

They said she had development problems. She was my little doll. At nine years old she looked four or five. Children teased, ‘You’re small, you’re small.’ ‘You’re small!’ she’d yell. Her heart was big. Tabish *bhai* showed me this video on his phone, done in Chingari Clinic. She’s saying the poem about the policeman’s wife. Cheeky, like the one saying it. It made me laugh to see her happy. Brought tears too. So full of life. Joy can also make you cry, no?

When she started at Chingari she was too weak to stand without help. They gave physio for her legs. Our neighbour’s boy Shyam Babu has a twisted leg. He too took physio there. Then the pair of them went about the city doing all kinds of mischief. Minakshi got strong. She learned reading. Words and numbers in Hindi and English. Writing too. She, Shyam and others made a newspaper *Chingari Bazooka*. Tabish *bhai* helped them. Minakshi brought her pictures home to show me. I felt shame when I saw the water dripping through our roof, the bed covered up with a plastic sheet and her lying under it to escape.

[You can see the *Chingari Bazooka* and Minakshi’s pictures at www.bhopal.org/minakshi]

When the fever came – every night, late, always after midnight, gone by day—it was no normal one. She was so tired. Didn’t eat. Wouldn’t go to a doctor. She hated injections and would scream and cry to avoid them. When they tried to take a blood test she sulked for a full hour. I spent a lot on medicines, from a doctor in the market. Nothing worked. In our community many children aren’t right. Deaf, palsy, epilept. Water’s bad. Poisons, they say. It grumbles your stomach. Medicine is good, but sometimes it’s no use. My husband and I are both from families of temple drummers. We have seen what happens. When medicines fail. We knew what this was.

He said we should take her to his village where there’s a temple of Ma. To reach there is five hours by bus on rough roads. It was hot as an oven, that season when snakes will risk death to hide in the shade of a peacock’s tail. Peacocks eat snakes. With the heat and dust coming through windows it was hard on the child, she was weak, and the journey exhausted her, but what else could we do?

The temple gate had big lions with wide jaws. Staring eyes. Child cried, ‘Mama, I’m afraid!’

I said, ‘Don’t you remember we got your *guddu* doll in a fair at this very temple?’ It’s a doll she loved like she was its mother. It spoke a poem in Hindi and English. ‘Ask your *guddu*, this is her home.’

In that temple the Mother comes as Kelamaiyya or Sheetlamaiyya. If she comes she’ll speak through my sister-in-law, C. The family fix a ‘sitting’. We’re all there. Minakshi too. We sit in a circle. C offers coconut, she lights incense and begins to invoke the goddess. Quietly I’m praying. Will, love and heart.

Mercy Mother, for my child. Come Ma! Come!



“Demons took my little girl”



Minakshi had learned a poem and demanded that Tabish record her recital. Watch it by visiting www.bhopal.org/minakshi, or scan the QR code. Thirty five years ago Bhopal did not just happen. It began. Tens of thousands are still chronically ill, as many more still drinking poisoned water. With numbers so vast it’s easy to lose sight of the individuals caught in this gyre of pain, but you’ve never lost sight of them. The world has forgotten. Not you. Stories like Minakshi’s shouldn’t happen. You can help. Background, issues and what we’re doing are at www.bhopal.org/minakshi. Please use this coupon to support our work as generously as always.

C shudders, her body shakes. Her head goes back. A goddess has turned up. I throw a veil over C’s head. It’s no more C, but a goddess with us in the circle.

‘I am Kelamaiyya.’ Her voice is not the same as C’s. The veiled head twists about looking this way and that. “Where is the child? Let me see her.”

I bring Minakshi and make her stand before the goddess. She’s shaking. I whisper don’t be scared. She will help. Kelamaiyya said that Minakshi had come under an evil influence but could be cured.

‘You must make a sacrifice. Bring live cockerels, a lemon, eggs, nails, red thread.’ There were other things. It cost Rs 3,000. We had borrowed for this very purpose. We’d have spent ten times as much.

Midnight. The ritual has to be done in darkness, away from eyes, in a lonely place. We’re waiting for the bad spirit to light its flame of fever. The child is shuddering, scared, exhausted. Her head is burning.

‘It’s here.’ We tie the thread round her neck. Bind the cockerels. Poor things. We bury them alive. They’re trying to shake their wings as the soil covers them. It’s over.

Next day, Minakshi’s calm. She takes food. Walks about. We come home. For a while she’s her old self. Then one night the spirit returns. Now it’s angry.

Again that long road, the child burning up. This time the goddess says Minakshi had strayed into a place where children were cremated. Full of bad spirits. Believe in them, don’t believe, what do they care? Even where we live they’re all about, gliding under the earth. You don’t see them, you feel them. A demon, Huné Bir, has taken Minakshi. We need a powerful sorcerer, one the demon fears. There is one. But he lives in thick jungle fifty miles away, the last twenty just jungle tracks. Whatever the difficulty, what matter the cost? Her father rushes to hire a motorbike. Even if we have to pay back for years, for the rest our lives. We are going to free her.

He returns on the motorbike. Then we move.

Oh that terrible journey. Father in front driving, me on the back weeping, the child between us, and Huné Bir crouched invisible on her back.

We left the road in daylight but night found us lost in the jungle. The light wavering around on trees, jolting, making shadows jump out at us, who knows what evil lurks in the trees.

Father’s yelling ‘We must go faster.’ I scream, ‘No! Slow! Slower! She can’t take the shaking.’

I hug her small hot body. I cuddle her. My poor little girl. I love you, my darling, don’t you leave us.

Everything stops. His voice says ‘We’re here.’

How many ages have passed I don’t know. Maybe I’ve been dreaming this whole nightmare.

We are at the edge of a small village.

Minakshi is asleep. We lift her off. She opens her eyes, screams ‘Papa! Papa!’ and falls.

From houses people come rushing. They find us crying. Our little daughter is dead.

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