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**Author/s: SK Leishangthem
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Email: editor@modernresearch.in
mrsejournal@gmail.com

Managing Editor: **Yumnam Oken Singh**

Dhono's Dream

SK Leishangthem*

All the beautiful damsels belonged to him. He never wastes time and money; he never goes in pursuit of the lady. To court a woman without her knowledge – there is nothing enjoyable like it. He enjoys the company of beautiful damsels and plays with them in paradise. He enjoys the company of the beauties on top of high mountains and crystal waters below. All these enjoyments come to a heartbreaking parting the moment the lady comes to know of it. The cool breeze burns his skin and the cold water cannot cool his burning heart. By the way, you may not see him in a cloudy day without a torch. If he were a woman, without a rich dowry Dhono would remain an old maid.

A man with a dog's demeanor, a cock's nap and one who eats like a pig would never go hungry. Even though his mother had carried him within her womb for ten months, he belonged to the neighborhood since the moment he started to walk. At 6 months, he had lost his father to a gunshot while felling trees in the hills. The neighbors showered their love upon Dhono after he lost his father and he never refused a word from the elders. He had a habit of singing with his thick lips, a tune impossible to the best singer; and the girls would say, "Brother Dhono! You have sweet voice. Play the drum." On seeing his good nature, many old women would say, "My son, you are so good. You'll surely get a good wife." But they never thought of giving their beautiful educated daughters to him. The girls also said, "Black men are beautiful women's black diamond." To Dhono, these words are the November rain that gives a dying wood a hope for life.

By some means, Dhono completed his graduation. Unemployed men generally turn to an NGO, a contractor, a business or a private school teacher for his living. Women turn a weaver, a *Marup* organizer, a moneylender or a private school teacher. Dhono's mother sold the

little plot of her farmland to bribe for a suitable government job for her son. It seemed as if he would be on top of the list when the money was taken, but his name was nowhere in the selection list. After much delay, about half the amount was returned in little installments – all ended up in fares for frequent visits to reclaim the amount and other sundry expenses. After sometime, Dhono started a shop with borrowed money from moneylenders. It also ended with people buying up in credit and other household expenses. He then started some contractor's work with an aim to make his long suffering mother happy. He never got the bills sanctioned for it too. He had now fallen into the deep pool of debt. Moneylenders coming to get back their money became the morning cock to wake up his sleep. At last, he got his bills cleared but he could not repay all the debts due to little deductions here and there in getting the bills cleared. With no means to clear the debt, Dhono jumped down from a building to end his miserable life; but luckily or unluckily, he fell on a fat Punjabi lady walking down the road. He survived but the lady died on the spot. He became a total bankrupt after giving compensation to the family of the deceased as well as bribing the police to escape imprisonment. Now, he had nothing except his home and mother. His story became the talk of the locality.

One day, Dhono was returning home through a *galli*. He fancied to hear someone calling him and turned to behold an angel of a beauty smiling at him. The dingy *galli* lighted up with her smile. The smell of her hair and the perfume she applied diminished the fragrance of a king's garden. Her lips trembled like the petals of a rose and the eyes were little crystals. Every part of her body emitted sparks of love and lust. Dhono was in a hurry to reach home to his mother but he was mesmerized by the beauty. When he came to his senses, the lady was close to him. He came back home that day after a few words with her. After a few days, Dhono brought her home to be his wife. Everyone came to see the beautiful lady of the ugly man. The joy of his mother knew no bounds as she had dreaded her son would remain a *brahmachari*. She colored her grey hair and started arrangements to be made for her son's marriage.

Dhono's wife flooded the house with her dowry and gifts. The neighbours were thunderstruck at the sight that included gold jewellery,

almirahs, beds and even a scooter. He was praised for his cleverness in choosing a wife and the neighbours told their sons to bring a wife like Dhono’s wife. But a gynecologist of the locality gave a cynical smile at the sight of Dhono’s wife. Surprisingly, all the items that flooded the house in the marriage disappeared within 2-3 months. Most were brought just to show for a brief duration at her marriage. They were returned when her parents gave a visit. Some were bought with money from *Marup* and were sold cheap to pay the installments; others were taken in the form of goods when she failed to pay the installments in cash. This happened more frequently until the arrival of spring season. The scooter was bought on credit and was taken back when she failed to pay the EMI. She told everyone that her brother has taken it and that she would be given a new one. Her jewellery turned out to be either paste or borrowed. When the ladies of the neighbourhood who had seen her necklaces, bangles and earrings came to borrow for an occasion, she told them they had been taken by her mother or sister for an occasion. Dhono’s mother had less work to do at home earlier, but her load increased with the arrival of her daughter-in-law. Not to burden her mother-in-law too much, she started to give minor errands to her husband. “Dear, I’m going to toilet. Please fetch a bucket of water ... Please finish cooking early today,” she would tell Dhono while he was cooking. “Dear, a glass of water for taking tablet, please.” When he comes to give the water, she would say “Please press my dresses after the meals are ready.” Days passed and Dhono’s mother who had gone to every house to narrate about her beautiful daughter-in-law till her teeth were shaking was gnashing her teeth with anger.

Dhono’s mother could no longer hide her feelings and, to lighten her heart, narrated her misery to her friend Ibemhal. But she was ashamed of people coming to know of it and told her friend not to pass the tale to a third ear for the prestige of her family. Ibemhal replied how she could tell anyone. Ibemhal was in no better situation; she had been tolerating her daughter-in-law like water tolerating oil. But on a day her daughter-in-law Tama put more fish on her plate, she narrated everything to her delight. At the end, she made her promise not to open her mouth to a third person. Tama swore she would die before she reached her mother-in-law’s age if she tells a third person. One day, Tama let the words slip from her tongue as she was gossiping with

Dhono's wife and catching lice from each other's head. Dhono's wife was adamant to know the person who started the tale and forced Tama to tell everything. She returned home after telling so many tell-tales of her mother-in-law. She flared up at the sight of her mother-in-law. All the 'do-not-tell's became known to both and they cursed at each other's back. A storm was brewing up in the house and the result was a battle-of-words that shook the pillars of the house. Dhono could not decide whose side to take and spent the night outside the house. At the first call of the morning cock, he entered his bedroom. The next morning, Dhono and his wife separated from his mother. The house was divided in the middle and his mother lived alone on the other side.

One day, some friends of Dhono's wife came for a visit; Dhono bought a fish and prepared the meal; the dish smelled of something else as Dhono made some mistake in the process of frying and putting salt. After meal, one friend whispered to another that the meal was a waste of her nail polish. Dhono's wife heard it and burned with shame. After the friends left, she started beating her husband telling how he could prepare such a meal. Dhono's mother heard the beatings and was pleased that her son was beating the bitch. She thought some thrashing was required to correct her. When the thrashing sound reached around ten in number, she thought it improper not to interfere and shouted, "Dhono! Stop beating her. That is enough. You are no more kids ... live together peacefully." Hearing her mother's words, Dhono replied, "Mother! I'm not beating her. She is beating me." Angry with his words, she picked up a stick, and seeing the stick, Dhono rushed under the bed. She struck under the bed with the stick here and there and said, "Come out quickly or you will see my wrath." From under the bed, Dhono shouted, "I am a man. I'm telling my word I am never coming out."

Dhono had a little son and it resulted in frequent quarrels between his wife and Tama. Once, the child's toy was missing. Dhono's wife said it was taken by Tama's daughter. Tama argued her daughter had never taken it. By evening, the little verbal quarrel resulted in a battle of the tug of war with the two women pulling each other by the hair. When Dhono tried to stop the quarrel, Tama went home and told her husband that Dhono has beaten her. Hearing the report, Tama's

husband came in a rage to teach Dhono a lesson. Dhono, who had never fought with anybody, tucked his loincloth and wrestled with Tama's husband, who was like an elder brother to him, in the courtyard. The battle ended only when the entire neighbourhood came and interfered. He thought they were right in the quarrel. Coming inside the house, Dhono's wife told him, "The people of this neighbourhood are too mean to live with. Let's go to my mother's house and live there." Dhono's mother also came to enquire about the quarrel and her daughter-in-law gave her all details. That night, she had a meal together with her daughter-in-law and they lived together again as before. When Dhono just started to have a pleasant sleep, his wife again talked about going away to her maternal home. Thinking of his poor mother, Dhono could not agree and his wife fumed.

After a few days, Dhono's wife eloped with another man. They had been in love before their marriage but the man had married another woman, as his parents did not like her. After marriage, they had been seeing each other secretly. Dhono thought she had gone for some work and would be back by nine or ten O'clock as usual. He had never dared to ask her the purpose of her errands outside, as she would only scold him. He spent the night with his son in his arms, waiting for his wife to return home. Dhono realized the situation only when some people came with a few cops to inform of the elopement, and he cried loudly. He could have discussed the problem with Tama's husband but he dared not after the fight because of his wife. Ashamed and enfeebled, he turned ill and soon he was seriously sick. Neighbours took him to a hospital and he was found to be infected with HIV. Doctors asked if he used drugs or had sexual relation with other women. Dhono simply replied that he never used drugs, and that forget about other women, even his wife had eloped with another man. Hearing his reply, the doctor rebuked him. His wife filed a case for the custody of their child while Dhono was still sick. Dhono argued his son would live with him but he lost the case, as he had no money to hire a lawyer. The magistrate pronounced, "The child will live with his mother till he is 18." Dhono's son was snatched away from his arms and he cried calling his son, "My child! Don't go, my child." Kicking with his little legs, the child escaped from his mother and ran to the embrace of his father. The child cried with tears rolling down his cheeks, "Father, I'll not go. I'll

always be with you.” The mother snatched away the child at last. Dhono was frustrated, heartbroken. Clenching his fist, he cried aloud, “My son! My son!” Hearing the shouting, Dhono’s mother came to his bed. She folded up the mosquito net and woke Dhono up. His body was wet with the rain leaking through the holes in the roof and his mother said, “What a sound sleep you had. You didn’t even realize water leaking on the bed.” After many more words, Dhono was awake. He got up abruptly and looked around. His mother said, “Not a grain of rice for today. Are you not going for rickshaw driving?” Slowly, Dhono stretched himself and replied, “Not today, mother.”

--- Translated by **Yumnam Oken Singh****

Glossary

Almirah	: a wardrobe.
Brahmachari	: a person who practices brahmacharya; celibate.
Galli	: lane; alley.
Marup	: a form of lottery.

***SK Leishangthem**, Freelance Writer & Businessman. Khekman, Thoubal, Manipur, India.

****Dr. Yumnam Oken Singh**, TGT-English, JNV Ukhrul, Manipur, India.