



BO (ବୋଉ)



ଗଜ୍ଜା

ମହାଶୟା/ମହାଶୟ
 ଚଳିତ ଜ୍ଞାନୀ ତା : 17.09.2023 ରିଖ ରବିବାର ସନ୍ଧ୍ୟା.୬.୪୫ ସମୟରେ ଆମର ପ୍ରିୟ ମା ✓ ବିକ୍ରମାବତୀ ତ୍ରିପାଠୀ ଆମମାନଙ୍କୁ ଶୋକ ସାଗରରେ ଭସାଇ ଦେଇ ଉତ୍ଥାପନ ତ୍ୟାଗ କଲେ । ଏଣୁ ସବିନୟ ଅନୁରୋଧ ଆପଣ ନିମ୍ନ ଲିଖିତ କାର୍ଯ୍ୟସୂଚୀ ଅନୁଯାୟୀ ଯୋଗଦାନ କରି ଶୋକ ସତ୍ତ୍ୱ ପରିବାର ବର୍ଗଙ୍କୁ ସ୍ୱାଗତା ପୂର୍ବକ ମା କ ଅମର ଆତ୍ମାର ସଦ୍‌ଗତି କାମନା କରିବା ହେବେ ।

<p>କାର୍ଯ୍ୟସୂଚୀ ତା.26.09.2023 ରିଖ (ମଙ୍ଗଳବାର) ଦଶାହ କର୍ମ ତା.27.09.2023 ରିଖ (ବୁଧବାର) ଏକାଦଶାହ କର୍ମ ତା.28.09.2023 ରିଖ (ଗୁରୁବାର) ଦ୍ୱାଦଶାହ କର୍ମ ଓ ସନ୍ଧ୍ୟା : ୭.୩୦ଘଣ୍ଟା ଶାନ୍ତି ଭୋଜନ ସ୍ଥାନ : ସପ୍ତେଶ୍ୱର ମନ୍ଦିର, ବି-ବ୍ଲକ, ବୋଏଲ ନଗର ରାଉରକେଲା</p>	<p>॥ ରତି ॥ ହୃଦଭାଗ୍ୟ ପୂତ୍ର ଅତନୁ ତ୍ରିପାଠୀ ଅଧିକ ତ୍ରିପାଠୀ ଓ ପରିବାର ବର୍ଗ Mob : 9437082666 9437245666</p>
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Bo

Bijayalaxmi Mishra was a proud, deeply religious Odia woman standing at the mighty height of 4'11". After being born in the village, she was whisked off and married off at the age of 13 to Anirudh Tripathy who eventually became a factory worker at the local steel plant. Throughout her life, she herself worked as a *Sanskrit* (a classical Indian-Aryan language) teacher at an Odia medium school nearby. She eventually had 2 sons that were 12 years apart, who each eventually had 2 children. She was highly respected among the Odia community and the Tripathy family as a matriarch. In her final years, she developed dementia. In these years she became more volatile, angrier, depressed with the death of her husband. She frequently voiced that she did not want to live anymore. She was not able to consistently recognize the faces and voices of her relatives. After 2 strokes in September she took her last breath in Rourkela, Orissa in the heart of her native homeland.

Context

At first glance, this collage is confusing to the average person. Who is this woman? What are these photos?

It was hard to have a super strong connection with my grandmother (who I called "Bo") because she was in a different country and she did not speak English. I am okay at our native language of Odia- but not as good as I would like to be. There were years when we could not leave to go to India because my family was just on VISA's. I had very few opportunities to meet her and cherish her presence in India. There are so many questions about her I didn't know. What was her favorite food? How did she feel about her son immigrating to the United States and leaving the whole family? What was her favorite *sari* (traditional Indian dress) to wear? How did she feel about being married at 13? Did she like teaching? Was she happy with the way her life turned out?

Towards the last few years of her life, Bo became depressed and developed a slight dementia. I didn't live with her, but the people that took care of her (my aunt, uncle, other family) started to frequently complain about her behavior. She became erratic when people left the house because she was too feeble and dependent on her walker to leave with them. She refused to eat. She hid all her pills she was supposed to take underneath her mattress. Everytime my mother called, she mentioned that she wanted to die. During my cousin's wedding this February she stared at me and snapped in rapid Odia: "I don't know who you are but your hair is a mess!". I (with my incredibly messy and curly hair in the humidity) stared at her in shock. Afterwards, as I told the story to my mother I started hysterically laughing. I might have been laughing from the sadness of my grandmother not being able to recognize me. I was naive enough to think that her dementia would not affect her perception of me.

However, she was still my grandmother and my Bo. When she remembered who I was, she made me eat good Indian food and snuck me *Kurkure* (which is an Indian savory snack) just like she always had. We laid around and had gossip sessions where she warned me to never trust men, especially men that were my age. She cried on the balcony everytime we left her house to go back to the United States. Everytime our family called, she would bless me and my sister and tell us to keep studying hard. She prayed everyday in the prayer room for all her children and her grandchildren.

She passed away around 2 months ago. I had woken up very late at 11 am and saw missed calls from my mother. When I called her back, she sounded upset and she told me that Bo had died. Towards the end, the hospital had taken a scan of her brain which showed intense brain atrophy which explained many of her problems. I broke down on the floor of my apartment hallway sobbing while my parents on the other end cried with me. I am not sure why I cried so much because I didn't think I knew her well enough. I didn't get a lot of time to grieve because I had exams coming up and I could not go to India for the week-long funeral. Immediately after I found out, I went to Hillcrest Dining Hall and got a breakfast burrito. Everyone was walking by, happy and slightly hungover while I sat there quietly eating in shock.

After her death, I was not able to grieve properly and her death still weighed on me. I kept crying at random points even weeks after her death just thinking about the fact that when I go to India now, her room will be completely empty and I will never be able to hold her weathered hand again. The only way I was able to process this was picking up images of her after her death and thinking about what kind of life she had. I found some images on my phone but then I looked for more on my dad's phone. When I went home, I went deep into my parents' armoire where they keep all their photographs. I looked through our many many albums and stumbled upon a little box in the back. This box was full of many black and white pictures of my uncle, my older family members, and my grandparents all in the past. It was therapeutic and healing to go through these photos- none of which I even knew we had! I had no idea what my grandmother looked like as a middle aged lady or even a young girl. In my brain, she had always been a slightly irritable, feeble little lady with a head full of white hair. I found photos of her with thick dark black hair like mine that was slicked back, proudly wearing a *bindi* on her forehead with little *jhumkas* hanging down from her ears: a look that even I frequently wear myself when I go to the Hindu temple. To find photos of her in the village where she is from, with her friends, with my dad as a little boy, etc. was so shocking and I struggled to even recognize her until my dad pointed her out to me. I combed through our many photo albums for a glimpse of the life of a woman that I did not know well enough. My family came to join me and look at the photographs with me. My parents had forgotten that they had them as well and we were able to come together and bond with shared grief. We shared stories about funny things Bo did or said and reflected on our relationships with her. Even though I wasn't able to grieve at her funeral in India, I felt that looking at these photographs and being able to discuss them with my family provided a lot of the closure that I needed.

These photographs were living proof of a woman that had survived poverty, child marriage, gender inequality, etc. Despite it all, she was a working woman bringing in an income (in a time and place where women did not work), she was able to raise 2 educated sons. This woman that scolded my father, that told me I was too skinny, that loved her daughter in law (my mother) more than the typical mother in law, that got anxiety every time someone left the house, that wore white everyday from the day her husband passed, that prayed for me everyday, that watched cartoons with me, that yelled at me in loud rapid Odia is nothing but photographs.

I wanted to make an actual collage, but these older black and white photos were extremely delicate and fading. To glue them and use them for this project would have destroyed the photographs which are too precious to my family. I chose to scan the photos with a photo scanner and create a digital collage. Putting these images all together into a collage helped me to consolidate her life and the most important people to her on a page. The first time I made a collage with the photos, I didn't like it because the photos were all placed on it perfectly. It didn't match her at all because she was a complicated woman with a complicated life who was not privileged enough to have a perfect one. I chose a wide array of images; portraits, black and white, with her son, with her husband, with her grandchildren, pictures in color, at her home, at her village, etc. The change in the style of photography from faded black and white to clear, bright iPhone pictures also represents the longevity and variation of my Bo's life. I was able to share this with my family as well.

This collage helped me stop remembering her with pity and thinking about her as a crabby little lady who struggled with dementia and remembering things. This collage is proof that she was so much beyond that, so much beyond her death, so much more than an MRI scan with brain atrophy and much beyond just her last few years when I got to see her. This collage and our stories of her are a testament of everything she survived and how strong my grandmother was.