



Do Good, And Good Shall Befalling

We present here a popular folktale, variants of which are recounted in different parts of the country. Remarkable for its suggestive power, the story, among other things, dwells on women's ways of negotiating with structures of enclosure and violence. The protagonist forges and maintains empathetic links with potentially dangerous forces that are feared and despised—whether these forces be interpreted as subjugated communities (the Nagas), as the powers of nature, of sexuality, or of the inner world of fantasy.

A certain Brahman had seven daughters-in-law. Six of them had many brothers and nephews in their parents' homes, but the youngest had no parents or relatives at all. In the month of July, the brothers and nephews of the six older women came to fetch them home for a visit. No one came for the poor youngest girl. She felt very sad, went out behind the house, burst into tears and said: "Not even a king cobra comes out of the forest, to take me away from here!"*

It so happened that the king cobra overheard her words. He was moved by her weeping, and felt sorry for her. A few nights later, a man came to see her father-in-law. His skin was the colour of an orange. He was very tall and had a shining face. The hair on his head stood upright, and his eyes gleamed like rubies. He had a habit of flicking out his tongue every now and then.

He said to the Brahman: "Your youngest daughter-in-law is my sister's daughter. At the time of her birth I had gone abroad. That is why I never met you. Since my niece now has no one in her parents' home, I have come to fetch her."

The Brahman was surprised because he had never met this person. He thought it best to enquire of his daughter-in-law. He went inside and

*A Way of saying: "Not even death comes to me."

said: "Daughter-in-law, your uncle has come to fetch you. Do you know him?"

The youngest daughter-in-law had lived there for years, and she was fed up. She thought she might as well have a few days' outing and relaxation. So she said: "Yes, I know uncle."

The uncle drank milk and wheat porridge. The time of departure was settled and everyone went to sleep. Before sunrise, the uncle was ready to leave. The daughter-in-law touched her parents-in-laws' feet. When they reached the outskirts of the village, she bowed to the village deity. Then she skipped along behind her uncle. She was very happy. She felt as if her feet had wings.

On and on they went. When the



sun began to sink, they reached a huge forest. The uncle suddenly stopped, and said: "You are not afraid of snakes, are you?"

The girl, whose name was Mani, said: "Uncle, is there anyone who is not afraid of snakes?"

Uncle answered: "In olden days, people did not fear snakes. Even today, as long as human beings do not harass them, snakes do no harm. In earlier times, people did not kill

snakes. They considered them the gift of god. God has made all creatures for one another's benefit. In those days, snakes used to be respected and worshipped. During the monsoon, people used to feed them milk porridge, and used to eat only after the snakes had eaten. At that time, snakes did not wish people any harm. When men became greedy to take their lives, they too began to hurt men. Anyway, daughter, have no fear, I am the king cobra. I could not bear to see your suffering, and since you called me to mind, I am now taking you to my home. I am your adopted uncle, you are my niece, so no cobra will harm you. Be fearless. Now I am going to assume my real shape. Close your eyes and sit on my hood."

So saying, the cobra assumed his



fearful shape. At first, Mani was frightened, but then she gathered courage, and sat on his hood. In a few moments, they reached the land of cobras. Mani was introduced to everyone there.

In a few days, Mani lost every vestige of fear. The king cobra had told all the snakes not to trouble Mani. So all of them showed her affection. Mani's aunt, the queen cobra, became extremely fond of her. In this way,

many days passed, but Mani did not get bored. Sometimes, she leapt like a doe, sometimes she played with the children. Mani's aunt was quick tempered but she was very gentle to Mani.

Some days later, Mani's aunt laid many eggs which soon hatched. The babies began to move around. One of them would strike at Mani, another would tease her. Mani began to fear them. One day, she said to her aunt: "Aunt, I feel very afraid of these children." Her aunt tried to reassure her. She said: "Daughter, carry a lamp in your hand. You will gradually lose your fear. These children will fear the light and will not come near you."

After that, Mani began to carry around a lamp at night. One day, many of the children jumped at Mani, ignoring the lamp. Terrified, she tried to run away. The lamp fell on the children. The thin tails of some of them got severed. The aunt was enraged and flew at Mani. Fortunately, her uncle came along and pacified his wife. Some days later, the king cobra seated Mani on his hood and took her back to her in-laws' place.

Next year, when Nagpanchami, the festival of cobra worship, came round, Mani remembered her uncle, aunt and



brothers. The cobra land, delightful as paradise, swam before her eyes. She got up and cleaned the house thoroughly. Then she drew a cowdung picture of a cobra on the wall, and worshipped it. Then she prayed to god for the welfare of her cobra uncle, aunt and cousins, saying: "O god, keep my uncle, aunt and cousins well. Do not let any sorrow overtake them." She closed her eyes and began to weep inwardly, missing her cobra brethren.

Meanwhile, the cobra children who had lost their tails grew up and asked their mother how their tails had gotten cut off. Their mother told them the whole story.

They flew into a rage, and with one voice, they screamed: "We will not rest till we have taken revenge." And off they went to Mani's house, to take revenge.

When they reached Mani's house, she was praying, with forehead pressed to the earth, for the happiness of her cobra brethren. Mad with rage, the cobras approached her, hissing loudly, but Mani remained wrapped in her meditation.

When she finished praying and opened her eyes she was overjoyed to see her cobra brethren. She ran and filled a large pan with milk and wheat porridge. The cobras ate and drank their fill. Then they began to dance with joy. Mani asked for news of cobra land, and showered them with love and affection. Those brothers had come to take revenge but the sister's behaviour dispelled their wrath and filled their hearts with love. Before leaving, they gave their sister a necklace of precious stones.

From that day on, all of them lived happily together.

(translated by Ruth from the Hindi version in "Kar Bhala Hoga Bhala", Maithili folk tales, edited by Bhagwanchandra Vinod, Sasta Sahitya Mandal Prakashan)

Women's Right To Housing

A public meeting was held on April 18, 1987, to highlight women's right to housing. The speakers dealt with various aspects of the issue, specially focusing on the DDA declaration of joint ownership of flats by husband and wife, and the challenge to this filed in the supreme court. (See **Manushi** No. 39)

This being the international year of shelter for the homeless, it is necessary to recognise that women, although they contribute to the household economy, and even if they are gainfully employed, rarely have

ownership rights over the matrimonial home or household assets. The fear of social insecurity often prevents women from resorting to separation when the marriage is a failure. If a husband throws his wife out of the house, she is left shelterless. It is therefore necessary to recognise legally the concept of joint matrimonial property whereby all property acquired at the time of and during the subsistence of a marriage be considered the joint property of husband and wife.

The meeting resolved that:

1. The basic right to shelter of all people be recognised, and government evolve a housing policy to guarantee this right.

2. Every shelter, house site, agricultural land, plot, should be registered jointly in the names of husband and wife. If the family is headed by a woman or if a single woman is living alone, the ownership be registered in her name.

3. The media make a special effort to highlight women's right to housing, this year.

— **Joint Women's Programme**