

THE MAT

(A short story)

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STF, Anveshi

On a summer noon, I was playing marbles as usual with my friends under the tamarind tree in the Dargah premises. This was our favorite tree, thick and very big. We liked to play under this tree for another reason. Most of the devotees visiting the Dargah distribute sweets among the children nearby. None of us wanted to lose the opportunity of having sweets and so we made this tree our *adda*.

As I was busy playing, one of my friends who was a year senior to me and studying in 7th class, came towards me shouting my name. He told me that 'Aunty' was calling me and wanted me to come soon to buy something for her from the market. Aunty was an aged woman and lived in our neighborhood. She didn't have children and her husband had passed away. She was a retired teacher and lived in a rented room near the mosque. She was always unwell, but had been sicker recently. She always preferred to call me for any outside work and gave a rupee or two as a reward.

As I reached her house I saw her waiting for me wearing a *burqa*, so that in case I didn't turn up she could have gone to the market alone. 'What is to be brought from the market, Aunty?' I asked her. She gave me 60 rupees and asked me to get a mat for her. She also gave me two more rupees saying, 'one rupee for the cycle rent and one rupee for you'. I was quite happy that today I would have an opportunity to ride a children's bicycle. I ran in the street joyously towards the cycle taxi shop, rented my favorite cycle for two hours and started for the market.

I enquired about the rates for a mat in different shops. The shop-keepers quoted between one hundred and one hundred and twenty for a single mat. I went to fifteen shops and no one was ready to sell for less than a hundred rupees. Meanwhile three hours had passed. I realized that further effort was useless and that I should return. I started back. Thinking about Aunty I felt that she would definitely scold me for coming back empty handed. The cycle rent was also increasing, so I was pedaling furiously.

Before going to Aunty's house I checked to see if my friends were still playing under the tree. I couldn't find any one. I saw a *janaza* (funeral procession) in the court yard of the

mosque adjacent to Dargah and everybody was busy for the Asar (5 o'clock) prayer. After the prayers the *janaza* was taken to the grave yard that was toward the left side of the mosque. I too joined the procession. Few minutes later the dead body was buried and after offering the last prayers for the dead, people returned.

Suddenly I noticed a mat that was thrown on the bush. It was the same mat that was spread on the *dola* (the bier on which the dead body is carried) before laying the dead body on it. I waited till everybody left the graveyard premises, and when I was sure that everybody had, I took out the mat quickly but carefully, brought it to the ablution tank, cleaned it thoroughly with water and dried it. I tied it to the cycle carrier and started for Aunt's house, to give it to her.

I knocked at her door. 'Who is there?' Aunty asked from inside. I told my name and the door was opened. I was standing at the door with the mat in my hands. Trembling I handed over the mat to her. Aunty opened it and examined carefully. I was afraid that the secret may be out. I took twenty rupees from my pocket and moved my hand towards her so that her attention can be distracted. Aunty took the twenty rupees and said, 'The mat is fine'.

Next day I was again under my favorite tree with my friends. I heard the same friend shouting my name from a distance. When I turned to him he said, 'Aunty is calling you'. I turned pale. I was sure that Aunty has discovered the secret and calling me to scold me. I went to her house in a nervous state and knocked on the door. Aunty opened the door and much to my relief asked me to bring some vegetables and meat from the market and went inside to fetch a bag.

I took the bag and money from her, went to the market, purchased vegetables and meat and returned within an hour. I went to her house and knocked on the door. There was no response. I knocked again but there was no response. All kinds of worried thoughts were coming to my mind. I knocked on the door for ten minutes. I thought Aunty died. I was sure that the mat must have caused her death. The ghost of the dead may not have liked her sleeping on it and it killed her. I was drowned in a flood of thoughts and suffocated by guilt. Tears started flowing from my eyes. I blamed myself for Aunty's death. If I hadn't given the dead man's mat to her, she wouldn't have slept on it, nor would the evil spirit have killed her. I kept thinking and crying. I didn't have the courage to speak to anybody else.

I went to the mosque with the news of Aunty's death with the intention of informing others. I started searching for the Imam Sahab. The Imam Sahab was a gregarious man and affectionate to children. He was working as an Imam in the mosque of our locality for many years. He was Imam as well as a Moazin but the people from our locality call him Moazin

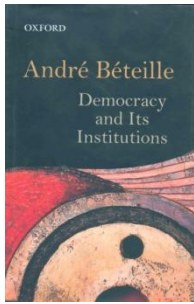
Sahab. I often assisted him in cleaning, dusting, washing and filling of water in the mosque etc. He was fond of me and considered me different, intelligent and useful. He trusted me.

Moazin Sahab was standing in the courtyard of the mosque and waiting to give the call for the sunset prayers. He was looking at the watch again and again to begin the prayer call at the correct time. As he looked at me I wished him and went nearer. Seeing my unstoppable tears he asked for the reason. I told him that our 'Aunty' has died. After hearing this news he too became sad. For few seconds he was silent, and then consoling me said, 'She was ill since a long time. Everything depends on Allah's wish, He calls whoever He wants. This world is a temporary shelter. Today she has died; tomorrow we all have to go from here. Pray that Allah forgive her'. It was now the time for the sunset prayer call and the prayer. After completing the prayer Moazin Sahab announced the death of the Aunt. Then there was *dua* for Aunt's good after life.

Soon after the prayers the news spread in our locality. I saw some people gathered near Aunty's house. To my astonishment, Aunty was shouting at them! 'Who has spread this false news of my death'? People told her that they heard it from Moazin Sahab. Aunty called for Moazin Sahab and shouted at him also. Moazin Sahab told her my name and said that I was the source of this news to everyone present. I was watching this scene from a distance and immediately ran away. But it was of no use. This news spread to the neighboring localities and even my parents came to know of it. People from my neighbourhood also quarreled with my parents. People started calling me with nicknames; some called me Iblis (devil), some Shaitan (devil, another name), some called me mischief monger etc. For a week I didn't come out of my home. If I did, people would pass comments and say all kinds of things. I didn't go to this mosque for fifteen days. If I wanted to pray, I went to a mosque that was far away. I was ashamed that Moazin Sahab suffered and faced Aunty's anger, and the irritation of and various others because of me.

One day after the Asar prayer two of my friends came to my house and passed the message that Moazin Sahab had called me. I was in a dilemma: if I went I would have to face his anger; if I didn't it would have been disrespectful. So mustering courage I went to the mosque where Moazin Sahab was sitting in the courtyard. I went and stood silently beside him. He stood up and said 'Assalamu Alaikum'. He affectionately put his hand on my head and said, 'Everybody commits mistakes. If you had committed a mistake, then it was also mine that I didn't confirm the news. Anyway, forget all these things now'. He then warned the other children present that nobody should tease me any more. I was pleased to hear all these things from Moazin Sahab and was happy that he forgave me. Forgetting everything I got busy again playing games with my friends.

New arrivals in English

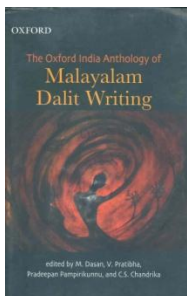
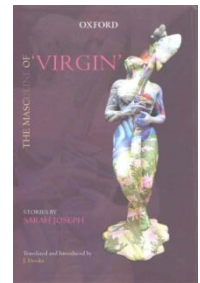


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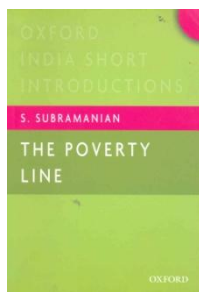
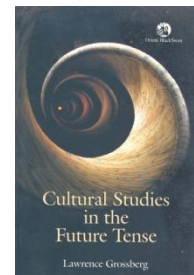


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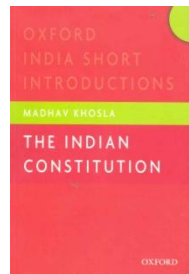
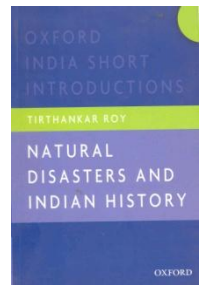


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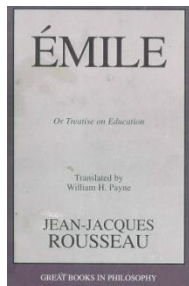
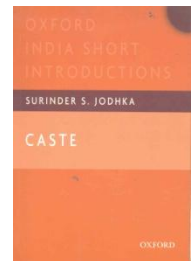


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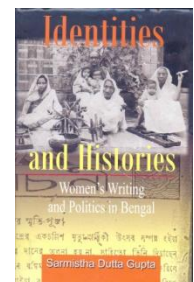


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