

THOUSANDS OF DAUGHTERS: The Life and Work of Rutuparna Mohanty of India

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A NOTE TO THE READER

In the following pages, you will find narrative stories about a Woman PeaceMaker, along with additional information to provide a deep understanding of a contemporary conflict and one person's journey within it. These complementary components include a brief biography of the peacemaker, a historical summary of the conflict, a timeline integrating political developments in the country with personal history of the peacemaker, and a question-and-answer transcript of select interviews during her time at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice.

The document is not intended necessarily to be read straight through, from beginning to end. Instead, you can use the historical summary or timeline as mere references or guides as you read the narrative stories. You can move straight to the question-and-answer transcript if you want to read commentary in the peacemaker's own words. The goal of this format is to reach audiences through multiple channels, providing access to the peacemaker's work, vision, lives and impact in their communities.

ABOUT THE WOMEN PEACEMAKERS PROGRAM

The Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice's (IPJ) Women PeaceMakers Program annually hosts four women from around the world who have been involved in human rights and peacemaking efforts in their countries.

Women on the frontline of efforts to end violence and secure a just peace seldom record their experiences, activities and insights — as generally there is no time or, perhaps, they do not have formal education that would help them record their stories. The Women PeaceMakers Program is a selective program for leaders who want to document, share and build upon their unique peacemaking stories.

Women PeaceMakers are paired with a Peace Writer to document in written form their story of living in conflict and building peace in their communities and nations. While in residence at the institute, Women PeaceMakers give presentations on their work and the situation in their home countries to the university and San Diego communities.

The IPJ believes that women's stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations and expose the realities of gender-based violence, thus providing an understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation. The narrative stories of Women PeaceMakers not only provide this understanding, but also show the myriad ways women construct peace in the midst of and after violence and war. For the realization of peace with justice, the voices of women — those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation — must be recorded, disseminated and spotlighted.¹

BIOGRAPHY OF A WOMAN PEACEMAKER —
Rutuparna Mohanty



Human rights lawyer and social activist Rutuparna Mohanty is the fourth daughter of freedom fighter followers of Mahatma Gandhi. From her childhood she learned that she lived in a society “where women are treated as secondary citizens, where in every five minutes a woman is either assaulted or abused and exploited, where women are grossly deprived of their participation in the socioeconomic and political floors, and where women have ... no voice against the violation of their human rights.”

To support women standing up to injustice, Mohanty began working with nonprofits and became the secretary of Sanjeevani, a large organization in her state of Orissa. There, she was especially affected by the plight of unwed mothers who faced discrimination, poverty and alienation, and were already victims of or became subjected to trafficking and prostitution.

Mohanty created Maa Ghara (Mothers Home), which provides a shelter for rehabilitating trafficked and sexually exploited women and girls. Through rescue, care and legal protection, the home has served 5,000 women since 2004.

As the legal dimensions of many of the girls’ situations became evident, Mohanty returned to school to become a lawyer to defend their cases. As she earned a reputation for fearlessly defending women’s rights, Mohanty took on high-profile human rights cases from which other lawyers had shied away: defending the rights of slum dwellers from government eviction, sexual harassment cases against powerful politicians and prosecuting perpetrators of gang rape.

But Mohanty has not stopped there. Maa Ghara has become a “people’s movement” to protect women’s rights, and includes community “vigilance groups” that prevent human trafficking. She publishes a weekly newspaper, *Janani* (“The Voice of Women”), which is “of the women, by the women and for the women,” and is working with police and politicians on policy reform and training that will better protect women and girls. Mohanty is fighting for nothing less than a state where there is “zero tolerance to violations against women.”

CONFLICT HISTORY — India

Women's Rights and Social Justice in India

India is a nation marked by complexity and contradiction. Known for its culturally diverse population now nearing 1.25 billion people, comprised of more than 2,000 ethnic groups, 29 languages and all major religions including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, India spans 3,287,590 square kilometers from the Indian Ocean to the Himalayas. It borders Nepal, Bangladesh, China, Burma, Bhutan and Pakistan.

South Asia's largest country faces an array of economic, social and political challenges, including territorial disputes, religious extremism, gender-based violence, corruption, extreme poverty and socioeconomic disparity following centuries of structural violence, characterized by the class-based Hindu caste system. These issues are complicated further by the enduring legacy of British imperialism, now more than a half-century after the national liberation movement achieved Indian independence in 1947.

Within this heterogeneous milieu, the dynamics of law, social justice and human rights are complex, particularly for women, whose evolving roles in Indian culture and society have put them at the epicenter of systemic and socio-structural change. Newly educated and emancipated in the decades following independence, women in India have become leaders in the public and private spheres, joining the labor force and heading hundreds of civil society organizations, making the national women's movement a force to be reckoned with in an otherwise patriarchal society.

However, the role of the women's movement in promoting change is itself wrought with contradiction. In the northeastern state of Orissa, as elsewhere in India, women confront gender-based vulnerabilities and sociocultural limitations where sex-trafficking, rape, domestic servitude, sexual abuse and harassment find little space for justice in traditional societies and systems characterized by rampant corruption and unnavigable bureaucracy. Seeking to transform the justice system and overcome gendered social norms of stigmatization and victimization, the women's movement represents a second wave of India's ongoing liberation struggle, with the defense of women's rights opening political and cultural space toward greater social justice for all.

Transcending Caste, Imperialism and Patriarchy

Perhaps the most well-known actor in India's national liberation movement, Mahatma Gandhi, is credited with leading the country's transition to independence from Great Britain, ending nearly 200 years of British colonial rule. Of lesser fame in Indian history are the many traditional cultures and empires. Given the millennia of dynasties and the legacies of Harappan, Vedic-Hindu, Aryan, Indo-Greek, Arab-Sino-Islamic, Sikh and eventually European elements, Indian independence in 1947 was no small feat. It was the culmination of cultural intermingling and sociopolitical transitions spanning thousands of years, in which British imperialism constituted a significant, although never all-encompassing, piece of India's history.

Understanding these historical origins illuminates the interwoven fabric of its present and perplexing dynamism and systemic injustices, including caste, gender inequity and socioeconomic inequality. Gender-related violence is further complicated and oftentimes validated by longstanding Hindu and Muslim religious traditions. These existing pretexts met British colonialism head-on, creating a complex

interplay between Western values and structures and the traditional practices ingrained in Indian society.

Women's Rights in India

The most prevalent concerns for women in India today include discrimination in the labor force, unequal access to education and employment opportunities, underrepresentation in government, sexual harassment, trafficking in persons, prostitution, rape, sexual abuse, domestic violence and servitude, female infanticide, dowry (expectation of property or money given by a woman to her husband at marriage), social stigmatization for divorce and unwed motherhood, and to a lesser degree, remnants of the Hindu practice of *sati* (widow immolation).²

While many of these practices, including *sati* and dowry, have been formally outlawed in India, they undoubtedly persist as customary norms throughout the country. Dowry abuse — including the disturbing practice of bride-burning in the instance that a husband is unsatisfied with the dowry he receives — is a significant if not growing phenomenon, with cases of torture for dowry accounting for 32.4 percent of total cases of crime against women in 2003.³

The prevalence of dowry actually expanded following its legal prohibition in 1961, rising from 22 percent in the '70s to 36 percent in the '80s, and to virtually 100 percent in the '90s.⁴ While many women in 21st century India have begun to challenge the social institution of dowry by insisting on finding husbands who will marry them without it, dowry indeed remains a significant issue.

The persistence of violence against women is exacerbated by the widespread impunity in India's legal system, wherein the vast majority of cases go unpunished, providing little disincentive to prevent it. Lacking witness protection programs, and with the burden of proof on the victim, convictions are notoriously rare, normalizing crime and violence throughout India with little to no redress.

Similarly, social stigmatization of women victims of rape and extramarital pregnancy prevent many women from seeking justice. Difficult bureaucratic processes and corruption within the legal system make redress or compensation inaccessible for the majority of women survivors. As a result, perpetrators of rape and fathers of unwed mothers' children face little responsibility, while the women victims suffer the consequences, unable to receive any financial support for their children and staying silent in cases of rape to avoid the shame of social stigma.

Despite these realities, India has made significant strides in protecting women's rights from a legal standpoint, adopting a number of laws related to the welfare of women, including the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act (1986), the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act (1986), the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), and the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Bill (1956).

As a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, India has adopted provisions such as the right to equal remuneration and treatment for work of equal value.⁵ The National Commission for Women was established in 1990 to safeguard all legal provisions related to women and provide means of redressing violations of women's rights.

By law, women are guaranteed equal access to educational and labor opportunities, and 33 percent of legislative seats are reserved for women in municipal bodies in urban areas and Panchayat Raj, their counterpart in rural areas, with some states mandating a 50 percent quota.⁶ However, women's representation in legislative assemblies is undoubtedly skewed, with powerful men oftentimes utilizing

their otherwise unqualified wives to maintain male dominance under the guise of including women in government.

Given the variety of issues confronting women within the country's vast sociocultural spectrum, the women's movement has its own unique and diverse nature, oftentimes polarized and politicized in demonstrations, media campaigns and activist priorities.

Social Justice and Strife in Orissa

In India's northeastern state of Orissa, stark contrasts between rich and poor exacerbate resource distribution, leading to extreme poverty in urban slums, rural areas and tribal villages, where communities become targets for human trafficking and violent extremist groups. Social advocates in Orissa try to draw awareness to the idea that trafficking in persons is not an issue of security but one of development, whereby victims are lured through promises of a better life.

Orissa also faces significant and frequent natural disasters, including hurricanes, earthquakes and super cyclones, with heavy rains a reoccurring seasonal burden on impoverished communities. Lacking social safety nets, natural disasters devastate neighborhoods, leaving people increasingly vulnerable with little hope for government support. Where the government fails to respond, development organizations like Sanjeevani and Maa Ghara, among others, are instrumental in providing humanitarian relief, advocating on the behalf of victims and survivors, and working to create livelihood alternatives for vulnerable youth in poor communities.

INTEGRATED TIMELINE

Political Developments in India and *Personal History of Rutuparna Mohanty*

- 1947** India gains independence from Great Britain as a result of the anti-imperialist liberation movement.
- 1955** Part of the Hindu Code Bills, the Hindu Marriage Act is established, allowing women to file for divorce and receive inheritance.
- 1956** Also under the Hindu Code Bills, the Indian national government passes the Hindu Succession Act, guaranteeing women legal access to their paternal property even after marriage.
- The Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Bill is passed.
- 1961** India introduces the Dowry Prohibition Act.
- 1971** **November 12 — Rutuparna Mohanty is born in Kapaleswar village, Kendrapara district in the state of Orissa, to Nirmala and Shri Bichitrananda Mohanty. She is the youngest of four sisters: Aparna (18), Anapurna (16) and Madhuparna (11).**
- 1980** India becomes a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women.
- 1984** Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, the daughter of the first Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, is assassinated.
- 1986** The Muslim Women’s (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act is written into law, as well as the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, which refers to the representation of women in advertisements, publications, writing, paintings or figures.
- 1989** **Rutuparna begins working as a news anchor for Doordarshan television network.**
- 1990** The National Commission for Women is established to safeguard all legal provisions related to women.
- Rutuparna is elected as the first woman president of the student union at Tulasi Women’s College, Kendrapara.**
- 1991** **Rutuparna finishes her Bachelor of Arts degree at Tulasi Women’s College in Kendrapara.**
- Rutuparna works for community development NGO, Jotirmayaa, opening village health centers in Kendrapara district.**
- 1992** **Rutuparna begins government employment with the Urban Development Department of Orissa state, overseeing the slum development program of the Kendrapara Municipal Corporation Area.**
- 1993** **Rutuparna begins law school and marries Guru Prasad in her hometown. She moves with him to the capital city of Bhubaneswar.**

- 1994** Rutuparna gives birth to a son, Gyandeep Viswa Prasad, in Bhubaneswar.
- 1995** Rutuparna completes the law examination and receives her Bachelor of Law degree from Dinabandhu Sahoo Law College in Kendrapara, under the auspices of Utkal University in Bhubaneswar.
- 1998** Rutuparna is elected as working president of the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation Employees' Federation.
- 1999** A super cyclone hits Orissa, leaving thousands dead and hundreds of thousands injured.
- 2000** Rutuparna is elected organizing secretary and is the first woman leader of the All Orissa Municipal Employees Federation.
- India's 1 billionth citizen is born.
- 2001** Following a 29-day government employee agitation in Orissa, Rutuparna resigns from her government position. She begins working with Sanjeevani, a nongovernmental social justice and advocacy organization.
- Rutuparna receives a United Nations award for best social work at the International Year of Volunteer event, as well as a certificate from OXFAM for best contribution to the flood-affected people of Kendrapara district.
- 2004** Rutuparna establishes Maa Ghara Foundation Trust, a transitional home for sheltering and rehabilitating trafficked and sexually exploited women and girls.
- In collaboration with the National Commission for Women, Rutuparna organizes a massive public hearing on atrocities against women, leading the government to open women and child desks in 460 police stations in the state of Orissa.
- A massive tsunami in the Indian Ocean, caused by an earthquake off of Indonesia, kills up to 300,000 people in several countries — including as many as 11,000 people in India.
- 2005** The Domestic Violence Act passes in Indian national parliament.
- Rutuparna receives the Rajiv Gandhi Sadbhawana Award from the Rajiv Gandhi Forum, naming her the best woman social activist of that year.
- 2008** The speaker of the Orissa Legislative Assembly resigns following a mass protest of 5,000 women and sexual harassment litigation advocated by Rutuparna.
- 2009** Maa Ghara establishes the first women's helpline in Bhubaneswar.
- Five men are convicted on charges of gang rape and sentenced to 10 years in prison, following two years of litigation by Rutuparna on behalf of the rape victim.
- Under Rutuparna's leadership, a legal case opens against Basanti Trust, an award-winning youth organization charged with running a fake marriage bureau and sex racket of trafficked youth.

2010 As a result of Rutuparna's public interest litigation case on behalf of evicted slum dwellers in Cuttack city, the Orissa High Court directs the government to adopt a policy to provide alternative housing, rehabilitation support and food for all evicted residents.

Rutuparna registers her name with the Bar Council, becoming a practicing lawyer in court.

2011 Maa Ghara begins publishing *Janani: The Voice of Women*, a weekly women's newspaper distributed through the organization's community vigilance groups in urban areas and remote tribal villages in Orissa.

2013 The Sexual Harassment of Women (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressals) at Workplace Act passes in Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Indian Parliament), becoming law.

Delhi high court presents a remarkable judgment on the Nirbhaya gang-rape case in Delhi, sentencing all accused perpetrators to death.

Rutuparna is chosen by the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice as one of four Women PeaceMakers.

**NARRATIVE STORIES OF THE LIFE AND WORK OF
RUTUPARNA MOHANTY**

The Fourth Daughter

“Yes, Guru Baikunthanatha Brahmachari, please come in. Welcome, welcome.” Shri Bichitrananda Mohanty bowed his head slightly toward his honorable houseguest as he opened the door, but he did not stop talking. “My wife, Nirmala Mohanty, she is suffering greatly. She is in labor pain now. We believe our son will be born very soon.”

The saint entered the thatched-roof cottage in Kapaleswar, unshaken by the faint moans from the end of the corridor. He seemed at home in the humble sitting room, observing the mango blossoms and ripe berries on healthy trees just outside. He sat there for quite some time, saying nothing. But the silence of the hours wore on his host, Shri Bichitrananda, who was growing impatient.

“Please, Guru Baikunthanatha,” he spoke at last. “Please, will you now give my wife your blessing for a safe delivery of our only son? I will take you to her.”

The saint stood and followed. He moved down the corridor as if floating, his footsteps mere whispers on plaster. “Now I will see how your wife will give birth to a boy,” he said before entering the bedroom. Startled by the voice, Shri Bichitrananda’s eyes widened with anticipation.

The saint entered the bedroom. He stayed for a few long moments, then left quickly — out the front door, past the gate, returning to the ashram, leaving only a few words behind: “Your wife will not give birth to a boy.”

Shri Bichitrananda had waited 18 years for his first son, held the precious possibility deep in his heart. Three times it had been a girl, and his thrill at the prospect of a boy vanished the instant the saint issued his matter-of-fact conclusion. And, as if by magic, Nirmala’s labor pains subsided, her womb worryingly still.

The saint’s premonition resounded in the anxious husband’s ears as he held his wife’s hand at her bedside, incredulous. He knew they had the saint’s blessing, yet he feared the unthinkable. After several hours, Nirmala cried out in pain once more. Then again. A few more hours and many more cries later, her labor was over.

As he looked down at his baby’s tiny limbs, peaceful at his wife’s breast, he forced a smile. He envied his brothers, their easy sons. Somber moods thickened the air as more slow hours passed. But Aparna, the oldest Mohanty sister, was eager to greet her newborn sister.

“Oh, look at her!” Aparna squealed. “She is such a beautiful baby girl!” She reached for her sister’s soft body, taking her in her arms. “Rutuparna, our seasonal leaf,” she said, working out the meaning of her new sister’s name. “I will make you some dresses. Small, small dresses. I will stitch them for you with my own hands. We might not have much money for food now that we are four daughters, but we will make do. And I will take care of you Rutuparna, my littlest sister.”

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“Tell me, father,” Rutuparna demanded. “Do you feel fortunate now that I was born your youngest daughter and not your son?” His 86 years camouflaged in youthful vibrance, his face wise but not worn, Rutuparna’s father looked up at her.

“Tell me,” she persisted, “are you happy that you have us as your famous daughters?”

Shri Bichitrananda Mohanty cleared his throat, pausing before he spoke. Pensive, he looked out the window of the home of his eldest daughter, his home too now that the cottage was sold, his children married. He felt lighter somehow, perhaps less resistant to the care of his family.

He thought first of his brothers, their sons grown, good men indeed. Now he felt silly for envying them all those years ago, somewhat embarrassed by his disappointment when his youngest was born a girl and not the son they all had hoped for.

He thought next of his eldest daughter, Aparna, a renowned poet, whose care for him in his old age reflected the values he'd instilled in his daughters since they were young. He thought of Madhuparna, a teacher and mother. The fruit trees and flowers outside grew blurry for a moment as he remembered Anapurna, whose life had been lost to cancer just five years earlier. And his dear Rutuparna sitting with him now — he saw her at once as a woman and a child, the successful social activist and lawyer she had become and the precocious, obstinate little girl she would always be.

“It is not that. It is not about boy or girl.” Her father spoke slowly, deliberately. “It is about upbringing; it is you and your sisters' education. It is the way of life we have taught you. Simple living, high thinking. Independence, integrity, honesty — the life of a social worker.”

Not only had both of Rutuparna's parents been social workers, but they had also been part of India's liberation movement — freedom fighters and followers of Mahatma Gandhi. While social work was her family's legacy, it had not been her original dream. Rutuparna had been drawn to the spotlight, with aspirations of singing, dancing and acting. Her father was apprehensive at first of his youngest daughter's blossoming stardom as a film actress in high school, but with her sisters' help, she had convinced him to let her follow her passions. Those passions shifted in college — toward the family legacy — when she took a job opening with a community development organization to pay her tuition.

“You have adopted that ideology in your life,” her father finished. “That is what matters.”

While he might never say the words she wanted to hear, Rutuparna knew he was proud of her. And she knew in her heart he was happy she was born.

Non-Negotiable

“Lana, you are too much!” Aparna was pacing now, holding her temples as she shook her head at Rutuparna. She had given her sister the nickname when they were children, after the BBC broadcaster Rutuparna admired on the radio for so many years. It was almost prophetic, as Rutuparna, only 18 years old, became a news anchor at Doordarshan television network, propelling her into the limelight.

“He’s a good candidate for you. A professor, a smart man,” Rutuparna’s brother-in-law echoed his wife’s growing impatience. “My colleague has a good family, a nice home for you. He will be a good husband.”

“But he’s just like the others!” Rutuparna finally managed a few words in her own defense. “Engineer, doctor, professor. All the same. What does it matter to me if he has a nice home? He’ll only care that I stay there and cook for him. He will never support my work.” She had abandoned her dreams of singing and acting, and then a news anchor, for social work. She was committed to the slum development program she was overseeing for Orissa’s Urban Development Department.

“You heard him, he doesn’t care anything about women’s freedom,” Rutuparna continued. “You want me to marry a man like that? I won’t have it!” Her words trailed behind her down the corridor, broken only by her mother’s slow exhale audible from the sitting room. Her mother’s and father’s tired, aging eyes met in futility from opposite ends of the room. Hiding close-lipped smiles, they sat silently, knowing there was no use in arguing with their daughter. *She is right to demand these things of her husband*, her mother thought to herself

“But these conditions of yours, they’re impossible!” Aparna shouted after her, their four feet padding toward the room where Rutuparna stayed in her sister’s home. “You’ll never find a man saying all these things about your two conditions for marriage. What man with a good home and family will accept you without dowry as you insist? And you scare them, demanding they support women’s freedom!”

“But I’ve told you from the beginning! If I will go to somebody’s house, I’ll give all of my time to them, I’ll give free service to them, I’ll give my whole life to them. And he cannot just give me these two things? If he cannot, then he is not for me. It is non-negotiable.” The door closed abruptly, Mohanty sisters on either side.

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“Give some juice to Lana!” Rutuparna heard Aparna’s distant voice on the other side of the wooden door. “She has not taken anything today.”

“Oh please, Namita, I am so hungry.” Outside the storage room where Rutuparna sat with her friend, chatty laughter grew near and then faint again as familiar voices weaved their way through the house. She only heard the voices but she could imagine the brightly colored saris well ornamented for the occasion.

“Please Namita, please, just a small bit. I can’t survive on only this juice they’re giving me. I’ll just pass out!” Rutuparna adjusted the ball of white flowers pinned below her right ear, leveling it just slightly higher than the ball on the left.

“You’re begging now, I see,” Namita teased her like she had in school so many years ago. “And what will the fine bridegroom, Mr. Guru Prasad, think of his bride breaking fast on their marriage day?” Giggling, she slipped out the door, agreeing to the clandestine mission, swearing eternal secrecy.

“But hurry!” Rutuparna called after her. “We haven’t got time, they will begin the *puja* blessing in a moment!” She slid the stack of red bangles over her left hand and up her wrist, the weight of permanence new but not uncomfortable. Her reflection tried on a smile, admiring her figure in the marigold sari. She was ready, yet still scared.

Tomorrow I will go with him, she thought. *Away from my family, far from Kendrapara. How will I take food? Where will I have a bath?* Rutuparna was heading into the unknown, but still, she would go.

“Hurry, eat it quick.” Namita handed her the bit of rice with boiled vegetables she had snuck from the feast table, closing the door behind her. “Your new relatives are coming to see you. All the children, they want to see you as you are, so beautiful, just before the ceremony.” She hoped Rutuparna hadn’t noticed her eyes widen as she glanced down at the mass of red now adorning her friend’s left forearm.

As they moved into the sitting room, Namita admired Rutuparna’s poise on her marriage day, smiling at the air of elegance, the femininity she had perfected since their childhood days dancing together at school. “They are starting the fireworks!” Namita changed the subject. “And the band! Your bridegroom’s *barat* is here. They are receiving all the flowers and taking *tika* at their third eye. It is all happening!”

The children burst into the room, hugging Rutuparna and pulling at her sari dress. Unknown women holding flowers, relatives of her bridegroom, left gifts with her, offering spoken blessings and well wishes for the marriage. They would be her family in just a few hours’ time.

As soon as they left, Rutuparna heard the familiar mantra beckoning her to the ceremonial *bedi*. It was time. The marriage rituals were beginning. She fastened the red *chuni* to her hair, veiling her head and face, and walked into the ceremony space. A banner hung overhead: “Lana weds Butu.” *This is it*, she thought. *Now it is really happening*. Twice she would go in and then retreat again, back to the sitting room. Guru Prasad would do the same. Separate and hidden from view, yet never more aware of one another’s presence.

As their eyes met for the first time in *sameekshanam*, she remembered him differently. He seemed somehow older now in his off-white *chudidhar panjabi*, his thick mustache slightly upturned as he watched her. It had been a month since they had exchanged rings, nearly two since they had met in her eldest sister’s home.

“Don’t worry, Lana,” Aparna had assured her before their first meeting. “He is in favor of women’s rights. He’s a social worker in the development field.” But she had to know for herself. She had to be sure. After the ring ceremony they’d spoken frequently, Rutuparna judging his responses to her carefully crafted questions. Would he be faithful? Would he support her in her work as he had said? After all, it was a matter of a whole life together.

Mangalam bhagwan vishnu mangalam garudadhwajah mangalam pundareekaksham. The *purohit* chanted the marriage ritual mantra as the bride and bridegroom sat before him on the small stage.

Rutuparna's father, proud yet puzzled, looked at his soon-to-be son-in-law. He couldn't stop wondering if the rumor was true. *Does Guru Prasad really wear a medallion of Jesus Christ around his neck beneath his marriage clothes? Is his family not Hindu as they said? Will he raise my grandchildren as Christians? What will become of my daughter? Our family culture and heritage?* He stayed silent, observant as he approached the stage. It was not up to him now, he knew. This was Lana's future — carefully arranged, yet uncertain.

Jatha ravanasya mandodari. The mantra and ritual neared their finale.

The last tendrils of Rutuparna's lingering resistance faded to acceptance as she felt her father place her left hand in her bridegroom's right. She searched the gathered crowd for Aparna and found her sister's eyes wet with tears, watching with reverence as her little Lana accepted the marriage path with such grace and undeniable purpose.

"Thank you for never giving up," Rutuparna whispered toward the palm tree where her sister was standing, her words inaudible amid the festive din. "Thank you for finding me someone accepting of my conditions, someone who will support me in our marriage. Thank you, my sister."

With the bride and groom's hands now tied together in yellow string, the ceremony was complete. They circled the bedi joyously, with just a hint of caution, greeted by hugs and gifts from their guests and families. Feast and celebration welcomed the new couple into their unfamiliar union, bound in forever.

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When he returned home that evening, Rutuparna had been waiting for him with arms crossed, a thousand suspicions dancing in her mind.

"Where have you been all this time?" Rutuparna questioned her husband as he opened the door. "You have not been working late, I know it. I have called your office and there was no response. Who have you been with? Don't tell me that woman from your staff. Was she with you? Why didn't you take me along? You know I'll be after you."

"Rutuparna, why do you still suspect me like this?" He walked past her slowly, placing his briefcase on the sitting room table. "We have been married nearly six months now. You know I have meetings after work some days with my colleagues. You are such a warmhearted person with everyone. I thought you are supposed to be such a broad-minded woman. But you are not! Why are you like this with me only?"

"I am warmhearted," she replied, nearing her husband. "I am broad with everything and everybody! But not for you. I am mean for you! You tell me I am mean, so then accept it, OK?"

Rutuparna knew she was possessive — and that her meanness was not actually meanness at all. It was love. And she had found what was most important to her: someone who wouldn't restrict her feelings or her work. They had agreed that they could comment on each other's work but they would never restrict it. Because some things are non-negotiable.

Mother's Home

1994

Rutuparna laid the tiny dresses across the bed: white crochet, pink and purple paisley, red flowers on cream fabric. *Just like the dresses Aparna made for me when I was born*, she thought. Fingers interlaced over her full-grown belly, Rutuparna looked down, as if waiting for a response from little lips she'd never seen, the sweet voice she couldn't wait to hear.

She was tired from long hours at the office, yet ready for her labor, her new responsibility. Her daughter would come any day now.

"I don't know why you are collecting all of these things," her husband's jovial voice startled her from her daydream. "All of these dresses and trinkets for a baby girl. You know we will have a boy." They had been at this game for months now.

"Let us see," she said, smiling with certainty. "Let us just wait and see."

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Rutuparna's mother was with her in the birthing room, just as she had been many times over the past nine months, taking care of her with the same homeopathic medicines she remembered from when she was a girl.

"Don't eat meat," her mother advised when she was ill in the mornings. "And take care with your words, your thoughts. Your child feels it inside your womb."

Late afternoon was setting outside the window as the nurse brought in their newborn bundle, his eyes still closed to the world.

"This is not our baby," her mother said. "We have given a red cloth to our child."

Rutuparna looked over at one of the other women in the room with her. *He must be her child*, she thought, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand, still damp from 12 hours of unrelenting labor.

Soon, the nurse brought another bundle, this time wrapped in red cloth. Guru Prasad's mustache curled upward in delight; he had been right, after all. Rutuparna lay there, looking down at her child on her chest, calm and clean in her arms. The room around her — her parents, her in-laws, her husband — celebrated the birth of their son.

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"Mama, why are you not here with me always?" Small eyes looked up at her and a little hand squeezed her fingers, begging her attention.

Rutuparna had been expecting this moment for most of Gyandeep's life. She had been away from him many times in the years since he was born, the first when he was just six months. She thought of all the time she had already lost with him, all the days she had sacrificed to the office, or traveling to faraway villages, or attending trainings for her government job serving slum communities. *Mama, don't go*. His tiny song would stay with her as she left the house each day.

"You are not giving me your time, Mama," young Gyandeep tugged at her sari, her heartstrings. "You are always gone. And I am really searching for you, always."

His words cut through her ribcage. *I must teach him*, she thought, leading her son into the sitting room, turning on the VCR as he sat in front of the TV.

“See Gyandeep, these children have nobody,” she said as they watched the images on the screen, the small brown bodies sick and hungry, abandoned by the world. “You have your father. You have your grandmother to care for you while I’m gone. Your uncles, your aunties — you have everybody.” Gyandeep listened intently.

“But these children,” she continued, “they depend only on me. They don’t have everybody like you. But I will ask you. You are my son and I love you, you know that. If you want me to leave them and stay with you always, I will. But if you can adjust for some time, if you can allow me to be with them also, then I’ll go.”

Rutuparna knew his answer would define their relationship, and her future, from that moment on. As his admiration for his mother grew with the years despite her busy schedule, he never once regretted his decision. After all, none of his friends learned to cook as he had, a skill of necessity he only picked up in his mother’s absence. In a way, he was grateful.

“No, Mama. You will go,” he said that day, his little voice firm beyond its years. “I have food, I have everything. They have nothing. I think they should get your love, too.”

For the first time, Rutuparna felt herself in her own mother’s shoes: the plight of the dedicated social worker whose love for her children could never overshadow her commitment to serving humanity. It was something many mothers could never fathom. But it was her duty, just as it had been her mother’s duty, their heavy hearts made light in the hope that their children would someday understand.

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2001

“Every day, people are dying,” the mayor of Bhubaneswar had answered Rutuparna when she sought his approval for emergency funds. She was trying to help Vima save his daughter, who had burned herself badly while cooking. “So you keep this file,” he said, handing her the unprocessed paperwork, “and I’ll handle the rest.”

That sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach — it was the sensation of powerlessness in a head-on collision with her core values. *What will I tell Vima?* she thought. He could not afford the treatment his daughter needed. Rutuparna wanted to help, but how could she when she was caught in a system that didn’t allow her to support those most in need?

Incensed, Rutuparna threw the papers in the mayor’s face, raising her voice in hostility. “If I’m getting a salary for this work, and if you are getting a salary for this work, and in their time of need we can’t help people, for what are we receiving our salary?” The endless corruption around her weighed heavy on her conscience, now nearly 10 years since she began working for the Urban Development Department of the State of Orissa. She’d had enough. She stormed out of the mayor’s office.

Through her colleagues, Rutuparna collected information to arrange a public interest litigation case in the high court against the corruption. When the court ordered the government to recover all the money that had been stolen, her higher-ups were out for revenge — threats to force her resignation, transfers to different offices, anything in their power to remove her from their otherwise comfortable

arrangement. But Rutuparna wouldn't be deterred. And despite the court ruling, neither would their corruption. Justice was no contest to power. The employees would begin their strike immediately.

"We are here to help these people," Rutuparna said to her colleagues, gathered to coordinate the mass protest and statewide government workers' strike — 25,000 employees demanding redress. "But how can we help these people if all the money is lost to corrupt officials? They are stealing taxpayer money and lining their pockets instead. We must take a stand. Otherwise, why are we here if we cannot help these people?"

Her words fell on sympathetic ears, her peers equally disheartened. As the leader of the employee's union of the Municipal Corporation of Bhubaneswar and All Orissa Municipal Association, they looked to Rutuparna for guidance.

After 29 days on strike and nearly a decade of struggling against the system and all its corruption, Rutuparna walked. She didn't know where she was headed, but she could no longer work for a government that refused to work for the people. Her parents had taught her better than that. It was in her blood: She could not remain complacent.

"But this is a good job, Lana," her sister said. "You can do a lot to help people in this job." When she'd taken the job 10 years ago to help pay for graduate school, she believed the same.

I have helped some people, Rutuparna thought, but I cannot help enough here. The time has come for me to go. I know I can do much, much more.

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2004

Nearly three years had passed since she asked her husband if she could work with his development organization, Sanjeevani.

"Of course, Lana," he had said. "There is no problem if you want to volunteer with us."

She traveled to villages and towns near and far, helping communities destroyed by natural disasters, like the super cyclone that hit Orissa or the devastating yearly floods. Everywhere she went, she saw women and children suffering most, more vulnerable to circumstance. Unwed mothers ostracized by their families. Victims of rape with no access to justice. Adolescent girls lacking support systems, many falling prey to human trafficking, disappearing without a trace.

These are the people who need help the most, Rutuparna thought to herself. They have no mother to care for them. They have no one at all. These were the women Rutuparna wanted to support. She returned home to Bhubaneswar with newfound inspiration. But she knew she couldn't do it alone.

"I want to create Maa Ghara — Mother's Home." It was the first time she'd said it aloud to anyone. Aprajita Sarangi, her soon-to-be ally and the director of the Women and Child Welfare Department, sat across from her, listening.

"We will give shelter to these women," Rutuparna explained. "We will support their mental and physical health, help them become stable again. But not only that: We will seek justice for them, helping them become less vulnerable. We will help them find acceptance among their families and communities."

"Do you have funding to start it?" Aprajita asked, eager at the potential.

“No,” Rutuparna replied, dropping her gaze, enthusiasm draining slowly from her face.

“Don’t worry, Rutuparna,” Aprajita said. Rutuparna looked up again, hope recoloring her complexion. “You start it, Rutuparna. Start the Mother’s Home. Let us see how we can raise the money.”

Maa Ghara would be a real Mother’s Home. *I will carry my mother’s dream with me*, Rutuparna thought. *Her loving spirit will be there, and the women will feel her sweet, caring nature.* She would make sure they were nurtured at Maa Ghara just as her mother had nurtured her. And the logo, she decided, would be the face of her mother.

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Rutuparna fought tears as she entered their sitting room, watching her mother from the doorway in the slow instant before she knew she was there. The light poured in through the window, landing delicately on her mother’s shiny hair, spilling over her simple sari, illuminating soft brown skin, aged with grace. *She is so beautiful*, Rutuparna thought. *So young, like a little girl.*

“I am so happy you are here with us, Mama,” she said, entering the room, placing full coffee cups on the table. “Thank you for coming to be with us at our home. I am so happy to see you.” Rutuparna was careful to make it sound like a special visit. Her mother would never accept their charity, not in her older age, not even from her family. And not even now as her tired bones suffered the pain of osteoporosis.

Flashes of memory played in Rutuparna’s mind as she watched her mother drink her coffee.

“Good morning, Lana,” her mother would say sweetly, gently welcoming the day with chapatti, flat rice and milk curd waiting on the breakfast table. Rutuparna cherished those memories, the time they spent together, just the two of them, in Bodi when she was young, her mother helping communities in need. Those early memories of her mother — the strong social worker so well respected, so giving of herself to her daughters and strangers who needed her help — still inspired her today.

Your dream, Mama, Rutuparna said to herself. *All that you have done in your time. Whatever you have left out, I will carry it forward. I will carry it always.* These words, unspoken, shone between them as their eyes met in shared understanding, the kind felt only between mothers and their daughters.

I will care for you, Mama, as you have cared for me, she thought, returning to her mother’s gaze. *So strong. Always so loving. A real mother. As you have been for me, I will be for you.*

Her mother closed her eyes, the sunlight warm on her face. And in that particular moment, Rutuparna saw her as she never had before.

Mama, you carry in you the light of Shakti.

Shakti was the symbol of power, the divine feminine. Without the female Shakti, Rutuparna believed, the male Shiva was powerless, a dead body. She prayed to Shakti, the form of a mother, the form of courage. And here she was, in this moment, in front of her.

My mother, you are a goddess.

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It was a simple beginning — groceries and supplies donated from people who believed in her dream, volunteers who shared her vision. Maa Ghara's first resident was an unwed mother. She called Rutuparna "Mama," just like all the women and girls who would enter Maa Ghara's doors in the years to come. Eventually, Maa Ghara would become a movement, with funding from the U.S. embassy, helplines set up in five districts throughout the state, self-help groups and community vigilance teams — and 5,000 women rescued and supported, their smiles newly alight with dignity.

Rutuparna now understood why God had assigned her the fate of giving birth to a boy.

I am the mother of one son, she thought. And thousands of daughters.

Blessing

“I’m pregnant.”

It was their last conversation before he disappeared from her life forever. Abhi Das, a milkman like her father, told Amita he would ask his parents if he could marry her. He knew marriage would save Amita from a life of social damnation as an unwed mother. The alternative unfathomable, her survival hinged on his parents’ decision. They sent him away, never to return.

“I’m pregnant.”

The second time she said it out loud, her mother and father fell silent for a moment. Amita braced herself for their scalding anger, her family’s honor irreparably compromised. Instead, they went to her boyfriend’s family.

“These things have happened,” Amita’s father erred on the side of rationality. “Your son is responsible. Let us together agree, and let’s get them to marry.” It was the logical solution, not least for parents whose unmarried daughter’s pregnancy promised a lifetime of shame for the whole family.

But Abhi Das’ father had also been thinking rationally. “We will not agree to this. We don’t know whose child she is carrying, but it is not my son’s.”

Amita’s father appealed to the townspeople of Bahadpur, organizing a local meeting to present his case for the young couple’s marriage, hopeful that social pressure could guarantee a livable future for his family. But he would soon discover that this was not about Amita. This, like so many things in Indian society, was about politics. Vengeance for his voting record prevailed over social logic as the town sided against him, favoring his adversary, a loyal supporter of the ruling party, Biju Janata Dal.

Amita’s family had nowhere to turn.

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Seeking support on her own, Amita approached the Orissa State Commission for Women. Practiced in their response to unmarried women distraught with circumstance, they referred her to Maa Ghara, the new shelter home for distressed women. Amita was Maa Ghara’s first resident. And there, she gave birth to her son.

“Don’t worry,” Rutuparna said to Amita, child at her breast. “You are a mother. You are a proud mother. Motherhood is a blessing.”

“No!” Amita averted her eyes, shifting her child’s weight in her arms so that her shoulder now stared Rutuparna in the eyes. “Don’t call me a mother! I am ashamed of this.” Stigma ran deep in her veins, in her 22-year-old soul, as she walked away.

Occasionally, Amita’s father would visit, regularly expressing his unhappiness. “My daughter has done these things,” he would say to Rutuparna and the Maa Ghara volunteers. “And now we can’t stay in our village because we face such shame, such dishonor.”

“What can we do to solve this issue?” Rutuparna would ask him. “What can we do for you?”

She knew just as well as he did that there was only one answer. “OK,” she said, “we’ll try.”

But with a child, who will marry this girl? Rutuparna wondered, knowing conservative society was their shared obstacle. Rutuparna and Amita's family searched until they found a willing candidate: a nice man named Khageswar, a farmer from Tarat village, 40 years old.

"OK," he said after hearing Amita's story. "I want to marry her."

The two families came together at Maa Ghara to see Amita. They organized the ceremony in collaboration with the State Commission for Women, finalizing the date over coffee and tea.

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The temple awaited their arrival, the first unwed mother's marriage in the state of Orissa. At 10 in the morning, bated breath and cameras ready, media from all corners of India waited too.

Amita, her son alongside her, was ready. Her parents, Rutuparna, delegates from the commission — everyone was eager to greet the groom. Television broadcasters and news reporters sat, feet tired from standing in anticipation. They put down their cameras and microphones. The minutes ticked by, accumulating into hours. They ate lunch.

"Where is your groom?" a spectator asked Rutuparna the obvious, as late grew later. The ceremony space was abuzz with creative hearsay: he must be having doubts.

"Why is he not coming?" another guest demanded.

"He'll be here," Rutuparna soothed their frenzied imaginations. Her demeanor cool and collected, she delivered an award-winning performance. But on the inside, Rutuparna panicked. *Everything is arranged, she thought. The media are all here. What will happen to this marriage? To Amita?* People fidgeted and paced. Some ate a little more. No one left.

Rutuparna answered her phone at a half-ring's notice. "Madam, our vehicle has broken down on the way to the temple." The unidentified caller spoke hurriedly. "We are on our way."

Rutuparna let out a sigh and slipped her phone back into her bag. "We will start by 2 p.m.," she announced to the press, still uncertain the groom would show. "So go and take your rest."

This is national news, they said. The biggest story of the day. They would wait for him, they said.

When Khageswar finally arrived, the temple's anxious energy erupted in jubilation. The groom entered the temple to a hundred flashing bulbs, microphones picking up his every step, cameras capturing the beads of sweat at his forehead. Not even the prime minister received a welcome like this.

The ceremony was joyful, like any other: Hindu ritual and prayer, a celebration of color. But everyone knew that this marriage ceremony was nothing like any other.

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Rutuparna loved when the smiling couple would visit her at Maa Ghara a few years later, their two sons in tow, the light of happiness surrounding them.

Women who had seen the images of their marriage on TV or in the papers had called Rutuparna, thanking her for her work. "You are doing a noble job, Madam," one woman had said. "We

are unable to marry our daughter because of dowry and we face a lot of problems. But you arranged the marriage of a distressed woman, and you are rehabilitating these women. God will be with you.”

This is my blessing, Rutuparna thought. Even so, her work never ended. Rutuparna was not one to rest where justice remained to be seen.

Since they were never married, Abhi Das owed Amita nothing. If their child demanded his property in the future, he would first need a DNA test as evidence of paternal lineage. With Rutuparna’s support, Amita filed for financial compensation to support their son, his mental handicap now diagnosed. She knew it might take 20 years for the courts to reach their judgment, even longer for Abhi Das to pay his fair share. But thanks to Khageswar and their marriage, Amita wouldn’t have to wait that long for resolution — for social recognition, security and dignity.

Amita’s two sons looked like their fathers. And Amita, each time Rutuparna saw her, looked lighter, stability overshadowing the pain and tumult of the past.

For the First Time

“Madam Rutuparna, you will make history.”

The prison authority, to her relief, hadn’t rejected her unusual request. She knew she would make history. It wasn’t every day that a marriage ceremony was arranged in jail — not every day that the bridegroom was a prisoner charged with rape, or that the bride was eight months pregnant with his child. Not in India. Not anywhere.

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Rutuparna was just leaving her office when the phone rang. “Madam, I am in trouble,” the voice at the other end spoke in a hurried whisper. “I want to meet you.”

“You cannot come now, I’m leaving to attend an important meeting.” She was already running late. “You’ll have to come later.”

“No, no, please. I’ve tried your number several times with no response, and now it is already very late. I want to meet you now, otherwise I will commit suicide.”

Rutuparna set her things down. The meeting would have to wait. “How long will you take to reach Maa Ghara?”

Fifteen minutes later, the girl arrived shaking and sweating. A beautiful girl, stammering and nervous, about to faint. Rutuparna brought her a cup of water. The heavy summer air was even heavier for the girl, her belly swollen with life.

“I have lost every hope.” The girl, maybe 20 years old, finally spoke. Her voice was parched and she looked down at her palms resting open in her lap. “I have knocked on every door, but I have failed. Then somebody gave me your number. Please help me.”

Rutuparna listened as she told the story of her boyfriend, the father of her unborn child. “He is someone I loved. And he also loved me. That was before. But now ...” She stopped for a moment to look up at Rutuparna, hoping to find sympathy, not shame.

“We fell in love, and we had a very good time. When I became pregnant, I told him, and he said, ‘Don’t worry, I’ll marry you.’ And I was happy.” Now her speech quickened, and Rutuparna noticed she was sweating again.

“But now I know it was a false commitment. He says he doesn’t believe that the child is his. He won’t marry me. He won’t even answer my calls.”

The girl was a student in the paramedical college. She feared the shame of her family, the stigma of her village if she returned home. They would never receive her now. “I will be a bad woman in their eyes,” she said. “It will be very painful for me. I am alone now.”

First she had gone to her boyfriend’s boss, thinking he might help. “What can I do?” he had said. “I cannot do anything in your personal affairs.” Then she turned to the Women’s Commission, pleading for their support. “You had consensual sex and you are older than 18, so it is your responsibility,” they told her. “We cannot help you.”

Maa Ghara was her only hope. Rutuparna knew her situation well, the familiar plight of unwed motherhood, condemned to a life of shame and loneliness, deemed unfit for marriage to any self-

respecting man. She had heard the story too many times. But this time she sensed that a piece of the story was missing. Something didn't feel right. Maybe it was the sweating, or the stammering.

"How did you come into contact with this boy?"

"I am living at my paramedical college. And the principal gave my mobile number to that boy — he is a friend of the principal. I missed his first call, so I dialed the number and he answered. We started talking. We spoke frequently and I liked him, so we fixed a date to meet. We became good friends — then we were lovers. I have spent a very nice time with him."

It sounded like the girl was trying just as hard to convince herself as Rutuparna. Rutuparna waited to see what else she would say if given the space.

If the boy will not marry this girl, what will be the future of this child? Rutuparna asked herself. *What will be the future of this girl?* Already eight months pregnant, she couldn't go for an abortion. If she gave birth, Rutuparna feared the child would be abandoned. Society would never accept her as an unwed mother. *She and her child will both face the stigma of her community.*

"There is something else," the girl spoke at last, filling the silence. "The first time ... well, he was forceful. And he always says he will blackmail me if I refuse him. But I know we were in love, so I don't know what he is thinking or who has influenced him." Her gaze fell cold, as if trying to see through the cement floor.

Rutuparna knew what had to be done. And she knew it might be controversial. But here in the socially conservative state of Orissa, there was only one way to save this young girl's future and her child's life.

"We will write a First Information Report against this boy and file it at the police station," Rutuparna told the girl. "And your principal, he must be investigated also. He is a well-positioned man, and he has no business giving a young girl's phone number to his friend. How can we be sure he is not using girls like you, offering them to these men and trapping them in this way?"

The girl was quiet, this time allowing Rutuparna to fill the silence.

"But first, let us see if we can convince him to marry you," Rutuparna said, hoping to avoid legal action. "Call him now in front of me." The girl dialed his number. When he didn't answer, Rutuparna rang him from her mobile. Still, no answer.

"So it is certain, we must draft the F.I.R." She knew the law wouldn't support a girl over the age of 18 who engaged in sexual relations with consent. He would get bail easily, and justice would not be served. Rutuparna had hoped it would not come to this, but there was no other option. Not in India. Not here where society presumed a woman to be at fault and a man innocent until proven otherwise. Where women were easily trapped while men ran free.

Rutuparna needed to present a strong case. "Section 376. Rape." The girl looked at Rutuparna, uneasy, but she knew she could trust her. No one else would help her. She had nowhere else to turn.

"Come now," Rutuparna said gently, "we must go immediately to the Bhubaneswar police station."

When they arrived, the girl's tears returned, her sobs inconsolable. The police officials tried to comfort her, more than familiar with her predicament. Despite their sympathy, they had little hope for

justice. “How will this case be solved?” they asked Rutuparna. “That poor girl, her case is so difficult. Look at her: pregnant and crying.”

The senior police official approached them and Rutuparna handed him the document. “You keep this F.I.R. For now it is just between you, the police and me. Do not register it. Let us first try to counsel them and convince the boy to marry this girl. If he does not agree, we will register the F.I.R. and send him to jail.”

The operation set, everything went according to plan. To clear himself of any involvement in the rape allegations, the principal agreed to bring in the girl’s boyfriend. “But it is not rape,” he had said. “It is my friend. And they are in love.”

“If it is as you say, you will bring him here. And if he agrees with your story, we will let you leave.” The principal was just the initial spark in Rutuparna’s larger design — the boy would never come to the police station on his own.

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“I have very good news for you — meet me in one hour in front of the university.” With no reason to suspect the motive behind the phone call, or the plainclothes police officer accompanying his friend, the boy came. He soon found himself in the last place he wanted to be: in the police station, face-to-face with his pregnant ex-girlfriend, just as Rutuparna had planned.

The principal spoke first. They were his own words, yet it seemed as if a puppet master were directing his every move. “You had relations with this girl. Why are you pulling me into this case? You tell them that I have nothing to do with this. You tell them that you are responsible for this!”

The boy looked at the girl, tracing the thin lines of tears that ran down her cheeks and dripped onto her protruding belly.

“Yes,” he spoke at last. “I am responsible for this.” He turned toward the police officer. “Let him go. I’ll clarify what happened.” His role complete, the principal quickly exited, no direction needed.

Now it was Rutuparna’s turn. The interrogation began: “You know this girl? Have you had relations with her?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Have you had physical relations with the girl?”

“Yes, I have.” He did not make eye contact with Rutuparna but looked into the ruby-red bindi in the middle of her forehead — her third eye — then dropped his gaze, chastised but still confident.

“Now she is pregnant with your child,” Rutuparna continued. “Why do you refuse to marry her? You know she will suffer a lot for this.”

“Maybe she will suffer,” he responded casually. “But I am not responsible for this child. I don’t know whose child it is.”

The room boiled with Rutuparna’s temper, ruby-red now pressed between upturned eyebrows. Louder now, she scolded him. “It is very easy for a man to say something like this. The woman who is carrying the child, only she knows whose it is, and she knows it is yours! You can’t say whose child it is!”

“OK,” the boy said, standing to leave, “then we will go for a DNA test.” He hadn’t planned for her to get pregnant. He wasn’t ready to be married, to be a father. His entire life would be changed forever. He didn’t want that, not yet.

“Sit back down! I will not allow that child to face the consequences for someone like you. You have to accept your responsibility.”

“No,” the boy shot back, still standing. “I have already consulted with my lawyer. So whatever you want to do, you can do. But I will not marry her.”

The boy’s confidence in his expensive lawyer wouldn’t last long. Rutuparna knew this as she watched him leave the police station.

“He has not agreed to marry the girl,” Rutuparna told the senior police official. “File the F.I.R.”

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After two nights in jail, the boy telephoned his lawyer. “Why am I not getting bail?” he asked. “You told me in one or two days I’d get bail. Now I’ll be in trouble in my job.”

The lawyer had no good news. “I didn’t know what kind of F.I.R. they filed. It’s section 376. Now it’s very difficult to get bail. I didn’t know Rutuparna Mohanty was behind that girl.” He knew that if he arranged bail for his client, Rutuparna would go to the media. “It’s very difficult. I cannot help you now.”

Desperate now, the boy’s father came to meet him. “Please father,” the boy begged, “go to her at Maa Ghara and ask if she will marry me. But with one requirement — she must present the compromise note in court. Tell her she must withdraw the case, and then I’ll marry her.”

And so his father went to see Rutuparna. “Madam, I am very sorry for this. I know my son is in love with this girl. He has told me. And he has also told me that he will marry her. I don’t know what has happened between them, but now he’s in jail and his job is at risk. Please help us.”

“What help can I give you?” Rutuparna replied, unyielding. “I’m sorry, but I am thinking of this child and that girl. If he will not marry her, where will she go? If I do not rescue her, then she will fall straight into the traffickers’ hands.” Traffickers, she knew, were more than ready to snatch up vulnerable girls desperate for financial support.

“Please, Madam,” the boy’s father insisted. “We will arrange the marriage. But you must make sure she presents the compromise note to withdraw the charges.”

“No,” Rutuparna said. This was not her first time handling a case like this. She knew the boy and his father couldn’t be trusted. “After marriage she will withdraw the case. Marriage, social recognition — that is what this girl deserves. After that, I have no problem helping you with the compromise note.”

The man nodded. He had no choice.

“We will arrange their marriage inside the jail.”

He turned his head slightly to the right, looking at Rutuparna from the left corners of his eyes. “But is it possible? He is my only son. He must have a proper marriage ceremony.”

“Yes, I will make it possible. He might be your only son, but this child also needs security. Think about this child also, not only your own.”

The boy’s father had nothing left to say.

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“Madam Rutuparna, you will make history.”

“Perhaps,” she replied dutifully. “But it is also reform. This boy is now accepting his responsibility. He is realizing he has done something wrong and he wants to rectify it. Let us give him a chance.”

“How many people will come?” the inspector general asked, concerned about security inside the jail.

“Security is an issue, of course, but I know you can handle that,” Rutuparna replied, smoothing over his doubts with flattery. “And I will handle the rest. We will have some people from the media and some of my Board members, the priest and some well-wishers.”

He relented. “You will make a list of the people who will go inside, and then we’ll arrange it.”

With the date set, Rutuparna informed the media — a crucial piece of their operation. They would serve as an official record of the marriage in lieu of legal registration. There was no time for that.

Tomorrow the girl would go to the court with the compromise note. And soon after the ceremony, her husband would be granted bail. He would come to Maa Ghara to receive gifts as her husband. And she would go with him to Balangir as his wife. Perhaps in other places, in other societies, there might have been a different solution. But here, Rutuparna knew, this was the best she could do for the girl.

It was a traditional Hindu marriage ceremony, in some ways like any other in Orissa: the girl’s crimson sari pulled tight over eight months of incipient life, the boy in his cream-colored chudidhar panjabi. Puja: prayer, mantra, ritual. And after, a feast cooked by the prisoners for their unprecedented guests. The celebration brightened the otherwise dank air of the jail.

Smiling into the news cameras, the boy and girl stood together as husband and wife, for the first time in their lives. In a jail, for the first time in India.

Solace

“Can I trust you?” The woman looked up, the skin below her eyes dark.

A few days after the marriage ceremony inside the jail, the superintendent asked Rutuparna to return. He told her about Sasmita, who had been released on bail but refused to leave. She had been there two months.

“Yes,” Rutuparna replied, taking Sasmita’s hand. “I’m a social worker. I’m a protector of women. You can trust me.”

Sasmita was afraid of going home to Nilagiri. She feared her family would find out what happened to her and never accept her. “If I tell you my story, do you have somewhere you can keep me with you?”

“Yes,” Rutuparna said. “I have a place for you, don’t worry about that. Tell me whatever you want to tell, like you are speaking to your mother.”

At that Sasmita began to cry, her words flowing in release. She had lost her mother to tuberculosis when she was young, and her father had been murdered in the paddy fields two years ago. “I have nobody now,” she said.

In her father’s absence, his elder brother had allowed Sasmita to stay with his family, mostly unwelcoming in their circumstantial duty to the teenage girl. “Every day, everybody was torturing me there,” Sasmita confided in Rutuparna. “They didn’t want me. There was no love, no affection. It was the worst place I could be. I knew I had to leave.”

So when a distant friend promised he’d help her find work in the capital city, Bhubaneswar, she left without saying goodbye.

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Sasmita’s job as a maid in a doctor’s home was new to her, and while not of her choosing, she did feel safe. One day at work, a woman came to see her.

“Why are you working here?” she asked Sasmita. “You can earn more money with me. Come, take my beautician’s course and you will work in my beauty parlor.”

Embracing opportunity, she left the doctor and his family to accept the woman’s offer. On her first day at the beauty parlor, Sasmita was all nerves, anxious but excited for her training. On the second day, her bones shook with the discomfort of her predicament — it only took a day to realize she was caught in one.

“You will earn more money,” the woman told her, encouraging Sasmita to be sure her male customers left fully satisfied. “You will have a lot of money. And all the luxury you ever dreamed of.”

When Sasmita was steadfast in her morality, the parlor owner — connected to the established nexus of well-paid police, sex traffickers and certain lawyers — devised a plan to safeguard her business.

“I have not stolen anything!” Sasmita insisted when the parlor owner made her accusation. But here, words were powerless. Without inquiry into the allegations, the police played their part perfectly, sending Sasmita straight to jail. Their conspiracy was a convenient trap. The lawyers played their part

next, signing her out on bail. Then Sasmita would have nowhere else to go. She couldn't go to her family now. Her only choice would be to return to the beauty parlor. She would be theirs indefinitely.

But Sasmita didn't play her part. She refused to leave.

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Sasmita's tears now dampened Rutuparna's sari. She rested her head in Rutuparna's lap as she stroked her soft hair.

"That is why I've stayed here in jail," she said between sobs. "What do I do now? How can I go back to my family, to my sisters? What face have I shown them? When they ask me why I was in jail, what will I say to them?" Crying still, she lifted her head to look at Rutuparna.

"You have no fault here, Sasmita," Rutuparna comforted her. "Don't worry. You will never face this trouble again."

Her far-reaching networks a saving grace, Rutuparna arranged for Sasmita's uncle and cousins to come to Bhubaneswar to meet with judges and the police commissioner to coordinate her bail application. Defying Sasmita's expectations, her relatives supported her release from jail. But while her family seemed to accept her, Sasmita still feared the stigma she would face in Nilagiri.

"I can't go back there," she told Rutuparna as her bail was arranged. So she stayed at Maa Ghara, joining other women whose equally uncertain futures felt like home to her. Sasmita participated in trauma counseling, vocational training and career guidance, building new skills and eventually joining Maa Ghara as a salaried employee with a transformed future.

Sasmita had been at Maa Ghara one year when she fell in love.

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"What is your intention?" Rutuparna interrogated the young man, a security guard, skeptical of his motivation. "Why are you coming to see this girl?"

"I am in love with Sasmita," he replied. "I want to marry her straight away." Rutuparna had a feeling he wouldn't be so eager if he knew Sasmita's story. So she told him.

"It's OK," he said when Rutuparna had finished. "I love her. I shouldn't see these bad things that have happened to her. These things are behind her."

His parents, however, felt differently. They were Brahmin, intent to uphold their caste, their inherited dignity as priests in the temple now threatened. "If our son marries this girl," they said to Rutuparna when they came to Maa Ghara, "he cannot enter into the temple. We do not agree with this marriage. And we will have no dowry from her. He cannot marry this girl."

Defying the dictates of caste and stigma, and without the blessing of the groom's parents, Rutuparna arranged the ceremony, sending invitations to supporters and media allies, who would share the story of their marriage, Sasmita's past and her now hopeful future. Amid the reporters and news cameras, Sasmita's new friends were there to celebrate too, survivors of their own histories who had shared solace over the years at Maa Ghara.

Famous social worker Dr. Bagavan Prakash played the groom's father in the ceremony, while Rutuparna acted as Sasmita's mother. The young couple's hands tied in traditional Hindu ritual,

celebration and feast followed their unlikely union. The press called him brave for accepting such a woman as his wife, saluting his honor and broadcasting his courage throughout Orissa — throughout India. Sasmita's bravery, like so many women's, was unreported.

“Your son has done a very good thing.” Neighbors of the young man's parents had seen the marriage ceremony on TV. “Really, we are proud of him. Aren't you proud of your son?”

Some days later, with change in their hearts, the groom's parents visited Maa Ghara. They invited their son and his new wife to return with them, to live with them in their home.

“Thank you, Mama,” Sasmita said to Rutuparna when they hugged goodbye, her gratitude warming their embrace.

Fortunately, Unfortunately

Content, she had watched the trees pass quickly, the forest a blur of green as she looked out the window from the overcrowded bus, bags of groceries piled on her lap. *Puri-Konark Marine Drive will soon have me home*, she thought to herself. Now that she had seen the tourist area and gathered supplies for her shop, she would soon be with her daughters. *They will love the stories from my adventure to the coast, so far away from Puri.*

It was November 3, 2007. She was 27 years old. She missed her family.

Fortunately, she was nearly halfway home. Unfortunately, she wouldn't make it that day.

Someone call the police! she remembered hearing, writhing and fighting as they dragged her from the 60-passenger bus and carried her deeper into the woods. Her slight frame, torn and bruised, had been no match for their determination. The five of them, swollen in aggression, each had their way with her. One by one. Fast and forceful. And then they disappeared.

She lay there, mostly still, nearly unconscious. Looking up at the space of sky between the leaves, she watched the blur of green once more, this time as it bounced rhythmically through her slow tears. Her bare flesh was bleeding the silent red of voiceless resistance.

Fortunately, the police would arrive in time to arrest four of them, the fifth a fugitive retreating further into the forest. Unfortunately, the damage to her soul, to her being, would not be as easily stanchied.

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Rutuparna listened as the woman told her story, which didn't end after that day. She filed the police report once she was rescued, but someone on the bus must have telephoned the station because the media was already reporting on it.

“When I arrived home, my family already knew. My husband was out of town working. Now he refuses to return home. He won't support me. How will I take care of myself and my two daughters? My small grocery business won't do. It's my only means of livelihood. And my village — they are ashamed of me. They tell me I am a bad woman. They do not want me there. They'd rather I go away.”

“I will help you,” Rutuparna reached for her hand, knowing she was the only one who would. “You are a victim, a survivor of gang rape, and your family, your village, they are again victimizing you by not supporting you.”

And it wasn't just her family or the village. Rutuparna knew the politicians were also after this woman, telling her to drop the charges, promising bribes in exchange. She had received the anonymous call a few nights ago: “Madam please, you might have seen the television, the case of the Puri-Konark Marine Drive gang rape. Will you please help this lady? They are pressuring her to withdraw her case. But this is a very sensitive case. The culprits must get their punishment.”

Listening to the woman at the other end of the line, Rutuparna knew she had to intervene. Since she knew the police and government were keeping a close watch, she had arranged for a sister organization to bring the abused woman and her two young daughters to Maa Ghara. It was there that the real battle would begin.

“I know they are telling you to give up your case. They think they can easily influence you,” Rutuparna counseled the woman, still holding her hand. “But now you are with me, and we will not

give up. Tomorrow we will visit the jail. You will identify the men who did this to you through the test identification process. Do not be scared, I will be near you.”

The next morning, the two women went together to the jail. But while she would be near, Rutuparna could only take her so far. “Please come with me, Mama,” the woman pleaded.

“I cannot go with you,” Rutuparna explained. They stood in the superintendent’s office, the woman with tiny tears at her eyelashes, Rutuparna holding her trembling fingers. “But you have already faced the scary part. Even if they try to make you afraid, don’t fear them. Think of how they tortured you. Don’t feel sorrow for them. Don’t feel guilty.”

The woman nodded. She followed the magistrate and police investigator through a door. Rutuparna waited, worried she would shy from identifying the perpetrator, as she had seen so many ashamed women do in the past.

Hands shaking, the woman stood before the line of men, the magistrate and police investigator on either side of her. *You can do it*, she heard Rutuparna’s voice firm in her head, coaching her. *Look into their faces. You will know who they are*. When she lifted her gaze, 200 pleading eyes were staring at her. She stared back.

“Him, over there. That one,” she said finally, quiet in her confidence. She hadn’t forgotten his face, the particular shape of his chin, nostrils and jawbone as they hovered over her that day. How his warm breath stank of liquor. “That is him. I know that is him.” She averted her eyes now, looking to the magistrate for guidance.

She identified the other three, recognizing their stature, their skin, remembering their impossible weight on her as she struggled beneath them. One was thin and muscular; another tall, robust; the third large, his belly protruding over his waist.

She returned to the office, her eyelids swollen and her eyes red with conviction.

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In the courtroom, the woman’s demeanor changed in an instant. Rutuparna watched the hope in her eyes dim as worry furrowed her brow.

“What is it?” Rutuparna asked. “This government advocate will fight the case for you. He will help you.”

“But Madam, I have seen this fellow before. He has come to me in the village to tell me to withdraw the case.”

“Are you sure it was this fellow?”

“Yes,” she insisted, “I know it is him.”

“Then he is corrupted already,” Rutuparna spoke quickly. “We must write a letter to the law secretary, mentioning this incident you faced and requesting an additional public prosecutor.”

A few days later, Rutuparna saw her work reflected in the headlines, as she often did. “Gang rape trial: New prosecutor named,” *The Times of India* reported.

It would be an in-camera trial, without public presence, Rutuparna explained. Only the judge, the lawyers, the victim and the accused. “The burden of proof is on you, the victim. Not on the accused. So you must prove you were raped. The opposition lawyer will ask you very filthy things. You must be prepared. You must be strong.”

On February 6, 2008, their battle continued in court and again in the headlines of *The Times of India*: “Gang rape trial begins in-camera.”

“Madam, I can’t do it!” On more than one occasion, the woman had left the courthouse crying, pleading with Rutuparna outside. “I don’t want to fight my case. I want to give up. I can’t listen to all these things again and again. It is too much!”

“You are right to be upset, you are right to cry. This is injustice you are facing, and I know it is difficult,” Rutuparna stroked her hair in loving encouragement. “But you must fight for this, my daughter. You must have courage. Otherwise, the five men responsible for this will be free. And they’ll do these things with other women, with other girls.”

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Some weeks into the trial, the woman’s mother came to Maa Ghara. “Come my daughter, let us go now. You do not need to fight this case. We will go home to our village. Come with me. Let us leave this Maa Ghara.”

Rutuparna knew the woman was eager to go home, that she had grown wearier with each passing day of court procedures. And she suspected the mother had been bribed by the culprits’ families to convince her daughter to drop the case, so she spoke to the mother in private. “You can take her back to the village, but just wait a few more days, OK? Just a few more days.” Rutuparna was biding time until the victim’s statement was recorded in court. Then she could go.

Later, Rutuparna would discover that the woman was offered 500,000 rupees to withdraw the case, no small sum for a poor family in need. Enough to solve her problems for quite some time. The rapists knew that. And, of course, so did the powerful politicians Rutuparna knew to be backing them. That was how things worked here.

But she also knew that true justice had no price. *We will win*, she told herself, *even if the big politicians are putting their money behind these men, pressuring this woman and her family.*

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“No, I cannot accept her again.” From the other end of the line, the woman’s husband still resisted Rutuparna’s attempts to persuade. “Because of this incident we are not able to manage our life again. The village will be after us, so I don’t want to accept her.”

“Don’t be like this.” Rutuparna’s words, as always, aimed to convince. “This is an accident your wife has faced,” she explained. “Like if you faced any accident, if you lost your leg your hand, would your wife still be with you?”

“Yes ...” he admitted slowly. “She would be with me.”

“You should realize that this too is an accident for her. You should accept her again. And your two kids — what will be their future?”

Fifteen days passed. They conversed regularly over the telephone, Rutuparna relentless in her arguments. After 20 days, he turned up at Maa Ghara, ready to accept his wife. Together they returned to their village to live again in their own home.

Their battle had taken almost two years, swift by Indian standards. The woman's statement had finally been recorded in court. The case was uncompromised, the trial complete, and the men responsible behind bars.

Fortunately: "Konark rapists jailed for 10 years" — *The Times of India*, October 9, 2009

Solace in her heart, Rutuparna wanted to read the headline to anyone who would listen. She felt deep gratitude for the few around her committed to justice in a sea of impunity and corruption, like the director general of police and the Puri superintendent of police. *Thank you for your fairness*, she thought to herself as she read the headline, a final page of sorts to the two-year fight. *To both of you for taking special interest to support the case, and for filing charges quickly to guarantee these men be punished, as they so deserve. Thank you.*

Unfortunately: "Three rapes a day, six convictions a year" — *The Times of India*, December 30, 2012

Three years later, Rutuparna read this headline aloud to no one. *Of course there will be more rapes*, she thought. *Why would they stop? We have a long way to go, but we've got to start somewhere.*

The Fight

“So what is it that you want, exactly?” Rutuparna questioned the soft voice on the phone.

“I want my complaint to be received and processed, just like any other. And after that, a fair investigation. Then whatever the investigation reveals, I will accept it.” At the very least, Gayatri Panda’s request seemed reasonable.

The creeping discomfort rippled fresh on Gayatri’s skin as she spoke. She saw his vulgar expressions of innuendo, felt his heavy grip on her hand as he pulled her toward him, heard his demands that she submit to her status.

“You should cooperate with him,” her colleagues had said. “It will be of great benefit to you in your career.” She shuddered at the thought — then and now. Twice she had filed her complaint with the responsible workplace authorities. Twice they failed to respond, warning her that she’d lose her job if she went any further. Muheswar Mohanty, speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Orissa, was too powerful. Not even the police would help her, she feared. Threatened, but not deterred, she sought Rutuparna’s help.

“Sexual harassment is a crime,” Rutuparna told her now. “I don’t care if it’s the chief minister, the prime minister or the president. The law is the same for everybody. I will fight for you.”

The determination in Rutuparna’s voice was exactly what Gayatri had hoped to hear.

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Upon deeper inquiry, Rutuparna learned that the Legislative Assembly of Orissa had neglected to establish the sexual harassment complaint committee now required by an Indian Supreme Court ruling. She phoned the few reporters she trusted most. *I will start with these three*, she thought. *It won’t be long until the others are after me*. She knew the media world well — both from her stint as a news anchor and the mutually beneficial relationship she’d developed with them over the years. She needed their megaphone, but they also needed her stories.

“I have an important case on my hands,” she told them. “Please come and take the victim’s statement and telecast it. The person we’re up against is very powerful. Will you do it?”

Of course they would. The more powerful the person, the more significant the story.

Gayatri presented her complaint letters to Rutuparna. She recorded her statement into the cameras, media now their greatest ally against injustice and corruption. The three agencies broke the story that very night, all the others rabid to grab a piece of the news now sweeping the nation. Rutuparna had them all eating out of her strategic spoon. She knew exactly how the whole show worked, just as she knew they’d be there waiting at the police station when she went with Gayatri to file the charges. National channels, state channels, newspapers — with the overwhelming power of the thronging press, the receiving officers had no choice. They accepted the F.I.R. on camera, a perfectly executed bit of media choreography, which obligated their follow-up.

Government opposition leaders always jumped at the opportunity to degrade and demoralize ruling party politicians, and this time their statements fueled public outrage over harassment in the workplace. Women leaders, activists and organizations raised their voices loud and high against the man under fire, his political positioning less and less safe from their growing reach, thousands upon thousands strong. Rutuparna was among them, leading the demonstrations.

Off the streets and back at home, she watched the contesting ruling party rallies on TV. Women in heavily adorned, obviously expensive saris held banners in support of the accused Legislative Assembly speaker, defending his honor now irreversibly defamed. Though fewer in number, their fire burning lower, Rutuparna could still feel their singe. She stood in front of the TV, watching the slow-motion replay of the effigy — her effigy — erupting in flames before diminishing to ash.

Let them burn my image, she thought, nearly smiling as she listened to the women cheer at her figurative demise. *I will not give up*.

And she didn't. The fight was fierce, making victory all the sweeter.

In the weeks that followed, the government of Orissa would recast the department responsible for investigating sexual harassment cases, establish workplace complaint committees throughout the state, and require quarterly reports be submitted to the government. And pressured by public reprimand, Muheswar Mohanty had no choice but to resign immediately.

The investigations into Gayatri's allegations continued, but Rutuparna, as usual, was up to the fight.

Red Bangles

“Over there, that’s her. The Madam with the bangles.”

Rutuparna overheard them talking about her as she sat with the women, many with sons and daughters bruised and beaten by police, with small thatched-roof homes now torched to rubble. Brightly colored fabric that hung over makeshift windows had gone up in flames, embers swirling in the smoky air. Their shanty shacks, once inhabited by entire families, were now unlivable by any standards.

Rutuparna had gathered the residents inside the school building, sheltered from the downpour that was steadily flooding the ashes of their former homes. She began surveying the evictees, trying to ascertain how many people had been affected, how many children hungry, how many rights violated. How long they had been there, where they had come from.

Some of them worked at the Medical College Hospital, others in private nursing homes, many as domestic workers and taxi cab drivers — all citizens invisibly helping the rest of the city live a decent life. The same system their labor upheld now threatened to leave them all homeless, grasping for survival.

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200 homes raided in Cuttack slum eviction. Rutuparna had watched the news coverage of the slum eviction for several days before ending up with the women in the school building. These raids, while intended to eradicate slum communities, Rutuparna knew always led to the creation of more slums in new areas. The problem merely moved further out of sight. Rather than returning to their villages, so far from the livelihood opportunities of the city, slum dwellers would stay.

These police are merciless, she’d thought, grimacing at the violence on her television screen from the safety of her living room. *Beating children and burning these humble homes to the ground. Dragging them out like they’re not even human beings.*

Political authorities and civil society members had become silent observers to the horrifying scene in Cuttack, and Rutuparna was appalled that social advocates had yet to offer their support to the innocent or demand the rights to food and shelter that all citizens were promised under Indian law.

“How are these fundamental rights so violated by the government, by the police, yet no one is taking any action against it?” she vented to her husband. But he knew from experience he shouldn’t attempt an answer to her impossibly rhetorical question.

Rutuparna knew from experience that if she didn’t go, no one would.

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For three days, they had nothing. No food, no shelter, no money. People were dying. Women were hungry — elderly women, pregnant women. They were scattered in the streets when Rutuparna arrived, their husbands still missing after being arrested for their resistance when the police raid began at 4 a.m. that Sunday.

Rutuparna started the demonstration, gathering the women and children together to sit with her in the school building, their protest silent. She had spoken to the higher officials of the District Administration and Police Authority, but her efforts had been fruitless. “We cannot help,” they’d told her. “It is not our duty to rehabilitate the slum dwellers. They are just too many in number.”

Where Rutuparna went, the media was soon to follow. And this time, the government came too. “Madam,” the government administrator spoke first to the stack of thin red bangles on Rutuparna’s left forearm before meeting her gaze, confident now he had found the right woman. “Madam, the district magistrate wants to talk to you.”

“OK,” Rutuparna replied, her tone frigid for this soulless man. “He can talk to me.”

The administrator had a feeling she wasn’t going to make it easy on him. “Please, Madam,” he said, fists clenched at his sides, his pressed slacks looking more uncomfortable by the moment. This wasn’t exactly his regular scene. “Come with me to his office to speak to him.”

“No, I’m sorry,” Rutuparna said. “I am here sitting with these women in demonstration. If he wants to talk to me, to do something for these people, then he should come here and talk to me.”

Slow hours passed, their bodies aching from sitting, clothes muddy from the moist earth beneath them. It was one hour until the close of business. She knew he wasn’t coming.

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Heavy rain fell as Rutuparna stormed into the Cuttack high court, two dozen women in tow, four dozen soggy feet crowding the courtroom. Their simple saris were stained with the dirt and sweat of three days hungry and homeless. The hearing stopped in its tracks. Necks swiveled in disbelief. Eyes widened with contempt and anticipation.

Rutuparna and the women took a seat, waiting as the proceedings hurried to a close. Robed justices, gavelled judges and suited lawyers snuck glances at each other as if to ask *What do we do?*

“I have 20 women with me.” Rutuparna approached Chief Justice Gopal Gouda as he leaned back in his cushioned chair, distancing himself. “The government has burnt their thatched houses. More than 100 children are out of school. For the last three days they haven’t taken food. Nearly 500 people are without shelter.”

Some of the women rose from their seats to stand behind Rutuparna.

“Perhaps there is some reason the government has evicted these slum residents and their families,” Rutuparna continued. “But let me remind you. There are fundamental rights in our constitution for the citizens of India. The right to food. The right to shelter. And the children have the right to education. These rights are being violated. And these women here with me — these pregnant and elderly women. They don’t have food or money or anything.”

The chief justice scanned the room with scrutiny.

“So I am asking you,” Rutuparna said, “can the law protect them?”

Gopal cleared his throat. “Are you a lawyer?” he asked, a matter-of-fact tone his defense against her palpable fury.

She shook her head. “No, I am not yet a licensed lawyer. I am an activist with a law degree.”

“Do you have your lawyer with you?” he pressed.

“No,” Rutuparna replied. *How could these poor people hire a lawyer?* she thought. *They don’t even have anything to eat.*

The chief justice appointed Amikesh Cury to advocate on their behalf. He accepted the application they had written in their native Odia, signed by all the women at the courtroom. It would form the basis of their public interest litigation case presented to the high court.

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Faster than most things are ever done in India, the court ordered the government collector and municipal commissioner (the parties responsible for the slum eviction) to provide food and provisional shelter for the 200 evicted families. All 120 children were to receive schoolbooks and uniforms, safeguarding their right to education.

And while the immediate relief was vital, the real success came later, following the September 15, 2010 court ruling on Rutuparna Mohanty vs. The State of Orissa. The evicted residents had won. The government was ordered to provide permanent housing and implement the policies and programs earmarked for slum communities. Amendments would be made to legislation for slum improvement and upgrades to living amenities for slum residents. There would be a judicial inquiry into police brutality during the eviction raid. And every eight weeks, wary of evasion and rampant corruption, the court would monitor the government's progress.⁷

Because of the Madam with the red bangles — making noise, being seen — and the determination of the evicted women from Cuttack, slum communities throughout Orissa found hope that their government would soon provide the safety nets they deserved as citizens of India. Wage laborers supporting the nation and economy. Human beings with the right to dignified lives.

Nearly Forgotten

“Dhali’s daughter plans stir to win paternal love” — *Times of India*, August 7, 2009

Arabinda Dhali had denied any relation to Sanjeeta Dhali for years. As a ruling party member of the Legislative Assembly of Orissa, he could get away with things like that. Only when Rutuparna took on Sanjeeta’s fight as her own would the famed politician’s past come back to haunt him.

More than two decades earlier, the same Arabinda Dhali, then a government servant, married Kamala, a young woman from a humble village in rural Orissa. She was pregnant with their child when he left her. Free from alimony and child support, skirting justice with influence, he claimed his wife had been unfaithful and disowned the daughter growing inside her womb. Eventually, they would each remarry, their divorce never legally recorded.

Embarking on a new life with a new woman in a new city, Arabinda’s political career blossomed in the limelight. He climbed the ladder until he reached the legislative rung of the ruling party, Biju Janata Dal. Without responsibility for any children of his past, the ground was fertile for his legacy to take root, uncontested by scandal or circumstance. Hands clean. Carefree.

His daughter tells a very different story.

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Sanjeeta grew up mostly alone, rejected by her parents, her existence an undesirable memory of a past they wanted to escape for good. Her grandfather gave her a roof over her head, but not much else. When Arabinda visited the village on his routine campaign tours, the townspeople pressured him to help his daughter. “You should support her,” they would say. “Relieve her suffering. Take her to Bhubaneswar with you and enroll her in a decent school.”

Because their votes promised victory come election time, he did as they wished. Sanjeeta left her native village to live with her father in the capital city, where her suffering only deepened — because now she was a threat to her new stepmother’s lifestyle and future stability.

One day, Sanjeeta told her father and stepmother about her new uncle’s habit of watching her from the skylight while she used the bathroom, his unwelcome attention crawling on her skin.

“You see?” her stepmother had said. “She’s trying to break our family. It’s a conspiracy. Her mother is behind all of this!”

Arabinda sided with his wife. Once again, Sanjeeta’s suffering deepened. Instead of attending school, she was forced into domestic labor in her father’s home. Paranoid that Sanjeeta would one day inherit her husband’s property, Sanjeeta’s stepmother arranged for her to be married — her candidate of choice her husband’s chauffeur.

Sanjeeta assumed that with marriage, she would finally escape the torture of her father’s home, that her suffering would at last be relieved. For a brief moment, she was hopeful, eager to believe in the panacea of marriage.

Of course, nobody tells a 14-year-old girl, unwanted in her father’s new life, much of anything. Nobody tells her that the chauffeur is also an ex-prisoner who murdered his own brother’s wife.

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“Look at this, Sanjeeta.” In a slur of speech and a stumbling stupor, he spat on the carpet as he spoke to his wife, the camera teetering in his palm. Sanjeeta looked away as he held her firmly, his rank breath sharp in her nostrils as the video played.

“You see, I have had sex with this girl,” he continued. “Watch, Sanjeeta!” Had she not grown numb to it by now, she might have felt something other than disgust. But after six years of his unique brand of emotional torture, she had nearly forgotten how to respond to her husband’s perverse infidelity and incessant harassment. “This girl will come stay with me here for a day, maybe two,” he said. “Please. Don’t complain, Sanjeeta.”

Still, she survived. It was what she did. *I have nobody*, Sanjeeta thought, alone in her particular nightmare. *My mother is not with me. My father is not with me. What should I do?* She knew she would face immense social stigma if she left her husband. She looked at her two young daughters, their future in her hands.

Finding her last bit of courage, Sanjeeta filed legal charges against her husband. It was only then that her father found reason to intervene in her marital affairs, fearful for his own reputation and political career. Upon his insistence, which nullified her police report, Sanjeeta stayed with her husband. Arabinda was safe. No one would know he had forced his underage daughter into a child marriage.

After three days held as her husband’s captive — punishment for turning against him — Sanjeeta phoned her father, begging him to rescue her. “Please,” Sanjeeta pleaded. “He is torturing me again. You told me that nothing would happen. I can’t stay here. Please, I’ll go back to your home.”

“Don’t come here.” Cowing to his wife’s demands, Arabinda was unyielding. “I have given you to your husband. I have no more responsibility for you.”

Fearful of her husband but fearless in her resilience, Sanjeeta took her daughters to Guzrat. She found work with a labor contractor, but the conditions were nearly unlivable, her 4,000 rupees per month not enough to feed her children. Desperate, she telephoned her father. “I am sick,” she told him. “My children are sick. I am in Guzrat and have no money. Please help me. Please let us stay with you.”

“Don’t come here,” he repeated, immune to his daughter’s tears. “Go to the railway. Better you commit suicide.”

•

“I am a distressed woman,” Sanjeeta told the volunteer respondent on Maa Ghara’s helpline. “I have two young daughters. I really need your help.”

On her second day at Maa Ghara, Sanjeeta met Rutuparna. She shared her story and the letters her father had written her years before, the certificate he had signed approving her leave from school, verifying their relation as father and daughter.

First Rutuparna called Sanjeeta’s mother in the village. “Yes, she is Arabinda Dhali’s daughter,” Kamala said, accepting no other responsibility.

Then Rutuparna called Sanjeeta’s father. “Sir, why are you denying that you are Sanjeeta’s father?” she questioned the reputed politician. “She needs your help.”

“Who is Sanjeeta?” he replied. “I have no daughter like this.”

Upon Rutuparna's advice, Sanjeeta filed another report at the police station, detailing her husband's mistreatment but this time also implicating Arabinda in the crime of underage marriage. She demanded her father take care of her in her time of need — that he acknowledge her as his daughter. But Rutuparna knew that demands were not enough. They would need biological evidence. DNA.

While the police were paralyzed by Arabinda Dhali's status, the public demanded justice for Sanjeeta. The media watched his every move; there was nowhere to hide. Once again, Rutuparna's connection with the press was one of her most powerful weapons. Community demonstrations threatened Arabinda's comfortable status quo, the government finally under enough pressure to forward Sanjeeta's police report from the local station to the state crime branch. Rutuparna's petition for a DNA test, however, was swept under the rug.

When Rutuparna asked the Women's Commission to order the DNA test, an official discharged the order immediately. But the government, quick to support Arabinda beneath the media's radar, transferred the official to another office, a common reprimand for lawful due diligence against corrupt men in positions of power. Still, the test order stood, but only until Arabinda challenged it in high court. The Women's Commission had no power to order a DNA test, he argued. It was a statutory body, not a judiciary body. The high court sided with power and money, and after a few months fighting on her behalf, Sanjeeta's lawyers eventually sided with them too.

With the DNA case halted at the intersection of corruption and powerlessness, Rutuparna and Sanjeeta pursued their second avenue: compensation from Sanjeeta's husband for years of abuse. For an entire year, the family court was equally unmoved. In all her time as an activist and social advocate, Rutuparna had yet to succumb to the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as justice teetered in the balance between rampant corruption and human dignity. In Sanjeeta's case, even the lawyers couldn't be trusted.

These lawyers will never support justice for the victim, Rutuparna thought, watching Sanjeeta with her daughters at Maa Ghara, hope draining from her troubled soul. *What good is my law degree if I can't help this woman in her time of need? I should fight directly for the victim.*⁸ She remembered the judge's cool question as she'd stood before him advocating for the slum residents: *Are you a lawyer?*

It was decided. Rutuparna applied for her attorney's license, and one month later, with the support of Bar Council members, she filed her first legal case as a practicing lawyer, defending women's rights in India's ocean of injustice. The political elite remained untouchable, with Arabinda Dhali's DNA test still pending. But with Rutuparna as her lead prosecutor, Sanjeeta won the case against her husband, receiving 12,000 rupees per month in financial compensation. A drop in the ocean.

Scar-free*February 8, 2010*

“Put an end to this case, Madam. You will never win. End it now or I will kill you.” His breath was heavy in her ear, his speech slow and deliberate. She was safe in her home, her husband sitting across the room, but still Rutuparna held the phone a little further away.

“I have planned everything,” he seethed. “I will close your Maa Ghara. I will rape you. And then I will kill you.” He never told her his name, but she knew it was him.

“You do everything you want,” Rutuparna responded coolly to his threat, even though the plot to kidnap her son still churned in her gut. “You may kill me, I agree, but just tell me how your death will come. Then I will agree that you can kill me.”

She paused for effect, listening to his shallow, course breathing. “Will it be a snake bite? An accident? A heart attack? In which form will your death come? Nobody knows, but it will.”

She drew the receiver further from her ear, the man’s anger audible across the room. She passed the phone to her husband. “I am fed up. You can listen to all the filthy things he’s saying now.”

Guru stayed quiet as he took in the man’s crass, threatening words, frightened for his family. A few moments later, he set the phone down on the table.

“Lana, you do this work and it is very dangerous,” Guru said, turning to his wife. “These people are dangerous, powerful people. They may harm you. And I am really scared about my son. What if they had kidnapped him from school as they had planned. What if he had not escaped that fate?”

Rutuparna reached for Guru’s hand. “I also care for my child. Of course I care for him. And I love my life, and yours as well.” He looked into her steady eyes. He knew the threatening phone call would not dissuade her. “Some of us must do the cleaning work, so that society will be clean. If everybody thinks that somebody else will clean, then the garbage will overflow, no? And eventually the nasty smell will reach you, everybody.”

Guru said nothing — he knew there was nothing he could say to change her mind.

“Tomorrow I will file charges against him,” Rutuparna said, still holding his hand. “Another First Information Report.”

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It had all started five months ago, with one of Maa Ghara’s residents.

“They are abusing us there,” Deepika confided in Rutuparna, now that she finally felt safe. “Sexually abusing us. And they force us to see the pornographic films they make. They are running a fake marriage bureau — fabricated documents, illegal marriages — as a front for the sex trade.”

It wasn’t the first time Rutuparna had heard from a survivor of Basanti Trust. But it was the first time a survivor was willing to file charges — to risk social acceptance in the name of justice and truth. Rutuparna knew the lives of 24 girls were at stake, and that she would have to fight against the powerful interests running this sex racket. She would take on Shri Byomokesh Tripathy and his Basanti Trust, who trafficked young women under the guise of an award-winning youth organization.

Deepika's testimony would be recorded on camera, along with three other young girls who had escaped to Maa Ghara. Speaking out against the abuse they faced, trembling voices their only defense, the media and public would hear their story.

After filing her F.I.R. against Byomokesh in the Mahila police station, Deepika gave her statement to the media. While the media did their job broadcasting Deepika's story, the higher officers of the Deputy Commissionerate of Police of Bhubaneswar were unresponsive. But Rutuparna was more than used to taking matters into her own hands.

Never one to hide, Rutuparna went straight to the source, along with Deepika and the girls who had come to her at Maa Ghara. The press followed them to Basanti Trust, eager to air the controversy. They recorded everything: the national emblem on fake marriage documents, the young girls kept there against their will, armoires filled with contraceptives and pornography, as well as hundreds of local residents outside demanding arrests and the closure of the illicit Basanti Trust house.

Despite their attempts at evasion, including their failure to record Deepika's case in front of the magistrate, the officials at Mahila Police Station had no choice but to arrest Byomokesh. The public pressure was too strong, the media presence too prevalent. Even so, his detention would be brief, thanks to the deliberate non-filing of charges within the 120-day allotment.

Police blunders were one thing, but powerful vested interests would keep Byomokesh from his deserved consequences. After all, those who had recommended his name for all those awards had their own reputations at stake. Media campaigns exposing the truth and advocacy for the victims proved no contest to their deep-seated influence.

Shri Byomokesh Tripathy was out on bail. And he was after Rutuparna.

•

February 20, 2010

They awaited his arrest after Rutuparna filed her charges, nervous to send Gyandeeep to school again, fearing the worst.

"We need support," Rutuparna admitted to her husband. "I have already filed the F.I.R. and the people demand his arrest, but the police are protecting him."

The Civil Society Federation came to her defense, lodging a formal complaint to the chief minister of the government of Orissa. They copied all consular officials, demanding that they protect human rights defenders. They wrote to the chief of police, to the director general of police. Finally, unable to hide from the public eye, Shri Byomokesh Tripathy was arrested once again.

Rutuparna, Guru and Gyandeeep all slept a bit easier, at least for the time being. But each time the phone rang, Rutuparna's heart still jumped, her head racing to know if Gyandeeep was safe, her arms reaching for him if he was nearby.

But Byomokesh never called. And Gyandeeep was safe. Still, Rutuparna waited, knowing better than to believe it was over.

•

October 4, 2010

The sudden ring made her heart skip a beat. Who could be calling so early in the morning? Rutuparna snatched up her phone. “Madam,” the police said when she answered, “we have received an F.I.R filed against you.”

“Against me?” Rutuparna set her coffee cup on the table, sweet brown drops splashing over the sides. She must have misheard. “How is that so? Who has filed this report?”

“Ms. Deepika Barik. I believe you know her.”

It felt like she’d been struck over the head. Rutuparna’s body sunk into the chair, elbows bent on the table to support the weight of her head, heavy in her hands.

“Yes, I know her,” she said at last. “She’s my client.”

“She claims you forced her to file the F.I.R. against Byomokesh, that it was not her choice. They have moved to appeal the original F.I.R. she filed in the high court. She is withdrawing her case.”

Rutuparna shook her head slowly. She was dismayed but not entirely surprised. And she would never blame Deepika. She knew their money had won her over, Byomokesh’s assurance of marriage and a better future an empty promise. Even as the headlines defamed Rutuparna, spinning a web of fabricated allegations and jeopardizing her work as a women’s rights activist, she would not allow resentment to poison her heart.

Angst afire in her belly, Rutuparna maintained composure. “I will never go against a victim,” she said to the police officer, putting the phone down.

“Why have you helped that girl?” Guru asked after she told him. “See how she’s putting you in trouble? And who will help you now? We have told you not to support that kind of girl.”

Rutuparna struggled in her soul to find an answer. *My husband is right*, she thought, *nobody is supporting me. Why should I support these victims and put myself in danger?* Maybe she should give it all up. Close Maa Ghara. Collect a good salary as a lawyer.

Even after Deepika filed her third F.I.R. against Rutuparna — claiming she had tried to murder her in her car in Bhubaneswar on a day Rutuparna was actually travelling outside Orissa, she did not give up or fight back. *I will never go against her*, she thought. *I will fight against Byomokesh for this attempt to tarnish my image, but I can no longer fight for this girl if she will no longer fight for herself.*

Rutuparna knew the politicians and legislators were supporting Deepika. And Arabinda Dhali, embroiled in his own legal scandal because of Rutuparna, was backing Byomokesh. She had done everything in her power to bring justice to Deepika and the other girls at Basanti Trust. *What can I do now?* she thought. *For me, this case is over.*

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But for Deepika, it was only just beginning.

She again belonged to Basanti Trust, a servant to their will and whims. For the plan to succeed, all evidence had to be destroyed, all witnesses silenced. Deepika went with Byomokesh to pressure Barboti Patra, who had spoken to Rutuparna months ago in secret but refused to go public with her

claims, fearing the shame of her family. When Barboti refused to be paid, they beat her — Deepika and Byomokesh both.

Barboti immediately filed charges against them, and Deepika found herself behind bars, Byomokesh jailed for the third time. Again, it was only a few days until they were free, but Deepika was still his prisoner, just in a different prison.

Other witnesses were scared silent. Byomokesh seized computers, disappeared documents. Even the media files with Deepika and the girls' original statements vanished. The entire state of Orissa had watched Deepika tell her story on TV, but there would be no viable legal evidence to support the case. And of course, no incentive either. The police obstructed justice at every level, their technical errors adding up to Byomokesh's impunity. Unlike Deepika, he emerged scar-free.

Into the Light

After so many battles, Rutuparna had her own scars, but she didn't give up. Maa Ghara's doors remained open. And she was still working hard for the women of Orissa.

"How many of you know your rights?" she asked the sea of colorful saris before her. "How many of you know about the laws that exist in your favor?" Two thousand women looked back at her, but not one head nodded. Nobody moved.

"And how many of you are aware of the government programs and projects for women here in the tribal areas?" This time, three women raised their hands slowly.

"Indira Awas, for the homeless," one woman replied.

"And Arnapura, the food security program," said another.

"Antodaya, for the elderly," said the last.

Of the 120 programs in place, only three women could name even one. The meeting in Sarat, a tribal village in the Mayurvanj District of Orissa, illuminated a number of disturbing realities that tugged at Rutuparna's impulse to defend women's rights.

What good are these laws? Rutuparna thought, uncharacteristically speechless before the crowd. *What is the point of having all of these rights and programs for women if the women are not benefiting from them — if they don't even know they exist?*

It was hard to fathom the millions earmarked for women lost in the pockets of corruption each year. And most of the funding that didn't disappear sat unused due to lack of information. Without information, the women didn't even know of the support systems available to them: women's health, welfare and employment — even food provisions for those suffering in extreme poverty. *Knowledge is power*, Rutuparna thought, the wheels spinning in her brain.

They needed a way to access the system, to receive their fair share of the benefits allotted them in national and state budgets every year.

Beyond the reach of newspapers distributed only in cities and larger towns, and often without electricity for television news programs, the women lived in an information desert. Rutuparna embraced the challenge. How could she counter their information deficit? She thought about the local women leaders in these tribal areas, how their strength might inspire others in distant villages. *If only their stories could be shared*, she thought. She knew Maa Ghara's self-help groups and community vigilance teams could be a powerful statewide network supporting women in even the most remote regions.

"*Janani*," she said to herself, the Odia word for "mother" a whisper at her lips. She had found her answer: the voice of women.

The women would publish *Janani* weekly in their native Odia, disseminating the newspaper throughout the state into tribal villages, rural areas and slum communities. Where the local women couldn't read or write, the community vigilance groups would play an important role, reading the articles aloud at their meetings. Through *Janani*, women across Orissa would learn about their rights, the laws in their favor, the projects, programs and resources available to them in their communities.

There would be stories of prominent national and international women, lifestyle pieces on fashion, cooking and beauty, a column on culture within India and far beyond her borders. Local

women leaders would be celebrated, their example inspiring others. They would have community reporters, contributions from human rights lawyers with case stories from the field. They would receive letters from women asking why their communities weren't yet receiving the newspaper, subscription requests from local organizations, intellectuals and activists.

Women would hear one another, and as their cumulative voice grew louder, they would become empowered to demand the services due them by law. With the light of knowledge now at their fingertips, they would stand up for the rights they hadn't known existed.

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The director general of Orissa's Central Reserve Police sat across from Rutuparna in his office, unsure what to make of her proposal. Quiet at first, P.M. Nair was interested, yet skeptical.

"You are purchasing weapons and dispatching police officials to these areas," Rutuparna built her case for a different approach. "But as you know, it's not working. The extremists in 18 of our state's 30 districts will not be defeated like that. This is not a security issue. This is a development issue."

The Naxal extremist group had been taking advantage of impoverished families from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes of Orissa. Youth from the poorest castes were easy targets for the insurgents, their anti-government objectives a serious threat to the established rule of law.

"Because of poverty and the deficiencies of our socioeconomic system," Rutuparna continued, "the extremists are gaining popularity among the people." The director general had to know as well as she did that the police had marginal impact in these densely forested areas. "It is not a question of heightened security or more police."

Rutuparna took his silence as unspoken agreement, so she kept going. "We propose identifying the young people from the most vulnerable families and helping them become self-reliant through employment and education. Once these young people are self-sufficient, the extremists will have less power to influence them."

"Do you believe it's possible?" P.M. Nair asked her frankly, weighing the options. It was an unorthodox idea, but it just might work.

"Yes, I believe so," Rutuparna said. "We are working on the ground, so we know where the vulnerable families are. We know who the extremists are targeting: the people who have no food, the families who have nothing. We will start there."

Pensive for a moment, he pondered her proposal. She had made a convincing case. "OK," he said. "We'll start it as an experiment. Let's see what we can do."

Their pilot program began with 30 girls from vulnerable families. They were given food, clothing, shoes and three months of security guard training led by the Central Reserve Police in collaboration with Maa Ghara. The girls arrived shy, many of them unable to speak their own names. But by the end of the training, Rutuparna observed the girls as they spoke to the media, their confidence beaming, smiles lighting the room. *Stars in their own right*, she thought, smiling herself.

Rutuparna orchestrated the program's finale: an employment meeting and certificate distribution ceremony, followed by a demonstration of their newly acquired skills to the public. P.M. Nair and Central Reserve Police Inspector General S.N. Sabat looked on as the big-name companies in

attendance offered jobs to all 30 girls. They would each earn nearly 10,000 rupees per month. And they would live healthy lives, no longer easy prey for extremists or traffickers.

P.M. Nair must have been convinced by the results. Over the course of the following year, the program was replicated throughout Orissa. Self-reliance through employment — the state's new and greatest weapon against extremism — allowed tribal youth to step out of the forest of vulnerability and into the light of dignity and self-respect.

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Her son's temperature stayed steady at 104 degrees. As she watched him motionless in the hospital bed, eyes still closed to the world, Rutuparna began fearing the worst. *But he's a star athlete*, she thought, knowing she couldn't let her mind go where it was trying to. *What if he...*

She and Guru had been sleeping there on the cold floor outside the ICU for three days now. She remembered the unexpected knock on their door, the neighbor frantic as she told Rutuparna about Gyandeep's motorcycle accident earlier that morning. After that, everything was a blur—up until the moment she learned his surgery had gone well. They had repaired his skull and the doctors were fairly certain he'd have no lasting brain trauma. But his fever persisted.

When Rutuparna needed strength in her work, she prayed to the goddess Shakti, the divine feminine. But at other times, she prayed to Shirdi Sai Baba, a spiritual master revered by both Hindu and Muslim devotees, who taught his followers to be selfless in the service of others and to love and forgive.

The first time Rutuparna left the hospital, it was to go to the temple. "Sai Baba, please help us," she prayed. "Gyandeep needs you. He is such a good boy. Please help him be healthy once again. Please let him live his normal life." Her husband had his own version of Hinduism. The rumors were true — he did wear a Jesus locket around his neck — but he only truly believed in karma. *We have only this one life*, he would say, *so we must live it because we don't know what the next life will be.*

Rutuparna thanked Sai Baba for helping them in the ambulance, when she had brushed a dab of *bibhuti* ash on her son's head. Gyandeep had immediately vomited blood, filling the bucket nearly halfway. "It is very good that he has vomited the blood," his doctor said when they arrived. "Otherwise it would have clotted, and he would have gone into a coma."

As she stayed praying in the temple, a woman approached her. "What happened, Madam?" she asked. "You are such a jolly person, but today you are looking so sad. What happened to you?" Rutuparna told her about Gyandeep's accident, his unforgiving fever.

"Why are you worried?" the woman replied, jarringly nonchalant. "You have *Sai Satcharitra*, don't you?"

Rutuparna nodded.

"Then you just read it for seven days, asking Sai Baba to cure your son. Go through the entire book, and your son will be saved."

Rutuparna rushed home, taking the holy book off the shelf and back to her son's hospital room, where she read aloud to his unresponsive body. The first day, she read the first chapter.

The second day, as she read the second chapter, Gyandeep sat up, the stiff bed squeaking beneath him. He placed his feet on the floor and gingerly walked the few steps to the sofa bed where

his mother was sitting. He sat beside her, laying his head, bandaged and hot, on her thigh. He said nothing. She kept reading. By the time she finished the second chapter, she noticed her thigh had grown cool again beneath his bandages.

She continued reading, day after day.

“We can release your son today,” the doctor announced on the seventh day. “He can go home now.” Gyandeept soon returned to school, no lasting damage to his brain or body. It was a miracle, his friends and family had said.

On the eighth day, Rutuparna went back to the temple, as instructed by the Sai Satcharitra. She brought food for the beggars. *Baba*, she prayed to the effigy of her cherished saint, *I want to feed you like my child.*

“Give me one,” a young boy tapped Rutuparna’s shoulder as she took out the *gulapjamu* sweets. She noticed he was carrying a small pot in his hands, and the *tika* pattern on his forehead was draped in strands of white, a red vertical line at this third eye. *Just like Sai Baba*, Rutuparna thought as she handed him a sweet.

Sunshine poured into the temple, draping the statue of Sai Baba in light as Rutuparna recited her prayer of gratitude for her only son’s healing. She would carry his powerful spirit with her always.

She turned to find the boy, scanning the temple for him. *Where has he gone?* she thought, her hand shielding the sunlight from her eyes. She had just given him that sweet. His tika pattern was still etched in her memory, but the boy with the Sai Baba tika was nowhere.

All she saw was light.

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Hands and feet moving in perfect unison to the sitar recording, the young women practiced their new choreography. Rutuparna held the camera steady, capturing their melodic girlish laughter on video. But the camera couldn’t pick up the flecks of light bouncing between their confident smiles.

To think that just months before, they had come to Maa Ghara so lost and broken, so vulnerable and alone. Afraid to be their bright and beautiful selves. If only they could see themselves now, as she did: her young stars shining with poise and promise.

Watching them now in the dance workshop, Rutuparna saw her younger self in their graceful gestures, remembering her childhood friends dancing Odishi with her at school. The dancing had led to acting, to a string of best actress awards, and her job as a news anchor. Rutuparna had always been in the light, in one way or another. Was it just a coincidence that her sister had nicknamed her Lana after that BBC broadcaster? “Follow your passion,” Aparna had always encouraged her. “Whatever your passion, you should do that.”

Dancing, singing, acting, Rutuparna thought as she watched the women through her camera’s digital lens. *My passion but never my profession.* By 10th grade, she had known the difference. She’d seen it in the eyes of the child she helped save from malnourishment — and in his mother’s gratitude that still shined in her heart. Not long after, Rutuparna had left her passion to pursue her profession. Contributing to the service of humanity was a value she learned from her parents, but she had chosen it

of her own free will. Her path seemed predestined, yet her particular journey had indeed been of her own design. *It is God's light working through me.*

I will always have my passion, she told herself, smiling as the women bowed in finale, their legs bending into curtsies. But it is my profession that fulfills me, connecting me to my purpose, my power. It is my profession that has helped these women emerge from their darkness anew, no longer condemned to live in society's shadows.

As beams of sunlight entered the room through the slatted windows, Rutuparna felt the divine feminine presence there with them — the white light of the Hindu deity glowing from within, and from without. *Shakti. She is Goddess. She is the Mother.*

And she is dancing her young stars into the light.

A CONVERSATION WITH RUTUPARNA MOHANTY

The following is an edited compilation of interviews conducted by Tara Ruttenberg in Fall 2013, and an interview during a public event by San Diego State University Professor Huma Ahmed-Ghosh on October 1, 2013.

Q: Given your background as the daughter of career social workers, how has the legacy of India's national liberation movement inspired you in your work?

A: Because my father and mother were part of the freedom movement, committed to the field of social work, they would never accept a luxurious lifestyle. They always believed in simple living and high thinking. My three sisters and I learned these things from them.

When I was a child, I remember my parents would receive visits from many social workers and peacemakers now famous for making history in India. My father always taught us to be good human beings. He would say, "Whatever you may be, be a good human being first."

Even though India is now independent, there were many issues left out of the freedom movement; there are still many more things to do. My father and mother have done their part in their lifetimes, and now we as activists and social advocates have to raise these issues and find solutions.

As sons and daughters of the freedom fighters, many people in my generation respect and honor the liberation movement. But I am worried about the character change and moral-ethical education of the younger generations. Gandhian ideology is slowly dying because of our corrupt politicians. They are using Gandhi's image and message to their own benefit to win votes. Nobody is really trying to care for Gandhi's ideology and spread his message.

We also find that the people who died in the freedom movement are not properly respected. Their memorials are not upheld or honored by society. Two or three famous freedom fighters have memorials built in their name, but many others who have equally dedicated their lives remain in the shadows. We are not giving due respect to the people who have dedicated their lives for India.

The government has failed to respond to local demands for new memorials honoring our national liberation heroes, so people have asked me to take on this issue for the sake of the nation, in hopes that something will change. We formed the Swadhinata Sangrami Sahid Smruti Sansad, a forum dedicated to protecting the deeds and dedication of the freedom fighters, our martyrs. It was my dream to start this forum. We want to build a kind of tourist attraction where the youth can go and learn about the people who have dedicated their lives to the freedom of India, and also be motivated by their important contributions to the nation..

Q: How has your middle class upbringing in rural Orissa contributed to your chosen path as an activist for social justice and women's rights?

A: Orissa is an underdeveloped state. There are a lot of natural resources, yet social inequality is a serious concern. There is a lot of poverty and unemployment, and gender issues are significant. I saw that firsthand as a child living in rural Kendrapara. When I was growing up, my family didn't have money for my higher studies, so I got a job working with a community development NGO to pay for my tuition. My assignment was to open village health centers, with the participation of the people in the different villages.

At that time, I was very new to public work and the people of the villages were very much my elders, so it was a great challenge to convince them to support those projects. But it was a meaningful experience for me at a young age, leading me to pursue a professional career in social justice. I learned a lot from

my own experiments, always trying things and learning for myself. I respected experience, but I wanted to know on my own what is good, what is bad.

In one village, I had held three meetings to convince people to open the health center, but very few people attended so the meetings were unsuccessful. I organized one last meeting with the hope that more people would attend. But that was a very rainy day, and I was worried about getting home, since it was a long way to travel and I only had a small motorbike. In the end, I took the risk and held the meeting.

When we finished the meeting, the storm had already begun. I drove 20 kilometers on the highway through the rainstorm, until finally I reached my home, soaking wet and cold. My father scolded me and said I couldn't go back to my job. After three days when he had cooled down, I told him, "Father, if I hadn't held that meeting, perhaps these people would have never turned up. I worked hard for them to attend, and bringing them together was a very difficult task." My father understood, and he allowed me to return to work.

I believe that because I took that risk the day of the storm, I am now able to do anything in the public field. I can just go into a mob of people; I can manage the mob, and I can convince and motivate them. That was my first lesson in public work. Now I face many more challenges. I have learned to invite those challenges always, and to solve them.

Q: The culture of rape in India has recently received international attention, most notably for the brutal gang rape of a woman in Delhi. How might the guilty verdict and death sentences for the accused help transform the impunity that prevails in instances of gender-related violence in India?

A: Gender-related challenges in India are wrought with contradiction. Yes, India has had a woman prime minister. Yes, India has had a woman president. India has women assembly speakers and corporate CEOs. But we should not forget that India has only 10 to 11 percent representation in the parliament and also in the upper house. We should not forget that only 3 to 4 percent of women are in executive career positions.

And we should not forget that there are a lot of crimes against women happening every day. This gang rape case in Delhi is one of thousands of similar cases happening every day throughout India. The verdict and sentencing in this case are excellent, yes, but I am not very hopeful about their impact. This is just one case highlighted by the media. Day-to-day I am dealing with these victims; I know the practical situation of India.

Why am I not hopeful? India has been independent for more than 65 years. But we are still following colonial law. When we make demands of the government or agitate for legal change, they are making small amendments, but that is not enough. The justice system is very bad in our country, I'm sorry to say, and the judiciary process is so lengthy. One rape victim I worked with received her court ruling after 20 years, so that is another constraint to achieving real justice. Corrupt law enforcement still continues from the colonial days. The system is unfavorable to women.

During the Delhi case, there were big demonstrations all over India. That was an opportunity for us to again scold the government for not being concerned about women's protection. We demanded the government be held accountable. The government is declaring a lot of protection systems for women, like women and child desks in police stations, cameras in public places, and counseling centers and helplines for women. But if the programs are not monitored by a department or a council, they will have no meaning in practice. So we demanded that the Women Protection Council be created and that

an important official with experience be appointed to implement a monitoring system for all of these programs for women. This is still pending, but we were able to leverage the mass public agitation surrounding the Delhi gang rape case to demand these things of the government.

A media person once asked me if I was hopeful about the situation for women improving following this rape case verdict, and in light of the new laws for women and the Women's Commission being set up. I told them no. I am not hopeful because there are hundreds of men sitting in that Parliament who are charged with sexual abuse. How will they make good laws in favor of women? We are talking about women's rights, women's participation and women in decision-making positions.

We have raised the issue of women's representation in politics to India's political parties. There was a bill to reserve 33 percent of seats at the parliament-level for women, but that is pending. I don't believe in this sort of percentage reservation, because it should naturally happen that women are involved in politics. But in our patriarchal society, it is very difficult for women to access positions of power and enter the political system. So for the time being, we are calling for percentage reservations. At the municipal level, we do have a 33 percent reservation in place. Now we are fighting for it at the parliamentary level.

Q: What is the future of Maa Ghara? What are some of the hardships you face as an organization?

A: I have a patch of land in my organization's name where I want to build a permanent home for the most vulnerable women to stay, where we can train them and help them become self-reliant and ready to return to their communities and families. I want to set up a training center there, and it could be a second home for Maa Ghara. But because of a severe lack of funding, I am not able to do it yet. We have the manpower, good people to manage the work. We have the community to help and the lawyers we need. It is now only a question of money.

Right now we are using a rental house for Maa Ghara, which is very expensive for us. We refuse to accept government grants or funds because we have to be impartial. I have to give justice to the victim, so I cannot work under the government. If I take a grant from the government, the government will have my hair in its hands. They can use me however they want. I have more freedom to fight against corruption if I refuse to take any government money.

If you go for any project with the government, from the very beginning you have to bribe. And again when the project is sanctioned, a percentage of the project money will be theirs — you have to bribe. As a person who left her job for fighting against corruption, how can I bribe government people to get a project funded? It is against my ideology. That is why I'm not taking government money, and that is why we have a lot of financial hardship at Maa Ghara.

Q: How have you been able to influence policy on human trafficking through your activism and advocacy? What challenges remain?

A: We are working hard to impact policy on human trafficking and how the government will protect women in rural areas in cases of rape and domestic violence. In 2004 we had a public hearing on the issue of atrocities against women. Before that hearing no one had drawn awareness to the issues affecting women, including police harassing women after they had already been victims of other gender-related abuse. Everybody faces those problems, everybody knows they exist, but nobody raised their voice.

We took on the challenge of bringing those issues to light through this public hearing. I called up the chairpersons of the National and State Women's Commissions, the director of the Women and Child Department, and the human rights director of the Human Rights Protection Cell. I put everybody in one panel, and we chose 20 cases that had never been heard by the police or anywhere, women who have awaited justice for a long time. They narrated their stories in front of the panel. Because this public hearing was the first of its kind, every national media channel was there to cover it, and everyone was eager to hear the final statement of the chairperson of the National Women's Commission.

After the hearing, the government was scared because they were now under the pressure of the public and the media. The director of the Woman and Child Department is a very powerful woman, so she pursued policy change with the government. After several meetings, the government declared it would open a women and child desk at each and every police station in Orissa. It was because of our public hearing that this happened, and it's a systemic change in government.

After some months I realized that in practice, the responsible officials were not staffing the desks. They were not functioning properly. They told me they had no extra funds and the protection of women was not their priority. The officials like to engage in the kinds of jobs where they will get some sort of bribe, and in the women and child desks, who will give them a bribe? Since then, we have been battling for government support on this, through mass demonstrations and protests. And just recently, the government declared that 535 special police officials would be appointed for the women and child desks.

When policy is made, there should always be dialogue with the people working in the field. Unfortunately in our country, policies and laws are created without public dialogue or discussion. Officials pass laws without any reality on the ground, so oftentimes those policies do not work.

Q: What do you believe will help end trafficking in Orissa, and in India in general?

A: The main thing is that we have to identify the vulnerable families and help them. The first cause of trafficking is poverty. The second is unemployment. The third is dowry because women who are unable to offer dowry to their husbands often fall victim to the traffickers. And the fourth is unwed motherhood because these women are so vulnerable and face social stigma in their communities.

Consumerism is also related to trafficking because there are many things that people want to buy to lead a luxurious life, but they don't have enough money to buy those things. Girls and boys in our society are fascinated by luxury as a result of consumer culture, and the sex traffickers know that. They offer them money to live luxurious lives, and then they trap them.

The media also plays a role propelling cultural degradation; they use women as objects to sell their products. In India they will use a naked woman in an advertisement to sell a mobile phone. That is a major reason why sex trafficking is growing. After arms and drugs, human trafficking is now the third most profitable business in the world.

A: Given its difficult nature, I imagine your work takes a heavy emotional toll on you from time to time. What is that like, and how do you stay motivated despite the many hardships and challenges you confront?

A: In this work, it is not possible to always achieve good results. Sometimes we receive threats and we face a lot of problems, from financial constraints to physical threats. Sometimes we find that nobody is supporting us. Friends are often scared to support us or mix with us. Sometimes my family members think my work is unnecessary, that I am calling danger upon myself. Sometimes financial supporters

don't want to bother the system or the government, so they don't support us. They appreciate our work and praise it, but when it comes to standing with us, they worry that they will be in danger like me.

Sometimes I think that I'll give up this work, that I can't continue. I don't have the finances to maintain all these girls in my homes. I don't have support from my family, because when my son was nearly kidnapped everybody blamed me. Sometimes I think I'll be happier if I focus on my law profession and get a good salary. Why should I support the victims and put myself in danger? Many times I have felt like this.

But then the very next day, a girl or woman will come to me and say, "Madam, please, you are the last hope for me. I have failed everywhere to get my justice. Can you help me?" So I again jump into the problem and try to solve her problem. I never wonder how powerful the person is I'm fighting against. I just try to protect that girl and the justice of the victimized.

Recently I was depressed, before coming to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program. The media people who had previously written several stories in favor of me began writing stories to tarnish my image after a victim was persuaded by her trafficker to turn against me. I was hurt because I thought the media knew me. So now I question myself: Who is in favor of us? When we didn't get funds from the government, when we didn't get support from our families and friends, the media always supported us to raise our voices. Then I found that there are a lot of political motivations and connections in the media.

So they have succeeded in tarnishing my image. I faced endless harassment at that time. But right when I felt alone and unsupported, I got the chance to participate in the Women PeaceMakers Program. So now I have a lot of support. I reflect on my work now and I feel that I have done a lot of good work. Now I'm feeling inspired, and I'm thinking that my work is going to impact so many people. People who are really listening to my story are inspired by me. Perhaps some darkly motivated people are trying to put me in trouble, but it doesn't matter. This is why we human rights defenders need support. People expect human rights defenders to support everybody. But they also need support, too.

Everybody knows that I go and help victims, and I don't bother to help any powerful people. People want that. And because of my public support, politicians fear me. My supporters will raise their voice if something happens to me. The blessings from the people — that is what feeds me.

BIOGRAPHY OF A PEACE WRITER—
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Tara Ruttenberg is a doctoral candidate in peace and conflict studies at the University for Peace, in Costa Rica, and serves as assistant secretary to the Global Alliance for Ministries and Infrastructure for Peace, an international peacebuilding organization. With a background in international politics, Latin American studies, grassroots community development and socioeconomic justice, Ruttenberg has written on issues ranging from leftist trends in Latin American politics and the role of indigenous cosmologies in development policy, to the emerging field of wellbeing economics, sustainable surf tourism and social activism toward systems change. She has a master's degree in international peace studies, also from the University for Peace, and a bachelor's degree in foreign service from Georgetown's Walsh School of Foreign Service. Ruttenberg currently resides in Costa Rica.

JOAN B. KROC INSTITUTE FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE
at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies

The mission of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPJ), based at the University of San Diego's Kroc School of Peace Studies, is to foster peace, cultivate justice and create a safer world. The IPJ was established in 2000 through a generous gift from the late Joan B. Kroc to the university to create an institute for the study and practice of peace and justice.

The institute strives, in Joan B. Kroc's words, to not only talk about peace, but also make peace. In its peacebuilding initiatives in places like Nepal and Kenya, the IPJ works with local partners to help strengthen their efforts to consolidate peace with justice in the communities in which they live. In addition to the Women PeaceMakers Program, the institute is home to the Joan B. Kroc Distinguished Lecture Series and WorldLink Program, and produces several publications in the fields of peace and justice.

ENDNOTES

¹ A version of this paragraph first appeared in the article “‘Women Cannot Cry Anymore’: Global Voices Transforming Violent Conflict,” by Emiko Noma in *Critical Half*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2007). Copyright 2007 Women for Women International.

² M. Supputhai. Problems of Women in India. In Subhash Chandra Singh (ed.), *Social justice and Human Rights in India*. New Delhi: Serials Publications, 2006.

³ New Indian Express, Fortnightly Report. Women’s Life, Coimbatore, June 3, 2003. Cited in M. Supputhai. Problems of Women in India. In Subhash Chandra Singh (ed.), *Social justice and Human Rights in India*. New Delhi: Serials Publications, 2006.

⁴ New Indian Express, Fortnightly Report. Women’s Life, Coimbatore, June 3, 2003. Cited in M. Supputhai. Problems of Women in India. In Subhash Chandra Singh (ed.), *Social justice and Human Rights in India*. New Delhi: Serials Publications, 2006.

⁵ Monica Chawla, *Gender Justice: Women and Law in India*. New Delhi: Deep & Depp Publications, 2006.

⁶ Catalyst. Catalyst Quick Take: Women in the Labour Force in India. New York: Catalyst, 2012.

⁷ Today, new policies for slum dwellers are being designed to address challenges formerly ignored, incorporating rehabilitation programs and social protection for evictees and forming a Slum Regulation Board for consistent monitoring and evaluation. If residents lose their homes to public projects, the government must provide them with food, water and shelter.

⁸ They attorney’s license is the Indian legal equivalent of passing the bar exam to become a professional lawyer.