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The Great Mango War of Begusarai

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Once upon a time in the land of lost communism lived the tall and handsome Sanjay Singh. His parents lovingly called him Pappu. Since he belonged to the warrior caste—the Rajputs—known for their bravery (or the concoction of it), Pappu desired to be the ideal Rajput. And this is a tale of his attempt at attaining that glory.

1.

Pappu was a sight to behold in the small, bored-out-of-its-mind Begusarai, nestled in the state of Bihar. Blessed with the looks of Sanjay Dutt (so he claimed!), he had a flair for flamboyance. His crisply ironed bell bottoms, wide framed sunglasses, and brightly printed shirts would put yesteryear's Rajesh Khanna to shame. Among his many fancies, he believed that the women of his neighborhood desired him. "He can give the *goras* a run for their money if he ever goes to foreign," his mother gloated as Pappu spat the *paan* out on the street. As the red colored spit glowed brightly on the concrete floor, he strode to begin his morning skin care routine. Bare-chested he stood in front of his bedroom mirror and applied the gram flour face mask prepared by his doting mother. His fingers moved in careful rhythm across his white face. As he waited for the *ubtan* to dry, he played Mithun Da's songs on high volume. Among his many obsessions were Fair and Lovely fairness cream, Hindi film compact disks, and his irrevocable love for *Malda*—mangoes typical in Bengal and Bihar. Round, juicy, and delicious!

Local men claimed that *Malda* was like a most sought-after woman—loved by the ones who had it and envied by the ones who did not. In its very limited period of availability, over summers, people would flock to the main *bazaar* for these revered mangoes. Fights would ensue over the last ones left. Kicks, punches, and abuses in Bhojpuri and Magahi would echo in a densely crowded market. Some would be lucky to steal a few amidst the chaos and leave. Battle won! However, Pappu was incredibly lucky and had to deal with none of these shenanigans. He lived in a big, rented house that his father's oil job paid for; and a huge and supple *Malda* tree flourished in its backyard. Summers were spent enjoying the cool breeze in the evenings and gorging on this prized

possession without having to race through the *bazaar*. He easily avoided those smelly, impoverished people who would finish their tiring daily jobs and then brave the heat of the overcrowded market to bring their families some fresh mangoes. No job, no wife, no children, and an ever-enabling mother—what else could this upper-caste Hindu man want!

2.

I was Pappu's favorite niece. Pappu doted on me and would often say things like, "Roma is just as white as me." As a girl and a child, for a long time I thought this praise mattered. I would stand close to him as my darker skinned sister gaped at us from the corner—her big, beautiful eyes perhaps mocking the idiocy of her sister. Pappu would take me on bike rides with him. We would play badminton and go to the movies. He was the fun *chacha*. But during the summer of 1995, he recruited me for a job rather peculiar for an eight-year-old.

It was June. My penniless, sweltering labor began at two pm and ended around six. Those were the days when the sun rose to swallow you. To make you hate your life with a vengeance. Over a hot cup of chai and some Parle G cookies, I had to make sure that no one stole the *Maldas* from our backyard. My mother used to collect as many as possible and keep them in a big straw basket in a lockless shed covered with a big muslin cloth. Mangoes ripen quickly that way. But there had been a few missing ones recently. Hence, Pappu was adamant to solve the mystery of his missing mangoes. To nab the bastards and give them a good thrashing. Divorced once and with the arrogance of the male who fell in love with his own image, I could understand this declaration of war. "It is a matter of pride, Roma," he would say. "It is time to show these Pandits, Chamars, and Baniyas that we won't bow down."

That mango tree had been in our big backyard for years. It was old, bore delicious mangoes, and was a symbol of prosperity. Fertility god resided in *aam*, so to speak. The tree stood tall in the left corner; its long branches made for a good swing during the summers. My backyard was where my friends and I would often play *kit-kit*. But due to this unprecedented event, my friendships were at stake.

Someone had stolen a few mangoes from our basket the other day. My mother got up early in the morning to bring some inside the house, but they were gone. She was blamed mercilessly by my grandmother for being careless. Hence, my grandparents decided that as the eldest daughter

in my Rajput *khaandan*, I must undertake the task of saving our mangoes from the faceless enemy. There was no pay, just some talk about how I will get paid in my next birth or something similar—I can't remember. I was also to make sure that our Brahmin neighbors on the left side and a family much lower on the caste status than us living on the second floor right above us could not pluck the mangoes from our magnanimous tree. After all, the tree branches were wide enough to reach the terrace, which would make our upstairs neighbors easily steal a few *Maldas* without us knowing. My late grandparents were skilled at pinning blame without evidence. So, after finishing school, without a wink of sleep, I sat on the armless steel chair vigilant as a goddamn soldier on the border waiting for the so-called enemy to strike. At any suspicious movement, I was asked to blow my plastic whistle and alert my uncle.

3.

“Brahmins are never to be trusted,” my grandmother would often tell me. Whenever she would oil my hair, she would remind me to always be careful of my Brahmin friends. “It is said that if you come across a poisonous snake and a Brahmin in a forest, kill the Brahmin first. And of course, you know who not to touch.” She would pull my hair tightly whenever she repeated that saying, reminding me forcefully that I better believe her. Babli was my best friend then. We would bike to school together, play on the terrace, and gossip about lecherous uncles in our community. She was the one not to be touched. My grandmother had strictly instructed my mother to keep a few utensils separate from the rest, especially for Babli and her family. “They would not mind,” my *dadi* said. “Be friendly, treat them as guests and they would not care about a separate *chai* cup.” Apart from this friendly segregationist grandmother, the mango emergency further strained my friendship with Babli. Pappu's hateful comments have reached the neighbors and the larger community.

“We would never steal mangoes from your tree,” Babli would remind me often when we walked back from school sharing some jujubes. “My father buys it from the market, and he would rather pay you if we would think of eating your mangoes.” Babli would say this holding her head high while I would keep staring at my shoes out of shame. The tale of missing *maldas* were now public. I had no clue how to stand against my grandparents while not losing my friendship. My mother had no power to intervene in this honorable mango-saving mission. Although, while getting

me dressed for school, she would often remind me, “never lose your friendship over some mangoes. I wish I could do more, but I cannot, or I will end up in the hospital again.”

“But *dadi* says, we cannot let others steal what’s ours,” I retorted one day.

“Beta, these are not your mangoes, this is not your house. It is a rented one. We got these mangoes from somebody else and that’s how it is supposed to be. When we move away, we will have to leave the tree and its mangoes behind.”

I was shocked. Enraged. Tears began to flow from my eyes. That day, I could not focus on my classes at all.

“Is all of this for nothing?” “Why am I made to sit in the blistering heat for the mangoes that aren’t even ours?” I decided to rebel.

I came back from school, did not eat lunch, and went straight to sleep. When my uncle came to wake me up for my duty, I hit him with a stainless-steel glass beside my bed and ran out of my room. Panic ensued. I started crying vigorously and told him that I would not look after his mangoes anymore.

“They are not ours. They are for everyone. My friends Sonu and Babli should eat them whenever they want them,” I yelled with all my eight-year-old might. A thundering slap ran across my right cheek. My mother quickly took me inside.

4.

Honor is weird. You go to war for it before even understanding the consequences. My grandparents had assigned a casteist value to the mango tree, as if trying to prove their entire clan how brave they were. Rajputs have been heroes and saviors of our one-sided Hindu history, and my grandparents were people who ardently believed in the mythology. Who would tell them that things have changed now? Hence, to protect their honor and emerge as saviors of their prestigious mangoes, they asked my uncle to call his dear friend, Mukesh Singh over lunch. They had lost trust in me, of course.

Singh was a known local politician. At 5 feet 4 inches, he was a fit man. To make up for his short height, he had grown a big black mustache, dressed in white kurta-pajama only, and wore heeled shoes. People found Singh’s style iconic. He was popular. A hero. A man. A perfect

replacement of a measly me. My uncle asked him if he could come and hang out in our backyard from three to six pm every day, for a week or so. For his payment, Singh was given the best possible attention from my family. *Chai* and *pakor*as were ready the moment he arrived. At six, he would get another plate of *sooji halwa*, *chaat*, or something similar. He would often stay for dinner where he would gorge upon chicken curry, fish fry, or *mutton masala*—all that my mother had to cook by herself. No mangoes were stolen during Singh's tenure! Pappu had been keeping a log where he put total number of mangoes that he counted every morning at seven am and then at ten pm. Such was his dedication!

After ten days, Singh left. My grandparents and uncle were beaming with pride. "Now no one will dare steal the mangoes, again. People are terrified. We have taught them a good lesson," he gleamed as he ate his parathas. For the next couple of weeks, nothing happened. It was peaceful and everybody was back to their routine until one afternoon.

5.

One day around three pm, while cleaning his shed in the backyard, Pappu heard a thud. He immediately sprang into action when he saw two young boys with some mangoes. They had taken some mangoes which fell from the tree and had rolled close to a tiny gate that we never locked. Jumping off from that gate was easy and barely attracted any attention, especially at the time of siesta—that's what those ragpickers might have assumed. My uncle called on his mother and all of us came out to see what happened. Before we could catch our breaths, the bare-chested Pappu, wearing his dark blue boxer shorts began chasing the kids who were way faster. The drama continued on the streets for about four blocks. Everyone we knew in the neighborhood was out to catch the matinee show. Some were laughing while some were not surprised at all. Smart phones were not a thing then or Pappu would have gone viral. My uncle was a loudmouth and picked up fights with many people. He had beaten up his friend a few months ago who suggested he should find a job and not sit at home. But to see two young urchins outrun him that evening was by far the best free show.

Soon, the crowd began to disperse as heat took its toll on us. We all went inside. The brazen performance of fragile caste pride and masculinity was pathetic. My mother made *chai* for us, and we sat in the living room, watching television. After about half an hour or so, Pappu came home. He was panting. His *chappals* were broken. Sweat was all over him. I noticed some bruises on his

feet as he had to walk back on foot in the scorching heat. No mangoes. The ragpickers had won. My grandmother immediately got some cold water for him to wipe his feet and I was asked to get some water for him to drink. He kept his eyes on his feet while my grandmother washed them. A troubling silence ensued for good fifteen minutes.

“Don’t worry at all. I will get those bastards next time. These things happen,” Pappu said with confidence meant to hide his shame.

I looked at my mom who smiled at me. I took the glass back to the kitchen and hugged her tightly.

6.

Pappu died a lonely man. A drug addict, married thrice, beat up all his wives, and abandoned his only daughter. My parents and I were thrown out by him and my grandparents in 1996. Pappu's rage ate him faster than he could have eaten the *Maldas*. Countless men like Pappu are on a task to save their honor against an imagined enemy. And many nations take after such narrow ideas of masculinized honor. They dedicate themselves to claiming someone else's territory by every means possible—violence as their favorite course. Genocide rationalized. And no matter how often they get defeated, they wake up every single day with the seductive vengeance to put the others into their place. My uncle would have been a hero today.

Bio:

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