

The Tale Of Two Sisters

A Brahmin once abandoned his two little daughters in the forest. Reason: They ate some of the food prepared for him which he wanted to eat himself. There was nothing strange about this, because he had an insatiable hunger.

The Brahmin of Durgapur lived with his wife and two daughters-Umabi and Jumabi. There was hardly a day when all four of them ate a full meal. The family was so steeped in poverty. He would also not go for any work. He would demean himself by begging for alms. He would be happy if he could scrounge off a handful of rice and pulses. Many a time the priest of the nearby temple obliged him.

One day, what he got was some rice powder and coconut gratings. His wife told him she would cook peedhas (something like the dosa of south India). She made the batter and began to spread it on the saucepan after sprinkling it with oil. When the Brahmin heard the saucepan saying sh-sh, he went into the kitchen with a thread in hand. He tied one knot. The saucepan cried sh-sh. A second knot was tied on the thread. When he saw his wife washing the vessel in which she had kept the batter, he knew that there were no more peedhas to be made. He then went for his bath.

On returning home, he sat down. 'Come on, now you serve,' he commanded to his wife. He ate one peedha and untied one knot. He ate a second peedha and loosened one more knot. This exercise went on till the woman said, 'That's all. There are no more peedhas.' The Brahmin found there were two more knots remaining on the thread, 'No! There should have been two more!' he shouted at his wife. 'Yes, there were another two,' conformed his wife, though she wondered how on earth her husband had kept a count of the peedhas she had made, 'But...but...' she fumbled for an explanation. After much pestering she said that the girls felt hungry and so she gave the peedhas to them. The Brahmin felt sorry that his wife had to go hungry, but he had already decided that he would punish the children. He then went to bed.

Next morning, he woke up the girls. 'How would you like to visit your uncle's house? Get ready, quick.' Father and daughters started, after an affectionate farewell from their mother. They walked and walked reached a dense forest. The girls wanted to rest for a while. They lay down beneath a shaded banyan. When he saw them sound asleep, the Brahmin placed some stones like a pillow, mixed sindoor powder in water and sprinkled it around the stone pillow and then left the place quietly.

It had already become dark by the time Umabi and Jumabi woke up. They missed their father. They saw something blood red near the stones on which he might have rested

his head. They were now scared. 'Father might have been killed by some wild animals!' said Jumabi. 'What shall we do now, sister?'

'But this is not blood. Jumabi,' remarked Umabi. 'I'm afraid, father has left us here and gone away. We'' have to spend the night in this forest till sunrise.'

The sisters huddled together till they saw the first rays of the sun. Then they started walking. They did not know for how long they walked. But they heaved a sign of relief when they reached a village. They found the streets decorated and the porches of houses well swept, sprinkled with water, and decorated with floral patterns.

They saw an old woman coming out of her house. 'Is anybody getting married here?;' asked Umabi.

'No, my child,' replied the woman, 'These are puja days.'

'But, grandma, Durga puja was over long ago.' Umabi reminded her.

'It must then be Diwali time,' said Jumabi. 'No, my little ones,' said the old woman. 'We are celebrating the Sun festival. We worship Surya to bring us health and prosperity. Now tell me, who are you? And why are you here all alone?'

'We are from Durgapur and our father was taking us to our uncle's place. On the way, we all felt sleepy and lay down beneath a banyan tree. When we woke up in the night, we could not find him anywhere. Grandma we don't know how we could not find him anywhere. Grandma we don't know how we would go back to Durgapur,' explained Umabi.

'Don't worry. You can stay with me for the time being. I'm alone,' said the old woman to console them. 'You both go and take a bath in the pond. After wards you must worship the Sun god.'

She gave them some clothes and they went to the pond. The girls had the shock of their life. When they hardly stepped into the pond, the water disappeared! They found themselves standing on a patch of dry land. They went back to the old woman and told her of the strange happening. 'It's a special kind of pond. Here take this dry grass and throw it into the pond. You'll find the water rising.'

The girls took the sacred grass and threw it into the pond. The water started rising. The sun appeared bright and Umabi and Jumabi thought that the god was happy with them. In no time, the pond was full of water, and they had a good bath. After putting on fresh clothes, they went back to the old woman. She asked them first to put rangoli in front of the house. When the girls went through with that task, they were

asked to prepare offerings to the Sun god. They turned their faces to the east and remained in worship for some time. They were then given rice and fruits. They forgot their hunger.

During their stay with the old woman, they made friends with the other villagers who also sometime shared their food with them. One day, the prince of the kingdom and the son of the prime minister happened to come that way. They were thirsty and hungry after a hunting spree. They had seen the girls and so stopped by to ask for water to drink. Having refreshed themselves, they readily accepted an invitation by Umabi to come in and enjoy some food.

The two young men found the girls very courteous and social. They told the young men that their grandmother was away collecting firewood. They requested them to stay back till she returned, but they told the girls that they had set out early morning and it was time they went back to the palace. Only then Umabi and Jumabi were aware who their young guests were. They went about excited and anxiously waited for the old woman to come back to share the news with her.

The prince and his companion never visited their new acquaintances again, but messengers from the palace came and met the old woman with proposals of marriage. She felt elated. The girls were almost orphans and she was not related to them. But suddenly she had become an important member of the family. She consulted the girls. Were they exulted? Their only sorrow was that they would have to leave the old woman. They would certainly miss her and the other villagers who had looked after them.

Umabi was excited that she wanted a chariot to take her to the palace for the wedding. After all, wasn't she to wed the prince of the land? Jumabi went in a palanquin in which she did not forget to take her puja vessels, for, she wished to continue her worship of the Sun god even if she were to lead a comfortable life in the house of the prime minister.

As Umabi had failed to worship the Sun god before she started for the palace, her journey was not smooth. There was a heavy downpour and the chariot had to stop at several places, so much so her arrival at the palace was greatly delayed. However, the marriage rites were performed, though the exchange of garlands could not take place during the auspicious hour. The prince's mother, the queen, thought it was a bad omen for the kingdom. Under her influence, the prince too did not shower his affection on his bride.

At the prime minister's residence, the wedding was a grand affair. At Jumabi's instance, her husband sent sweetmeat and other delicacies to her village. The old woman and the other villagers were surprised that no sweetmeat had come from the palace, and they soon forgot Umabi.

When, even after one year, Umabi did not bear a child, the queen suggested to the prince that he should send her back to the village. He was not quite willing to do that, so he discussed it with his friend, the prime minister's son. He, in turn, consulted his wife, Jumabi, who told him that, as she was expecting a baby, he should bring Umabi so that she could be of help to her after the birth of her baby. Thus, Umabi found herself once again with her sister.

They often recalled how they found themselves abandoned in a forest and how they grew up in a village. Both Umabi and Jumabi now worshipped the Sun god in earnestness. Soon a baby boy was born to Jumabi and there were festivities in the prime minister's residence. His son invited his friend, the prince, to join the celebrations. At the prime minister's residence, the prince saw his wife, Umabi, and he was taken over by remorse. There he decided to take Umabi back to the palace. He announced his intentions and there was great rejoice in the prime minister's residence.

When the prince entered the palace with Umabi, both the king and queen received her with great affection, as by then they had started missing her. The queen regretted that she had advised her son to send her out of the palace. Umabi realized that the change of heart in the queen was because she was worshipping the Sun god when she was with Jumabi.