


The Daughter of Niyamagiri

(A Translation of Rajat Mohapatra's Odia tribal story "Niyamagiri ra Jhia")

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There was only one king for the nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine *kondhs* (a tribe). The oldest *dangaria* (a person living in hills) among the indigenous mountain people of the area was called Niyama King. Sitting in the trunk of a tree with termite roaming on his beard, he implemented *niyama*, the rules; so, he was named the Niyama King. The foremost rules in his kingdom were that nobody would starve and nobody would remain naked. Also, no one could cut trees or kill animals. The forest had given them everything. Nobody was allowed to sell the land. They would refrain from being shrewd and adopting the urban ways. Nobody would be suspicious of the other or betray others. Betrayal – a layer of sweet falsehood over truth – was considered the first sign of urban civilisation. The king had also declared that nobody was permitted to be educated the way town people were educated. He believed that such education led to the destruction of rural societies. Take for instance, reading newspaper meant to cut trees and buying books implied disappearance of forest. Similarly, using shoes meant killing of cows and wearing fur denoted death of sheep. Everyone obeyed and respected the king's rules. The life of *dangaria kondh* (the kondh tribe living in the Niyamagiri hills in the state of Odisha) was tied to many such rules known and unknown to others.

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The king heard a girl crying one day. He beckoned to her and asked, “Daughter, why are you crying?” Sobbingly, the girl replied, “Father is beating me after drinking *handia*, country liquor.”

‘Don’t you have a mother?’

“No.”

“Where did she go?”

“I don’t know. She left the house because father beat her.”

“Don’t cry. Now you are my daughter. No one will beat you.”

Wiping her tears, the girl returned home. After that day no body dared even telling her anything. Everybody knew that every nook and corner of Niyamagiri, the mountain region, was under the rule of Niyama King and in his regime there was equality for all.

Soon the girl grew into a young woman. Her name was Jhumki. Her body was as smooth as the high hills. Everything about her – her eyes, ears, body and heart – was beautiful like nature. It was difficult to take one’s eyes away from her. Bideshi (the foreigner) was following her from a distance since some days. He was captivated by her beauty and had a strong desire to come near her. He was impatient to know how she spent her day and night.

Jhumki was different from other *dangaria* girls. She seemed an integral part of nature – a part of the forest and the mountain. Her ancestors had been living on the foot of the mountains since thousands of years. They nurtured the forest and the forest nourished them in return. The dark *kondh* and the dark green mountainous forest complemented each other. They lived for each other. Jhumki’s ripened body gave the impression of inscription on black stone. Her round face with smooth cheeks, her watery eyes marked with kajal (kohl), the nose ring on her flat nose, her hair tied in a round bun decorated with wild flowers and pins, the necklaces hanging from her shoulders, the brass and silver rings adorning her ears, attracted the onlookers. She had blue tattoos on her forehead consisting of geometrical shapes. She had also got her name with three stars inscribed on her hand. These tattoos were very dear to Jhumki. Her mother had wished the name inscription to ensure that if the child was lost, she could be brought back to the mother.

The foreigner secretly followed Jhumki. When the sun crept from behind the mountain, Jhumki took her bath in the river. By the riverside near the mountain in the shade of the old banyan tree, there was a stone smeared with vermilion. Jhumki offered flowers and vermilion to

that stone deity every day. She prostrated before the deity and murmurs things incomprehensible. When she rose, somewhere from the branch of a tree dropped a silver coin. She collected it and tied it in a knot to her saree. She carefully took out the coin and hid it in an old earthen pot. It happened every day. Only she and Sukru knew about it. Sukru was like a friend who protected her and helped her when she was in trouble. But soon the mystery of the coin became known to the foreigner too.

When Sukru was not nearby, the foreigner approached Jhumki and said, “You have got what I am searching for. Will you give it to me? I will give you whatever you want in return. I want to take the coins you have collected in exchange of two thousand rupees. You keep this one thousand rupee note today. I will pay the rest of the amount after taking the coins tomorrow. I am sure you have not seen such notes earlier.” He handed a one thousand rupee note to Jhumki and explained, “Do you know the value of this note. This is worth a thousand coins you get in one thousand days. You will get two such notes. You can fulfil all your wants. You can buy anything and spend it according to your wish.” Jhumki could not believe her ears. Staring at the foreigner, she said, “I will tell you tomorrow.” The foreigner said, “I will wait for you tomorrow morning at this place. Come with those coins.”

Jhumki agreed and came back home with the one thousand rupee note. Sukru met her on the way and they crossed the dark road together. The foreigner monitored from a distance. On the way, Jhumki smelled the paper note. She liked the strange scent it produced. The money in the pot lacked that fragrance. She dreamt of a wonderful future.

Next day, she handed over the half-filled pot to the foreigner and got another thousand rupees note. She carefully tied it to her saree. Then she took her bath, prostrated before the deity and waited; but there was no coin this time. She looked at the grass, looked around everywhere, but there was no sign of the coin. She returned home with a heavy heart. She consoled herself by thinking that though she lost the pot of coins, she had got notes of two thousand. She could get anything in exchange of it. Jhumki felt rich. The next moment, she felt confused. She knew that Niyama King was angry with her. That’s why she didn’t get any coin that day. Jhumki wanted to cry, “Can these two paper notes take the place of that pot of coins? It’s impossible, just impossible.” She conveyed it all to Sukru. Sukru comforted her, “I know everything. Don’t be sad. Now you have a lot of money. What do you want to do?”

“Let’s go and buy something from the market.”

Both of them went to the market, but could not buy anything because the shopkeepers had not the capacity to return rest of the amount. It was not possible to spend the money even in the weekly market. They planned to go to the nearby town to get in exchange small notes which could be spent.

Next Saturday, they went to the town and were cheated. The swindler took a thousand rupee note from them and gave them ten fake hundred rupees notes. On the return journey, the bus conductor refused to accept the fake note and forced them to get down. Luckily, Jhumki’s childhood friend Lata was in the bus and she agreed to pay the bus fare. While walking down the village street, Sukru thoughtfully said, “We are *adivasis*; it is good for us to stay away from town people. Otherwise we will be doomed.

“Yes Sukru. You are right. Our village, our forest, our mountain, our river – they are for our well-being.”

She smelled a hundred rupees fake note and murmured, “*Adivasis* can easily be cheated. What can they do?” She angrily tore all the notes and threw the papers in air. She felt light. She had no money. She was tired and could no longer walk. She felt thirsty. Resting under a tree, she asked for water.

Sukru said, “Don’t worry. I will fetch water for you. If I don’t find water, I will come back with *handia*. You stay here.” Sukru went to bring water. The spring was not far, but that day there was no sound of falling stream and no trace of clear water.

Jhumki slept while resting. She dreamt. She visualised the foreigner coming with a bottle of water. He sprinkled water on her face and insisted her to get up. With closed eyes, Jhumki could clearly hear, “Get up Jhumki; get up. I am here with you. You will not be in trouble. Take some water, biscuit and cashew. Come and get into my car. I will take you towards civilization.” Jhumki was thirsty. She felt water on her tongue. She went into a deep sleep. She sensed a close relation of man and mountain; the next moment she perceived a remoteness. Man delights in climbing the mountains. The mountain too revels in taking man into her lap. Sometimes man desires to shatter the mountain. But, standing at its foothill who has not felt insignificant. Man compares the steep rising hill with the broad captivating chest of nature. Nature is the best friend of human – the source of his strength and confidence. Nature nourishes life with food and water.

Plants, leaves, flowers, fruits, mountains, birds and animals – all are indispensable for existence. Jhumki had well understood from her childhood that nature was her parents. When she wept on the stone outside her house, she could feel somebody comforting her. She felt a pair of consoling hands wiping her tears. Now deep sleep descended on her.

Amidst the silent green mountains, Jhumki's dream seemed to stretch from one horizon to the other. The mountain was filled with healthy green field puffing its chest and the spread of golden mustard flowers shining in fuzzy dreams. From the dense branches of the mango groves came the tweeting of the wood pecker. In another direction the fisherman could be seen in deep meditation. All these wove together a beautiful dream which nature only could create. Could fear exist in such a world? Behind the closed eyelids of Jhumki hid the rainbow world of dream. Leaning against the Siali creeper, she could feel the warmth of a mother's lap. She could envision dreams flying amidst floating clouds to the tune of celestial music.

Ah! She wished this beautiful reverie to continue. She yearned to see it with open eyes. She rose to sit. The receding glow of the sun from the west turned her face into a golden fairy. On her radiant body the tattoo created the illusion of filigree work. She discarded all she was wearing. She cast off her bangles, necklaces, ear rings, *payal* (anklet) and toe rings. Stark naked, she entered the stream to feel its depth. Her eyes gestured the foreigner to swim with her.

But the foreigner was engrossed in shooting the video of her crazy mermaid-like swim. He discerned that the young woman, ecstatic with happiness before a few moments, was being drowned, lost and hidden. The darkness of the western sky engulfed the water. His camera could no longer capture that deep darkness. He threw the camera into the water. He started walking like a man who had lost all sense of direction. He could experience the horror of darkness. Sometimes a fear inducing voice intervened that darkness. He remembered Jhumki's face and marched forward.

Source:

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