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GENERAL IMPACT FACTOR & More

Amnesia

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She woke up with a swollen lip and bruised cheek. This time it was for putting in too many red chilies in the chicken curry. Last time it had been a black eye .for making it too bland. She sat up gingerly on the bed tears welling up in her kohl laced eyes. Raju was standing beside her with a cup tea. She knew the tea had been prepared by her six year old daughter, Bulbul.

“Sumi, I’m sorry. *Maaf kar do*. I was drunk. I refused but my friends insisted,” Raju said softly in a repentant one. Sumi took the cup of tea sullenly.

“You know that I have no recollection of what I do when I’m drunk. It is called a blackout by English doctors. If you don’t believe the English doctors, ask the Homeopathic and Ayurvedic doctors.”

“Then how do you know what happened last night?,” Sumi snapped..

“Bulbul told me when she woke up.”

Raju touched her cheek softly looking suitably crestfallen as all loving husbands do the morning after they beat their wives. “How will I go to work today? *Chachi* is again going to scream at me. This is the second time this week. She will hire someone else to wash the utensils”, Sumi cried shrilly.

“Oh... Everyone knows I earn well enough I earn enough to look after my family. You insist on washing *jootha* utensils to bring me shame,” Raju's tone had subtly shifted from penitence to petulance. Sumi didn't answer. Half of what Raju earned was spent on alcohol. The rest was barely enough to cover the rent and feed three children. But she knew if she dared voice this, Raju would stomp off in anger and get drunk again to get even with her.

“Don't annoy him when he apologizes,” Sumi's mother and aunt had warned her repeatedly. “You have three children to look after and two daughters among them to marry. Where will you go if he leaves you? Look on the bright side. It is very clear he loves you because he begs for forgiveness every time he raises his hand against you. How many husbands do that? Besides, he never taunts you for being black.”

Sumi was black but had sharp features. Sumi had always known this was people said this about dark complexioned girls to make them feel good about themselves and display them in the marriage market. The problem was that not only was she dark, she was short and thin too. Much as her father had tried to buy her a cheap groom, he wasn't successful and finally had to pay ₹25000 for a barber in the city. This was apart from the marriage expenses.

Sumi knew her father would have to sell a little piece of land he had bought to get her married. But then every father in her village had to dig up their reserves to get their daughters married. Nevertheless, she was happy. She was finally going to leave the village to settle

down in the city. Most people in her village had warned her that life in the city would be tough. On the contrary, she found it easy. Raju, her husband had rented one room in a chawl with a bathroom to be shared with ten other tenants. This was better than defecating in the fields at prescribed times and living without electricity. In the city, there was electricity most of time and Raju had bought a ceiling fan, a light bulb and even a gas stove with a small sized cylinder for her convenience. Sumi preferred cooking on the smokeless stove in the corner of the room instead of the cow dung cakes in the open like she used to in the village. There was a bed too in the room. But Raju slept on it while Sumi would sleep on a thin mattress on the floor. In the mornings, she would fold it and roll it under the bed. Sumi didn't mind as Raju earned well and on Thursdays when the barber's shop was closed, Sumi would dress up in bright colored sarees with bangles and a *bindi* and he would take her out to the city zoo. Sometimes, in the evening they would stroll down the lanes lined with vendors selling *chaat*, *puchkas* and *bhelpuri* and she would gaze at the crowds and the cars that raced past. Raju would ask, "What would you like to eat?" and Sumi would demurely reply, "Whatever you like." Raju would then buy her whatever he chose chatting up with the vendors who make suggestive jokes about newlyweds and with a wink say, "Take care of *bhabhi*." Sumi would just blush and lower her eyes.

Of course, it was not that she didn't have to labor. Raju's family was large and would often visit. Her mother-in-law accompanied by her daughters were the most frequent visitors. Sumi would have to cook, clean, mop floors and wash clothes. She didn't mind as she was used to hard labor in the village. Her workload, however, had increased after the birth of two daughters. Fortunately, after two years, Sumi gave birth to a son and she had been relieved she wouldn't have to hear barbs about not being able to conceive a son. Raju had been undoubtedly ecstatic at the birth of a male heir and had exhibited it by squandering away the month's salary drinking with his friends and returning home in an inebriated state.

Banging the door, he had shouted, “No one dare tell me anything today. I’m the father of a son today. I shall call him Bunty. Bunty, my son!” The women who had all gathered around for the delivery of the child and subsequent celebration giggled.

“Look how happy my son is,” Sumi’s mother-in-law had sighed. Sumi’s mother also had nodded wisely. “You are right, samdhannji,” she had said.

Unfortunately for Sumi, the drunk bouts which had been justified on grounds of the lack of a son now became frequent and were now defended as expressing joy at Bunty’s birth. It left Sumi short changed. Raising three children as expensive and there was barely enough for food and clothing. Physical abuse following nights of drunken revelry had also started. But every time Raju battered Sumi, he would be regretful the next day insisting he had no memory of his misdemeanors.

“I don’t remember anything at all. Did I really slap you? I get possessed by a demon after drinking. It isn’t me. If it was me, I would remember hitting you.”

If Sumi glared at him disbelievingly, Raju would gaze at her reproachfully his eyes moist.

“Haven’t I told you that the English doctors in the city have also certified that people lose their ability to remember their actions when they are under the influence of alcohol. How can you not believe me? Am I a liar? Do you have no faith in me? Don’t you trust your man, your own husband,” Raju would almost wail accusingly.

“Then why don’t you just stop drinking?” Sumi would weep angrily at times and at times softly with exhaustion.

“I will,” Raju would promise contritely. But these promises were empty and Sumi knew he didn’t mean to keep any of his promises.

The situation was deteriorating for Sumi. Visits from her in-laws was becoming difficult to manage.

“So what are you cooking today?” would be the usual question.

“Listen, could you buy some chicken and bring it?” Sumi would ask Raju nervously.

Raju would impatiently wave his hand. “Why don’t you go and buy it? I really am busy.”

“OK. But I don’t have any money,” Sumi would say guiltily. To ask for money in front of guests was not what courtesy demanded of her. But she had been left with no other option.

Raju would then turn around and throw up his hands in the air. “Women! Do you know I gave her ₹ 1000 just last week? She says today she doesn’t have one naya paisa today. She is such a spendthrift. I slog all day and this woman spends it away without a thought,” he would declare theatrically drawing some money from his pocket and thrusting it in Sumi's hand.

Everyone would sympathetically shake their heads and censure Sumi with castigating eyes. Hurt and humiliated, she had wanted to retort that the ₹ 1000 had been used to pay the rent and that her kids had been eating *maar bhaat* for the past two days. But this would have meant showing grave disrespect to the man of house. So Sumi would just keep quiet.

For Sumi, the most pleasant time of the day would be during those late evenings in summer when the electricity would suddenly vanish apparently due to what people called load shedding. The women would gather outside their homes sitting with wooden fans in their hands and gossip. Sumi would listen learning that most of them were subject to harassment of alcoholic husbands but managed to be independent by toiling in households nearby as maids. It was then that one of the women suggested she do the same.

“The old *Chachi* living in the apartment behind this building is looking for someone to wash utensils. If you are interested I can take you and introduce you to her,” she offered sympathetically. She was a large middle aged woman with confident walk and a raucous laugh. Her name was Rajjo. Her husband drove an auto rickshaw

and of the four children they had, two were married. Rajjo or *Meethi ki Ma* as people called her was popular for being forthright but not shying away from a fight.

Sumi indecisively murmured, “Let me ask Him. I don’t know whether he will agree.” ‘Him’, of course, referred to her husband. Women generally used terms like ‘My man’, ‘Him’, ‘His’ to refer to their husbands.

The rest of the women guffawed hearing Sumi's reply. “Ask your husband?!” one of the women asked in merriment. “Do you think our husbands have given us permission to become a maid? They would prefer to watch us starve rather than earn by an honest day's work.”

“Just take up the job and then tell your husband. He'll slap you around a bit but after a while he'll accept it and so long as he gets his food on the table, he'll ignore it,” advised Rajjo chuckling.

Rajjo was right Sumi realized. Raju opposed Sumi's working as a maid vociferously and when Sumi despite his resistance took up the job Rajjo had proposed, Raju's thrashings became more frequent. The day after as usual, he was as usual remorseful insisting he had no memory of his misdeeds.

“I haven't the faintest memory of this sin what you are accusing me of committing. Maybe, I was just venting my anger at your cleaning other people's homes to earn a paltry sum. Don't I earn enough?,” he asked mournfully. “You are bringing dishonor to the family name. What will people think in the village? The *bahu* of our house has become a servant in another house!” he ranted indignantly.

Sumi wanted to scream, “What kind of honor was it that got diminished by a hard day's labor but considered pummeling the wife a display of machismo?”

But Sumi knew under the circumstances, silence was the best policy. She just bore it with stoicism and her new job gave her a sense of freedom. She cooked early in the morning and went to work leaving Bulbul, her six year daughter to take care of her two younger

siblings. She enjoyed gossiping with *Chachi*, her employer and the other domestic help in the neighborhood. Moreover, the money ensured that Sumi could indulge her children with little treats like chips and instant noodles.

Raju could sense Sumi's happiness and begrudged her new found hard earned independence. He stopped paying the grocery bills sneering vindictively, "You are the earning member of the family. Why don't you pay the bills?"

Once in a while, perhaps overcome with a little pang of guilt Raju swaggered in with a couple of kilos of mutton and fish. "Do you know how much this has cost. What I spend in one day, you earn in a month," he would scoff.

Sumi would nod her head appreciatively ignoring the snide remarks. She didn't want to vex him any further. After all, he was her man and if he left her, a woman with three children abandoned by her husband would have no respect in society. But she also knew no amount of appreciation expressed would provide any armor against a battering spouse. Her haven was *Chachi's* house where she would pour herself a steaming hot cup of tea made with milk and watch the blaring TV. As a child, peeping through barred windows with her friends, she had watched *Chitrahaar* on the TV of the *mukhia's* village. When the *mukhia's* wife would spot them, she would drive them away with a broom. But in *Chachi's* house, there were so many channels. Well-dressed men and women would sing playing *Antakshari* but her favorite was thus man making people play *Saap Seedhi*.

Chachi was getting older and she was unable to cook for herself and her husband. Her children lived in Delhi and when they would visit their mother's house, they would tip Sumi generously. "Look after Ma and Baba. They are being so stubborn. They won't come and live with us. They simply insist on being self-reliant."

Sumi never told Raju about the tips or when *Chachi* had increased her salary. She quietly stowed the money she saved in a small bag in-between the folds of an old saree in her metal trunk her father had

presented as part of her dowry. She had no clue what she was going to buy with the saved money. She knew if she bought anything expensive for the house, it would enrage Raju further. *Chachi* had once given her some clothes her grandchildren.

“Take these frocks. They are as good as new and will fit Bulbul”, *Chachi* had said. Sumi had been watching Bulbul dance around gleefully in her new dress when Raju came in.

“Where did you get this new dress?” he had asked quietly.

“*Chachi* gave it. It’s her granddaughter ‘s,” Sumi had said.

Sumi later just remembered a blow landing on the side of her face.

“Bitch! So now my children will wear the hand me downs of the rich people whose feet you lack.” Raju's yelling had permeated through her consciousness. She had woken up the next morning her ear hurting and Raju staring at her shamefaced. Yes. She had known he didn’t remember anything of the night before. She had just turned over closing her smarting eyes feigning sleep.

The next day *Chachi* horrified had advised Sumi that put whatever money she had in the bank or post office. On the other hand, Rajjo had opined Sumi invest her saved money in buy jewellery for the future.” Buy a pair of earrings. No one need to know. I always buy something whenever I have extra cash. No one knows but over the years! I have come to own a full set; a necklace, earring, a pair of bangles and a finger ring. I have hidden it away in a place no one can find. These will come in handy when your daughters get married. God forbid, if there is a medical crisis or any other emergency of any kind in your house, who will you turn to for help? Do you think your parents, siblings or in laws will help you? You can always pawn your jewellery to bide you by in times of crisis and later, recover it by repaying the loan.

Sumi was convinced by Rajjo's arguments. She gathered information about the prices of various jewellery and finally saved up enough for a pair of *jhumkas*. She confided her intentions to Rajjo and Rajjo assured her that she would help her. A date was set and in the

evening, Sumi stuffing her money in a little purse inside her blouse set off with Rajjo. Waving her hand, Rajjo called an auto rickshaw to a halt.

“Jewar Baazar,” Rajjo said authoritatively sliding into the seat. Sumi sat huddled beside her feeling heart flutter and skip a beat with anticipation. She had never visited a goldsmith’s shop before. Weaving through congested lanes, the auto rickshaw screeched to a stop in a crowded lane. Sumi stepped out surveying the streets with awe. Rows of small jewellery shops stood with glass doors and a security guard outside.

Rajjo ushered Sumi into one of the shops. “This is where my brother in law works. We will get genuine gold here. The rest are thugs,” she whispered conspiratorially. Sumi stepped inside nervously clutching the end of her saree wrapped across her shoulders to her breast and feeling her purse tucked away under the blouse to make sure it was safe and sound. A balding man with a pot belly and sharp beady eyes stood behind a polished wood counter. There were rows of shinning necklaces, earrings and bangles displayed in glass covered showcases behind him. “God! There must be worth crores of ornaments here,” Sumi thought engulfed by a sense of wonderment. The village goldsmith back home kept locked in a couple of trunks and was mostly contemptuous of the poor who would come to buy some jewellery for a marriage in the house. He reserved his respect only for the *zamindars* and *mukhias*.

“*Bhabhi*, welcome!” said the balding man standing across the counter with folded hands. “What shall I show you today?” he rasped brightly.

“Namaste *Bhai* Sahab! Not for me. For her,” said Rajjo pointing towards Sumi. “She wants to buy a pair of *jhumkas*. She is like my sister. Show her something really nice.”

“Of course. Your sister is like my sister,” he replied beaming. One of the workers got chairs for Sumi and Rajjo to sit while the bald man bent down pulling out a polished metal tray and laid it down

reverentially on the counter. There were a dozen *jhumkas* of various sizes and designs fitted snugly in each compartment of the tray.

“Something reasonable. We are not the rich who can afford to throw money around,” Rajjo said

The man nodded understandingly and carefully drawing out two pairs of small *jhumkas* extended it to Sumi for inspection. Sumi set her heart for the one lined with tiny red stones at the bottom.

“How much will you charge for this?” Sumi asked gently running her fingers through the *jhumkas* feeling the cool touch of the bright gold on her skin.

The bald man running his hand over his egg shaped head sighed appreciatively. “You have great taste,” he said and quoted a price. “It is more expensive. Since you are visiting me for the first time, I’m ready to sell it without any profit,” he said smiling at Sumi.

For Sumi, the price was just right. It would take almost all the cash her purse held to purchase the *jhumkas* but it would be worth it. She looked at Rajjo and signaled her approval. Rajjo taking the cue negotiated for a while and the bald man reduced the cost by a further ₹100.

“*Bhabhji*, I have done all I could. I’m selling this at the cost price just to help you. If I indulge in additional discounts, I will run a loss. How will I run this shop then?” said the man folding his hands in a *namaste* posture pretending exasperation signifying his helplessness to reduce the price any further. signaled Sumi to complete the transaction.

Sumi discreetly extracted the purse lying snugly next to her bosom and counted the notes twice before handing it over. The man had packed the *jhumkas* in a compact blue velvet box and inserting it in a little plastic bag placed it in Sumi's outstretched hands. Sumi swiftly folded it into a tiny tightly wrapped package and shoved it beneath the folds of the saree exactly into the spot where the money purse had been.

Clutching the money purse with the left over change, Sumi stepped out in the sun assailed by a sense of victorious achievement. She couldn't wait to get back home and try on the earrings.

The sun had set by the time Sumi reached home. She knocked on the door calling for her daughter. "Bulbul, open the door."

Bulbul opened the door irritated. "Where were you? Bunty was crying and I've put him to sleep in the cradle. Munni is still out playing. She won't listen to me. I have chopped the potatoes and kneaded the dough like you asked me to."

Sumi was bursting with excitement. She needed to tell someone. "I have bought something," she said extracting the little package from within the folds of her.

"Is it something to eat?" asked Bulbul curiously.

"No. Even better," Sumi said opening the package. She held the *jhumkas* in her hand gingerly staring at it in admiration. ?

"Its real gold. Your *nana* had only given me silver ornaments during my wedding and your father's family had only given me a gold plated silver *mangalsutra*. This is genuine gold."

Bulbul didn't quite understand what her mother was talking about. But she liked the new trinket." Can I wear it?" she asked.

Sumi laughed and held the *jhumkas* against her daughter's ears. "Yes. But not everyday. People will try to steal it if they know it's real gold. It will be part of your dowry when you get married."

A clamorous thumping on the door disrupted the conversation. Sumi quickly packed the earrings in the velvet box and hid it under the pillow.

"Open the door," she instructed Bulbul. She ran to obey her mother. As she opened the door, a drunk Raju swayed in reeking of alcohol pushing past Bulbul.

"So what have you cooked for dinner?" he asked surveying the pots and pans.

“Only potatoes? So I work all day and come back home to eat potatoes?” Raju snapped holding Sumi by the hair twisting it hard. He smirked hearing Sumi yell in pain.

“No. No. Ma has bought something for my marriage,” cried Bulbul. She was sure Papa would be equally happy to see the earrings.

Sumi's heart sank. “No,” she cried as Bulbul ran towards the bed. Raju turned loosening his grip. His eyes narrowed as Bulbul threw the pillow and showed the blue velvet box resting on the bed to her father. Wishing to desperately appease her father Bulbul took it and offered it to him.

“Give it to me,” ordered Raju immediately leaving Sumi and striding towards Bulbul. Bulbul stood with a wide smile and box in her open palms.

“So what have you bought?” Raju said nastily. He snatched the box and opened it nonplussed for a moment at its contents.

“Its gold,” said Bulbul proudly. Raju unsteadily drew a deep breath and shut it. Sumi tried to withdraw his fingers away from the box. Raju grasped it firmly and shoved her.

“So this is what you have been doing behind my back. You have been stealing from my pockets and saving from the money I give you to run the house,” he spat with malevolence.

“No,” Sumi cried grappling with Raju for the *jhumkas*. “That's not true. I saved for months from the money I earned. “

Raju was tottering. Unsteadily he kicked Sumi pinning her down to the floor with one hand and avariciously fidgeting with the box in the other. “Here I slave all day and have no money left after feeding my shameless and useless family and you, my wife, are only obsessed with adorning yourself. You are like parasites sucking my blood. I'm going to sell this. I need some comfort too,” he slurred incoherently.

Sumi was overcome with a blind rage. She could hear Bulbul wailing in the background. Her fury instilled a sudden strength in

her. Knowing Raju's body was weak due to the excessive intake of alcohol, she kicked him in the shin. Raju taken unawares fell backwards into the bed positioned behind him. Before he could struggle to sit up, an infuriated Sumi had spun out of control. Spotting the broom under the bed, she stretched her hand and pulled it out. With all the power of her repressed anger she swung the broom across his body.

Raju stunned by blow writhed in pain. He stared at Sumi in bewilderment. "You hit me," he mumbled disbelievingly and closed his eyes.

A trembling Sumi with her chest heaving gazed down at Raju lying still. She waited for a minute and sat down on the bed next to him burying her hands in her face. Bulbul inched up to her tentatively and touched her tentatively. Sumi hugged her.

"Is Papa going to be ok?" Bulbul asked fearfully.

"Yes," Sumi said reassuringly. She turned to pat motionless Raju on the back. Raju's eyelid fluttered. He squirmed and after rambling incoherently for a moment, turned over and started snoring.

Bulbul giggled. Sumi laughed with her. "Don't tell Papa what happened today. He was drunk. So he won't remember anything," Sumi said warningly. Bulbul nodded. Sumi rose and spotted the blue velvet box lying in the corner of the room. She picked it up and held it close to her heart. "Where should I hide it?" she wondered. "The rice tin!" It was the perfect idea she thought as she caught Bulbul's inquisitive watching "Take off Papa's shoes and cover him with a blanket," Sumi ordered Bulbul. "After that, go and call Munki. It is really dark now. She shouldn't be out playing so late."

As Bulbul ran off outside, Sumi swiftly locked the door from inside. She hurried to the steel tin used for storing rice resting near the stove. She opened it and dug her hand with the velvet box deep inside the heap of rice till she touched the base. Placing the box there she withdrew her hand and covered the indented hole in the rice pile with the rice around so that no one would know what was

concealed inside. As she closed the lid of the tin, she heard Bunty bawling in the cradle. Munni and Bulbul were also knocking at the door. “It’s time to get to work,” she sighed.

The next morning Sumi woke up early. The sun was about to rise and a little light was filtered through the small window near the bed. Sumi thought about the blue velvet box and smugly smiled to herself. She rose stretching her hands up.

“A hot milky cup of tea in the morning is perfect”, she thought ought and as she poured two steaming cups of tea for Raju and herself. “Poor chap won’t be able to recall what happened last evening.” Feeling a pang of guilt, she sat on the bed and stroked his head.

“Listen. Wake up. It’s morning. Have some tea,” Sumi whispered softly so that none of the children would wake up. Raju yawned and his eyes flew open. He rose his eyes red and slumber filled. He sat up clasping the cup in one hand, pressed his forehead with the other.

“What happened?” asked Sumi sympathetically. Raju's face suddenly changed. He glared at her. His face turned red. “You hit me. You hit me with a broom.” Sumi’s face lost color. “But you never remember anything what happens after you drink.”

Raju flinched. He stared at Sumi. She stared right back. There washing drop silence all around.

Terminologies

maaf kar do: forgive me

jootha utensils: utensils which are left to wash after eating

Chachi:aunt

chaat ,puchkas,bhelpuri: snacks often sold on the streets of India.

bindi: colored dot worn by woman in the middle of the forehead

jhumkas: traditional Indian earrings

bhabhi: sister-in-law

maar bhaat: rice cooked in water

Meethi ki ma: Meethi's mother

Chitrahaar, Antakshari, Saap Seedhi: popular television shows during the 1990s

Zamindar: landlord

Mukhia: headman of a village

bahu: daughter-in-law

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