Hibiscus Under Neem: Tale of Kankuben's Struggles

Continuing our humble endeavour in recognising the women centurion, this time we have covered a moving story of a widowed mother, Kankuben Parmar. A truly heroic spirit, she carried the load of two, for five long decades. Read on to find out how she dared life from the front yard of her home and triumphed over the odds!

Life, for Kankuben, a widow, was not easy. Her youngest son was only six months old when she lost her husband and a sole supporter. She was in her late thirties then. "My life is but one long struggle of survival and taking care of children" says the lady who became a widow fifty years ago. Born in a farming family in the Aakru village of Dhandhuka, Gujarat, she was married, while an adolescent, to her brother-in-law after her elder sister's sudden death.

In Richness and in Poverty

She had truly been a better half of her husband, sharing all his responsibilities equally, if not more. Her husband had farms wherein they used to sow cotton, barley and wheat. Soon after her marriage, there came famine and she and her husband had to sell all their cows and buffalos. The hard times continued and they traveled to far away cities like Bombay and Ahmedabad looking for labour work. On being asked how she liked the sea in Bombay, she said, "We went there as workers in search of work, not as tourists in search of adventure or beautiful sites to pen down".

On their return to the village a couple of years later, they worked on farms as tenants and shared the output with land and livestock owning farmers. Kankuben and her husband were given some part of the harvest in exchange of the labour they did on the joint farms. In those hard days, she would get up at three or four o'clock in the morning, chaff grains, clean them, grind them, make 'rotala' (bread), milk the goats and get children ready for the day. She herself would go to the farms and work the whole day.

The final hit of her already harsh life came when her husband died leaving her to take care of their four sons and two daughters. This was another phase of struggle for a young widow in an orthodox society where widows were looked down upon with much scorn. "My in-laws would abuse me verbally, call me names and hold me responsible for my husband’s death" (ignoring of course that late husband was never held responsible for the death of his first wife: Ed) Kankuben’s brothers-in-law would come to her house, insult her and ask for money and find one or the other reason to quarrel with her. When things started affecting her young children, she took the matter to ‘Darbar’, one of the village elders for whom she worked. He intervened and settled the quarrel for good.

It must be attributed to her deep culture that she still respects norms of the society that made her widowed life so difficult. "The social rules must be respected and not questioned" was her standing answer to any probing question regarding society and tradition. She expects her children to follow these rules as faithfully as she did.

Nurturing Future

Since her parents-in-law had discarded her, she reared her children by herself. Sometimes she took the younger ones with her to the fields. When praised for her strong will power to rear all her children by herself, she said “God takes care of children, we are mere instruments.” Although she had four brothers, Kankuben never sought their help. She kept all her misery to herself and lived with mighty tolerance, traditionally, the most revered quality in an Indian
woman. She would not even take compliments for this inner strength of hers and humbly reply, “I’ve a big stomach, I can keep all my troubles to myself”

She herself is an illiterate lady but taught all her children to read and write. Now they all are settled well. She is proud to have her youngest son working for PWD, and another son working for ‘Lal Bus’ (red city bus) in Ahmedabad. However, she does complain about not having been on a pilgrimage. “All my life I’ve been taking care of the house and children. When my children grew up, I started taking care of the grandchildren”. She wishes to go on pilgrimage, especially to Bagdanad, hermitage of Shri Bajrangdas Bapa, if one of her children or grandchildren would take her.

Hale & Hearty at Ninety

She is around 90 years old but has no serious ailment and still can cook and do other chores when needed. She attributes her good health to unpolluted grain and nutritious cuisine of earlier times. They thrived on milk of their own buffalos and used pure ‘Ghee’. She thinks that young generation, using ‘Vanaspati Ghee’ is very delicate, running to the doctor at every little scratch they get. “They don’t obey elders and eat unhealthy food. Nor do they take traditional medicine”, grumbles the caring woman.

She strongly believes in eating fresh and healthy food. The front yard of her house has a little garden where she grows vegetables. “We eat fresh vegetables as far as possible. We pluck them fresh from our yard, clean them and cook.” And there’s a massive ‘jasood’ (Hibiscus rosasinensis L.) tree flourishing with red flowers under the dense shade of ‘neem’ (Azadirachta indica A. Juss.) tree in the front yard of her home.

Kankuben often interacted with other villagers while working on the farms. There she learnt many indigenous treatments for various ailments. Here are few select ones:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High fever</td>
<td>Three and a half leaves of ‘mamejeo’ (Enicostema hyssopifolium (Willd.) Verd.) herb is pound and taken. If possible, cover the paste with plain cotton cloth. The pain will vanish overnight.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Normal Fever</td>
<td>Soak tender bark of ‘limdo’ (Azadirachta indica A. Juss.) overnight in potable water. Drink that water in the morning on empty stomach.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swelling</td>
<td>Pound ‘asalio’ (Lepidium sativum L.) plant and apply the paste on the affected area. If possible, cover the paste with plain cotton cloth. The pain will vanish overnight.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cold</td>
<td>Drink hot water extract of ‘ajwain’ (Trachyspermum ammi (L.) Sprague ex Turrill).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mouth Ulcer</td>
<td>Chew leaves of ‘chanothi’ (Abrus precatorius L.) creeper to cool the mouth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Animal with red mouth (inflammation in mouth)</td>
<td>Mix molasses with hot water. Once it becomes cold give it to the animal to drink.</td>
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After years of unending work, now, Kankuben can live a little leisurely; she spends time playing with her grand children and often turns the television on. She likes to watch ‘Mahabhарат’ and even movies on television. She is not a great story teller but plays with grand children and teaches them new words through traditional rhyme. She sang one for her grand daughter who loves to be around grandma.

Varta Re Varta,  
Bhabho Dhor Charta,  
Chapati Bolawata,  
Chokara Samjavata,  
Ek Chokaru Risamu,  
Kothi Pachal Bhisanu,  
Kothi Padi aadi,  
Bhabhae Raad Paadi,  
Chokrae Chees Paadi,  
Ararar Maadi!

(Story oh story, old man takes the herd for grazing. Clicking the fingers, explaining the children, One child whimpered, went behind a barrel, The barrel fell down, old man did shout, Loud screamed the child, Oh mother mine!)