

English Medium School

(A Translation of chapter 2 of Dr. Gayatribala Panda's Odia novel *Mummy Jaha Jane Nahin* [What Mummy doesn't Know])

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My mother is a writer. She writes poetry and stories. When I voiced this, the whole class burst into laughter. Our Rajendra Sir chuckled too. Perhaps, my teacher and friends think that mothers can be doctors, engineers, teachers, other officers or house makers, but not an author.

In my class only my mother is a writer. They don't consider it as a profession. But, don't they know, it is a tough career? Of course, they don't realize that and laugh. But how shall I convince them that to accomplish this hard task, my mother spends sleepless nights and always remains drowned in deep thoughts?

Let me tell you the entire story. There are forty two students in our class. Today in English class the teacher was not in a mood to teach. So she enquired about the profession of our parents. She also put the same question to me. But no teacher of LKG, UKG, class - 1, 2 or 3 had asked me that question. Madam asked in class 4 only. Is there any connection between occupation of parents and education of a child? Is it obligatory for the teacher to be acquainted with it, when a child comes to higher class? Actually, I'm confused. I don't know the answer.

Now mummy always states that I am in higher class. Earlier, for me, it was morning session in school – from 6.30 to 11.00 a.m. Now it is day session – from 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m. Mummy says, “You are a big boy now. You should do everything *yourself*. You should wear your uniform *yourself*. You should pack your school bag *yourself*. You should do your homework *yourself*.” Mummy also insists, “You are in higher class. Don't watch TV; don't watch cartoons. Concentrate on your studies. Eat with your own hand.” I can eat with my own hand, but I refuse to use my own hand to eat milk and bread. Shall I share a secret with you? Actually, I love to have it from my mother's hand. But she doesn't understand that and I hesitate to tell her that I like to eat from her hand. Mummy may tease me or she may get angry. Suddenly she may yell: “Since the last ten years this boy has been annoying me like anything. Because of him, I could not do anything. I lost my career. Always sick. If it is fever today, he will catch throat infection tomorrow. Moreover, his asthma. Oh God! How many more sleepless nights for me? How to handle so much of tension?” Then mummy will start admonishing my father.

Why does mummy get angry so soon? She loses her temper for little things. But when she receives a call from her friend or our relation (i.e. a call from Mira Aunty or Rita Apa), she goes on chatting sweetly for hours. I finish watching Doremon; then, I switch to Tom and Jerry or Chhota Bheem and she doesn't discern.

After that mummy's mood alters. She sits close to me on the bed. She queries about my school, my friends, my teachers... Unpredictably, she becomes thoughtful, then asks me, “Isn't it time for your study? Always TV. Come with the Math book or the Science Olympiad. I shall take a test. Let me see, how much do you score?”

That day mummy was telling somebody that it is not right practice to pressurise the children. She was unhappy with Neha's mom. "Neha goes to karate class at 5.00 in the morning, then goes to tuition, then to school. After returning from school in the afternoon, she rushes to music class, then dance class, then tuition again. Besides, she reads newspaper and practises speech every day before going to bed. On Saturday and Sunday, she has art, swimming and abacus classes. Hardly any time to play." Mummy continued, "She is a small kid. If she is compelled to do so many things, she will be mentally depressed. Children at this age should play and enjoy. When they will mature and realize the importance of study, they will read by themselves. That's why I don't give much importance to my son's studies." Mummy was conveying this to one of her friends.

The same mummy, when she coaches me, scolds, gets angry and beats me. I don't like that. She has trained me not to tell lies, but she is lying to her friend. No, no, it can't be. My mother is not a liar.

After Baba, my father, and I sleep, mummy lights the table lamp, opens her diary and scribbles something. Not every day, but most of the days. She pens less and ponders more. I feign sleep. I stealthily look at her and think: What has she to think? Rather I should think. My toys are old now. I wish to have a new remote control car. The watch gifted by my cousin Sanu has stopped working. It needs repair. I also want a Ben 10 pencil box, like the one which Sahil brings. But mummy refuses to buy me one. Her excuse is, "Study is important. There is no need to show off in school by taking pencils of different designs." Similarly, when I desired to wear the new watch to school, she came up with a straight no. She said, "You go to the school to study, not to exhibit your status. Other students who don't have such watches will be unhappy." That day I was very angry. Why does mummy care about other children? If someone else is sad, why should we bother? If they don't have relatives in the U.S., what can we do?

What was I telling about? Yes, mummy writes, thinks, thinks and writes. Sometimes she takes me to her lap and mutters something. I think of opening my eyes and looking at her. But I don't dare. Mummy will know that I am not sleeping and I am only pretending sleep. Mummy hates pretension, falsehood. I don't even stir. Mummy softly keeps on moving her hand on my forehead and then whispers, "Bestow my son with good sense, make him a good man. Give him a good heart."

Mummy never says, "God! Give my child a car. A remote control car." Why does she never wish that? Doesn't she know that I love big cars? Mummy holds me tight, kisses me, and then switches the lights off. But she can't sleep. She keeps on rolling on the bed. Baba wakes up and rebukes her, "Why don't you sleep. What's the benefits from all these writings? Only it affects your health adversely." Mummy behaves as if she has not listened.

In the morning, I think of asking mummy, did you cuddle me at night? But I find it difficult to ask because my mummy again becomes the old mummy who disciplines me when I make mistakes, is cross when I don't eat, is vexed when I watch TV.

You know, my mother is very good at elocution and extempore, but I am not. I can write well, but I am afraid of speaking in front of a crowd. That's why my class teacher doesn't like me, but she likes Sahil, Pratyush, Devdutt or Ankita. They can recite rhymes at the top of their voice, can sing songs, tell stories, but I can't do these things. My teacher doesn't give me any attention. I hate to go to school. She says, I'm a shy boy.

Rajashree madam told this to my mummy in parent-teacher meeting. She said, “He is very shy, very calm and quiet. He doesn’t speak much. He has a good handwriting and he also draws beautifully, but the problem is that he can’t speak. You change his attitude. He is not mixing in nature.” Mummy tried hard to persuade the teacher that I could also speak well if she gave me a chance to participate in all events. But madam smiled and said, “How can we send students who can’t speak well in place of good children (students)? We have to give explanation to the Principal. We are target bound.” Mummy’s expression changed instantly. No, she didn’t react. She left the place without uttering a word. She even didn’t take leave of the teacher. That meant mummy took the teacher’s words to heart. She seized my hand and walked out hastily after signing the register.

Mummy was silent all the way – so silent that I dreaded to look at her face. What would she do now? Would she shout at me at home, thrash me, or report it all to father? I didn’t really know what would mummy do? When something hurts her, she becomes still like a stone. That day she was silent like a cloud about to rain. Raghu da had told mummy to bring vegetable from the market. Refined oil and eggs too. He would make French toast. But when the driver uncle reminded mummy about it, she told him not to stop anywhere. It meant she was angry.

After reaching home, mummy didn’t tell anything to Baba immediately. Baba asked about the parent-teacher meeting. Mummy said, “Now-a-days schools are no longer study centres. They have become business centres. Everywhere target and only target. The big schools don’t shape the children, rather spoil them.” Then she narrated everything to Baba. Baba reacted, “I shall meet the Principal. What are good children and bad children? The teacher is being biased. If a child is shy, he should be given more opportunities. Why do they send only some particular students for all the events? And even if they are sending, it’s needless to say that those children are good and only they should be sent. What will be the effect on other children?”

It seemed as if mummy had stopped talking. She was sitting quietly on the dining chair. The tea Raghu da had left on the table had grown cold, but mummy was absorbed in her thoughts. If it were any other day, mummy would have relished sipping her hot tea. She likes hot steaming tea. Nobody in our house can drink tea that hot. But when she sits for her compositions, it is different. She takes a sip, then writes or works on the computer. The last sip will be ice cold. Sometimes mummy goes on sipping even when the cup is empty and she is barely aware of that. Today also mummy was totally oblivious of her tea growing cold.

I was worried, what would happen to me after this? Would mummy thrash me angrily? Would she discontinue my watching TV? Would she unsubscribe the cartoon channels or give assignment in Math? Even I started speculating on the possible questions: “What is family? What are the different types of houses? Tell me three synonyms of sky in Odia? Seventeen nines are?” She might quiz me from Math to Science, Odia to English to Social Studies, then GK.

“Who was the first prime minister of India?”

“How many districts are there in Odisha?” etc., etc.

If I failed to answer, she would explode, “You know everything about all the upcoming models of cars of different companies, but don’t know these. Zero in studies. You

can sit hours in front of the computers to play games, but can't sit for an hour to study? That's why I have to hear so many things from your teacher. You act over smart at home. But what happens at school? You are not able to open your mouth. I feel so embarrassed when I go to pick you from school. I feel so slight when I meet the mothers of Sahil and Pratyush. Their sons are all-rounders while my own son is good at nothing." I am so used to these words that they reverberate in my ears; sometimes they visit my nightmares. When her anger crosses limits, she even murmurs, "I wish I were childless. Because of this worthless boy, I have to bear so many things."

To tell you the truth, I don't feel so bad when mummy is cross with me or beats me, but when she repents giving birth to me, tears roll down my eyes. After that, I have seen her sobbing too. What can I do? I feel shy to speak loudly in the class. If I fumble, everyone will laugh. If I mispronounce any word, mam will be angry and shout, "Just stop here. Enough of you."

But mummy is right in her own way. She has won so many prizes that those awards fill the entire cupboard in our sitting room. Also, I have seen plenty of them in Grandpa's house. My Grandpa says that mummy always came first in her class. She was also excellent in painting and debating. Baba says, "Learn something from your mother. She has been the gold medallist in her university."

I think of telling mummy that I am only ten years old. Shall not I know more things and study well when I grow up? But I can't tell that. Grandpa has taught me that we should not argue with our elders. Even when we are not wrong, we should remain silent. We can explain it later, but at that time it is improper to retort. Grandpa is really good. He is not short-tempered like mummy. He simplifies things for me and I understand. I like his way of clarifying by citing examples. Those citations are like stories. In the end, he asks me the moral of the story: "What did you learn from it?"

I wonder, how mummy can be so angry, especially when she is Grandpa's daughter. Then I realize, it's possible because I am her son, but I don't stand first in the class.

After sitting for a while near the dining table, mummy came to the bed room. I was engrossed in thinking, while a book of *Panchatantra* laid on my lap. Actually I was recalling Rajashree madam's words and mummy's silent reaction. I was sure, madam would mind it. She would be angry with me. She would scold me in front of the whole class. I cautiously looked at mummy. She was absent minded, then she called somebody on the land line.

My heart started beating faster. Is it Principal madam? Or is it the supervisor madam?

I don't know who was saying "hello" on the other side of the phone, but I heard mummy relating the whole incident of the school. I found that mummy was actually hurt by that one sentence, "We can send only good children for different events." She was saying, "That means he is a bad child. Who are you to define good children and bad children?" Thank God! Mummy was not arguing with madam, she was telling all these to Grandpa only. Whenever mummy is puzzled or tensed, she calls Grandpa. I don't know what does he say, she becomes normal again.

When I am sick, mummy phones Grandpa and delivers him the details of the symptom. Sometimes Grandpa suggests medicines and sometimes he advises to consult a

doctor. At times in the middle of the night, mummy calls Grandpa. Often he recommends – wipe his forehead with damp cloth, massage his body, pat his stomach with water, burn seven red dried chillies, etc. This time also he instructed something and mummy only said yes.

Mummy put the receiver and came near me. She glanced at the open pages of the *Panchatantra*. I was scared because I was not reading and if mummy would ask me some questions, then...

No, she didn't ask anything. Tenderly she said, "Today I'll make chicken pakoda for you, your favourite. Or will you like paneer pakoda? We shall also go to the park. I think we shall take Chinku with us. Both of you will play and Chinku's mummy and I shall wait there. I shall get you ice-cream also."

Hurrah! I was about to scream out of sheer happiness. Actually, mummy never goes to the park. I have insisted a thousand times, but always she has some excuse or the other. She denies on the pretext of paucity of time. Oh! "pretext of paucity of time" – sounds difficult, you're surprised – I have picked these words from our principal sir's speech in the Assembly. Sometimes mummy tells she has meetings, sometimes she has to bring vegetables from the market. She has also to go to choose tiles for our new house or to purchase clothes for the first time visiting relatives. For her, visiting the park is a wastage of time as she can finish her other works during that period.

But mummy does not understand that I want to play. I don't have any friend. No brother even. I feel lonely. Mummy is occupied with her own work; Baba stays out of home for his work most of the time. He is always busy with his business. I feel awfully forlorn in this big house. I have started learning Odia, but I still struggle to go through books or newspaper. As soon as I grasp a series of words, the meaning eludes me. The nice arrangement of books in mummy's library invites me to feel it. But I can't follow any of those. I am bored to tears. I watch cartoons on the TV and keep on switching from one channel to another. Now-a-days, I prefer viewing Hindi movies. I love the fighting scenes. When the hero knocks down the villain, I can't resist clapping. Mummy wants me to be a doctor, but I wish to be a police officer like Singham so that I can defeat anyone.

One day I will tell it all to you, mummy, what you don't know yet. I love you mom.

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