

I had two mothers. One who gave birth to me. And the other, whom my elder brother Prakashbhai and I used to call Bhai, was Ramanbhai, my aunt's son. My father (we called him Kaka) died when I was about 10. Ever since, my mother and Bhai contributed equally to my upbringing and education. Bhai died 13 days after my mother's death. Both breathed their last in the same hospital. The last rites for both were performed at the Vileparle crematorium. And I felt as if someone had snatched the sky away from above my head.

The two incidents connected with mother that are indelibly stamped on my memory are both wrapped in the shadow of death. My Kaka died in November 1950 of cancer. Nothing could stop my mother's wailing. Somebody brought me into the sitting room where my Kaka's body lay on the ground. Mother was sitting in the midst of family members. Tears were rolling incessantly down her cheeks. I sat in my mother's lap and said : "Don't weep, mother, or I too will weep." For some moments, she put her hand on my head. And she stopped crying. In those few moments, I think I grew several years older.

On June 25, 1973, mother was drawing her last breaths in Nanavati hospital, where she had been lying unconscious for 15 days. She was paralysed and had been rendered speechless. Daily, we asked Dr Godbole : "How is mother ?" and he would reply: "No change." But today his reply was different : "She is worse." All the family members were gathered around her bed. The chain of breath was breaking before our eyes. I felt I was being crushed by an immense weight. I am not a particularly religious man but somehow I started chanting aloud : "*Om purnam adah, purnam idam...*" I felt a bit relieved. That noon, mother relieved herself of the burden of breath. A few minutes later, the nurse covered her with a sheet. In those few minutes, I think I again grew a few years older.

Mother was born on Vasant Panchami but she never experienced any springtime in her life. First, the chores of the big joint family and then, widowhood. Never did

From *Matru Vandana*

“While Sleeping In Mother’s Heart...”

by Deepak Mehta

(translated from Gujarati
by Nirav Patel)

she get a chance to blossom. After she was widowed, all her interests were centred in her two sons. The sons grew up and got married. And, as happens in every joint family, I left the home after some years of marriage and settled separately with my family in Vileparle. This was a terrible blow for mother, but it could not be helped.

Ever since her marriage at the age of 15 or 14 in 1914, mother had lived at Vajeram building in Dadi Sheth Agiyari lane. Her last wish was to go straight to the Sonapur crematorium from that house. But fate did not allow even that. The house was so dilapidated that it had to be vacated and mother had to move to Prakashbhai's house at Bandra. A friend of Prakashbhai's asked her if she liked the place, and she replied reluctantly : "It will be all right, gradually." But she lost the will to live after she left Vajeram.

Rarely did I hear from mother anything about her parental home. The only time I went to Porbandar, where her home was, was after her death, for some official work. I have not met my mother's parents or brothers. I met my mother's sisters only when they visited us in Bombay. Mother melted her whole existence into her marital home. Only when her sisters came to

Bombay did she speak with the accent of the Porbandari dialect. But after they left, she reverted to her usual style. Hers



was the strength of self effacement and sacrifice.

After Kaka's death, when I was a schoolboy, the doctor had advised me to wear spectacles. Bhai ordered a pair for Rs 25 from Baliwala & Homi at Kalbudevi. Two days, four days, six days, passed, but Bhai did not bring home the spectacles. I reminded him daily but he made one excuse after another. At last, after a week, I got the spectacles. But in my heart I was very angry with Bhai.

In 1963 I completed my MA and immediately got a job in a college. I joined duty from June 20. On the first of the next month, I was expecting the first salary of my life. "What shall I bring you, mother?" I asked her the previous evening. Mother looked at Bhai and then said : "Deepak, buy two small silver lamps for Thakurji and five and a quarter kilos *prasad*. Don't bring anything else." I expected only Rs 110 as 10 days' salary. Mother misunderstood my embarrassment and tried to explain: "Deepak, when you were in school and had to get spectacles, we did not have the money for them. We sold two small silver lamps of Thakurji. Only then could Bhai pay the bill for the specs. At that time, I took a vow to buy back the lamps from your first salary." Now I realised why there had been a delay in bringing the specs from the shop. And this time, I was very angry with myself.

As long as Kaka was alive, we were financially well off. We had an income of Rs 3,000 to 4,000. from sharemarket business. But the big joint family whittled it away. Someone's marriage, someone's sickness, help to somebody. No one thought of the future. The : Vajeram prosperity disappeared with Kaka. One by one, relatives too went their different ways. Bhai was the only one who did not part company with us. Had it not been for Bhai, my brother and I would have had to discontinue our studies and look for jobs. Bhai's courage and mother's patience saved us.

Mother never visited a temple. Because of poor health, she had to stop even her fasts in her last years. Yet she had great faith in her Thakurji. Daily, she would light a *ghee* lamp and pray for at least five minutes. When perturbed in the night, she would chant: "*Laxmi-narayan.*" She would celebrate Janmashtami with much festivity. She would spend the day beautifying the *mandap* with flowers, arranging the toys, and preparing *prasad*. Even when our income had dwindled considerably, she never failed to celebrate this festival.

Mother was not very educated. But she was fond of reading. Our library at home had over 3,000 books and whenever she had some time, she would pick up a book and start reading. She knew many couplets by heart. Sometimes, she would test our knowledge of poetry by asking : "Whose poem is this?" For many years, our family had the custom of reading together every evening. We read novels by Munshi, Ramanlal, Meghani, essays by Kakasaheb and Masharowala, poetry by Kant, Kalapi, Nanalal, Meghani, Uma shankar, Sundaram, and some biographies and autobiographies. Everyone would assemble and Bhai would read aloud. In those days, I listened to many more books than I read. Mother wrote in her will that no religious rites should be performed after her death. Instead, if her sons wished, they could gift to various libraries those books which were very dear to her. And she had attached to her will a list of such books that she liked.



Vidyaben Bhapatrai Mehta, born 1900, died 1973

Her other hobby was sewing and embroidery. She used to give away the pieces she embroidered as gifts to different relatives. I have, however, preserved one tablecloth on which she had embroidered Kanu Desai's paintings.

Mother also liked cooking and eating. She was very fond of sweets —ice cream, *srikhand*, *dudhpak*.

She enjoyed eating and also enjoyed feeding others. In her last years, she had to cut down drastically on sweets because

of her diabetes. In her last illness, she said : "I want to eat *srikhand*" We asked the doctor and since he knew she would not live long, he said : "Let her have her last spoonful." When I put the spoon in her mouth, she enquired : "Has everyone else eaten ?" But how could we eat *srikhand* that day ? And the next day she slipped into unconsciousness.

Mother and Bhai never expected any financial help from my brother or me, even after we started earning. If we brought

anything for them, they would say : “Why this unnecessary expenditure ?” Bhai vehemently insisted on paying back whatever little we spent on mother’s last rites. He said : “Vidyabhi did not want you to bear the burden. She told me to sell off the four gold bangles she used to wear when alive, and to meet the expenses. I had to respect her last desire. She didn’t want to owe anything to anybody, not even to her own sons.”

Bhai, and Prakashbhai when he was small, had the hobby of taking photographs. They had a small studio in the house. Hundreds of family photographs, were kept in a cupboard. But mother and Bhai destroyed all photographs of themselves ; they would even cut out their own figures from group

photographs. Today, we have no photograph of them. After mother’s death, I found one of her at the house of a relative. These relatives also have a taperecording of her singing a few lines from “*Lagyo kasumbino rang*” I have rerecorded her voice from the original. Over the years, how many songs in my mother’s sweet melodious voice I remember.

In our house no one was addressed in the familiar third person singular (*tu*). Following the Nagar family custom, mother always addressed me in the respectful third person plural (*tame*). With her great love, mother fulfilled all my desires except one—she did not fulfil my desire to be called *tu* by her. I have yet another desire to be fulfilled in this life—when I close my

eyes for the last time, I hope someone will find and play the old cassette on which my mother sings :

Lagyo kasumbino rang !

*Raj, mane lagyo kasumbino rang\
Jananina halyaman podhantan
podhantan*

Pidho kasumbino rang;

*Dhola dhavan kerī dharaye
dharaye*

Pamyō kasumbino rang.”

(I am coloured

with the bright juice of courage !

While sleeping in mother’s heart

I drank the colourful juice of

courage ;

With the white milk of my mother

I drew in the colourful juice of
courage.)