Invisible in Plain Sight

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Voices from the By-Lanes of Kamathipura

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juggernaut

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For my father, Dr Jnanesh Ranjan Roy, who let me dig for worms, and crush leaves and flowers, believing that a child's messy potions were just a different kind of a playground of wonders, far beyond any single definition.

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Prologue

The rule of the jungle has always been the same; either you become the beast or you get killed by the beast – the hunt is always on. The rule of the jungle has always been the same since the evolution of species; either you are the big cat or the sly fox, powerful and feared or cunning and dangerous or be part of a skulk. The rule of the jungle is fatally savage, with little empathy for the weak. The only strength for the weak is to be part of a horde and revel in the security of numbers. In the jungle, the weak are not – or should not be – protected; there is always an active purge of the weak. There are no ethics, no gratitude, no morality; the artificial constructs of protection that society defines. As soon as it turns dark, the predators unleash their bloodthirsty canines and go hunting. The law of the jungle is ferocious. The philosophy of survival is not a choice. Outside the jungle, we – the evolved society who live within the comfort of our rules and structures, and

offer protection for our weaker constituents – often forget the law of the jungle.

The apparently harmless metropolis of Mumbai too has a jungle in it; an impenetrably thick and dangerous jungle, ruled by predators and survived by many. If you ever step into it, you will be sucked into the vortex, it will play a mind-altering conspiracy against you from which there is no escape. Survival, with only basic instincts at play, is part of the game. Surrounding this jungle from all sides, lies the oasis that is the epitome of societal refinement, of values, of moral lines and barriers, of affluence and acceptance.

Two disparate worlds coexist – one within the womb of the other without giving a thought to each other. 'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,' wrote Rudyard Kipling. When these worlds intersect, the real story of interest emerges.

It was a special day in the life of a Bengali household – celebrating the New Year, the first day of the Hindu month of Baisakh, roughly mid-April. An uncomfortable and humid summer had set in. Mumbai had never been so hot, and that too in April itself. Muttering under her breath, the woman of the house – adorned in all her finery – had just fed her family a hearty meal complete with delicacies both Bengali as well as Maharashtrian – *gorom bhaat* (steamed rice), *ilish bhapa* (steamed Hilsa fish), *cholar dal* (Bengal gram cooked with coconut and spices) and *shorshe ilish* (Hilsa fish cooked in a mustard gravy), along with the ubiquitous puran poli (a flat wheat pancake with sweet gram flour stuffing) and the must-have *amrakhand* (a mango-flavoured yogurt to

celebrate the king of fruits in India). The woman – born a Bengali with Odiya roots – was a 'practising Maharashtrian' who enjoyed this amalgamation that defined the core of India. Her large-sized government apartment was adorned with strings of jasmine blossoms that made the summer heat somewhat bearable. The night before, she had made a fine-ground paste of rice powder and had soaked it in water to draw the Bengali rangoli known as *alpana* to pray to Laxmi, the goddess of good fortune, to bless her family – a practice that had been passed down through the generations from mother to daughter. Would I call the woman religious? I am not sure, for religion is different from tradition. This woman was steeped in tradition. It had been a day well spent with the jolly banter of her family – her ageing mother, the one who had given her her Odiya roots; her quiet and soft-spoken husband and her very argumentative son. But a feeling of trepidation had also flooded her mind.

It was a feeling akin to walking along the outer margins of societal acceptability; of being on the cusp of committing a crime, desperate to hide it from the world. Something she wanted to do but also wanted to avoid at the same time. She was what may be commonly expressed as in between worlds, or about to walk into the bowels of the jungle that she had been a cursory observer of until now but it was time to cross the Laxman Rekha and walk into the other world. Laxman Rekha is a mythological phrase adopted from the Indian Hindu Epic Ramayana where it is said that, Lakshman, the younger brother of Lord Ram, draws a protective line around their hut and requests Sita not to cross it, in their absence. Lakhsman Rekha symbolizes a boundary of safety and protection that results in dire consequences, when crossed, as in the epic when Sita crosses it, the demon king Ravana abducted her.

She filled an earthen pot with delicious rosogullas (a Bengali sweet made of jaggery and cheese), gave herself a moment to breathe, adjusted the jasmine garland pinned to her neat bun and set off. As she left her home, she called out loud to no one in particular that she was stepping out for a while, and would be back after a couple of hours. However, she had made sure that each member of her family was busy elsewhere so as to not hear her. Not that anyone had ever questioned her about her whereabouts. Maybe it was the agony tearing at her heart that made her turn and look back into the comfort of her own home, perhaps wishing that someone would stop her. The workings of the human mind remain a mystery.

Off she went into the forbidden forest. It was a balmy afternoon. A milk-white car hesitatingly stopped a few steps ahead of the wide, dingy lane that opened into a few narrow smaller by-lanes. The streets were lined with makeshift shops selling gaudily sequined garments, or maybe they only appeared gaudy to her. Hawkers along the footpath looked like a line of ants – all overloaded with wares of various kinds. Most of the shops had tin walls which reflected the harsh glare of the sun, turning the place into a bright furnace. Men crowded the small eateries, bars and cigarette, beedi and paan stalls that stood by the side of the street. Betel nut-spit stains and beedi stubs littered the ground. A peculiar smell of cheap country liquor engulfed the place. The neighbourhood did not appear to be out of the ordinary. Millions of by-lanes with similar sights and people criss-crossed the country. Yet there was something dark about it, as if it were shrouded by something, like an omnibus funeral scarf that wraps the face of a dead body. Fear and apprehension had taken over her mind. Yet, overtly, it typified impoverished neighbourhoods

– like many small ones dotting Mumbai – which one passed by without so much as giving them a second glance. She remembered how quickly she used to roll up her car windows every time she passed through this area. And if her mother or son were travelling with her in the car, she would invariably ask the driver to take another route instead of passing through this particular zone of the metropolis.

With a palpitating heart, she stepped out of the car, the glare of the sun hitting her full blast. She looked delicate even though she had steely eyes. Her perfectly pleated soft yellow silk saree glowed in the bright sunlight, complementing the beaded mojari sandals and small diamond ear-studs that glinted in the sun. Every time the wind caressed her face, the scent of jasmine perfumed the air around her. She lowered her gaze, maybe to avoid the harsh sun, or maybe to deflect many an unwanted gaze that made her nervous and also acutely aware that here she was being judged by one and all. And indeed, all eyes had turned towards her, screaming at her intrusion. She looked like an alien amongst them, the odd one out. Beads of sweat ran down the sides of her face. Her stomach was all knotted with unease, the deep stench of human excreta disorienting her further. This unease was so unlike her normal, confident self. She was used to being in command of situations and her emotions. But today this confidence had deserted her at a time when she had needed it the most. She was in the heart of 'their' territory, which she had only heard of while visiting the nearby post office frequently over the past three months. It was a place that she had only envisioned in her imagination from the cocoon of the post office when she was there for meetings, or other planned activities. Her world far from the world that was Kamathipura.

The woman in question was the postmaster general of Mumbai with more than 5,000 men and women working beside her, and she the commander of this ubiquitous force. And command she did this ubiquitous force. Fearless and forward looking, it seemed like only yesterday – rather than 26 years ago – when she joined the civil services, where she had told the interview board that she wanted to be amongst the people and become an agent of positive change. Many things about her had changed, but the fire in her eyes to be that catalyst never did. This fire was the reason why she even happened to chance by this area in the first place – to ensure that people without the papers to prove their identity were brought into the formal fold of financial inclusion. She had been tirelessly working towards this goal for the past five months, spending hours in the tiny, claustrophobic post office at the mouth of a lane. Sending her dedicated bunch of postmen and women to bring in women who did not want to leave their comfortable corners was one thing. Being able to talk to them was one humongous task; explaining financial inclusion was quite another. Every time she was in that area, of course, her post office was the epicentre from where she reached out and engaged in countless hours of ice-breaking with them, always aided by the staff of the post office. During this time she had completely upgraded this tiny, dilapidated post office into a modern, digital, people-friendly, all-women post office. Aiding the women here had become her mission; be able to protect them, to give them a voice and to educate them in financial inclusion so that they might command their own finances and, in a small way, have a right over their own wants in life. In this flow of work, as it happens with humans, an emotion of fondness had crept in for one particular 'gang' of women.

A gang that was boisterous and temperamental but also loving, led by a fearless woman who had no filters while talking. She said what she felt. Society had not been able to suppress her ability to express her thoughts, even though at times it caused a great deal of embarrassment to others. Kajol, the woman, would be her primary host for the day. This time the postmaster general's foray into the area was different. She was alone, heading into the unknown; she was 'going native', a typical anthropological term that had stuck with her from the time when she was a practising anthropologist years ago, before her avatar as a civil servant. There was something romantic about the term 'going native', suggesting an immersive experience where one sheds one's prejudices and rigid mindset and adopts the environment of the other. Wait a minute, why were these thoughts coming to her? Was she going as a guest or an anthropologist? Or is that what reality is without one's knowledge? A new interaction is also a chance for study and learning; we do not merely term it anything other than a visit. She ventured into the belly of the jungle – an area she had not dared to go before, only glanced at when passing by – but this time it was different, she was alone. No staff members accompanied her for assistance or protection.

There had been no reconnaissance, no forward planning; just a leap into the unknown. For today, to celebrate the New Year, she had been invited for the first time into the 'homes' of the women whom she lovingly called the 'toofani' girls. Her term for them truly reflected that sisterhood of women, but the world had a very different and ugly label for them – one that stamped a woman forever and showed no mercy. The Italian Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci coined the term 'subaltern' for people like them. They are the people who are

left out or ignored by the annals of popular history. They are powerless in an absolute sense of the term.

She halted at a distance, almost turning back, her mind fertile with excuses for cancelling the plan, but a sense of duty, of a promise made, made her hold steady. She chided herself for having accepted Kajol's invitation. The toofani girls were opening their homes to her. It was a rare invite, one that is rarely extended and even more rarely accepted. Nevertheless, it being the first time that she was visiting someone's house, she had carried out the social formality that she had been taught – of bringing sweets for them. The pot of rosogullas she had brought along was to be the ice-breaker, Kajol was a Bengali after all! With that she started walking towards one of the serpentine by-lanes. That was the initial pull, the start of this story, the common bond of melodious Bengali.

Language is known to shape culture and behaviour. Speaking to people in their preferred language establishes an emotional connect with them. It seems like magic that people who have absolutely nothing other than a language in common can feel comfortable with each other despite the chasm of societal differences.

She stepped silently ahead to see Reshma – one of the women she had exchanged many a light moment with and had also scolded as if she had been an errant child – standing with three other women. She was decked up in a dazzling and gaudily colourful saree with a deep-cut sleeveless blouse that had tiny sparkling mirrors all over, cheap stone jewellery and a garland of jasmine flowers in her hair. Her bun had been done in a bouffant style popular with the heroines of 1960's mainstream Hindi cinema. Her face glittered with overdone garish make-up. Her lips were blood red with uneven coats

of lipstick, and her eyes were hardly visible, masked by the dark magenta eye shadow.

This was the way our postmaster general had always seen Reshma – on overkill. A familiarity had bred in this tawdry. What struck the woman was how the jasmine garland was perceived and the connotations it carried despite being a neutral element. But nothing could have been further from the truth for the garland that lent grace and femininity to one, made the other look like an object of cheap enticement. The other women with Reshma were dressed like other heroines of the Hindi movies. One stood apart. Dressed in a black chintzy gown, big, round junk earrings and dark, blackish-maroon lipstick, she looked like a goth. Her hair was open and coloured a glaring blonde. Her eyes were painted with thick layers of kohl.

Reshma saw her Officer Didi approaching and ran towards her, hugging her so tight and with a force so strong that the woman was pushed back a little. The postmaster general was taken aback by the funk of tobacco and alcohol from Reshma's mouth. She looked at her angrily and said, 'You are drunk again, in spite of the doctor's warning!' She knew that Reshma struggled with chronic gastritis and frequented the local doctor's clinic or Hakim's. The broad smile on Reshma's face disappeared at once and her face turned white as a sheet. She looked down and stood silently. But before Reshma could reply, the other women came running up hugged their guest.

The one in the gown snatched the pot of rasgullas from her hands and shouted out of excitement, 'With us around, why are you carrying this load? By the way, what's this? A gift for us?' Her eyes lit up with joy. Seeing their enthusiasm, she smiled and told them that she had brought rasgullas for all of them and asked the woman in the gown to distribute the

sweet amongst themselves. As per the Bengali law of bonding and celebration, when fellow 'bongs' meet – and God forbid if they are all women – there has to be a deafening cacophony, with all of them speaking at once.

In the hullabaloo – and unnoticed by the postmaster general – a drunk and unkempt-looking middle-aged man had crept towards them. He asked her in a voice that resembled sandpaper grinding against metal, '*Kitna hai?*' The postmaster general either did not hear him well or did not understand that he was asking her how much she would charge, but she got a sense of someone defiling her space and was assailed by a foul, nauseating odour. As if at the cracking of a whip, the atmosphere of camaraderie vanished and there was a micro-second of deathly silence. And then reality sank in. The postmaster general found herself being pushed into the inner recesses of a building nearby and heard Guriya's rancid voice screaming unheard profanities at the man.

Reshma's rave was followed by one tight slap on the left cheek of the now bewildered man, and numerous other swear words and slaps from the toofani women. The postmaster general could still not fathom what exactly was going on. She stood there flabbergasted, seeing the women physically abuse the man. The man, now mildly injured, was asking for forgiveness with folded hands. It was such a paradox – these were women that she thought needed saving, but whatever was happening, it appeared that they were quite a powerful bunch and that it was the poor man who needed saving. There wasn't much to distinguish between the hunter and the prey. The hunter at this very moment looked like a hapless prey. In the midst of this terrible chaos, the postmaster general saw Kajol and Salma, who was fondly known as Aapa, running towards her.

As she came closer, Salma, half amused, half cross, pushed her towards a dark, musty, narrow flight of steps leading further up into the darkness. Turning back, Salma shouted, addressing Guriya with a wink, indicating that she should take care of the man, using an abusive, filthy, colloquial version of Bengali that the postmaster general had only heard drunk rickshaw wallas of Kolkata speak. Her head was now buzzing with a sudden ache. Too much was happening too soon, over which she had no control. She couldn't see much but could only hear the foulest of language being spoken, and that stung her ears. Within a blink of the eye, Salma and Kajol caught her hands and took her up the dilapidated four-storeyed building. As the three of them walked up hastily, she turned around and saw several women lining the street, to partake in the drama of the day. It looked like an ordinary day for them.

The postmaster general silently walked with them into the darkness, which was both literal and figurative. A foul smell of urine and sweat pervaded the staircase. She tripped on her saree, fumbled and fell as she could hardly see anything. Aapa switched on the flashlight of her mobile phone to show her the way. Everything was broken and rotting. Everything and everyone.

As they climbed up a few steps she saw a shadow rushing towards her. She was nervous. Salma screamed at the top of her voice to the shadow – a few more profanities – asking the shadow to reveal herself. A female voice, soft, laced with shame, as if it did not belong there, cooed back. She immediately recognized Rani's gentle voice. Salma and Kajol smiled a smile of relief.

The postmaster general had reached their sanctuary, their home. She saw a line of numerous pocket-sized rooms, made

of plywood and 'decorated' with newspapers for wallpaper. All the doors were shut. Some walls were rotting, leading to gaping holes through which you could look from one room into the other. Some rooms were lit by the same dull yellow light. There was not a single opening for ventilation. A cat was nosing through the piles of garbage that lay on the ground, emitting an odour of human vomit.

The postmaster general saw Rani standing with a wide smile on her face and hugged her. Rani led the way to one of the nondescript rooms and made the shivering woman sit on the bed, which had no linen on it. The neon bulb in Rani's tiny, claustrophobic room blinked randomly, creating psychedelic patterns on the damaged, dilapidated walls. The mattress was of ancient provenance, with the cloth covered in grime. It had given way in some places and the cotton stuffing was bursting out and playing hide and seek. There were large stains on the mattress which gave off a musty smell, like that of human sweat and semen. The postmaster general felt giddy. She could barely hold back the puke that had risen to her mouth. It was as if this filth would be hers forever and could never be washed off her body. She tried to keep the vomit in and also maintain her composure for the three women were watching her pale face intently. They were testing her, looking at her leeringly, while also acting like protective mother hens. No rules of normal human behaviour were applicable here.

The jungle has its own rules. You camouflaged yourself to survive. But right now the postmaster general was an orange in an orchard full of apples. 'Didi, Didi,' Rani's intoxicating voice woke her up from her mental stupor. '*Didi, mein Reshma ka chillana suni upar se, woh harami buddha aapko aapka* rate *pooch raha tha! Maine Aapa aur Kajol ko bheja aapko lane!*

Uski toh treatment chal rahi hai. Yahan kabhi koi aadmi aap ke aur nahi dekhega.' Rani had heard the old man asking the visitor her 'price' and had sent Salma and Aapa to bring her here. That man was getting 'treatment'. That meant he was being beaten mercilessly by women who themselves were abused everyday. What an irony! No man here would bother her again.

And here their officer didi thought she was the protector of these women. Never before had she felt so enraged, so small, so powerless or so commodified as she felt in that moment. The 'bubble' in which she lived her life had kept her in a structured, protected world indeed. A world of clear rights and wrongs, a world of education and refinement, a world of respect where women empowerment, empathy, chivalry, sensitivity to the issues of women, etc., were the ideals of achievement that everyone aspired to. But none of those rules and mores of the 'normal world' existed here. This world was unabashed and did not offer any excuses for it. None whatsoever.

She was dumbstruck, as if she had been slapped hard by some invisible hand. Silent and frozen, she sat there, goosebumps showing on her skin and tears streaming down her lightly kohl-lined eyes. Her rate, her price! It was one of those moments when you understood the words but could not fathom fully what they conveyed. Perhaps that was a way of escape to maintain one's sanity. The only way to survive was to cultivate an alter ego to which bad things happened, keeping the real you safe. A deep sense of rage and the bile of hatred rose deep in the pit of her stomach. She shakingly stood up to leave, but Kajol's strong reassuring hands held her back. Kajol looked deeply into her eyes, as if commanding her to sit down, silently saying that it was going

to be all right. Meek and docile as a mouse, this woman who commanded a few thousand people with her voice of steel, sat down quietly in obedience. The roles had reversed. Aapa came in with a glass of water. The postmaster general was exhausted and spent. Salma stood silent for a minute, watching her with an unfathomable gaze, as if she were a biological specimen, almost teasing and chiding her at the same time. With a momentary pause and a devil-may-care attitude, but in a soft, hesitating voice, Salma asked, '*Humaare hath ka paani piyoge na, didi?*' ('You'll drink water from my hands, won't you, sister?') Of course the postmaster general would accept water from them. She, without any emotion, a deer in the headlights with a blank look and the movements of an automaton, took the tumbler and drank the water quietly. There was comfort in the mundane. She felt calmer. She had shifted from her sympathetic nervous system to her parasympathetic system.

She was by now completely overwhelmed by the protection and respect she was being given by these women who had been vilified with many slanderous words, the most sanitized of them being 'sex workers'. They had been disowned by their families, by society, by the so-called civilized human race. They were looked down upon and hated by the world, which regarded them with righteousness, passed judgement on their character and intentions. Vilify them if you must, but does one ever talk about the men, their clientele? Men with families who lurked here in the darkness, depraved men who often abused these women? Yet the world was silent about them. The tales were only of the women, otherwise invisible to society, women who had the exact qualities and follies as any other woman, who were daughters, wives and mothers – just like any of us. And they had surrendered

to this forced invisibility, to this grossly unfair rejection by society without resistance. They had borne the weight of all the stigma of the profession they had been forced into and carried their scars, all by themselves, and for years. Perhaps they were too exhausted, too worn down to stand up and fight for their rights in a society that even refused to acknowledge their existence.

Tears ran down the postmaster general's eyes to be with them, to see their 'homes' in that ocean of immense filth and muck, and be granted their love and protection. Their affection, empathy and strange camaraderie seemed to block out the foul and 'immoral' odours of sin, urine, alcohol and sweat that pervaded her nose. It was the comfort of an unlikely sisterhood. It was a collision of different worlds, but which were bound by one common factor – of their being women.

It was an extraordinarily ordinary April afternoon for her, in that tiny room in the fourteenth lane of Kamathipura. It was a day that changed her forever. There would be no looking back for her from here on in life.

Kamathipura, one of the largest, darkest and scariest jungles of human trafficking in the world, is a forbidden zone located in the southern part of Mumbai. Perhaps some of the most spine-chilling incidents of human trafficking, prostitution and heinous criminal offences in whole world too have happened here, where every day hundreds of innocent girls are trafficked from different parts of the country, sold and forced into sex work. Any one attempting to escape is either forcefully drugged, made to get inebriated or is sexually

abused. They are compelled to adopt prostitution as their means of living.

Kamathipura breathes in evil and breathes out terror; the terror created by gruesome creatures who cannot be called 'human beings' anymore, who inflict horrifying torments on innocent girls to turn them into prostitutes. They are at it relentlessly, and the girls, reduced to human corpses or, rather, sex machines, die every single day of their lives. But Kamathipura was not always a shelter to prostitution. The historical records say that it was during the latter half of the eighteenth century that William Hornby, the then governor of Mumbai, initiated the massive project of uniting the seven islands of Mumbai on the pretext of administrative necessity. This demanded a huge labour force, a large proportion of which was outsourced from the state of Andhra Pradesh. The labourers who worked on the construction sites started dwelling in the low, marshy and cheap areas of the city, like Byculla, Mahalaxmi and Kamathipura, the last being the most densely populated ghetto in the city where the 'Kamathis', the migrant labourers of Andhra Pradesh who played a significant role in the development of the area during the early years of its establishment lived. Kamathipura, originally known as Lal Bazaar, underwent a massive transformation. The Andhra labourers renamed it as Kamathipuram, which later became Kamathipura, in resonance with the local diction. Naturally, there were many things Andhra in Kamathipura – Andhra temples, Andhra restaurants and Andhra community halls where the religious and social festivities of the community used to be conducted. During this era, Kamathipura had the highest number of 'pocket rooms' in the city, available at affordable rates, which mainly attracted labourers arriving from different states of the country. These labourers, who

worked in the city's construction sites, had their families back home in their native villages or towns. Gambling, alcohol and sex were their stress busters after a hectic day of work. This was the chief reason for the rapid emergence of Kamathipura as the largest red-light area in the city. Ninety per cent of the sex workers from the localities of Girgaon, Oomburkharee and Phanaswadi in the city too relocated here, post 1865.

There was also intense trafficking of European, Japanese and Chinese women to this area, which had the most exotic sex workers in all of the city, eventually leading to their racial segregation in localities variously known as 'Safed Gulli', 'China Town' or 'Desi Randi-khana'. Along with the influx of domestic migrants from across the country, immigrants from the Chinese and Japanese communities too played a pivotal role in the flourishing of sex trade in the area, which soon consisted of numerous brothels and dance bars. Street prostitution here attracted a wide range of customers from various walks of life. The sex trade of Kamathipura spread its wings up to the localities of Grant Road and Madanpura. The transformation of Mumbai as the commercial capital of India post-Independence increased the rate of influx of people into the city from across the country in search of jobs, and that in turn increased the demand for commercial sex. The country's poor economy too had a role to play in the large-scale prostitution and pimping that resulted, eventually leading to Kamathipura becoming Asia's second largest sex district and the densest jungle of human trafficking in the world.

1

The Bloodthirsty Hyenas

'Every word has consequences,
every silence too.'

Jean-Paul Sartre

Salma was woken up by the sound of the azaan. It was almost dawn and time for the *fajr*, the first morning prayer. She opened her eyes slowly. She was still feeling dizzy. The rotten smell that pervaded the tiny room in which she had been kept for the last few days was intolerable. She felt the vomit rising in her stomach. She tried to get up from the crummy bed where she was lying naked, but a writhing pain erupted all over her body, especially in her lower abdomen and did not even let her sit up. It seemed as if someone