

AN EERIE TALE (EK BETAAL KATHA AUR)

... And to keep him diverted, he commenced a new story... “So, you have been hearing about Kings and Queens, Princes and Princesses, or wealthy merchants till now. But the story that I am presently going to narrate has a very different theme. It is a simple narrative about a very common girl.

“In some *mohalla* of some town in some state of Hindustan, there lived a girl named Kalpna. She was a good-looking and educated. No doubt, every parent considers his offspring to be as beautiful as the moon, but Kalpna was actually very pretty. She was fond of dance and music, and had received proper training as a small child. But later, when the Ustad hiked his fee, he was sacked, and Kalpna had wept bitterly. However, whenever she felt the urge, she danced and sang to records of film songs.

“After graduation, she had wanted to do an MA, but her parents had not thought it necessary because they wanted to get her married. Post-graduation would have been beneficial if she could have worked and earned whereby they would be relieved of having to pay a heavy dowry, otherwise, it would just make her swollen-headed, and it would be difficult to find a boy.

“Kalpna was a beloved daughter. You are right, no doubt, every daughter is dear to her parents. From the time she was a little girl, her father had started saving for her wedding, and her mother had started collecting items for her dowry. The case of boys is different, all you need to do is give them a good education, and they are on their own. But, as far as girls are concerned, no matter how educated they may be, there is no end to providing for them, even after they are married: be it a festival or auspicious occasion, an inauguration, death or mourning, the in-laws have to be appeased. If she's fortunate to be blessed with a child, then the entire family has to be gratified, even at the time of the offspring's vows. No matter how much is put aside for girls, it is never enough.

“Kalpna had been sitting at home for the last three years. It was fun in the beginning, but as time wore on, it started becoming unbearable. What could she do? Where could she go? She became withdrawn and began to lose her zest for life.

“One day she raked out her easel from some discarded goods, and fitted it with a canvas. She then searched for brushes and bought new paints. She had almost forgotten that once upon a time she had been interested in painting. She revived the talent and reproduced a flower ... a fresh, blooming flower ... gleeful ... jocund... drenched in the morning dew ... and preserved it in the core of her being. Every woman has an inflorescence within her that gives her intense tolerance, the strength to struggle, and the will to survive. She looks forward to a beautiful life, a life full of exotic hues. She inhales and exhales colour, giving it novel forms and vitality. She creates new life!

“Kalpna not only adored colours, but lived amidst them. Her paintings

decorated the walls of her room, verandah and gallery. Where there was colour, there was life and beauty ... they added vibrancy to existence.... And so, she kept brightening her being... and beautifying her surroundings.

"Suitors came to see her... appreciated her looks... lauded her accomplishments....! Her eyes sparkled when they commended her paintings. They left after speaking with her father, saying that they would send a feedback, but as usual, there was never any further communication. They were cowards in the sense that they did not have the guts to reveal their expectations face to face. Kalpna was surprised at the fact that every doctor and engineer expected a dowry of at least ten to twenty lakhs. The boy may have nothing except a job, but that itself was enough to merit a dowry of several lakhs.

" 'Ma, do people really spend lakhs on a single wedding?'"

" I don't know. Maybe money has started growing on trees, and can be plucked as and when required.?"

"Disgusting! Such repulsive deals! Then why the hypocrisy of seeing the girl and so on?" After every few months there would again be a lot of hustle-bustle round the house because another suitor was expected. The same entertainment ... the same stupid questions pertaining to educational qualifications and accomplishments ... request for a song ... what was the use of singing or exhibiting my paintings? They should just complete the negotiations and go.

"Kalpna had found another way to keep herself busy. In the room adjoining the drawing room, she started a school of Dancing and Fine Art. Girls from the neighbourhood joined her classes, and she was able to earn enough to support herself. Now, she didn't feel guilty of being a burden on her parents either.

"She was happy, the colour returned to her cheeks, and there was an awakening of self-confidence. But then the neighbours started becoming curious. Every time there was a proposal for her, the busybodies began to eavesdrop. You should not think that this was a unique case pertaining to Kalpna only. This is the duty of neighbours generally, and they carry it out diligently! To be repeatedly show-cased ceremoniously ... to hear herself praised ... to face a barrage of questions ... only to be rejected ...amounted to being stripped publicly. However, she had learnt to accept the fact that born as a woman, she would have to endure the humiliation of *Draupadi*; but, every setback added to the guilt of her parents, and they made increased efforts to find a suitable boy.

"You'll be happy to know that finally a desirable match was found for Kalpna. He belonged to a middle-class family like her, and worked as a clerk in a bank. His age, looks, salary, everything was just fine. They agreed to spend as per their expectations on the wedding. The list of requirements sent by the boy's side comprised a scooter, fridge, television etc. There is hardly any alternative because such demands have become the order of the day, and they are not considered unusual at all.

"Kalpna's Dancing and Fine Arts School was shut forthwith. People began praying that other unmarried girls should also meet with similar success. She and

her parents were indeed blessed.... But her story does not end here. ...

"There was a misunderstanding between the two parties, resulting in a conflict on the day of the wedding. The boy's side said that ten lakh had been agreed upon over and above the dowry, the girls side said that all was inclusive in that amount. Finally, Kalpna's father promised to pay the remaining amount as soon as possible; after all, they had his daughter as surety. The boy's father had to agree lest things sprang out of control and reached newspapers involving testimony from both sides and other related problems.

"Kalpna left for her in-laws but was greatly disillusioned. She realized that these new relationships were strung to a weighing machine, and instead of being bound with skeins of the finest silk as she had once dreamed, the balance was forever being tilted as in a see-saw. She then decided to please people and win them over by serving them. Everyone agreed that she was pretty, educated, talented, and good natured. She kept herself busy from morning till evening, catering to the needs of one and all, and never showing insolence of any kind. The neighbours appreciated her work; the young girls became fond of 'Kalpna Bhabhi' who not only sang for them but gave them singing tips; her parents-in-law were satisfied because the new bride had soon learnt to manage the household; her husband also loved her.

"When Kalpna was going home, her mother-in-law carefully explained, "Beti, please remind your father to send the remaining amount of money as soon as possible . . . And, come back soon We'll miss you."

"Her parents were under the impression that their daughter had sorted out things.

" *'Pitaji*, that remaining sum of money . . . They were saying that . . ."

"*'Are Beti!* It's a matter of twenty two lakhs. How can it be arranged so soon? Besides, it's not required now. Once the marriage has been solemnized, everything automatically settles down."

"She returned to her in-laws with a lot of gifts but not the money due to be paid. After a few days she again went to her parents with instructions to get the money, but returned empty-handed. She was sent again, and this time she sobbed and pleaded. She had also wept bitterly before her husband, but if tears could turn into coins, she was prepared to weep all her life so that they could hoard as much money as they wanted! But tears are nothing but tears. They have value only for those who have feelings, otherwise they are mere water. This time her husband, Manoj, did not come to fetch her, and he didn't send anyone either. She kept waiting. Everything suddenly changed.... People changed.... Their communication changed.... Nothing was as it had been Manoj had recited poetry for her, serenaded her ... but now all that was gone. Her beauty evaporated and her accomplishments turned into a mirage. What should they do? ... eat her talents with honey?... adorn her as an icon of beauty? The things she had brought fridge, television, sofa, almirah... were all stuffed into the two-roomed little hutment. They wanted to buy a new house for which they needed the money. They had a

working son whom they had married, and if his wife couldn't even provide for a new house, what was the use of such a son and such a marriage.

"And so . . . Kalpna turned into a ball. Now, she was not a woman . . . nor a wife . . . nor a daughter-in-law . . . nor a daughter even . . . Just a ball . . . absolutely round . . . no different from other balls . . . being thrown from one court into another. Both parties had their excuses. Her parents were not rich, and felt that once she was married everything would be fine. Her in-laws had a working son who bestowed upon them the right to become wealthy and own a good scooter, fridge, television etc.

"Both teams got tired . . . and the ball was also battered.

"*Beti*, write and ask Manoj to come and fetch you. After marriage, a girl's place is with her in-laws. How long can you go on living here?"

" 'Why? Is there any problem in feeding me? I'll re open my school, *Ma*, or work somewhere to fend for myself.'

" 'No, *Beti*, it's not that! What will people say? As it is they keep making enquiries. How long can we go on lying?"

" 'Who has asked you to lie? You made the deal! Why should you make my life hell? I'm satisfied with my lot. You needn't bother about me, I won't be a burden on you.

" 'It's not that. These minor tussles are common. Things will gradually settle down, *Beti*. Besides, we didn't send you empty-handed. We spent much after all . . . and . . . a married girl should stay with her in-laws. Your *Pitaji* will escort you there . . . He will also explain things to them.

"And Kalpna was again sent to adorn her in-law's place.

"What followed is very simple. Within a couple of days Kalpna suddenly sensed an eerie peace and tranquility in the house which made her suspicious. Nobody said anything to her or even spoke loudly in her presence. Nobody taunted or mocked her. They were particular in front of neighbors, and didn't ask her to do any household chores. She should have breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed, only that this stifling atmosphere gave her the premonition of a coming storm. There was a mysterious smile behind the calm facades. Manoj's palms became moist and slimy to touch. His advances didn't arouse any romantic feelings in her; rather she felt life oozing out of her in the grip of a python.

"Kalpna wanted to run away . . . escape to freedom . . . breathe freely . . . in a salubrious climate where the ambience was not vitiated with conspiracy . . . where there was the rejuvenating fragrance of fresh flowers not the overpowering toxic asphyxiating smell . . . But where could she go? Was there a haven for her anywhere? Her parental home?

No, that too was as alien as her in-law's place. She felt humiliated there and became a physical and spiritual burden on her parents. They are pained to talk about her misfortune so resort to lies. She has nowhere to go. She is a woman so can't live alone. She can't run away because such women become prostitutes who themselves are commodities to be trafficked. One cannot escape business

transactions ... they are omniscient ... at home ... outside ... far, far away ... all kinds of swapping.

"Kalpna did not have cause to complain. There was no ill treatment or lashing out. Rather, she felt like a sacrificial lamb being well-fed ... but she was helpless.

"And then, one day Kalpna's parent's received a call stating that their daughter had been burned while cooking on a stove. They rushed to find her in the hospital ... singed ... black ... bloated like a ball ... all dimensions had been reduced to nothing ... there was no sign of her cascading hair ... her long artistic fingers were jelled to the palms ... the floret within had crumbled to ashes ... and the fragrance had turned to a putrid decomposing stench.

"On being called, she managed to open her eyes with great difficulty. She didn't look at anyone in particular. What could she say to her parents-in-law and husband? Those relationships had been based on business transactions right from day one. She had stayed with them for barely a year. But a deal is a deal. How long could a fake coin be pawned? It was discarded. How can love and affection develop in a year when those with whom she had spent half a lifetime couldn't keep her snuggled in parental bonds. Beloved *Ma*, *Pitaji*, you bore and bred me. Did you send me back to see this day? Is this the adornment you yearned for? Oh *Ma*, what explanation will you have for people now...?"

After listening to the narration thus far, *Betaal* stopped and said. "Tell me, who is responsible for Kalpna's demise? If you are aware of everything and yet are not honest, then this society will disintegrate into inanimate fragments. Who is to blame ...?"

Readers, this is the question of *Betaal* I also put to you. Do answer or else

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