

A Little Secret

Mudra Rakshasa

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When the soldier in Raja saheb's little garden struck 12:30 then, like a law court peon, the perawallah's crippled son Shahzada announced, "Oh Dhondha's mother, it is one o'clock."

Everybody knew that the little garden's soldier was a half-hour behind. Dhondha was as dear to his mother as her own heart, but his wife she roundly cursed and then spat in the corner. That was her way of preparing to descend the three flights of stairs. Her good son Dhondha stuck the snake, star and fish stickers on his little bag and in it he put the foreign spinning top with its magnet. The stack of dog-eared cards he stuck in under his drawstring, and staring at his mother he scratched his little fist-like navel that stuck out inexplicably. His mother asked, "Will you go to Kullan's house, beta?"

With an innocent look on his face he agreed. Then she said, "There won't be any playing, you know."

"Yes, mother. I'll take a book along." Out of the almairah he got a book whose cover revealed it to be the *Qissa tota-maina* (*The Story of the Parrot and*

the Mina). Then he said, “I’ll take along a general science book, mother.”

Pleased, his mother began forcing her arms into the sleeves of her blouse.

Rukki had also heard Shahzada’s announcement. She was feeding her two little girls rice. She was tall, young, wide-hipped and a squinty-eyed, lazy type of woman.

The old perawallah’s wife noticed her own loose gusset and complained because she was already late getting ready. Kundan’s toothless aunt bent over a few times cracking her hip bones, rolled up the palm mat and stuck it under her armpit. Lachmicand’s little wife was already set to go. Paddan’s mother’s “man” was the book-keeper at a socks store. He would have his morning meal and be out of the house by ten o’clock, so Paddan’s mother would usually take a nap. As always, today too she woke up on time and busied herself trying to pull the hair out of the wart on her nose. As soon as she heard it was one o’clock she sprang out of her cot. Rukki, the perawallah’s wife, Kundah’s aunt, et cetera, they all gathered like members of the Legislative Assembly.

Kundan’s aunt spread out her mat in the damp lane that was the children’s main thoroughfare.

Like always, Paddan’s mother treated the bottom step like her throne, and leaning back against the wall she reigned over the assembly. She was universally respected. For this, there were a number of reasons. First, her husband was an educated man who always wore a freshly-washed kurta to the office. Second, despite her night blindness she had memorized the entire layout of the neighborhood, both the obvious and the not so obvious, as if she were an official district

geographer. Third, should a newborn girl be seriously afflicted with gas, she was the only one who knew where the kandail flower needed to be placed and the dot of vermilion.

Like flies, the housewife's children were crawling and swarming all over, but their mothers elbowed them, slapped them and shooed them away. Today two sensitive topics were under consideration, the behavior of Tungunlal's daughter and the marriage of Siupersad's little girl.

When the assembly was free of the kids, Paddan's mother put down her small hand fan, and to indicate the discussion was to begin she sat down with authority.

Recently Paddan's mother had discovered one of Rukki's secrets, and she had already clearly informed everyone that when Rukki said she was going to the temple, she went instead to the Company Garden. Once that had become public knowledge, Rukki had changed dramatically. Now she herself had become absorbed in the mysteries of the latest juicy stories.

Today she had a very tasty morsel of news. The daughter of the temple priest Tungunlal did not go to her uncle's house; she ran away. Granted, Paddan's mother, who considered herself a master at cutting off the wings of flying birds, had expressed that very possibility only yesterday (though the bird had flown away even before its wings had been cut!), but certain proof of that had been obtained today, and it was Rukki who had it. So today Rukki sat sort of in the middle of the circle.

The suspicions of Paddan's mother often turned out right. For months she had been saying there was a "bad connection" between Babulal and Guniya,

Tungun the priest's daughter. It was only about a week ago that with her own eyes Lachmicand's wife saw both of them go into a room on the second floor of the temple. A half hour or an hour later Babu came out with his angocha wrapped around his waist, he jumped the roof and headed home while Guniya the slut came down the stairs singing a film song.

Bimmo mahrajin said, "Sister, how could you see anything in such darkness!" and with an air of self-confidence she showed her teeth as she began shelling watermelon seeds.

Paddan's mother immediately broke in. "Listen to this! In such a few words there's darkness? Remain silent, bhauji. There was no darkness."

Bimmo mahrajin was silenced. The others chattered between little explosions of laughter.

Actually, Bimmo mahrajin was by caste a goldsmith, but she had lived with Takhu maharaj. Takhu's mother was indeed a brahmin. She was widowed at an early age and went on a pilgrimage, but when she returned she was pregnant with Takhu. Beside herself, she took every medicine available, but Takhu remained fast in her womb like a bat and wouldn't hear of coming out early. So the long and short of it was that one of Takhu's eyes was perfectly fine but the other was as weak as a city streetlight. Takhu maharaj had Bimmo sunarin live with him, so she later became known as Bimmo mahrajin. While Takhu remained hale and hearty for some time, rheumatism finally took hold. After that, Bimmo mahrajin never went anywhere. One of Takhu's cousins came. Every day Takhu and Bimmo mahrajin yelled thunder and lightning at each other.

But the day when Paddan's mother put her table and chair at the window and looked out, well, that was it. Paddan's mother couldn't believe what she saw, but there it was. Lying on his cot Takhu maharaj was cursing for all he was worth and Bimmo's devarji lay with his head on her lap and said softly, "Remain silent, bhauji."

Everything she saw Paddan's mother had told to the assembled, and Bimmo had fainted. Today that was the incident Paddan's mother had alluded to and thus cut Bimmo's wings.

Kundan's toothless aunt was a devout sort so she, needlessly, wrinkled up her nose, curved her eyebrows and said, "No no."

Having virtuously employed her "veto" against this worldly topic, Kundan's toothless aunt had no sooner turned her nose back than Dhondha's mother, wanting to float her own little mango in this vinegar of juicy gossip, said, "So what now, aunti, don't you want to hear about Guniya's talents?"

Then she broke into a giggle, but since no one joined in, her laughter soon turned into a surprised "ayn" while her mouth hung wide open.

Who knows when Rammo bhujain had silently come to the doorway of the room at the very end of the passageway where she sat on her knees opposite the large wall mirror combing out her hair with a horn comb.

Bimmo mahrajin picked up her fan and with its handle jabbed Lachmicand's wife three times and whispered, "When did that one come here, girl?"

Dhondha's mother closed her mouth with a sudden plop, lengthened up her neck and stared at Rammo. Kundan's aunt blinked her eyes and looked toward

the end of the lane, blinked her eyes again and looked again, but she didn't see anything. She was just about to lose her temper and say something when the perawallah's wife hit her with a knee and stopped her.

But even this sudden silence of theirs had no effect at all on Rammo.

Rammo bhujain had been a member of this gathering before, and she was the kind of member of whom everyone was jealous and whom everyone supported. They were jealous because she was able to tell the juiciest stories of all. The others, because of their advancing age and because running a household required their full attention, were restricted, besides some juicy aspects of their married life, to talking about the difficulties of childbirth and the unsatisfactory and overly repeated reminiscences of back-talking hussies. If Lachmicand's wife told about how she threw up all day when she gave birth to her first son, then the perawallah's wife would trump her by saying, "What's the big deal about that, my womb's been turned upside down." So everyone's experiences were greater than everyone else's, and obviously, should someone's own pain be declared to be small and insignificant, then she would be upset. The subject of adultery was even more dangerous. It would result either in a squabble over what's true and what's false or in one requiring another to reveal her secrets, and that would end up in a "walkout".

Whatever the case, their stories were never as juicy as Rammo's. During the past six years of her *romani* life, she neither became a mother nor got married. It was said she was a bhujain, that is, in the grain roasting caste, only because of her dark skin; otherwise, she was really a malin, in the gardener caste. But the most

interesting thing is that despite not being married she still insists on decorating her hair part with vermilion.

Though everyone had been willing to support her, deep down they felt a certain reluctance. She was exceptionally outspoken and gluttonous too. The former did not allow others to talk about her, and despite her gluttony she was very generous feeding others. One day she fed Dhondha's mother a full sixteen golguppas. The next day, however, after drinking iced lassi Dhondha's mother worried she might get hemorrhoids.

Rammo had been absent for about two months. The night before she went missing, the neighborhood had stayed up all night for the dancing of Ratto and Binno. They had crowded onto dhurries spread under the peepal tree, and Ratto and Binno had amazed and moved them all, from the indolent youth to the masters and the housewives not the least. Ratto was rather short and squat, Binno very tall and thin. Both had beautiful voices, but when it came to charm and grace Binno was the superior.

So that the daughters-in-law's hearts would not be taken away by all that singing and dancing, their mothers-in-law usually forced them to stay inside while they themselves stayed awake all night. Dhondha's mother placed a canister of flour and a canister of rice near the roof's wall so she could look over it and watch the performance all night. Paddan's mother set a cot up against the room on the roof, but when she tried to climb up into it, the cot slipped and she came down with a thud.

After exclaiming "ooii amman" and "hai hooii" a few times, she held her

back and lowered herself down slowly, and then spent the entire night giggling quietly in fits and starts.

”After a few groans of ’O mother!’ and ’Oh dear!’, she held her back and slowly lowered herself down, and then spent the entire night giggling quietly, laughing in fits and starts.”

A little later Rammo bhujain suddenly joined Paddan’s mother. Despite their difference in age their compatible natures had them singing the praises of “good wives” until dawn, at which time scrambling up the stairs and beside himself came Paddan.

His mother was startled and grinned with some embarrassment. Paddan, though, paid her embarrassment no mind whatsoever, rushed toward her and shook her by both shoulders while yelling, “Amma! Amma!”

Angered, she asked, “Aré, what’s happened?”

“Amma, where . . . where is she?”

“Who, ré?”

“Ka-Ka-Kalavati! I can’t find Kalavati!”

“Oh, what are you going on about?” Paddan’s mother quickly stood up. “She’ll be around somewhere.”

“I can’t find her anywhere, amma! She’s not here! I’ve looked everywhere!”

His mother’s heart began pounding against the trap of her rib cage like a frightened mouse. She shook him and said, “Hey Ram, so why are you screaming? She’ll show up somewhere!”

Rammo sniffed the fragrance of a secret and gave this incident particular

attention. When Paddan's mother's eyes fell on Rammo, she became particularly uneasy. She ended the conversation with her son right there and went down the stairs.

Rammo inferred what the problem was. Even Paddan's mother knew that Rammo knew. That was what she had been afraid of. But what will be will be.

Ever since Paddan's wife had made the ritual journey from her father's home to her husband's, they had had to lock her in the upper room three times, four days they had refused to feed her, and five or six times they had given her a beating. But who has any power over what's to be.

Paddan's mother scoured every corner of the house, to the extent that she even looked in the buckets and the large clay storage jars, but Kalavati was nowhere to be found. Helpless, Paddan started beating his head and crying deeply even before his mother did.

At that same time the perawallah's wife was rinsing her mouth and thinking, "For the Asarh fair why don't we make barfi out of paper paste instead of khoa?" Then she heard someone crying so she raised her head and asked, "Ari, mother of Paddan! Who's started crying?"

Paddan's mother didn't know what to do. Nevertheless, she thought of a way out and said, "It's nothing, jiya; it's just Paddan talking in his sleep."

But then she realized she'd have to be more courageous because someone could be listening, and beyond just asking what's going on, she might suddenly visit, so Paddan's mother herself opened the door and went outside. Then her heart stopped. She saw Rammo suddenly turn away from the doorway and head

straight for the stairs. Unable to prevent Rammo from spreading their secret, she ground her teeth and leaned against the balcony. Big tears welled up out of her eyes.

Early that morning the first thing she did was send Paddan to her sister's. Then she closed the door and lay down. If anyone came to see her, she would groan and moan and say she wasn't feeling well. Who knows what Rukki and Lachmicand's wife had heard, but it was no sooner afternoon than they both suddenly came in to ask how she was doing. Seeing the subterfuge in Rukki's eyes, Paddan's mother's eyes blazed. Then it was Lachmicand's wife who brought it all out in the open. She said, "Bhaina, we haven't seen your little daughter-in-law all morning!"

"Look at this — how many times did I tell you that a telegram came during the night. Her mother is ill so she's gone to see her. And here you people are, reading all kinds of nonsense into this!" Very sharply Paddan's mother closed the curtain on the truth and turned her face away. A little later the two of them left. Paddan's mother let out about a dozen curses on them, counting every one, then she covered her face and remained lying there. She did indeed look ill, so the suspicions and rumors, having gotten all tangled up, went nowhere.

As the afternoon progressed, Paddan's mother seemed to suffer from a higher and higher fever. But she was certain she would be able to nip in the bud any flower that might arise in today's assembly due to her absence and Rammo's detective work.

While lying there she often felt she should get up, see Rammo and try to

reach an agreement with her, but she was unable to do so. She felt as if her blood were slowly drying up. Thirst pierced her throat like thorns. She wanted to ask for someone to bring her water, but even merely for that she did not have the courage. Then, who knows when, she fell asleep.

When she woke up, she saw Kundan's toothless aunt bending over her and calling her. With a start, Paddan's mother sat up. From the light in the room she could tell it was about evening. Recognizing it was Kundan's aunt, she became alarmed. But Kundan's aunt merely assured herself that Paddan's mother was all right and then she left. It seemed that the women had not gathered that afternoon, which Paddan's mother was exceedingly satisfied to hear. She was reassured even more by another piece of news: Rammo has been absent all day.

Rammo ran off with Babban paanwallah — as soon as Paddan's mother came up with that idea, she could feel Hanuman's warclub in her hand with which she could cut off the head of any rumor. Her face lost its sickly, yellowish tint. Her waist regained its tone. The next day, managing her heavy hips, she once again reigned over the assembly from her staircase throne.

Lachmicand's wife gave that day's gathering the name "Salima's Assembly". Augmenting the fragrances, Paddan's mother described the various flowers that bloomed between Rammo and Babban during Ratto's and Binno's dance performance. Rukki eagerly shed more light on each and every detail, and nudging each other with their elbows, the women luxuriated in this juicy tale like so many gulab jamuns in sugar syrup. Having successfully turned the people's attention away from her daughter-in-law and onto Rammo, Paddan's mother

chewed away on the paan of contentment.

But less than two months later Babban suddenly appeared at his stall singing film songs as usual. He was Paddan's intimate friend, and it was he who was the "hero" of the mess concerning Paddan's wife. Scores of times Paddan's mother had warned her son about him. She had even invisibly sent Babban gifts of curses. But Paddan's problem was his addiction to opium, and Babban was the only available ferryman who could see him to the other shore of that desperate river.

The effect of which was clear. On the day of the dance performance he had given Paddan a double dose and had decamped with his oh-so-fair and oh-so-round wife.

Meanwhile, Paddan's mother kept the members of the assembly busy with various bits of information until one day she announced that her daughter-in-law had taken ill. Even before then her husband Munshiji had left very early one morning and had returned particularly late. Finally, one morning, tears dropping down her cheeks, Paddan's mother announced that her poor daughter-in-law had passed away.

But not even a full week of mourning had passed when Babban suddenly came. Paddan fainted. He knew full well with whom Kalavati had gone away, so he expected she would return when Babban did. When Babban returned alone, Paddan beat his own head.

Yet another worry tortured his mother. Riffraff are riffraff. The dissolute neighborhood boys will certainly talk about her daughter-in-law. They'll spread

rumors. So as a preemptive security measure she suggested something improper concerning the priest's little girl. That was all she needed to do to keep the housewives busy for a while. Then she would think of something else.

But then Rammo suddenly reappeared. My God! Paddan's mother felt as if someone had turned her upside down and stood her on her head. When the women stopped staring at Rammo and returned to their senses, they turned their attention to Paddan's mother. Her throne, though, was empty. Nobody knew when she had slipped away. Poking and jabbing one another, the women remained sitting for a while, thinking Amma might return, but when that didn't happen, the crowd gathered itself up and went to her room to see how she was.

Her door was locked from inside. They could hear Paddan's mother groaning. Rukki softly knocked on the door. A little later, groaning, Paddan's mother said from inside that she wasn't feeling well again.