



FOR A HOME, FOR A
PORT IN THE STORM
CHITRA GOPALAKRISHNAN

Anyone who lingers in our home, say for more than an hour, at our urban farm home on the outskirts of New Delhi, would know its port of entry is Reba.

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They have to go through this woman, who is our live-in housekeeper, governess, cook, garden caretaker, pet handler and therapist, fish and wildlife expert, medicine woman, electrician, plumber, curator of all farm activities, custodian of our secrets, with only some of these roles allocated to her by us.

This woman one who has a definite sense of self, unyielding ideas of her wall-to-wall jobs, deep convictions about her distinct position among the staff, resolute beliefs of her relevance, her influence in our home, our lives and her own peculiar brand of understanding of the world.

At our farm, in the Mehrauli district, named Kadambari, where we live, grow vegetables, greens and flowers and get plants to cooperate with the fish for our aquaponics adventures, life is all about living with the rhythms of nature.

Reba lives this life with us and refers to our dwelling as her home, just like we in the family do. Maybe, it's her use of 'amar', in Bengali, a language we are unfamiliar with, that causes the mix-up. The word that her clan uses interchangeably to mean both 'mine' and 'ours'. Or, maybe, she really says 'sabar' (everyone) and we mishear. Or perhaps, this is truly her home, her safe place where she can be herself, for after all, home, people say, isn't a place but a feeling.

Nothing at our farm stirs without her knowledge, without her say-so, not even a leaf. Reba gives herself full permission to believe in this.

When those around press her to say more about her role, we know, Reba says she is its manager. What she makes of the term, of the mantle she likes to carry, with no such designation attached by us, careless as we are about such things, and with her smattering of English, is best known to her. Possibly, Reba believes she manages us all, family members and staff, animate and inanimate farm beings, frag-

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mented and distracted as we all are.

In the time she has been with us, around twenty-five years, she has been in unison with me in many activities: mothering my daughter and five dogs, nursing and nurturing my ninety-one-year-old mother, planning my daughter's wedding, welcoming our granddaughter, and building and developing the farmstead.

Yet Reba is known to act on her own volition, cheerfully taking on things she never signed up for. And freely acting on things she has not been asked to do with her own brand of single-mindedness. Say as when standing as the first line of defence against meddlesome intruders and when all manner of disasters strike at the farm... flooding during monsoons, where pools of water stagnate for days on end, not to mention the variety of aquatic life that begin to spawn in them; the dropping of cable lines followed by long periods of power outage and the bursting of water pumps and pipelines and the resultant water crisis.

And, through all of this, through the whole shebang, through the sum of her formidable parts, comes a sassy independence, a certain level of accommodation to act as it suits her.

So it's not hard to understand why many come to the easy belief that Reba has hired us rather than the other way around.

She peers at me, today, unsmiling, dishevelled, through the May heat, through her mottled, swollen, dark cheeks and wasp-stung eyes. I see beads of sweat gather on her high forehead and plump nose, and the drippy dampness of her silver-black hair that she holds together in a top knot. "I am going to coat my eyelids with raw mango pulp and its creamy milk to quell pain and inflammation. It is a soothing remedy and will help me forgive the wasps," she declares.

Then as a quick afterthought, she adds, "After all, they build their earthen nests this time of the year and I probably have unwitting-

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ly disturbed some of them in their enterprise.”

I see Reba’s situation, or rather her serene return an hour later, with composed pleasantness, a toothsome smile and unblemished eyes, with a new lens. Her simple side dish for curing her eyes acquires a new depth within me.

My eyes follow her familiar, short frame as she walks briskly away from me, pitter-pattering in her mismatched clothing. I watch her balance her body bulk and swing her plump hips and arms past evenly round pools of sunshine on the grounds. One that the fallen, yellow petals of the long line of amaltas trees have settled into. These sunny, on-ground, petal patches, these rustling circles full of free-spun laughter, are among the few joyous reprieves in the Delhi summer. They tell you the low-hanging, oppressive sun is not all that malevolent. Not one’s complete reality.

Sensing my eyes on her, Reba turns to inform me, in her forever, high-decibel, half-Bengali and half-Hindi dialect, “I am on my way to fill my dhunachis, my earthen containers and coconut husks, to smoke out the mosquitoes in the evening. My home will be filled not with their whines but with the strains of the warm incense of dhuno. My stone floorings, ceilings and walls will all breathe out its fragrant vapours.”

But back to the matter at hand. It is not as if Reba’s bodily miracles, her corporal thaumaturgies, have never happened before. Cramping and bent over with stomach pain, some years ago, I saw her hurriedly fill a glass of water, stir it with a spoonful of sugar and salt, cut its swirls with a knife, like an oar on a boat, order me to drink it in a single gulp as she slow-murmured incantations. As I obeyed her in my comatose state, I recovered within minutes.

Muscle pulls, stiff backs, headaches... I have seen how she mends them on a regular basis with some ferocious, ungodly, shakes,

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pulls, wrenches and invocations and through her seasoned use of heated, flattened, thick wheat rotis laced with rock salt and turmeric that she uses as a poultice.

Reba's actions, I know, could be construed as magic or witchcraft, Bengali jaadu tona, as some of our staff believe it to be, depending on which point of her coordinate plane you stand on.

Seen through this prism, it is easy to fathom why impressions of her vary wildly. If one did attempt to chart everyone's notions of her, say like Venn diagrams, I suspect they would not be orderly, complex, conflicted and compassionate as she is all at once.

"Only a brief visitor would be fooled into believing the cook and housekeeper, Reba, the woman who just handed you a jug of drinking water, just holds a ladle or a broom," I hear Desraj, our resident gardener, whisper conspiratorially in vernacular Hindi, one spoken on the banks of river Gomati in Uttar Pradesh.

Oblivious of my presence nearby, I hear him spit and then say in slithery sibilants to the gaggle of hardy women who have come for the day to lay grass on a bald patch in our farm, "By the end of the day, you will know that her role is not only about recipes and cleaning but includes interference in everything to a level that is more than necessary. One must have a moth-to-the-flame death wish to cross paths with her, to believe it is possible to win against her foghorn voice." As I see the women look at Reba with fear and an odd reverence extended to a sister in control, I giggle in amusement. Desraj has inadvertently aroused awe when he meant to instigate ire.

Recent words, similar to his, of a newly-arrived, horrified neighbour, echo in my ears. "Really, she takes on too many liberties. My staff wouldn't ever dare to venture out of turn when we have visitors, let alone sit with us and hold conversations with them in our drawing-room. Or even dream of it." I hear her tut-tut, see her roll her eyes,

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uncaring of my reaction, my crumpled face. “But you allow Reba to take the centrestage. Unbelievable!”

Our other cook, or helper cook, Sarla, featureless and impassive in comparison to Reba, lives in dread of her unruly exuberance, her bossiness as much as being co-opted into her explosive surprises in the kitchen.

I overhear her say, ever so often, in her deadpan voice, when Reba is outdoors or out of her earshot, even as I eavesdrop while breakfasting, over the clang of utensils, “Her food is shaped by her geography and circumstance, or so she says. I think it is barbaric as she snares many into eating strange, rustic Bengali foods, a poisonous combination of roots, bitter leaves, herbs, berries, vegetables, flowers and strange ingredients.”

Rajesh, our wiry, close-cropped, quiet, no-nonsense man Friday, a diligent man of the soil, a driver, a plumber, a sobta-maker to harvest rainwater, a fixer of things that need to be fixed, a doer of things that need to be done, in short, a sallow, unsmiling version of Reba, says of her, “Loving yet belligerent, giving yet territorial.”

When his wife, Savitri, who visits him every quarter from their village in Uttar Pradesh’s Raebareilly, probes, with womanly inquisitiveness, about Reba, he says, “Those to whom she is loyal, she will do anything for them. To those she dislikes, she is like a warm-blooded soldier loaded with a rifle, letting loose flying bullets. Yet she has no littleness to her, no meanness of spirit even towards those she opposes. And her sisterly acts of kindness to me, not fleeting but daily occurrences, though we are from such dissimilar backgrounds, make my life bearable.” Savitri repeats his words to me, appeased, I suspect, by his use of the term sister to address Reba.

Sonu, the swarthy, muscled, gatherer of dead leaves, lopper of branches on the farm and the manurer of its furrows with a rotting

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mixture of mustard seeds, garlic, tomatoes, chillies, worm casings and moist neem leaves, talks of Reba as Mother Earth, the instinctual nurturer of plants, trees, flowers and all living things.

“I have seen her rescue hundreds of baby squirrels and birds who fall from their high nests, feed scrawny, caterwauling cats, tend to dying peacocks, be indulgent to rats and lizards, whom everyone else dislikes, keep track of each marauding monkey by giving them names, variants of the word mischief, Chulbuli, Masti, Sardar, Natkat, Dusht, and even capture an irate, hissing cobra in a plastic bucket that we later released in the nearby forest.”

I overhear Ram Khilawan, another brawny, vigorous toiler, our expert vermicomposter, our producer of mulch, say of Reba to his co-worker, as they shovel in-sync mounds of fallen leaves, twigs, cut grass and unused vegetables into a deep composting pit, one that will be covered and marinated over two seasons for well-developed compost, “She loves these dogs immoderately.”

Our two current, black, capricious, hyper-active, super-vigilant, she-Labradors wait in eager anticipation of rolling in this ungodly, odorous mix. When the two men and I slacken our attention, their ears perked and their back legs angled out behind them.

With inappropriate names, Emma and Sophie, a far cry from images of genteel, parasol-carrying, civil and graceful ladies, and with contrary natures, yet united by a complete lack of manners, our dogs, who have never known what leashes are, really need to be understood at their core if love for them is to come.

Shooing them both away, wildly excited as they are by the early niff of decomposition, the overlay of smelly heat and the cluster of writhing worms and snails within the buzzing, moist mess, he says, over their angry barks, “Reba massages, bathes, grooms, powders, cooks and feeds these two daily. She agonises when they are sick, ties

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talismans around their necks and prays for their safety.”

To his wide-eyed co-worker, who has never heard of such luxuries for canines, Ram Khilawan’s next words are even more incredulous. “I have walked in on her when she holds long conversations with them, rests both of them on opposite laps and sings them to sleep with Baul gaan. These melodies, she says to me, have a long folk tradition in her state and sung by wandering fakirs, god’s madcaps, lashed to the point of insanity by the wind and nature’s elements. What’s not to trust about her? Or her love of dogs beyond all measure?”

Luv Khush, a hard-of-hearing, hardworking, simpleton gardener, who says little but smiles in response to any and all questions, sees Reba’s diligence and patience. “We work together each year in March to plant lotuses. To sprout lotus seeds, we first soak these hard, black, pellet-like seeds for over a week, change the water daily and keep watch over their temperature as they need moderate warmth. Then we cautiously file, sand and nick the seeds to get to their cream-coloured insides and re-soak them till they sprout,” he says to me in a low, unhurried cadence.

Pausing, as if even the recount of the process is gruelling and talking painful, he says, “Then when they get to four inches in height, we transfer these leaf-stem sprouts into a dishpan and then into the pond. After a three-week dormant phase, the rhizomes thicken into tubers and sprout leaves. As the process is long and arduous, I get impatient and am ready to give up midway, but Reba perseveres and retains her composure.”

Savita Rani, who comes in to bundle fallen twigs, which she head-loads back to her home for fuel, is less sure about Reba’s equanimity. “She never wears a dupatta and silences me insolently when I tell her to cover up her bosom, to be demure, ladylike. It is between me and my didi, she argues. If my mistress has no problems, why

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should you? I will wear as I please.” Savita Rani looks at me beseechingly, as if seeking an ally, her face lengthened by piety. She says, “Reba’s heated arguments give me the feeling of swallowing glass shards, memsahib.”

My friends have an altogether different take. “This permanent feature in your life, your home, knows more than all of you about agency over her daily life, of egalitarianism, the power to shape her future. She lives it at a fever pitch and has the ability to dismiss all criticism of her ways as untrue rumours,” they laugh.

It is not as if Reba and I don’t have power struggles. We do. It’s ongoing. If I put out the washing to dry in a particular manner, she will rearrange it. If I use a particular dish to set the curd, she will transfer it to another. If I decide on a menu for the day, she will find ways to change it. I could stretch the list endlessly of how she marks her territory each day. On some days, to my amusement, not so much of others, I bully her back, beat down her audacities.

Yet I know her stories, the ones beneath her skin, her tales of struggle and survival, of incidents that have brought her towards her way of thinking. Towards her self-possessed outlook. Towards her need to hold on to every inch of territory.

She was born in 1971, in Bangladesh, the year of the Mukti-juddho or the Liberation War when Bangladesh became independent of Pakistan. It was a year that changed the history and geopolitical scenario of South Asia during her infant life, when her family had to flee from their home as refugees. She was among the ten million who footslogged their way to India, the land of her forefathers and mothers, amidst brutal shelling, the fallout of which was retaliatory action by the Indian government against Pakistan.

Reba often wrestles with the narrative of her infant life, one steeped in the politics and mistrust of three countries, whenever she

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recounts it for me in snatches. Bits from there. Pieces from elsewhere. It is as if she resists a linear tale, telling it in one go. She always keeps hidden a few slices, a bit of its pulse. Maybe, because she herself patches it into coherence based on several strands of hearsay. Or maybe, because she believes telling it whole will somehow simplify her and her family's ordeals, water it down to a weak plot.

"It is not like some parts of my story or my family's saga, are political; everything is deeply so. While we were imbued in Indian culture while in Bangladesh, as this is our original home, and spoke Bengali as spoken in West Bengal, we were at the same time intimately and warmly rooted in our life there, amongst the people, within the familial friendships formed with our neighbours over generations. We were at home with the spoken Bangla there, a tinge different from our Bengali, their culture, as also by the political influence that Pakistan exerted. You could say that in many ways, as people who were ousted, as people whose personal freedoms and choices were abraded, we became fettered, divided between all these countries, misbelieved, mistrusted and maligned by all of them," she says with simple clarity.

For me, Reba's observation, against the background of evictions and rubble, is savvy in its penetration of history in the making.

Leaning her head back, her eyes closed, I remember her telling me once, "I was a three-month-old baby when my family was forced to abandon our ancestral home in Haridpur district, built over two generations, as the conflict reached our doorsteps. As the Pakistani troops came into our homes."

Pausing to reflect, she says, "Holding a minority status and experiencing multiple jeopardies, I am told that when my family was on a desperate run, I fell out of the cloth knapsack my mother used to shoulder-carry me. That a relative, following behind, found me on the ground, bawling and injured yet clinging on to life palpably, with hun-

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gry hope, opening and shutting my mouth, just as starving baby sparrows do, only they do this with their beaks.”

When her eyes open, they speak of unspoken anguish, of things she is still scared to give voice to.

“That is why I was named Reba, which in Bengali means a woman who binds the family and home together,” she says pensively.

Later, she continues, in a subdued voice, “We sought refuge in Nadia district in West Bengal where we were shunted from one refugee camp to another until we pitched our huts in Bagula village. Yet, even here, our thatched roofs were constantly blown away by storms and people looked at us as outsiders. You could say my ache for a home, my home, for a port in the storm, for a place of love, safety and dreams began here, from my deep sense of homelessness. As my need for parents, orphaned as I was before I turned two. Both my parents died in our new homeland, in quick succession, within months of each other, destitute and dispossessed in the extreme.”

On another day, when Reba is open to cast her mind back on her old life, she wistfully reminiscences about her older siblings, her voice thin, faint. “They would relate stories of starvation to me. Of malnutrition. Of how we all had to find food, nutritious food, to stay alive. Fresh vegetables were out of the question as money was scarce. Fish was out of reach, too, barring monsoon times when we could pluck them out of overflowing ponds. Of our staple food, rice, they would say, we could afford only a tiny, round, cheap and yellow variety called China Chal, the other varieties, Kanak Chur, Chine Kamini, Rani Akanda, Hogla and Kala Bhat, being frightfully expensive.”

Reba’s gloom momentarily lifts as she takes a backward glance, yet again, this time of happy memories. Of how her siblings, as children and teenagers, gathered together to make puffed rice and chaler pithas in the village they now called home, with all their hearts, and

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where their acceptance was beginning to happen, slowly but surely. When transactional acts began to fade and friendships began to sprout.

“Puffed rice got made after boiling husked rice several times, air drying it and pouring it over a huge, iron container with super-heated sand. We loved the sight of these rice grains bloating like little, white balloons and gobbled them hot with a whole lot of spicy ingredients. Over an open fire, we also made sweet, round, chaler pithas by folding in rice flour, salt, coconut and jaggery with water and steaming it in an earthen vessel with little hollows in them. These fluffy treats were like pieces of heaven served to us.”

Stopping to gather her thoughts, she says, “Such intense heat over our cooking vats, the pleasure our food gave us, our camaraderie over loss, somehow burnt away our anger against those who spread hate against us, be they people or politicians, whatever their country or calling, as our need for vengeance against them for disrupting our peaceful lives, for leaving deep, painful emotional scars and for making us invisible in our own country when we were made to leave. I am glad we learnt the art of forgiveness young. Hate is mental venom. It poisons your spirit, destroys your soul and sows bitterness into all your relationships. It is no way to live.”

Reba’s eyes fill. The landscape of her pain and that of her family fall as tears.

On yet another day, on a wintry, fog-ridden day, as we chalk out a Bengali menu for our dinner guests, Reba volunteers more of her life stories. “My brother Sushil Biswas,” she recalls, “is full of stories of how we as a family began to dip into our ancient culinary wisdom and practices passed on to us by our elders through oral traditions, of how we began to eat a lot of wild greens in our new home, both from the land and also from waters, and of how we began to source our pro-

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teins from products of water lilies: their roots, stems and bulbs that we scraped, boiled, dried and ate.”

“I myself remember how we would elevate the flavours of our rustic dishes, give them a twist through our ingenious use of pumpkin, its skin, stem and yellow flowers. We would do the same with ash gourds, drumsticks, raw bananas and even use the bitter leaves and blossoms of neem trees. I have vivid memories of how we used to treat ourselves to the products of the tropical palm. To its fresh juice at dawn when it is at its sweetest, to its warm chunks of jaggery in the evening when its juice was hardened into brown lumps through hours of slow bubble-boil while our elders indulged in its sap as liquor, tadi, when weren’t looking,” she says, her voice alight with happiness.

“So while I grew up in our new home, in scarcity, in want, in hunger, we ate foods available to us for not only sustenance but also for comfort. As much as a continuation of our older cultural memories as a celebration of the new in our current homeland. In a way, through my cooking for all of you and your guests, I bring my story, the story of all my homes,” Reba tells me.

If I am struck by her perceptiveness at this point, she awes me with what she says next, “While I must confess that I did begin to think of my local cuisine as inferior, as starvation diet, I have come back to its wholesomeness, not because many TV food channels say so, but through my own understanding. I have, hence, made it a part of my daily experience, as all of yours on many days. More so, as you all enjoy what I cook, though you belong to the south of India and eat a variety of cuisines, of this country and others, dishes you have schooled me to learn and appreciate.”

Reba continues, “I know the story of food is universal as it is binding. For it speaks of love. The greatest gift you have given me is an ability to heighten my culinary aesthetics and amplify the pleasures

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of eating for those partaking of the food. I use this skill, one I have learnt well, to make my local foods flavoursome.”

While most of her accounts make allusions to the other devastating impact of the war, physical abuse, bodily violations, social discrimination, poor living conditions, illiteracy, the lack of healthcare, they stop short of spelling them out. Perhaps, she wants to spare me the agonies she has endured as a woman, the many darkneses that have descended on her, the messier truths of her life, or maybe she is eager to find the proverbial silver lining, to end her stories on a hopeful note.

Like her tale of her arrival in New Delhi. Her flinging open of doors of opportunity.

Reba says, “Coming here has helped me throw away my painful past, begin life with a fresh identity and make my social acceptance easy. At the age of fourteen, I ran away from my village Bagula, left the man I was forced to wed, who beat me and snatched my earnings, and boarded a train without a ticket or any idea of where it was headed. I hid in the toilet when the ticket checker came and arrived in the capital penniless, directionless and homeless. I worked at a tea stall, graduated to being a maid in a small home, then a nanny, and after several false starts, yet jobs that taught me many life skills, especially how to be a female professional in a dangerous world filled with misogyny, I finally found you,” she says.

She is frugal with details of her brief marriage, any other longings she may have clung to later or her desire for children. “These dreams have slipped through my fingertips. Why think of things no longer within grasp?” she questions prosaically. She walls her vulnerabilities from me, from herself, too, perhaps, to keep emptiness at bay.

But I see her pain now as clear as day. The agony she cannot seem to mask. Ageing and physical disabilities are one part of her

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troubles. Weakening knees, stomach and vision mean a lot of medication and diet restrictions.

Reba's greater hurt comes from her immediate family. She has always saved a large part of her salary for handsome remittances to her family members. "I hoped to live with them in my declining years and my way of saying this to them was to feed, clothe and educate them. But they have played fast and loose with my earnings and my financial security now lies in building myself a home of my own. I know I will do that, except it pains me to know that my old age will be spent alone, in a tired, sorrowful space, without the scaffolding of a family. It is a sad way to live and will be no life at all," she says.

"How could our love that has sprung from the same source scatter thus? Destiny has deceived me yet again." Reba's defeated, broken words, her face of raging despondency, her empty eyes, her shoulders sagging, all hinging on self-annihilating madness, scares me.

Sensing my fear, my concern, she attempts a winsome light-heartedness, as if the game of loss isn't her game, "For now my home is with you and I will make sure everyone knows it." The glint in her eye is wicked.

I know when Reba leaves us and her home, to retire in her village, many visions of her will swim into my mindscape. Images of her unfailing devotion to my child, the co-rearing of her through her childhood and young adulthood. Her welcoming of my granddaughter with the same joy as mine. Her boundless love, energy and alacrity in caring for our dogs. Her little gestures of arranging flower petals in intricate designs within urns. Her bringing of jasmine flowers for my deities. Her sun-drying of rose petals for my potpourri. Her stockpiling of oils, for my hair and hers, darkened as much with age as their ingredients, and, foul-smelling mostly. Her daily, assiduous collection of used coffee grounds, eggshells and banana casings as manure for

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rose plants. Her imitation of the gurgles of rain culverts as she drains out stagnant, monsoon waters, as if her warbles will somehow speed up the process. Her odd pronunciations, bulf for bulb, Hotsap for WhatsApp. And her made-up words autoised, jointery, absurdities I have adopted.

I know she will have to finally cross over to the other side of that most difficult bridge, the one leading to self-love and self-sufficiency. After all, they say, loneliness is its own antidote.

Will her new, final home catch her imagination as the starting place of her real rest and comfort? Will she find there what she always seeks: genuine connections, a sense of community yet with personal space and freedom, respect, understanding and love? Will it come to be her best and most fulfilling form of love, or will she hang between worlds strictly enforced as our world still is by limits, hierarchies and protocols of social distance?

CHITRA GOPALAKRISHNAN, a New Delhi-based journalist and a social development communications consultant uses her ardour for writing, wing to wing, to break firewalls between nonfiction and fiction, narratology and psychoanalysis, marginalia and manuscript and tree-ism and capitalism. **Author website:** www.chitragopalakrishnan.com