



REMEMBERING SANO MAMA

Mama Ghar is a cosy place for the children. Each year, no matter where we are, we try our best to return to our maternal uncle's house. My childhood was no different. Relatives from all over India and Nepal used to flock there. As soon as the Dashain came, the preparation to go India would begin. We counted our fingers as the days passed by. Not only the calendars on the walls brought Dashain, but the new clothes which we got smelt of the festival. The marketplace filled with plastic and tin toys, balloons and trinkets. Additional kiosks were set up in front of the shops to sell Dashain-related goods. Villagers serving in the Indian and Malayan armies returned home, with new cassette recorders on their shoulders.

Mother prepared wicks for the festival. Village women gathered in our house to chat about Dashain. People bought goats in their homes, and even if they could not afford one, they took a loan and got. The goat was also a symbol of prestige. Those who couldn't afford a goat hacked chickens and ducks. Animal sacrifice was mandatory.

On the final day of departure for Mama Ghar, we did not sleep. The bus came early in the morning, a long-distance one from Narayangarh to kakarbhatta.

"Driver ramro cha, Ankha chimlera chalauncha," My father said. For my young mind, I thought it meant driving blindfolded. I later came to know the double entendre.

Dashain brought a glow in everyone's face. The journey crossed through Hetuda, Chandranighaur, Nijgadh, Koshi, Lahan, Ithari and then the Indo-Nepal border.

We vomited on the way; My brother, sister and myself. Whenever the bus stopped for lunch, we went out to stretch our legs and freshen up. Mother would take out pouches from her bag. She would put it on the bus seats, spread the chapati, stuff it with potato curry and gave it to us. The smell of the countryside sneaked into the bus through the window chinks. Whenever someone opened the windowpane, the wind rushed inside, lifted the roots of the hair and flushed our faces. The smell of the countryside is also the smell of Nepal. The paddy fields, mud, and the vegetation all mixed up to brew a nostalgic aroma. Even today, when the first drops of monsoon rain, falls on the fields, the earth sends a smell that immediately connects me to childhood. The long stretch of the terai dotted with the wildlife forests, fertile land and rivers extended right till the border.

By evening, when the bus came to a halt, a small sleepy town of Kakarbhatta welcomed us. The rickshaws rushed in at the entrance of the bus to get their customers. But more than that, whenever we arrived in Kakarbhatta, we desperately looked for the toilets near the motor stand. Father knew a hotel owner near the bus station, and whenever we travelled along that route, we went to the same place. After the refreshment, the rickshaw pulled us through the check-post, where both the Nepalese and the Indian police examined our luggage. The rickshaw rolled down to the Mechi bridge, crossed the other check-post and reached

Naxalbari. We got in one of the buses headed directly for Birpara. That is my Mama Ghar.

The Dooars has a dense concentration of Nepali speaking population. Most of them are employed in the tea industry. The bus sped through the tea gardens, through various small towns we never knew their names until it reached Birpara. Before Birpara, there is a small place called Gairkata. That's my Mama's Sasurali. I remember the day when I was quite small and had come there to attend his wedding.

At Birpara, we got off and took a rickshaw down to Mama's watch shop. It was a one-room shop in front of the old Om Cinema hall. He would be busy with his monocle examining the parts of the watches. They lay there with cases pulled apart. Most of the watches I can remember were hmt and Ajanta. Large clocks of all shapes clung to the wall. We greeted, hugged until he would take me to one of the sweet shops. I was free to order whatever sweets I wanted—Samosa, Misti etc. The taste of it hangs in my tongue even today.

Melodious Hindi number blared out of the large mic of the hall. Later, he would close the shop, lock it and go along with us. We sat in a rickshaw while he used to ride on his bicycle. The road to Mama Ghar passed through the railway tracks. Often, we had to wait for a while, amongst heavy traffic of buses, rickshaws, bicycles and pedestrians when the gates were locked. A giant train would pass by, fanning us with a continuous gust of wind. On the other side of the railway gate, Mama stopped by a Pan shop and bought pans for all the family. For us, it was the mitha pan. My heart bulged with joy nothing can compare. The rickshaw crossed Chota pul(Chota bridge,) and headed for Khakrabari, through the narrow village trail. It waltzed left and right as it passed through potholes and gravel. A few more turns and we saw our Mama Ghar looming in the distance amidst the beetle nut and coconut groves.

Relatives from all over India and Nepal flocked Mama Ghar. The house resonated with laughter for almost a week. On the day of Tika, more than the blessing, we hurried down to the backyard as soon as we got an envelope and counted the money.

I don't know how many times, I went to Mama Ghar after that. As time went by, maternal grandparents died one after the other. Elderly members of the family began to depart in never returning journey. They went into the void, leaving deep scars behind, that took years and years to heal.

Last year, on my trip to India, I remember the night spent at Sano Mamas house. All of my mamas were there. We talked for more than half of the night.

It's July here in Scotland. A few days back, I got a call in the afternoon. I never knew that Mama had already left. That too of a stroke. Each death is painful but dying before time is more painful.

Next year, I will go to Mama Ghar again. I know I will meet my other mamas, but Sano mama will not be there to say, "Bhanja, Aayau".