

**Y**OU may find this ridiculous, but it is true...

There came a time in my life when I became envious of Pochamma.

How can that be?

Pochamma is an agricultural labourer. She is illiterate. She doesn't know if she will eat her next meal ... and ... I am the grand daughter of a landlord ... a respectable Brahmin landlord at that.

This may sound preposterous... .

I was envious of Pochamma because of her goddess.

Pochamma's goddess was a squat formless stone with two large fish shaped eyes drawn on her featureless face. Whenever I looked at Pochamma's goddess I could not help comparing her with mine. My goddess was beautiful, with smooth white skin and a slender waist. Adorned by the most beautiful jewels, studded with precious stones, my goddess looked ethereal and distant.

Pochamma's goddess lived in a low roofed mud temple that was more modest than Pochamma's own mud house. My goddess lived in a grand temple where the *kalash* touched the skies. Its huge halls were supported by the most exquisitely carved pillars and surrounded by bright fascinating murals.

Pochamma went in and out of her temple at will. There were no fixed hours for *puja*, there were no ceremonies... and ... there were no priests.

The goddess in my temple was housed in the *garbha griha*, sanctum sanctorum deep inside the temple complex. The priest stood right in the middle of the *garbha griha* obstructing the view of the goddess. I often came away dissatisfied with the *darshan*. The timings for the *arti* and *darshan* were fixed. If I missed it, it was all over. The heavily carved wooden doors with ornate brass handles closed to shut me out.

At home I was constantly chastised for not learning my prayers. I found it

## STORY

# Pochamma's Goddess

○ Radha D'Souza

hard to remember the long verses in Sanskrit. Pochamma simply chatted with her goddess. She walked in whenever she felt like and squatted beside her goddess,

*Amma...* she always addressed her as mother. I had to address my goddess as "Devi."

"*Amma*, now you tell me... what should I do? That *sowcar* wants his interest payment right away... where can I find the money? Now if my Rajanna had sent some money home I could have paid him... that boy has lost his job... he is coming home."

After harvest Pochamma carried the first sheaf of corn she cut to her goddess. She walked coquettishly with a broad grin on her face, "*Amma!* Look what I have brought you. This time you

have given me a good harvest... but I need to pay off the *sowcar*. Be happy with so much. When you help me pay off my debts I will bring you a whole chicken... better still get my Rajanna a good job—a permanent one—and I will sacrifice a fat goat... did you hear that."

She laughed mischievously as she placed the corn before her goddess. She caressed her goddess. She cracked the knuckles of her fingers on both her temples as a gesture of endearment.

I always felt amazed at the casual way in which Pochamma touched her goddess, even caressed her!

We were strictly forbidden from going too close to our goddess. Even the priest had to abide by strict rules. At home when cleaning the pictures or statues or lamps at the little shrine in the *puja* room, we had to bathe, wash our hair and attend to the cleaning in wet clothes. Or else everything in the room got polluted. A complicated ritual of washing everything and sprinkling the room with Ganga-water followed. When I had my periods even my shadow could not fall on my goddess. That was a very serious offence. I sometimes wondered what Pochamma did at such times.

Once I asked her rather shamelessly, "Pochamma do you go to your temple when you have your periods?"

She held the *pallav* of her saree to her mouth, bashful... "How you talk *akka*,"

She always addressed me as the older sister, even though I was at least



ten or twelve years younger. I was after all the grand daughter of a Brahmin landlord.

Pochamma never seemed afraid of her goddess. Her goddess was never known to be angry. In all the folklore and legends narrated during festivals and story telling sessions after harvest, Pochamma's goddess was always the giver of bounties, a friend of her devotees.

My goddess could become angry. When displeased she was the destroyer—she carried arms, waged wars, annexed territories, killed many demons and others she considered evil.

Whenever I visited our home in the village during vacations, I could not help making such comparisons.

Time went by... I completed my B.A. My family found a suitable alliance. I was married to an engineer who worked for the state electricity board. I forgot all about Pochamma and her goddess.



About four and half years after my marriage, a few days before my twenty-fifth birthday, my husband died suddenly. My world crashed.

Even now the memory of the tenth day ceremonies curdles my blood. Despite the years, I find it hard to forget the women who gathered around me wailing and beating their breasts. They opened out my hair, they broke the glass bangles on my wrists, they removed my anklets and toe rings, wailing all the while. My mother beat her head and cried, "What sin have I committed. Oh Devi! these hands that ought to adorn my child — now must these very hands remove the nose ring from the child of my womb."

My grandmother mumbled as she wept, "Why did you not take me instead? I would have come gladly. I had planned to give this child bangles set in ruby when her womb was filled... how I looked forward to the seventh month ceremonies... and now you make me remove her bangles... with my own

hands. Must a grandmother live to do this?"

While all this was going on, I could hear heated arguments among the men about social progress. They said in the old days on the tenth day the barber was called and the widow's hair shaved off... she was draped in unbleached *saree*, which was her only dress for the rest of her life. How inhuman all that was. Our society had to keep pace with changing times. Of the sixteen adornments of a married woman, *we* now let *them* keep the hair and coloured clothes, they said.

Someone suggested this was because many Brahmin families were entirely dependent on jobs in the cities for their livelihood. They were reluctant to support their widowed daughters and sisters. If the widowed daughters and sisters had to work it was only proper that they kept their hair and wore normal colours.

Others were angry. They denied such crass reasoning vociferously. "It is not that ... nowadays girls are educated ... they understand the need for *self-restraint* and choose to lead an ascetic life of their own inner volition. It is not necessary to be brutal or use



physical force... ”

"Look what happened after the Hindu Reform Bills ... it was brought into force nearly 50 years ago, but how many Brahmin women remarry? They will not do it. Just because some cronies of the British put some sinful things into the law books... it cannot negate thousands of years of virtuous upbringing our women have had."

By then I recall, it was time to wipe off the *sindoor* from my forehead and remove the *mangal sutra* from my neck. There was such a chorus of wailing in the women's section that the men stopped talking. I went to live with my parents. I knew I would never be sent to work. My parents and grandparents were wealthy people and I was their only daughter.



This may sound outrageous... I don't care any more.

When a woman loses her husband she is supposed to give up all desires and move *forward* towards an ascetic phase of life, skipping the phases in between. What actually happens is quite the opposite. She regresses... she becomes a single woman once again. Which means she is filled with all kinds of desires.

That is what happened to me...

I had never been too fixated on sarees or jewellery. I wore them because it was required of a married woman to have all the sixteen adornments. Now I *wanted* to wear beautiful clothes. I *wanted* to look attractive. I often gazed into the mirror and sighed. My desire to dress up and look attractive became obsessive.

I bought myself nail varnish. Why not? Henna was prohibited but there was no reference to nail varnish in the Scriptures. I bought lipstick. Surely I thought it is not the same thing as *paan*. I even bought high-heeled slippers. I stopped wearing the ash mark on my forehead. If I could not wear *sindoor* I was not going to wear anything. That way I could look

modern... people would not *know* I was a widow.

There was a great deal of uneasiness about all this in the house.

“I don’t know where all this is leading to,” my mother would sigh as she followed me about the house.

There was an air of expectancy in the community as people whetted their minds waiting for a nice spicy scandal to break out ... in such a respectable family too!

My father finally decided to take matters in hand. He attributed my behaviour to the corrupting influences of city life—advertisements, cinemas, hoardings, television—someone my age could not escape such influences, he reasoned.

He sent me to the village to live with my grandparents. Everyone acclaimed his decision as a wise one.

I returned to my village after a gap of over five years.



About this time Pochamma too underwent bereavement. Her son Rajanna, barely twenty-four, was killed by the police in an ‘encounter’. He was suspected of helping the Naxalites. Nobody dared to ask what the basis of the suspicion was. Who would?

Pochamma was possessed by sorrow. She walked towards her goddess swaying and abusing, “What have you done? ... I called you *Amma*... have you turned deaf... have you become a stone... can’t you hear any more... can’t you see any more... what has happened to your heart ... have you thrown it away?”

She said all this punctuated by the choicest abuses.

“When you filled my womb, I offered you rice, pulses and coconut... when he was born I sacrificed a chicken ... and now this is how you repay me... see what you get now.”

She gathered mud from the ground and hurled it at the goddess.

“Take this ... and this ... and this...”



She yelled hysterically as balls of mud came flying and besmirched the goddess.

Pochamma then banged her head on the goddess. Blood trickled from her forehead and smeared the goddess. She clung to the formless shape and wept like a child.

I stood there, transfixed.

I too wanted to throw mud at my goddess. I wanted to ask her, “Why have you done this to me?”

But, with my goddess I could only ask, “What have *I* done?”

I knew all her answers. My goddess had a condescending smile. Everything that happened to me was due to my own misdeeds. I could not ask, “Name one misdeed of mine.”

I knew the answers. It was because of things I had done in my previous life or the one before that or perhaps the one even before that... my *karma* was to blame... and how could I say anything about my misdeeds in the earlier lives?

None of this angered me so much as the realization that my goddess was always with a male consort. She was never alone.

Pochamma’s goddess was simply ‘Mother’ to everybody. She was always alone... even in the stories that

were told about her there was no mention of her ever having had a husband or consort... and... it did not seem to matter to anybody that she did not have one.



I began to visit Pochamma’s goddess more regularly—not just seeing her from the outside. One day I took heart and went inside her temple like her own people. At first it seemed odd... there were no taboos... no rules... no restraints of any kind... no intimidating priests. By and by as I became familiar with the atmosphere I began to like it immensely.

Tensions revived at home.

“Why don’t you go to our temple?” my grandmother would say, “Go to the *Devi* and surrender yourself to her, you will feel better.”

I did not like to go to my temple any more. I was not allowed into the sanctum sanctorum any longer. I could not receive the flowers and coconuts from the priests ... the crown from the goddess’s head was not put on mine as a symbol of blessing any more. I had to stand in the main hall and watch the *puja* from a distance. I felt shut out.

One day I asked Pochamma, “Do you think your goddess will listen to me the way she listens to you?”

She was distressed. She beat her forehead with her hands, “*Amma*, why did this have to happen to *akka*... *akka* is so nice...”

I noticed she did not answer my question. Nor did she blame her goddess for my fate... how could she?

I found myself talking to Pochamma’s goddess ... but I could not bring myself to converse aloud like Pochamma.

One day I ventured closer to the goddess. I ran my hands over her squat formless shape... perhaps it was the act of caressing... I don’t know how it happened... I found myself speaking aloud to the goddess, “*Amma*, please don’t think I am not yours, let me ask you one favour... just one favour... I

promise I won't ask for anything more..." I held her in my hands endearingly. "I will give you anything you ask for..."

At that, the words stuck like a lump in my throat ... what could I give Pochamma's goddess? My jewellery was in the custody of my parents. I had no source of income... I had to ask my father or grandfather for everything I needed... besides, we did not eat or sacrifice chicken.

A sense of despair swept over me. I broke down and sobbed, "Amma, please don't forsake me... deliver me from this state ... even if I cannot give you anything, consider me your child... and... and..."

The words spluttered... "Amma, find me a husband..."

The moment I uttered those words, a powerful current ran through my entire body... how could I entertain such thoughts? How could such thoughts formulate into words? And, how could such words be uttered? ...Actually uttered by the mouth? ...Was Pochamma's goddess already overpowering me? ... Did She actually consider me one of her own kind? ... Such ideas may come to her people ... but I was a Brahmin!

I ran from the temple. That evening I was delirious with fever. My grandmother was very happy.

"She is coming around," she said. "That is how it always happens, especially when the girl is young ... it may take several such deliriums."

She beat her forehead in disgust. "A woman's birth is a wretched one... may even my worst enemy not be born a woman... desires do not leave a woman so easily."

My grandmother nursed me with great affection. She even neglected my grandfather. The fever subsided. I recovered.

My grandmother gave me a lot of tips to help me overcome desire. Her tips included bathing in cold water as it restored peace to the body, not eating

pickles or spicy food as they excited 'desire', not looking at the mirror and of course reciting verses in Sanskrit praising the goddess ... 'our' goddess.

A month or two later I went to see Pochamma's goddess. It was an involuntary act. To my great surprise, the atmosphere around the mud temple had changed completely. Under the huge banyan tree next to the mud temple, a crowd had gathered. They were listening intently to a speaker who was arguing something vehemently. I had never seen the speaker before. I turned back without entering the temple ... what with all those people there.

Whenever I went the speaker was there. He started talking to me, "How is it that you come to *this* temple?" he asked.

This was the first sentence he ever spoke to me.

"I feel good ... that's why..."

He seemed educated and from the city. Once the ice was broken he started talking more freely... I must say he is a great talker... even now. He talked about many things... there under the banyan tree.

He was a lecturer at the university. He taught anthropology. He had relatives in our village whom he had come to visit during summer vacations. He wanted to feel his roots. He talked about the caste and the agrarian question in India, about the debates that went on in the universities — whether the resolution of the caste question would lead to agrarian revolution or the agrarian revolution would resolve the caste question. I forget in what order those things were supposed to happen. He even talked about the women's question in India... and a lot more... .

Back home in 'our' community, there was a lot of talk about the lecturer ... and what malice! Some said he was an ignorant, incompetent fool who had managed university degrees only because of the government's policy of

pampering worthless scums. How can 'these' people become 'learned,' they argued... if you drag a donkey to a *Saraswati* temple can it learn to sing, they asked.

In Pochamma's community, unlettered ignorant mothers held him up as a living example to their children, the young gaped in open admiration ... even the elders in the community listened to him.

I was happy to gaze at his intense, sincere face and listen to all the lofty things he said.

The vacations came to an end and it was time for him to return to the university. Before leaving he asked me, "Will you come with me?"

We boarded the bus. On reaching the city, we went straight to the police station to make a statement that I had left 'voluntarily' of my own free will and gave the police my birth certificate as proof of age. We then went to the office of the Registrar of Marriages and filled up the forms.

Soon all hell broke loose... .

The account of what happened after I left is based on the reports of his friends who came to see him at home... and some of my acquaintances who kept contact with me secretly so as not to sully their reputation.

My father was furious with my grandmother for not keeping an eye on me. He went to the police station to lodge a complaint of kidnapping and rape. Normally the police would have obliged happily. In my case, they told him my husband was a well known backward caste intellectual and there could be trouble for the police if they obliged my father in any way.

"She is a major and the law makes us helpless—even though we sympathise with you," they told him.

My father vented his rage against my mother.

"She has smeared shit on my face ... that daughter of yours ... what face

will I show the world now?" he bellowed.

What could my mother do except cry silently... poor thing!

In earlier days my father would have had to perform a funeral ceremony for me to show to the world that from then on I was deemed 'dead'. Things have changed now — a simple declaration is sufficient.

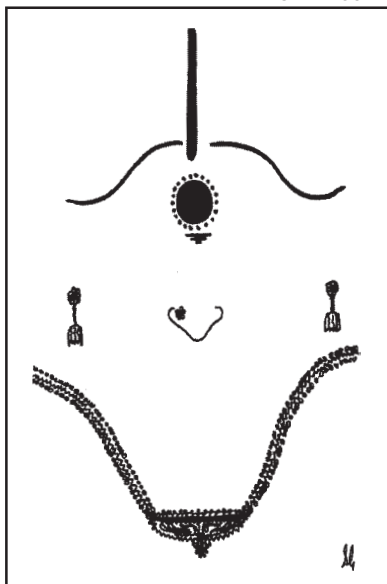
When people came to see him, my father launched into a tirade, "These people, give them an inch, they take a yard. First they wanted entry into our temples... we said okay... after all times were changing. Then they wanted water from our wells. The rascals threatened to join with the British if we did not let them defile our wells... and we had to give in. Then they wanted to come inside our temples of learning... our schools and universities. They snatched the jobs from the hands of our sons... positive discrimination indeed! Now they want our daughters... you call that positive discrimination... it is invitation to social anarchy."

He later became an ardent campaigner against Reservation Policy and Mandal Commission. This helped him retrieve some of his lost prestige.

In the village, things took a dramatic turn. No sooner did we board the bus, news spread like wild fire. Search parties from our community went all over the village looking for me. There was a great sense of outrage. The following day, armed mobs from our community marched into Pochamma's locality, where they set fire to thatched huts. With big bamboos they broke Pochamma's temple and with it her goddess.

The next day, boys from Pochamma's community threw acid bulbs at the people from our community and one person's face was charred completely. They gathered outside the *sowcar's* house and burned the debt records. These were Naxalite 'infested' areas... some country-made revolvers

SIMRAT GULATI



were also used on both sides. Para military forces arrived and set up camp in our village. They arrested most of the young boys from Pochamma's community.

In the city, the newspapers were full of lead articles and analysis. Newspapers were divided into two great camps, as it were. When one paper wrote something, the other countered it.

One side argued, "The problem with India is there are too many goddesses. If India is to emerge a strong and powerful nation, it is imperative that we rally under one goddess. Unless the State, all the temples and one single goddess merge into a single Holy Alliance we can never become a powerful nation. Look at the West — they have become powerful for this very reason. They combined the State, the Church and one single God into a single invincible Trinity several centuries before us, and, see where it has taken them. If it is necessary to change the Constitution for this we will do it."

The boys from my community formed an organization to build a huge *Devi* temple in the place of the now demolished *Amma* temple. Soon there was a nation-wide campaign to build

a *Devi* temple at that very spot where Pochamma's goddess had been since times immemorial.

The other side retorted, "Can India ever become a strong nation when sixty percent of her people are not considered human?" Why have the Western nations become so strong and powerful... not because of their God... it is because of their internal strength. They have no caste... and their classes are so easily made and unmade. Beware of the temple campaign. They want to wipe out our identity... they have always done that. First they did it by bracketing us with cattle... and now they want to do it by destroying our goddesses. First they maintained their hegemony by ostracizing us, now they want to do it by assimilation. What do they think the Constitution is—their father's private property—that they can amend it whenever it pleases them."

The boys from the other side formed organizations to resist the *Devi* temple programme. On that very spot they wanted to build a grand temple for their *Amma*. Soon a nationwide campaign was launched to oppose the *Devi* temple campaign. At mass rallies all over the country people assembled and pledged never to allow a *Devi* temple in the place of their *Amma*... even if it cost them their lives. Public meetings came to be organized on both sides.

In the meantime the Jung Institute of Social Psychology invited my husband to work on a research project on 'Mother Worship In Ancient Communities.' So we left the city.

There is only one thing that saddens me from time to time. Whenever I think of Pochamma I am filled with a sense of remorse. The only thing Pochamma valued in her life was her goddess... somehow I feel I have been the cause of her *Amma's* destruction... □