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The Mother As I Saw Her

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"Oops! What's this!! It seems like that rain drops falling inside is far more than outside. Oh!

Lord where I am?!! In which family I was married? Such a dumb father of mine. Caste, Creed!!

F***. Is this how they welcome their new "family member?" Oh god take me." Sutapa said obscurely looking at the roof holes. It was the first encounter of Sutapa, a 26 year's old newly married bride, with her in-laws. That very next morning her hubby paid the decorators from his share of dowry. Marriage is not a dream for some girls, it was sometimes a survival strategy for them. Sutapa, a 26 years old nurse, was married to a jobless moron and that was the day of their Bengali 'bou bhat'. Just because a miserable father wants

to shrug off his responsibilities and the liabilities of his daughter, took some "deliberate" decisions.

Sometimes it works but sometimes...only god knows. That very first day at her in-laws' place Sutapa's all kind of infatuation, curiosity, dreams, imagination vanished pretty swiftly. It was a kind of jail ward to her. The warden, her in-laws have always a microscopic vision to find out only mistakes in her. From household chores to eating from dress sense to looks everything is being criticized. No, she did not protest vehemently then and still now she doesn't. Because some people love to get pain-masochist. But the only way and only escape route from this typical Bengali in-law's was her job. Her nursing job. After finishing High school, not many options were left for her, so she joined a nursing college.

Guys it is also a long miserable story I will come to later but let's focus on the 1st matter.

Nursing job was not exciting at that time precisely in such as remote village where there was no electricity, no literate person to talk with was a sort of nightmare. But she won by her own will power. Her jobless hubby often used to come to her place whether to gaze at her or to suffice his sexual gratification is not known.

Finally the day came. She had to return to her in-laws to spend those "precious holidays" of Durga Puja.

Devi Durga is worshipped as a source of power and that power emanates from the woman kind.

But the real Durgas never feel that kind of empowerment, even those self-esteemed and self-assured women feel hapless. Sutapa was one of them. She has an income but does not have liberty to spend. As if she was married only to earn money and hand it over to her hubby. Parlour, spa facial, manicure, and pedicure – such things are slavish for her, which she can fantasize only. Believe me she can't. Till now she could not reach to the freedom that she can enjoy. Now she is 51. 25 years passed away but she can't. Just because she

sacrificed her personal life that time and this obnoxious memories taunt her to maintain herself, her dimmed beauty. Past memories still haunt her so much that even before applying lipstick she thinks several times.

Sutapa was cooking in totally unhygienic earthen oven, suddenly her mother-in-law called out.

----- 'Bouma, what is this? Is this how you will run our family? You used up full bottle of oil (300 ml) in 4 days!! Perhaps your father is well off but we are not.'

----- Ma, why are you shouting? If I don't cook them well father-in-law will question my cooking ability. He will again chastise me. Please ma don't drag my father in this matter, what has he done?

----- What has he done? You want to listen? He should not have given birth to a moron like you. Bloody drama queen.

----- Ma....! She cried. She could not bear this agonizing pain, this kind of insult. Her fair chubby face is drenched with first tear drops in her law's house.

----- Make it quickly, your father-in-law can't resist hunger, and show your statecraft at some other place not before me. Hmm crying. She murmured.

----- Since day one, I told that 'don't bring any educated, government employee person'. They can't fit into our family. They always have another intention. Who wanna listen to this poor fellow? Now deal it. Usual drama, stock replies...deal with these. Bloody *****.

----- I will leave maa...as soon as my CLs (leaves) finish I will definitely leave. Don't worry.

----- Hmmm that I know very well.

Accha tell me one thing, nursing staffs always go for a second marriage. Are you planning for it? Tell me the truth. I will come to know eventually.

----- Maa!!! Please. What are saying? Please maa humiliate me as much as you can but don't say these things. I will die out of shame.

----- Die? Ha, ha, ha, ha. You guys are pretty smart. You can murder others but will never die. I got your intentions.

----- Maa!!! Sutapa said obscurely.

'Baba, why don't you call me to stay for long at your home?'

----- No Sibani (her pet name) it's not like that. Actually I wish but I can't beta.

----- Are you sick baba? Tell me. Please.

----- No, no. I am fine...am pretty good just missing you, missing you very much.

----- Awwwww baba don't say like that. I wish to meet you and mom. But they don't allow me, baba. You know, na. How ruthless they are.

----- Shhhhh beta, don't talk like that. They are you well-wishers.

----- Well-wisher, my foot. Baba, they wanna insult me in everything, in every aspect.

They always abuse me, dragging you guys, baba. I can't bear this. I can't. Sutapa started to cry soberly.

----- Sibani, this is a patriarchal society and you have to manage yourself to cope up with such things, beta. Don't cry. If you wish to escape, please try to remember our faces, beta. What will we answer to your in-laws, to the society?

Let it be, ma. Can you lend me some money, ma? Your brother's book list is so long. Said her father.

----- Baba, 'lend me?' Please. Don't say this word again. I will send the money by money order soon. I do have some

responsibilities and it is part of it. I will definitely give. Tell Jagu that I am fine and I will meet him soon.

----- Thank you, beta.

Today Sibani (Sutapa) got a stern realisation. This house is no longer good for her. Either she has to divorce her husband or she has to commit suicide. After getting the firm request, Sutapa wrapped up five thousand rupees in an envelope. Her husband eaves dropped all this event and started shouting.

----- Are you sending 'our' money to your father? Ha? Tell me? Fie! Ashamed of you, this is how your family runs? Is this your family policy? No, I will not make this happen. I will now call them and tell them about this kind of despicable request of your loser father. How dare he seek money from us?

----- 'Us?' This is my money, my income. I do have liberty to give them. I am not supposed to ask for a permission for this.

----- How dare you? Wait a second, wait. I will call rest of them. They will see how much desperate this witch can be.

Suddenly her father-in-law came to that spot asking about what happened?

Why are you shouting, at this morning? This is my house. If you wanna stay here, you have to abide by our rules. Rule, no one.....

----- Baba it's not like that. I am not shouting. Your daughter-in-law is 'donating' all her salary to her father, baba. Is this fine? Just imagine how cunning they are. That's why they married this woman here...for this purpose?

----- All salary! Are you mad? I'm giving five just thousand rupees. This is my offence!!!

----- Five thousand is not a small amount, bouma. You do have some liabilities for our family also.

----- Baba, every month I give it all. All eight thousand rupees. Not a single penny, I spend on myself. Please baba, don't blame me like that.

----- Listen bouma, when we took our decision to take you as our 'baou' (daughter-in-law), we did not do such a deal. We didn't make such an agreement in red letters.

----- 'A deal?' It was a marriage. Right, baba? Not a business consignment. And moreover my father is sick and I am the only earning child of the family. So he asked for some money for diagnostic tests, baba.

----- Whatever! Don't forget that you are now a part of our family, not theirs. So no question anymore. You can't give this amount to him. It's wrong. Violation of the marriage deal (red letters, non-judicial paper). That's it.

A red letters deal is a very conventional tactics of in-laws to humiliate and strangulate the voice of bride's side. They make a deal during fixing of the date of marriage and inscribe the limitations imposed by the groom's family, like the do's and don'ts. In short, it's a code of conduct by the typical Bengali in-laws.

After hundreds of pathetic days and nights, finally Sutapa got a warm hug and appraisal for giving birth to a baby boy... omg!! Baby, boy!! At last God, at last you saved the poor lady. God might act as a saviour but the financial situation didn't. Family expenses increased but income didn't. That meagre salary is the only hope for those tyrants. The new baby started to grow in this extremely 'unhygienic' atmosphere. Everyone, except Sutapa and her baby, was ready to spit up their 'venom' on each other. Backbiters turned into war wolves.

Nobody earns a penny but by the end of the month, everyone eagerly waits for one night. Sutapa murmurs 'A father!! Hmm you don't have any quality to be a father. You can't even arrange the food for the sake of your own son. How will he survive...how, how, how!!!'

----- Hush! Don't utter a word. Bloody ***** don't you know our condition? Ha? What you have, just go and feed him. Baby food! Do

you know how much it costs? Stop sending money to your family if you want to save your child. Bloody greedy father. Fie!!

----- What are you saying? It is your son also. At least, buy one tin of Ceregrow for him. He doesn't want to take barley. The baby cries a lot at night.

----- Oh! Now you're teaching me how to take care of a child. You? You bitch. Those people who can't feed Cerelac or Ceregrow to their children, don't their children survive? Tell me.

After the argument for one hour, her moron 'husband' beat her so fiercely. All the earthen white wall remains as a witness of how a 'domestic violence' can be.

----- 'Mamma, why don't you come often mama. I miss you a lot.'

----- I know beta, I miss you too.

Sutapa said looking at her emaciated, pot-boiled belly, thin-limbed baby boy.

She said obscurely. 'What have they done? Oh my god. For this day, I fought up against the evils to rear upon nine months in my womb?' Sutapa no longer resists herself. He bursts into tears.

What have they done? Her vivacious, healthy chubby baby turned into a malnourished child. His scalp is full of dandruff, his pot-boiled belly reminds that of a Somalian child. She decided: 'enough is enough, she will take care of her child at any cost. Schooling matters but this! How can he survive in this condition? But God again plays his cards in His own ways. Sutapa can't take her child to her workplace. Because she is pregnant again! Their second child is on the way.

'No bouma, you can't take him along with you. You can't even look after him (elder one). In this gestational period, you should go to your father's place. Rest of us will take his responsibilities.'

----- No ma, I can't. He is not keeping well these days, ma. Deficiency of vitamin c, stomatitis in his lips and cheeks, dandruffs, cough and cold. He needs much care now. I can't go, ma.

'Oh! So, you and your father gonna look after both of "our grandsons" (Why son? There is another story). We can't afford his medication! Got it. Do whatever you want I will not interfere with it.

Nah! Sutapa could not take elder child with her. Her husband didn't allow it.

The in-laws were sure that the baby in the womb is a male baby and not a female baby. This way they used it to fulfill their aspirations. How inhuman one can be. Just imagine if Sutapa's second child were a baby girl? How much pain she had to bear with for the rest of her life. She is not alone in this situation. This is a common thing with most of the housewives in our country.

No. Her second child did survive. He didn't have to deal with those guys. He got permission to stay with her mother. Mother's lap! Safest place to dwell in. Free from all sorts of agony, hostility, and perils. All her love and affection that she failed to give her elder son, Sutapa gave it to the younger one the lucky one.

She won in proving herself that she is 'fertile' not sterile. However, it is difficult to change the mentality of some people. Financial crisis followed that made this family miserable.

Sutapa thought she will enjoy her maternity leave. But God was not with her. She relentlessly tried to suffice everyone's need. But nobody seemed to be happy. Their hunger, their craving for this 8000 rupees in salary grew more and more day by day. Her hubby who was reluctant to find a job was still a jobless. Finally, he decided to start a business.

Nothing big. Minimalistic deal. But who would finance him? Who would be the scape goat? No one. Hm, Sutapa came in forth. He literally invested her own savings, although not a big amount but

50,000 rupees, the only amount that she could save for schooling purpose for both of the children.

Being in the field of healthcare, she wanted her children to be immunised and vaccinated fully on time. But here superstition superseded. Sutapa was hopeless before her family.

Sutapa left no stone unturned to fulfill everybody's need. But God knows why sometimes life becomes menacingly hostile without any reason. Sutapa's mother-in-law suffered a brain stroke. The family was broke. Her treatment expenses were estimated to be high as she needed to be treated at a private hospital.

Although the in-laws were so adverse to Sutapa's family, they did not hesitate to take financial help from them. Sutapa left no stone unturned in seeking help from everyone she knew, at office, in neighbor.

----- 'Sister as you know Kolkata is the only place where you can treat her. There is hardly 10 per cent chance of recovery I guess'.

----- 'Doctor, how much will it cost?'

----- 'I can't say the exact expense but it could be anything about 5 to 6 lakhs. Hurry up sister, blood clot is so severe. It will start to create pressure on another nerve. Any veins will get punctured any time. Get her ready for a quick CT scan.'

Those family members who abashed Sutapa for giving 5 thousand rupees to her father were now at the mercy of her. Sutapa mortgaged her the only bangle she owned to do diagnosis tests of her mother-in-law. What an irony of fate! This lady, ill with severe issue, brutally tortured that same Sutapa at every step but now she is the one who did all possible things to save her life.

----- 'Tell your father to lend us some money. Ambulance fare is too high. I can't afford. Please Sutapa.'

----- 'I am trying my best, but all that he has is only ten thousands rupees. How will we admit her in a nursing home? We want at least fifty thousand.

----- 'I will manage, don't worry.

----- 'But how?'

----- I will sell our truck. This is the only way left with us. Otherwise she will die.'

For two months they put up a brave fight. They even remained empty stomach, begged for money even from unknown people. Finally the sacrifice resulted into a hope. The lady recovered, however with several disorders. She could not remember anything and could not see properly. Her condition was not sound anyway.

----- 'Physiotherapy is the only solution, sister. I am telling you. Otherwise medication will help her only to keep in a 'living state'. But she will be a burden for you for life.'

----- 'Physiotherapy? At home! Oh my god. It's so expensive. Doctor, please suggest us some another way of treatment.

----- 'This is the only treatment that can cure her'.

Holding her catheter and bed-pan, she just prayed to God. For next four months, Sutapa relentlessly took care of that lady. Finally, with Sutapa's selfless service the old lady got cured fully.

On the other hand, the childhood of their children was left to fate only. But their mother's story gave them a good lesson. Thousands of perils lurk in ocean but the sailor harbours his ship every time safely without making a mistake. Both the children came to understand that if they ever made any mistakes, they could not be rectified. So they spent their time on their studies and dared not fritter away time.

Happiest day for Sutapa was the day of their results. It was the day when she boasted herself. She proudly said 'Do you know? My son came first in his class'.

Sutapa got an idea and reached outside the office clerk's room.

----- 'Come in'

----- 'Sir, you said that the government will provide allowance if an employee submit their children's educational expenses (school fees slips)?'

----- Hmm let me see. Oho! What's is this Mrs. Sutapa? You pay 300 rupees per month for your children and now you're making mess for getting an allowance! What a joke!

----- Sir, you told that this 5000 rupees (again the same amount) is pretty important for our family.

----- It is for the English medium school not for a petty 300 rupees institution. Are your children pursuing medical or engineering? No na. So you're not eligible.

Now take those slips please. No further arguments.

----- Sir please. Do something.

----- Sorry, I cannot do anything. Sorry.

Sutapa came back with empty hands. She had to struggle even harder. But luck strikes those who fight.

Sutapa could get her elder son studied MBBS from a renowned college. He became an established doctor. And the younger child also got admitted in a medical college. Sutapa won all hearts by her sacrifice and devotion to her family. This is not a typical case though, there are thousands of such women in our society who rear their children in direst condition and achieve success.

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Debayan Bera is pursuing MBBS at Midnapore Medical College, West Bengal. He writes frequently on various topics.

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