PHENOMENALLY: MARAM SINGLE MOTHERS OF COVID

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On February 7, 2021, I sat with Kemdina, my aunt and her sister-in-law, Hoila, my mother as they intricately knotted the tassels of Maram traditional piijouli, and heard the first thunder of the year. We sat for a few minutes, listening keenly to the signalling of the thunder. Hoila said with a sigh, 'The thunder came from the ramhai (south); it is not a good sign. Had it been from the ragung (north) the rains would have been favourable. Clearly, this year's verdict is not in the farmer's favour. There are already whispers and tales about the year's weather predictions, and [these] fears were confirmed by the flowering of bamboos. Against all odds, the pandemic directed people back to the earth.' Kemdina spelled out the predicament brought by COVID-19, saying, '2020 has instilled a food-shortage fear, with the lockdown and the shutting-down of lifelines, and many villagers decided to return to the paddy fields, which is why my sister-in-law decided to once again toil on the paddy field which had [previously] been leased out for years at a time, and teach me the tricks of cultivating rice.'

Hoila, who has been single-handedly looking after her four children since her husband's death thirty years ago, narrated, 'I have been like a country hen, trying to get her brood not only under her wings, but into the nest away from the claws of a kite. I did all I could to bring home my three daughters who were away at different universities. The one source of income for me is renting out my other house of eight rooms on National Highway 2, where the tenants used to run snack shops. With the lockdown, all the tenants left for their homes in the villages, and some for good. Since then, the rent stopped coming and prices of consumable goods have been skyrocketing. This isn't a good time to keep body and soul together; this is a strange time.' She continued in her soft-spoken tone, 'People are saying that there is a farmers' protest going on in Delhi, and that no rice may come to the market next year. People are afraid they'll have no rice to eat. That's why folks are returning to cultivating the paddy fields.'

Hoila narrated a folk anecdote on the importance of plant decisions. 'A long time ago, before humans learned to cultivate, the plants of the earth held a conference to deliberate on who would volunteer to be the staple food of the humans. When the baitouti (callery pear) proposed to be the one, the offer was turned down because it takes about a year for its fruits to ripen. The vote was cast upon atii (paddy) to be the food guardian of the humans, for it takes just about five months to produce grains. Ever since then, abai (rice) became the stomach-filler.'

With her head lowered and her voice breaking, Hoila continued, 'My initial worry for the safety of my daughters, once they were home, slowly gave way to worry for my older sister, Psiina, whose kidneys had failed and was undergoing dialysis at a private hospital in Imphal. With the COVID-19 protocols, restrictions, and denials of visitation, the only way to correspond and connect was through phone calls, though the distance from Maram to Imphal is just about eighty-six kilometres.' The painful rift created by the geographical distance filtered into her voice as she said, 'Every now and then, there would be new protocols on COVID-19, some made by the government and some by the villages. An unnameable fear loomed over every activity in the house;

Fig 1: Hoila, with paddy saplings

grief creaked through every eye on the wall, it was as if I would be told any moment that my sister is no more. This constant thought disrupted my daily chores, and tears became a constant companion. The more news updates on the virus, the more silent the house became. As the virus claimed more lives, the prayers for safety from the virus were said at every meal.'

Hoila continued to narrate, 'Psiina's condition was worsening day by day, and dialysis was administered on a daily basis. A meeting was called by the village authorities, and strict procedural instructions were given out regarding quarantine and deaths by COVID-19. Hearing the covid protocols, it made me feel that death by the virus put one on the same plane with death by suicide, the most abominable death; nobody would turn up for the funeral, nobody would even talk about it, nobody would come to bury the remains of the deceased. People from another tribe were hired to carry out the burial, and in case of

a failure to get them, friends and family would use their heels to kick the deceased into the grave with no coffin, and the house where the suicide took place would be gutted and abandoned for good. When someone died of COVID-19, the only differences are that funeral rites were permitted to be performed at the cemetery, the remains of a person were properly placed in a coffin and taken straight from the hospital to the cemetery and buried immediately, be it day or night, in the presence of a priest and family members only.'

Between tears, she continued her narration. 'My worst fear was made real when Psiina tested positive for the virus just before one session of dialysis. The hope of her recovery dwindled drastically, and distress overtook faith in her son and two daughters who were nursing her in the hospital; their fears were wired over the phone in deep breaths and insurmountable pain. For the next couple of days, my sister listed a litany of dos and don'ts for her funeral over the phone, and I was in a feverish panic.' At this point, I interrupted her and asked if there was any familiar feeling from the past? She said, 'I started visualising a meeting at the cemetery—my sister's coffin and I—in the manner of my husband's body brought home in a coffin decades ago, my five-month-old infant staring cluelessly at the wailing and loud mourning. Sometimes you sit down for lunch, and that's when the remains of your love are brought to you, unannounced. I walked around as though I had lost all bearings in life. Psiina was not only my older sister, a friend, and a mother figure, but my confidante too. The only armour I rested upon was prayers, believing in Christ's saying that if we have faith, the size of a mustard seed, we could move mountains.'

Hot lemon-ginger tea was served and as we took our cups, Hoila continued, 'The telephonic conversations started to deteriorate and whenever I made a phone call, Psiina was either gasping for breath or was way too exhausted to talk. More prayers were sent upwards for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing, strength and faith. Waiting every day for the COVID-19 test result was agonising, and respite finally came when Psiina tested negative. I was overjoyed and felt my prayers were heard, and she was shifted to the general ward.

The happiness was short-lived, for Psiina did not survive the night, and took her final breath at 3:00 a.m. on January 22, 2021.' As I listened, little did I realise that I had stirred all the warmth out of my tea cup before I'd taken a single sip.

Kemdina, a single mother of a teenage girl, felt the blow of COVID-19 differently. 'Before COVID-19 took the world by storm, I was diagnosed with a huge uterine fibroid,' she said. 'I had saved enough money for the removal of the mass, but the virus came in my way. I put [up] with severe back pain, constipation, and was weighed down by constant fatigue. The doctor told me that whatever food I have been consuming, the fibroid had been gobbling it all up. Henceforth, each time I felt fatigued, I blamed the benign tumour. A year has gone by, and due to the lockdown I have not been able to resume my tiny business of running a snack shop that sustained my family, and exhausted all the money saved for the surgery. Worries have begun to mount. My daughter is in the tenth standard, and should be writing her matriculation examination, but the school has been shut for the entire year. In a remote village like Maram, conducting online classes is unimaginable. The government announced the closure of all tuition facilities due to COVID-19 protocols, and she had to discontinue her classes. I feel that my daughter is slowly unlearning her syllabi. News and rumours are rife about the board exam—sometimes it is about the possibility of holding the exams, at other times a possible cancellation. All my stress and tensions were borne by the uterus, as the doctor said, and I could feel my uterine fibroid getting bigger; my hypertension becoming uncontrollable. I feel that they somehow had formed a silent pact to feast on me, physically and mentally.'

Kemdina has a knack for rearing pigs, which was her other source of income. With much pride she proclaims, 'I always keep at least two pigs squealing and grunting on my property. They maintain and balance my emotions. I love to show them off and whisper into the ears of visitors to look at how fat and healthy they are. You see, my pigs have a sinless gluttony—one became so fat, it couldn't stand on its limbs anymore. Whenever I go out to visit my sister-in-law or neighbours, or go out for

other household chores, it is usually my pigs that rush me back to feed them on time—this is my mantra for keeping them fat and juicy. I have a concrete pigsty that can accommodate two to three pigs, and rearing three pigs at a time is easily managed. It is one thing to enjoy rearing the pigs, and another to please people's palates and enjoy the appraisal that my pork tastes great. Whenever my pig is butchered, there is such a demand that I barely get a kilo to keep for myself. During Christmas of 2020 and the new year of 2021, two of my fattened pigs landed on the people's celebratory dining tables.' Kemdina's joy of rearing pigs is instantly translated into a festive mood. Though the Maram people consume non-veg on a more regular bases these days, feasting on pork, chicken, fish and so on is mostly done only during festivals. She giggles and continues, 'But I don't have any pigs at present; swine flu came and it is too big a risk to buy piglets. I miss running to feed them, gathering wild vegetables, cooking their meals, but above all I miss their faeces which I used as manure to nurture my garden of gainam (chives), enchiikum (cilantro), ruibakanti (bitter tomatoes), salou (spring onion), gobzii (cabbage), laipakti (beans), and more. When the neighbour's pigs started succumbing to the swine flu one after another, amounting to the loss of lakhs of rupees, I felt [lucky], and clever. But on sleepless nights, I saw and heard pigs.'

Kemdina recounts her initial encounter with the virus. 'At first, it was the fear of contracting the virus that got on my nerves, but fear morphed into frustration and anger. My funds were gradually being drained and I was left with no option but to sweat it out in the paddy field. Hoila pledged to teach me the skills of cultivation. We went about clearing a piece of land to sow the seeds for saplings; slash-and-burn, dug, and fenced with branches of trees and twigs, and sowed rice seeds on the promising ground. Then we took to the terrace cultivation side, to plough the soil; the earlier the better, for the dew and sleet soften the soil making ploughing easier. My sister-in-law could work like a man, and there was no question of ploughing the field, hiring a man and a buffalo, so we went about breaking the slaps of dug-up mud into the smallest size possible. In the field, I am clearly a neophyte,

in the real sense of working on it. My parents were cultivators and I often accompanied them to the field but I never really took the task of working on it year-round, through the seasons, and being solely responsible for the paddy's fate. And here I was for the first time, a field of my own to deal with. I did not feel discouraged, but I felt burdened. The thing with me is, because I am a single mother I don't give up when faced with a struggle. I am a fighter and the mantra that I repeat to myself is to be a woman of substance, and I try and try to live up to it. It takes betrayal and pride to strengthen resilience.'

With the virus surging on, and sources of income becoming scanty, Kemdina narrates her predicament. 'My sole option to survive was to sell my house by the highway, which I bought years ago. A tiny old wooden house which would probably fetch a few lakhs; if worst came to worst, I was willing to let it go. There would be takers. A house, no matter how shabby, on a commercial side is a gold rush. Even as I ran the math of selling the house over and over in my mind, I looked for other survival alternatives, and I somehow made it. My daughter made it through the matriculation exam based on her year-round performance. The matriculation exam was not conducted and the students' performances were evaluated based on their continuous assessment. It felt quite weird that students could graduate without the normal proper written examination. The result did not quite sink in, for I did not want my daughter to be a pandemic-matriculated batch. I wanted my daughter to be a normal graduate, [having given] the examination and through hard work, and not by COVID-19's grace. Even though I butchered and cooked a huge chicken weighing five kilograms to celebrate my daughter's passage into higher secondary school, I often remind my daughter about the nature with which she jumped, skipped, and hopped into the pre-university council programme. Just because I spoke her mind, she pouted for days together.'

When the season for plantation arrived, the failure of the monsoon gnawed at every cultivator and there were constant fights for water. Some even went to the limits of changing the waterways which had

been laid by the ancestors. Fortunately for Hoila and Kemdina, they had a different story to tell. They had water, and after their constant stirring with spades their fields were softened like dough, ready to take the roots of the paddy saplings, to nurture and coexist. When they went to the sapling spot, they couldn't believe what they saw; the saplings had all been grazed upon by cows. They salvaged whatever they could and replanted it. They also put some fish in the field. Though the fish forgot to grow and remained the same size during the harvest, the paddy plants were thick with grain, and the two reaped a good harvest.

Meanwhile, a road widening project for National Highway 129A was underway and Kemdina received compensation for a portion of her wooden house that was demolished. She deemed it as god-sent aid. When the raging second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic subsided, the harvest was completed, and with the money now sitting in her account, Kemdina decided to tarry no longer in having her fibroid removed. I volunteered to be her caregiver. 'Guwahati, my family advised me, is a much better place for treatment than Imphal. I also opted for it because that would give me better peace of mind; there

Fig. 2. Kemdina, with her bundle of joy

Fig. 3: Hoila and Kemdina with their harvest

will be less wagging of the village tongues. A single mother being hospitalised is a treasure trove for gossip mongers,' said Kemdina. 'I worked hard and saved every rupee that came my way, and built a concrete house; and people questioned the source of my money. Society wants single mothers [to be] poverty-stricken. I matriculated, and did not go to college for a sheer lack of interest. But I understand the psyche of society quite well. A society measures the value of a person by the number of digits printed in [their] bank account. That's one reason why I am always determined to be financially independent. And being monetarily independent would either shut the misanthropes out or in.'

On November 15, 2021, Kemdina and I boarded a flight to Guwahati. Upon arrival, the fear of surgery began to creep into Kemdina. She was panicky and her mind vacillated between fear, reason, and courage, and her blood pressure was constantly on the rise. In the ultrasonography result, the impression read, 'bulky uterus

with presence of a large subserosal fundal exophytic fibromyoma measuring 10cm in size' and 'ovaries are atrophied (post-menopausal status)'. 'That's a very large mass,' said her doctor. After all the hospital procedures were performed, the one thing that concerned her doctor was her hypertension, which a little bit of calm and peace of mind could normalise, and it did.

It was during one of the sessions with the doctor before the surgery that Kemdina opened up about another issue that was worrying her, which until that point she had been far too shy to talk about. She told the doctor at the time, 'Because my pregnancy out of wedlock was a disgrace to my family, and the humiliation doubled by betrayal from the man I thought loved me, I was completely heartbroken; I became extremely timorous, mortified to open my mouth about anything that concerned me and my body. I did not visit either a doctor or a hospital throughout my pregnancy. The one thing that was very clear to me, at that point, was the fact that I wasn't afraid to die. Dying seemed so easy and desirable. If I survive my pregnancy, I prayed to God to give me a beautiful child. I now think of it as silly, but that was what it was. As the labour pains started to gnaw, I gave strict instructions that nobody was to take a peek at me (laughs) during the delivery. After hours of labour pains, that seemed to me like days, my baby decided to make her entrance into the world butt-first, which nearly killed me. I was bleeding copiously and a doctor was called to the house. The doctor made the slit sideways but still my daughter refused to budge; in sheer panic because I was losing consciousness, he made another vertical slit. My baby was born, but I inherited a permanent perineal tear. I lost control over air, liquid, and solid.' She asked her doctor if it was possible for two surgeries to take place with one shot of anaesthesia.

The doctor took few minutes to contemplate, and then asked if he could have a look at the tear. After the investigations were over and I re-entered the room, the doctor's first words were, 'Kemdina has been suffering immensely for the last sixteen years. This is the first case of its kind I am seeing, after twenty years in my profession.' He also said that in normal cases two surgeries are not performed simultaneously, but

since the patient had come from a long distance away, he made a call to a colorectal surgeon and they decided to go ahead, fixing the surgery date for November 18, 2021.

The doctor gave us an eighty percent success chance for the perineal tear surgery, with an assurance that though it may not be a hundred percent successful, there would not be any chance of deterioration. Kemdina was to undergo two surgeries that involved two surgeons; a gynaecologist and a colorectal surgeon. The gynaecologist said that he would first do his part of the surgery, after which the colorectal surgeon would take over. Kemdina decided to take the chance, not only because of the absence of muscle control in the rectum, but considering how her quality of life would be affected in old age.

We reached the hospital in the wee hours, and as Kemdina changed into the clinical green attire of the hospital, we waited eagerly for the RT-PCR result that would determine whether the operation would go ahead as scheduled or not. In between deep breaths, and held breath, the RT-PCR result arrived, giving us a green light. The doctor was happy, as was I, but Kemdina was of a different opinion. As she was changing into the hospital gowns, she spoke, 'I am dead scared about the impending operation, and I half-wished for a positive covid result.'

Kemdina was wheeled away into the operation theatre, and I waited outside the theatre for about two hours along with the other caretakers. I do not know how many surgeries were going on simultaneously, but surgeons came out one after the other, calling out the name of their patient, beckoning the caretakers to come and witness the thing that was weighing their patient down; holding it in bowls like little secrets, shifting it gently and putting it out like trophies. When Kemdina's surgeon finally emerged from the closed doors and called her name, I stood up immediately, yet I was taken aback because he was holding what seemed like a whole grilled chicken in a tray—I could see his hands shaking. When the mass was finally packed and given to be taken for biopsy, it weighed about two kilograms, and my hands shook too.

When we got to the private room after the surgery for post-operation observation, Kemdina half-jokingly told me, 'When I was

pushed into the operation theatre, mortal fear overtook me; I wanted to get up and run away, but I had no choice so I talked myself into choosing strength.' She also said, 'The doctors were very kind,' in-between her sleepy spells after the surgery. I asked her if she had seen her mass and she said she did.

Kemdina was advised to ingest only black tea and biscuits for the next twenty-four hours. At one point she asked for a cup of Horlicks

Fig. 4. Kemdina, in the hospital after surgery

for some quick energy, and I complied. After a good couple of hours, a violent purgation manifested in what would have been otherwise a near-perfect post-going-under-the-knife experience. As I changed her diapers she told me, 'I am reminded of my older sister, who had a stroke a couple of years ago, and how I too changed her diapers as a mother would for her infant. The circle of life comes round in being incapacitated, in adult diapers.' She wanted to gift the unused packs of adult diapers to the debilitated oldies back in Maram, for she whispered, 'The expenses on diapers are a grief, and they will be very grateful.' When we packed to return home, unfortunately, we did not have the space for the diapers and Kemdina, for once, was beside herself.

The huge airy window of the room we were in gave us a good view of the utility poles spread over the roads in Guwahati. Kemdina lay on the infirmary bed, switching between sleep and waking like the birds that would come and sit on the electric lines and take flight, only to return in no time. Kemdina spotted a dove that was basking on one of the electric wires and asked what kind of bird it was. I told her that it was a mahow, a spotted dove. She watched it for a good minute or two. 'I wish to be that mahow, for it will never know the pain of myomectomy or hysterectomy, and so [too] the crow that sits opposite to the dove.' Tears began to stream down her face as she talked about returning home, a reverie of her mother or her older sister there to wait on her; both had passed away long ago. Of course, she would not return to an empty home, as her daughter would be waiting, but that seemed a sea of difference to her. The phone calls made between the mother-daughter duo were filled with quiet words and silent tears. On the second day after the surgery, a phone call came from her daughter, reporting that their hen had caught an avian influenza; the condition of the hen was described as 'eyes are bright but the bum is wet and swollen.' To this the mother instructed, 'Mash medicines O2 and tetracycline in warm rice and force feed it if necessary.' In the next phone call her daughter broke the news that the hen did not get to hear a rooster crow the next day.

On being discharged after three days, the doctor in the hospital instructed Kemdina to stay in Guwahati for a couple of weeks. He said that the stay was necessary not so much for the abdominal incision, but for the rectum recuperation which needed to be monitored closely. I, along with the family that was hosting us, went into fifth gear to get Kemdina back on her feet, feeding her pigeon soup, eel soup, beef marrow soup, pig trotters soup, spinach, French beans, broccoli, and so on, alternating them on a daily basis. In Guwahati, escargot and grenouille are hard to come by; they are believed to be excellent for healing wounds. Every time there was talk about a speedy recovery, snails crawled and frogs jumped and leaped into our conversations. During the initial days after the surgery, Kemdina could not sit for more than a few minutes at a stretch because of the excruciating pain, and also for fear of tearing her stitches; there were days when she thought undergoing a dual surgery had been a mistake. On other days, she was beginning to mourn the loss of her uterus as though it were a child, and wishing she had saved her even just ovaries. She developed reveries of other children of her own, walking hand in hand with her daughter, sitting and laughing by the hearth. The ecstasy and the sorrow in her wishful thinking, pining for what was not to be, became her constant companion. Kemdina would count on her fingers the number of women in the village who had undergone hysterectomies, including her close associates, and draw consolation from the unfortunate sameness. Her older sister told her over the phone that it was okay, and better still that she got her uterus removed for the sake of saving future anxieties of developing other complications; hearing that was a breather for Kemdina.

Days turned into weeks, and we talked about going home. Omicron had been born and was making its way into the news and to India, and one case had been reported in Manipur, making anxiety and distress take a chair at the dining table. We made haste to go home, met the doctor and asked if we could leave Guwahati. The doctor was hesitant, but since the wounds were healing very well, he permitted us to go, with the assurance that he would be available on the phone anytime.

As we prepared to leave and with Christmas around the corner, Kemdina's daughter insistently reminded us about the putting-up of decorations and other Christmassy concerns. Kemdina pacified her daughter over the impossibility of going to do Christmas shopping, saying they would have to manage with what they already had. The daughter understood, and for Christmas they had lights around ten potted crassula ovata instead of a traditional pine Christmas tree.

The journey from Imphal airport to Maram is often a pleasant ride, with winged hills on both sides of the road, but journey by night is rather dire, passing through unlit villages, and sans street lights but for the cat's eyes embedded in the road. The December cold was marrow-numbing and we arrived home to a charcoal-lit fire, welcomed by Hoila and Kemdina's daughter. The daughter was in overjoyed tears to have her mother back home. Once at home, Kemdina though exhausted from the day-long travel, felt cosy and warm as she took her dinner. One can't really say if in her mind she still expected her late mother and late older sister to be waiting on her, but she would sometimes narrate dreams and reveries of their presence; an interaction between absence and presence, of the living with the dead; in a manner of the shift from shivers to hot flashes, a side effect of hysterectomy.