

A CHAITRA PRINCESS

When Surabhi was born, the Chaitra full moon of the lusty month of May was beaming all over with happiness. Lalluma had been playing football that evening and later in the night she had called Parthappa to get a Taxi, packed her clothes, clutched her mother all the way to the nursing home and walked in straight to the delivery room. Parthappa tried his best to work up enough worries so as to be pacing up and down the floor. A young man with an Iyengaar's *naamam* had all of an expectant father's concern written appropriately on his face.

"Don't worry" Parthappa tried to console him "it will all be over soon".

"No Sir" the young man all most burst out crying "it would be very inauspicious for my boy to be born now"

When the nurse came out within half an hour holding Surabhi in her hands and telling her that her father was around, she looked up, saw the bright electric bulb, closed her eyes and went back to crying in her sleep, reassured that the Sun was her Father.

"Very auspicious, Sir, very auspicious", the *naamam*-ed young man approved.

Surabhi's name was chosen by Parthappa. He consulted the Sanskrit-English dictionary for that and found that Surabhi meant all that he thought about his daughter and more. He also thought that it would be a unique name. When Surabhi grew older she was to be asked if she was named after the television programme with the same name which was born more than three years after she was named.

After the naming ceremony was properly over Parthappa was told by his aging aunt that it must be a very sweet name since several Calcutta sweet-shops had that name. The neighbour's daughter had the same name and Lalluma's best friend's best cow had the name.

Surabhi herself grew up to understand that she was the goddess of plenty and the source of all happiness and contentment. A look at her mother's face dotting over her convinced her of that.

Parthappa was always very original.

"I am going to call my daughter Princess" he informed his nieces holding his three week old daughter. Gujun and Ritu and Ammu and Kripa were all there cuddling the baby. Even if they were cousins, it was more important that they were sisters—and elder sisters at that! They were waiting to be called didi or akka.

Gujun and Ritu were the elder cousins (didi) of the very unBengali Parthappa's less unBengali but born Bengali brothers. Ammu and Kripa were Surabhi's "akkas", being daughters of Laluma's very orthodox Tamil Iyer family.

"Oh! how boring!" they all protested.

"Do you know why I call her princess?" Parthappa asked.

"Because she is your daughter"

"Not so simple."

"Because she is Lalluma's daughter."

"Not at all."

"Because she is so kuchikuchukuchi" Ritudidi said and took my daughter away.

"Because she is her grandfather's grand-daughter", I proclaimed.

"Taatha's granddaughter?" Ammuka was sure because she was a princess herself.

"Maybe" Parthappa had not thought of that "but mainly because she is Daadu's granddaughter"

"And Dida's" Gujundidi added. She did not want her grandmother left out of any credit.

"And Dida's" Parthappa agreed "and Paat-ti's" he confirmed to Ammukka who loved her grandmother as much.

"Why is she so Mottai?" Kripakka asked. Surabhi was rather bald and the lack of her hair highlighted a ring around her head.

Daadu's was the baldest head.

"Anyway I am going to call her Bambli Maas. Her face is so red!"

Kripakka cuddled Surabhi looking up at the grapefruits growing on the tree.

Pomplei mousse - bambli maas, bambina bambli. So her daughter was to be nicknamed bambli. Not bad! But Parthappa would not give up that easily.

"Do you know why she is a princess if she is Daadu's grand-daughter?" he persisted "Because Daadu was the last of the Maharajahs of Maahesh"

"Daadu was a maharajah?" Ammuka was impressed. She always thought that Daadu with his white flowing beard and kindly eyes was a Rishi, a wise man, a sage.

"Well almost. Daadu's father and his father's father and his father's father's father"

"My God! Daadu's father's father's father!" Gujundidi marvelled.

"Great great great grandfather. That's great!" Ritudidi flashed her dimples "I am not sure anybody can be that great".

Parhappa was sure she was quoting someone but he was not sure who. He persisted nevertheless.

"Well you see all these great people were Maharajah's"

Parthappa suddenly kindled himself to a genius idea.

"You know why she has the ring round her head? That's the proof she is a princess. All these great people wore the crown on their head because they were raajas. And if the father and the father's son and the father's son's son and so on were to keep wearing the crown, what will happen?"

"The crown will be very old" Gujundidi volunteered.

"The crown will make a mark on the head". Parthappa offered.

"Because the crown is very old and very dirty?" Kripakka asked.

"No because of the story of creativity. According to my theory, creatures have evolved into what they are by adapting to the given circumstances."

"Liar. Liar." Gujundidi howled excitedly waving her fingers "It is Darwin's theory. I know I know. My father told me"

"Okay. But do you know Darwin's surname. Darwin Ganguly"

"Yes but that's not the Darwin, Gujun is talking about" Ritu corrected me "Your Darwin is still evolving" she laughed.

"My Darwin is our kuchikuchiku. Give me back my baby" I took Surabhi back and she promptly went to sleep."You see that mark. My father, that is Daadu, and Daadu's father and Daadu's father's father and so on had that mark wearing that crown. If you wear a crown for so many generations then your head evolves to the shape suitable to wear a crown. That is why Surabhi has this ring around her head so that the crown can settle comfortably."

"She's really a princess?" Ammukka was impressed.

Princess Baambli Surabhi Ganguly of course had no problems regarding her identity. She was the daughter of the moon mother and that very comfortable sun father. Her mother doted over her in the most loving way she could. Her bath was the right temperature. Her oil was the right oil with right ingredients

of tulsi leaves and camphor. She had the softest nappies and the quickest changes. She had the warmest freshest food without any long, sterilising waits.

Her father had the biggest stomach any sensible father should be made of if the baby is to nestle comfortably. Parthappa held her in his left hand and used the other hand for singing. He made some terrible and cacophonous sounds when he tried hard. He sang rather well when he was not paying any attention to his singing but instead was pouring music over his daughter. At this time she would not go even to her mother. Parthappa sang what he thought was the English equivalent of Bengali lullabies:

Parakeet with swaying tail

Play with baby ever so well

Hobble and gobble

Rattle and Prattle

My darling here, come and cuddle.

Surabhi at this point would sit quietly playing with the silver bangles on her hand. Her kaajaled eyes resisted all sleep until she had savoured the full day in her mind playing all the while with her silver bangles. It was only after this that she would sleep knowing that there would be another day.

Lalluma sat by her side playing her veena and chanting her slokas. The vedic chants would ring through the house reverberating with all of a mother's affection.

Surabhi of course knew that she was going to have a brother Vasishta but till he came she had her mother all to her self. She would not tell her mother that now.

Her world started filling more and more. Her mother brought all things that she considered nice to her attention. Her mother gave her her aunt, Geethamma and Ahchichi and Ammukka and Gujun didi and Bashuppa.

The first time she went out she was wrapped in Dida's specially woven blanket. Princess Baambli was taken to the most sylvan of surrounding that offered the most fragrant of flowers. And the best music that birds could offer. She sat in the best parks that Bangalore had including that of the best institute of science that the nation could think of. It was the best because it had all the external style and atmosphere that a proper Englishman would have liked. She knew all the plants and birds that existed. Her Daadu taught her that. Her Daadu with the flowing beard that she loved as he rubbed it gently on her face. In return she drummed his bald head with her flat hand. That was Daadu's biggest reward.

Taak dhooma doom, taak dhooma doom

daadu would say. Daadu was the second word she spoke after amma.

Slowly Surabhi moved about on her own in the big house that her mother had cleared for her. There were no furniture nor any sharp objects; nor could she fall off the bed because there wasn't one. She would stand by the window on Daadu's hand-made bamboo chair humming Daadu's songs and entertaining the neighbours. The birds would talk to her when there was no neighbour around. Surabhi learnt that her mother gave her all the things she liked. And what she liked most was that when she was sleepy she had her mother always by her side. She had to look around and her mother would know that it was time for

Surabhi's dreamworld. She just had to hear her mother's voice near her to know that she was going to be well looked after.

One day she realised that Daadu was no longer staying with them. Nor was Dida. She visited more and more Geethamma who took her out in their car. Geethamma's and Ammukka's house was where she learnt other things. There would be this big table on which she sat with the whole family around applauding her every little trick. She found in Ahchichi's head the drum that Daadu had taken away. Her amma's constant prattle and her reassuring glances kept her happy and secure wherever she was. And that Parthappa!.. always making loud comments and laughing louder! Princess's retinue of cousin servants reassured her that she was still a princess though her hair had grown nicely around her crown's ring.

Surabhi was slowly learning to be on her own. She would converse for long, quite aware that her mother was not around. She would know that her mother would be away for a little while when she took her to bed to sleep with extra affection. It was not very often. She knew that her mother was not by her side when that extra warmth was missing. She would be kind enough to sleep a little longer so that it would give her mother a chance to be by her side when she woke up and save her from feeling guilty. There was always someone around whenever she wanted anyone, however. And she loved Geethamma's loud cheering laughter greeting her when she woke her from the sleep. Princess quite forgot her mother with all the company she had during the day; but Lalluma was always there in the night when she wanted her most. Princess's best characteristic feature was that her grief was to be shared with Lalluma alone.

Parthappa somehow knew when she was sad but she had a special communication with Lalluma during her sad moments. Princess could not tolerate anybody - and that meant any body - saying bad things about her mother.

Time passed. She had cut her first tooth; she knew how to walk a few steps and she knew the few important words to communicate to others what Lalluma would have understood in any case.

Parthappa would ask her "Two plus three?" and she would point five fingers of her left hand to him and say "Fie" and her father would exclaim "Einsteiness!". That gave her the maximum applause that thrilled her father no end and she did it just to please him.

Lalluma did not like her performing in any way. After all she was a Princess and a Princess did not have to perform.

Then it happened one May night just after her first birthday. Lalluma had taken care to see that she really enjoyed her birthday. There was no party; no cutting of the cake.

But on that day, all those who cared for her dropped in to see Surabhi and there was enough paayasam and cakes for all.

Princess was surrounded by her well wishers. Princess seemed to have no time for her queen, mother. Lalluma had taken her this evening to her bed to sleep after a warm filling meal and had spoken the sweetest things to her and she had been especially comfortable although it was quite early in the evening.

Parthappa had not helped very much, what with his enthusiastic singing. Princess obliged her mother and went to bed even though the gang were all there. She looked forward to waking up and meeting the gang.

"Hey! she has woken up" Gujundidi was shouting.

"Don't shout. Let her get used to waking up" Ritudidi was the big girl.

Ammukka picked her up. "Nalla thachi-thuchi paapa?" she asked.

"Baambli Sona. Ghinchi mona" Kripakka pretended she was Parthappa.

Baambli was getting used to these noises and she recognised a few.

Lalluma always said Thachi-thuchi when she wanted her to sleep.

Ghinchi mona was Parthappa's special way of addressing her.

Which reminded her of her hum-aam, her food. It will come, she was sure waiting for Lalluma.

She clapped her hands and showed her enthusiasm and smiled ever so sweetly at everybody in general.

They were being specially nice to her she noticed singing in enthusiastic chorus her favourite songs.

They urged the moon to come and be the bindi on her forehead to match her glowing face.

Kripakka sang the bengali song in which she asked the sleep giving aunts to make her sleep. She did not know what the words meant.

"Whaaat man! you are asking her to go back to sleep." Gujun didi protested mockingly.

So Ammukka sang the Tamil song about Anil the squirrel

"Anilay anilay, odi vaa. Koiya pazham kondu vaa".

"How you can sing lullabies in the Tamil language I don't know. You can't put a baby to sleep by rattling stones in a tin can." Gujun didi laughed.

"It's not a lullaby, maddy, it's about food and Bengalis love food."

Not a bad idea to have food now princess thought and she looked around for Lalluma.

Geethamma brought the food instead.

Princess knew they were doing something special as her loyal subjects sat around enjoying cheering her as she ate. At this hour of the night they were usually sleeping.

Ahchichi had taken the place of Parthappa and tried to make as much noise as possible. She noticed that the children moved away from her to sit in front of that box with colourful pictures and noises that kept moving.

Ahchichi had all the toys dancing in front of her trying to attract her attention away from Geethamma's spoon which seemed, somehow today, to be shovelling food into her mouth. Actually Geethamma was nice, but it was much nicer when Lalluma was around.

The children were quiet now. Ahchichi also went to the box to see something that drove the children away. It was English news time.

Surabhi knew she had not ever stayed awake that late. The funny part was that she did not hear Lalluma. Nobody even mentioned her name.

Bashuppa and Arpithama came late and they were so nice to her. Bashuppa always had something new each time and she quite enjoyed his company considering the fact that she was feeling sleepy. He sang Parthappa's song swaying her in his arm. She almost went to sleep.

Something told her that she should not sleep. She also could not cry. Princesses do not cry in the night in front of every body especially when the mother is not around. Bashuppa carried all the sleeping children to his car one by one.

"We will take her for a drive. By that time Lallu should have come back." he said handing her over to Arpithamma.

That was the first time she heard Lalluma's name. She pretended as if she had not heard. She cheered Arpithama no end, laughing when she had to.

The fresh air in the garden and the droning car noise would have lulled her to sleep normally. She would not sleep unless she knew why Lalluma was not around.

Without Lalluma she would not want to be a Princess.

Geethamma and Ahchichi were the only ones who were left. She felt nice in Geethamma's arms and she kept dozing off. Each time she woke with more determination.

She tried to pay attention to everything Geethamma was saying.

She felt too sleepy.

She then asked Geethamma to put her down and got her to fetch her favourite toys. She spoke to them, sang to them nicely, fed them and put them to sleep like any nice mother should.

She wanted to ask about Lalluma but princesses don't show their concern.

She asked for her favourite puzzles. She assembled all of them in a jiffy keeping the pictures face down, just to make it difficult for her.

Baambli's face was really a cause for concern.

Her hair was all over her very very sleepy eyes.

She was squatting on the floor with her legs apart conversing with her hands not really knowing how the hands moved nor what she was conveying.

She knew that Lalluma would be back soon. It must be that baddy Parthappa who lured Lalluma away.

She found Geethamma was getting very worried.

She asked the moon to put the bindi on Geethamma's head and she sang Parthappa's song to put Geethamma to sleep. Geethamma hugged her some more and kept saying that Lalluma would be back soon.

As if the Princess did not know that!

Ahchichi was sleeping in front of the TV.

Geethamma almost begged Baambli to sleep.

Bambli said that the sun was going to come out and that it would be nice if they stayed up to see the Sun waking up. Baambli showed her a funny way to hold a toy.

"See Geethamma", she said "Shame, shame."

No, she told Geethamma, she did not want to go to the bathroom, thank you.

She felt Lalluma coming to her.

The bell rang. Lalluma came in. "See Geethamma, Lalluma has come" she said.

Lalluma swept her up in her arms.

"Kozhundai!" she cried suppressing tears of guilt.

"My Chaitra Princess!" Parthappa said.

Surabhi was fast asleep.