

Mohini's Crusade

Pandu loved Mohini best of all. In his eyes she was far lovelier than any of the girls of his village, or even of the temple town he worked in. She was not only beautiful, but playful as well, when she wanted, rousing his spirits, getting him to chase her, and then surrendering with happiness to his embrace. She was a gifted dancer, light on her feet, and he enjoyed seeing her trip down the steps to the lake for a luxurious bath. He played in the water with her, both splashing water on each other, rolling around, happy, noisy, triumphant. In the drowsy afternoons, after a morning's work, and a satisfactory lunch, when he would dose in the shade of the peepul tree, the tinkle of her anklet-bells was all he wanted to hear, making gentle music to lull him to sleep.

Pandu and Mohini grew up together, so the strong bond between them was natural. His parents wanted him to get married, but he delayed that decision, since he was still a boy, and wanted to be carefree, playing with Mohini, going round the temple, taking part in its festivals, without a care in the world, in the colourful, bustling, sunshine hours of the temple's life. But then, as Mohini should have warned him, there are always people who wanted to complicate life, make use of him and Mohini for their own purposes, of course in the guise of doing what is right and proper, and according to religious custom.

The heavy monsoonal rains had let up a little, and the air was brilliant with moisture-laden air, and smelt of flowers and coconuts. After his mid-day meal, Pandu was sharing his red-skin bananas with Mohini, he would peel and take a bite, and toss the rest into her mouth, when an assistant priest came by and said that the *Guruji* would like a word with him, when convenient. Pandu finished his fruit dessert, washed the *dhoti* he had worn the previous day in the lake, and squeezing out the water hung it on a line to dry. He tied Mohini nominally to a tree with a grass-rope round one of her ankles and went into the temple at a leisurely pace to find out what the *Guruji* wanted. Life with Mohini had taught him her peaceful rhythm, never to hurry, but get things done faster than more tense people.

The *Guruji* was fanning himself with a palm-leaf fan, seated in an old arm-chair, with his legs up on pulled out leg supports. Like Pandu he had lunched well, and was at leisure to think of what else to do. After enquiring about the welfare of Pandu's parents, and Mohini's, he told Pandu what was uppermost in his mind.

'Pandu, Sant Maharaj Shri Narendraji of Dwarka has written to me about a pilgrimage he wishes to undertake to the South at the time of Dussera. In the North they celebrate the killing of Ravana by Rama with great fanfare every year. I myself have witnessed it when I was on a pilgrimage to all the holy sites, it's magnificent! Mind you, we can never do anything so grand, but he is a holy man, and it is proper he should visit our temple. Sri Ramanuja himself established it, and what could be holier?'

Pandu could only agree with these observations, but wondered why the powerful *Guruji* should be taking the simple temple mahout into his confidence. If he waited he would be told what he needed to know and do.

He was not left long in doubt. ‘Pandu, I am telling you all this, for I want you to understand the importance of the *Santji*’s visit. He is coming here with his followers, and they are looking forward to your service while they are here – in other words, they would need Mohini for their religious processions, and I want you to assure me that you will give them unstinted cooperation at all times, and not look to refer back to me at every single step.’

Pandu was eager to please the *Guruji*, in any case he was accustomed to doing as he was told, and religious processions were the easiest way to oblige, besides being a lot of fun, and attention getting for his Mohini, who fully appreciated the part she had to play. He assured the *Guruji* that he needn’t worry that Mohini and Pandu would give any cause for dissatisfaction to the august guest, in fact, as always happened praise would come to the temple because of Mohini’s docile and pleasing nature. He left the audience knowing that all that was expected was just routine, as far as he and Mohini were concerned.

The northern contingent of pilgrims arrived during the days devoted to the Devi, and took over the *dharamsala* attached to the temple. The temple servants had cleaned up the place as thoroughly as they knew how. The temple cooks, accustomed to making the most delicious South Indian dishes of the region, gamely tried to extend their skills to the making of *rotis* and north-Indian style curries. Despite all this obsequious show of goodwill, the guests were constantly complaining about some shortcoming or other, till even the obedient temple accountant was bold enough to remark that maybe they should shift to a star hotel instead.

Pandu had little role to play in making them comfortable, but he was shocked to see many of the pilgrims smoking cigarettes, and one or two of them even coming out of the local ‘wine shops’ which were located discreetly well beyond the outer perimeter of the sacred temple. He didn’t know any north Indian language, but he could tell by the way some of the guests looked at the women that they were being disrespectful, to say the least, and he voiced his feelings to a retired teacher, who had once taught him in primary school. The older man gently explained that in north India, respectable women covered their head with the end of their saris, and never went bare-headed with flowers tucked in their hair. Undoubtedly, some of the younger men might have mistaken the virtue of the women. Pandu accepted the explanation, and this relieved him of some anxiety, but still he avoided the proximity of the guests whenever possible.

Influenced by these unhappy first impressions, Pandu was happy that his role with the guests was limited just to one parade on Dussera day, and that too, sitting up on his Mohini’s neck and looking forward. He didn’t care much for the chief guest, the so-called *Santji*, who looked too severe, and – and - he searched for the phrase – yes – coarse, but then most probably north Indians looked different anyway. He said to himself the *Santji*

would sit behind him on a covered cot tied to Mohini's back, and he wouldn't have to look after him especially.

A couple of days before the procession day, another group of northern followers arrived, but stayed in some hotel, and spent the better part of the day locked up in discussions in an office of a relatively unimportant political party. The result of these discussions were apparent throughout the temple town the next day. Phalanxes of auto-rickshaws, festooned with party flags, had been organized to tour different parts of the town, especially the Christian-Dalit slums on the edges of the commercial area, and the Muslim localities near the textile factories, with loud-speakers blaring about the inevitable victory of the party in the coming elections, that minorities and others should take heed at last that they lived in a *Hindu Rashtra* and their security depended on their loyalty. From temporarily rigged up platforms, energetic campaigners, dressed in saffron *kurtas*, spoke in little understood chaste Hindi about the glories of their religion, the party's determination to revive traditional culture, and ultimately about the inevitability of electoral victory. Muscular men then went about aggressively applying *tilak* smears to the foreheads of men, especially to those that looked 'christian' or 'muslim.'

As Pandu was walking back to the temple compound from the lake, after bathing Mohini, he met an agitated *Guruji*.

'These are very strange people,' said the *Guruji* hoarsely. 'Yes, no one can disagree with what they are saying, but it is not right to go around and say it to Christians and Muslims. What do they think? They will go away tomorrow and we will be left with enemies!' Shaking his head, the man went away. Pandu had complacently witnessed in the past a stream of businessmen and politicians come and make offerings at the temple, of money, gold, and jewellery, in the hope of getting some benefit from God. This was the first time, he saw with astonishment, that the sacred temple and God could be used for political gains, that too by 'foreign people' from the north. He spoke to Mohini about it, but she seemed supremely untroubled, and he also decided like her to leave such matters to God himself.

The next morning, the day of the procession, he dressed Mohini very carefully, with anklets on all four feet, a broad richly-embroidered saddle cloth on her back, garlands round her neck, and a carefully drawn Vaishnavite mark on her forehead. Decked, fed, and ready, he brought her round to the side of the temple next to the pilgrims *dharamshala* as he had been ordered. The northern pilgrims were all gathered there, all dressed in saffron *kurthas*, and each carrying full-sized tridents. Pandu was surprised and unhappy. The temple was a Vaishnavite one, and tridents were a mark of Shiva, but then the *Guruji* knew best about these matters, and he could no more raise theological questions than Mohini could. A few local politicians came up and said that a route through the town had been decided upon, they would lead the procession, and his duty was to follow them with the elephant. He signaled to Mohini and was about to mount, when they told him not to. A huge framed portrait of some northern politician was to be placed on Mohini's neck instead, and it was his duty to secure its stand with ropes. He signaled to Mohini to kneel, and helped them secure the portrait of their leader, an angry

looking old man in saffron robes, also holding a trident and balancing a silly crown on his bald head. They asked him if he could lead her from the ground, and he nodded nonchalantly. Mohini was a lovely, understanding, gentle God fearing creature, and would follow him like a lamb, even in un-Godly processions, he thought bitterly.

When everything was ready, and the *Santji*, dressed in dark saffron robes, with a tall saffron turban on his head, and holding a six-foot trident in his hand, had taken his stand in front of Mohini, they all set off with much shooting and waving of tridents. TV vans from several companies were located at strategic locations, and cameramen were in the crowd filming the procession for their news channels. Pandu walking ahead with the crowd turned to look a little anxiously at Mohini. Though unaccustomed to so much shouting in foreign languages and the waving of tridents – after all, she was a Vaishnavite elephant – she followed quietly, as he knew she would, being both docile and intelligent, even that huge stupid picture on her neck seemed to bother her not at all, and she gave him a quiet wink.

Instead of going through the Brahmin locality as he normally would, they took him straight to the Christian areas, where the procession stopped for a bit and the pilgrims shouted themselves hoarse, raising political slogans, and shaking their tridents. The kids there had never before seen the temple elephant enter their narrow streets, and all joined in the fun, dancing round, imitating the shouting, and clapping. The older people went about their work without paying the least attention, and after some time, the northerners got tired of shouting, and the angry *Santji* gave another signal to advance. And off they went. A few from the procession dropped off, Pandu noticed, to have a quick drink at a nearby toddy shop. Well, with so much shouting, he was not surprised.

There were now police on point duty at street corners, redirecting car and truck traffic to enable the procession to proceed. If Mohini entered those lanes, there was no way any vehicle could get past her, even without the saffron-clad crowd surging round her. But the traffic did get into a snarl, as was to be expected, with cars, and autos trying to get ahead of others and closing all gaps, and preventing any chance of movement in any direction. So, several minutes were spent standing still in those hot dust-covered lanes, shouting slogans above the din of honking cars, and the shrill blowing of police whistles, and the cursing of people caught in a jam.

The temper of the procession was not improved by such delays, and Pandu could see with concern that many were really mad with rage, and started hitting out carelessly at doors, pillars, and electric poles with their tridents. One or two prodded Mohini from the back with their pointed tridents, and merely jeered at Pandu when he remonstrated, but Mohini was as gentle as a lamb and took such insults with the unconcerned dignity of a lady. At last, when the traffic opened, they surged forward towards the Masjid. Pandu had never taken Mohini there before, and he did not know what to expect. As they entered the Muslim areas with their shouts and trident shaking, he noticed that most doors and windows were shut rapidly in their faces, and the one or two Muslims caught out in the streets looked away sullenly. He hoped they would walk past the Masjid quickly, but he was mistaken.

The *Santji* stopped right in front of the Masjid, though no one seemed to be in it, except a lonely watchman, who looked out from his perch. It was a rather old ramshackle affair, built by poor people for their prayers, which only recently had started to receive a face-lift out of money donated by a few of the faithful, who were working as mechanics in the Gulf. Led by the *Santji*, everyone in his crowd started vying with each other in shouting the loudest, waving their tridents with abandon, banging their butts on the ground with force. Pandu noticed that two police jeeps were parked round the corner of the Masjid, but the constables in them were looking away in boredom. The tall northerners then started jumping up and down, mixing political slogans, with shouts of '*Har! Har! Mahadev!*' Suddenly a jeep roared up from the side, festooned with flags, and several men dressed in mock tiger skins, and waving tridents, jumped out and ran up to the front of the Masjid. A welcoming cry rose from the back, and several tridents were thrust enthusiastically into Mohini's bottom.

Whether it was the noise, the sudden thrust of several prickly tridents, or the sight of tiger skins, Pandu would never know, but with a great angry squeal Mohini reared on her hind legs, sending their leader's portrait smashing to the ground. She wheeled round stamping on it, and the breaking glass pricked her tender soles, making her trumpet in great agitation. Trumpeting and wheeling, she scattered the crowd around her like chaff. Pandu had been pushed to the front, she could not see him anywhere, and his call to her could not be heard over the shouts and screams of the crowd. She spotted the huge saffron-clad figure of the *Santji*, and charged towards him. With surprising agility he ran for shelter, but her trunk reached out and gripping a fold of his robe, tore it away completely, leaving him stark naked. He ran to the nearest doorway at speed, his saffron turban at an incongruous angle on his head, his trident thrown away, his huge, heaving belly, which flopped halfway to his knees, covering his private parts, except when he exerted himself to maximum effort. The protecting doorway was that of the Maulvi's, who thinking that no man should be naked in front of everyone, least of all a holy man, tore down a curtain, and wrapped the *Santji* in it, dragging him in. Others sought similar shelter in Muslim houses, and the enraged elephant charged the rest, a few missing their step and falling into the open drains that ran on either side of the street. One of the tallest of the pilgrims, who had poked at her once too often with his trident, tried to climb an electric pole, which was a big mistake. She caught and flung him into a large municipal garbage collector. Sinking into the trash most probably saved him from her wrath. Trumpeting, she ran all the way home to the temple, scattering the crowd she was now convinced were her tormentors. Pandu ran as hard as he could after her, but as he knew, she was light on her feet, and he could not catch up with her, till she stood, trembling, in the safety of her own yard. It took the panting Pandu half an hour to sooth her down. Slowly she stopped flapping her ears in agitation, letting him caress her trunk, and speak in low familiar tones, telling her to forget those wicked people she would never see again. Slowly she lifted her feet one at a time, let Pandu examine them, remove any pieces of glass, and rub oil on her soles, and behind her ears.

The Muslim saviours were unctuously polite and helpful to those who had taken shelter with them. When all danger was well past, the *Santji* himself returned to the *dharamshala*, his bulk clad in two of the Maulvi's *lungis*, one round his abdomen, and the other drawn round his breasts like a blouse. The pilgrims also straggled back, many drenched with the sewage of the drains they had slipped into, others wild-eyed and scared, accompanied by the heartless laughter of children, who danced around, making faces.

A few of the busybodies among the pilgrims had made their way to a police station to lay a complaint against the elephant, its mahout, and the temple, but the *Santji* sent one of his aides to withdraw it immediately, astutely realizing that the incident should be hushed up as quickly as possible. Others were sent with cheque-books to known media friends to suppress the recording of the incident, but, unfortunately, one or two of the news channels, which refused to be amenable, ran the footage every hour on the hour.

The departure of the northern pilgrims was far less flamboyant than their arrival. Discreetly, without making any further complaints to the temple staff, they sneaked out the next day to catch their train northwards. Mr. Paul, the local Ticket Collector at the station, waved them into the train, without checking their tickets, as much as to say they should not wait upon the order of going, but go, out of the town, to wherever they came from.

For a few days thereafter, Mohini kept starting at sudden sounds and trembling, but her own good nature, and the constant soothing companionship of Pandu helped, and she forgave him for what had happened, and at long last, accepted his apology, and his promise that such an incident would never happen again. Pandu was half expecting the *Guruji* to call him for an explanation, but the call never came, and when he met him by chance after a few days, the topic was not brought up – it was as if the visitation had never been.