The Trouble-Easers

Abstract
It is Friday: the day to remember the Trouble-Easer and Behram Yazad. Mother mops the brick floor in the bedroom and closes all doors. I dawdle on the bed, my prayer cap on my head. I am impatient. I wish my mother would get along with the ceremonial story, and not take so long with her prayers. I hear the Swish-swish of the Kusti as she whips the sacred-thread behind her to banish evil. She will tie the thread thrice round her waist, knotting it in the front and in the back, and, so, gird her loins in the service of the Lord.
It is Friday: the day to remember the Trouble-Easer and Behram Yazad. Mother mops the brick floor in the bedroom and closes all doors. I dawdle on the bed, my prayer cap on my head. I am impatient. I wish my mother would get along with the ceremonial story, and not take so long with her prayers. I hear the Swish-swish of the Kusti as she whips the sacred-thread behind her to banish evil. She will tie the thread thrice round her waist, knotting it in the front and in the back, and, so, gird her loins in the service of the Lord.

When Mother emerges from the bathroom, the gauzy scarf covering her head tied in a soft loop beneath her chin, her face devout, the bedroom air smells holy. And she has not even lit the joss-sticks or the fire yet.

I help her spread the durrie on the floor, and, on it, a spotless sheet. It is immaculate except for a few holes burnt by errant sparks from previous prayer-fires. Mother places the fire-altar tray, with its portion of sandalwood shavings and frankincense, in the centre of the sheet. Around it she arranges a portrait of our Prophet Zarathushtra - one finger raised to remind us of the one and only God - and of the ragged-looking saint Mushkail-Asaan. A silver bowl containing water, a mirror, chickpeas and jagged lumps of crystallized sugar, complete the arrangements.

I take my place across Mother. Shaded by the scarf, her features acquire sharper definition. The chin, tipped to a dainty point, curves deep. The lips, full, firm, taper from a lavish 'M' in wide wings, their outline etched with the clarity of cut crystal. The soft her cheeks is framed by a jaw as delicately oval as an egg. The hint of remoteness, common to such classically sculpted beauty, is overwhelmed by the exuberance and innocence that marks her personality. Mother is beautiful beyond bearing. My heart beats fast. She does not look at me. I am observing an aspect of her that is too private. A shy and guilty voyeur, I remove my eyes from her face.

We sit cross-legged. Praying under her breath in sibilant whispers, Mother lights the joss-sticks, and arranging the sandalwood in a crisscross atop a thin bed of ashes in the fire-altar, sets it alight with a match-stick. Turning her face slightly to avoid the smoke, she gently fans the sandalwood to start a crackling little fire the size of a fist. She adds a pinch of frankincense and the room is so filled with smoke and fragrance that I can feel the presence of the angels. My eyes and my nose water.
At last Mother utters the words that will start the story of Pir Khurkain and Mushkail-Asaan.

'Once upon a time there was a wood-cutter named Pir Khurkain.'

'Jee ray jee (Yes jee yes),' I respond reverently.

I too have a part to play. Each time Mother comes to the end of a sentence I must say, 'Jee ray jee.' If I fail to respond promptly, Mother peeks into the mirror and quickly says: 'Yes jee yes,' to herself, becoming both the teller and the listener, and I am done out of my part.

Right through the ceremony we shell the chickpeas and collect them in a dish. The discarded dark brown husk floats in the silver bowl. The bowl's contents will be reverently tipped into a fern-pot or a gardenia hedge later.

As the story progresses my mother's pure, rich voice picks up the spellbinding rhythm of all great tellers of tales:

Once upon a time there was a woodcutter,

'Yes jee yes.'

Everyday he chopped wood and provided for his wife and daughter.

'Yes jee yes.'

One day his neighbours cooked liver. The fumes from the frying liver drifted to his house and made his daughter's mouth water.

'Yes jee yes.'

The girl wondered, 'What excuse can I make to visit their house?' She decided she would pretend she needed some fire.

I don't recall anyone telling me, but I know that everything in the story happened a long time ago, before matches were invented. People lit their fires from a central hut - or a temple - where a fire was kept alive all the time, or they took it from each other's hearths.

When the girl went to her neighbours house to ask them for fire, they told her to get it herself, and no one offered her any liver.

Then she went to the neighbours again. This time they brought her the fire, but no one gave her any liver.

The woodcutter's daughter felt brokenhearted.

In the evening when the woodcutter returned, he asked his daughter: 'What is the matter, why are you so sad?'

Then the girl told her father, 'The neighbours were cooking liver. I went to their house to ask for fire. They did not bring me the fire, but asked me to get it myself. Thrice I went to them, the third time I went they had sat down to dinner. This time they fetched me the fire, but no one asked me to stay to dinner. My heart and soul were in the liver, but they did not give me any: that's why I'm sad.'

The woodcutter said, 'Don't worry, child. Tomorrow I will cut a huge stack of wood and buy you all the liver you desire.'
Pir Khurkain went to the forest to cut wood early the next morning. He chopped the trees until he had gathered a large stack of wood, but when he went to collect it in the evening, there was nothing there. The stack of wood had burnt to ashes.

Pir Khurkain was too ashamed to face his wife and daughter empty handed, and he decided to spend the night in the forest.

The next day he cut another stack of wood, but when he went to fetch it, the wood had again burnt to ashes.

The woodcutter could not bear to face his family empty handed, and again he spent the night in the forest.

Pir Khurkain spent the third day cutting and chopping an even larger stack of wood, but when he came to take it to the market, he found only ashes. Pir Khurkain thought: It is three days since I’ve eaten, but I cannot bear to show my face to my wife and daughter empty handed. He became very dejected.

‘Yes jee yes.’

The woodcutter waited in the forest till the evening became dusky. He thought he would sneak into his house late at night and spend the night quietly in some corner.

When he arrived at his street he concealed himself in a shaded spot, waiting for the night to advance.

Now it so happened that the angels who ease troubles, Behram Yazad and Mushkail-Asaan, were out for a stroll in the city, and while wandering through the streets, they came upon Pir Khurkain. They asked him, ‘Why are you standing out here in the dark? Is anything the matter?’

The woodcutter was too embarrassed to give them a reply and he kept quiet. On their way back they saw him again. ‘Why are you still out on the street?’ they asked. ‘Tell us what is worrying you and we will ease your troubles.’

At this point mother adds a pinch of frankincense to the fire, and holding her palms together and bowing her head, asks the angels to ease her troubles. She makes a motion with her hands, as if drawing the smoke towards herself, and continues.

The woodcutter told them the tale of his misfortunes and suffering. (Mother repeats the story almost from scratch, starting with: One day the neighbours were cooking liver – I can listen to the sad litany of the poor woodcutter’s woes a million times and not get fed up.)

Then Mushkail-Asaan and Behram Yazad were moved to pity by the woodcutter’s misfortune, and scooping three fistfuls of sand from the ground, they poured it into his lap. ‘Cherish what we have given you,’ they said, ‘and keep it safe. Distribute some chickpeas and sugar or sugared-cardamons on any auspicious day you like, and think of us.’
The woodcutter thought: ‘What good will this sand do me? I will throw it away as soon as they leave.’

But Behram Yazad and Mushkail-Asaan could read what was going on in his mind, and they said: ‘O Pir Khurkain, don’t throw away what we have given you. Cherish it and guard it with your life. Each grain of sand will be useful to you. Sell it at a high price, don’t sell it cheap; and remember to remember us.’

‘Yes jee yes.’

Mother must again place frankincense on the fire. She does so, saying, ‘I will never forget you O Behram Yazad and Mushkail-Asaan.’ I also add a pinch of frankincense and parrot her words.

When the woodcutter returned home, his wife and daughter were asleep. He poured the sand into a corner, and lay down.

Shortly before dawn, when his neighbours set out for work, they called to his daughter: ‘Wake up, girl, wake up. Your house is on fire.’

When the girl woke up it seemed to her as if their house was lit with lamps. She awakened her father and told him that their house was on fire.

The woodcutter said: ‘Go back to sleep, child, it must be one of our neighbours’ houses that is on fire. What do we have in our house that it could burn? We own nothing.’

The girl went back to sleep. Now Pir Khurkain got up and saw that the whole house was filled with light and dazzling bright. He looked around, and saw that the sand that he had thrown into a corner had turned into an incandescent heap of diamonds, emeralds, rubies and pearls.

‘Yes jee yes.’

The woodcutter gathered the gems in a rag and went back to sleep.

‘Yes jee yes.’

The next morning the woodcutter selected one gem from the heap and took it to a jeweller’s to sell. The jeweller asked him: ‘What should I give you for this, one billion rupees or two billion?’

‘You are mocking me,’ cried the woodcutter and went to another jeweller.

The other jeweller said: ‘I don’t have enough money to make you an offer for a gem like this.’

Then the woodcutter went to the biggest jeweller in town. The jeweller said: ‘I cannot fathom the value of such a magnificent jewel. But here’s what I can do: I’ll make three mounds of gold sovereigns of different sizes. Throw the jewel into the sky and which ever mound it falls on, will be yours.’

The woodcutter threw the gem up into the sky and it settled on the largest mound of gold.

The woodcutter collected the gold coins and went to the market. He bought meat, liver, bread, sugar, butter, flower etc. and all the other
groceries he could think of for his house. Next he hired some labourers, and after helping them to raise the loaded baskets to their heads, directed them to his house. When he had finished buying everything he needed, Pir Khurkain bought some roasted chickpeas, and repeating to himself the story of his meeting with the Trouble-Easers, and giving three chickpeas to whoever happened to cross his path, he took the road home.

In the meantime the first lot of hired men had arrived at his house. Pir Khurkain’s wife and daughter were standing outside, and the men asked them if this was the woodcutter’s house.

‘This is the woodcutter’s house,’ they said, ‘But the poor woodcutter could never afford such fancy purchases.’

They told the hired men that they must have made a mistake, and sent them away.

The labourers met the woodcutter on the road. He turned them back and walked behind them repeating the names of Mushkail-Asaan and Behram Yazad and giving three chickpeas to whoever crossed his path.

But when the woodcutter returned with the merchandise, his wife cried, ‘We’re poor folk. How can we suddenly afford to buy all this? You must have committed a theft.’

Then the woodcutter told his wife and daughter the story of his meeting with the angels. They put everything away in its proper place, and then washed and cooked the liver. They ate and drank their fill and had a marvellous time.

‘Yes jee yes.’

The woodcutter heard that some of their neighbours were going to Mecca on a pilgrimage, and he told his neighbours that he would go with them.

But before he left he made a necklace out of those diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and pearls. He put the necklace round his daughter’s neck and told her: ‘Daughter, you can build an even larger and more resplendent house than the King’s palace with this money. But don’t forget, we owe all our happiness to the Trouble-Easers Behram Yazad and Mushkail-Asaan. Remember to think of them every Friday, and distribute three pice worth of roasted chickpeas after you pray.’

Then the woodcutter went away to Mecca to perform Haj.

‘Yes jee yes.’

The woodcutter’s daughter built a house like a palace. They entertained lavishly and the house resounded to the sound of laughter and the chatter of new friends.

One day it so happened that when the woodcutter’s daughter went to the bath-house she found that someone was already inside and the doors were closed to her. She asked the maid who was waiting outside, ‘Who’s in there that you won’t allow me to enter the bath-house?’

The maid told her that the Princess was having her bath.
When the Princess heard them talking, she called to the woodcutter’s daughter and said, ‘Let us bathe together, after all, you are a woman, and I am a woman.’

When they came out of their baths, the Princess sent for round silver platters of pilaff and sweets and invited the woodcutter’s daughter to eat with her.

Pir Khurkail’s daughter wondered how she might repay such royal hospitality. She removed a diamond from her necklace and gave it to the Princess.

‘Yes jee yes.’

When the Princess returned to the palace she showed the diamond to the King and complained, ‘Father, you are a King, and yet you don’t have a single gem to compare with this diamond given to me by a woodcutter’s daughter.’

The King said, ‘Daughter, God has not made all men equal. Some wear crowns and sit on thrones, some toil and reap poverty, some live by honour and some by pride, and some have strength and some ill health. One man’s fate is not the same as another’s.’

The Princess and the woodcutter’s daughter became devoted friends.

‘Yes jee yes.’

At this point mother interrupts the narrative to say, in an almost childishly self-righteous way, ‘The woodcutter’s daughter forgot you, O Trouble-Easer, but I will never, ever, forget to remember you.’ Mother puts more sandalwood on the fire, which has almost become ashes. Then she joins her hands, and bows her head, and asks for blessings on her house. When she passes her hands over her face, I sit up. The interval is over, the story will continue.

One afternoon the woodcutter’s daughter and the Princess came upon a lake in the forest. The Princess said, ‘How inviting the water looks. Let’s swim.’

‘I can’t swim,’ her friend said. ‘But I’ll sit by the lake while you have a swim.’

The Princess removed her clothes, and, last of all, the diamond necklace round her neck, and hung them from the branches of a tree. She told her friend to mind her belongings, and slipped into the water.

Then Mushkail-Asaan came in the guise of crow and took away the diamond necklace.

When the Princess came out of the water she discovered that her necklace was missing.

‘Yes jee yes.’

They shook the branches of the tree and searched the underbrush but they could not find the necklace.

Then the Princess cried: ‘There is no one here but us. I told you to mind the necklace and now you say you don’t have it. You have taken it.’
The Princess took her complaint to the King. The King questioned the woodcutter’s daughter, but she told him, ‘I have not taken anything.’

The King cast the woodcutter’s daughter into prison.

‘Yes jee yes.’

When she heard that her daughter was in prison, Pir Khurkain’s wife ran to the palace gates crying, ‘O King! How can I leave my unmarried and chaste daughter alone in prison? Put me in with her!’

The King now cast both mother and daughter into prison. He confiscated their property and all their possessions in lieu of the necklace.

‘Yes jee yes.’

On his way back from the pilgrimage to Mecca the woodcutter was robbed by bandits.

When he arrived at his house he found it dark and gloomy and frighteningly desolate.

The woodcutter knocked on his neighbours’ doors. His neighbours told him that his daughter had stolen the Princess’ necklace and the King had cast both his wife and daughter into prison.

Pir Khurkain ran to the palace and standing before it cried: ‘O, King! What manner of justice is this that I, a man, sit at home free, and my wife and daughter are in prison?’

The King told him, ‘Your daughter has committed a theft, that is why I have put them both into prison.’

The woodcutter pleaded, ‘O King, release them, and lock me up in their stead.’

The King freed both women and cast Pir. Khurkain into prison.

That night Mushkail-Asaan appeared before the woodcutter in a dream; ‘I gave you every happiness that your heart desired,’ he said. ‘Yet you could not remember to pray over a few chickpeas for me?’

In his dream the woodcutter wept and cried, ‘O Trouble-Easer, forgive me. My daughter is young and heedless. She has made a mistake.’

And because Pir Khurkain was a truly good man, Mushkail-Asaan said, ‘When you awaken you will be free of your chains. You will also find three coins to the right side of your head. Send for the chickpeas and sugar with the money and remember us; we will ease your troubles.’

Another break in the story. Another pinch of incense added to the fire, a folding of hands and bowing of heads. Mother says: ‘When you ease other people’s troubles, O Mushkail-Asaan, ease ours as well.’

Next morning when Pir Khurkain woke up, the chains that bound his hands and legs fell away from him. He looked to the right of where he had laid his head and found the three coins. He sat by the barred prison window thinking of the Trouble-Easer.
Presently he saw a Passerby who was on his way to buy clothes for a wedding. The woodcutter begged him to bring him three pice worth of roasted chickpeas.

The Passerby was brusque and rude. 'I have no time to waste,' he said, 'My daughter is getting married, and I am too busy in the bustle of wedding preparations to get you chickpeas,' and he went his way.

The woodcutter angrily muttered. 'May you hear news of a death instead of a wedding, and may you need a shroud instead of wedding garments.'

The Passerby was on his way back to his house when some men rushed up to tell him, 'Your son-in-law has suddenly taken very ill. He's unconscious and on the verge of death. You must buy clothes for the funeral.'

The Passerby turned back sorrowfully to buy clothes for his son-in-law's funeral. The woodcutter saw him, and again begged him to buy three pice worth of roasted chickpeas.

The grieving Passerby went up to the barred window and said, 'Give me the money brother, and I will get you the chickpeas. Earlier I was on my way to buy wedding clothes; now I have news that my son-in-law is deathly ill, and I'm in no hurry to get burial clothes.

The Passerby brought the woodcutter the roasted chickpeas.

Then the woodcutter blessed him and said, 'May your sorrowing house be filled with joy again.'

Once more the men rushed to catch up with the Passerby. 'Your son-in-law has recovered,' they said. 'Go quickly and make arrangements for the wedding.'

The woodcutter repeated to himself the story of his meeting with the Trouble-Easers and the help they had given him, and handed three peeled chickpeas to whoever went past his window.

'Yes jee yes.'

The next day the King and the Princess went for an outing in the forest. They got tired and sat beneath a tree when lo! The diamond necklace fell into the princesses lap!

'Yes jee yes.'

They looked up and beheld a peacock. Mushkail-Asaan, in the guise of the bird, had returned the necklace.

The King thumped his daughter on the back and scolded her. 'You have accused an innocent girl of theft! You have committed a very grave wrong.' The King and Princess became very sad and were sorry.

The next day Pir Khurkain was released from jail with great pomp and celebration. The King took the woodcutter to the palace and said, 'Can you forgive us, O Pir Khurkain? My daughter has made a terrible mistake!'

The woodcutter wept and cried: 'You have dishonoured my family and disgraced my daughter! Who will marry her now?'
Then the King said: ‘Would it please you if I marry her to my son?’
And so it came about that the daughter of a humble woodcutter was
married to a prince.
The King removed his crown and placed it on the woodcutter’s head.
‘Yes jee, yes’
The story ends. Mother asks blessings for our family: ‘As Pir Khurkain’s
troubles eased: as a woodcutter’s daughter married a Prince: as the
Passerby gained his son: so help us great Trouble-Easer and Behram
Yazad and make our wishes come true. Amen!’
The room is scented with incense and foggy with smoke. Almost all the
golden chickpeas are peeled, their dark husks floating in the silver
bowl. Mother gives me three chickpeas and pops some into her mouth. She
will now distribute them, giving more than the prescribed three to visitors and
members of our household.
My bottom hurts with sitting so long on the hard floor. It is worth it; I
feel ennobled – God blessed.
It didn’t occur to me until many years later to wonder how a Muslim
woodcutter, who went for Haj to Mecca, got tangled up with Zoroastrian
angels and Zoroastrian prayers. But that is what happens when one lives
cheek by jowl with people of other faiths – saints jump boundaries and
the barriers fall.