

BANTO

(Translation of the short story, BANTO)

The bell of Jassi, the milkman's bicycle, left Banto wandering in the labyrinth of the past.

She had finished making *rotis*. She put the dish containing *daal* on the hearth, and removed the burning logs from the fireplace. She would clean up the kitchen only after the meal was over, but got involved in putting things in their places.

The sound of the bell startled her. She quickly took water from the pitcher, washed the flour off her hands, and ran up to the terrace.

The sunlight was entangled in the topmost branches of the neem in front as if it were waiting for her. She breathed a sigh of relief. Putting her hands behind her, she leant against the parapet, and lifted her eyes towards the clear, blue sky, enwrought with golden embroidery.

There was time left. The crimson strands of the sun were yet to weave into the gold. The sunlight was to descend gradually before getting lost in the distance, behind the fields.

It was time. At the far end of the road that crossed her house, she spied a blotch, a fast-moving, white blotch.

Banto fixed her gaze in that direction. The blotch was becoming clearer as it neared. Now a face had become visible. It was the hamlet's teacher, returning with quick, sure steps. She was modestly clad in a black-bordered white sari, the *palla* being neatly pleated and pinned to her shoulder. She looked just as prim and proper as she had done in the morning, only that the white flower in her hair was missing; perhaps it had fallen off somewhere. She walked past Banto's house carrying some copies, a book, and a small purse. Gradually, her form again dwindled, blurred and was lost.

Everyday, when Banto saw the teacher go that way, she felt she was doing immense service. Leaving all her work only to observe her follow a regular schedule, Banto began feeling that she too was participating in some work of utmost importance, and hence continued to follow her as far as the eyes could see. When nothing more was visible she heaved a long sigh, and fixed her gaze at some indiscernible object.

After a bend, the narrow cobbled road stretched straight ahead. Running alongside were the commons. Then the fields-stretched far and wide. Beyond that, lay the railway track. Once a day, around afternoon, train passed that way. Then too, Banto would rush to the terrace. She looked at the train as it whistled by emitting clouds of smoke.... it seemed as if a long black snake had slithered past her, poisoning the entire sky with its venom. A thin black line was all that remained of the billows of smoke. Suddenly she felt that the reptile had returned, and was crawling over her whole body, moving from the head to the neck, wrapping itself around her bosom tightly, passing over her stomach down to her thighs and legs, and there from entering her very being. Her entire physique would

become electrified, quivering from top to toe. But she just sat motionless. This creepy sensation was exigent at least it made her heart throb... otherwise, she would have literally become rooted to the spot frozen, fossilized.

That sensation spread, and stimulated every vein and artery in her body. She experienced a ticklish feeling as the snake's venom dissolved and flowed within her. For a moment at least, her breathing quickened. She clutched her breasts, made quick motions of rising and squatting, her eyes glued to the firmament.

Birds flew around amidst patches of white clouds. She could discern various forms emerging from all this. They assumed shape slowly became diffused only to take on new perceptions. At times a moving cloud floated away, and the face of an infant materialized within it. Gradually the tiny, round visage became elongated and turned into one of a bearded man. Soon the beard became unkempt, and grew in different directions of the cumulus, assuming the aspect of an ogre.... he too disappeared after a while Now the clouds dispersed, and flew around like tiny bits of cotton.

She could remain standing at the terrace, holding onto the parapet, staring into the distant sky from where pieces of cotton floated down and lost themselves in the earth. She knew there was no one to call her, chide her for staying out, rebuke her for leaving the work incomplete, and, above all, to ask her what she was doing there, whom she was peeping at.

If only there were someone to grab her hand and forcefully drag her back to the house, shake her up, even push her down, then perhaps this inertia, apathy, passivity and torpor would have yielded to a recurring rise and fall of her bosom. Then, possibly her *orni* would repeatedly slip off her shoulders, and she would have to arrange the elusive stole over her head and breasts ever so often.

But that was not to be. Her eyes had calcified and her shoulders were stiff. Inertly covering a bowed head and bosom, the *orni* had become mute and uncommunicative as if it were wrapped around an inanimate stave.

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She had become accustomed to the bickering at her own home. There were arguments between Ma and Baba, hurling of abuses, followed by lamentations and crying. Baba usually returned late, often well past midnight, and there was pandemonium. Ma understood he had been gambling, which implied drinking and getting drunk. That was his pastime at which he staked the lives of his family and lost.

Ma would be boiling with rage when he returned stealthily like a thief. The moment he uttered a word, her pent up fury erupted, and all hell broke loose. There was shouting and screaming, exchange of obscenities. Things were thrown around. She beat her breast, and was beaten in return. Finally, Baba retired into a corner, exhausted and vanquished.

Banto and her younger brother, Mehtab, would be jolted from slumber and joined the uproar. Later, however she got used to the commotion, and while the

brawl continued, she hugged Mehtab, and the two again went off to sleep. Ma wept, beat her forehead, lamented, and unlocked a treasure house of expletives.

There were times when Ma laughed as well. When Baba didn't go out in the evening, she oiled his salt and pepper hair. She washed her face, put on a clean set of *salwar-kurti*, cheerfully asked the two children to go out and play, served his meal, and saw him eat to his heart's content.

One day, however, when Baba was at home, Ma did not adorn herself as usual. That day he had returned early, in the afternoon. It seemed he had been involved in a fight, and gotten the worst of it. His hair was dishevelled, and his swollen face had a few scratches as well. Initially, Ma showed concern, and began searching for *haldi-chuna*, a paste of turmeric and lime applied to abrasions. While she attended to him, her whispers turned into hysterics. It was surprising that he did not raise his voice at all. At times he would put in a word or so, but that was all. She was swearing at him, cursing him with necrosis and death, maligning his ancestors and sending them to damnation. But Baba kept his cool not once did he raise his hand.

Drained out after all the yelling, she burst into tears. She gagged her mouth and sobbed; she was literally swallowing her screams. Sounds of shrieking and flogging emanated from most homes so no one paid much attention to them; however when there was crying and howling, all the neighbours responded and rallied round the person. That is why Ma tried to quell mortified wails by stuffing her *orni* into her mouth.

Banto was astonished to see her behave that way. She had not even sobbed like this when the *Numberdaar* had confiscated their buffalo. Baba had borrowed money from him to repair the thatched roof of their house. No one knows what he did with the cash either he gave it away or lost it at a drunken game of cards... whatever happened, the roof continued to leak and drip as before. After pressing his claim for long, one evening the village headman arrived, unfastened their buffalo from the shed, and walked off with it.

The buffalo had been masticating contently, and was startled. It was milking time, and she allowed no one except Ma to approach her. At the sight of a stranger holding her rope, she shook her head, threatened him with her horns, and expressed her resentment by refusing to budge. But when the headman's son began raining blow after blow on her back, and the *Numberdaar* tugged at her rope, she could do nothing except bawl and be dragged away; looking back and beseeching all the while.

Ma wept, lamented and abused Baba, "You good for nothing creature, may you rot in hell! May you be the prey of worms! You haven't even spared the cattle and flock.... You've gulped down everything, you drunkard... We've lost a lactating buffalo on account of you.... You accursed man, may you be damned ! "

All the neighbours had collected round to witness the scene. There was nothing to hide; everything had been exposed. The debt could not be cleared so the headman had taken away the buffalo. It was as simple as that; there was no scope

for reasoning or explanations.

But that day Ma just could not contain her sobs even though she had shoved almost half the *orni* into her mouth. Banto went to her. She wanted to console her, dry her tears with her own crumpled *orni*. Of course, she had given up wearing frocks long ago. The day the Sarpanch's son had pinched her arm blue, Ma had forced her to change her dress code. Her friends who had completed Primary School in the village and were going to the hamlet to attend Middle School, wore frocks. But because she could not move out of the village she had to wear *salwar-kameez* and cover her head with an *orni*.

So when Banto moved to wipe her mother's face, she was impulsively pulled forward, embraced, and hugged so hard that she almost suffocated. She could not remember Ma having shown such affection ever before. Her heart began to sink.

By nightfall Balvira arrived riding his familiar bicycle, the wheels covered with dirt and mud and the handles adorned with tassels.

Baba often went out with him only to return well past midnight or even the next day, giving rise to a very volatile situation. Seeing Balvira, Ma would go indoors complaining: "He has descended upon us again like the angel of death! He won't allow us to live in peace! O God! Why doesn't he ever get drunk and sleep on the railway track? He has ruined his own life, and now wants to take this fool down with him."

But that day when Balvira showed up, Ma did not swear at him as usual; she just wept silently. She spread the *khat*, covered it with a *dari*, asked him to sit down, and sent Banto with a *thali* of food for him. That day she had prepared an item of vegetables' to accompany the *daal*. Balvira was already heavily drunk. He kept eating quietly while she served him freshly baked, hot *rotis*. Her Baba, with his head in his hands, sat beside him on the same charpoy.

Having finished the *thali*, Balvira gulped down a whole *lota* full of water, belched loudly, and lay down on the bed. "You better hurry up, it's getting late. It'll take two hours at least even by cycle," he said, addressing no one in particular.

Her mother's crying intensified. When Banto entered the room, she took out the only decent dress that the girl had, and asked her to wear it. There was an *orni* with gold lace around the borders, which had been gifted on the occasion of some relative's wedding; wrapping it around her, ensuring that her head was well-covered, she brought her out, and presented her to Balvira. Once again, she could not contain her sobs.

Banto had never seen Balvira this closely before. He used to come and Baba would soon go out with him. Ma too didn't allow her to appear before him, saying, "Drunkards and gamblers cannot be depended upon".

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Once or twice he had come with a bottle, Ma sent her indoors, and served him herself with water and salad consisting of onions and tomatoes.

But that day it was Ma who had escorted her out, with arms around her

shoulders, advising her, " Banto, this Balvira is your man now. You are his wife. Go, my daughter... Your destiny has henceforth been hitched to his."

She was astounded. what did Ma mean? "oh *Amma*", " was all that she could utter; it seemed as if someone had hit her really hard on the chest, and she was unable to speak out. She was badly shaken, and her legs were trembling. She clutched Ma's hand. How could you become husband and wife just like this? Marriage implied arrival of the *baraat*, dancing and singing, a party. Without informing *Banto*, without organizing a reception and things, she was being handed over to someone as his wife?

She soon came round, but couldn't look up because it seemed a lot of sand had gone into her eyes. Turning to her mother, she asked, "*Amma*, how can I just go with him? Our marriage has not yet been solemnized."

Ma's eyes were again in spate, "You wretched creature! Born to sinners like us, you are only destined to such a marriage. Go *Beti*, if God wills it, you will be happy". She pulled her hand free and raised it towards heaven.

After that, there was nothing that Banto could say or do. She didn't look back at her parents, drag her feet or weep and shout; rather, she obediently followed Balvira.

They had walked but a short distance when the village was left behind; leaving the fields, when they emerged onto the footpath and reached the tube-well, Balvira asked her to sit on the handle of his bicycle. In the light of the bulb on the wooden pole, she observed Balvira carefully for the first time. He was fairly mature, a friend of her father, but had not grayed like him. That day he had oiled his hair and set it. Indeed, he had big moustaches, resembling those of the village headman. He was heavily-built with a slight paunch like Sarpanch Chacha. His complexion was dark and shone in the light of the lamp. His eyes were heavy with sleep; perhaps he had had a lot to eat and was drowsy.

When she tried jumping onto his cycle, she lost balance, but Balvira supported her; holding her waist, he carefully seated her on the handle, and then getting on himself, they rode off. As her back came into contact with his chest, she sensed a strange smell of putrid sweat. He drove the bicycle slowly... was it because he was being careful or was she merely imagining. However, from time to time, he kept instructing her, "Sit tight... don't fall... don't go off to sleep".

Not only had Banto shut her mouth, her mind too had stopped working; she was absolutely numb. Sometimes, however, she was diverted by a rustling sound as the bicycle moved between the standing crops, the fireflies that flitted around, the gyrating tassels on the handles, or her new *orni* which might tear on being entangled in the vehicle. And that is how the night journey came to an end.

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Balvira's village lay adjoining a hamlet. The house comprised two pakka rooms, a thatched verandah, a spacious courtyard with a corner for the cattle and flock, and an enclosed terrace. There was no shortage of food or beverages. Banto

was impressed. Besides, seeing his position at home and in the precincts, she realized that she had done well to come away with him.

An old woman, wrapped in a *dhoti* over a shirt, came out. Her healthy demeanor seemed to belie her age. She gave Banto her blessings in the traditional way, and escorted her into the house. The next day she dressed her in new clothes. The women of the village came to see her, and pour wee drops of poison into her ears: Balvira lost his first wife long ago. He was into dubious business. There were regular visits by the police. Summons came home. Who would give a daughter to him under such circumstances?

"Such a beautiful bride! She's like a flower."

"What's your name?"

"Banto! Oh Banto, Balvira will keep you like a Queen."

"He paid the full and final amount of five thousand", someone whispered into a neighbour's ear."

"How old is the girl? Balvira will have to wait. Its not a bad bargain for five thousand."

"Oh *Chachi*, you have chosen well! She's almost like Balvira's daughter. She's so sweet! Congratulations *Chachi*!"

Banto sat coyly with her head down. Her back ached. At night, when she turned in her sleep, the pain shot through her whole body.

There was no one in the house except the old woman and Balvira's younger brother, Satbira. He was married but the *gauna* had not taken place, and his wife was yet to be brought home. There was not much work to be done except cooking twice a day; that too, was handled by the old woman on occasions when Banto didn't feel like doing it. There was a hand pump in one corner so that, unlike her parental home, she didn't have to go anywhere to fetch water.

Banto had enough to eat and drink. Balvira was away most of the time, for days and weeks, and came home just once in a while; that too was as bad as not coming. In the dark too she could make out that he had arrived because of the putrid smell of sweat which suddenly pervaded the entire room. She would shrink into a corner, bundle herself up, become a conch shell, hard and impenetrable from all sides. He too would quietly lie down somewhere, and leave before dawn.

That's how days merged into nights and nights merged into days. Another day would dawn, she would arise, sweep and dust, cook and leave the dishes on the fireplace. The old woman then served everybody including Banto who ate everything that was given to her. She had no idea how much she wanted or how much she had consumed; when she saw that her thali was clean, she realized that she had finished eating, and got up. She would wash up and set the kitchen. In the evening too the same routine was followed, after which she retired to her room. As far as the flock and cattle were concerned, it was again the old woman who tended to their needs.

Balvira's mother loved and cherished Banto who had bestowed honour and respect on her. All sorts of rumours were rife about Balvira. His business too was

not above board and ever so often the police came enquiring after him. Once when he did not come home for months, there was nothing that the village folk didn't, say. They even alleged that because of his nefarious activities, no one was prepared to give his daughter's hand in marriage to him.

Banto's advent removed the stigma on him. Many a time when Balvira returned late and went to Banto's room, the old woman stood outside eavesdropping. She expected to hear something... some conversation, some sounds, some laughter, some whispering, the jingling of bangles, an argument if nothing else... then quarrelling at least. But the little room remained as quiet as before... lifeless... drowned in the silence of the night. Her heart began sinking. No doubt the stain had been blotted out, but it was now more than four years and there was no sign of Banto becoming pregnant. How could she ever conceive in a place that was like a cremation ground!

Anyway, Banto was still very young and had just begun to mature. But, there was danger of her going astray. As it is Balvira came as a visitor and nothing more. Should the girl run away or elope with somebody, all their efforts would go waste, Balvira would again be disgraced, and people would ridicule him. What if he was a charge-sheeter and had dubious dealings, the village stood in awe of him; they could say indulge in all the back-biting they desired, but in his presence, they dared not look up or even utter a word; no one risked enmity with him.

In spite of all this, who could stop tongues from wagging? once he became a butt of ridicule, all the fear would be shed like leaves in autumn. There was no dearth of enemies, and even if they did not say things to his face, nothing could stop their innuendoes.

The old woman's heart went out to Banto. Her lackluster face reflected the barrenness of her room... vacant eyes, sealed lips, blank expression, no fluctuation of emotion... what so ever, not even a strand of hair was out of place. This is what reassured the woman. She didn't perceive any potential threat from Banto. The girl had preserved the honour of her son and her family.

Initially, it was Banto who was evasive, but now Balvira tried to evade her, making her wonder: is this the same man who inspires fear in everyone? Is he the one they dread? No one dares to provoke him or pick up an argument with him. But as far as she was concerned, he was just like her father... timorous, putting up with imprecations and not retaliating. He didn't speak much or react to anything either.

Once or twice the old woman told Banto that she could go home and meet her people if she so desired. But she refused. What was the use? However, she often recalled her sobbing mother, dejected father, and insecure siblings. She wondered whether the Numberdaar had return their buffalo.

It was sheer coincidence that joy and sorrow followed in close footsteps. A few days after Satbira brought home his wedded wife, Balvira's body was found in the canal outside the village. It was said that there was a dispute over division, and his accomplices had shot him. He had not returned home for two days, and on the

third, they had got the information of his murder.

The old woman went berserk. She couldn't stop abusing Satbira's wife, accusing her of being the harbinger of disaster. While the hapless girl sat in her room weeping, Satbira moved around feeling guilty.

As for Banto, she remained stoic, as if the news did not relate to her. She had left all emotions behind the day she had come away with Balvira on his bicycle. She had brought a heart and mind devoid of feeling and thought. Now too, on getting the news of his demise, as usual, her mind was numb, and her eyes were blank, searching for something in the vacuum to fix themselves on.

The old woman hugged her and wept, but she remained unresponsive, as taciturn as she used to be in her room, alone, or even when Balvira was there. But the old woman continued to wail and lament. No one knew who she addressing, God or Satbira's wife, locked up in her room.

Banto kept sitting, and when she could not put up with the lamentations, shouting and weeping, she went and stood on the terrace. It was time for the train to pass.

Some days later, Banto was cooking in the kitchen; the *daal* was simmering, and her hands were in flour. Satbira was ready to go out to work. The old woman called him, and, in Banto's presence, instructed him to take her in as well; by the grace of God, there was plenty to eat and drink, and there was no harm in keeping two wives. She also intimated that he would manage the fields, and leave the job of *Munim* that he was doing in the town. Now that Balvira was no more, the labourers would create problems, so he should look after the work at home.

Hearing all this, Banto stopped kneading the dough, and looked up. The old woman was determined while Satbira sat with his head bowed. He did try to look up and say something, but seeing his mother's expression, he remained mum and lowered his eyes.

Banto could not believe her ears. She wanted to pull the old woman's dishevelled hair, and shake her up really hard. But, can competitions ever be organized in cremation grounds? Was there so much strength in her lifeless hands? She saw the old woman's face transforming into that of the *Numberdaar* callous, tugging at the buffalo's rope, raining blows on its back. Her immobile hands slumped deep into the dough, Satbira just got up and left without eating.

The cycle of days and nights went on as before, Nothing changed for Banto either. At first, Satbira went around with eyes lowered, and tried to avoid her. Soon he became normal. His wife too emerged from her room and began helping with the household chores. On occasions, she also interacted with Banto.

Then, one evening as Banto was winding up the day's work, the old woman again remembered some thing and said, "Banto, tonight make sure to sleep with your door open."

She was stupefied. She wanted to maintain a distance with the old woman, but the latter would not allow it and persisted, "I had sent Satbira to you last night,

and the night before. Why did you lock your room from inside?"

She remained silent. She had got used to being at the receiving end. The old woman was pelting her with stones that rebounded and disintegrated on hitting her petrified body.

That night again there was a knocking at her door intermittent, timorous knocking. She ignored it for a while, but when the timid, muffled tapping began to penetrate her ears and crawl over her body like a reptile, she could not bear it any further. She got up, and quietly peeped through the chinks in the door. Satbira was standing outside with his head bowed. She observed him for some time, then opening the door, extended a hand and touched his shoulder. As he bent towards her, she sensed that the cremation ground within her was about to be devastated; perhaps she had seen some movement in the deathly silence. She shifted her hand from his shoulder, and putting it around his neck, slowly pulled him towards her. He came closer, and his head now touched her shoulder. In the dark, while trying to search for his face, her gaze rested on his lowered eyes.

She heaved a sigh of relief. She felt that she was standing in the *kachcha*, clay courtyard of her parental home. The entire scene came flooding back; *Amma* in the forefront, swearing and shouting; *Baba*, head hanging, sitting timidly in the corner; the *Numberdaar* tugging at the rope and dragging off the buffalo; his elder son raining blows on its back; her brother, *Mehtab* clinging to her in fear; and she, trying to reassure him by putting her arm around his neck.

When Satbira tried to liberate himself from her clasp, she was jolted back to reality. She loosened her hold, and bring his face close to hers, she whispered, "Go brother go. Isn't your wife waiting for you? Why are you staring at me, *Bhaiyya*? Go, go to your room, go to her."

And, closing the door quietly, bolting it from within, she flung herself on her bed. She felt that at last she had succeeded in driving away the *Numberdaar*, not allowing him to walk away with their buffalo. She soon fell sound asleep.

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