Illustration: Kolkata Coffee Man



MISSING BEATS

FICTION



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"Ganesh! Ganesh!" someone was calling. "While you keep fishing here, your father is leaving," the old man shouted. He was walking slowly, balancing himself on the slim dykes that separated the paddy fields. Ganesh didn't hear a word. The five-year-old was squatting by the pond, holding on to his fishing rod, his body a figure of concentration. Nothing could move him till the fish took the bait.

"You don't want to go then?" The old man was standing next to the little boy now. He was panting like he had walked a long distance.

"Dadu, when did you come?" Ganesh asked, as if waking up from a stupor.

"Your father is leaving for Calcutta. Your mother doesn't want you to go, so she's convinced him to leave now when you are away. But I know how much you want to go to the city. You have to rush."

"Baba can't leave without me... Dadu you take the fish home." Ganesh swiftly put his fishing rod inside the small pail where half a dozen fishes were taking their last breath. He put on the Hawaii chappals lying next to him and shot off like a bullet through the green fields.

With a satisfied smile, Gobindo Das sat by the pond to catch his breath. He experienced a different kind of joy in watching his grandson sprinting across the field with such enthusiasm. A happiness that his daughter-in-law wouldn't understand. She came from a different village, where playing the *dhaak* was not the tradition, weaving saris was. By giving his grandson this push, he probably made that small effort to save this tradition that his ancestors carried in their veins. The sound of *dhaak* defined them. He had gone to Calcutta with his father during Durga Puja and Kali Puja, later he had taken his son Giri with him and now he wanted his grandson to experience the same.

Gobindo picked up the fishing rod and plunged it into the muddy waters. Maybe two more would be good for a feast. There had to be one. He had triumphed. His daughter-in-law's attempt to keep his grandson away from their tradition had failed. Ganesh Das would also become a *dhaaki* like his ancestors and rule the festivals of Bengal. Apart from those few days when playing the *dhaak* was a necessity, for the rest of the year he could be whatever he wanted to be — a school student, a teacher, a farmer — whatever he pleased, Gobindo thought.

His mother protested. "You are still too young to go to the city."

"Who will play the *kashor* with Baba if I don't go?" Ganesh reasoned.

He packed two shirts, and a pair of shorts in a *jhola*, took the *kashor*, the round bronze plate that had to be struck with a wooden stick to add to the rhythm of the *dhaak*. He had been practising fervently to be in tune with his father's *dhaak* beats.

He held his father's hand tightly and sat on a cart drawn by a cycle that would take them to the bus stand. From their village Nanoor, they would have to take a bus to Bolpur and from there a train to Calcutta. Ganesh didn't look back once; he was so excited about his first train journey.

Gobindo's son Giri always accompanied him to the city. They were just back from the Durga Puja festivities. This time it became clear how Gobindo's health was failing. Standing for long hours, carrying the heavy *dhaak* had become an ordeal for him after tuberculosis scarred his lungs and took his strength away. At 70, Giri was convinced his father wouldn't be able to follow the rigorous schedule again for three days of Kali Puja, which came just after Durga Puja.

So, Giri was on his own for the first time. He hoped he would be accepted the way they accepted his father at the Kali Puja *mandap*. To deal with this niggling anxiety, he embraced his son tightly as he sat on his lap by the train window and tried to distract himself with the child's excited chatter about every tree, every forest, every cloud, every hut seemingly passing by. Ganesh suddenly waved at all those people standing at a level crossing and squealed in delight as many reciprocated.

It was a long journey from Bolpur to Howrah Station and then to that spot near Hazra Road crossing where all the *dhaakis* congregated.

"That's where work awaits. All *dhaakis* come there every year and puja organisers take us from there. It's an unwritten rule, no one knows who started it," Giri explained to his son.

With trepidation Giri waited, in a corner of the bustling pavement, where his father had always sat. Ganesh had become quiet. The milieu of the city, an endless stream of pedestrians, sparkling lights adorning the pandals, cars and buses honking relentlessly and the aroma hitting his nostrils from the street food stalls, had filled the child's heart with wonder.

"If they come to get us and pay me an advance you can eat whatever you want," Giri told his son.

The Puja organisers came. They were initially disappointed to see Giri alone, but after finding out about his father's health, they were more than happy to make Giri the official *dhaaki* of their *barowari* puja.

"*Tomar chheley?*" an organiser asked.

Ganesh clung on to his father's kurta, suddenly scared of the big bad world.

"*Ki mishti. Ki naam tomar?*"

That year the five-year-old *dhaaki* became the sensation of the Kali Puja *mandap*. Giri placed the *dhaak* on the floor and his son climbed up on a chair and when he struck the stretched animal skin on top of the barrel with his two sticks, magic happened. Everyone gathered to witness this prodigy and shower him with money, clothes, sweets and chocolates. They took him home to feed him lunch. Giri smiled in pride. Their tradition would be safe now; his father didn't have to worry.

Since then, every year Giri and Ganesh came down to Calcutta during Kali Puja, lived an enchanted life through those three days. Ganesh remained the cynosure of all eyes switching between the *kashor* and the *dhaak*. People absolutely loved this shy boy with impeccable manners and pampered him with treats and tips.

Gobindo died a happy man knowing he had passed on his skills to his next generation and the next. He had preserved the family tradition and had even honed an exceptionally talented *dhaaki* in the family, his dear grandson Ganesh.

That year Ganesh had turned 10. He didn't need a chair to climb up and play the *dhaak* anymore. He slung it on his shoulders and practised with passion. It made him strong. His mother still felt he was obsessed with an instrument that could only get him eight-10 days of income. He had to learn to fend for himself for the rest of the year. Giri worked in the borrowed fields but that hardly ensured two square meals a day, so being an apprentice of a *raj mistri*, a master mason, was a good option for Ganesh, his mother decided.

Ganesh went to school in the mornings, worked with a master mason during the day, came home dunked in cement and sand and went to sleep dreaming of playing the *dhaak* at the puja *mandaps*.

As his workload increased, Ganesh was allowed by his mother to only accompany his father for Kali Puja; for Durga Puja his father got a young apprentice, to play the *kashor* with him. The year was 2020. Giri returned dejected. The virus that had left their village unscathed had affected the city. The Durga Puja *mandaps* had shrunk, some hadn't even been erected because the organisers had cancelled the puja that year. He had managed to get work, but the budgets had been slashed and his

pay had been halved; he was not sure if Kali Puja would be any different.

He had almost decided not to travel to the city for Kali Puja, but looking at Ganesh's excitement he decided otherwise.

They waited in their usual corner on the pavement near Hazra Road crossing. The usually bustling road looked forlorn. The street food stalls, where Giri always treated Ganesh to chilli chicken and chowmein, were closed. People walked around in masks that only showed eyes that spelt nothing but fear. The entire ambience had changed.

They waited.

Evening descended, the lights came up, but no one came looking for them. Like them, many other *dhaaki*s waited. The night was spent on the pavement and Ganesh thought: Maybe next morning someone would take them along. He would get to play the *dhaak*.

No one came. Giri took a decision. He left his *dhaak* with a fellow villager and walked to the Beltala Lane Puja *mandap* where they played every year. They were stumped to hear the sound of *dhaak* emanating from the microphone. It got louder as they neared the *mandap*. The *mandap* lacked the grandeur of the past years. So did the idol.

"Baba, it's recorded *dhaak* music," Ganesh said heaving a sigh of relief. He had almost thought they had hired someone else.

Giri looked rattled. "Will they be playing this from now on?" he mumbled.

The *mashima*s, *kakima*s, *kaku*s who used to pamper Ganesh were nowhere to be seen. There were barely five chairs in front of the pandal and only one was occupied by a gentleman in a mask.

He recognised them and came forward. "Sorry, we couldn't afford you this year. The budget is really very small."

Giri kept looking at the top half of the gentleman's face unable to process that he was being made redundant.

The man gave him ₹200. "Have tea and *mishti* with this. Maybe next year you can play if we have a budget..."

Ganesh had never seen his father crying. Not even when Dadu died. But on the way back in the train, he could only see the silent drops soaking his shirt. He couldn't find a single word to console his father.

"How can they have Kali Puja without a *dhaaki*? That microphone replaced us? We can be thrown away so easily..." Giri kept mumbling.

Giri never returned to Calcutta and never played the *dhaak* again. He earned his living as a seasonal farm hand. His income remained meagre, his wife's jibes became unbearable. When Ganesh turned 16, he got an offer to work in New Delhi with his mentor. His mother thought the pay was good, he would learn the skill well. His father didn't stop her.

Ganesh started living in an old house with five rooms at Kali Bari Marg. Each room was cramped with at least seven-10 people, mainly Bengalis like him, who had come to find a better life in Delhi. The newcomers had to stay at the room on the mezzanine floor which was like a cauldron in summer. Ganesh missed home. They didn't have money, but he was happy in his two-room hut with its thatched roof, playing in the fields, fishing in the ponds, sleeping soundly in the *uthan* (yard) under the stars. And then he missed his *dhaak*, practising with others, mastering the beats.

He started visiting the Kali Bari nearby. The silence in the *mandir* was a welcome respite from the continuous cacophony of his quarters. Whenever he got some time, he would sit in front of Ma Kali and pray. He would tell her to give his life back. Let him be who he was — a *dhaaki*.

Six years had passed since that fateful day. Bengal's festivities had become more ostentatious, *dhaaki*s were back in demand, but his father's deep wound didn't heal. He never touched the instrument again.

"Something inside me died that day," he would often say, "I don't want to keep waiting for them to take us to the *mandap*. I don't want to be at their mercy. If Ma wanted us, she would have sent a messenger. She didn't."

On the very first day he had stepped into the Kali Madir, Ganesh had noticed the *dhaak* standing mutely in one corner. No one played it, it was just there, to be used on special occasions perhaps. Ganesh sometimes sat next to it running his fingers over it, closing his eyes and hearing the sound. Wondering if his real identity would be lost forever under plaster and mortar.

"Can you play it?" the *purohit* asked him one day.

Without batting an eyelid, Ganesh said, "I am a *dhaaki*."

"Play then," said the *purohit*.

As the *arati* began, the *purohit*'s whole being melted into the rhythm of Ganesh's beats. The boy closed his eyes and kept playing. Devotees were mesmerised by the familiar beats of home, of Bengal in Delhi.

"You will play in the *mandir* during Kali Puja this year," the *purohit* said.

Ganesh kept staring at the idol of Ma Kali, crossed his fingers and touched his forehead. She had heard his prayers.



Only one sentence came out of his mouth, "Can I ask my father to play with me?"

The *purohit* smiled and nodded.

Ganesh's roommates found it ridiculous that he hadn't even asked the *purohit* how much he would pay him and he was spending his own money to buy train tickets to go and fetch his father from Nanoor. His mentor was cross because he was asking for leave.

Only he knew this was an opportunity he had to grasp, whatever the cost. He had to save the tradition that was his birthright and prevent his father from letting it slip away.

Ganesh boarded the train to Howrah and then took another to Bolpur. When he reached Nanoor, dusk had set in. He knocked on the door of his home. Giri opened it.

"You! What a surprise. Hope everything is fine."

"You always said Ma Kali never sent you a messenger, never called you to play the *dhaak*. I have come as her messenger; she has called you to play the *dhaak* at the Kali Bari in Delhi. You will have to come with me."

Giri held on to the door tightly. His eyes remained closed, but the tears glistened on his cheeks.

Ganesh put down his bag, took off his shoes, and stood in front of the dust-covered *dhaak* — the mute witness to Giri's humiliation and hurt pride.

With his fingers he cleared the dust. He now knew the agony a *dhaaki* felt if he couldn't play his instrument. Even if it was for just eight days in a year, it defined his whole existence.

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