

ALL the children eyed mother's little carved box with greed. Even their father. It was a small, compact box of rosewood. Inside it was a tray divided into smaller compartments. Underneath the tray, the dark space reminded one of a lumber room; strongly built, it was like a solid block of wood when shut. In front of it was a narrow hole to fit an iron key and on either side, ornately carved brass handles for lifting the box. Yes, mother's box was more like her face: noble and wise. Just as one look at her calm, unruffled countenance revealed the priceless, exalted quality of her mind, the sight of the locked box gave an indication of the invaluable things stored inside. Just as Ma's face brought on an inexplicable joy, the box filled the mind with sheer delight.

It was Ma's very own box, which had come with her as a part of her dowry. Every bride carried one of these to her husband's house. All other things could be used by the members of the husband's family, but the little box was meant exclusively for the bride. There was some money kept inside, wrapped in silk for her personal needs. She could not ask anyone for money when she reached her husband's place, could she? How would she be able to tip the messenger who brought sweetmeats and fruit from her father's house? That itself was an act of honour to her in-laws. There were times when she would have to hand out small amounts of money to the younger ones in the new household as gestures of her affection — again, a mark of honour to her own parents!

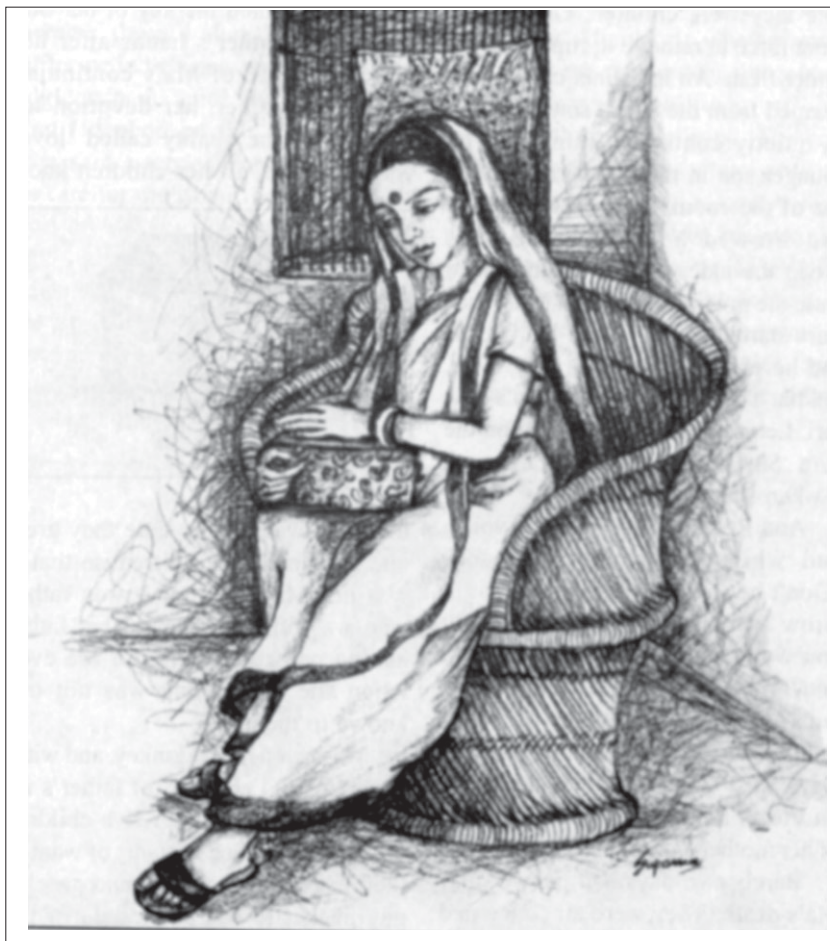
Besides this, the newly wedded bride had nothing which she could spend of her will. It was just that little box she could call her own; and it seemed to whisper confidences into her ears all the time. The daughters-in-law of those days stifled both the

SHORT STORY

The Little Carved Box

Pratibha Ray

Translated from Oriya by Jayanta Mahapatra



inadequacies of her father's house and the indignities of her husband's family — holding herself back and going through life without uttering a word — like the little locked box, as their own mother had done.

Ma never let the key of the box out of her hands. Even when death overtook her and she lay on her bed, the worn key was tied to her sari. At

that time the eldest daughter-in-law had boldly removed the key before Ma's body could be draped in a new sari. Her throat was dry and her heart was thumping away in fear as she realised that her mother-in-law lay dead. And amid a gripping disquietude she feared that the corpse's icy hand might suddenly fall upon her own and wrest the key of the cherished box

from her fingers. The eldest son stood there staring like a lump of wood, his heart torn in grief, while they removed the ornaments from Ma's dead body, one piece after another. There was no other way but to obey the cruel rules of the world. Would mother ever know whether her gold jewellery was burnt with her on the pyre?

When it came to the tiny nose stud they had seen on Ma's face from the time they were children, Uncle used some force to remove it, rupturing the tender flesh. An indistinct cry of pain escaped from the eldest son's lips but he quietly controlled himself. The younger son in the meantime slipped out of the room, held back his sobs and showed how tough he was. When the eldest son's wife began to untie the precious key from Ma's sari, tears started rolling down his cheeks and he protested weakly, "Let it be, Rekha. Tie the key back to Ma's new sari. Let it burn along with Ma on the pyre. She never allowed us to touch it when she was alive."

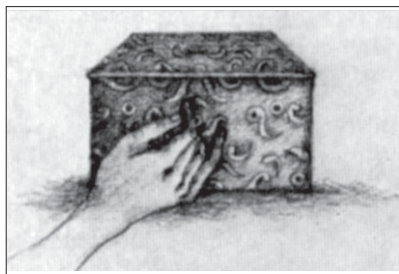
And Rekha, in a consoling voice, had whispered to her husband, "Don't be stubborn as a child! You'll throw away the key on the pyre, but you won't throw away the box, will you? Who knows what the box contains? Perhaps the savings of a lifetime... You know how thrifty she always was!" And Rekha broke down into tears as she recalled the virtues of her mother-in-law.

Barely two days had passed after Ma's death. They were all concerned as to who would open the box. No one knew what valuables Ma had stored inside, but while she had lain withering away to the last day of her life because of father's indifference, she had not spent a single paisa on herself. She didn't even disclose what she had left behind for each of them. Certain that the lamp of her life was going out, they had urged her, "Do you have anything to say, Ma? Any-

thing, whatever you wish! Any wish you would like to be carried out?"

Like her little strong box, she had kept silent. She said nothing before she died, but just before the end came, she held on to her eldest son's arm and mumbled, "My box...". The rest of her words was unclear. Ma's mellow voice had floated away to the other side.

It was, however, understood that Ma never wanted the key of her box to fall into father's hands after her death. In spite of Ma's continuing respect for father, her devotion towards him, the quality called 'love' was not there, all her children knew



this very well by the time they grew up. They had come to realise that it was not Ma's failing; it was father who was fully to blame. That father had no particular liking for Ma even when she was young was not unknown to them.

Ma slaved like a donkey, and within the limited confines of father's income saw to it that her five children did not experience any sort of want in their lives. Father would hand over his pay packet to Ma at the end of the month, but from the very next day start demanding money from her for his extravagances. Ma kept persisting, "Look, there's no more money. I have to borrow now and then to run the house. Have you any idea how much you have taken already? Do you want the children to starve in the end? You may look after the household expenses yourself and spend as much as you wish."

The children had got Ma's words by heart after a while; they knew that after her harangue, she would in the end open her box and place the few rupees she could spare on to father's outstretched palm.

Whenever the children pestered her for some pin money, Ma groused, "What! Do you think your father is a millionaire! As if he gives me stacks of money month after month so that the children and their father can spend as they like! Here, hack my limbs, and sell them! The children realised that Ma was only venting her anger against their father even when she raved at them. They also knew that their mother would stomp her feet in open rage as she walked to her room.

And then, gently, she would open her precious silk-wrapped strong box with a soft click and hand out small change to each one of them. Sorrowful because she had scolded the children, her face would mellow and soften like the earth after a heavy shower of rain, and Ma would go on to fondle them, a touch, a tender caress, a sigh escaping from her like a soft surruration in newborn leaves at the first breeze of spring.

She would then mutter under her breath, "If your father only gave more thought to the home, this money would be enough for our needs. Why would they beg for an extra paisa or two and be reprimanded?" And the children would knowingly linger on to hear Ma's words after they had got their share.

In no time the children would seemingly sprout wings at Ma's sympathetic words and skip off happily to school. In their young minds Ma's little carved box would assume the form of a never-emptying magic casket. For money always appeared to flow from it; some amount was always there, maybe stuck in a corner. It was Ma's auspicious hand which kept the box

filled, as each paisa kept adding up. All the household expenses — father's lavish spending, school fees, the children's pin money, and the expenses for festivals and social obligations — were met from this source.

About once in a year Ma settled down to rearrange her box with great care. It was one of the happiest days for the children. Even at this age it is difficult to forget the delight of that moment. Ma and her five children would sit around the precious box, the light of joy and curiosity in their eyes. As if Ma's box contained all the priceless goods of the world! Tiny metal containers with gold nose studs, earrings, gold chains and necklaces, even hair-pieces and armlets — small and big items of jewellery which were in use in those days filled Ma's strong box.

Ma polished the jewellery she had brought along from her parents and stored them with care. She used a few necessary ornaments. She knew it was a dream to be able to make an ornament for herself with father's limited income and his reckless spending; it wouldn't even be possible to make any for the weddings of their three daughters; or to make gold rings for the bride-seeing rituals when her sons were to be married.

Some envelopes of various sizes were in the box — land deeds, important receipts. Wrapped in silk were a few of her father's letters, mementos of invaluable moments with her dead father. Perhaps these were the rarest of all the possessions in Ma's box. Ma read the

letters each time she sat down to rearrange her box. She would recall her father, seeing his handwritten notes. Eyes flushed with tears, she'd tell herself, "The man is dead and gone, but the bit of paper lives on. The writing is there as though written the day before! Human life doesn't measure up to a piece of paper! But does that irresponsible father of yours realise this? He goes on wasting his life with drugs. Do my words have any value? A mere slave, I slog day and night, suffering indignities, perhaps to die of neglect in the end! But who cares? Can I depend on this man? Has he ever said a tender word to me? Will he care for me when I am old and ill? It is my destiny. Did my father have any inkling of this man's true nature when he gave me in marriage to him? He appeared very pleasant on the outside. Why should I blame my father?"

The children would patiently hear

her words and quip cheekily. "But mother dear, we are there to look after you. Let him not care!" And in an instant Ma's sorrowful countenance would light up with compassion. In a sudden gesture of affection, she'd blurt out, "Go on, who knows when you will be grown-ups! God only knows. I have left you to His care. Be one among the better people in this world. Don't follow in your father's footsteps. That itself will be my life's fulfillment. Afterwards, whether you'll look after me or not does not matter.

Mother was talking, without doubt, with father in mind. The conversations invariably ended with father, howsoever they began. As they grew older, the children realised that Ma had to regain her peace of mind by expressing her pent-up feelings in his absence, unable as she was to speak out before her heartless husband. Or else it would have been hard for her to live.



Thanks to Ma's selfless dedication, the sons were well-settled in life by the time father retired from service. Even the three daughters had been given a good education and married off respectably. It was the ever-full box of mother which had paid for the higher education of the sons and the wedding expenses of the daughters.

Ma's real misfortunes in life started after father's retirement. Father continued to ask for money from Ma as in the past, but she could not meet his daily demands. The children came to know that father did not shirk to strike her even in her advanced age. For like the children, father too was under the impression that Ma's little box was always full of money.

Mother never agreed, however, to go and live with her sons. She would silence them with, "Will that inhuman being relent if I walk off to live in comfort with my children? On the other hand he'll sell off the house and spend all the money! And he will ruin his health. Whose loss would it be? Only your father's, isn't it?"

At times her sons and daughters would exclaim in sheer exasperation, "Let her live with him if she chooses to, and suffer father's brutalities! If she'd only leave him for a while and stay away, he would realise her worth, go down on his knees perhaps to have her back!"

But Ma merely smiled then and said, "Do you feel your father will appreciate your mother's worth even when she's dead? Does he have any feelings, a heart? I've lived on here for fear of what people might say. And for all of you, my children. If it weren't for you, I'd have ended my life long ago."

The children would try another ruse. "We'll send you more money to spend. Hand it over to father. Then

maybe he will treat you better." But Ma would retort in a stern voice, "As wrong as it is for a father to let his sons have enough to spend extravagantly, it is equally unethical for a son to give such money to his father. Your father shall never be in want as long as I'm alive. It doesn't mean that I'll allow him to squander away my sons' hard-earned money. Your money should be spent in running your homes well. Save a little for illnesses and emergencies. There's always enough rice here for us to manage."

In truth, Ma had never made demands on father for any luxuries for herself. Nor had she ever asked her well-placed sons for money to spend on herself. Even without father's earn-



ings, Ma always appeared to have enough, like the goddess Lakshmi. Who knew how much she had saved in that box of hers?

Towards the end, Ma never gave a single paisa to father. When he demanded money, she snapped at him, "Where can I get you money? There's nothing in the box. I can't go on begging your sons for your shoddy expenses! Do what you like." And father would shamelessly demand, "Give me the key. I want to see for myself."

Ma would cry out in alarm, "No. Never! You dare not open my box even after my death! I'll tell the chil-

dren. They'd rather throw the box in the pyre than let you touch it!" And because of the resentment father harboured against Ma's box, his ill-treatment towards her increased. Still, Ma refused to hand over the key to him. If, perhaps, father had found out for himself that the box contained nothing, his doubts would have disappeared. Ma's stubborn attitude irked the children at times; they felt that her old age was responsible for her seeming obstinacy.

Ma, however, continued to open her precious little box at least once a day. Who knew what she did behind closed doors? But when she opened her door and came out, her sad visage seemed to lighten up with a smile, as though water had been sprinkled on a wilted flower. Father would fly into a rage and shout at her, "You ill-bred woman! Go, count your money in secret! Carry it with you to the pyre! Just wait and see whether I don't spend all that money in a single day!"

The children also imagined that Ma was counting out the money in her room. Why else would she open that box of hers? Why didn't she give father the key? And the daughters-in-law inferred that she must have hidden away some valuable

jewellery, perhaps some of her savings to reassure herself in her last days. She had never spent any money on herself all her life; and even if she had saved a bit, it was never for herself. Who else would inherit it but her sons?

Ma was not that old. It was her loveless life and Father's persistent cruelty and inconsiderateness which had emptied her entire being. Once she fell ill, she took to her bed, unable to recover till the end. She had a brief illness, and then she was gone.

She had overheard the children blaming their father as they talked in

low tones around her bed and had remarked, “Your father was not always like this. He was a good, kind man. A few months after our marriage, he left the village to work in the city. I remained behind. Finally when I arrived to live with him, he had changed. Bad company had made him lapse into wasteful ways. He had turned inhuman. As long as I had lived in the village, I was at peace, hearing praises showered on him. That was my only period of happiness. And then, everything went up in flames.”

It was difficult for the children to believe that father had been a kind man once, and that there had been some love between mother and him. They had never observed any such show of sentiment. Nor did they see father grieve even when she died. They had not seen tears in his eyes, ever. His whole being remained as though shut towards Ma, shut in like a stone.

Today the key of mother’s precious little box has upset everyone in the family. Who was to open it? Nobody had the courage to do so. Ma had gone without giving anyone the necessary permission. Quite the contrary, she had asked her sons to burn the box with her on the pyre. But now, the box had to be opened somehow. Certainly Ma must have left behind some valuables, jewellery and money. It could not be that the box was completely empty.

Nobody could gather enough courage. Finally, the key was placed in the hand of the 18-year-old grandson, the college-going Uday. He was the fittest one to open it, they decided, for he alone as a child had been headstrong enough to open the box with Ma’s key — whereas Ma had never given such permission to any of her sons.

Uday slowly opened the box. Inside there were a number of containers and holders. The three sons and



their wives leaned forward to peer inside. The familiar aroma of Ma’s hands mingled with the box’s worn, sweet smells entered their nostrils. Soothing, soul-filling. But had Ma really left behind a lot of jewellery?

All the containers seemed empty — not even a nose-stud anywhere. Uday gingerly felt around the bottom with his hand. There was not even a coin, nothing. What had Ma been

father had somehow learnt of this — perhaps Ma’s only weakness in spite of her many virtues — and therefore went on to ill-treat her throughout her life. Was that why Ma would never give anyone the key?

“A love letter!” The smirk in Uday’s voice was obvious as he started reading it aloud. “My heart’s goddess, beloved Tilottama! The world is a curse without you...” Uday’s father snatched the letter from the boy’s hand and in sheer frustration shouted at him, “Get out of here! Who asked you to open Ma’s box? You’ve just entered college and you are behaving like an adult! All sorts of important documents inside; suppose they are mislaid!”

Uday slunk out of the room sensing his father’s helplessness. A know-



doing then in secret? Why was she so stubborn about not giving Father the key? Uday searched around the corners once again. Resting on the bottom was an ornate brass casket. But what was inside it?

A letter, folded twice. In between the folds, the photograph of a young man. The yellowed, discoloured picture clearly showed that the youth must be old now. Did Ma have a lover then?

Somewhat embarrassed by the disclosure, all of them tried to turn their eyes away from the picture. And the sons began to wonder whether

ing smile played about his lips. That unromantic, moralising grandmother of his was once somebody’s sweetheart! He couldn’t believe his eyes. Who had been her lover? And she had loved him with such unflinching passion that she had treasured the letter until her death!

Uday’s father retrieved the letter from under his wife’s inquisitive gaze and was hurriedly pushing it into its envelope when his eyes, because of that irresistible desire to find out who Ma’s lover was, fell suddenly on the last two lines. The next instant full realisation dawned on him as he read

the name at the end of the letter, and he turned into a lump of wood. The letter ended: "...I enclose a photograph, taken especially for you. Let all your anger be spent on it... Your unbecoming husband, Nirranjan."

It was hard to recognise father from the youthful features in the photograph. That one letter from her lover which Ma had clung to all her life as her priceless possession had been written by their father, Nirranjan. It enabled Ma to gain her strength from this very possession to live out her miserable existence. On this photograph of father had piled up all Ma's anger and pain and wounded pride. That single letter penned by father to Ma when she was left behind in the village in which he expressed his love for her, was what she had saved in an entire life-time, a momentary message like the fleeting touch of spring. Indeed, how deep was her love for father!

The eldest daughter-in-law's eyes turned moist as she looked at her husband with a newly found comprehension. What other priceless gift could have Ma left behind but this — the gift of this knowledge that she had given everything of hers to her husband, loving him till the very end without getting anything in return? Had she herself been capable of such love in the years together with her husband? Sulekha couldn't suppress the sobs which engulfed her whole being as she recollected Ma's unwavering devotion.

The next day the eldest son handed over the key of Ma's box to father with a straight face. It appeared as though father had been waiting for this all along. He strode lightheartedly into Ma's room and swiftly shut the door. He had been muttering to himself, "The mean woman that she was, skimping all



her life, what did she carry with her in the end? I'll empty her hoard in a day!"

There came to their ears the sound of a box being opened. Then, all was silent for a while. Suddenly, something new drifted in - the sounds of father's uncontrollable sobbing. The heartrending cries of a child! "Tilottama, I am inhuman, barbaric! I failed to understand you. I robbed you of your happiness, never giving you anything in return. How will I live, Tilottama? I don't want to anymore!" And in moth-

er's closed room, father broke down over her opened carved box.

Eyes flushed with tears, both sons stood near the door listening to the language of father's finally opened heart. Like the opened box of their long suffering mother after her death, father's heart had loosened out at last. But Ma was not there to see it. She had left behind the world she had built with her own hands — her own precious box. She had gone far beyond all hopes and desires. □

An Appeal To Our Subscribers

A lot of copies of **Manushi** get lost or stolen in the mail. We appeal to you to let us know if your copy of **Manushi** is not reaching you. A sure sign that you didn't receive an issue due to you is when your subscription skips one or more numbers - for example, if you get **Manushi** 86 & 88 but not **Manushi** 87.

It is very important to us that you stay closely connected with **Manushi** and do not miss any issue. Therefore, we make it a point to send duplicate copies when a subscriber writes to let us know about copies not received. However, we can send duplicate copies only if you let us know within FOUR months.

Please help us to reach you with every issue.