

Mrs. Janaki Pattanaik, popularly known as Janaki Ma in her neighbourhood, never tired of telling people about the two attractions of the holy city of Puri: the Jagannath Temple and her illustrious daughter Aseema. When the local youngsters pointed out the sacrilege in her statement she bared her betel-stained teeth to defend herself, "My daughter Aseema was born after the Lord blessed me during Ratha Yatra. My mother-in-law wanted to name her Jagadamba but my father-in-law allowed my husband to have his way". The audience had to acknowledge Aseema's sanctified presence on earth. The old people nudged each other and asked her, "When will Aseema become a district collector like her father?"

When we first met Janaki Ma, we knew her as the owner of a decent lodge in Puri. The room charges and culinary standards did not disappoint us though we wondered about her business targets. She probably wished to attract customers and help them earn merit at affordable rates. Our interest lay mainly in strolling on the sea beach. My wife Neera was not the devout religious type and postponed the mandatory trip to the Jagannath Temple to our last day in Puri. Janaki Ma criticized Neera's agnosticism and urged her to visit the temple immediately. Irritated by Neera's reluctance, Janaki Devi blurted out, "My Aseema, who is going to be a district collector, pays homage to Lord Jagannath as soon as she gets down from the train. New Delhi, where she has been a student for many years, could not corrupt her".

The old cashier at the reception desk looked at her and teased her, "Janaki Ma, when will Aseema

Short Story

Grand Expectations

○Rita Nath Keshari

become a district collector?" His roguish looks drew a sharp reaction from this pious lady happy with her cloistered life in Puri. "She has taken the administrative service exams and very soon ministers in Delhi will put garlands round her neck".

I could see Neera's heckles rising at the very mention of I.A.S. and ministers. Her communist beliefs often led her to take an anti-establishment stand. I almost expected her to shout slogans against the civil services as a stinking relic of the British Raj. I did not want Janaki Ma, reveling in her parental glory, to suffer any kind of shock. Moreover, the wizened cashier would nettle the middle-aged lady even more. Pulling my recalcitrant wife to one side, I counseled her, "We can't find any other lodge at this rate in Puri even during off-season. The charges are so conveniently low because of her lack of business sense. Think of our shoestring budget and be nice to her". Neera acquiesced and politely enquired after Aseema's health and studies.

The old cashier spoke through his laughter, "She is ignorant of everything outside Puri. I have to write the address on the envelope and translate the contents of her letters. Aseema, ignorant of her

mother tongue, can write only in Hindi. Her father was keen on her learning Hindi because it would help her to write the civil services".

As Neera and I strolled along the beach, I commented casually, "I wonder what Janaki Ma's husband is like? Do they ever walk on the beach like this?"

Grinning naughtily she said, "I have gathered quite a bit about him. Don't you dare say that feminine curiosity got the better of a communist like me?"

"Why should we think of an aged couple when we are on a holiday here?" I shrugged it off. However, I felt a little miffed with a man who was obsessed with his career and was moulding his daughter in his image. Probably the daughter accepted his tyranny only to anchor herself safely in life or else she would also drift about like her uneducated mother.

The following morning I was pleased to see an appetizing breakfast spread out on the dining table. Janaki Ma approached us and coaxed us to eat more. I assured her that Neera is blessed with a petty bourgeois appetite. Neera glared at me for she did not like to eat a heavy breakfast. The middle-aged lady shook her head and said, "I don't understand such words. I want to

know if you like the food". I nodded vigorously and complimented her, "It's wonderful and I am sure your husband adores your cooking". She pressed the end of her sari to her eyes as tears welled up in them.

Neera weighed her words carefully, "As the wife of a district collector you did not have to cook, I presume. You must have been on the board of several social welfare committees". Janaki Ma sat down at the table without our bidding. She was getting ready to unburden herself. She prompted herself by pushing a king size paan into her mouth, "My husband was a brilliant student from a very poor family. My father promised to set him up in life on condition that he marries me. He married me and in due course passed his civil service exams with flying colours".

"Then what happened?" Neera asked with baited breath. The cashier called out to her and she got up to leave. She promised to continue her story another time.

We were to leave the next day and to my sheer horror, Neera cornered the aged cashier. "Isn't it a shame that Janaki Ma, despite her affluent background, is more or less an abandoned woman? I have an academic interest in her story. A man can't enjoy his father-in-law's patronage to build up his career and then dump his wife like this".

The cashier did not wish to disclose much about his employer but he did not snub or dismiss this obstinate news seeker. Her earnest look and Janaki Ma's fondness for us must have loosened his tongue a bit. Riveted by her gaze he began hesitantly, "Janaki Ma's husband cannot be faulted on any point. His fidelity to his wife is almost legendary. He dedicated his life to the upbringing of his daughter. He

has adopted many more students that are promising and supervises their education. He spends all his time and money for them. It seems that his daughter Aseema will also extend her full support to this pet project. They are seriously committed to giving this backward state their very best. Both father and their daughter wear khaadi clothes and eat vegetarian food. Janaki Ma appreciates their frugality but does not understand their lack of human warmth". The cashier shut up when he saw the owner of the lodge approaching them.

"You must come again to Puri. My daughter has gone to Mussoorie for her civil services training. I have asked her to get a posting in Orissa so that I can live with her. I'll show her father that my Aseema is not afraid of living with a dark-skinned and uneducated woman like me. He sends me money regularly as though he were settling his debts to my father. But I always return his money month after month", Janaki Ma stopped abruptly because our rickshaw puller was getting impatient. She ordered him to take us to the station safely and to charge us moderately.

During the train journey, I was a little amused by Neera's pensive mood. I prodded her to reveal what was in her mind. "I am trying to piece together Janaki Ma's life. Her father invests his money on a promising candidate. He neglects his wife but plunges into social service to help poor students".

"Of course, he does not want them to get trapped by mercenary fathers who buy husbands for their daughters and suffer a lifetime the way he did. He realized how heavy a price he paid to fulfill his ambition. I think he has repented enough.

Moreover, Janaki Ma never moulded herself to be a worthy companion for her intellectual husband", I tried to analyse the situation.

"You chauvinist prig! How can you justify the way this scheming fellow has exploited his wife? Even the daughter is alienated from the mother. A man's prolonged callousness towards his wife has to be considered a vice. She is determined enough to run a lodge. Do you know that this lodge is actually her father's ancestral home and the employees are family retainers? She wanted to provide them with security in their old age so she started this business," Neera voiced her opinions slowly.

This incident faded from our minds as the months wore on. Neera and I, involved in our own problems, did not feel the years passing. We managed to set up *Samata*, a voluntary self-help group for labour class women, in a nondescript district headquarters town quite far from Kolkata. Our objective was to provide women labourers with micro credit so that they could start trading with agricultural products. We settled near our office and workshop because this helped us to perform better.

One morning, we went to meet the assistant district collector to forward our application for a government loan for a major project. Sitting in the antechamber, I tried to find out something about the officer. I struck up a conversation with the bored looking personal assistant. At first, he was reluctant to open his mouth but Neera persuaded him gently. He spoke hesitantly, "Honest—very honest—young—unmarried. Ms. Pattanaik has proved herself as a young and dynamic

I.A.S. officer". The carefully worded sentences actually hid his real feelings.

"Is she from Orissa?" Neera asked in an effort to gauge the officer's response to our project report and loan application. The personal assistant warmed up to Neera's question. "Madam's main education was in Delhi. She is from Puri but speaks Hindi and English fluently. Her father is now a top-level Secretary in Delhi".

Something stirred in the dim recesses of our mind. A faint image of a district collector's wife running a lodge in her ancestral house in Puri tried to crystallize in our mind. Names did not come to our rescue but other details were slowly emerging to convince us that the young officer had her roots in Puri. Neera struggled hard to remember the name of the middle-aged lady who had treated us more as guests than as customers. A crooked smile on Neera's face roused the curiosity of the personal assistant. "I know her quite well. Her parents don't live together".

The assistant swallowed hard as he remembered his duties. In my own clumsy way I tried to save the situation, "If you could just let us know whether her mother is still in Puri ..." He nodded sheepishly and replied in the affirmative. "Her name is Janaki Pattanaik", he uttered thoughtfully.

A bell rang and the assistant, looking relieved, ushered us in. One look at the young lady sitting across the table did not quite resemble the affectionate lady we had met in Puri a few years ago. When she spoke, her voice was a younger version of Janaki Ma's. The young Ms. Pattanaik expressed her strong desire to help us in our project and aired her liberal views quite boldly.

However, she also cautioned us that funds were not easily forthcoming and many projects turned out to be stillborn due to financial hassles.

With tea and biscuits in front of us, the atmosphere became less formal. Neera asked her about the Delhi institutions she has attended and her answer thrilled my wife. They discovered common acquaintances, friends, and Neera's uncle turned out to be Ms. Pattanaik's professor in her M.A. course.

Unable to bear my wife's name-dropping, I blurted out, "A few years ago we had been to Puri and had the opportunity to meet Mrs. Janaki Pattanaik. She was an enterprising lady running a lodge. If you excuse my observation, you bear an uncommon resemblance to her".

The young administrator took a few minutes to swallow my comment and smiled charmingly, "My mother is still the same enterprising lady. My father moulded her into a businessperson at a time when business was a dirty word. He trained her to manage her family's vast property and enjoy her independence".

There was not much to add after this as we could see that she tried to be the balancing factor in her family's chaotic life. On a sudden impulse Neera said, "We are planning to go to Puri for a short vacation". The officer looked quite peeved and stared intently at us. She shrugged her shoulders, "You don't have to share your holiday plans with me. I thought you were here in my office to discuss your project".

After we came out the assistant grinned at us. "What makes him so merry, may I know?" she whispered to me. I had a feeling that he was

eavesdropping. "Don't worry. I will look after your file. That is my job", he said unctuously.

I wavered for a while but the thought of playing into the assistant's hands filled me with revulsion. I glared at him and mentally noted the different sources I could turn to for project finance. Unable to elicit any response from us the personal assistant looked at me quizzically. Janaki Ma's words about spurning her husband's money rang in my ears. I returned the insolent man's stare and asked him, "Do you know about a mother who refuses to touch her daughter's and her husband's money?"

Before the man could formulate any answer, I asked him a second question, "What good did Janaki Ma's principles do to her?" Neera pulled me away from the suffocating atmosphere of the government office.

Driving back to our office Neera commented, "I don't understand why Janaki Ma insists on her daughter's posting in Puri. What fun will a young woman have in living with her mother? Grand expectations! She sends back Aseema's money just to show off her principles to the world! By the way, we must meet that assistant outside the office and fix things with him".

Neera's words rang in my ears as I drove along: 'grand expectations'. Although she waited for her husband and daughter all her life, yet she never settled for a compromise. Where were our grand expectations leading us, I wanted to ask Neera. She was silently observing our district town trying to emulate a metropolitan centre. Like Aseema, did she too find it more promising than Puri? I decided to concentrate on the unruly traffic around me. □