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Paromita Goswami

India

### The Recruit

*Apologise with folded hand to candidates for error in exam centre address. Deeply regret the pain of those who travelled outside the state. Recruitment exam for 7000 posts in Grp C and Grp D categories postponed. Assure serious action against those responsible.*

Maharashtra's health minister got away by tendering half-hearted apologies in a long thread on Twitter, but the department's recruitment fiasco put Priya in a miserable situation. Two days back she had convinced her father to give her a thousand rupees, which he eventually did by borrowing from the village moneylender. Yesterday afternoon she and her two friends had boarded the train for the overnight journey to Lucknow from Nagpur. The compartment was packed with young people her age - all in their twenties - all headed to Lucknow to appear for the health department exam. She had never felt happier and freer. The three friends chatted, shared food and quizzed each other on probable questions. Their excitement kept sleep at bay.

Even as he handed her the money, her father had voiced his doubts repeatedly. "Lucknow is a thousand miles away! Why are they calling you to another State to appear for an exam?"

"I don't know," she had replied, "the other girls are going too. The address on all our hall tickets is of the same college in Lucknow."

"Let her go," her mother had intervened, "she has set her heart on a government job, let the *pori* try."

Priya's parents worried for the two children - Priya and her younger brother - and struggled to ensure food on the plates, two or three sets of new clothes in a year and a pair of new *chappals*. Their two-acre rain-fed paddy farm produced barely enough for the family of four. All through the year Priya's father worked under a mason. Her mother looked for work on daily wages. When Priya turned three, the *Anganwadi Bai* called out to her, took her by

her hand and led her to the preschool under the big tamarind tree. The children ran around the tree collecting tamarind to suck with salt folded in bits of old newspaper. When she turned six, the *Zilla Parishad* teachers automatically enrolled her name in the village school. She was just twelve when she joined her mother to do *rowni* - the backbreaking work of paddy transplantation in the monsoon season. She joined the women who plodded through acres of wet, muddy fields, from morning to night. She caught a high fever the first time, but over the years, like other village girls, she too learnt to push her body to the limits without thinking too much about its needs. When she turned sixteen, Priya bought a second-hand cycle with the money saved from the paddy work and started to attend to the government college in the town six kilometres away.

Now at twenty Priya was in second year graduation. Twenty! She has learned to ignore the neighbours and acquaintances who descended every now and then with information of 'a really good boy'. It hurt her when people taunted her parents for keeping a twenty-year-old unmarried daughter at home. However, the person whose comments she absolutely dreaded was Atya, her father's sister, who was hell bent on getting her married to one of her two sons. Priya had grown up being told repeatedly that she was destined to marry one of the two *mehunas*, as was the usual custom. Almost intuitively she disliked the idea which translated into her dislike for the two cousins. She couldn't stand their constant whiling away time at *paantheles*, their stained teeth and vacant grins. But Atya, their mother, was a domineering woman, relentless in her perseverance and solidly backed by the community leaders. Marriages between cousins - *mamachi mulgi* and *atyacha mulga* - were not only common, they were considered favourably in the community so where was the question of Priya or her parents saying 'no'?

Priya felt a hand on her shoulder as her friend offered her dinner, but she refused. The incidents of the day had destroyed her appetite. Early that morning the train from Nagpur had pulled into Lucknow station. Even before she stepped out, she sensed something was extremely wrong. There was a large, angry crowd of people from different parts of Maharashtra milling on Lucknow platform. They were furiously cursing the government back home, heaping choicest abuses on the *netas*. People were talking frantically into their phones.

Priya joined this milling crowd of potential candidates who, after travelling a thousand miles, had learned that the address was wrongly printed on their hall tickets. There were no colleges in Lucknow whose names matched with those given to them. The Maharashtra government had made a terrible mistake that had sent hundreds of

students across state borders all the way to Uttar Pradesh. There were videos circulating on the social media - the Maharashtra health minister's apology, the opposition leader's attack on the insensitive government and both were getting severely abused. The exam had been indefinitely postponed by the ministry. 'Indefinitely' was a scary word that could be stretched to mean any length of time - one week, one month, one year or five.

After a crestfallen day at the railway station, Priya and her friends boarded the night train back home. All around her tired bodies lay asleep, but Priya crouched on corner of the berth and peered out of the window. The train hurtled through the intense darkness, lit only by the flickering light that fell through the train's windows. She knew what torments lay in store and the very thought of going back home filled her with foreboding. The outward sympathy of the villagers would barely cover their cruel gloating at her misfortune. There were many who would openly express their derision. She closed her eyes and could clearly see her Atya sitting cross legged on the cot outside their house, cracking a whole betel nut between her teeth, waiting to mock her with special comments reserved for the occasion. No, in a village nobody spared you for stepping out of line.

The night grew darker outside and the rhythmic movement of the train made her drowsy. Her sleep was disturbed by dreams of Atya lecturing her father. "Ramesh, this is the last time I have come to your doorstep. Why do I show such large heartedness? - because you are my youngest brother. Did we not decide that your daughter will marry one of my sons. What is your problem? You know we have twelve acres of land..."

"*Tai*," Priya could hear her father's reply "you are my older sister and you have the right to ask for my daughter. But you know my hands are tied..."

Atya's lined face hardened. "Are you going to tell me again that you have no money? All I am saying is that let us do the *sakharpuda*. Once the engagement ceremony is over, we can have the marriage later. *Arey*, I am doing you a favour, you fool! That girl is already twenty! Twenty! You have to think of her marriage before she runs off and gets herself pregnant..."

"*Tai*, she is studying you know. She wants..."

"How does it matter what she wants? Ramesh, my brother, let me tell the truth. You have just two acres of land. Look at your condition. Look at the condition of your hut - it will fall flat if I sneeze! If I walk out, remember you

will have to pay three times the dowry to find a husband for that precious daughter of yours. Where will you find the money then?”

Priya shifted uncomfortably in her sleep as Atya continues her cruel arguments. “*Arey*, does that girl know the cost of wheat and *dal*? You borrowed thousand rupees at *paanch rupaya shekda* - does your precious girl know how much the thousand rupees will amount to at five percent compound interest per month?”

Overcome by guilt, she woke up as hot silent tears flowed down her cheeks. She wished she could stop the train from speeding towards its destination. A couple of months after her return, Priya was engaged to the elder *mehuna* in a ceremony where the whole village was present. Her parents sank further in debt while Atya went about with the air of a victorious general.

Priya pretended that the events happening around were unconnected to her. The engagement became a ceremony of disengagement. It was for some other girl that the village women were singing to the beat of the old drums. It was a traditional *sakharpuda* song, a conversation between the girl and her father that she had heard a millions times and this time was no different:

*Tula magoosa aley va, tula magoosa aley va, bai maze,  
tula magoosa aley...*

*Kunya deshache raje maze pitaji, kunya deshache raje,  
kunya deshache raje?*

*O daughter, they have come to seek your hand,  
they have come...*

*Which kingdom do they rule over O father,  
Which kingdom do they rule over?  
Which kingdom do they rule over?*

This community song in which every married woman joined in invariably brought tears – aunts, grandmothers, mother wiped the corner of their eyes.

After the engagement Atya's visits to her brother's house increased as also her endless instructions regarding the preparations. The *mehuna* accompanied his mother only once and later complained that his would be wife did not smile while talking to him. Priya's mother cajoled him, begging him not to be angry. "She is shy, you know. Once she is married, she will behave according to your wishes - *tumchya shabdacha baher janar nahi!*" Her mother's unnecessary apologies saddened and angered Priya.

Every morning she cycled to her college – just the physical act of peddling twelve kilometers a day brought her relief. In the afternoons, she worked as an office attendant in a typing school and spent some time in the reading room, delaying her return home for as long as possible. She came and went as she wanted with a demeanour so serious that neither her family nor her nosy neighbours dared to ask any questions. Even Atya kept her distance and toned down her comments.

Two weeks before the wedding Atya was on her final visit to her brother's house. "Everything is in your hands now," she said vehemently to no one in particular "I have so much to do in my own house. Do you think I can manage both sides at once?" Then she settled before the tiny TV in the front room with the full intention of enjoying her favourite post-dinner serial. Priya's mother was coaxing the hens into the baskets for the night. Her father and brother were making a list of things to do - collect the ring from the goldsmith, arrange for six *kattas* of rice...

Nobody took any particular notice of Priya as she entered the room, and even less of the paper in her hand. There was a time when the arrival of a letter was an important occasion in rural households. The postman never went without a cup of tea in the home where he delivered a postcard. But these days letters came by email and were printed out of computers. That morning a letter from the official email of the Chief Conservator of Forest had arrived in Priya's inbox. She stood with the letter in her hand and announced, "At least the forest department made no mistakes with the tests. And I passed all the tests. First, I walked 16 kms in eight hours, then I ran five kilometres in less than an hour, then I passed the hundred marks written exam and finally the interview last week. This is the joining letter. In ten days, I begin training in the forest academy at Chandrapur."

Then she turned to Atya and added: "I am calling off the marriage Atya, I don't want to be married right now. Also ... I am convinced that marrying a *mehuna* is not a good idea."

“How dare you! How dare you!” Atya’s voice was dangerously low, her blazing eyes narrowed to a slit, “you will pay for this! I will make you pay for this,” she hissed, “I will make all of you pay for this.”

As the front room exploded with Atya’s anger, Priya unrolled a mat and sat on the mud floor in a corner of the kitchen. Her mother entered, wiping sweat from her face with a corner of her *pallu*.

“*Pori* are you really breaking the engagement?” She whispered urgently, her eyes brimming over.

“Yes *Aai*, ” replied Priya with a smile.

“But Priya!...”

Before her mother could complete the sentence, Priya laughed, waved the letter around and sang out in a clear voice:

*Which kingdom do they rule over?*

*Which kingdom do they rule over?*

*O mother! Which kingdom do they rule over?*

The ancient song became like a wild bird with sharp silver - it rose above the house, flapping its huge feathery wings, circling against the endless night sky.