

As I bid goodbye to these unfortunate prisoners, two faces from my past seem to shake me and ask, "Why haven't you written about us? You met us long before you met these women." I can see them as they stand before me: the middle-aged Vaishnavi, her hand rattling long iron tongs (*chinta*), and next to her, the emaciated Rajula, a begging bowl in her hand and a nosering shining on her pale face.

How could I forget them? They were prisoners of a different order. No chains on their feet, no walls to crowd them in. They had the world under their feet and the wide open sky above their heads. They could roam wherever they wished, carrying their past locked in their hearts. No police or law officer ever dogged their steps: their bodies were free, but what about their souls?

This is the story of a nun, a *Vaishnavi* who roamed from place to place—Badrinath, Kedarnath, Banaras, Haridwar, calling, "*Alakh mai, Bhiksha de!*" In those days, you often came across such mendicants and I can recall several from my childhood, who wore long ropes of *rudraksha* round their necks and came to seek alms at our door in Almora. No householder ever turned them away. Perhaps people were more generous (or god-fearing) in my childhood. Every Saturday and Tuesday, two Nepali *Vaishnavis* came to our house, calling "*Alakh mai, Bhiksha de!*" Our cook would give them a large helping of rice and lentils in their bowl. Then they would leave, but not before showering blessings on me, "May you grow up to marry a prince, *lalli*. May you bring many brothers to this house: not one or two, but seven tall and strapping ones!"

How times have changed! Today would any house

*Female criminal

Part Four

Apradhini*: Alakh Mai

○ Shivani

Translated from Hindi by Ira Pande

consider a crop of seven sons a blessing? No wonder I often hear harsh voices shoo away mendicants, "Why can't you work? There is nothing wrong with you—get out! I don't give alms to idlers!" However, I still can't turn away such people when I meet them for my ears remember that sweet voice blessing me, "May you grow up to marry a prince, *lalli*. May you bring many brothers to this house: not one or two, but seven tall and strapping ones!"

Then one day, a completely new and deep voice called out: "*Alakh mai, Bhiksha de!*" I peeped out and there was a new *Vaishnavi* standing in the courtyard. Tall and strapping, with a small ochre bag slung on her shoulder she was rattling a long pair of tongs in her hands. What arrested my attention was her size and appearance: she looked like a man in drag! She stood there imperiously, looking around her for some human contact and finding none, called out

"*Alakh Niranjan! Mai* will eat here today." Interestingly, she used the masculine gender when talking of herself and I wondered if she were a woman at all. With her cropped hair she looked like a man, spoke like one and certainly had the voice of one. Her broad chest showed no sign of womanly breasts, and she was taller than any woman I had ever seen. Her flat nose had wide, flared nostrils that looked as if any minute now she would blow smoke out of them like a dragon!

She looked up and spotted me peering from behind a pillar on the verandah above the courtyard. "You there, little girl," she called to me. "Did you hear me? *Mai* will eat here today, this is the Guru's wish. Go, tell someone inside." Then she planted her tongs in a flower bed and settled down to wait.

I was terrified. We siblings lived alone with our grandfather and had long finished our morning meal. Our cook, a forbidding Brahmin whom we called Lohaniji, had locked up the kitchen and was probably sleeping in his quarter. Where at this hour would I find food for this dragon?

"*Mai*, why don't you rest here?" I said politely. "We have finished eating but let me ask my sister if she can get some *bhiksha* for you."

"No!" she thundered and rattled her tongs noisily. "I told you I shall eat here today. Go get me some firewood and pots and some *besan*, curds and chillies. *Mai* will eat *karhi-chawal* today. Go!"



Suparna

I was beginning to get a little irritated but there was an air of such authority about her that I found myself asking my sister to come and help me look for the ingredients for Mai's meal. By the time we reached the courtyard, Mai had once more planted her tongs close by and spread out her huge legs to make herself comfortable under our walnut tree.

"Come, children," she greeted us, "have you brought what I asked?" She leaned her bulk against the tree and squinted at us. We put down the lot before her and within minutes, she had erected a makeshift stove with two stones, lit a fire and put a pot of *karhi* to cook. Then she began cleaning the rice and turned to us again.

"*Alakh Guru!* Do you want to ask anything? *Mai* does not come here often. She has come today because *Guruji* sent her."

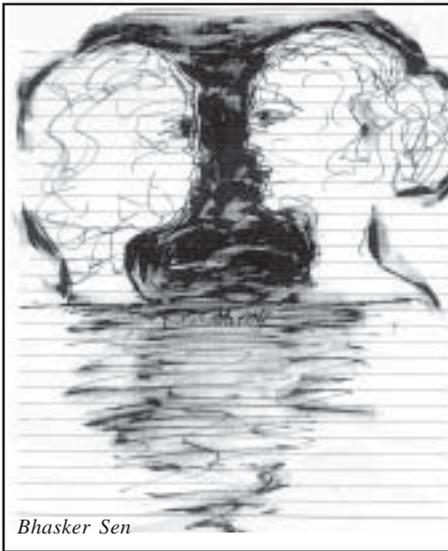
At first we couldn't understand what she meant, then she took a handful of rice grains and shut her eyes, mumbling some incomprehensible *mantra*. Both of us were thoroughly scared by now: Who was this woman? A witch?

"What do you want to know? Something about the one you will marry?" she focused her red eyes on us and they were glowing like coals.

"I have decided never to marry," my sister said smugly. "So I don't need to ask you anything about my future husband." This was true, she had declared her decision quite firmly to our family a while ago and I think they had accepted it. But obviously, *Mai* knew something else. "You will marry," she told my sister firmly. "No power on earth will ever stop that from happening." She said this with such conviction that I could almost hear the sound of a band and a wedding procession outside our gates.

Then she broke the spell by turning her attention to her cooking and adopted a completely different tone as she started to chat with us. I

watched her as she fiddled with the pots and pans: Not only did she look like a man, she even had a faint moustache on her upper lip. For a moment the same thought flashed through our heads: Was this some wicked man who had come disguised as a woman to kidnap us? As if she could read our thoughts, *Mai* flashed her teeth at us, "Scared you, did I?" and she suddenly grasped my hand. A shiver of pure horror ran through me: I felt as if a huge, slimy lizard had fallen on my hand. I still cannot



describe what her touch was like without shuddering at the memory.

"Don't be put off by my face, child," she said kindly. She sighed deeply as she ran a hand over her moustache, "My name was *Laxmi* and when I came as a bride, my mother-in-law took one look at me and said to her son, 'This is not a *Laxmi*, my son. This looks like a *Laxman Singh*.' She and I became mortal enemies from that day on." Her deep voice began to sound gruff now, as if she had a bad cold. Our eyes went to the beads around her neck and she introduced each one to us. "This was given by the big *Guru Maharaj* when he accepted me as his disciple. This one, by the next *Guru* for saying my prayers and this one came from a cremation ground. These *tulsi* beads

I picked up when I went for the *Kumbh* to *Prayag*."

My sister got up and signalled to me to come inside as well but I was so enchanted by the stories the *Vaishnavi* had that I pretended I hadn't felt her nudge. The *Vaishnavi* did not see this side show as her attention was on her food. She first made three little morsels for her *Gurus* and turned to me, "Want some?" To tell you the truth, I was tempted at the sight of that spicy *karhi* but how could I possibly eat the alms I had given? I shook my head.

She finished her meal and scrubbed the pots and pans till they glistened, then picked a few embers from the dying fire to light her *chillum*. She foraged in her shoulder bag for a small red box and snorted some snuff into her huge nostrils. Then took a deep puff of her *chillum* and really became a dragon with smoke coming out of her nostrils.

"*Vah,*" she declared in a satisfied tone. "*Mai* is very happy with you today, child." I was fascinated at the size of her palm—and tried to imagine what a slap from her would mean. Was she a *Vaishnavi* or a wrestler?

"Do you really walk all day and night, *Mai*?" I asked

Her bloodshot eyes considered my question indulgently.

"Yes, child. *Mai* committed a terrible crime once. This is why *God* has cursed her to walk day and night, and never rest. She plants these tongs wherever her *Guru* commands her to and when she hears his voice she picks them up, says *Alakh*, and sets off again. Snowstorms, thunderstorms, raging torrents and streams—she has survived them all. She has sinned, child, so this is now her fate. She does whatever her *Guru* tells her to, whatever he tells her..."

She touched her hands reverently to her forehead at the mention of her *Guru's* name, then took a long puff from her *chillum* and floated off into a trance.

Guru? Where is he? What kind of Guru was this who she could hear yet I could not see? Was he a magician who whispered his command into her ears and then vanished?

“Ha, ha, ha”—the *Vaishnavi* roared with laughter. “Silly child, how can you see Guru maharaj? He comes silently like a breeze and whispers in *Mai*’s ears alone. He stays with *Mai* all the time, child. Day and night, wherever she goes, he goes with her and tells her not to be afraid—wherever she goes, whether the cremation ground, or the burning *ghats*.”

If she visited burning *ghats* and cremation grounds, how could she be a *Vaishnavi*, I wondered? Was she some *tantric*’s disciple? The hair on my neck rose as I remembered something that had happened recently in our neighbourhood. A *Vaishnavi* came one day to their house, planted her tongs in their courtyard and established herself there. The simple housewife allowed to her stay on. There were rumours that the *Vaishnavi* offered meat and alcohol when she did her *puja* and brought terrible times to the host’s family. First, they lost their newborn son, then the head of the family died and finally the lady of the house lost her mind. Then, as mysteriously as she had come, one day the *Vaishnavi* vanished. I began to tremble as I wondered whether this *Vaishnavi* was someone like that.

With her eyes still closed, my *Vaishnavi* began to speak in a low voice: “*Mai* was ten years old when she got married and sent to her husband’s home after four years. His name was Aan Singh and ran a flourishing transport company. His lorries ran all over the *terai*—Tanakpur, Haldwani and Almora. Half the petrol went into the lorries, the other half into his belly. Used to come back drunk and then mother and son took turns to thrash *Mai*. Go fetch some wood, they would tell her. Or,



go to the jungle and cut a bundle of grass for the animals at home. Often, they sent her to graze the buffalo in the jungle. No one ever fed her a morsel or gave her even a sip of water. That bloody buffalo was another evil spirit—she would make poor *Mai* run all over the jungle and exhaust her. If *Mai* ever asked her mother-in-law, ‘Can I visit my mother?’ The witch would brand her with hot tongs for her cheeky request.”

At this point, *Mai* propped her *chillum* against the tree and rolled up her clothes: Her torso was an ugly mass of weals, proof of the abuse she suffered in her husband’s home. So she was a woman, I realized as I glanced furtively at her wasted breasts.

“One day, when *Mai* was burning with fever, her mother-in-law ordered her to take the buffalo for grazing to the jungle,” she went on with her story. “*Mai* wept and pleaded, told her there was a leopard in the jungle too, and she said, ‘Good! If he eats you up, we’ll get a proper daughter-in-law for this house.’”

It seemed the wretched buffalo had been primed to torture *Mai* by the old hag: It was so frisky that day that *Mai* was run off her feet. Finally, the creature stood grazing at

the edge of a ravine that rose in a sheer precipice from the raging waters of the Kali Ganga in the valley. If anyone toppled over not even a fragment of bone would survive. *Mai* was really angry that day, child, angry at her hunger, angry at the old hag, angry at her drunkard husband and decide to take it all out on that buffalo. She gave it one heave and down it plunged—sailing over the precipice like a blade of grass.

Then *Mai* went home weeping and the old hag asked, ‘What happened? Where is the buffalo, you wretch?’

‘In the jungle, *saas-jyu*. Come I’ll show you,’ said *Mai*.

Her cursing, screaming mother-in-law followed *Mai* to the jungle to the same ravine. The old woman was a thin, fragile creature and *Mai* a strapping young woman...

‘Where is my precious buffalo,’ she screeched.

‘There,’ said *Mai*, and pushed the old bag of bones over the edge. She went like a blade of grass, child, like a blade of grass ...

When *Mai* reached home, a furious Aan Singh was waiting for her with an axe in his hands. Drunk out of his mind, his eyes burning like coals.

‘Where were you, whore,’ he yelled, ‘how you dare to come home alone? When you know a leopard roams that jungle, how did you dare to take my mother there?’ *Mai* was livid: the bastard could think of his mother and his wretched buffalo, had he ever spared a thought for *Mai*?

‘Your mother fell down a gorge,’ *Mai* wailed. ‘Come quickly with me, she is hanging from a tree, we may be able to rescue her yet...’

Aan Singh ran to the spot. He swiped a blow across *Mai*’s cheek saying, ‘What have you done to my mother? Where is she, you whore?’

‘There,’ said *Mai*, and shoved him down the sharp precipice to the raging Kali Ganga below. *Mai* never returned home after that, child, never. She went

to a cave where a Nepali Guru Maharaj lived, fell at his feet and confessed her crimes. Guru Maharaj accepted her as his disciple and said, ‘Go *Mai*, from now on roam the land and eat and wear what others give you. This is the penance you must perform for what you have done. From now on, remember, God alone will look after you, He is your only support...’”

The *Vaishnavi* picked up her tongs and bag, dusted herself and stood up laughing. “God bless you, child, *Mai* has to leave now...”

Before I could say anything or call my sister, she had descended the steps of the courtyard and vanished.

I used this masculine *Vaishnavi* as a character in two stories: *Lati* and *Dhuan*. Later, she made a sort of guest appearance in my novel *Chaudah Phere*. Her extraordinary story continues to haunt me till today. In one day, this woman had snuffed not one but three lives—a buffalo, a mother-in-law and a husband. And yet can anyone deny that she had a reason? No court heard of this triple murder, no lawmaker pronounced a judgement on her and no jailor kept her in prison. She became her own jailor and the chains on her feet were clamped there by her own conscience. What also caught my attention was the fourth murder she committed but never spoke of: when she stood at the edge of the precipice and decided to hurl her youth, her desires and aspirations forever into the raging torrents of the Kali Ganga. They floated down that ravine like a blade of grass and left a celibate *Vaishnavi* where a young girl once stood. Did any law court ever pronounce a more terrible punishment?

At this point, another prisoner of conscience stands before my eyes. I first met Rajula under the same walnut tree where the *Vaishnavi* had planted her tongs. Rajula carried a small tambourine in her hand and sang the *Riturain* songs of Spring in a high sweet voice. In the Almora of my childhood, bands of professional folk



singers would arrive in the month of March at the start of spring, and go from one prominent home to another to entertain them with the traditional folk songs of the season at *Chaitra baithaks*, or private spring concerts. Unlike professional singing girls, there was no trace of the bazaar about these women. They wore velvet *ghagras* trimmed with lace and their faces were discreetly veiled with *odhnis*. Their tinkling laughter rang through dull courtyards and lit up the lives of these stern Brahmin *havelis*.

Another, rather less attractive, tradition of those days also comes to my mind. Several older men from the high-born Brahmin families in Kumaon had installed a singing girl as a mistress in their homes. A ‘Ram’ was prefixed to the name of the singing girl to make it ‘kosher’ so that it was possible to meet a Ramkatori, Rampriya or Rampyari at an uncle’s house. Naturally, the most lively *Chaitra baithaks* were organized in homes where one of their own lived as the mistress of the householder. Unfortunately, no one in our neighbourhood had such a patroness but that did not stop us from running to the window whenever we heard a

band of them go singing their way to a *baithak*.

One day, I went across to a neighbouring relative’s house to borrow their newspaper. I barged into my granduncle’s private sitting area and will never forget what I saw. My granduncle, cigar in hand, was reclining on a bolster surrounded by giggling *apsaras*(nymphs). My eyes were dazzled by the colours of their bright clothes and the scent of their bodies. It seemed as if someone had sprinkled a dozen bottles of perfume in the room. For a moment, the old man was nonplussed at the sight of his grandniece but recovered his composure quickly. With remarkable aplomb, considering his posture and surroundings, he asked me kindly, “What brings you here, child?”

“I wanted to borrow *The Statesman*,” I stammered.

“Oh, is this your granddaughter, *Lalla*? We must sing the first song of *Chaitra* for her, in that case,” one *apsara* smiled. And before my granduncle or I could say anything, I was surrounded like a queen bee by her worker bees by their honey-sweet voices:

*‘May this auspicious day
Come a thousand times
In the lives of our daughters...’*

I was touched, caressed and smothered with those hands and voices. Unused to such loving touches on my body, I was nearly reduced to tears with embarrassment. Sensing my discomfiture, my granduncle said sharply, “What is all this? Go child,” he said gently to me, “the paper is lying there. Pick it up and take it home.”

The old man was a widower and childless to boot. Perhaps his mistress, longing for a child to fuss over, was responsible for that episode. Years later, Maupassant’s *Madame Tellier’s Establishment* reminded me strongly of that day. Maupassant’s story is about the madame of a brothel, Madame Tellier’s, who takes her lively, giggling

band of prostitutes to attend a niece's baptism. He describes brilliantly the havoc that ensues in the Catholic home of her brother as this exotic band of Parisian butterflies descends on a simple village.

My ears still ring with the sweet *Riturain* song, set to *Raga Desh*, that they sang for me that day.

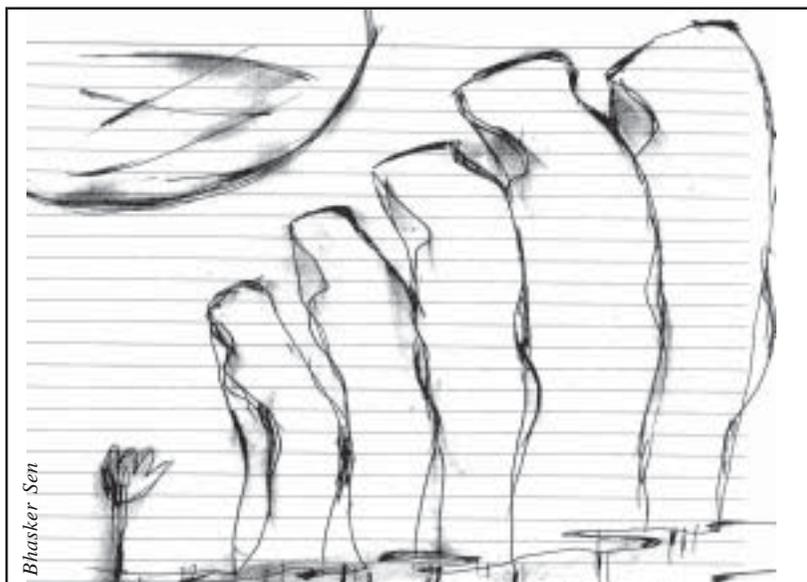
*'May this auspicious day
Come a thousand times
In the lives of our daughters...'*

So when Rajula came with her tambourine to our courtyard, singing the same song I was stunned. She was dark and her eyes were deep pools of sadness. Her sweet voice had an attractive break and a nasal twang, like the poignant wail of a *shehnai*. I now realize that she was probably syphilitic for her nose had collapsed and that is probably why her voice had that nasal quality.

"What shall I sing for you, *lalli*?" she asked me. "*Riturain, Pari Chanchari* or *Ramola*...?"

She came almost every day and her fund of folksongs had all of us eating out of her hands. She generously shared her treasure trove with me and I eagerly learnt as many as I could to take back to Santiniketan. Kanika Devi, Jyotishdev Burman, Suchitra Mitra were my contemporaries and we often used these lovely *pahari* tunes in our impromptu concerts. *Tilak Kamod, Desh* and *Durga*—these were the three *ragas* that gave life to the folksongs of Kumaon. Rajula had learnt them from her mother and given them a flavour all her own. She was born to sing and when I hear the Malwa folksongs that Kumar Gandharva sings, I remember her artless and unself-conscious singing with new respect. She took a note to the highest pitch and left it there to float in silence—then after a pause she would pick it up from the base and play with it as if it the song was a kite.

She had no accompaniments, just a small battered tambourine. Often she



lit a flame to warm its sagging skin and bring it to life. Then, she would shut her eyes, place a hand on her ear and sing. When she sang "*Beru Pako bara masa*..." that famous *Kaumaoni* folksong that everyone has heard, I swear even the walnuts on our tree turned red with passion.

"Rajula, where did you learn to sing like this?" I asked her once.

"From Him," she closed her eyes and pointed heavenwards.

No human being could have given her that voice, so Rajula was right, her voice had to be a divine gift. She sang all the *Riturain* songs—*Bhagnaula, Ramola*, the lot—but when she sang a hymn called *Kariye Chhima* (Forgive me), she was at her best.

*'What I have said, or left unsaid
What I heard, or did not hear
What I did, or left undone
Forgive me for all that, my Lord!'*

She would go into a trance, her eyes streaming with tears as she asked Him for forgiveness. I have seen her move her audience to tears when she sang her special song.

"Why do you have to beg when you have such a voice, Rajula?" I asked once. By now, she and I had a special bond that grew from our shared love for music. Rajula became silent.

"Don't ask, *lalli*. By the grace of people such as yourself, Rajula earned so much that I could have built ten such palaces for myself by now," she replied pointing to our haveli. For a moment, something like pride lit up the pools of darkness in her eyes.

"So?" I prompted her, "where did all that money go?"

"Into the river," she said and dropped the tambourine into her lap.

"Don't joke, Rajula," I held her hands as I begged her. "Tell me where that money went."

"What is the use of that, *lalli*?" she asked sadly. "You come from a high-born Brahmin home, *lalli*, your touch can wash away the sins of a fallen woman like me. You are my *gangajal, lalli*, I cannot hold your hand and lie. I threw away forty *tolas* of gold..."

"Forty *tolas* of gold?" I gasped.

"Yes, *lalli*," she nodded tonelessly.

"Not just that," she went on. "Four thousand silver coins with Vittoria's face on them, I threw those into the Bhagirathi as well."

"But why did you do such an insane thing, Rajula? You have to beg for your food now, why, when you had so much, did you...?"

“There was a reason, *lalli*, I had sinned. Committed a heinous crime. I was just not caught, that’s all. God must have shut His eyes that day”, she said and gave a wan smile. Then her pale face went paler and she muttered, “I killed someone, *lalli*.”

I held my breath.

“I killed my own son.”

I peered into her face but her eyes were dry, perhaps she had used up all her tears.

“Why,” I whispered. “Why did you do such a thing, Rajula?”

“Because he was the spitting image of his father, *lalli*. When I could see his father’s features in his face from the minute he was born, just imagine what would happen when he grew up and went out in the world? Everyone would know whose child he was.” She took a deep breath and went on in a steady voice, “So I took him to the river, shut my eyes and held him there until he drowned.”

What a strange woman this was! Most mothers would consider it a

badge of pride to give birth to a son who resembled his father and here was Rajula, who had killed hers for this reason.

“You won’t undersand, *lalli*, she answered my unspoken question as she patted me kindly. My whole village used to worship his father and after all, I was not even his wedded wife. I was a lowly singing girl, God’s handmaiden, the fallen scarlet woman of the village. How could I let his name be tarnished? I ran away from the village that night and dropped all my worldly goods in the Bhagirathi. Don’t ask me what I have suffered and where I went after that, *lalli*. May God forgive us all!” She touched her hands reverently to her forehead.

“God punished me for that crime: I lost my voice, dreadful sores broke out all over my body, *lalli*. I was like a leper who people shunned and moved away from. Occasionally a kind soul would toss a few coins my way as I lay under a tree. And the nightmares!” She shuddered as she recalled them.

“I dreamt my clothes were drenched with the milk from my breasts, I wanted to scream but no sound came from my throat any more. Then one day, I sang *Kariye Chhima*, the song you love. And a miracle took place. My voice came back! The voice I had lost. Now I walk from home to home and sing *Kariye Chhima, lalli*. This is the penance God has decided I must perform and I bow to His Will.”

Rajula must have died singing that song by now but her tambourine and the tinkle of her voice come back ever so often to me. Years later, Rajula became the heroine of my novella, *Kariye Chhima*, and I felt as if I had finally been able to repay the woman who taught me more beautiful music than I ever heard.

Rajula and the *Vaishnavi* opened my eyes to a truth that I have grappled with ever since. That there is no jail on earth that can shackle a free spirit and no spirit so free that its feet cannot be bound in chains we cannot see.

Concluded □

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