Silenced for centuries by caste prejudice and social oppression, the Dalits of Maharashtra (formerly called 'untouchables') have only in the last forty years found a powerful voice in Marathi literature. The revolutionary social movement launched by their leader Dr Ambedkar was paralleled by a wave of writing that exploded in poetry, prose, fiction and autobiography of a raw vigour, maturity, depth and richness of content, and shocking in its exposition of the bitterness of their experiences. One is jolted, too, by the quality of writing by a group denied access for long ages to any literary tradition.

The short stories in this first English anthology forcefully convey the 'differentness' of Dalit literature. The protagonists of these stories are shown struggling for survival at their different levels — confronting casteism, limitations, abject poverty, misery and brutality — and fighting a brave battle.

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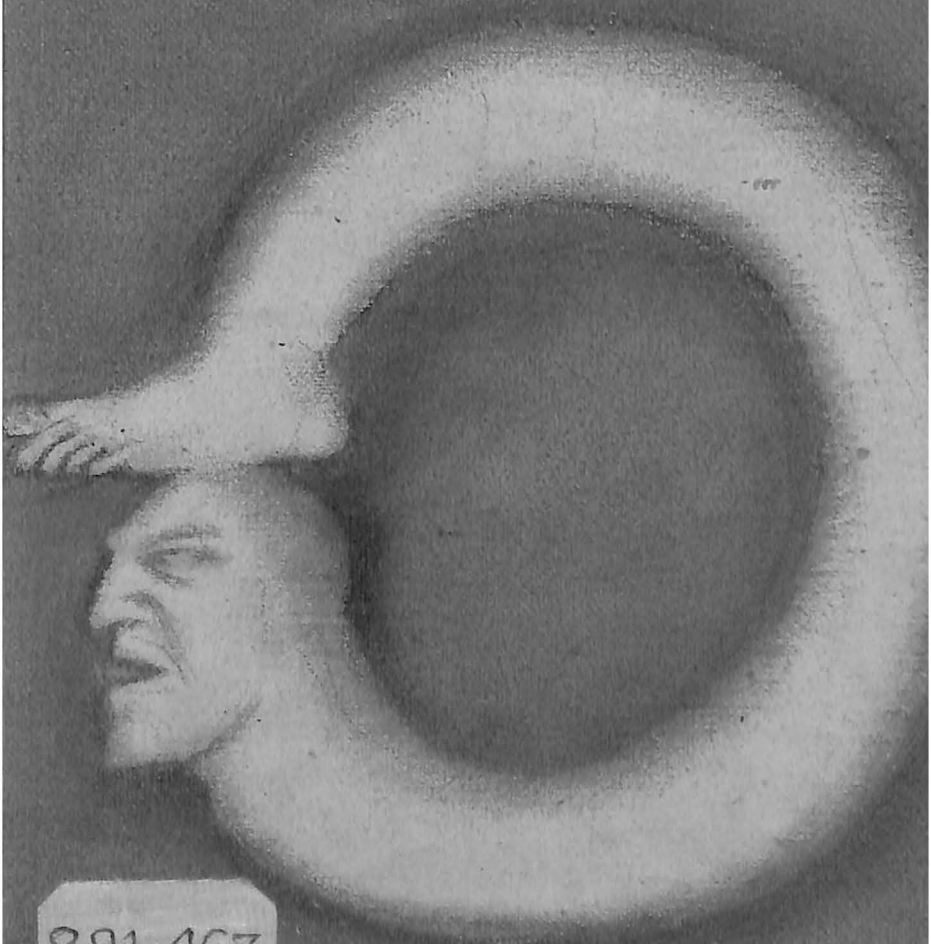
HOMELESS IN MY LAND

translations from
Modern Marathi Dalit Short Stories



dited by Arjun Dangle

About the Author

Arjun Dangle, born in Bombay in 1945, holds an M.A. from Bombay University, and is an important name in the politics and literature of Maharashtra.

A founder member of the militant Dalit youth organization, the Dalit Panthers, he is at present the president of the State Unit of the Bharatiya Republican Party.

Dangle's collection of poems, *Chhavani Halte Ahe,* won the Maharashtra State Award in 1978. He has also published a collection of short stories, *Hi Bandhavarchi Mansa* and his *Dalit Sahitya — Ek Abhyas,* a critical work, is a standard reference book in many universities of Maharashtra. He has recently published *Dalit Vidroha,* a collection of essays on politics and literature. Many of his poems and short stories have been translated into various Indian and foreign languages.

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Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Short Stories

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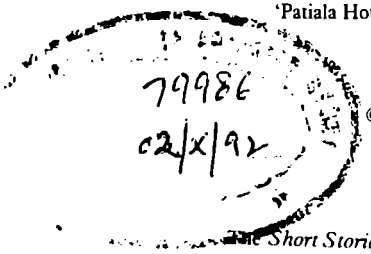

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Contents

Acknowledgments . . . vi
Introduction . . . vii

Bandhumadhav *The Poisoned Bread* . . . 1
Waman Hoval *The Storeyed House* . . . 9
Yogiraj Waghmare *Explosion* . . . 17
Arjun Dangle *Promotion* . . . 22
Bhimrao Shirvale *Livlihood* . . . 27
Baburao Bagul *Mother* . . . 37
Amitabh *The Cull* . . . 45
Keshav Meshram *The Barriers* . . . 51
Anna Bhau Sathe *Gold from the Grave* . . . 64
Avinash Dolas *The Refugee* . . . 70

Glossary . . . 75

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Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to write an introduction to this anthology of Dalit short stories, because I have been an active participant in all the movements concerning the Dalits — literary as well as social, cultural and political. I have witnessed the ups and downs in each of these movements in the last two decades. I am proud to be one of the voices raised on behalf of millions of exploited Dalits.

Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom of a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality.

There are numerous theories about the origin of Dalit literature. Buddha (6th century BC), Chokhamela (14th century AD), Mahatma Phule (1828-90) and Prof. S.M. Mate (1886- 1957) are variously held to be its originators. But these theories are too far-fetched. Although it is true that these great men were deeply concerned about the plight of the untouchables, history shows that it was Dr Ambedkar who was the pioneer of Dalit literature.

It is no coincidence that the Dalit literary movement began in Maharashtra, the birthplace of Dr Ambedkar's movement. His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness.

The term 'Dalit literature' can be traced to the first Dalit literary conference in 1958, which passed a resolution defining the term. However, this conference went almost unnoticed, thus proving beyond doubt that the Dalit class was indeed neglected.

The sixties saw many new things happening in Marathi literature. For the first time a poet — Narayan Surve — wrote about the problems of workers. The Little Magazine movement also took root and flourished in this decade. Marathi literature made its acquaintance with the Angry Young Man.

In Dalit literature, Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat were

already established but the movement gained great momentum from the short stories of Baburao Bagul. His collection of stories, *Jevha Mee Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had Concealed my Caste) made such waves in the Marathi literary world that some critics hailed it as the epic of the Dalits while others compared it to the jazz music of the Blacks. Bagul's stories taught Dalit writers to give creative shape to their experiences and feelings.

In the seventies, thinking Dalit critics began to theorize on Dalit literature and its role. A number of young writers, full of a new awareness, had started writing for periodicals like *Asmitadarsha*. The poets Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Tryambak Sapkale, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Umakant Randhir and J.V. Pawar and short story writers Tarachandra Khandekar, Yogiraj Waghmare, Avinash Dolas, Yogendra Meshram and Bhimrao Shirvale are a few who developed during this period. For, on the one hand, Dr Ambedkar's vision of a Republican Party of India — which would represent his political ideology — did not materialize. And, on the other hand, the party by the name, which did exist, was fragmented and thus rendered ineffectual.

But Dalit writers began to realize more and more that there was no point in merely writing provocative poetry against injustice. The Dalit writers had also become familiar with the Black movement and literature in the USA. The result was that the youths Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle and J.V. Pawar took the initiative and established the political movement called the Dalit Panthers in Bombay in 1972. The leaders of the Dalit Panthers were all writers. Thus a wave of writing describing experience in provocative language swept Marathi literature. This was probably the first time in India that creative writers became politically active, and formed an organization.

Dalit literature is not simply literature. Although today, most Dalit writers have forgotten its origins, Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about change. It is a consciousness of these beginnings that has guided me in the selection of the short stories included in this anthology.

At the very first glance, it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them; instead, there is new thinking and a new point of view.

All the stories in this anthology have been selected because they forcefully convey the 'differentness' of Dalit literature. How deep a chasm there is between the prose of mainstream Marathi literature

and that of Dalit literature! We immediately recognize that the language, experiences and heroes of Dalit literature are totally different. In selecting stories, the quality of writing has been the main criterion. Another has been the aim of showing the material and psychological situation of the Dalits living in urban slums, those living in rural areas, and those who have risen to the middle class through special facilities for their caste. The heroes of these stories are shown struggling for survival at their different levels. They are shown confronting limitation, abject poverty, misery and brutality. In the stories 'Gold from the Grave', 'Mother' and 'Livelihood' is depicted fierce battle for life in an urban slum, and a world surviving beyond the pale of so-called 'cultural values'. 'The Poisoned Bread', 'The Cull', 'The Refugee', 'Explosion' and 'The Storeyed House' demonstrate the position of the Dalits in rural society, and their fight for existence. 'The Storeyed House' gives a glimpse of how Dalits wishing to live honourably and with respect, on terms of equality, are persecuted by higher castes. If this story shows attitudes of caste superiority, then 'Promotion' reveals the ambivalent crisis of identity in the Dalit middle class.

I must thank all those who helped me in the preparation of this anthology. I am also grateful to all the writers and their publishers for their co-operation.

ARJUN DANGLE

BANDHUMADHAV

The Poisoned Bread

Come harvest time with its operations of winnowing and sifting, when the birds whirl in the sky, my heart bleeds like a wounded bird as I recall the bygone harvest of twelve years ago, when I had gone to meet my grandfather — Yetalya Aja to us — at Kupad.

That day, as usual, Grandpa Yetalya took me with him as he went out looking for a job of winnowing and treading out the corn at the threshing floor. As a matter of fact he intended to beg for me a cucumber or a marrow or a few peanuts, if possible, at one of the farms. And by getting me to assist him he hoped to get a slightly larger share of the corn and a few ears of jowar for us.

We stopped at a threshing floor. There, tidying a pile of dishevelled ears of corn, was Bapu Patil. Grandpa approached Patil and saluted him with a *johar.* Acknowledging Grandpa's salute like a swaggering maharaja, Bapu Patil said,

'Hey, what brings you here at such an early hour? Hope you haven't come here with your mind set on evil. For don't they say, an encounter with a Mahar in the morning, and you're doomed for good.'

Grandpa displayed no reaction to Bapu Patil's insolence. On the contrary, he appeared extremely meek, and with the utmost respect said to Patil,

'Why do you say that, Anna? I am your slave. I have come to you on purpose on hearing of the operations at your threshing floor. My lord is our bread-giver and we find it a privilege to beg for our share of corn, master. I am your begging Mahar and feel proud to be so.'

But Grandpa's humble plea had the reverse effect on Bapu Patil, who turned more sarcastic:

'Don't give me that line, you're no longer the Mahar-Mangs of the good old days, to beg for your share of the corn. You are now Harijans! You've even started claiming equality, so I was told, eating and drinking with us at the city hotels. So, there remains absolutely no difference between us, does there? Now that you're our peers, tell me, why do you still beg for a share of the corn?'

And yet I could see no adverse effect of Bapu's attack on Grandpa. In fact, I discerned a sense of pride in him as he straightened himself and said,

'How could you say that, Anna? This Yetalya is certainly not one of those claiming equality. How can one, in that case, account for God's creating religion and the castes?'

'Come on, don't you know that the rain-god got enraged because you — the Mahars and Mangs — have profaned religion, and abandoning caste, have defiled Lord Vithoba of Pandharpur. How else can you account for the drying up of the Chandrabhaga river?' Bapu Patil added insult to injury.

I could take it no more. I felt my cheeks burning. But I quelled my temper and, cutting Bapu Patil short in the middle of his fiery tirade, burst out, 'Patil, will you kindly tell me what you meant when you accused us of forgetting religion, abandoning our caste and of polluting the god? And if a religion can't tolerate one human being treating another simply as a human being, what's the use of such an inhumane religion? And if our mere touch pollutes the gods, why were the Mahars and Mangs created at all? And who, may I know, who indeed, created them? And would you please tell me the name of the god whom the Mahars and Mangs can claim as their own?'

My retort made Bapu Patil wild. I'd addressed him simply as 'Patil' whereas the rest of our clan called him Anna or 'elder brother'. And to top it all a Mahar was answering him back. Violent anger shook him and he screamed at me: 'Look at that snot-nosed brat! He can't even keep his nose clean and yet has the audacity to talk back to me! Yetalya, whose good-for-nothing whelp have you brought with you?'

The violent rage of Bapu Patil sent Grandpa into a panic. Knowing too well that in a fit of temper Bapu Patil was capable even of committing murder, he started shaking violently. In a voice stricken with fear and in the humblest of tones, therefore, Grandpa replied, 'He's my eldest daughter's son, from Sangalwadi. He's too young to know how to speak to his elders. He's city-bred and has learnt to read and write.'

'Need he be so impertinent just because he knows how to read and write? And mind you, even if a Mahar or Mang gets educated, no one will ever call him a Brahmin. A Mahar is a Mahar even if he passes L.L.B. and becomes a barrister. You should know the story of Chokhamela. Was he let into the temple by Vithoba of Pandharpur? Why, I ask you, has Chokhamela been kept at the foot of the temple?

One should always keep to one's own position.'

Having been brought up in the city of Sangli, I was a little bolder than the rest of my clan. So I said to Patil: 'What's this "position" you're talking about, Patil? And whose position?'

At my retort, Patil exploded: 'Look here, boy! Simply because you've had a little education, don't think you can teach me. You should know that God intended to have a definite hierachy when he created the Brahmin, the Maratha, the fisherman, the weaver, the Mahar-Mang, the Dhor and the cobbler in that order. Everyone must abide by this scheme and act accordingly. Put every man in his proper place, as they wisely say. A chappal is never worshipped in place of God, is it?' He paused.

I was determined to give tit for tat. 'So you think you can treat us like your footwear! But are we really like that? Aren't we also made of the same flesh and blood as the rest of you? We too are born after nine months in our mother's womb. Isn't it logical then,' I ended rhetorically, 'that basically there's hardly any difference between us?'

'Yetalya, have you come here to work or to quarrel with me? If you and your grandson are so well-off, why in the first place did you come to me to beg? Get lost! A little learning doesn't entitle that boy to teach me, understand?'

At this Grandpa Yetalya literally fell at the feet of Bapu Patil and appealed to him with tears in his eyes: 'Don't, don't say that, please. He's a tiny tot. Just a boy. Please don't take him seriously. He hasn't seen enough of the world and doesn't know how to speak to his elders.' And then turning to me he chided: 'Mhadeva, don't just stand there gaping at Anna. Pick up that grubbing-hoe and start work.'

I felt helpless and dumbfounded as he handed me the hoe.

The next moment I set to work with my head bent low, moving the grubbing-hoe in the heap of corn. Somehow I managed to suppress my anger. Bapu Patil was standing close by, watching us for some time. After a while he left but not before warning us: 'Finish the job before I return from breakfast. We'll yoke the bullocks for the winnowing in the evening. Hurry up. Don't you know you have to work hard if you want your share of corn?'

We then seriously yoked ourselves together for the work at hand. Grandpa, however, left me half-way through it saying that he would go to Gyanba Patil's threshing floor to fetch a tripod and a few measures of corn. I was left alone.

I was working hard at the threshing floor. The red hot sun was

scorching me. The exhaustion caused by the hard work and the unbearable heat of the sun made me sweat profusely all over. I was famished. But there was no trace of Grandpa and I was far from achieving the target. Wild ideas began to cook in the heated cauldron of my brain.

I was worried at the thought of Bapu Patil turning up suddenly, and finding the job unfinished. And since I had already roused his anger, I thought, I was going to be easy prey.

And before the thought died away, Bapu Patil, now accompanied by Tuka Magdoom, arrived there quite unexpectedly. I was scared stiff. I was lagging behind in my work; there was no trace of Grandpa yet; and here appears my tormentor! 'You, grandson of Yetalya, has your grandfather dropped dead?' shouted Bapu Patil.

'He's gone to Gyanba Patil's farm to fetch a tripod,' I faltered, already frightened.

At that Bapu Patil was extremely furious and started abusing Grandpa in the most humiliating terms: 'Has he gone to fetch the tripod or to whore with his wife...?' Tuka Magdoom did his bit faithfully by aggravating the matter: 'Oh these Mahars are a lousy lot. You'll never find them at their work. These good-for-nothing fellows only know to while away their time.'

I could control myself no more. And yet I found myself pleading before Bapu Patil: 'Why do you abuse him? Grandpa will be here soon...'

Unknowingly I had added fuel to the fire for the inflamed Patil was now screaming with biting sarcasm: 'So you don't want me to abuse your grandfather. Should I then touch his feet?' And turning to Tuka Magdoom he said, 'I've been watching this chap since morning. This brat of a Mahar has been rudely answering me back.'

'No use telling me, Anna. Just give him a hard kick in the loins. He deserves nothing better than that.' Tuka Magdoom incited him.

Presently Grandpa arrived, running like mad. His very appearance was enough for Bapu Patil to let loose his volley of abuse: 'I say, Yetalya, were you assigned to do a job or to play hide-and-seek? It's past noon now. And this grandson of yours has only been toying with the weeds. Stop working this instant at the threshing floor. I shall manage it myself. Get up! I'll give you nothing...Get up!'

'Don't do a harsh thing like that, Anna, you can kick us if you like but please don't starve us.' Grandpa pleaded with tears in his eyes. But the stony hearted Patil was not moved. We eventually finished

the assigned job and got the bullocks yoked and moved them onto the threshing floor.

But after we had toiled throughout the day Bapu Patil did not give Grandpa even a few measures of jowar. Grandpa was crestfallen. As we dejectedly left the threshing floor, however, Grandpa could not fail to notice the pen where stale, rancid pieces of bread lay scattered on the ground in front of the oxen. It's rightly said that as the Chamar has his eye on the *chappal*, so does the Mahar on stale bread. Flies were swarming over the mouldering crumbs which had turned green and foul.

Grandpa begged Bapu Patil for those crumbs. The oxen seemed to have refused to eat them. They were smeared with dung and urine. Grandpa collected them all with happy excitement and neatly put them into his sackcloth. And he left the place but not before blessing the Patil. I followed him with my head hung low. There was a heavy silence between us. Finally breaking it, Grandpa said, 'The landlord got angry with me because of you, Mhadeva. I had thought that having toiled the whole day we would get a larger measure of corn. Now, what shall we have for supper?'

'We'll gulp down the crumbs you collected. Haven't we got these rotten pieces as a reward for labouring all day long? A good exchange indeed! Are we any better than cats or dogs? Throw a few crumbs at us and we are happy,' I said mockingly.

'You said it,' Grandpa exclaimed. 'Mhadeva, will the Mahars and Mangs never be happy? What a humiliating life we live! Do you think I feel happy about being oppressed by the landlords and the rest of the villagers? I too want to retaliate and have a good fight for the humiliation and injustice they have been piling upon us. But, my boy, I am helpless! I see no end to this suffering.' lamented Grandpa.

'But why should it go on? Even a lion locked in a cage all his life forgets how to hunt. This hereditary land-right has trapped us Mahars for good. How can we dream of doing business independently since we've been fed all our lives on the charity of others? What achievement can we ever boast of? All that comes from begging is more begging.'

As I erupted spiritedly, filled with disgust, Grandpa Yetalya stood gaping at me, stunned. I could see the admiration he felt for me. He seemed to be enveloped by an impenetrable darkness on all sides. After a while he said, 'Mhadeva, I fully agree with what you say. But how does one escape from the fix of this hereditary holding?'

'By abandoning it. There's no alternative.' I replied immediately.

He walked in silence for a few moments. He looked as if he were lost in deep thought. Suddenly he stopped and turning to me, asked, 'How will the Mahars survive if they abandon the land-right? Thanks to it we can at least get these stale crumbs. Only this way can I approach the landlord and beg for bread as my right. But if that too is gone, what are we left with?'

'When I said we should abandon the land-right, I didn't mean we should give it up literally. But we must stop begging under the pretext that we are getting our rightful share of corn. And instead of enslaving ourselves to life-long labour in exchange for that right, we must free ourselves from the land-bondage and learn to live independently, with a sense of pride. We Mahars have been misled by the false notion of land-right, taking it as a rightful favour to beg for bread as long as we live. We forget all the while that the crumbs they give us make us slaves.'

I suddenly stopped talking as we approached home.

'You're right, my boy. I am convinced. You've touched my heart,' said Grandpa and threw a few crumbs from his sack to the dogs squatting opposite our house.

Grandma came rushing out of the house and shouted at Grandpa: 'Have you gone mad? If you give all the food to the dogs what shall we eat?' She collected all the pieces thrown before the dogs and cleaned the mud off them. She then mixed them with *dulli* and cooked them for supper. At night everyone at home greedily hogged the stuff. What with the heavy meal, we feel asleep immediately after supper.

But the next morning we woke up to the sound of Grandpa writhing in agony like a poisoned dog. He was vomiting and purging too.

All the neighbours huddled together and started suggesting various types of remedies. I was sitting by Grandpa's bed, helpless and confused. But even at that time, in spite of myself, I could visualize the entire predicament of the Mahar caste. In those frenzied moments, I thought I saw the crumbling, mildewed pieces of bread smeared with dung and urine taken from Bapu Patil's cow pen floating before my eyes! The share of corn which Grandpa always took as his rightful dole from Bapu Patil, I was convinced beyond doubt, had caused the vomiting and dysentery. He seemed to have taken to heart the whole episode at Patil's threshing floor. Sitting by the side of his bed, shedding tears, I felt benumbed and despondent. My mind was wailing in agony. 'When shall the meek and humble people of my community be uplifted? And when shall they be treated like human

beings... When?'

In the meantime my maternal uncle had brought a doctor all the way from Sangli. Examining Grandpa, the doctor asked, 'What did he eat last night?' I went into the kitchen and brought the earthen pot in which the rancid crumbs of bread mixed with *dulli* had been cooked. Putting it in front of the doctor I said, 'These are four-day-old stale and mouldering pieces of bread cooked with *dulli* — this is what he ate last night.'

The doctor looked surprised as he said, 'That's it! The mould in the stuff created toxin. That toxin must have caused his dysentery. It's a serious case..'.

Grandpa showed great amazement as he lay in bed: 'What? You say the crumbs had turned to poison? It was in fact poison? Poisoned bread...? Really poison?'

Grandpa lost hope. The dysentery and the vomiting had almost killed him. And the doctor's diagnosis was the last straw.

None of the medicines suggested by the doctor proved effective and we became helpless.

Seeing him writhing in agony I broke down and in an emotionally choked voice, said to him, 'Grandpa... Grandpa, please say something to me!' I could sāy no more and started weeping. Grandma immediately joined me, and uncle too started sobbing.

Mustering all his strength and with tremendous will power Grandpa finally succeeded in articulating a few words: 'Mhadeva, don't weep, my boy. I'm an old thing now. And being so old, I may stop breathing any moment. What can I say to you now? I can only say: never depend on the age-old bread associated with our caste. Get as much education as you can. Take away this accursed bread from the mouths of the Mahars. This poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man...'

Then he stopped abruptly, turned his face away and closed his eyes for ever.

Grandma was the first to react. She broke into a loud wailing. My aunt joined her and then everybody raised a deafening lament. The ominous lapwings too were producing shrill and piercing notes in the sky. I was numb. Everything was numb.

Amidst the commotion I could still hear Grandpa's last words: 'The poisonous bread will finally kill the very humanness of man....' The recollection of these words put a stop to my sorrow in the loss of my beloved Grandpa. They inflamed me with a sense of fury and

disgust, prompting me to retaliate.

And therefore, when it is harvest time with its operations of winnowing and sifting, and the birds whirl in the sky, my heart bleeds like a wounded bird as I recall the bygone harvest, twelve years old now...

Translated by Ramesh Dnyate

WAMAN HOVAL

The Storeyed House

There was something really wrong with the State Transport bus. It had come up the winding road in the mountain as if with a life-time's effort. The road was now down-hill and yet the bus moved as slowly as a sick man walking with the help of another. It reached the plain where the dispensary building was situated, and stood still, like an obstinate bull. Now, the destination was hardly a mile or two away. But the driver was sore and the conductor had no option but to be silent. When they realized that the bus wouldn't move any faster, a couple of passengers exclaimed: 'Goddamit for a bloody nuisance!'

The conductor asked the passengers to get down and they all put their strength together to push the bus. Having gained this initial momentum, the bus started. Passengers clambered up, jostling one another. The conductor rang the bell and the bus gradually took on speed. It entered the village reluctantly, like a truant child being dragged to school. As it wound its way through the curves on the outskirts, it groaned and croaked like a hen about to lay eggs, and stopped with a bang in front of Bhujaba Patil's residence. As it halted, it gave a big lurch, sending the passengers helter-skelter, churned like water in a pitcher when the carrier stumbles.

All the passengers got down.

The coolie put his hand on a huge wooden box and shouted, 'Whose box is this?'

Bayaji, who was brushing away the dust from his body, answered. 'Oh, it's mine, please lower it down.'

The coolie heaved and grunted as he lowered the box which Bayaji caught with ease.

Bayaji had packed his entire household goods in this box. There was no longer any reason to hang around in Bombay. He had worked honestly for the past thirty-five years in the dockyard and had retired from service two months before. Not that he had held an important position. He had merely got an extension for two years; during that

period he had become a supervisor. Otherwise his entire life had been spent lifting heavy loads. He had worked very hard whenever he could, day and night.

Bayaji had crossed sixty but was in sound health. He had a sturdy frame right from birth, and hard work had given a well-formed shape to his strong body. He paid fifteen paise to the coolie, put the box on his own head and began to walk in the direction of his house into which he had thrown pots and pans and sundry other things.

As he reached Kadam's house he saw Bhujaba coming towards him. Bhujaba was a known rascal of the village. Bayaji balanced the burden on his head. Straightening his neck, he said, 'Greetings to you, sir, how are things with you?'

Bayaji was a Mahar by caste and according to age-old custom should have greeted Bhujaba with 'My humble salutations to you, sir, who are my father and mother.' So, when Bayaji merely said 'Greetings' Bhujaba became furious and said, 'Do you think you can become a Brahmin merely by saying 'Greetings?' Can you forget your position simply because you've turned Buddhist?'

Bayaji was nonplussed. For a moment, he was tempted to knock him down with his box but realized that he couldn't afford to do so. Besides, now he had come back to his village for good. He was to spend the rest of his days on this soil and would be interred in the same oil. He would not be able to return to Pune or Bombay hereafter. It was not good policy to incur the hostility of anyone in the village, least so of the Patil, the village headman.

So he said in a meek tone, 'Sir, why spring this on me even before I set foot on the soil of my forefathers? I have to stay here till the end of my life.'

'Why? Aren't you going back to your job?' asked Bhujaba. 'No sir, my service is over, I've turned sixty.' With this Bayaji lifted the load from his head a little to place it in position.

'Then you've collected your Fund amount?' Bhujaba was taking his measure. 'Yes sir,' Bayaji replied with pride. 'How much?' Bhujaba asked greedily. 'Not much, what can a daily worker earn?' Bayaji answered. 'Why won't you mention the figure, man?' Bhujaba persisted artfully.

'Some two and a half thousand rupees.' Bayaji gave the correct figure.

'Bayaji, you have a heavy load on your head. Go to your house first. We'll talk at leisure later.' Bhujaba said in mock sympathy.

'Yes, yes.' Bayaji mumbled and walked in the direction of his house. At the moment, Bayaji was the proud owner of two and a half thousand rupees in cash, so it made no difference whether he was an untouchable or a Buddhist. If only one could swindle out of the untouchable Bayaji — or rather Buddhist Bayaji — four or five hundred rupees, that was enough. With the thought in his mind, Bhujaba entered his *wada*, the big house.

Exchanging pleasantries with people he met on the way, Bayaji reached the public building called Takkya in the untouchables' settlement. The building was named Buddha Vihar by those who had embraced Buddhism. As Bayaji neared Buddha Vihar, the children, who were playing with a ball made of rags, finished their game and cried out, 'Baiju Nana is here, Baiju Nana is here!' and scampered in the direction of Bayaji's house. Bayaji's eighty-five-year-old mother quickly scrambled to her feet. She had aged much but her old-world frame was still sturdy, and her teeth were strong enough to break grams. She could thread a needle without help. When she heard of Bayaji's arrival her heart swelled.

As Bayaji came in, his wife concealed her joy with the end of her sari and took down the box from his head. His grandchildren clung to him and began to twist the folds of his dhoti. The neighbouring children watched the scene in idle curiosity.

'Come, get into the house, children!' said Bayaji. His mother walked out with a bent back and told Bayaji to wait outside the door. Bayaji obeyed.

The old woman came forward, poured some water over the piece of bread in her hand, moved it around Bayaji's face and flung it away as an offering. She ran her palms over his cheeks and pressed her fingers on his temples. All eight fingers gave out a cracking sound.

Bayaji's family was doing well. He had eight children in all, six sons and two daughters. The daughters had been married off and had given birth to children. The elder sons looked after the fields, the next two sons were in government service, the one after them was a school-teacher and the sixth one was still studying. Since they knew that Bayaji was coming home for good the elder son in service and the two daughters were already home to greet him. All of them wondered what their father had got for them from his lifetime's earnings.

The next day when Bayaji opened the box, it revealed only some pots and pans, nails and photographs.

Looking at these, the elder daughter asked, 'Nana, how is it that

you haven't brought anything for us?'

Bayaji was amused that his daughters thought in this childish manner even after they had children of their own. He ran his eyes over all his children and said, 'Look here children, if I had brought new clothes for you, they'd tear, if I had brought an ornament it would soon wear out. Out of my earnings I wish you to have something that'll last longer.'

Bayaji paused after these words.

His eldest son was godly. He said, 'Neither we nor our wives want anything. Tell us what you'd like us to do.'

'Look children, ours is such a large family. Even at mealtime, we've to eat by turns or sit crowded, knocking our knees together. I wish to build a house out of my earnings, and it has to be a storeyed house; the usual three-portioned house won't be adequate for us.'

All were happy with this plan.

The plan was finalized and the foundation of the storeyed house was laid on the auspicious new year day.

The news that Bayaji was building a storeyed house spread like a cry from the rooftops. There was only one storeyed house in the village and that belonged to Kondiba Patil. That Bayaji, an untouchable creature, should think of a rival storeyed house was too much for Kondiba to bear. Others also murmured that the untouchables were forgetting their position.

Work on the foundation had started. Dattaram Vadar was given the contract of construction. The foundation trenches were filled with mud, bits of stone and other fillings. Work progressed with speed. One day Bayaji saw Kondiba coming towards him and greeted him. 'It's with your blessings that I have ventured on this storeyed house.'

'Baiju, you shouldn't lose your head simply because you've set aside some money. Do you aspire to an equal status with us by building this house? The poor should remain content with their cottage, understand?' Kondiba remarked rather sharply.

'No Patil, please don't misunderstand me.' Bayaji was a little dizzy with nervousness.

'How do you say that? One should keep to one's position. You shouldn't let a little money turn your head.'

'I only wish to build a shelter for my family. Then I shall be free to breathe my last.' Bayaji answered.

'Who says you shouldn't have a house? You can have a small house with three convenient portions, a veranda in the front and at the back

and the living section in the middle. Why spend unnecessarily on a storeyed house?' Patil gave his counsel.

'No, but...' Bayaji faltered.

'You may go in for a storeyed house only if you don't wish to stay in this village. I hope you know what I mean.' Kondiba shot out as a warning and walked away. Other ruffians in the village threatened Bayaji in a similar manner.

Out of fear Bayaji had to abandon plans for the storeyed house. The conventional three-portioned house was taken up. Work was resumed and the walls rose rapidly. The middle portion was a little elevated and a small first storey fixed up there with a wooden flooring. This part could be reached by stairs rising from the kitchen. No one could guess from the outside that there was a first storey to the house. Bayaji had to make the best of things.

The house was complete and the traditional housewarming ceremony was planned. Invitations were sent to relatives in different villages. The village elders, by convention, could not be invited to a meal or refreshments, so they were invited to the ceremonial *paan-supari*. Bayaji put up a fine *pandal* in front of the house. His sons worked hard for two full days on the decorations. Relatives started arriving. Well-known devotional singers, Kadegaonkar Buwa, Parasu Buwa, Kalekar Bapu Master, Jija Buwa and Vithoba of Wadgaon came with their troupes. People looked forward with delight to the forthcoming contest among the various troupes.

In the evening four petromax lights were hung in the four corners of the *pandal*. It lent a unique golden yellow light to the surroundings. Guests were engrossed in conversation.

Kondiba Patil was soon there. With him was the thug Bhujaba and four or five seasoned rascals like Vithoba Ghayakute and Parasu Martanda. These people felt uneasy at the sight of the brand new house, the impressive *pandal* and the crowd of smiling faces.

Their eyes roved all over the place. Bayaji led them up the stairs in the kitchen. The first floor looked like a drawing room. The walls were radiant with blue oil-paint. The fresh colour gave out a pleasant smell. Framed pictures of great men like Lord Buddha, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Karmaveer Bhaurao Patil, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and others hung on the walls. The loft-like first floor was filled with a pious and holy ambience.

Bayaji spread a rough woollen carpet for Patil and the other high-caste people. Patil sat quietly on that. His companions rather

uncomfortably took their positions around him; Bayaji offered them the customary betel leaves. Patil accepted the leaves but immediately gave it back to Bayaji with the remark, 'Yes, it's all very nice!'

'But why don't you accept the betel leaves?' Bayaji asked nervously. Bhujaba smiled artificially and said, 'It's enough that your offering is honoured; is it also necessary to eat it? We'll make a move now.' With this Kondiba Patil, Bhujaba and his companions rose to leave. As they came down, Bhujaba felt as if he were tumbling down the stairs.

They eyed one another as if to say, 'This untouchable worm has got a swollen head. He needs proper handling.'

Bayaji fed all his guests with a sweet meal of *shira* and *puris*. Along with betel nuts items of gossip rolled over their tongues and then the session of social devotional songs began.

Among the Bhajan singers, Kalekar Bapu Master had a superior voice. Kadegaonkar Buwa was better at classical singing. Devotional songs were sung in praise of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and Lord Buddha. People swayed their heads in appreciation as the programme gathered momentum. It was two o'clock in the morning. Bayaji was strutting about in the *pandal*. He sat down by a guest now and then, to inquire after his welfare. Small children, unable to resist sleep, had dropped off like bundles of rags. Women sat in the front verandah. Bayaji's children were busy preparing tea for a second round. They had put tea powder and sugar into a pot on a trenched stove and waited for the water to boil. The *bhajan* was in full swing. 'I had a dream at night and my breast was full of feeling,' went the line.

The group advanced from baseless devotionals — like 'From the east came a horde of ghosts, each one with seven heads' — to social devotionals.

Kalekar Bapu Master's powerful voice rose up, 'Take to heart the sweet advice of Bhimaraya and bow down to Buddha for the emancipation of the whole world. I fly to the refuge of Lord Buddha, I fly to the refuge of the Faith; I fly to the refuge of the Faithful.' The song rent the air, filling it with joy. And then the undreamt-of incident took place.

Bayaji's new house had caught fire from all sides. It had suddenly flared up. The womenfolk in the front verandah screamed in confusion. The guests stood up swiftly and began to pull out the women like a herd of cattle.

Bayaji was frantic. He ran around crying, 'My house, my storeyed house! It's on fire. My enemy has taken revenge on me.' He entered

the roaring flames, crying, 'My house, my house.' He climbed up, pulled the pictures of Buddha and Babasaheb from the walls and hurled them down. As he was about to come down the stairs, it crumbled down in flames. People pulled up water from a nearby well to put out the dreadful fire but it could not be easily contained. 'Bayaji, jump down, quick, jump,' people shouted. Women and children were crying and screaming. Now that the staircase had collapsed, no one could go up. Scorched in the flames, Bayaji ran around like a trapped creature, howling all the time, 'My house, my house!'

And then the upper storey itself came down with a crash, and along with it Bayaji, with a resounding thud. People pulled him out.

Bayaji was burnt all over. He was still wailing, 'My house, my house!' Bayaji's children encircled him and cried their hearts out. The guests were busy putting out the fire. All Bayaji's hopes had been reduced to ashes. What was the use of putting out the fire now?

Bayaji was badly burnt and he was in great agony. He asked for water all the time. As his eyes began to roll in his head, his eldest son moved closer, gulped down the sorrow that was surging in his throat and asked, 'Nana, what's your last wish?'

'Sons, I want you to build a storeyed house. I've no other wish.' With these words, his head collapsed like the storeyed house. Bayaji was quiet and the fire too had calmed down.

Bayaji's mother wept bitterly. 'Your father passed away without giving me a burial. At least your hands should have pushed the dust over my dead body. Bayaji, speak to me.' She was mad with grief.

Bayaji's wife was sobbing her heart out, crying repeatedly, 'Who's done this evil to us? Let the house burn to cinders. Save my husband first!'

The entire family was shattered by the calamity. The spirits of all the men were dampened like a cooking-fire on which water had been poured.

In the morning the village officers and witnesses visited the place to record the facts of the accident. 'Bayaji's death was the result of an accident due to a petromax flare-up,' was their conclusion.

The house was burning before the house-warming ceremony was over and Bayaji was in ashes in the cemetery instead of enjoying the comforts of a retired life.

After the funeral, people returned hanging their heads. All of them were pained at heart to think that having come to celebrate the housewarming, they had the misfortune to attend the funeral of the

host.

All were sitting in a sullen mood in the *pandal* when Bayaji's eldest son came out with three or four baskets, a spade, a pickaxe and a hoe. He outlined a square with the pickaxe and began to dig.

The eldest son was digging, the second was gathering the earth with his spade and the others were lifting it away in baskets.

The guests asked in amazement, 'Children, you are in mourning! What's this you're doing?'

'Our father's soul cannot rest in peace unless we do this.'

'But what is it that you're doing?'

'We're starting on a house, not one with a concealed first floor but a regular two-storeyed house,' replied the eldest son of Bayaji. And the six brothers resumed with determination the work of digging the foundation of a two-storeyed house.

Translated by M.D. Hatkanagalekar

YOGIRAJ WAGHMARE

Explosion

At twilight, Sheku was seen craning his neck and peering into the distance. He would walk a few steps forward and then return to sit under the tamarind tree. Since mid-day he had been watching the road intently. His mind was not at rest. Seeing some woodcutters returning home, bent under the weight of the bundles of wood, Sheku went up to them and said, 'Did you run into a young man on the way?' One of them replied, 'I saw some cowherds playing hide and seek. I wouldn't know if one of them was yours.'

'Well, he's not a cowherd, but a smart lad dressed in a white shirt and trousers.' But by the time he had said this, the woodcutters had walked away.

Sheku grew more anxious. He prepared himself to walk up to the outskirts of the village to take a look. He slipped his chappals onto his feet and set out.

'I had asked him to get back before it was dark, but there's no sign of him. He must've stayed there,' Sheku muttered to himself. As he walked ahead, he ran into Nama Bangar who was returning home with his cattle. Seeing Sheku he asked, 'Well, old man, where are you off to, at a time like this?' 'It's my son, sir, he hasn't returned yet. So I thought I'd go up to the outskirts to take a look.'

Nama Bangar took out his tobacco pouch. The two put a pinch of tobacco into their mouths. Nama spat twice or thrice and then went away. His herd had already gone a furlong ahead. Sheku looked westwards at the isolated path. His failing vision did not discern anyone coming up the path. The sun had set. The old man turned to go. He entered his hut and lit the lamp. The womenfolk were busy cooking the evening meal. Darkness had gathered outside. It was then that the old man saw his son coming homewards.

'Well, Shetiba, how late you are!'

'I started late,' Shetiba said, as he slung his bag on the hook.

'Did you have any company?'

'Yes — my friend Atmaram Shelke from Wadgaon was there. I

spent some time at his place, that's why I'm late.'

'Oh all right — have a wash and rest.'

Shetiba obeyed. By this time his mother had roasted some *bhakri*. The little ones in the house had all gathered round her and were looking on eagerly.

When she served Shetiba his dinner, all the children sat around his *thali* and began to eat. No one spoke. The calm silence was occasionally broken by the clamouring of the kids. Sheku could not bear the silence. What had come out of Shetiba's visit to the factory at Dhoki? Did he get the job? So many questions crowded his mind. Questions that Shetiba alone could answer. But Shetiba was silent. Sheku could not figure out what had happened. He longed for Shetiba to speak. He was yearning to hear of the outcome of the visit — not Sheku alone but his wife and Shetiba's wife Pami who had huddled into a corner in the darkness. Pami watched her husband, his head bent over his *thali*, washing down the few morsels salvaged from the claws of the children, with a sip of water. She felt uncomfortable that her husband would not talk about his visit to Dhoki.

Shetiba was still mute. At last, when he could bear it no longer, Sheku asked, 'Was the work done?'

The darkness in the hut grew more oppressive. The lamp flickered and stood still in anticipation. The children too shut their mouths. Pami and Shetiba's mother perked up their ears.

'No,' came the answer in subdued tones. He put away the morsel that he had raised to his lips and drank some water.

Shetiba's 'no' created sudden ripples in the silence. His mother sighed audibly. His wife wiped away a tear with the edge of her *pallav*. Sheku recovered and asked, 'What did the Saheb say?' 'There are no vacancies. There might be one or two next month.' Shetiba answered with his head bent low. As soon as he heard the word 'Saheb', he began to recollect the Dhoki factory environs — the bulky, gigantically powerful machines heaving non-stop, huge piles of sugarcane, labourers cutting the cane, others carting it away, lorries, bullock-carts, confusion, hurry and scurry. Shetiba stood watching all this, bewildered and scared. A thought crossed his mind — if the Saheb had given me a job, I too might have slaved here and all our household problems would have been solved.

Now he had come to the other side of the factory, where a lorry stood. Some labourers were dumping the dregs from the machine and the molasses into the lorry. Their bodies were layered with dirt. The

grooves of muck on their bodies glistened in the heat. They looked repulsive. Shetiba couldn't bear to look at them. He felt sick. He moved away with his handkerchief to his nose. Outside, near the gate, a signboard read, 'Wanted coolies to carry molasses.'

Shetiba started when he read it. And God knows why, he laughed to himself. His chain of thought was broken.

Shetiba's 'no' made everyone forlorn. It was three years now since he had passed the matriculation examination — and he hadn't got a job yet. If not as a clerk, schoolteacher, *talati* or *gramsevak*, he would get a job as a peon, Sheku had felt, and he spared no efforts, sent in applications by the dozen but he didn't get a job. He would return home empty-handed and dejected, braving himself to face another day. Yesterday he had been to Dhoki to be interviewed for the post of a watchman, but was not selected for the job. Sheku had hoped that things would look up after Shetiba got a job, there would be enough to eat and enough to cover their bare bodies — these were his dreams. At first, he hadn't minded much when Shetiba had failed. But now everywhere and every time the answer was 'no'. Sheku began to lose faith, his gossamer dreams began to fall apart and the sand under his feet seemed to slip. He was completely broken.

'What do you plan to do now?' Sheku asked suddenly.

'Wait for something else to turn up,' answered Shetiba.

'How long are we to wait? This endless waiting will kill us. Nothing doing, tomorrow I'm going to get you some work. We don't want this job of yours.'

The old man spoke desperately. Shetiba felt choked — he wanted to say something, but not a word escaped his lips. His father got up. Threw a mat outside the hut. Pami lay down beside the grindstone. His mother, brothers and sisters crouched under the meagre bedsheets. His poverty seemed to challenge Shetiba with a wicked grin. He sat leaning against the wall for a long time. A host of thoughts spawned in his mind and the silence seemed unbearable. He got up and lay down near his father. The night crept by like a slithering python.

Next day Sheku called some elders from his Mahar community. Bhiwa Gaekwad, Gangurde Satwa and Gana from the next lane came. Diga, Nivrutti and Sida from Kamble Lane were called too. Everyone assembled. Shetiba was reclining, brushing his teeth with a *neem* stick. Small talk was exchanged and then Diga Kamble asked Shetiba bluntly, 'It's a long time since you sent for us. Got a job or something?'

Shetiba felt disheartened at the mention of the word 'job'. But without showing his dejection he said,

'No! No sign of a job yet. Baba is the one who's called you, ask him.'

'Well, well, father and son don't seem to be seeing eye to eye,' Sida observed sardonically.

'It's not that, Uncle,' Shetiba said as he spat.

'Then what is it?' Sida enquired again.

'Look here, Shetiba doesn't know anything about this. *I* have called you. You see, it's like this ...' Sheku began to explain.

'There were forty families in this Mahar community. About twenty have gone to the cities, where they live from hand to mouth. Things are not what they used to be...' The men nodded in agreement. Sheku would not come to the point, so Gana impatiently interrupted him and said, 'What you say is true, but why are you beating around the bush? Go on, tell us what's on your mind.'

'That I will. Listen folks. When no other child from the Mahar community was sent to school, I sent Shetiba.' A murmur ran through the group.

'It's three years since Shetiba did his matriculation, yet he is without work. He's been desperately looking for a job, without success.'

Sheku had opened his heavy heart to the world and was giving vent to his bottled up feelings. Shetiba could not figure out why his father was placing his case before the *sarpanchayat*. He looked grim as he listened to his father.

'Now, we're going through bad times... We have to go without food for two days at a stretch sometimes. There is no hope of Shetiba getting a job, so I have turned to you in desperation. Give me my share of the *vatandari*. Do that somehow. I was wrong to listen to Shetiba and give up the *vatandari*. I'll set him to do the village duty.'

Sheku began to sob violently. He stretched his hands before the assembly for help. Shetiba felt as if he had been struck by a thunderbolt. This unexpected move of his father shattered him like a banana tree crashing in torrential rain. He felt he was being crushed under a thousand-tonne weight. Every word of his father cut into his soul. 'My children have been withering away like firewood and I watch helplessly. I can't take it any longer. I can't bear to see them writhing in hunger like fish out of water. Whatever happens, at least they'll get a few morsels, if he does the scavenging.'

Shetiba was dazed and bewildered by this decision; he began to tremble like a leaf. He couldn't think of what to say, his eyes emitted sparks of hatred, disgust and protest. Through trembling lips, he managed to mouth the words. 'Then I shall not stay in this house.'

'Where will you go, leaving your mother and these kids?' Shetiba asked, with a lump in his throat.

Away from you, thought Shetiba. The answer rose to his lips and faded. The defiant stag made a valiant effort to rise, but collapsed from the grievous wound inflicted on him.

His eyes, which had flashed fire, turned dim. His tongue seemed paralysed. All he could see was his mother sitting by the fire in rags, his half-naked brothers and sisters, his father shrivelling with age, all these like living corpses. The corpses suddenly besieged him. He wanted his young Panchfula to become a doctor. Vitthal would be either a lawyer or a district collector. Suma would be better off as a school teacher. He wanted to buy his Pami a nylon saree...

Shetiba did not eat that day, nor did he exchange a single word with his father. At night he ran a high fever. Sheku was awake. He got up and adjusted the tattered sheet on him. As he stroked his burning forehead, the heat gave him a shock. He was overwhelmed with grief and two tear drops trickled down from his eyes.

'I understand, son, I can understand your agony. I knew you'd resent this.' Sheku could not control himself and began to shake with sobs. The hut was quiet. The oil in the lamp was almost over. Shetiba turned over in his sleep, muttering to his father. 'Baba, don't do this to me. Don't ask me to do the scavenging.' Sheku quickly put his hand on Shetiba's half-open lips.

Shetiba talked like one who had yielded, given up the battle. His father, already wrung by poverty, began to cry silently. After a while he dozed off.

It was morning. Sheku's house held the pallor of death. Shetiba had left the house early in the morning — he had gone off. He had told his mother, 'I'll do any work that I get. Even carrying molasses.'

Sheku was wildly beating his chest and asking his wife, 'Did you give him a morsel to have on the way?'

Translated by Lalita Paranjape

ARJUN DANGLE

Promotion

'I'm telling you, you have to do it.'

'No, I won't.'

'Look here, Godbole, the lady's on leave for two more days and this proposal has to be sent in today. Please get it ready. If you don't I shall have to...'

'You can report me if you like. I have told you a thousand times that this is not my job.'

'Have some manners and learn to respect your superiors.'

'I know you are my superior, but I am senior to you. Please note that.'

'Please get out.'

Waghmare drew a sheet of paper towards him to file a report against Godbole. He gulped down a glass of water. Putting together the report in his mind, he stared at the whirring fan above. Actually, there was no point in filing a report. He knew from experience that no action would be taken against Godbole. The entire department knew that Godbole was Joshi Saheb's emissary and carried his tribute every month to appease the powers that be.

No one ventured to make enemies with Godbole. Still, it was better to file a report. He would have a legitimate reason to offer if he were questioned regarding the delay in submitting the proposal.

He rang for the peon and asked him to bring two Banarasi 120 *paans*; he also asked him to tell Awale Saheb to come up for a cup of tea. The peon left. For some time Waghmare sat with his head in his hands. Then he rang again, expecting Mr Singh's peon to come in. He rang once again but no one turned up. He finally got up and walked across to Mrs Karnik's table, rummaged among the papers and retrieved the paper dealing with the proposal. Godbole sat sprawled in his chair and didn't budge an inch. Waghmare paused, wondering to whom he should entrust the work. Every table groaned under the heavy pressure of assignments. Really speaking, Godbole ought to have dealt with this proposal, since it came within his purview.

Wagahmare took the file inside and began reading it.

Suddenly the cabin door was flung open and Awale Saheb stormed in, in his usual fashion.

'Why, you seem to be mighty busy, eh?' he said as he sat down.

'Yes — that Godbole doesn't listen to mė. From now on, I'll have to be prepared to face these hassles.'

'To hell with it. Why should you be doing his work? Give him a good hammering and get him to do the work.'

'No, he doesn't listen to me.'

'You're a timid bugger. Why don't you go ahead and issue him a memo instead of whining like this. Remember no one has obliged you by promoting you in the reserved category.'

'There's no question of an obligation, but relations get spoilt.'

'Does Godbole respect you?'

'He doesn't. And I suppose it's quite natural that he should resent the fact that I've been promoted to the post of Assistant Purchase Officer, though I'm junior to him.'

'Listen, it's only now that we are being promoted to the 'Saheb' positions in this 33% category. But remember these other people have enjoyed the privilege of being in the 100% reserved category for centuries. Doesn't that mean anything to you?'

'Forget it.'

'Forget it indeed! You'll wake up only when you are left high and dry with a pot slung around your neck.'

They had tea. Waghmare hoped Awale would go away. He always remembered Awale whenever he was tormented by problems concerning his caste. Awale lent him firm support but also distressed him further.

Chewing *paan*, Awale asked, 'By the way, do you deal with printers?'

'Yes. Anything to be done?'

'Nothing much. The Backward Class Workers' Association needs some receipt books for Ambedkar Jayanti.'

'No, that will unnecesarily create problems.'

'Are you aware of all that goes on in your Purchase Department? The Railways are being fleeced there — and you are scared of getting a few receipt books printed.'

'No question of being scared, but...'

'Forget it. By the way, why don't you attend the meetings of our Backward Class Association? Our people from the staff are upset

because you don't come.'

'Well — I've to attend to this proposal. Shall we meet later?'

It was well past four by the time Waghmare prepared the draft of the proposal. He decided to give it a final look in the morning and then send it for typing. Suddenly he remembered Godbole, but soon banished him from his mind. There was no point in tagging behind Awale. He would only make matters worse and people would humiliate him. Waghmare reminded himself that after all he was an officer now and had to maintain a certain standard. The wheels of thought began to spin furiously. He suddenly realized he was thirsty. He rang for the peon.

'May I come in, Sir?' asked Miss Godambe.

'Yes.'

'Sir, I'm going on three days' leave from Monday.'

'How can you take leave now? Don't you know Mrs Karnik hasn't resumed yet? Take your leave later.'

'No, Sir, I must take it now.'

'Anything special?'

'We're going to Shirdi.'

'Oh! Why didn't you say so in the beginning? Don't worry. Go ahead. And remember to offer an *abhishek* on my behalf.' He opened his wallet to take out the money.

'No, I'll make the *abhishek*.'

'Come on, take the money, otherwise you'll earn the merit instead of me,' said Waghmare, chuckling.

Miss Godambe left happily.

As soon as he put down the glass of water, the phone rang.

'Hello, Assistant Purchase Officer Waghmare here.'

'Saheb, I'm speaking on behalf of Chunilal and Sons.'

'Yes! Your work will be done. I have it in mind. When are you coming this side?'

'Saheb, why don't you come instead? Shall I send someone to pick you up?'

'No, not today. We'll see about that next week.'

'Right.'

'O.K.'

Waghmare felt elevated. Godbole vanished from his mind.

It was past five. The office was empty. Waghmare could have taken the 5.05 local. But he let that go.

All his old cronies travelled on the 5.05 in the second class. Now

that he was an officer he was given a first class pass. Awale was ill-mannered and coarse. Instead of travelling in the first class he travelled second class with his friends. Not only that, he had noisy discussions with them in the train. Waghmare suddenly remembered his friend from his clerical days — Gaekwad. Gaekwad whose booming voice greeted him with 'Jai Bheem, Waghmare Saheb!' Waghmare shuddered at the thought. There was no reason why Gaekwad shouldn't say 'Jai Bheem' softly. Whenever Gaekwad thundered thus, Waghmare got the feeling of being closely watched by those around.

Waghmare entered the first class compartment of the 5.15 local. He got his usual window seat. There were four minutes to go. Just then, the man with *The Evening News* entered the compartment, panting, having had to run to catch the train. He plonked into the seat opposite Waghmare's, looked at him, smiled and said, 'You seem to have reserved this seat on a permanent basis. You always get the window seat.'

Waghmare started when he heard the word 'reserved.' He wondered whether his fellow commuter knew that he belonged to a scheduled caste. After assuring himself that he couldn't possibly know his identity, he pulled out *The Illustrated Weekly* and began leafing through the pages. Once again he felt he ought to change his surname. Akolkar would be the right choice, since he was from Akola.

By the time he reached the Officers' Railway Quarters it was five past six. He remembered that there was a Marathi film on TV. He quickened his pace.

The TV was on, with his wife and kids intently watching it. Waghmare changed and settled down on the sofa to watch the film. There was a knock on the door. His wife went to open it and ushered in a dirty, shabbily-dressed woman, accompanied by two equally unkempt children.

'Come in, the film has just started.'

Waghmare Saheb's face too turns dirty and unkempt. The film ends.

'Kusum, I'll take your leave now,' says the shabby woman.

'Have a cup of tea before you go.'

'No. He must have got up now. He's on night shift today.'

The woman and her children go away.

'Who was that woman?'

'She's my aunt. She lives in the slum opposite our quarters.'

'You seem to have specially invited them. Why didn't you receive them in grand style?'

'I'll tell you what happened. I met her when I was going to the market. She was always so good to me. She didn't know I lived here. I had met her after ages...'

'Come, don't get carried away. We don't live in the B.D.D. chawls. Next, you'll have the entire slum visiting you — what will our neighbours say?'

'Well, are they going to rob you?'

'Don't talk too much. Learn to maintain your status. After all, you're an officer's wife.'

Kusum burst into tears. She thought of her poor aunt who had loved her so much. She recalled being fondled and fussed over by this aunt. She wondered when she had come to Bombay. Her aunt was so near, yet ...

'Come on, serve me dinner.'

The memories of her aunt shattered into fragments as Kusum hastened to serve dinner.

'Didn't you buy any fruit?'

'No.'

'But you said you'd been to the market.'

'I did go; but the fruit was too expensive.'

Waghmare sat on the sofa. His five-year-old son came and laid his head on his lap. Waghmare noticed his bruised knee.

'How did you get hurt, Pappu?'

'D'you know that Pramod, who has a super Ganpati? His Grandma pushed me.'

'Why? Did you beat him?'

'No. We were playing and I drank water from his water pot.'

Waghmare's mind is filled with the image of Godbole. His newly-sprung wings of promotion fall off and a mere mortal named Pandurang Satwa Waghmare crashes helplessly into the abyss below.

Translated by Lalita Paranjape

BHIMRAO SHIRWALE

Livelihood

They poured out of the hutment blabbering. They shouted and ran about, chasing one another.

'Oh, oh, it was only yesterday that the girl got married, and today old Jankabai is dead!'

The widow Jankabai lived by collecting and selling burning coal dropped by engines on the railway line. And as the fire in the coal cooled, so did the fire in her stomach. But today, there had been a void in her belly. It had taken her off her guard and she had closed her eyes for a moment while picking coal on the railway line. And the monster-faced engine had gone roaring over her tired body, tearing it into shreds.

Yesterday Jankabai's Kashi had been married. Today Kashi had become an orphan. The daughter of the widow had been pushed out into the wilderness.

Not that Dharma wasn't a good man. He was a loafer who had made up his mind to walk the straight road. But while he waited for the chance to walk the straight road, he was hounded by the need to work and this drove him to doing all the crooked things ever invented. Jankabai had approved of all this and handed over her sweet, gentle Kashi to his care. His body was tanned black and had grown tough with hard labour. Hidden in his arms were strips of tensile steel. Jankabai handed her daughter over to him with great trust, and with equal trust slipped out of the world like a piece of *bhakri* falling through the fingers.

Kashi wept and wept and wept, and maybe because he was grieved or maybe because his wife was weeping, Dharma also wept. And soon the young couple steadied themselves on the tracks of life.

Dharma had some education, but no qualifications, and when he saw that even those who had qualifications lived like paupers, he despaired. He waited every day for a job. But his stomach would not wait. The fire in his stomach would rage and he would rage against himself because he had no work to do. Soon his rage grew to devour

his whole life. He had heard national leaders make speeches. He had read everything that came within his reach. But he didn't need to hear or read. Because the hutment colony in Koliwada had taught him a lot, made a scholar of him. The path it had shown him cut clean through good and bad, wicked and evil, right and wrong, ending in another world altogether. Therefore he thieved as well as laboured. Picked pockets and carried loads. Conned people, cheated people, slit people's throats. He did all these things because there was no alternative to living, and he had no wish to die. Live he must by whatever means he could. But pockets weren't always available to pick, or loads to carry.

It was now five or six months since Jankabai had died. What Dharma owned was this Rs. 20 a month hut in Koliwada, which was really like owning nothing. And all that he really owned, aluminium pots and pans riddled with holes, stood ranged in that hut.

Kashi was hungry. Dharma was hungry. No money had come in that day. Neither from a straight job nor from a crooked one. And the two were hungry. Just, simply, hungry.

Amongst these aluminium pots and pans was a brass pot. Jankabai had bought it for her daughter's kitchen out of the money she made from selling hot coal. A fire raged in Dharma's innards. There was no way he could live except by enslaving himself to somebody. Either wear another's collar around his own neck, or slit somebody's neck. But that day nothing had turned up, neither good nor bad. Suddenly he thought of the brass pot given to them by his mother-in-law. It dazzled his eyes like the philosopher's stone. He grabbed the brass pot with hasty hunger and ran all the way to the Marwari.

He entered Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand's shop. He had heard this man had saved many in the hutment colony. Dharma told him his tale of woe. In return Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand told Dharma his tale of woe.

'Look, brother. These are government rules. We can't keep pawned goods. Can't help you, brother.'

Dharma knew about government rules. But Dharma also knew that there had been no food in his stomach for two days. There was much distance between the government and his stomach.

He pleaded again with Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand. The Marwari said with great generosity, 'Look, brother, you know I don't like any crooked business. But since you are in need...I'll take this pot on my own responsibility.But you'll have to pay four annas interest

on the money. And you'll have to pay off the interest first. See if it suits you.'

Interest and principal and such mathematical words meant nothing to Dharma. He was beyond them. The rain poured outside, and inside of him struck flash upon flash of lightning. His mental faculties were concentrated in that single point within him, his stomach. He took twenty-five rupees at four annas a rupee monthly interest from Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand and ran to his hut.

Twenty-five rupees was equal to five days of life, and once again it was the straight road and the crooked road.

And then, for the first time in a month, Dharma had a decent sum of money on him. He would buy mutton and get drunk, he thought. And he would retrieve the brass pot from Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand.

But it wasn't meat and drink that lay in store for him.

He went to Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand to get his brass pot, but the man asked to see the receipt. Dharma had no receipt. The pot had been pawned against government rules. There was no receipt for such deals. Dharma tried one way and another to identify himself. He said he lived next door in the hutment colony. But the Marwari refused to part with the pot. And then Dharma lost his head. The hunger in his innards, the fire in his heart, the steel in his arms, all rushed into the blood of his blood-shot eyes and he went insane. In the grip of this monstrous passion he struck the Marwari, laying him flat. He kicked him in the back and twisted his arm right out of its socket. Terrified, agonized, the Marwari ran around screaming like the devil. Then he collapsed and died in the gutter. He died in the gutter and the good folk on the road caught Dharma.

Dharma left the Koliwada hutment colony to serve a sentence of twenty years' hard labour for murdering Shah Bhanwarilal Khiwarchand. Kashi had no idea why people went to prison, or how or why they continued to live there. She was turned into a column of fear, an uprooted tree. She wanted to know how she was going to live.

The dawn broke. A Bombay dawn. This dawn doesn't break with the crowing of a cock. It breaks with factory sirens, the shattering thunder of trucks, milkmen, vendors, newspaper boys. Their raucous voices together wake the Bombay sun. It was dawn and Kashi still lay awake in her rented hut. How was she going to pay the rent now? How was she going to live?

Kashi's young, nubile body was not as fair as the core of the

turmeric plant, but it was fair. It was not as sculptured as a statue, but it was delicately chiselled. Kashi had not been aware of these things when Dharma was around. But when Kesu Ghatge the bootlegger came to console her with a ten-rupee note first thing in the morning, she knew that life without Dharma was going to be dark and dangerous.

'Kashibai, you are like a sister to me. Dharma was a tiger of a man. But you'll be all right. I'll look after you. Here. Keep this money.' And before she could say yes or no, Kesu Ghatge the bootlegger had gone.

Kashi felt Dharma's absence acutely. But not so the day and the night. Day followed night and night followed day. And destitute Kashi held on to life in that little hut. Every breath she drew was a question, shall I live or shall I die? And on that breath she continued to live. And the bootlegger Kesu Ghatge continued to visit her every other day to give her a little gift and to tell her she was his sister.

Kesu Ghatge was a bootlegger only in name. He'd once really been a bootlegger. But his business had folded up under the double burden of customers' credit and cuts to the police. Because he did not pay the police on time, he'd once been beaten up good and proper and sent to jail. The beating had torn a tendon in his right leg and blinded him in one eye. He had come out of jail just before Dharma went in. He came out dragging his bad leg and flapping his bad eye. He had once been the *dada* of Koliwada. Now he scrounged for scraps. People feared him for his hideous face. He had never wished anyone ill, but the hooch trade had finished him off. He'd become strange in his ways after he came out of prison. He didn't give a damn about anything. He would get up in the middle of the night and start raving. His neighbours feared him then because he talked of taking revenge and of killing people. At such times, he would fly at the throat of any person who came his way. He didn't want to live straight. The wish to live decently was dead in him. When he was drunk he talked of ripping the world open with his knife. He was involved with innumerable petty crime gangs. He would pick pockets and thieve and break into houses and gamble. He would go to the Dadar and Boribunder stations to carry luggage, and give the owners the slip and go and sell off their stuff in Chor Bazar and get drunk on the money. And then he'd talk about taking revenge.

There were times when Kashi used to feel terribly scared of the bootlegger Kesu Ghatge. But he used to call her his sister. This put

her mind at rest. She had tried to earn her living by working. She had managed to get a house job through some women she knew. She washed and cleaned for a retired gentleman. She worked at this job for fifteen days. Then one day, the old man took advantage of their being alone to make a pass at her. That was the end of her ideas of earning her own living. But it wasn't the end of living. And bootlegger Kesu Ghatge continued to come with a fiver or a tenner and his hideous face and his dead eye flapping...holding out a helping hand to her.

And one dark night, when Kashi was fast asleep, Kesu Ghatge entered her hut. He came in and lunged at her body like a starved man going at a plateful of the choicest food. Kashi woke up with a dreadful fear in her heart to see Kesu Ghatge trying to rob her of her virtue. He had called her 'sister,' but her young body made him numb with desire. An unsuspected strength flowed into Kashi's body and she fell upon him, fighting and clawing. At the height of her fury and her fear she grabbed the still smouldering brazier and flung it at him. He screamed like an animal and ran out...

Next morning Kashi woke up with fear in her heart. But there was no sign of bootlegger Kesu Ghatge. A whole day passed and she felt easier in her mind. But four days later people began to look at her differently. They hadn't looked at her like that before, because Kesu had always been there, invisible but menacing. Now they fearlessly made passes at her and tried to trap her in their net.

God knows what happened then, but Kashi began to rock like a raft caught in a tempest. Where was the mast, where the rudder, where the coxswain...where was Dharma? I will remain true to him, but who will help me remain true to my honour? How can I keep this body, made sacred by Dharma's touch, safe from ravishing hands? How can I retain the impress upon it of his steel-muscled arms? It is beyond me now. I cannot do it. I need help. I need help to live to see Dharma in twenty years. Kesu wasn't bad. But he was shrewd. He was a traitor. He was dangerous. He said I was his sister and tried to dishonour me. But then he helped me a lot too. Maybe because he wanted to dishonour me. But he was someone to depend on. At least he kept those thousand lust-filled glances from barring my way. You need someone to support you. Strong. Powerful. Huge. Like steel. Like Dharma. There was only one other like that — Kesu. But Kesu looked like a nightmare. Like a monster. So what? He's strong. He has power. People are scared of him. I should have made him my own. Instead,

I threw burning coals on him...Kashi was caught in the turbulent conflict of overwhelming feelings. She could find no way out. Where was Kesu? Had he been arrested? Or was he...

Then unexpectedly one day, a month later, Kesu Ghatge the bootlegger came and stood in her doorway like a nasty dream. He stood smiling faintly. With his bad leg and his blind eye, and now his skin in white patches like dermatitis where the coals had burnt him that evening. He looked repulsive, monstrous.

And God knows what happened, but it was as if she had suddenly remembered her humanity, and she fell upon his neck, humble and sad. She wasn't deterred by his terrifying looks. She shut her mind to his cunning, his treachery, his dangerousness. Just out of hospital after a month's treatment, Kesu Ghatge the bootlegger became Kashi's man.

She now forgot all thoughts of good and bad, right and wrong. There was only one valid motivation. The stomach and support, and both these were in the hands of Kesu Ghatge. In a way she was his wife. In a way she was his mistress. To prevent people's tongues from wagging, they set up home under cane matting on one of the least frequented pavements in Colaba. Nobody went that way. This was good.

But Kashi saw in Kesu Ghatge none of the fight for work that she had seen in Dharma. She used to get after him to find a job. Sometimes he'd say yes as a joke and sometimes seriously. But nobody wanted to give a job to someone who looked so hideous. So he would go and get drunk. And then he began beating Kashi. He looked upon her healthy youth with suspicion out of his own deformed apology of a body. The sap and fire in her body still remained unexhausted. And this bred strange perverted thoughts in him. He tried to make her ugly. Around the same time Nature carried out her major function. Bootlegger Kesu Ghatge's seed began to germinate in her womb. They had spent nights of starvation themselves. It was too much to expect food to be created for this unborn life. And Kesu, still haunted by perverted desires, continued his attempts at mutilating Kashi's beauty. And in her womb, that accursed seed continued to sprout.

And then one day, Kesu reached the top gear of his perverted desire. He kicked Kashi, grown languid with pregnancy, and stuffed lime into her eye. Jankibai's darling daughter became blind in one eye. One eye closed forever and Kesu sighed with pleasure and then began to laugh like the devil.

Kesu had no job. If he found one he'd brawl and abuse and soon be out of it. Crime had now entered the marrow of his bones and every vein in his body. There was no way out of it for him now. One day he was caught by the police trying to rob a young couple somewhere near Marine Drive. He was tried and sentenced to three years' rigorous imprisonment. And when Kashi came to hear of this, the shock of it caused her foetus to slip out of her womb before the nine months. Her neighbour on the footpath helped with the delivery. Kashi regained consciousness on jaggery-sweetened tea from the Irani shop and a *paan.* And with tender love she took the tender life that had come from her womb into her lap. But when she looked at the child, her eyes stared wildly. The child had been born without shape or form. Every bit of Kesu's monstrosity was reincarnated in it. The head was outsize. The upper lip was missing. And the only sign of a nose were two holes. With a distended stomach and limbs like match-sticks, the creature bore no resemblance to humanity. And it had begun to scream from the moment it was born. Kashi grew fearful of the child's terrifying ugliness. She saw in its noseless, lipless face an image of Kesu's cruel face, and she felt the urge to strangle it on the spot with her own hands. Anger, fear and the love of a mother all attacked her at the same time. But she did not kill the child, because she couldn't. She couldn't even suckle it because it had no upper lip. She squeezed the milk out of her breasts, which were brimful for who knows what pleasure, into a cup, squeezing herself dry while the weird child yelled and screamed and grew.

She had no support now, no help to live. And there was nowhere she could look for help. She would leave the child on the pavement like a grub scrabbling in muck, and go out begging.

But begging is like a magician's art. You need skill and experience for it. She didn't have these. Before she knew what she didn't have, she decided to sell her body. A body off a pavement sells cheap.

But her body too was not saleable. It was loose and flabby now. Looseness is fatal to men's sexual desire. That is what went against her. 'She's too loose, the bitch. She's an old jalopy.' And the decision which she took as a last resort bore no fruit. She began to starve. Food was hard to come by.

When she thought of the repulsive child and of Kesu Ghatge's face, her brain would splinter like glass and scatter all over her body. She tortured her own body, because she was unable to find some other body to torture it. In despair she took to begging again. She put the

weird child on her lap and sat begging on some unknown pavement.

Many people passed by, Indians and foreigners. And they threw coins at her, five paise, ten, twenty-five, fifty. She gathered together her earnings in the evening and found she had fifteen rupees in her bag. She had never before seen such a sum in one day's earnings. She went out the next day and the next and came back with fifteen rupees and some days twenty, and became accustomed to the work. This was a strange revelation in a strange world, that her earnings came out of the weirdness of her child. People threw coins on account of the terrifying ugliness of that baby's face. She realized that he was the trump card in her life.

Kashi, who had once wanted to strangle the baby, to demolish every sign of Kesu Ghatge from before her eyes, to revenge herself on him, now began nursing the child with tender care. She bought baby foods and tonics for him, and he began to thrive like a huge baby owl. And the more he thrived the fuller became her bag with coins. Then one day, she bought a hut.

Just as the skyscrapers went up one by one they brought up in the crooks of their arms a rash of huts and that is where she had bought herself her own hut.

Once Kashi fell ill. She couldn't take the child out to beg. Soon the other beggars in the colony were queueing up at her door. They hired the child for five or ten rupees, sometimes even for fifteen or twenty to take it out begging. And she realized that this son of Satan must be circulated. He must reach every house that survived on begging. She was ill in bed for a month and she made fifteen or twenty rupees a day on the child without moving a muscle.

Night followed day and day followed night. Three years went by like a pilgrimage to Kashi-Benares, with God showering his graces on her. Then that incarnation of the devil, Kesu Ghatge, came out of prison like an enraged tiger let out of a cage.

He came out and went to the old pavement. He didn't find Kashi there. She must be dead, he thought, and prepared once more to kill and to die. He got involved once more in all his old activities, coolie work and conwork. And he won and lost as of old and beat up people and got beaten up by people.

And then like a star shooting out of a pitch black sky came the news that Kashi was alive in a hut at Nariman Point. Living it up in fact, on the earnings off the child of his loins.

Like a wolf that goes sniffing after a goat, he went in search of her

and one black midnight entered her hut, drunk. There was a light on in the hut.

'Aei Kashe!'

Kashi snored peacefully, and the sound of her snoring made the veins in his neck swell.

'Aei Kashe!'

This time his voice was a roar. She started up and seeing him standing there she thought it was the devil himself baring his fangs at her. She screamed.

'Who..who's that?'

'Your mommy's husband.'

And she felt as if, on this hot night, a chill had entered her body. Her body began to tremble. Every part of her shook. And suddenly Kesu Ghatge went absolutely still. The eyelid over his bad eye flapped and he smiled faintly. This made her tremble. Her heart had reached the point where, like a piece of elastic, it could be stretched no more. And it frightened her. She felt her heart would now be torn into shreds. She suddenly began to pant. Her chest heaved asthmatically. And out of that pair of bellows in her chest sprang a flame of fire.

'Why have you come here?'

Kesu Ghatge flared up under this attack.

'You bloody bitch...'

'If you'd had any decency, any shame, you wouldn't have shown your face here, you bastard...son of a bitch.'

'Mind your tongue, you whore. I've come to claim my earnings.'

'What earnings? You hadn't given me your mother's cunt, had you?'

These words acted on Kesu Ghatge like a foot falling on a snake's tail. He roared and ran at her. Kashi's screams woke the entire hutment colony, which came pouring out in the middle of that night. Everyone asked everyone else what was happening. One, a beggar, blind in both eyes and drunk to his teeth, went berserk with rage and writhed this way and that on the ground abusing everybody. Kesu Ghatge kicked the old man. And the old man rolled on the ground howling.

Seeing the people gathered around, Kashi found courage. She screamed like two cars colliding at top speed.

'You ghoul, why do you beat a helpless old man?'

'You whore, I am also blind, though only in one eye. Now hand over my earnings.'

The people stood around watching. Kesu looked so terrifying that nobody dared interfere.

'What earnings, you bastard?'

'My child...'

And then Kashi knew that he had found out the source of her livelihood. I nursed the monstrosity he planted in my womb and now he's come to lay claim to it.

'What child?'

'There he is, my Hanumant, on the cot. He's mine and you'd better give him to me, you slut.'

'I carried him in my stomach for nine months, carried this burden, and then spent my life's blood looking after him from the day he was born, and what's your claim, you bastard, to this child?'

Unexpectedly then, Kesu turned towards the residents of the hutment colony.

'My good folk, this is the child of my loins. This is my wife. So what if she brought him up? A bitch nurses her pups and makes them big. But it's the master who owns them finally. I am her master and her child's master. But I'm not laying any claim to her, mind. All I want is to take away what is rightfully my income.

'That's my child. And this whore won't let me have him.'

Both because it was past midnight and because the reaper of the harvest was indeed the sower of the seed, the good folk supported his claim. And anyhow they had not been very pleased with Kashi's doing so well for herself, and wanted to see her fall. Their convention-ridden minds grabbed the opportunity to see this happen. Kesu was triumphant. Like a victorious candidate in an election, he forced his way into Kashi's hut and laid her flat with a massive kick on her face. Kashi stumbled into a corner and collapsed. Bootlegger Kesu Ghatge picked up the hideous child. Putting his weird offspring on his shoulder he emerged from Kashi's hut smiling triumphantly. What he had on his shoulder was his livelihood. What Kashi had lost was her lifetime's livelihood.

Translated by Shanta Gokhale

BABURAO BAGUL

Mother

The children looked up — backward children with their peaked, ragged faces — at the teacher. The poem was about a mother, and they remembered the warmth of the mother's lap, the only place where they ever felt secure. The teacher's voice went on, soothing, melodious, and they were transported to a new joy of being. The children, usually quite indifferent to school, smiled happily through their unkempt hair; their muddy faces shone with a strange wonder. The teacher's song-like voice rose higher and higher, and then it was all over. The sound of the bell broke in harshly and the children were pulled back from their brief moments of joy, and this strange new wonder was lost. Very soon, the children went back to their usual antics — the pummelling and the shouting, the scuffing of feet, the fights and the swearing.

The poem continued to haunt Pandu, however. He started thinking of his own mother as 'Vatsalya Sindhu' — a river of motherly love and benediction — just as the poet had done. He was finally convinced of her greatness. The heavy burden he always carried on his shoulders lifted somewhat and he was a child once again, wanting to shout, to run and wave his arms about in joy. The hostility that he usually felt towards his classmates abated somewhat. He sat watching them at play, and a benign smile slowly came to his face.

It was a strange sight to see. Pandu never smiled, never mixed with the other children. The children were puzzled. Lakhu would often drive Pandu out of his wits with his venomous mischief. But today Pandu laughed at his antics and Lakhu was pleased. 'Snotnose!' they shouted together at another boy. Very soon, however, Pandu himself became the target of their mischief. Kisan yelled cruelly, 'Don't touch Pandu, any of you. My mother says Pandu's mother sleeps with the *mukadam* like this...' He puffed out his chest and cheeks and stood tall in imitation of the hefty overseer. The class was convulsed with laughter.

Pandu slowly went back to his seat, and sat down woodenly. All

around him, obscenities were being bandied about. He had no father, and now everyone was saying that his mother was a whore. The boys around him repeated the gossip they'd heard at home. Pandu was confused. He started defending his mother stoutly. His mother must be something special. The children didn't quite like this — their anger mounted. Two of them pushed Pandu hard. There was a big commotion as they all tried to punch him, one after the other, and through it all the bell announced the end of the school day. They hurriedly snatched up their slates and tattered books and ran out of class.

Bhaga put up his shirt collar, however, like a street rowdy, squared his shoulders and through taut lips told Pandu, 'You bloody pimp. Just come out. I'm going to murder you.' He removed a rusty old blade from his notebook and threateningly placed it at Pandu's throat. Then, with a whistling movement Bhaga turned around, and like Jaggudada, the bad man of the community, swaggered out. The gang was waiting for him outside. They shouted out their abuse against Pandu's mother, and Bhaga made obscene gestures.

Pandu's face burned with shame and anger. He felt a demonic, murderous rage rising within him. He could have killed them, murdered them all in cold blood. It was good to think of them lying together in a pool of blood. It was a short-lived joy, however. He remembered that he was an orphan, now that his father was dead, and his mother an unprotected widow. He was afraid that Dagdu, their neighbour, would pick another fight with his mother, try to strip off her sari... Rage gave way to infinite helplessness and he felt spent.

The gang was disappointed when they realized that Pandu was no longer interested in exchanging abuse. 'Coward!' they yelled at him, 'Petticoat! Sissy pimp!' The gang slowly started towards home.

When Pandu saw that Bhaga and his gang had left, he slowly left the classroom, took up the books that now seemed enormously heavy, and with leaden gait entered the untouchable quarter. But when he saw Bhaga playing marbles at the end of the street, he lost nerve, and at last, with fear constricting his heart, made the long detour that finally took him home. With a diving movement he entered their little room and waited anxiously for his tormentors to reappear. When no one showed up for a long time, he felt the beating of his heart gradually subside, and he realized that he hadn't eaten since morning and was ravenously hungry. He sat near the mud stove and drew the bread basket closer. Two or three cockroaches spilled out; he shivered in

disgust. One by one he opened the other pots, but all he got was the stench of putrefying food and the swarm of flies that buzzed out uncertainly. Pandu's eyes slowly welled up with tears, and he started sobbing quietly into his shirt front.

...My mother has certainly changed, she is not the mother of old. Last night I waited for her return for such a long time, but she didn't come on time. She was so, so late; and when she did come she didn't say a word to me, never kissed me once. She went straight to cook, served me supper silently, and then went to bed like a small child, talking to herself, smiling quietly to herself. She didn't sit by me when I ate, didn't ask me how I was. Wasn't it the same this morning? She bathed early in the morning, wore a new sari and blouse, and then sat holding the mirror in front of her for hours. She turned the mirror around and looked at herself from all angles. What else did mother do? She slowly caressed her own arms and breasts...she played with the new silver chain around her neck. Pandu had seen her tying and untying her tight *choli*.

As he remembered one by one her actions of this morning, a slow fearful suspicion suddenly gripped his heart. It was true then, perhaps the overseer was her lover. His heart started beating loudly; he no longer felt like eating. To keep himself from worrying about it, he took his schoolbooks and slate and sat near the door, reading — his usual practice. But he couldn't concentrate. The thought of what the children at school would say to him the next day worried him. He thought wildly of running away from the shame and dishonour. He now felt like rolling in the mud, weeping and wailing loudly. But he was afraid that if he started crying, the women in the street would wonder why. They would come round to see what was wrong, and would start abusing his mother in front of him. He was desperately trying to hold down the sobs that threatened to overpower him. And he was also praying fervently for her return.

He was staring at the crowds in the street, his eyes searching for his mother. Dagdu, already dead drunk in the late afternoon, came up to him swaying dangerously. He stared at Pandu, and spat disparagingly. 'The whore of a slut! You're shameless enough to make the rounds of the shops with that pimp, with your child sitting alone at home! If that was what you needed you only had to tell me — I'd have obliged. And here I've been burning with desire for you, all these years... But now...'

As Dagdu continued abusing his mother, Pandu burnt with an

impotent rage. He lost his childlike feelings as the murderous fires continued to haunt him; he felt like hurling a heavy rock at Dagdu's swaying, retreating form and his mind's eye was luridly coloured by the spraying blood that he imagined would gush out of Dagdu's head. He trembled with revenge and anger, and suddenly the full import of what Dagdu had said, at last dawned on him. Like a short puff of air, his anger and hatred towards Dagdu melted away, and he thought, disdainfully, that Dagdu was undoubtedly right. Fear, anger, contempt for his mother slowly formed within his mind, and one by one he was forced to answer so many questions about her...Is that why she is always late nowadays? Was that why she was late last night? And will she come home tonight or will she run away for ever like Gangu next door? And what will happen to me? How will I learn to live alone?

The questions tormented him, and he could control his tears no longer. 'Mother,' he screamed and threw himself on the ground with a heart-rending cry. He held his hand over his mouth to suppress the sobs, but the neighbours heard and one of them ran in.

'Listen all of you! That shameless tart's little one is crying. What's the matter?'

'What?' A few more women came out, showed him sympathy and stood about abusing his mother.

...At that very moment, she was rushing towards home with lightning steps, knowing he would be hungry, and waiting. Her steps slowed down as she saw the gang of women, her envious enemies waiting at her doorstep. She was now sure that he too had turned against her, joined the enemy ranks. Didn't she have proof now? And suddenly he seemed to her like his cruel, alcoholic, deceitful father. Anger quickened her steps, and she rushed towards their little room. The entire street was transfixed by her undulating walk. The men stripped her bare in their mind's eye, the women burned with envy, but couldn't help looking. Dagdu slowly called out 'S...l...u...t!' and the women laughed in derision. It was obvious that Dagdu wanted to pick a fight.

Pandu's mother, secure in her new-found love, rejoicing in the great physical prowess of the overseer, burned with anger, but walked straight, and threaded her way through the hostile crowd. The women started hurling abuse at her, and Pandu forgot his sorrows and sat up. His new-found knowledge enabled him to see her tightly worn expensive sari, the careless confidence, the defiance in her walk; her

lips, which he now considered evil, reddened as they were with betel juice. He was convinced of her guilt; his mind was already willing to take sides against her.

She noticed at once the suspicion in his eyes, the glance that took her in from top to toe, and her love, her concern for him slowly turned to rage. At that moment he looked exactly like his TB-ridden, suspicious, nagging father. In his eyes she could feel again the accusations that her husband had often levelled against her. The memories of all the physical and mental torture she had undergone were very painful, hard to forget. Pandu now looked exactly as his father had done years ago.

Pandu was just an infant then. The kitchen fires had to be kept going, and he needed medicines, and milk and fruit. All day she would work at the construction sites, hauling bricks and cement. On her return she would glimpse the same dark suspicion that stared out of Pandu's eyes at this minute. She was beautiful, desirable, which automatically meant that perhaps she consistently sold her beauty, gave it away for a price. His eyes would follow her, watch her every movement. And then he would begin the most degrading act of the day, something that gave her nightmares even now. He would strip her and examine her feet, her thighs, her breasts, her sari and blouse, and would carefully scrutinize her lips and cheeks. His eyes would constantly seek proof, proof of her infidelity, proof that she was indeed an adulteress. And often those suspicion-ridden eyes would perceive a change in the way she looked at him. Or the way she walked, or...or...In great fury he would ask, 'Your sari looks as if you've worn it in a hurry, your hair's coming loose, where were you, slut?' He would search her again for the money he thought she was earning the easy way, and when he found nothing, he would taunt her, 'Giving it on credit now, are you?' His blows were always aimed at destroying her full-blown beauty. He hoped she would lose a lot of blood, become lame or deformed, ugly, and so, in spite of his ebbing strength, he would aim at her face, her nose, head, eyes. Then he threatened to kill her when she was asleep. He blamed her entirely for his disease, his failing strength, his joblessness. Once, out of sheer desperation, she had pleaded with him, 'Let's go to the village. The men here harass me all the time and so do you. The village air will do you good. Forget your differences with your brother. Let's go back.'

'How dare you remind me of that swine? Temptress, witch! I'll die, allow this child to die, but I'll never let that pig near me.' He held her

responsible for his estrangement from his brother, for hadn't he looked at her with lust in his eyes? They had to come away to this great metropolis after he had almost killed his brother with an axe. Later, he would detect desire in the eyes of every man who as much as glanced at her. He got into fights over her; became tuberculous. As the disease advanced, he lusted after her body even more avidly; the suspicions grew wilder and the accusations more preposterous than before.

One night she suddenly woke up from a deep sleep to find him heating up the iron tongs in the fire; he had taken away the clothes from her body. She froze in horror as she realized that he had wanted to brand her naked body with the hot iron. From then on, she actively wished for his death, and demanded her conjugal rights even when she knew he was indeed close to death, hoping to thus hasten it. A few days later he died, and she felt guilty, as if she had sent him to his early death.

She had suffered immeasurable torment after his death. Men were drawn to her; she did not want them. They tried rape and their women waged a war of slander against her.

...The suspicion in Pandu's eyes took her back into the past, but she was jolted afresh into the present by Dagdu, who now sat on his porch hurling abuse at her lover, the overseer. Pure hatred towards Dagdu and her own weak son coursed through her body. She wanted to kill them all. She walked up to Dagdu and shouted: 'May you get leprosy! May the worms eat up your eyes and nose, you pimp.' She then turned from Dagdu and the full force of her fury found its target in Pandu. 'Die, you bastard! Like your father who died of his own evil.' Pandu felt his mother did not need him any more — she had murdered his father and would murder him. He felt he would have to leave this place, soon. He got up, but couldn't hold back his tears; he hid his face in his shirt front and cried piteously.

Then she suddenly saw him as he really was: totally vulnerable, totally dependent on her, even as his father had been before him. She noticed his thin, spindly arms and legs, the concave stomach, that now lay exposed, and the whitish pallor of his skin. A nightmarish thought suddenly struck her; did he have TB too? God forbid! She rushed up to him, 'Have you been coughing? Tell me son, do you feel feverish? Don't be stubborn, tell mother.' But he refused to answer her desperate queries; he was longing to cry in peace, and run out of the house if necessary. He had been torn apart by suspicion. For the last

six months, ever since she had met the overseer, it was true that she had neglected him; she hadn't even touched him. The loneliness of the past ten years had made her vulnerable, and now she could only think of the overseer's strong arms. She wanted to hold Pandu to her, but her lover had been very demanding; she could hardly move. She suddenly remembered the new clothes she had bought him.

'Son, forgive me. Look, I've brought you some new clothes. Wear them and come eat, son. Forgive me, I'm just an old silly.'

It was good to look at her tear-filled eyes. He looked at the clothes. There were two sets; and there were a couple of saris for her as well. The new clothes reminded him of last Diwali. He had worn new clothes, but the neighbours hadn't liked it. How could a poor widow's son be allowed to wear new clothes for the festival?

'Good for you!' They had jeered at him. 'Your mother's "business" seems to be doing very well. What a great rush there must be. Five rupees for each customer.' And when he had retaliated, Dagdu had rushed at him. Mother had heard the rumpus and had run out. But Dagdu had held her tight and throwing her to the ground, had almost succeeded in removing her clothes. Pandu had picked up a big stone, and had thrown it with all his might at his mother's tormentor. The neighbours had gathered round to break up the fight. Since then, he had stopped wearing new clothes. Now, as he glanced at these clothes, the cruel words that he had heard last Diwali came back to haunt him: 'Your mother's "business"... big rush... five rupees for every customer...'

The love that he'd just begun to feel for her again, started melting away. Perhaps she had really gone to the bad now. No point in staying here any longer. 'Come, son. Put on these clothes and come eat,' she was pleading with him. But he was disgusted at the thought of his classmates jeering at him, abusing her in front of him. He couldn't take it any more. 'Whore! I spit on your clothes,' he shouted and ran out of the house. Her pain knew no bounds. Was she finally being made to pay for her sins? She had spent ten long years as a widow, and had tried so hard to love Pandu, she'd lived only for him, till the overseer came along last year. She had lost her husband, and now her son had turned against her. She started crying helplessly.

It was close to midnight now. She had locked the door, afraid that Dagdu would come in and molest her, and was waiting silently for Pandu's return. After a while she started muttering slowly to herself. 'Son, you called me a whore and went away. You hurt me more than

your father ever did. Was it for this that God sent you to me? You've all tortured me — you, your father, the men in this street — also the women. For you, I waded through hell. Do you know something son? I was beautiful, and after you father's death, Mohammed Maistry was prepared to make over his car to me if I agreed to marry him; Walji Seth would send a fifty-rupee note through a messenger every Saturday night and ask me to go over to his bungalow; and even Dagdu was prepared to give me his life-savings. I could have lived a merry life, but I gave up everything, son. I lived for you, hoping you'd grow up, be my support, but you have betrayed me...'

The room now seemed to her like the cremation grounds — everything was so still. She felt so alone, afraid that Dagdu would come, would try to rape her. And at that instant she felt that by locking the door she had turned away her son for ever. Perhaps he would come, would find the door locked and would go away. She heard the sound of the dogs in the distance, and thinking he had come back, joyfully opened the door.

'Come son, forgive this old sinner.'

The door opened and the overseer stood in the doorway. His massive frame seemed to dwarf everything else in the room.

'What's happened? Why do you look so scared? You're sweating.' He hugged her, pretended to wipe the sweat off her face, and started caressing her arms and breasts. She slowly responded, and out of the hunger of the past ten years of widowhood, flared an uncontrollable desire. And that was why she failed to hear the timid knock at the door, the faint, hesitant cry, 'Mother!' He saw them, his mother and the towering figure of the overseer in a tight embrace. His last hopes seemed to crash about his head; broken-hearted, he wildly rushed towards the door. She saw him then, ran after him calling his name but the overseer, already blinded with lust, refused to let her go; he was pulling her into the room with his strong brown arms.

Pandu was running away at great speed; his fast falling tears had almost blinded him, the stray dogs ran at his heels, snapped at him and now he was screaming, shouting with terror, afraid of the dogs...

She was trying desperately to escape from the bear-like hug of the overseer. But like a person stuck fast in a quagmire, she found release impossible...

Translated by Mira Manvi

AMITABH

The Cull

'A cull... a cull!' The clarion call rent the air, and men and women, rubbing the sleep off their eyes, rushed out of their mud hovels like hens fluttering out of their coops when the shutters are opened. Those sleeping out in the yards were quick on their feet. They were all ears. Dawn was breaking into the first glow. With their tin pots filled with water some were heading towards the scrub for their morning ablutions when they heard the cry.

'Who says there's a cull?' said the old woman Bulkai.

'Don't know!' Rodba replied.

'Who says there's a cull — could be a fib to hassle us!' commented Nagai, another old woman.

'Come on, who says ... ' Bulkai shrieked.

'Oh, that Dhondya, Dagdya's son...'

'What does he say, how does he know?'

'He just came from the scrub. He met Pandya Padewar and his son, they were dragging the cull to the scrub,' said Warlya.

The news of the cull spread like wildfire throughout the Mahars' shanty town. Everyone was talking about it, asking the other, 'Is it true?'

'What beast is that?'

'How do I know?'

'O Dhondya, do you know what beast...' Dagdya asked Dhondya.

'It's Timaji Patil's cow — the sacred one! Pandya said so as he was dragging it away.' said Dhondya.

The news set the whole shanty town in hectic motion accompanied by shrieks and shouts. Old Bulkai said to Rodba, 'What are you waiting for, come on, be quick, there won't be anything left for us!'

'Look, I have to go to the toilet first.'

'Oh, can't it wait? Forget about it on a day like this!'

She collected two knives and took the only tin trough she had, the one with a hole plugged with a rag. She pushed a reluctant Rodba in front of her. Both of them started towards the gum trees. Rodba took

his tinpot filled with water.

Old Nagai noticed them and yelled at her son, Dajya, swearing at him and pushing him towards the gum trees. Seeing that he was not quick enough for her she took the basket and scurried towards the gum trees, stooped in the back as she was. She blabbered all the way. Now Dhondya and Dagdya stirred. They sharpened their knives on stone, brandishing them like sabres, testing the sharpness on their own fingers. When their knives were sharp enough they started towards the scrub with their palm-leaf baskets. One after another, the whole colony was now on the march — Warlya, Chindhya, Chindhi, Ughdya, Godi, Lahanya, Barkya — everyone, with whatever container he could find: basins and baskets, creels and crans, troughs and trugs, tall aluminium pots, flat plates woven out of palm leaves, earthen pots. Ughdya's son, Kisnya, was the smartest; he reached there first, ready with his knife and trough.

Vithi had a large brood: three sons, three daughters, the youngest still a suckling. Her asthmatic husband coughed and coughed. He couldn't hold any job so she had to feed all of them somehow. Children came in quick succession — the next as soon as the previous one was weaned — there was no break. She was utterly fed up, but was there a way out?

They all sailed in the same boat; on whose shoulder could she cry?

'Nilya, Nilya,' Vithi called out to the eldest. He didn't seem to take any notice. She pulled the rag cover off him. Her movement ripped the already frayed rag. That further angered her. She pulled Nilya up into a sitting position. He flopped back amongst the covers, his eyes still closed. He had been reading till late night in the light of the kerosene lamp. But she had to wake him. She gripped him under the arms and made him stand up. Then she splashed a bowlful of water over his eyes. He grumbled and swore at her, screaming, 'Why me, why wake me up so early!' But who had the time to put up with his tantrums? Someone had to go and fetch a potful of flesh that would feed the family for the next few days. Nilya tried to shirk the job — he moaned and groaned. So she brought a heavy arm down and thumped him hard, pushed the tall metal pot, with a hole plugged with a rag, into his one hand and the knife into the other. She shouted her threat, 'Go get a potful or there'll be no food for you ... I'll hang you by your toes.'

On the scrub under the gum trees were gathered all the Mahars from the shanty town. Each carried a knife and some kind of

container. Some made do with a broken piece of a mud pot or a rag. Some didn't have even that, so they would have to carry the meat in the folds of the dhoti or sari they were wearing.

Pandu wedged the carcass of the cow between the two gum trees. He and his son Somya started skinning the carcass with their knives. Everyone scrambled nearer, either standing or squatting on their haunches. Pandu wasn't going to let anyone touch the carcass until he had skinned it carefully and taken his share of the meat. He was careful. No cuts, no tears; he must have a nice, clean, complete coat of the hide. With his professional skill he was skinning the beast with careful but confident strokes of his knife — the four legs first, then the tail, the bottom and the neck. Then he skinned the belly and the back. His hands were covered with blood. He had no shirt on; his dhoti hitched round his waist was smudged with blood. No time to bother about that! For the whole of last month there had been nothing, nothing at all. This was a long awaited chance and he didn't want anything to go wrong.

Surrounding him they raised a din, sharpened knives in their hands, and took position, ready to strike. Kites and vultures perched on the gum trees. Some hovered in the air, fighting in flight. The flutter of their wings, their shrill shrieks had attracted all the dogs in the village. They barked and growled, some waited expectantly with their legs tucked under, some haunched on their hind legs, craning their necks, with tongues lolling and dribbling. They pushed themselves as near as they could. Whenever someone noticed that they were too close, he would chase them away with a stone.

At last the skinning was over. Pandya and Somya cut open the belly carefully. The blood spouted in a stream and showered those around. Somya held his trough near the spout and collected some. Warlya pushed his trough, he got some too. Somya now took out the innards and plopped them down. Then he cut out the liver, put it into his second trough, took out the lungs and the heart as well. That filled both his troughs.

Then he sliced off a thick steak from the ham and heaped it onto the trough which was already filled to the brim. He covered his troughs with the neatly folded hide, put away both his knives, looked around to make sure he had not left anything behind and walked away with the troughs on his head.

As soon as Pandya and Somya were out, others, like sanguine Rajput warriors, pounced upon the prey, raising a full-throated battle

cry. Baija, Old Bulkai, Rodba, Shirpat, Barkya, Warlya, Chindhya, Bhimi, Chingi, Chindhi, Namya, Tukya, Kisnya, young and old, all marched forth, flashing their knives. Everyone had an eye on the thick thighs and buttocks. They pulled and tugged at the carcass. Tens of knives were sawing at the chest at once. Whatever piece, small or big, they could manage, they cut and put into their containers. The knives slashed and sliced, chunks and chunks of meat were piled into the hampers and baskets. It was a free-for-all. It was no use brawling, yet abuse was bandied around freely, along with pushing and shoving. 'Oh, stop it! Watch it! Stop pushing, you, pick from where you are!'

'Why bicker, no one's stopping you from cutting.'

'O Barkya, give me a small piece, come, put a piece into my basket, Kisnya!' Old Nagai was pleading and begging on her knees, occasionally swearing at someone. Nobody gave a damn. They were too busy with their hands and mouths. In the fierce competition the old and the weak were out.

In the circumstances, there was no way the birds and the beasts could get anywhere near. Vultures, kites and crows were squawking, screeching, fluttering their wings; mangy dogs were howling, barking in protest, wagging their tails ingratiatingly; what else could they do?

Nilya, far from nimble, didn't even know which piece to go for and how to cut it. Yet pick he must, fill the tall pot, for he was under threat. Alternatively he would have to beg from door to door or, worse still, just go hungry. If he were to collect more maybe... he began to daydream... a big earthen pot filled with meat, salted, cut up, dried in the sun just as in Hatya's house. Nilya's mum roasting a couple of pieces on open fire, just for him! and then Nilya munching them, savouring the dry meat — Hatya need not brag any more!

Nilya, a knife in one hand and his tall metal pot with a hole plugged with a rag in another, was standing with sleep heavy on his eyelids. He couldn't reach the cull, for there was such a scramble. Wherever there was a little gap he tried to push inside but someone would shove him, he would lose his balance and fall down. He would get up, only to be pushed off again and again. It just wasn't possible for him to do anything.

Kisnya had his trough overflowing. He looked up at Nilya standing there empty-handed and felt sorry for him. With his knife he cut off a few chunks of good thick meat and threw them at Nilya. 'Come on, Nilya, take them, put them into your trough, you son of a bitch.' The pieces fell into the dust.

Old Bulkai bent over to reach for them. Kisnya snarled at her, 'Move aside, you old hag, let Nilya have them.' Nilya picked them up from the dust, shook off the dirt and put them into his pot. Kisnya pushed the crowd aside to make room for Nilya, but the heaving crowd closed the gap before Nilya could plant his foot inside. He was thrown back.

The carcass was a mere skeleton of bones now. All the meat had been scraped off the bones. They were all covered in blood as if they had played Holi. Their hair was red. Their limbs were red. The dirty rags they wore were red. From top to toe they were all dyed in the same colour — red.

Then they started to trail back home, with freshly butchered red meat still dripping blood in their troughs and trays, bowls and baskets, pots and pans, rags and panniers. Excited and contented, towards their homes they marched.

The kites, vultures, and crows now sprang into action. The dogs, alerted, attacked the skeleton. The crows hovered over the heads of the people going home and swooped down on the troughs they carried on their heads. The kites and the vultures, emboldened by the sight, dipped from the gum trees onto the troughs and baskets. They watched from above the walking meat cargo and flocks and flocks of them converged onto the target. Crows carried off pieces in their beaks, kites and vultures in their claws. With these they flew to the gum trees to savour the catch. The men and women, used to such attacks, held onto their baskets and troughs tightly with one hand and with the other brandished their knives and twigs picked on the way to ward them off.

Nilya chased off the dogs and threw stones at the curs that dared bark at him. If he threw stones at the kites and the vultures they flew off only to return the next moment. Nilya searched for meat he could saw off with his knife, but it was a tough job. Holding his breath and clenching his teeth, he scoured whatever he could. Shooing the dogs away, he hacked off pieces and put them into his pot. Tense all over, he worked hard. The ribs had little meat on them and the chunks that Kisnya had given him were the only good meat, the rest was all bones. But he wasn't wise enough to understand that. Suddenly a crow darted and poked at the cow's eye. While trying to shoo him off Nilya saw the cow's tongue lolling down. Surprisingly nobody had noticed it — may be the cow had kindly saved it for him, he flattered himself. With all his might he cut it off and put it into his pot. Two dogs were fighting

over a thigh bone and in the tug of war they dropped the bone. Nilya hurled a stone at them and as they scampered off he picked up the bone. There was a bit of meat on it, so he put it into his pot. Contented that he had more than enough, he got up and put his knife away. Carrying the pot on his head, he started walking towards home.

The birds and the beasts stirred again. Crows pounced on his trough. Nilya picked up a twig and brandished it over his head. Kites and vultures were quick to join the crows; one of them swooped down. In trying to chase them off with his twig Nilya started losing his grip on the pot. So he threw the twig away and with a firmer grip with both his hands he held the pot tightly. He quickened his steps. Now the dogs were at his heels, barking. As he ran, he tried to ward off the dogs and the birds. Suddenly he stepped on a bramble bush. He fell over and the thorns pricked him. As he was trying to recover his balance, the vultures came down heavily and the tightly gripped pot on his head fell off. The meat pieces scattered into the dust. Dogs pounced on them. Crows clamoured for them and managed to snatch a few. Vultures and kites carried away a couple of them. A dog made off with the bone it had lost to Nilya before. Nilya, still unable to get up from the brambles, threw stones at them and tried to shoo them away. But the dogs took away the bones. Nilya's feet were bleeding with the thorn-pricks. He couldn't move his legs. But he had to rescue his pot, with whatever was left in it. The dogs might dare to carry off the pot as well! Nilya pushed himself towards the pot, he stood the pot upright. He brushed the dust off the chunks and put them into his pot. He seemed to forget the pain and his bleeding feet as he collected the bones covered with dust and heaped them into his pot.

The birds are still hovering over his head, swooping and pecking, the dogs are barking. But Nilya is busy filling up his pot.

Translated by Asha Damle

KESHAV MESHRAM

Barriers

Zingu crossed the railway gate and walked on, his eyes wandering here and there. If he met a well dressed man, he bowed to him, addressing him as 'Dadasaheb', and proceeded briskly on his way.

His manner of walking seemed out of tune with his scrawny build. Perspiration welled up on his face. As he walked he kept lifting the hem of his dust-stained dhoti held together by knots. His shirt, too, was full of holes. He carried a roll of bedding under his arm and a thick stick in his hand. His dhoti had turned almost black from wiping away sweat and dust. Dirt from the road and the layer of fine dust thrown on him by passing cars and trucks had turned his naturally dark skin an unsightly colour.

Narayan followed his father, carrying a thick gunny bag in his hand. He was as dark as his father but he was quite tall and well-built. He had visited Murtijapur twice — once when he was in the fifth standard and again when he was in the seventh. So he wasn't as awe-struck as his father at the sight of the district town.

The school in his village had classes only up to the seventh standard. There were just about seven or eight households of neo-Buddhists in Dadhi village, but their enthusiasm for educating their children was great. Everyone in the village insisted that Narayan be sent to Murtijapur for his further education. They said that he could stay comfortably at the Gadge Baba hostel.

Since the decision, his mother Sitalabai had been crying for days because her dear son was going to live all alone, away from her. 'Is my one and only son too much for you to feed?' she reproached her husband, driving him mad with her incessant wailing.

'Be quiet. Are your wits better than mine?' Zingu, already half sick with worry, growled even louder at his wife.

'But won't you listen to your betters at least? Deshmukh's wife said that...' Again and again Sitalabai urged her husband not to send Narayan out of the village.

The mention of Deshmukh's wife softened up Zingu a little. 'Well,

what does she have to say?'

'The poor thing was thinking... Her sister's at Nagpur. They've got a big bungalow and motor car. The boy could make himself useful about the house. He could study too.' Sitalabai was carried away, pleased that her husband was listening to her.

'Now what's this new thing you've come up with?' said Zingu, confused. 'Just the other day you were saying there's work right here, in the Deshmukh field and farm house.'

'But you wouldn't agree to it,' said Sitalabai, gesticulating at him. 'What's the use of learning so much? If the boy has to be sent away he might as well be sent according to the wishes of those who have fed us for generations.' And Sitalabai stopped, heaving a great sigh.

Deshmukh had also tried advising Zingu. From Zingu's father's time they had served in the house of the Deshmukhs, who had helped their family in times of need. On festival days they were given new clothes by the Deshmukhs. Every other day, they were given buttermilk, and sometimes curd. They had standing permission from the Deshmukhs to take away cakes of cowdung fuel. Zingu was not prepared to accept that such a generous patron would not think about his interests.

But for the last two or three years there had been huge gatherings here and there. The speakers had told the neo-Buddhists to throw their idols into the river. A crowd too huge for the gaze, large enough to tire your eyes, had assembled in the village Dadhi-Pedhi. Zingu had not seen such a large number of people since his childhood.

'People who worship animals but treat human beings like beasts — they do not belong to us and we do not belong to them.' Resolutions and speeches on such themes were made. The rich and the high caste people did not stir out of their houses for three or four days. It was a new discovery for the seven or eight Mahar households of Dadhi village, that those whom they had feared since their childhood were equally afraid of them and of those who spoke on their behalf. Although three days before, Devake Saheb had described the gods as monkeys and pot-bellies, he was neither struck down with fever nor was his body pierced by divine wrath. He went on giving speeches everywhere, sometimes on foot, sometimes by bullock cart, bicycle or even a snub-nosed jeep. Seeing all this, they felt as if they were living in a new village. They had a chance to experience something novel.

For a month the atmosphere of the village seemed fresh and new. Then habit, need and poverty brought them back to where they were

before. Rituals began again, though without the idols. Fasts, Mariai-worship, incense-burning, festivals, fairs, the Govind Maharaj feast day, the birthdays of Dr Ambedkar and Hanuman were once again celebrated. The Deshmukhs and the Kulkarnis breathed a sigh of relief. They were happy that the people remained the same in spite of changing their caste names.

Zingu, however, was determined to educate his son. However much Deshmukh reasoned with him, he wouldn't listen. 'Saheb, the two of us are here to serve you till we die. Let the boy go out. Let him see this new type of *raj*, this democracy, the one you mark with a cross.' Zingu was firm in his decision.

Finally it was discovered that the headmaster at Murtijapur was really a relation of the Deshmukhs and Deshmukh gave a sealed letter to this relation, Dongre Saheb. Deshmukh's wife too gave a letter addressed to her brother. Guarding those two letters as if they were a hundred-rupee note, Zingu had reached the *taluka* town at noon.

As they walked they came to a well where the two of them stopped to slake their thirst. There was quite a traffic of women to and from this well. Whenever a woman came there, Zingu approached her with cupped palms in the hope of water to drink, but the woman would draw water for herself and go away. After about fifteen minutes Zingu was given some water.

'Narayan, my child, have some water,' said Zingu, glancing fondly at his son, who sat apart looking glum. But Narayan shook his head.

'Don't you want some water? You've been asking for it for quite some time,' said Zingu, surprised. He wiped his face and hands with the end of his dhoti and started walking ahead.

'You go on. I'll follow you,' said Narayan to his father. Zingu thought that Narayan wanted to ease himself, so he went forward slowly.

The sun was declining in the sky. The shadows of the trees had lengthened and twisted. A dog ran up panting, raised its leg and pissed an oblation on the edge of the well. It thrust its head into a half filled bucket of water and happily took a drink. Then it bit at its own tail, screamed at itself and scampered away. Narayan enjoyed the sight.

Narayan put aside his bag and got up. He threw out the rest of the water from the bucket. He propped his left foot on the parapet and lowered the bucket into the well. Slowly he drew it out, then washed his hands right up to the elbows, washed his face and his feet, wiped his feet with the cloth round his neck and tied it around his neck again.

Just then a shadow fell across him. 'Who're you?' A fair old man with a Brahmin's top knot and bare to the waist asked him.

Narayan went and put the bucket near the well. Then he looked at the old man and smiled. Pressing the muscles of his arm, he said,'Baba, I'm Narayan Zende from Janata High School.'

'Good, good,' said the old man, contentedly nodding, and twisting his sacred thread. Narayan smiled again.

Zingu was watching all this from a distance, his eyes popping and his heart palpitating. Narayan hastened his steps to catch up with his father.

'Narayan, my dear boy, you shouldn't do things like this. Suppose someone had seen you and caught you? It isn't good to be bold and forget our station in life. It's a sin — you can go to hell for it.' The words broke out of Zingu as if he were suffocating. Narayan said nothing.

At last they reached Headmaster Dongre's house. A message went in that someone had come from Nanasaheb Deshmukh of Dadhi village. Dongre came out and enquired, 'Who're you? Are you Zingu who's come from Bapu?'

'Yes sir, that's who I am,' said Zingu, bowing low from the waist, with folded hands. He gently put down the two letters on the step.

'Vatsalabai, bring the silver bowl,' Headmaster Dongre called out.

'Sit down, Zingu, you must be tired. You've been sent all the way by my sister and brother-in-law.' At these words Zingu bowed again from the waist. Narayan, who was standing some distance away, was astonished at the welcoming note in the words. He came a few steps closer.

Headmaster Dongre had now noticed him. A question rose in his mind about who this boy could be, his height equal to Dongre's own. The question broke out onto his lips. 'Has my brother-in-law employed a new farm-hand?' He said to Zingu, pointing towards Narayan.

Zingu hurriedly stood up again. 'No sir, he's mine. He's my son Narayan.'

'Really?' said the headmaster.

A middle-aged woman hurried out. There was a silver bowl in her hand.

'I've brought the cow's urine,' she said. The headmaster dipped his fingers in it. He flicked a few drops here and there and scattered a few on the letters lying on the veranda. Then returned the bowl to

the lady, who quickly went inside.

The headmaster read both the letters again and again, his expression continually changing. He had the habit of winking with his left eye. From time to time he kept looking at Zingu, and then glancing at Narayan.

'Well done, Zingu. You've really got guts. That's a clever piece of thinking. We'll take good care of your young master Narayan,' he said, nodding.

Zingu had conveyed something to Narayan while the letter was being read. Narayan nodded. At the headmaster's words Zingu got up again. He smiled, contorting his body in a queer fashion. And repeatedly bent down to salute the headmaster. Narayan came forward and joining his hands, said, 'Namaskar, Guruji.'

'Why, the boy's accent is really pure. He's smart,' said Headmaster Dongre, looking pleased.

By now the darkness had thickened about them. Vatsalabai had brought out food served on leaf platters. Dazzling white rice. Hot millet *bhakris*. Pounded chutney. Hot *zunka* with linseed oil poured on it. Zingu and Narayan gratefully ate their fill.

There were two aluminium pots filled with water. Zingu put the pot to his lips and drained it. Vatsalabai refilled it with water from the earthen water pot. Narayan raised the pot but poured the water into his mouth from above, gulping it down in a steady stream, his throat bobbing up and down as he drank. Vatsalabai stared at his throat and bare chest. They washed their hands, cleared away the leaf platters and went to throw them away at a distance. Two or three dogs dashed up hopefully. But the leaf platters, wiped clean of food, must have blown away with the wind, for hardly had they turned their backs, than the dogs ran barking in a different direction.

Telling the headmaster again and again to look after Narayan and reminding his son that a guru was next only to God, Zingu had turned back to go home. For a long time the noise of the barking dogs came through the darkness. Then that too quietened.

With his father's departure Narayan felt a great emptiness. For a while he was numbed. He could see or hear nothing. The light outside the house had been turned off. Inside, the headmaster had sat down to his evening meal. Narayan was to stay there in the night and set out for school next morning for which the headmaster was to make the arrangements for him. For a long time Narayan sat clutching his roll of bedding. It made him feel as if he were lying asleep in the crook of

his father's arm.

Good arrangements had been made for Narayan at the hostel. The school too was good. Narayan had been admitted to Standard VIII C. He was the tallest and best built of all the boys in classes eight and nine. On the first day many boys asked him who he was and asked him his date of birth. Narayan Zingroji Zende, 4 July 1945. There was an expression of wonder on the boys' faces as they realized that this strapping champion of a boy was only twelve or thirteen years old like themselves. But apart from his size, he seemed just like one of them. One or two of them struck up a friendship with him.

'It's a good thing you are built like this. These wretched boys may look small but they're little thugs. If anyone gives me trouble, you'll hammer the fellow, won't you?' said Sampat Karhade, putting a friendly hand on his shoulder. 'Let's be friends too,' said Ashok Savji, introducing himself.

A few days went by. There was to be a speech by Raghba Kamble at the hostel. Raghba Kamble was a smiling man who had lost the use of a leg in battle at the height of his youth. He was head of the Backward Castes Association of Akola district. His chief occupation was to tell students about the new ways of thinking, and to explain Buddhism and humanitarianism to them in simple language. He used to make the boys laugh so much at the anecdotes he told that not just the backward caste boys but the others too were mad about him. His name commanded respect in schools and colleges. The inspector of police used to snap out a salute on seeing him and the *tehsildar* would stop his car for him.

Textbooks and notebooks were distributed to the boys in the hostel. Raghba Kamble's address had been written up on the hostel notice board. He looked after matters in Akola and Amravati districts. His train, the Bhusaval Passenger, arrived late at the station, and so Narayan, who had gone along with a few boys to send him off at Murtijapur station, reached school late.

As Narayan hurried towards his class, the headmaster appeared in front of him. Narayan tried to hide but was unable to. 'Stop!' called the headmaster and Narayan halted, his head lowered. 'Is this the time to come to school? Is the free food you're getting making you oversleep? You people are the government's sons-in-law, aren't you? Freeloaders, one and all!'

Headmaster Dongre was tearing a strip off Narayan, who tried once or twice to offer an explanation but the headmaster's voice was too

loud. His Marathi teacher, Agashebai, came out of the class for a minute but went in again.

During the next period, Narayan went and sat quietly on a bench at the back of the class. Karhade and Savji tried very hard to get out of him what the headmaster had said but he wouldn't tell them. 'I'll tell you later,' was all he would say.

When the Geography lesson was over, the peon brought a note. His teacher, Kakade, told him that the headmaster had summoned him after school ended and signed in acknowledgement and returned the note with the peon.

With lowered head, Narayan explained the reason for his lateness that morning and asked for forgiveness. Some thought appeared to be going through the headmaster's mind as he listened.

'Look here, this is your punishment. You're to come to class fifteen minutes before school begins. You're to sit on the bench at the back. In the lunch break you're to go to the station to drink water. Ten minutes after school closes, you're to see me before leaving.'

Narayan nodded. At first Narayan was happy that the headmaster had given thought to his studies. But he could not hear too well from the bench at the back. It was a strain to walk ten minutes to the station in the noontime sun. But he was determined to earn the headmaster's approval by working out his punishment to the letter.

One day, he had come early as usual when the school peon came and told him that the headmaster had called him. He went.

'Narayan,' said Headmaster Dongre, 'There's a lot of work I want done.' Narayan nodded.

'Our cook at home has called you. Go and see what the matter is. Take your books along with you.'

'Sir, I can come this evening, straight from the hostel,' said Narayan.

'No. It must be something important. Go right away.'

Narayan went, but reluctantly. As he got out, Ashok Savji was coming to school. Ashok gave him an enquiring look, which Narayan answered only with a finger pointed at the headmaster's room.

Narayan trudged his way to the headmaster's house but when he reached there, there was no one at home. Just as he was deciding to go back, Vatsalabai appeared, carrying a water pot.

'Oh, you've come. I just went to relieve myself. Planning to go away, were you?' She put the water pot outside, took up some ash and went inside to wash her hands.

'What's happened is that a cart full of firewood arrived yesterday. There aren't too many logs. It was I who told Dadaji, "Narayan's a sweet-natured boy. I'll look after everything."' She spoke as if she were talking to herself. As she spoke she gestured to him to follow. In a large courtyard behind the house, a heap of firewood lay under the shed. She gave Narayan a *ladoo* on a castor leaf and fetched an axe for him.

Narayan looked at the heap of wood and then at the lady. She was leaning back against the door, one foot propped on a high log of wood. Narayan took off his shirt. He took out his pencil from the pocket of his shorts and put the pencil and his books away to one side. He ate the *ladoo*. 'Just wait, I'll bring you some water.' The lady brought some water in a bowl. 'Take that water pot,' she said, pointing towards a dented aluminium pot.

With a great deal of force, Narayan hit a log of wood with his axe. That aluminium water pot was the one the lady had just used for her ablutions after relieving herself. What's more, it was the same water pot from which he had drunk at his meal on the first day. Narayan declined the water with a gesture of his hand. Chips of wood flew fast and furious. By three o'clock he had split the entire heap and made a neat pile of them. He was soaked in perspiration. In the past few hours, the lady had come out several times, stood watching for a while and gone in again. The school peon had come and taken away the headmaster's lunch box.

Narayan did not put his shirt back on, but wet with perspiration as if he had just had a bath, had wrapped his books in his shirt and was walking back to his hostel, bare to the waist.

Anusuya Chabukswar, a tenth standard student in his school, was looking at him with a strange expression in her eyes. She was the daughter of Raghbadada Kamble's sister. She too had been to the station the other day.

Narayan had won all the events at the school sports — long jump, high jump, running and wrestling. The name Narayan Zende was well-known to the five hundred or so students in the school. This new boy from a small village had smashed all previous records. The students were all talking about how the school would shine in the district sports. That whole week Narayan was drunk with excitement.

After much entreaty Narayan went to Sampat Karhade's house. Sampat's mother listened to the news of all his exploits with interest and affection. Sampat told his mother that since his friendship with

Narayan had begun, no one had picked on him. His mother brought some bananas in a plate and gave them both milk to drink. As Sampat bent to pick up the plate and glasses, his mother said, 'Let it be, I'll do it myself. Just give Narayan company till the end of the street.'

Though Narayan said, 'I can manage on my own,'.he liked this courteous custom of giving a guest a send-off.

As they turned to leave, they heard someone saying in a harsh voice, 'Where do you think you're going?' Narayan said, 'See what it is, I'll be off.' And saying his goodbye, briskly walked away. 'Useless brat, you've defiled our entire clan! You smuggled in this arrogant, lying, thieving outcaste. He's a Mahar and he had the nerve to draw water from the well and drink it. I just learnt about it.' Sampat Karhade's father had him by the scruff of the neck and was dragging him along. The dismayed and bewildered Sampat was allowing himself to be dragged, yelping like a reluctant puppy at the end of a string.

* * *

Headmaster Dongre saw to it that Narayan was kept too busy to stay in class. Once he gave him the job of cleaning out the sludge from the well in his courtyard. Narayan was hard at work in the well from morning to night. Food was thrown to him from above. He ate his food right there and drank the brackish water of the well to quench his thirst.

The various teams of the district sports meet had left for Amravati. The headmaster stated that the dates for the individual events had not yet been received. The sports festival came to an end. All the boys were surprised that this year, for the first time, the post office should not have delivered the letter giving details of the individual events.

Raghbadada had come to Murtijapur. He was to visit the school along with the deputy education inspector. Narayan had told him about everything that had been happening. As he told how he had not been allowed to participate in the sports meet, his eyes had filled with tears. Narayan, who usually did not allow his emotions to show, shed tears in Raghbadada's presence.

Anasuya Chabukswar too had some complaints. Headmaster Dongre used to teach her class too, and used to make fun of her spelling and punctuation in the whole class.

'So what's this lady to do if she matriculates? Become a scholar like Pandita Ramabai? Or marry another Baba Ambedkar?' And he would wink in emphasis at the words 'bai' and 'baba'.

Raghbadada listened quietly to all this and then said, 'Children,

our day will come. If a mouse never leaves his home for the mountains how will he ever see the sky?' With quips like this he made the children laugh while he smouldered inside. He gave Narayan a fountain pen as a present, without there being any specific occasion for it.

Raghbadada Kamble slipped into Headmaster Dongre's office. The peon politely told him that the headmaster was busy, as the deputy inspector was to visit the school that day.

But Raghbadada said, 'What's this, Headmaster? You seem to be very hostile to our children. It doesn't injure just them, but the school, the district, and the country too!'

At Kamble's abrupt plunge into the subject, the headmaster was flustered. 'Which children?' he said.

'Chabukswar, Zende, Zinzade, Gaikwad, Kathane, Khobragade — how many names do I have to tell you?' Kamble knew exactly what he was talking about. 'And Headmaster, remember, Deputy Inspector Gavai is my brother-in-law. If you go on showing hostility to our children, make jokes about Babasaheb Ambedkar and his wife, prevent prize-winning athletes from entering sports competitions — it'll not just be a transfer for you, but the law of the jungle. It may be a democracy, but the next example of wrong-doing will mean a big stick. And if it's serious wrong-doing, the house at Dadhi will be ashes!' Kamble's threat had the finality of an ultimatum, sharp as the blow of the sacrificial axe on a buffalo's neck at Dassera. And he walked out with measured steps.

For a couple of weeks after this there was no summons from the headmaster for Narayan. All the other children were envious of Narayan. They had imagined that it was out of special affection that the headmaster called him so frequently. Narayan just smiled at this.

One day while he was having a drink from the school tank, Headmaster Dongre was making his rounds. He did no more than look at Narayan. Flustered, Narayan had greeted him but his gesture drew no response.

Narayan entered the classroom. He was sitting in the front row next to Savji. Agashebai was teaching them the lesson entitled 'Indian Culture' by Sane Guruji. Narayan was writing something in his notebook. It was hard to concentrate on Agashebai's teaching that day. He had been feeling quite upset since meeting the headmaster's gaze.

On his way back to the office, Headmaster Dongre passed Narayan's classroom. The squeaky noise of his shoes filled the corridor. Then he halted and turned back. His steps came towards

Class VIII C. He came into the classroom. The entire class rose and greeted him. 'Namaste Guruji.'

At a gesture from him the class sat down. He often made a casual visit to a class in this manner. Agashebai went on teaching. '"We have inherited a great legacy worth teaching the entire world,"' Agashebai was saying in a high-pitched voice. As Headmaster Dongre was leaving the classroom he stopped for a moment at Narayan's bench. He had a good look at the pen in Narayan's hand and peeped into his notebook. 'What's this you've drawn?' His voice boomed out, sudden as a drum-beat. Agashebai stopped abruptly. And all the students started staring at Narayan. 'Nothing, Sir, nothing,' said Narayan, rising, his notebook covered with his hand. 'See me in my office before you go home,' ordered the headmaster, his former grim expression restored to his face, and he went out.

'What've you been up to?' asked Agashebai. 'Nothing, nothing,' said Narayan, shaking his head violently. 'Who knows what you've done to annoy him?' said Agashebai, pulling the notebook away from him.

Her face fell. She returned the notebook to Narayan and said to the children, 'I'd like you to read now, I've got a headache,' and she sat down on the chair. In his notebook, Narayan had written 'Indian Culture' and then 'Sane Guruji'. There were no further words on the rest of the page. He had not taken down a thing Agashebai had said. He had just used his pen to draw a picture of a donkey.

In the evening Headmaster Dongre said to him, 'Don't draw such stupid things. And don't use a pen. You'll spoil your handwriting.' As he spoke he was briskly signing, one after another, the papers on his desk, reflections of light gleaming from the cover of his pen.

Narayan nodded. 'Don't draw anything like that again... so, will you come to my house tomorrow morning?' Narayan nodded again and left the office.

When he went to the headmaster's house the next morning Dongre was about to leave for school. Narayan sat down on a block of stone in the veranda. Vatsalabai had brought him some tea in a thick broken cup without a handle. Narayan said, 'Sir, I just had some tea. If I have any more it'll kill my appetite.'

'Why don't you have it since it's offered with such love?' Vatsalabai had taken the cup from Dongre's hand and gone inside. Narayan gazed at the retreating cup, so delicate and milky white, and drank down his tea in one angry gulp and banged down the cup. 'Just see to

things in the house,' said Dongre, 'I'm off.' He put on his coat and went off to school, his shoes crunching the ground.

Narayan spent that day at Headmaster Dongre's house, reweaving tapes onto the cots. Vatsalabai moved around him, addressing him caressingly. Narayan did not eat any lunch. Although Vatsalabai asked him many times, 'Shall I serve you lunch?' Narayan said each time, 'No, I'm fasting today.' Finally she stopped importuning him.

There was a bustle of dusting and tidying at the school as preparations for Gandhi Jayanti got under way. The classrooms gleamed with cleanliness. Speeches were learnt by rote. The political leaders of the village dressed themselves in dazzling white and moved cautiously through the different neighbourhoods. A special programme had been arranged at the hostel too. The teachers and the villagers were to visit the hostel along with the chief guest.

Raghbadada Kamble too had arrived. Anasuya, looking very grown-up in a white sari, handed out flowers to the guests as they arrived. Some guests took the flowers from her smiling; others avoided touching them. There were speeches by the leaders. Raghbadada too gave a speech of gratitude. He declared emphatically that men everywhere were the same. There was a rattle of applause. But some of his listeners sat with stony faces.

Headmaster Dongre was cracking jokes as he accepted a *jalebi* from Narayan's hand and ate it. He was chatting with the others present. The *jalebis* had been sent by the local Gujarati Samaj and it was Kamble who had asked Narayan to distribute them.

Two days later a summons came for Narayan in the evening. Headmaster Dongre ordered some medicines for Vatsalabai's stomachache from the tribal settlement about a mile away.

It was not Narayan's practice to say no when asked to do something. He kept in mind his father's words that a guru was next only to God. He felt dejected.

That evening — it was a Saturday — he met Savji as he left the city limits. Savji stopped him, exclaiming, 'You're going all alone where the tribals live! The 'll kill you!' But leaving Savji behind he went ahead, pushing thro igh the darkness.

The darkness ha deepened considerably by the time Narayan had returned to the hea master's house. It was after nine. The 'medicine' given by the Bhil Desa, was Mahua liquor. A policeman by the railway crossing ed to stop Narayan, who fled for his life.

Headmaster ngre seemed surprised to see him. 'Didn't anyone

stop you on the way?' He sounded disappointed. Narayan shook his head.

As mealtime at the hostel would by then be over, Narayan agreed without a fuss when asked to stay on and dine.

He was very conscious of the reek of Mahua liquor from the house. Narayan was sitting on the veranda eating his dinner off a leaf plate. The headmaster's voice grew louder. He was rambling. As he ate Narayan remembered the gossip he had heard about the headmaster in the hostel. What was Vatsalabai to him? Why hadn't they married? He had heard all about the headmaster's love of religious rites, his observance of the rules of ritual purity, his habit of drinking on Saturdays — both heard and experienced them.

'Gave me a *jalebi* with your own hand, you mongrel dog!' The headmaster was muttering. 'How did you dare?' Vatsalabai was trying to lead him inside by the hand. 'Desa Bhil spared you. Constable Arjuna also spared you. The cheats!'

Narayan had returned to the hostel.

For a few days Narayan was not to be seen in class. Headmaster Dongre enquired where he was.

'Sir, he has gone to Akola with Raghbadada for Anasuya Chabukswar's engagement,' Ashok Savji and Sampat Karhade informed him.

* * *

The night was heavy with darkness. Cicadas chirped. It was a Saturday, Headmaster Dongre's day of rest. The whole of the past week Narayan had been absent from school. Dongre had written to his sister and brother-in-law at Dadhi that if Narayan had returned to the village, they should keep him there or send him to Nagpur to work.

In the middle of the night Narayan swiftly made his way to the headmaster's house. He was dressed in a dhoti and turban. The whole house was silent. The smell of liquor still lingered. Narayan sprinkled kerosene all around from the bottle that he had. He struck a match and threw it on a pile of wood. There was a burst of flame. Narayan quickly turned away.

Narayan, now dressed in shorts, was going to Akola in the Nagpur-Bhusaval Passenger. From the train he could see that the house on the corner was a roaring mass of flames.

Translated by Priya Adarkar

ANNA BHAU SATHE

Gold from the Grave

Bheema was excited by the news of the death and burial of a prominently wealthy man in the neighbouring village. He was elated and in his imagination he visited the man in the grave several times over. Sitting under a tamarind tree he watched Nabda, his darling daughter, playing by herself. His wife cooked the meal inside and Bheema waited for the sunset and the dark. He glanced eagerly at the sun which was not going down fast enough for him.

Bheema was built like a giant. When going out he usually put on a yellowish dhoti, a red turban and a shirt of coarse cloth. He looked like a wrestler. With his big, bulky head, thick neck, bushy eyebrows and broad face sporting a luxuriant growth of moustache, he had frightened many a ruffian into docility. He feared nothing.

Bheema was from a village on the banks of the river Warna. His great strength was of no help to him in finding a job in his own village. He had strayed over to Bombay in search of work. He had searched for a job all over the city in vain and finally moved to this suburb on the fringe of the jungle. His dream of having a gold necklace made for his wife had come to nothing. He hated the city of Bombay which offers you everything except work and shelter. Settling in the suburb he landed a job as a stone quarry worker.

The jungle had given him both gainful employment and a roof over his head. With his strength of a giant he attacked the rocks, and the hill receded. Granite rocks gaped wide open at the strokes of his hammer. His employer, the quarry contractor, appreciated his work and Bheema was quite happy with his job.

Within six months the quarry closed down and Bheema found himself without work. It was a shock for him to learn that he was jobless when he reported for duty one morning. He was confused. The thought of starvation plunged him into the deepest pit of anxiety.

He stood by the side of a stream in the jungle with his clothes under his arm. He washed himself and started walking towards home. Looking around he found that there were mounds of ashes, obviously

the remains of funeral pyres, and charred bones scattered everywhere. The thought of death did not frighten him. He thought that the dead person must have been jobless, and death must have given him relief. He knew that starvation was staring him in the face. His darling Nabda would go on crying for food, his wife would be sullen and he would have to watch all this helplessly.

Suddenly he noticed something sparkle on the top of the mound of ashes and he bent forward to have a closer look. It was a ring of gold weighing about twelve grams and he quickly picked it up. Squeezing the ring in his palm he felt the keen pleasure of a discovery. Finding gold in the ashes of a funeral pyre opened a way for Bheema to survive and keep the wolf at bay.

The next day found him wandering all over in search of cremation grounds and graveyards. Sifting the ashes he gleaned grains of gold. Seldom did he return home without an earring, a nose ring, an anklet or a necklace. He found that the intense heat of the funeral pyre melts the gold which gets embedded in the bones. He shattered the charred bones into small pieces. Ruthlessly he reduced the skulls and wrist-bones to powder to find a grain of the precious metal. In the evening he went to Kurla, a suburb of Bombay, sold the gold and returned with money in his pocket. On his way home he usually bought a packet of dates for his darling Nabda.

Bheema thus lived by sifting the ashes of dead bodies. He could not understand this paradox of life and death. The distinction between the two was lost on him. He knew that there was gold in the ashes of a rich person, and that the ashes of a poor man did not contain a grain of the metal. His simple logic led him to believe that only the rich should die to help the poor live in this world and that a poor man has no right to die. He solemnly declared to his friends that those leading a life of humiliation have no call to live or die. Day and night he searched cremation grounds and graveyards. Like a ghoul he lived on corpses and so his life was inextricably woven with corpses.

Strange happenings were being reported at the time. Corpses buried in tombs were found to be exhumed. The dead body of the young daughter-in-law of a moneylender was said to have been hauled to the river bank from the burial ground. This caused panic among the people. The police were alerted. It wasn't, however, easy to guard the corpses in the graveyard. An all night vigil over the cemetery was impossible.

The sun set and now it was dark. Bheema ate the food served by

his wife. Divining his intentions she asked him where he was set for. 'Let's give up this business,' she expostulated. 'The whole thing is disgusting. This sifting of ashes, the corpses, the gold, everything is ghastly. People have started talking about us,' she said.

'Shut up,' Bheema shouted at her. Feeling hurt he said in a peevish tone, 'I'll do what I like. Let people say what they will. Who'll feed us if I don't earn?'

'Please don't misunderstand me. This kind of wandering in the cemetery like a fiend is not a fitting occupation for you. I'm frightened to death. The whole thing gives me the creeps.'

'Who's told you that ghosts only haunt graveyards?' retorted Bheema. 'This city of Bombay itself is a colony of ghosts. The real spectres live in houses and the dead ones rot in the graves. Monsters breed in the city, not in the jungles.' Bheema concluded.

This silenced her and Bheema prepared himself for the night's excursion. He growled at his wife that he had not got a job while he roamed all over Bombay, but the funeral ashes had brought him gold. 'When I broke stone the whole day I received only a couple of rupees while a day's work on the funeral ashes fetches me a tenner.' He left home in anger. It was quiet everywhere when Bheema started on his night round.

He had covered his head with a piece of cloth and draped himself with the cowl of a gunnybag. Having girdled his waist Bheema walked on with long strides, holding a pointed iron bar under his arm. All around him it was pitch dark but Bheema was not afraid. The only thought in his mind was that of buying a sari, a petticoat and a blouse and a packet of dates.

The atmosphere was charged with expectancy. The silence was oppressive. A pack of jackals scampered away after a piercing howl. A snake wound its away from the path into the jungle. An owl screeched and the silence grew more frightening. Bheema approached the village and squatting down, peered all over. The village was very quiet. Someone coughed, a lamp winked and everything was still again. Bheema was satisfied. He entered the cemetery and looked for the most recent burial mound. He jumped from one to the other. Scattering the broken earthen pots and bamboo strips he lighted a safety match at each mound and made for the rich man's grave.

Clouds gathered in the sky. The darkness deepened and there was a crack of lightning. Bheema was scared at the prospect of rain, for it might not then be possible for him to find the newly dug grave.

Quickly he moved on and the effort made him perspire. On reaching the end he was frightened and stopped dead. He heard the gnashing of teeth. The sounds of growling and scratching of the earth were also audible. Bheema could not understand it. He lurched forward and all was quiet again. In a short while he heard somebody kicking and Bheema was struck with fear. It was for the first time in his life that he experienced dread, this fear of the supernatural.

But he soon collected himself. When he realized what was happening he felt ashamed. A pack of jackals was there for the dead body buried in the grave. They did not touch the stones laid on the ground. They were trying to reach the corpse by burrowing through the sides. Having scented flesh they were ravenously attacking the grave in which the recently dead man was buried. Though united in their goal they were in furious competition with one another. Putting their noses to the ground they sniffed and vigorously assailed the grave, having been excited by the scent of the flesh.

Bheema was furious. He jumped onto the top of the mound and stationed himself amidst the stones on the rich man's grave. Bheema picked up the large stones and hurled them at the jackals. This sudden attack frightened them and they moved away into hiding.

Bheema, encouraged, decided to get to the corpse before the jackals did.

When the jackals found him busy at work they attacked him. One charged at him, as if in a frenzy, and snapped at his gunnybag cover. Bheema was upset that his cover was torn. Spitting out the pieces of the gunnybag stuck in its fangs, the jackal charged at Bheema with greater vehemence. Now Bheema was ready for it. He finished the animal with one jab of the pointed crowbar. With the fallen animal lying dead by his side, Bheema began digging the grave. But the jackals in the pack attacked him from all sides and a dreadful battle ensued.

Bheema had unearthed half the tomb but had to pause awhile to defend himself against the jackals who were snapping at his flesh. He gave a blow to each one that attacked him. The jackals fell when he hit them but others hurled themselves upon him in greater fury and tore at his muscles.

Bheema, who bore the name of the second son of Kunti, was fighting the jackals for the possession of a carcass, his daily bread. A grim battle was fought in the vicinity of the village, a battle that would never be recorded in the annals of the country's mythology.

All over it was quiet. The city of Bombay was asleep and the village, at rest. The macabre war in the graveyard raged on. The man fought for the gold and the beasts for their food.

Bheema hit the animals with his pointed iron bar and felled them. Those that escaped his jabs tore at his flesh and those that were hit screamed aloud. Bheema howled in pain when he was bitten and swore at them.

After a very long time, the jackals stopped their attack for some moments of rest. Seeing this Bheema began his work of digging open the grave. He loosened the earth and wiped the sweat off his face. He was utterly exhausted. No sooner did he get down into the tomb than the pack of jackals again charged at him. He struck them hard and the defeated pack scampered away. Bheema, the giant, had come out victorious because of his strength and endurance.

Bheema dragged up the corpse with great effort. He lighted a match and took a close look at the corpse. The rigid corpse stood up in the grave in front of him and Bheema groped all over the body. He found a ring on one of the fingers and pocketed it. He tore off the gold rings in the ears and then he remembered that there could be some gold in the mouth of the corpse. He pushed his fingers into the mouth but the jaws were locked tightly and he had to use his crowbar as a wedge to open the mouth. He opened it wide and put his fingers inside. At that very moment the pack of jackals set up a howl and scampered away into the jungle. At the sound the village dogs began to bark loudly, which awakened the people. Bheema could distinctly hear the call given by them to come together and drive away the jackals from the burial ground. This sent down a shiver of fear through his body. He found a ring in the mouth and put it into his pocket. To make a thorough search of the mouth cavity he put two fingers of his left hand into the mouth but found nothing. Inadvertently, he pulled out the iron bar before taking out his fingers.

The jaws shut together with a snap and his fingers were caught in a vice-like grip. A surging wave of excruciating pain passed through Bheema's body.

He saw people coming towards the burial ground, with lanterns in their hands. Fear grasped him and anger against the corpse welled up in him. In sheer rage he hit its skull with his crowbar. The impact of this blow tightened the hold of the jaw bones on his fingers. The teeth cut deeper into his finger bones. He knew that if people found him in the act of defiling the graveyard they would either kill him or hand

him over to the police after a good thrashing. So this is what they call a ghost, he thought, looking at the corpse. In his anger he hit the corpse still harder, cursing the devil to let him go.

By now people had approached the cemetery. Bheema pushed the bar into the mouth of the corpse and pried it open. When there was an opening he pulled out his fingers a bit cautiously. They were cut into pieces and were hanging to the base by shreds of skin. He suffered intense pain. Holding the broken fingers somehow in his fist he bolted towards home.

When he reached home he had high fever. Seeing the state he was in, his wife and child started wailing.

His fingers had to be amputated. The surgeon declared that it was the only way to save him. On the very day that he lost his fingers he learnt that the quarry work would start again. That giant of a man called Bheema wept like a child. Those very fingers with which he smashed stone to smithereens were lost for the sake of gold from the graveyard.

Translated by H.V. Shintre

AVINASH DOLAS

The Refugee

'Go away from here, my son.'

That a mother should say this to her son! It was impossible to believe. No one would have believed it if he had told them. He was haunted by a rising swarm of thoughts. Again and again, he searched within himself for an answer. That the mother who brought him into this world should say to him, 'Go away!' He just couldn't bear it. He staggered like a blind man whose support had suddenly been taken away. Today, on account of his quick temper, he had to sever himself from his relations. Every part of the road looked as lifeless as stone to him. He was trembling, trying to walk steadily. How often he felt like turning and looking back! But his stubborn mind would not let him. His father was not his father any more, nor was his village his village; and the mother who gave him birth couldn't call him her son any more. His mind burned with the thought. All of them were alien to him. He was an outsider among them — an orphan! Why should he turn back?

His forehead was covered with beads of sweat which appeared like bold pimples all over his body. He felt his nose tingling and his eyes filled with tears. Overflowing his eyes, the tears ran down the slope of his nose to the rim of his lips, and he felt their stinging saltiness. He said to himself, 'One shouldn't call them tears. This is just water, salt water. It is worth nothing, and it knows no other way but to leak out of the eyes like this.'

Overhead, the sun was scorching hot. Hot fumes rose from the earth. The woods around him looked desolate — as desolate as his own life. Like a piece of iron sought by someone for no particular purpose, heated, hammered, pounded flat at will — that's what he was — iron at first inflamed, then enduring blow after blow of the hammer, till finally one day it snapped.

He stopped at a brook and splashed his face over with water, he cupped his hands and drank the salty-tasting water. He dipped his dusty feet into it, chappals and all. He tried to come to grips with the

turmoil in his mind, and turned to look back just once. But the village was out of sight. The trees and the bushes had obliterated it. It was as if nothing had happened. There was no village, and there were no people, no animals. He wiped his face with a handkerchief and started walking again.

His feet were slipping out of his sticky chappals. For a moment he thought that the slimy, slippery chappals might suddenly give way. He smiled to himself. What was his life anyway? Was it not a feat of trying to keep his balance, standing in the mire of slimy customs for twenty-one years? The tenuous folds of casteism would hem in his mind every now and then, but it would still struggle to break out. He slipped on a rock in the path and his wet chappal suddenly snapped. Calling his own ancestors a thousand names he hurled the chappals away. Cursing, he walked on, barefoot. He was surprised to realize that he could use such ugly words of abuse, and spoke to himself, 'My name itself is a curse.'

Now the noise of the traffic had become louder. Still cursing himself, he started walking fast. He had no wish to calculate how far he had come, in how much time. He didn't feel it necessary either. He rubbed his face with the palms of his hands and tried to revive himself from his fatigue. Darkness came over his eyes as he did so. He felt his eyes with his fingers as one would do in the dark. He felt his blood-pressure rising in his chest. His whole body was agitated. A shriek escaped his lips and a sob welled up. In a moment his eyes filled with tears. But instantly, a surge of anger passed like lightning through his head. Quickly, he wiped his eyes, mopped his face with determination and clenched his fists tightly, trying to stop the shivering of his body.

The station was crowded. There was still time for the train to leave. Where should he go? To the north or to the south? East or west? He should go where the road took him. Or his feet. After all, wherever you went, you'd find only human beings, whether in a village or in a city, to the south or the east. Shameless, thieving, servile, wretched dogs who sit chewing the crumbs thrown to them, and getting beaten like mad dogs, if they don't submit. Some bark at the morsels thrown to them — just like me! Some chew the pieces and bark at their own young ones. His heart choked with a rapid rush of emotion. Thinking in this manner, he had called himself a dog. He turned back and walked, taking long strides.

A beggar was noisily biting at the hard, dry pieces of bread in his

dented tin bowl. From time to time the beggar took a piece of bread near one of his eyes, examined it closely, then took it to the other eye, turning it this way and that.

He went ahead, and turned to the left. A woman was chewing a betel-leaf and looking around with shifty eyes. He remembered Chandra, who had asked him to lend her some money. 'Brother Santu, spare me five rupees until Friday. I've to take my son to the doctor. He is very ill.' Her old father was blind. Her husband was caught in the explosion of dynamite in a well and was bed-ridden, his limbs turned to jelly. And yet he had not been able to help her. She sold her body for the sake of five rupees — for her child — to Tulya, the grocer. He was the male, and she the female — it was a payment in terms of body, caste, circumstances. Santu held his hands together tightly, shook his head, and turned away. There was a man dipping all four fingers into the curry he was eating, slurping it noisily. His fingers, thrust into his mouth, were wasted, broken, full of sores, and pus and blood oozed out of them. Santu saw it all and a wave of revulsion passed through his whole body. He turned back the same instant and started walking briskly in the direction of the station.

'Saheb, give something in charity.'

'. . . . . .'

'I am a pilgrim, Saheb.' He turned to have a look. Near the bench where he sat, stood an old man of about sixty, painfully balancing his four-stringed guitar, and his head which tottered.

'Where have you been?'

'To Pandharpur.'

'What for?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' — miserable laughter.

'Saheb?' a questioning expression on the face.

'Why did you go there?'

'To see Mother Vithoba.'

'Or to die?'

'Saheb ...' The beggar muttered and with a strange expression on his face, stumbled and moved away. Man is a big question mark, he thought.

The train thundered into the station. There was a sudden flurry — people rushed here and there. The monotony of it all! He sat still. He didn't know where he was to go. The train gave a whistle. A water carrier served water, pushing his hand-cart along. From a compartment a young woman called, 'O waterman!' The waterman

went there saying 'Yes Memsaheb,' and offered her a glass of water. Instantly a man sitting next to her snatched the glass from her hand and looked at her in contempt. He poured out the water in the glass and gave the empty glass back to the waterman. Then he climbed down from the compartment, beckoned to the woman and got her a glass of water from the restaurant on the platform. Watching this scene Santu was filled with anger. He felt like crashing into the driver's cabin and starting the train, cramming into the compartment first that man, the beggar and all the people of his village and then smashing the train somewhere. At least this hatred between man and man would then come to an end.

The train started and he entered a compartment. Where should he go? and why? He didn't have an answer. He had no one he could call his own. His rebellious blood was rising in his veins. The train had caught speed now. He looked around. Men were standing in a packed crowd in the compartment. There were some sleeping on the benches. One man sat at their feet, his body folded into a bundle. There sat another man staring at the fan overhead in a sad, melancholy manner. He pushed through the crowd a little and stood by the bench, leaning against it. He felt like lying down and shutting his eyes tightly.

'Where are you going, Saab?' Startled, he looked in the direction of the voice. The man standing near him had asked him the question.

'To Bombay.' The words escaped his lips unexpectedly. He must say something more, so he asked, 'And you?'

'I too am going to Bombay.'

He didn't feel there was anything special about it. Every day thousands of people go to Bombay.

'Where do you live?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Where do you live in Bombay?'

'Matunga,' he said for no good reason.

'I'm to going to Santacruz.'

He didn't say anything. The man waited a little and then asked again,

'Do you have any relations in Santacruz?'

'Relations?' he murmured, almost to himself.

'Brother, it's sheer bad luck that we had to come to Hindustan.'

He was startled to hear that, and looked at the old man, who had said it in such a sad, doleful manner.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'What can I say, Saab? We're from Bangla Desh.'
'Bangla Desh?'
'Yes.'
'But there's quite a massacre going on there.'
Instantly the headlines in the newspapers floated before his eyes.
'Of course, there's a massacre; we're also fighting back.'
'Your name?'
'Surji.'
'And what other news from there?'
'We're fighting with all our might.'
'Then what brings you to Bombay today?'
'Saab, we have our relations in Bombay.'

Bangla Desh — massacre — refugees. A whole series of scenes passed before his eyes. A man leaves Bangla Desh to see his relations in Bombay. The government of India gives shelter to thousands and millions of the homeless. And here I am, a citizen of this country! A woman in a village drew water from the well of the high-caste, so they beat her up. They ordered all Mahars to empty the well. A young man like me trying to break out of this casteism couldn't stand all that. I resisted. The whole village was furious. They beat up the Mahars as they do their beasts. They stopped giving them work, they wouldn't allow them water, food — just because they were untouchables. They told me to beg forgiveness, to grovel and prostrate myself before them, confessing my wrong doing. Or else, they threatened to burn the entire Mahar settlement. Just because we are untouchables! I argued, I protested — for my rights. But my own mother — she took my younger brother in her lap, and touched my feet, her own son's feet, and said, 'Don't do this,' and finally told me, 'My son, go away from here!' A mother tells her own son to leave the village — she is reduced to such wretchedness, only on account of caste and custom. And the boy has to leave the village. The whole scene came alive again before his eyes. On one side there was Bangla Desh in turmoil and on the other, the community of the Mahars, in agony. One homeless Bangla Deshi was going back to his relations after twenty years. And one Mahar, even after twenty years, was homeless in his own country.

Translated by Y.S. Kalamkar

Glossary

aarati the waving of a lamp
abhishek the sprinkling of holy water on the deity
bhajan a devotional song
bhakri coarse, unleavened bread
Bheema one of the five Pandava brothers from the Mahabharata, known for his immense strength
bidi crude leaf-cigarette
chulha hearth
cow's urine considered holy; used for 'purifying' 'polluted' things
dada the local bully; literally, 'elder brother'
darshan opportunity to see and be in the presence of a holy or venerated person or idol
dulli a big piece of meat
Hanuman the monkey-god from the Ramayana known for his devotion to Rama
Harijan Mahatma Gandhi's name for untouchables
Jai Bheem a form of greeting used by the followers of Dr B.R. Ambedkar; 'Bheem' was Dr Ambedkar's first name.
johar salutation from a Mahar to someone of a high caste
Mahar an 'untouchable' community
Marwari literally, man from Marwar in Rajasthan, but used to signify a money-lender, as many money- lenders in Maharashtra come from Marwar
pallav the end of the sari
paan-supari a roll of betel leaf containing betel nut, offered to guests
pot slung round your neck, a the untouchables of earlier days had to move about with a pot around their necks to spit in so that their sputum did not 'pollute' the earth
puranas Hindu mythology
shira sweet made from semolina
tawa griddle
thali metal plate

vatandari traditional duties assigned to an untouchable, such as keeping streets clean, maintenance of public property, etc.

zunka a dish made of gram flour and onion, usually eaten with *bhakri* (see above)

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