquiry into the membership of each union.

We announced we would give a stern answer to these improper proceedings. We decided we would boycott the membership inquiry. The battle against this attack on the rights of the working class would be so intense that management would tremble.

Management's attack in response occurred much quicker than we had anticipated. When we arrived the next morning, we found the Union office padlocked, and a notice had been posted to the door which said that because of our boycott of the membership inquiry, authority for negotiations had been given to the other union. I know that if Ganga Ram had been there, he would've smashed open the lock.

That evening, while we were talking to reporters, someone told me the management's main office was on fire.

"That's fine," I said sardonically. By the time the interview with the newspaper reporters was over, I had become so emotionally exhausted I went home. I practically forgot the news about the fire. So much had happened in just one night.

Rameshwar had been arrested. Not only was he arrested, but in order to interrogate him, the police had taken him to some unknown spot.

After that, despite all my efforts to find him, I was unsuccessful. Later, I heard

he was in Mullawan.

This was my third trip to Mullawan. The person who had told me about Rameshwar didn't say anything in particular, yet sobering apprehensions engulfed me. I feared that in Mullawan I was about to see something that was not going to be particularly pleasant.

Rameshwar was in the courtyard, lying on a cot, as if someone had placed him there. Anyone observing his long silence, his grin, and his body, could immediately tell that he had been tortured for a long time.

"But why? Why did they do that?" I asked helplessly. In response he only asked, "All well there?"

It looked like he was going to cough, but he didn't. As I was adjusting myself to avoid the heat, the sound of that song of the women began to be audible.

Usoor Dahnuv wrote Sheetala Mayi a letter,
I will marry thee.
Usoor Dahnuv came with an army
of forty-nine horse and fifty elephant.
Mother held her sword and shield —

Rameshwar looked up to the sky. A trembling seized his chest, as if he were about to cough, but instead of a cough, only a slight belch came.

Now the song was audible from every direction, like ropes being thrown up toward the descending evening.

Just then, I noticed that the grin on Rameshwar babu's face began to

disappear.

"No, Rameshwar babu, no!" I wanted to say, but just then, with the grin gone, and after another attempt at coughing, a spurt of blood from the left corner of his lips stopped me.

Let it be. Let it go away. Bearing her sword and shield, Mullawan Mayi will get revenge from the King, won't she?