

# Jirwa-Mai\*

○ Ramanika Gupta

Based on a true story, Translated from Hindi by Ruchita Sahay and Sarala Jag Mohan, revised and edited by Anurima Banerji

“*Maiya*<sup>1</sup>, search for my first-husband now. He has sent a letter along with his address. From now on I will stay with him. I’ve seen so many men. Now, only the one I married will fulfil me.”

Her words made me laugh but something also pierced me in the heart. This was the same Jirwa who had dragged innumerable men to court, forcing them to seek forgiveness before the panchayat -and today this very Jirwa was retracing her steps, bound by the same orthodox beliefs which had aided and abetted the mother and daughter’s excommunication. Jirwa-mai’s entire past came flashing to my mind. I asked her, “Jirwa, has the woman in you accepted defeat?”

There was a strong resemblance between the lives of mother and daughter. Both had been used, kicked around, and deceived by men. They went to court to seek justice. But a man is a man after all. Strong and influential, he can blow off a court order at the snap of his fingers. Jirwa-mai alone kept roaming around

with the court documents. But what is the worth of a paper pitted against the might of money, the razor-edged sharpness of caste, the power of the male ego, and the strictures of social convention? When society does not accept the court’s order, what can a stamped paper do? Something could change only if someone dared to defy society itself. Jirwa mai’s generation was not yet prepared for this.

Many years ago Jirwa-mai’s husband left for Calcutta and didn’t come back. Raghunath and Jirwa were born before he left. Seven years elapsed. No news. Neither her parents nor her in-laws knew whether he was dead or alive. Still, she was tied to the man’s invisible presence. She told me, “a woman who falters doesn’t have the right to go to another. It is the privilege of men to have one or two wives. Nobody admonishes him if he can bear the expenses.” Uttering these words, Jirwa-mai would keep cursing herself for succumbing to love.

Jirwa-mai’s wandering thoughts finally halted in the blind alley of fate, and her entire past flicked before her eyes. She had been so infatuated with that ‘Koeri.’<sup>2</sup> She could not live without meeting him in the chill of the night, in the scorching heat of day, in the first shiverings of dawn. Occasionally, she also sought his help for tilling her field. Her husband had stopped sending money long

ago. Villagers coming back from Calcutta didn’t know his whereabouts. Her mother-in-law died, waiting for her son. Her father-in-law became blind. There was no one else in the house, not even a *devar*<sup>3</sup> with whom she could talk. The rest of the clan had their eyes set on her land and property. It was only the Koeri who helped her in attending to the needs of the household. When the workload increased, he started sleeping at her place.

Then she conceived Bhunesara. Following an old custom, the villagers sent a *gamcha*<sup>4</sup> to Calcutta asking, “Is it alright with you if your wife bears another man’s child? Please reply.” Neither the *gamcha* returned, nor did any news trickle back. But a few days later, the husband himself came back. Actually it was a coincidence. He had not even received the *gamcha*. He had arrived not from Calcutta, but from Varanasi.

The whole neighbourhood gathered around Jirwa-mai, who was trembling like a criminal, hiding from her husband’s sight. But how could she conceal the bulge of her belly? If she could have chopped it off, she would have done it. The neighbourhood wanted to know the husband’s response to the *gamcha*. But he was oblivious. As people passed by, they glared at him with questioning eyes. Eventually, the father asked his son, “What is to be

\* This is a shortened version of the Hindi story *Jirwa aur Jirwa-mai*, which appears in Ramanika Oupta’s short story collection, *Bahu-Juthai*.

<sup>1</sup> Colloquial term for mother.

<sup>2</sup> One of the many Hindu sub-castes found in Bihar, they were initially engaged in the cultivation of vegetables.

<sup>3</sup> A husband’s younger brother

<sup>4</sup> A rectangular piece of cloth, usually in red and white checks, tassled and used as a towel.

done now? Your wife is pregnant. The *gamcha* was sent to your address. Now that you have come back, please tell us what to do.”

Equipped with newly acquired urban ways, her husband had outgrown the *gamcha* mentality. He was seething with anger. The community’s panchayat was convened. Jirwa-mai’s brother and old mother were also summoned. But, the brother disowned her and took off. If his mother insisted that Jirwa-mai had to be brought back home, then he and his wife would have to bear the expenses for her upkeep. What was the use of getting involved in this mess? So, washing his hands off the whole affair, he said, “She is at the mercy of her husband and his relatives. They can kill her or keep her. She has erred, now let her face the consequences.” Her mother was left behind, wailing and weeping.

Jirwa-mai now stood isolated before the people of her community. Why would a Koeri come to the *teli*<sup>5</sup> panchayat? He was not summoned. The community had to punish the woman! “Well, why should another caste come and pay the penalty on her behalf?”

The Koeri community was unforgiving., “Punish that woman, we will take care of our son.” Thus, even Jirwa-mai’s lover didn’t come to her aid. How long could a lone woman hold her ground against such a crowd? Jirwa-mai admitted her mistake.

Rural society maintained a somewhat tolerant attitude towards women whose husbands worked in far-off places. Now this sense of freedom appeared rustic to Jirwa-mai’s husband. Out of a false sense of pride, he sat hanging his head in shame. Occasionally, he would glance at Jirwa-mai and turn away in contempt. The steady stream of love that he had felt for her over the last seven years seemed to have vanished all of a

sudden. His heart, like a lush field, had once been bursting with love for Jirwa-mai. Now it had become a barren desert.

Some of the boys in this community were studying in schools and colleges. They had picked up from their storybooks the ideals of Sita-Savitri and Padmini. Actual women who toil in the fields day and night were no longer understood. The boys were trying hard to forget about the generation of their mothers. That is why Jirwa-mai’s behaviour had injured their pride.

The elderly members of the panchayat, who believed in following the inherited values, were exerting pressure on the boys to accept the baby growing in Jirwa-mai’s womb. But the influence of the schoolboys mounted. There was a big hue and cry - the womenfolk stood dumb-founded. Some cursed Jirwa-mai, while others blamed the Koeri and the rest castigated her husband.

The boys roared, “This woman should be stripped and beaten up right here. The bitch has brought shame to the entire community!” Stripping and beating a woman in public was their idea of restoring and enhancing their community’s honour. It hardly mattered that those very boys brought disgrace to the village by sexually harassing girls in the fields. But they could not tolerate a *teli* daughter, in love with a Koeri.

The panchayat delivered its judgement - “Jirwa’s mother and the child in her womb will have no rights over the property of her husband. Jirwa-mai’s husband is free to remarry.” Jirwa-

mai was excommunicated and sternly warned to leave the *teli* settlements the very next day. Where could she go? She fell at her husband’s feet, wailing, “Forgive me, I won’t repeat this mistake. My father is no more. My brother isn’t ready to keep me. I am even forbidden from going to the *teli* quarters. If you won’t keep me either, then where will I go? A child is growing inside me. Have pity on me. You can remarry now. I will serve her. Give me leftovers for food but let me stay at your door. Don’t make me an outcast,”- she kept imploring her husband. But his heart did not melt.

The village boys continued their taunts and threatened to teach her a lesson. Her husband kept quiet. His silence frightened Jirwa-mai immensely.

After the panchayat meeting, when Jirwa-mai went inside her room, her husband promptly stood up and walked out. She was too scared to sleep. The cruel faces of the young boys barely out of school flashed before her eyes. Motivated by the feeling of revenge, their faces hardened like stone. And their ego, like a cobra, was ready to strike. She bolted the door from inside. She had just drifted into sleep when suddenly she felt the door had come off its hinges, and was advancing towards her.

The door assumed the shape of her husband and stood before her. His face bore the hatred of the school boys and the wrath of the entire community. He raised a rod, and thrust in into her. And she shrieked. With a force surpassing that which is used to deliver a child, she pulled out the rod from her womb and flung it away, fleeing the house, leaving imprints of blood on the pathways of the village. She finally fell at the doorsteps of the sarpanch<sup>6</sup> and spent the night over there. She got up at dawn and a private doctor stitched her wounds. She didn’t inform the police. After all, they are also men. From where would she get the money to pay them? They



<sup>5</sup> Community of oil-men and oil-women

would say, it was her own fault - she too believed so. But her miserable plight unnerved the sarpanch's wife. "After all, she is somebody's daughter! This can happen to anybody's daughter." With this rationale, she started nursing Jirwa-mai.

When she regained her health Jirwa-mai went to the Koeri's house. The Koeri's family protested. Jirwa-mai was adamant that the child in the womb belonged to the Koeri, not to the *teli*. She asked that a panchayat be convened in the Koeri colony. The panchayat declared that the Koeri could keep her, but not at home, only in the fields. Day in and day out, Jirwa-mai toiled in the Koeri's field like a labourer and nurtured the child in her womb. She ignored the barbs of the Koeri's wife and her children.

One day she cried out in pain. The Koeri fetched a mid-wife. The cries of an infant were finally heard. The mid-wife came and asked for her due. "It's a boy." For a moment the Koeri's face lit up with joy. He took out coins tucked away in his waistband. He handed two to the mid-wife and soon the news spread in the colony - "The *teli* has given birth to a son." Jirwa-mai was delighted!

"There's no need to worry now. I have a son. Even if the father abandons me, my son will look after me. Even by fighting it out he will definitely get a share of his father's property." Worrying about security had overshadowed her happiness during the pregnancy.

The co-wife came, accompanied by her sons and daughter. A new claimant to the property had been born, so their faces went pale with this worry. Even the Koeri refrained from expressing his joy in the presence of his grown-up sons. Looking at their faces, Jirwa-mai

secretly wept. But she was comforted by the thought that, "this child looks exactly like the Koeri. Just one glance reveals that he is his father's son." On the other hand, the Koeri was torn between the fear of his grown-up children and the joy over his newborn son. To top it all the daughter-in-law tittered, "The old man has been hooked in old age. Oh, this is the time for his sons and daughters to produce children. In this house the father is ahead of his sons. Why not, he is hooked on this young woman!" And they giggled in such a way that the Koeri surely heard.

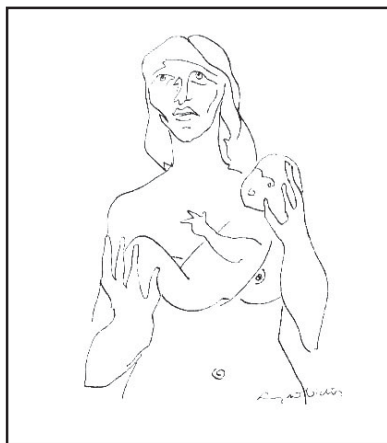
But whenever he came to Jirwa-mai's thatched hut in the field, the Koeri would forget all the ridicule. He only remembered Jirwa-mai's beautiful face. When he cuddled his dark, newborn son, he would forget about the other children, and the disregard shown by his sons-in-law. "I'm still young. I can keep four wives," his ego bellowed. "What do these rascals know? All of them are effete and hen-pecked. They do not realise that another helping hand has been born. They are only worried about the property. For this son of mine, I will take a new piece of land." Jirwa-mai toiled in the fields with all her might and looked after her child. Her elder son Raghunath and her daughter Jirwa, children from the first husband, had also come to stay with

her since her in-laws left them there. Jirwa-mai's husband left for Calcutta and didn't come back. He didn't even write to anyone in the village. The Koeri looked after the three of them, without any recrimination - though he had to listen to the taunts of his children and first wife.

One day the sons emphatically told their father, "Look, we won't give even a single penny from our share to your new women or her child. If you wish you can go and toil at Hazaribagh. We will not let that *teli* step into the fields. When her son grows up and demands his share, we won't budge! You can leave the family. We will take care of our mother and plough the land ourselves."

Jirwa-mai panicked. When the Koeri came back at night she said, "Look, if you don't guarantee some piece of land for my son and myself when you are alive, then tomorrow nobody will let me even step on it. Now that I am part of your life, you can save me or destroy me, but do not force me to beg on the street. Put some land in our name, that same land, which we till and plough." The Koeri agreed. Next day, early in the morning, Jirwa-mai got ready to leave for court. But the children somehow got wind of the plans, and prevented them from going.

Then Jirwa-mai shouted at the top of her voice and collected all the villagers. She forced the Koeri's sons to convene a panchayat. The Koeri confessed that Bhunesara was his son. The pancha declared that Bhunesara would get an equal share in his father's property. The Koeri was even instructed to write that piece of land Jirwa-mai had asked for, in her name. The next Monday the Koeri went to court and put everything in writing. When he came back, the boys confronted him again. The eldest son got the same land written in his name, on a stamped paper. When Jirwa-mai



<sup>6</sup> Head of panchayat

came to know about this she filed an appeal.

But the Koeri's son-in-law was a peon in the court and complained to the Sub-divisional Officer's wife, convincing her that Jirwa-mai had a firm grip over his father-in-law, that she had driven away the Koeri's wife. Naturally the official's wife sympathised. In clear cut terms, she told her husband - "Look, the case of Mahangu Mahto's father-in-law has been presented before you. Under no circumstances should that witch get that land. Only his first wife should get it!"

That is why, though all the papers were in Jirwa-Mai's favour, she did not receive possession of the land. Ashamed, the Koeri avoided Jirwa-Mai. Fed up with the tussles between his sons and Jirwa-mai, he left home and went to live at Bokaro. Jirwa-Mai went searching for him in Hazaribagh and that is when she came to me. She narrated her whole tale of woe and showed me the orders of the panchayat. She said imploringly, "*Maiya*, please search for my Koeri. Please help me in seeking justice." I didn't approve of the Koeri's desertion. I was an ML A at that time. I asked Jnaneshwar, my worker at Bokaro, to look for him, and sought police assistance in bringing him to my place, hi the meantime I let Jirwa-mai stay at my house.

The Koeri finally arrived. I had a talk with him. He melted at the sight of Jirwa-Mai. He agreed to give her a piece of land again. They stayed over for two nights at my place. The next day he went to court and put a piece of land in Jirwa-mai's name. But this time the fear of his children had forced him to promise fallow land. Jirwa-mai went to claim her land with great pride. The Koeri's son pointed towards the barren soil. Sobbing and defeated, she came to me again.



By now, the Koeri had fled. Jirwa-mai filed a court case to retrieve the land as alimony expense. She won, but now did it matter? What was the value of a court paper, unless there was support from a strong person who could help her take possession? "What do I do, the paper is there, the court's stamp is also there but somebody should be there to read it. Who all can a lone woman fight? Everybody is siding with his sons. Now only when Bhunesara grows up can he take the land by force. I am left to fend for myself by washing other people's dishes." She tried to console herself by saying that she would wait for Bhunesara to grow up, and tried to forget her present dilemma. But the seedling of a desire to possess land still sprouted in her barren heart and never died. It kept growing, falling and turning fresh and green again.

She got her daughter Jirwa married. Bhunesara was also wedded

to a girl of the same family in which Jirwa was a bride. No other *teli* was ready to forge an alliance with her family. The boy was eleven years younger to Jirwa and Bhunesara's wife was five years older than him. When Bhunesara grew up he would send for his wife - and when Jirwa's man grew up, he would take her to his home. These unwritten contracts and ill-matched exchange marriages are common in this society.

Jirwa-mai stayed on in Hazaribagh and started working as domestic help. Every time the Koeri came over, Jirwa-mai would crib about land, and he would leave in a hurry. His sons and daughters at the village had come to know that the Koeri was seeing Jirwa-mai again. The last time the Koeri went home the whole family showered him with love. But that very night the Koeri died. He was cremated immediately, after consultations with the village head.

They did not inform Jirwa-mai, nor did they call his son Bhunesara for the last rites. “*Maiya*, if I had been there, the police would have come and prevented them from taking away the corpse. I would have gone for a postmortem. All of them got together and poisoned him.” Jirwa-mai flung her hands in despair. Her face reddened with rage, and in shrill tones she cursed the Koeri’s sons and daughters.

Jirwa had been living in my house along with her mother. She was quickly growing into a woman. Though she was socialising a bit too much with the nearby shop assistant, Jirwa-mai did not reprimand her. When I received complaints, Jirwa-mai dismissed them, saying they were all accusing her out of jealousy. Jirwa-mai herself was becoming intimate with a sepoy staying at a nearby hotel. Sometimes she would go to him at night, or he would come over to my house. I did have some suspicions about this, but I could not interfere, since I used to be away from home most of the time. And what could I do? They were mutually consenting adults.

Actually, Jirwa-mai willingly turned a blind eye to Jirwa’s relationships. She was making Jirwa’s boyfriend pay for her own court expenses. And she wanted the sepoy to fulfil her dream of getting the possession of her piece of land by having him look after court matters. But her plan didn’t work. The sepoy abandoned her; and eventually, so did Jirwa’s friend, who, after spending a considerable amount of money, had won the case for Jirwa-mai, but was still incapable of taking possession. Fed up, he decided to leave and Jirwa eloped with him. Jirwa-mai spent her day crying and yelling, cursing her daughter, blaming her friend, lambasting the sepoy, and counting her misfortunes.

One day Jirwa came back. Under pressure from his kin, Jirwa’s

boyfriend had married a girl from his own caste. Jirwa lived with her co-wife for a few days. Her name was Reshma, and she was soft and smooth like silk. She was beautiful. Jirwa was short and fat. But with her prancing doe-eyes, brimming with love, she showered unrestrained affection on Reshma. But soon she started to fear the power of Reshma’s delicate body, and began feeling inferior, although her boyfriend Nazeer, a fair and handsome youth himself, never regarded her in this way. He loved Jirwa’s prattling ways and her innocent smile. But for no reason, she started thinking of herself as superfluous, angry at Nazeer and at herself. Frustrated and dejected, she came back to her mother like a wounded serpent.

Now, Jirwa-mai bore the weight of two slurs. She and her daughter were alike in their misfortunes. She would sigh and often say, “*Maiya*, both of us were deceived by our accursed hearts. The two-mouthed serpent of love has bitten us. We are ill-fated.”

Then one day, Jirwa-mai woke me up early in the morning - “*Maiya*, my ‘first one’ has come, looking for us. He’s very ill. His treatment will cost a lot of money. *Maiya*, please ring up the doctor, and ask him to attend to him tell him properly. After all he is my first husband, isn’t he? My parents had married me off to him. What can I do if he left me, but he has come back. *Maiya*, we were children, when we got married.” Astonished, I stared at her. A generous feminine soul was embodied in that foolish woman. Once, that bloody rod had been synonymous with this man. Jirwa-mai’s pale face then, and the face now stricken with anguish as she pleaded for the life of that man - all these images blurred in my mind as she repeatedly sought my help in saving her husband’s life.

I telephoned the doctor, and arranged for some medicines. Jirwa-mai bore all the expenses out of her

own earnings. She admitted him into a hospital and cared for him. Bhunesara was there too. That boy did not understand the idea of “father.” Therefore, when his mother told him that the man was his father, he believed it. After all, motherhood is a fact, fatherhood a mere belief.

Even after prolonged treatment, the first husband passed away. Jirwa-mai felt blessed in the sense that he had died in her hands. She had nursed him with great devotion. She also arranged the funeral with all the prescribed rites. It was then that society accepted her back into the fold. Even her son Bhunesara, begotten by a Koeri, was accepted in her *telijati*. Now, Jirwa-mai wanted to abandon everything and live as the widow of the first husband. Her soul didn’t wander anymore.

All men had deceived her. She now thought that only the first man had come to her rescue. At the time of his death, he came back. He had made her his widow. It was important for her that her community had allowed her to perform the last rites and even agreed to let her borrow money for the feast. How did it matter if the rate of interest was doubled? The significant thing was that the community participated in the feast at her home. After all, the penalty had to be paid. After feeding the entire village, Jirwa-Mai was deep down in debt. What was left for her now? For the rest of her life she would have to repay the loans incurred for the sake of her husband. When Bhunesara grew up, she thought, he would fight with the clan members and acquire the land in the village. No doubt, her relatives were occupying it now. But what did it matter if those people had the upper hand today? And what it matter if those people did not pay their share of the feast? At least they had to lend out the money. It was her ill luck that she had gone astray. These thoughts kept her alive, but seared her at the same time. □