

# *Mehar Estates*

A Plantation Story

By Saugata Nandi

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*Dedicated to  
my loving wife Padma*





## *O! You Wall*

The rage swells in me,  
As I push against the wall,  
Who are you to stop me, I ask,  
Why do you try to change my path?

To flow down my bed is my duty,  
Giving life to all on the way,  
Who are you to distribute my water,  
Why do you try to stop me from my duty?

All the life is taken out of my drops,  
As oil and sludge and waste is dumped in me,  
Who are you to make me unclean,  
Why do you try to change my life?

Birds die of thirst, fishes die of sludge,  
Oh you irresponsible creature, realize the truth,  
I will be there, always, whether you are there or not,  
What is it that you are trying to change?

I can break the wall, now if I want,  
I can claim my path,  
But, I won't, as I only know you are a part of me,  
Who is it that you are trying to stop?

When the time comes for me to reclaim my path,  
I will do so, you cannot stop me,  
I will decide, I will act,  
You cannot change my journey, my destiny.

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This book is entirely a work of fiction and all characters are fictional. It has no resemblance to any person, group or community – either living or dead.

### **Main characters in the book**

Nazin – A grand old lady from Coorg; a skilled planter; owner/ manager of Mehar plantation;

Dalia – Nazin’s orphaned granddaughter;

Rohan – an ambitious young man in a disputed plantation;

Kunwar – a professor dedicated to tribal welfare;

Prakash and Mehul – Nazin’s sons;

Robin – a Kodagu tribal who goes on to become the tribal village headman;

Rao – an unscrupulous coffee broker aiming for more money and power for himself in Coorg;

Venkat – a police inspector who works closely with the Police Commissioner;

Chand – a retired planter and a community patriarch;

Dhruva, Veda, Anand, Maya – volunteer leaders of committees dedicated to helping Coorg reform.

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To watch mutely as cancer and a brain tumor slowly consumed her grandmother was heart-wrenching for young Dalia Mehar. The problem had started in the gastrointestinal tract; almost simultaneously, a small tumor in the brain had also developed. It was like a checkmate.

Dalia was heartbroken. She remembered when, as a little girl, she would sit in her grandmother's lap and watch her pound spices early in the morning. This was a regular ritual for her grandmother: Wake up early, plan the menu for the day, pound spices based on the menu, and then start the rest of the day's work.

Nowadays, spices were commercially available in small sachets, powdered and ready to use. Dalia's grandmother hated those; she believed that they never had much flavor and most of the powders were contaminated. She always said that the pulverized spices were made out of lower grade seeds which would not fetch good prices if sold as seeds. Being a planter, she knew what she was saying.

‘Never purchase spice powders, Dalia. Buy whole seeds and powder them yourself,’ grandmother’s words were etched in Dalia’s memory...

‘At the most, three more days,’ said the doctor. People either hated the old lady or loved her, but no one could ever ignore her. Once a vibrant woman full of vitality, she now had a frail frame. Skin on the bones remained, while all the muscles had slowly withered away. She whispered to Dalia, ‘Bring me some fish curry with coconut chutney for lunch, cooked the Coorgi way.’ Dalia understood what this meant – her grandmother was asking her to cook her last meal. The underlying message was to cook it with spices the way she would, hand pounded from whole spices from her plantation.

The next three hours were very emotional ones for Dalia. She took out the spices from her grandmother’s store, pounded them using the same stone mortar and pestle that her grandmother used. She realized the difference between the true flavors of fresh, hand-pounded spices and the powdered ones sold in sachets. She was happy that her grandmother had entrusted her to make the meal; at the same time, she was sad, as she realized that she was perhaps making it for the last time for her grandmother.

Time flew as she cooked and soon it was twelve o’clock. Dalia packed the fish curry, chutney, and white rice in a ‘hot case’. She also packed the copper utensils – the plate, the glass,

and two bowls – in which the old lady liked to have her food. Dalia wondered how much her grandmother could eat; in the last one week she had been taking solid food very sparingly. A few teaspoons of rice, half a glass of water, half an idli, three sips of Horlicks... these were the measures of the quantity intake.

As Dalia opened the hot case and laid out the dishes in front of her grandmother, she saw a sparkle of happiness in the otherwise lackluster and watery eyes. The special relationship that the old lady shared with Dalia, her only surviving grandchild, was known by everyone in the community.

Mehar Estate, with its coffee plantations, pepper plantations, and fruit orchards, spanning over 170 acres of land, was one of the richest estates in entire Coorg. They all belonged to Nazin, Dalia's grandmother, and had been passed on as an inheritance to Dalia. Nothing for anyone else.

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## *Mehar Estate*

**D**alia's first visit to India and Coorg, 20 years ago, was still fresh in her memory. She remembered making the journey from Singapore, where she lived with her parents, to Bangalore, and then the taxi ride to Coorg. All along the ride, large trees lined both the sides of the road. They provided a beautiful canopy and mesmerized her. That particular month, the trees were flowering and the whole drive was a breathtaking one. The red blossoms of the gulmohar trees, the green cover overhead, and the musky fragrance created an unforgettable experience for the young Dalia.

As they drove into Coorg, the heady smell of citrus trees and fruits filled the air. There was a bit of crisp and chill in the air. All this had made her forget the long trip; in fact, it made her hungry.

A right turn, three more minutes down the lane, and they were entering the gates of the Mehar coffee estate. Tall trees entwined with creepers towered all over the estate. Sunlight, filtering through the tall trees gently fell on bright green plants with nearly red berries, which formed a thick undergrowth. Dalia watched curiously as workers on thin bamboo ladders

plucked something from the creepers and put them in a bag attached to their waist.

She could see a pond, pomegranate trees, sapota trees, and mango trees, and, nestled comfortably between them, a brightly colored mansion. In front of the home stood a very familiar person. The same face, similar eyes. Dalia's grandmother, Nazin Mehtar. It was the first time she was meeting her grandmother in person, though her father had often shown Dalia her pictures.

Barely had the car stopped that Dalia got out and ran to her, hugged her tight, and started crying. This was the first time she had really broken down and cried after the demise of her parents and younger brother in a road accident 20 days ago. The pain melted away for the moment. She felt very much loved, cared for, and protected. Dalia remembered her father's words: If ever in life you feel sad, lonely, and alone, just catch a flight to Bangalore and go to Coorg to your grandmother. Now here she was, just eight years old, an orphan. A new life had started for Dalia, and deep down she knew it.

The old lady had always been very fond of her plantations in Coorg. She was a proud woman with a regal air about her. She was very passionate about coffee, pepper, vanilla, and the fruits that grew in the plantations under her care. The house also had a kitchen garden that grew coriander, curry leaves, tomato, bell pepper, eggplants, and the seasonal vegetables – enough for the needs of the family.

The flowerbeds were neatly lined and freshly painted as if to welcome Dalia, the only other surviving member of the family. For years, a fierce battle of power, control, and inheritance had been waged within the outwardly peaceful plantation. Finally, when the settlement of the long-drawn lawsuit favored the old lady, the opponent took his terrible revenge. Both of Nazin's sons had been murdered, their entire families wiped out. Two fatal car accidents, one near Mysore and the other in Singapore, took away her sons and their families. Dalia survived by a stroke of luck. There was a rumor in Coorg that the coffee of Mehar plantations was the best because the manure was blood.

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## *Coffee Plantation*

**B**eautiful, green, peaceful, and quiet – these are the words used by tourists to describe a plantation. But look a little deeper and one could see that beyond the beauty and the greenery, a plantation was a huge headache. Dalia would watch her grandmother start her day grinding fresh spices. The lady would be lost in thought, planning her day as she pounded the seeds. These were moments she wanted to herself, undisturbed. After that, she would visit the plantation alone, looking for any signs of rot, pest, or any imperfection in the work carried out the day before. She would make a note of these and pass the list to the supervisor at eight in the morning.

The day's work would then be planned along with the supervisor. Weeding, spraying pesticide, spreading fertilizer, cleaning the undergrowth, pruning the shade, planting new saplings, plucking the berries, pulping and drying them – all of this work was like an orchestra. If a single step went wrong, the quality of the yield would drop and subsequently fetch less money.

The entire work was labor intensive. Consequently, fewer workers, less work accomplished; more workers, more work

accomplished. Managing over 170 acres spread over two estates like this meant that every activity took at least a fortnight with 30 workers, assuming they worked effectively.

Five workmen and their families stayed at Mehar Estate, while the rest were contract hires. Over the past few years, most of the labor was migrating to cities to find work as construction workers. The lure of a better life, better facilities, and better education for the children were the most important factors for the shift. India was developing, maybe a bit too fast. The inclusive policies of the government were giving rise to aspirations in the labor population, and the movement from an unskilled to a semi-skilled and highly skilled labor force, was taking place systematically.

At Mehar, coffee was produced the most, followed by pepper, cloves, fruits, and a bit of vanilla bean. Once the coffee seeds were picked, they were dried and bagged. Every bag was then sold to companies which would roast the seeds, blend them, grind them, and sell the powder in the marketplace. A touch of lemon zest, a drop of vanilla, a dash of green pepper, a little less chicory, a little more peaberry, Arabica gently blended into Robusta – enchanting flavors were created with minute twists of the traditional coffee. The creativity was endless at the stages of roasting and blending.

Over time during the process, though, human labor would get replaced by machines.

The dried coffee seeds fetched around one-tenth the price of the roasted, ground, and packed coffee. Planters had to manage the entire work and the workers with the money they got. As the cost of labor increased and the global coffee prices fluctuated, planters were constantly getting squeezed. They had no control over the prices that the Chicago and New York coffee exchanges declared; yet, the prices they fetched were significantly influenced by these far-off commodity exchanges.

Globalization had its challenges. There were times when the global market prices were lesser than the cost of growing the coffee in Coorg; then, there were times when the global market prices were one-and-a-half times the cost of growing it. This fluctuation had given rise to the new skills of speculation, stocking, and selling at the right time – all of which were now becoming essential for the planters.

Not only that, water scarcity had started plaguing the plantations. Unseasonal rains were giving rise to new problems. The charm of plantations was eroding for the planters. Many planters, after bitter experiences, had sold their estates to real estate companies and moved away. The younger generation preferred the city life, with much lesser uncertainty and far more pleasure.

Amidst, all this, one lady who could manage the plantation well, make good profits, and tide over all the issues (seemingly) effortlessly, was Nazin Mehar.

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## *Family House*

**M**arried at the age of 16, Nazin came to a forest in Coorg with her husband, Johan Mehar. They had bought a twenty-acre plot of forest land and obtained permission to grow a coffee plantation. They lived in a small house with a single room, a kitchen, and a toilet. In those days, if one had money, one preferred to spend it on guns than on a large house. Guns were essential for protection: elephants wandered around freely, leopards were numerous, and hares, jungle fowl, and snakes were often found on the plot.

It was hard work, right from the word go. Wild bushes had to be uprooted, land had to be watered, rocks broken, and the hard soil tilled. For a steady source of water, a reservoir had to be created, which also doubled up as a fish pond.

Work was divided between Nazin and Johan. While he was spending time getting the plantation ready, she focused on the reservoir and the house. They put them together literally brick by brick. With no experts available, the multiple roles of manager, financier, architect, and supervisor fell to the two of them. Gradually, one at a time, things started taking shape. The