

New Indian Playwrights

In *Old Stone Mansion*, a play widely staged in the original Marathi and in several other Indian languages, Mahesh Elkunchwar takes a close look at one of those old families still struggling against time in some small town or village, trying desperately to hold on to the tenuous bonds that once kept such a family together, even as the big city in the distance lured it and the inevitable individual yearnings pulled the members of the family apart—a phenomenon so common in India today. Elkunchwar sees history in action, and steers clear of the sentimental, to produce a document of social change, striking in its authenticity.

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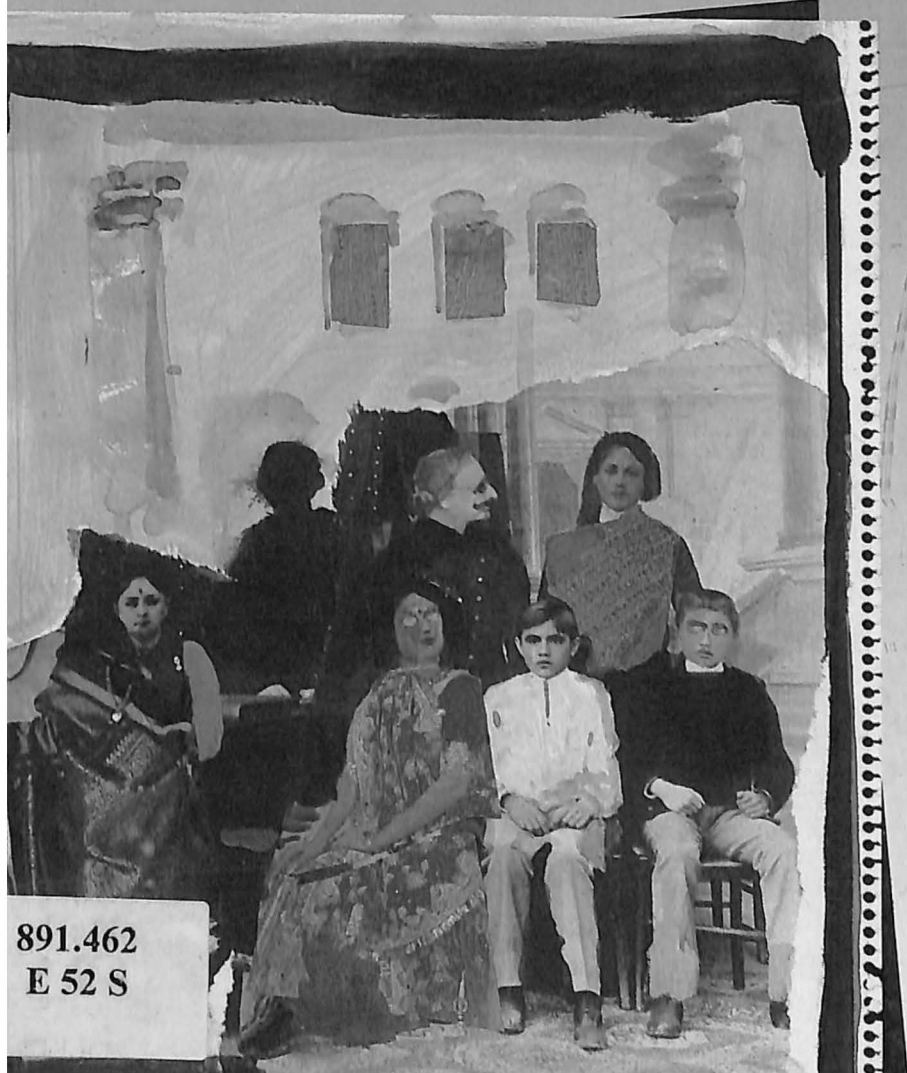
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OLD STONE MANSION
WADA CHIREBANDI

Mañesh Elkunchwar



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Mahesh Elkunchwar
Old Stone Mansion

NEW INDIAN PLAYWRIGHTS

Badal Sircar, *Three Plays*

Vijay Tendulkar, *Ghashiram Kotwal*

Mahasweta Devi, *Five Plays*

Utpal Dutt, *The Great Rebellion*

Satish Alekar, *The Dread Departure*

Mahesh Elkunchwar, *Two Plays*

Mahesh Elkunchwar, *Party*

Mahesh Elkunchwar, *Autobiography*

OLD STONE MANSION

(Wada Chirebandi)

Mañesh Elkunchwar

Translated from the Marathi by

KAMAL SANYAL



Seagull Books

CALCUTTA 1989



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Contents

A Note from the Publisher	vi
Introduction	vii
Old Stone Mansion	1

A Note from the Publisher

Old Stone Mansion (Wada Chirebāndi) by Mahesh Elkunchwar forms part of Seagull Books' New Indian Playwrights series, which aims at building up a comprehensive and representative series of new Indian plays covering the period from the sixties downwards in the major languages—theatrically major—of the country. In the next four years, all the significant new Indian playwrights should be featuring on the Seagull list.

Playwrights appearing for the first time with Seagull Books will include Satish Alekar from Marathi, Chandrasekhar Kambar from Kannada, K. N. Panikkar from Malayalam, and Ratan Thiyam from Manipur; while there will be new titles by Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Utpal Dutt who are on our list already.

Photographs of the Marathi production are courtesy Kalavaibhav and the NCPA Archive. They appear between pages 18 and 19. Photographs of the Bengali adaptation, *Uttaradhikar*, are by Mahinder Singh. They appear between pages 34 and 35.

Introduction

When Mahesh Elkunchwar (b.1939) came back to playwriting in 1983 after a self-imposed withdrawal for about eight years, he was 'a different person.' He had already left behind his obsession with the 'absurdity' of existence imperilled by the inroads of repressed sexuality and secret violence; and the Tennessee Williams-like outbursts and showdowns that burst into his earlier plays in the phase that closed with *Flower of Blood*.¹

As Elkunchwar now recalls,

After *Flower of Blood*, I stopped writing for seven or eight years. I didn't write a single word because I was not happy with what I was doing. I thought what I was writing was substandard. There was another personal reason. I had somehow lost the desire to talk to people, to anybody. I had a feeling that I had nothing to tell people, nothing to say. And when you have nothing to say, it is better to withdraw, to do your gardening, or read or listen to music, or go to college and teach, or sleep—simple, look at the ceiling and spend your time, which I did for seven long years, and I think I was very happy. . .

I was gradually maybe changing. . . I think I am now a different person. After the seven long years, I again began feeling I could write. That is when I wrote *Wada Chirebandi* . . . the first play in which I find myself going out of myself, looking at the world with sympathy. . . In October 1983 I began to write *Wada*. In those seven quiet, silent years I had seen what had been happening all this while in the aristocratic families in small places . . . had been watching the process of social collapse that is the fate of these families. I had seen many *wadas* crumbling

down, people getting buried and yet not wanting to come out of the shambles.¹²

Elkunchwar himself comes from the *wada* (the old, ancestral country house) culture, the son of a zamindar, born in a *wada*. But 'luckily' his family 'did not face the same decline because my father was wise. He made us learn, and cautioned us. . . you will not get the land. You should not live here, I will not feed you. All of us brothers got out. Only one stayed back to look after the place.'¹³ Hence the subject he chose for this play—an exploration of the *wada* mind as it endures against the odds of time—is 'an indivisible part' of his being; though it does not stand in the way of a subtle critique of the accumulating contradictions within the system.

The *wada* insularity is a product of the large joint family with its hierarchic patriarchy that holds the tensions in check under a facile pretence of authority. The senior males are lazy drones, the elder women are the patient upholders and preservers of the system, the younger males of the same generation are as subservient as the women in their submission to authority. It is only the new generation that bristles—in several variations of rebellion ranging from bitter cynicism to escape to irresponsibility; from a surrender to crass commercialism or careerism to a total disaffiliation. Elkunchwar takes great care to chart out the positions and roles and rules of this great family battle that is acted out against a history that drives the brahman gentry into bankruptcy : 'There were seven brahman families in this village. Of these three left long ago. Four remain. Of them two are priests. One a school teacher. All in debt. Our show is grand and our debts massive.' Caste pride imposes obligatory ceremonies on the almost pauperized brahmans, impoverishing them still further. They would still try to cling desperately to the traditionally defined/determined caste roles. Even when driven to the wall, they would not support the idea of a member of the family starting a shop which would be a violation of the caste code. But as the narrative unfolds, one can see how the code has already become as much of a myth as the much vaunted one of the ties of dependence and trust that are supposed to bind the family together. While on the one hand, members of the family try to pin one another down to commitments for the family and start off a whole strategy of evasions, the myth of heredity and continuing relationships assumes mystical dimensions on the other, in the nightmarish poetry of Vahini decked up in the family jewellery identifying with a vision of the ancestors.

Time is an encounter of obsession and fallings off, in the scheme of

the play. At one level, there is the weird conflict of 'in the front yard you have the tractor and at the back you have the palanquin.' At another level, the very presence of the old grandmother who remains blissfully unaware of the fact that directs the play—the death of her son, Venkatesh—and goes on asking for the time, is an evocation of Time stuck still. 'Her concern about the rats, their holes which no one fills up, that she is not taken away but that all is over with her, and the most unfortunate part that she does not die! . . . Dadi is Time, and also the silent spectator who sees Time flit by in front of her eyes.' ⁴ Something of the mystique of Time as obsession comes into play when mysteriously, unnoticed by anyone else, Dadi crawls up to the tractor, one never knows why.

Against the image of the old stone mansion, unmanageably enormous, as yet another symbol of Time as obsession, one can read a narrative of assaults that generate in the experience of the commercial cinema with its elaborate paraphernalia of glamour, build up through Ranju's obsession with star gossip to a point where she plays with the idiom of the screen romance, drawing directly on "quotes" from the popular films—e.g. 'No, I am a scamp'; 'my life is like an untouched page'; to climax in her running away to Bombay where she is abandoned by her private tutor boy friend.

The distance between the Vidarbha village where the action takes place and Bombay where the films are made is the distance that yawns between decaying feudalism and the megalopolis. The part of the family that has settled in Bombay lives a hard life, a typical lower middle class life, in a cramped two room flat; and yet in the village they represent prosperity, and are at pains all the time to disillusion their relations lest they expect too much from them. Sudhir and Anjali stand on a precarious dividing line which becomes even more precarious with the tensions from their separate regional origins—the Konkani against the Vidarbhi—which work their way into the dialects they use (a dimension which could not be accommodated in the translation). But the inescapable pull of the *wada* culture tells on Anjali the outsider at the end of it all, when her idiom catches traits from the Warhadi dialect spoken by the Deshpandes of Dharangaon.

There has to be a crisis to revive the loosening ties within the family. But the crisis is more than a family crisis—it is a crisis of traditional culture against commercial or consumer culture. As Elkunchwar says,

Wada is not a simple family drama, it is more than that, a document of social change, political change. . .⁵

In its first draft, the play had begun in the morning, with Sudhir and Anjali approaching the *wada*. It was Vijaya Mehta, the director of the first Marathi production, who suggested that the play should open in the night. Elkunchwar asked her, 'Why do you want this?' She said, 'It would be visually beautiful. It's total darkness, the crickets chirping outside, and there are these three lanterns in the three corners of the stage, and everybody is waiting for the city boy to come down. It is late night, and there is this tension in the atmosphere.' Elkunchwar said, 'Fine, I like the idea . . . I can write it in no time.' Once the waiting for the couple from Bombay became part of the play, it served as a prelude to the clash of cultures, Bombay against Vidarbha. The first version of the play had the private tutor as a character. But one of the first listeners 'pointed out correctly. . . that an outsider had no business in the Deshpande family'; and the private tutor had to go. But what remained of his whistling presence and the reference to 'that transistor hanging from his neck like a sacred thread, day in and day out' was enough to seduce Ranju, her head 'full of cinema'. Satyadev Dubey, however, retained the private tutor for his Hindi production.

It was Dubey who told Elkunchwar about the friend of his who had bought a tractor which he never came to use, and would never have the heart to sell off. 'The tractor had sunk into the ground, broken to pieces, but the family never used it. He gave me this image and the play took shape . . . The tractor image started a thought process and the characters started taking shape.'⁶

Reacting to the present translation, Elkunchwar, in a letter to us, suggested that on second thoughts he would 'personally like to delete' Chandu's telling Aai that he would have liked to have had a shop of his own. As Elkunchwar now feels, 'Chandu as a mute sufferer is better than one who has even the slightest courage to speak out his dream. Thus his last cry, "Sudhir!" becomes more poignant at the end of the play.'

Though the basic experience that underlies the play is common to all those parts of India where caste orthodoxy and feudalism still fight a losing battle against the inroads of a consumer economy, Elkunchwar has always insisted on a regional authenticity, provoking Vijaya Mehta to retort : 'I feel that on stage the illusion of reality does more than ethnic reality. . . Truthfulness is more important than authenticity. I do not mind missing authenticity if thereby the truth comes out better.'⁷

Working on the same principle, Sohag Sen, in her Bengali production, transplants it to West Bengal, and still touches the 'truth'.

The other thing on which Elkunchwar insists is on his 'pauses', the silences—an insistence that has met the same fate as his mentor Chekhov's! But the truth, Elkunchwar's truth, endures.

SAMIK BANDYOPADHYAY

- 1 Mahesh Elkunchwar, *Two Plays : Flower of Blood / Reflection*, Seagull Books, Calcutta 1989.
- 2 Elkunchwar, speaking at the Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta, on 24 February 1988 (from the recording preserved at the Sansthan).
- 3 Elkunchwar, interviewed by Shubhada Shelke, *Facts and News*, no. 2, NCPA, Bombay, July 1987.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Elkunchwar, speaking at the Natya Shodh Sansthan.
- 6 *Facts and News*.
- 7 Vijaya Mehta, interviewed by Shubhada Shelke and Chetan Datar, *Facts and News*, no. 2, NCPA, Bombay, July 1987.

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Wada Chirebandi was performed for the first time in the original Marathi by Kalavaibhav, Bombay, at the Shivajee Mandir, Dadar, Bombay, on 1 May 1985, with the following cast.

AAI	Vijaya Mehta
DADI	Sulabha Koranne
VAHINI	Girija Katdare
ANJALI	Swaroop Khopkar
PRABHA	Aruna Joglekar
RANJU	Suparna Sawarkar
BHASKAR	Achyut Potdar
SUDHIR	Uday Mhaiskar
CHANDU	Pramod Pawar
PARAG	Shirish Joshi

DIRECTION	Vijaya Mehta
PRODUCTION	Mohan Tondwalkar
MUSIC	Raja Desai, Atul Bhagat
DESIGN	Raghuveer Talashilkar
LIGHTING	Dilip Kolhatkar
ASSISTANT	Pratima Kulkarni

A shorter version of this production in Hindi was telecast under the name *Haveli Buland Thi*.

Virasat, a Hindi translation of the play by Vasant Dev, was produced for the first time by the National School of Drama, Delhi, at the Sri Ram Centre Auditorium on 13 December 1985, with the following cast.

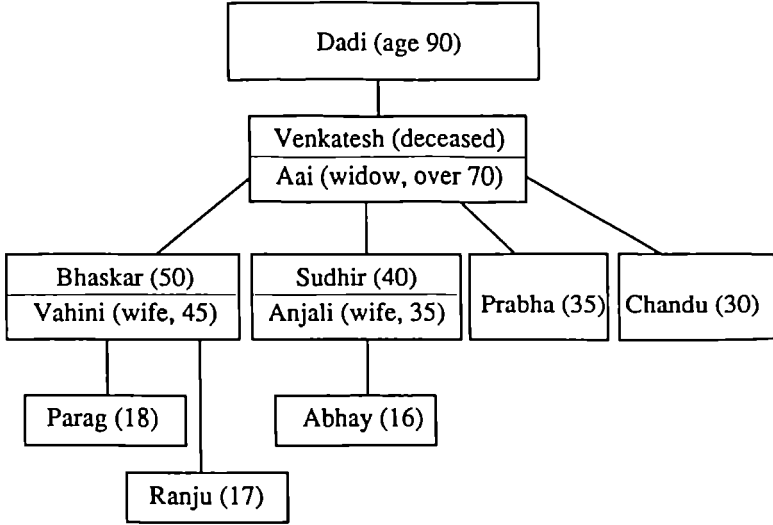
AAI	Nutan Surya
DADI	Neelam Prasad
VAHINI	Uttara Baokar
ANJALI	Dolly Ahluwalia
PRABHA	Aruna Karamkar
RANJU	Seema Biswas
BHASKAR	Srivallabh Vyas
SUDHIR	Anang Desai
CHANDU	Om Prakash

PARAG	Shirish Joshi
THE TEACHER	Govind Namdev
DIRECTION	Satyadev Dubey
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	Uttara Baokar
STAGE DESIGN	Vasant Josalkar
LIGHTING	G S Marathe
SOUND	Suresh Shetty, S N Dasgupta

Uttaradhikar, an adaptation in Bengali by Subrata Nandy, was produced for the first time by Ensemble, Calcutta, on 24 February 1989, at the Gyan Manch auditorium, with the following cast.

AAI	Swapna Mitra
DADI	Buddhadeb Samaddar
VAHINI	Alaknanda Datta
ANJALI	Madhuchhanda Ghosh
PRABHA	Swaroop Das
RANJU	Sangeeta Chakravarti
BHASKAR	Ati Das
SUDHIR	Tapas Thakur
CHANDU	Rajat Sengupta
PARAG	Ashis Naskar
DIRECTION	Sohag Sen
STAGE DESIGN	Khaled Chowdhury
LIGHTING	Naveen Kishore
SOUND	Partha Chatterjee
COSTUMES	Jayoti Bose

The Deshpandes of Dharangaon



<i>Aai</i>	–	mother
<i>Aaji</i>	–	grandmother
<i>Dadi</i>	–	grandmother
<i>Bhavji</i>	–	brother-in-law, husband's brother
<i>Wance</i>	–	sister-in-law, husband's sister
<i>Tatyaji, Baba</i>	–	father
<i>Bhau</i>	–	elder brother
<i>Vahini</i>	–	elder sister-in-law, brother's wife
<i>Soonbai</i>	–	daughter-in-law
<i>Kaka</i>	–	uncle, father's brother
<i>Kaku, Kaki</i>	–	aunt, father's brother's wife
<i>Bai</i>	–	term used in address to older women

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Act One

Scene 1

The ancient and respectable but dilapidated mansion of the Deshpandes of Dharangaon, a small village, somewhere in Vidarbha. There is a veranda in front, and a bedroom left of the veranda. At a height of a foot and a half behind the veranda, there is another room, and behind it one gets the impression of more rooms. In the veranda, a number of chairs, old, half broken, of various types. A swing. A very old carpet on the floor. A few bolsters in a sorry state. In the bedroom, a carved mahogany bed and a magnificent mirror. In another room which serves for a drawing room, there is an antique iron chest. In the central room behind the veranda a pile of old steel trunks. A semi-circular apron in front of the stage is the courtyard.

The time is about ten thirty at night. A lantern in the central room, where Aai squats, resting her chin on her knees, lost in thought. Dead silence. Dadi's voice breaks upon this silence, tearing it to pieces.

DADI. Venkatesh, . . . Arrey Venkatesh! Where has the poor dear gone now! What time is it?

Sound of a man's rhythmic snoring.

DADI. The wretched time does not pass.

Ranju comes out on the the veranda, a lantern and a copy of Filmfare in her hand. She pretends not to have seen Dadi as she comes in. She comes into the middle room and looks at herself in the mirror. Arranges strands of hair on her forehead, engrossed in the act. Prabha walks in with her bedding. She glances at Ranju, comes to Aai and spreads her bed. The sound of snoring continues.

PRABHA. How long are you going to wait, Aai? Lie down now . . .

AAI. What's the time?

RANJU (*starts reading loudly*). Does Hema Malini get midnight calls?

PRABHA. Ranju!

AAI. Tell Chandu, tell him to go to the bus stop and find out—

PRABHA. The last bus must have come by now, Aai. Get up. They will come tomorrow. (*Aai gets up and starts going out.*)
Where are you going in the dark?

AAL I left the back door open, dear.

PRABHA. Let me go and close it, Aai.

Aai sits down again. There is a whistle from outside. Ranju, alert, is about to get up when Chandu comes in. She sits down immediately and starts reading.

RANJU. Are the vital statistics of Zeenie baby changing?

CHANDU. What are you reading, my girl?

RANJU. Filmfare.

CHANDU. That's literature!

RANJU. The teacher says I should read a lot of English so that my English improves.

CHANDU. Very clever—your teacher.

Sound of snoring.

DADI. Isn't there anyone near here? Venkatesh, have you abandoned poor blind me?

Chandu goes and sits near Dadi. Touches her.

DADI. You have come, my dear!

Chandu quietens her and goes in. Aai lies down on the bed. Prabha sits by her, reading a book. Ranju continues reading aloud.

PRABHA (*to Ranju*). Read silently . . .

Silence. Rhythmic snoring. Then suddenly a whistle . . . Ranju is about to go to the door.

PRABHA (*she too has heard the whistle*). Who is at the door?

RANJU. No one.

PRABHA. Come inside, will you? Right now!

RANJU (*grumbling*). Go on, scold me, all of you. Whenever you get a chance.

VAHINI (*passing from the middle room to her bedroom carrying a lantern . . . to Ranju*). The wretch suffers insults all the time. Now pay attention to your studies or else . . . if you fail again . . . (*Goes to the bedroom.*)

Vahini puts the lantern down. Looks at the snoring Bhaskar. Then applies cream to the cracks in her feet . . . Ranju comes in.

- RANJU. Failure, failure! Aai, why do you call me a failure all the time?
- VAHINI. Aren't you one? (*Persuasive.*) You must study hard, child.
- RANJU. Aai, may I sleep in the room where the safe is kept?
- VAHINI. No. If your Kaka and Kaku come, they will sleep there. You better sleep with Dadi tonight.
- RANJU. Never. She calls out to people all night long.
- VAHINI. Then sleep in Parag Bhau's room. The mice have the run of the place though!
- RANJU. No. Never. I shall not sleep in a man's room alone.

Bhaskar turns on his side. A brass box with filigree work, kept near the pillow, falls. Startled, Bhaskar wakes up. The sound has reached Aai and Prabha also. Aai is alert . . .

- VAHINI. What fell down?
- BHASKAR. Nothing. Sleep.
- VAHINI. Where did you pick up this old box?
- BHASKAR. Oh, it's an old box. Tatyaji's betelnut box. Thought I might as well use it. It was lying in the attic junk.
- RANJU. Betelnut box under the pillow! Hee hee.
- BHASKAR. Stop jabbering. Go to sleep. Go now.

Ranju goes.

- VAHINI. Why are you sleeping on the cot in this period of mourning? Now we will have to wash the bedding.
- BHASKAR. I suppose your darling brother-in-law and his wife have not come . . .
- VAHINI. Well Chandu Bhavji says the bus is cancelled. Wonder if they are stranded . . .
- BHASKAR (*sarcastic*). Oh they will come all right! Has guts, he has.

Bhaskar goes towards the prayer room with the box. Vahini is surprised. He passes Aai and Prabha in the middle room. Aai stares hard at him. Bhaskar hurries past. Comes back immediately. He does not have the box with him. Aai looks on steadily. He is confused.

- BHASKAR. Why don't you go to sleep? I don't think Sudhir will come today.

Aai is quiet. Bhaskar goes to his room. Vahini looks at him curiously.

BHASKAR (*unnecessarily justifying himself*). Who kept the prayer room door open? The mice have played havoc there.

VAHINI. Again! Now why did you go to the prayer room when you are in mourning? What will Aai say? Look at that—now what is he up to?

Bhaskar lies down. Vahini gets up. Goes to the back door from the central room and calls.

VAHINI. Aho—Chandu Bhavji—enough. Enough for the night. You needn't bring any more wood. Take Dadi to her bed first.

VAHINI (*comes back to the centre room, to Aai*). Do you want anything else?

Silence. Vahini goes to the bedroom. Aai gets up and starts going in.

PRABHA. Now where are you off to?

VAHINI. She must have forgotten to shut the kitchen window.

PRABHA. Why do you have to bother with all that now? (*Before she has finished saying this, Aai has gone.*) Stop. I am coming. Don't go alone in the dark.

Prabha goes, taking the lantern with her. Vahini lowers the flame of the lantern and lies down. Long silence. A flash of torchlight outside. There is the sound of a struggle. 'My God,' cries a female voice. 'Careful!'—male voice. Enter Sudhir and Anjali, somewhat unnerved. They have luggage in their hands. They stop. Sudhir looks at Dadi. The end of Anjali's sari has caught in something and is torn. She struggles to manage the torn sari.

SUDHIR. Looks like everyone has gone to sleep. (*Pause.*) You go in . . .

ANJALI. I won't go in first.

SUDHIR. Dadi does not know we are here.

ANJALI. You better go in and meet Aai right away. Five days have gone by.

SUDHIR. I don't feel brave enough. Go along.

ANJALI. Haven't I told you . . . At a time like this, you should be the one to go in first.

Silence. Both come on to the veranda. Bhaskar comes out. For

some time no one speaks.

BHASKAR. When did you receive the telegram?

SUDHIR. Day before yesterday. We started immediately.

BHASKAR. Hm. I wondered what could have happened. It's past ten already. So I was wondering if you had received the telegram . . .

SUDHIR. The train arrived late at Amaravati. There was not a single bus. So we had to take a taxi from Amaravati.

BHASKAR. Tatyaji did not give us any time. He finished his *sandhya* and got up and collapsed on the spot. I called out, Tatyaji, Tatyaji, in vain. It was all over.

SUDHIR. How is Aai?

BHASKAR. All right really. In a sense. She is waiting for you to arrive. Quite anxious about it. We don't leave her alone for even a moment. But she thinks only of you.

Vahini comes from her room. She draws the end of her sari to her eyes, as she looks at Sudhir. Anjali too draws the end of her sari to her eyes.

VAHINI. You could not meet him—could you Bhavji. If you just knew that he was constantly asking for you and Abhay lately. . . *(Pause.)*

SUDHIR. How could you let him do *sandhya* when he was so ill. . . ?

VAHINI. You know him. Did anyone have the guts to say anything to him? However high his temperature, he never stopped taking his bath. And he had become so weak—could not even break a *papad*. Still he went to the puja room—purified after his *sandhya*. A very righteous and holy death if you ask me. *(Pause.)* Why didn't you bring Abhay? How Tatyaji used to adore him!

SUDHIR. His exams are on. He is in the twelfth class now. . .

BHASKAR. Aai felt very bad . . .

ANJALI. These days you don't even get reservations in time . . .

SUDHIR. I shall send him at Diwali.

BHASKAR. Do that. At least for the festivals and funerals we should get together.

VAHINI. Leave your luggage and go and meet Aai first. . .

BHASKAR. You'll sleep in the room where the safe is kept.

SUDHIR. Why? It's better upstairs.

BHASKAR. You say that because you haven't seen the upstairs

lately. . .

Aai and Prabha come from inside. As soon as they are aware of the movement, there is absolute silence. Then, mustering courage, Sudhir and Anjali come forward to the centre room where Aai stands. She looks at Sudhir, then sits on the floor and stares at the ground. Sudhir sits in front of her. Silence.

SUDHIR. We received the telegram very late . . .

All of a sudden, as if a dam has collapsed, Aai weeps. But only for a few seconds. Weeping. . .

AAL. Our shelter is gone for ever.

Silence. Outside on the veranda, Vahini wipes her eyes. Bhaskar remains indifferent.

BHASKAR. Shouldn't he have brought the boy? Your dear brother-in-law did not feel a thing—comes after five days have gone by. Like an indifferent visitor.

VAHINI. Let it be now. They have come, haven't they?

BHASKAR. Says he will send him at Diwali. Doesn't he realize the importance of the occasion? What is he talking about?

VAHINI. Now, this time don't you say anything at all . . .

BHASKAR. I am just . . .

VAHINI. You do everything that needs to be done but spoil it all with your vile tongue.

BHASKAR. I am angry. Your father-in-law is dead and you are worried about reservations? What does one say? How does one react to such an attitude?

VAHINI. Aho. Don't forget she is a Bombay girl. She has spent all her life there—before marriage and after marriage. Daughter of a Konkan man. Is she going to feel for your dear ones? Till the last rites are over don't you say anything or show displeasure.

Chandu comes out.

VAHINI. Arrey, where have you been?

CHANDU. I was giving water to the cow.

VAHINI. Aho. Didn't you go to the bus stand?

CHANDU. Went there long back

VAHINI. So Sudhir Bhavji has not come then?

CHANDU. They said the bus was cancelled.

VAHINI. What do you say?

Chandu notices the suitcases.

CHANDU. Arrey. They have come!

VAHINI. Of course they have come. Did you enquire properly? Or were you sitting on someone's porch chitchatting?

Sudhir comes in. He pays no attention to Chandu as he sits down.

VAHINI (*laughing aloud*). Aho. They came by taxi. Do you think they travel like us in a bus?

SUDHIR. Aai has taken it hard, hasn't she?

VAHINI. It's a shock for a woman, Bhavji. For any woman it would be a big shock.

Anjali brings some pills.

ANJALI (*to Sudhir*). Take these pills.

VAHINI. Whatever for? What pills?

ANJALI. His B.P. goes up these days if he is upset.

VAHINI. Have you a lot of money saved in the bank, Bhavji? You seem to have befriended the diseases of the rich!

ANJALI. Take them. You missed them on the journey.

VAHINI. How nervous you get! And so well organized to have remembered to bring the pills in all the bustle. Oh my God, how did your sari get torn?

ANJALI. As we were coming in, it got caught on the steel plate of the tractor.

SUDHIR. That tractor now! How many days is it going to lie there like that in the courtyard?

VAHINI. Aho—it has to remain there. Isn't there Nandi in front of Shiva's temple? Well, you look at the tractor first before you enter the mansion of the Deshpandes of Dharangaon. Get up now. Come and have a bite, both of you.

SUDHIR. No, no . . .

VAHINI. Aho—the food is ready.

SUDHIR. I don't feel like it.

VAHINI. True, a person is gone. But does anyone give up food and drink? Please get up. Those left behind have to carry on. Come on . . .

DADL. Venkatesh! What time is it, dear?

- SUDHIR. Have you told Dadi about Tatyaji passing away?
 VAHINI. Aho. If we have to tell her—what do we tell her? She cannot hear. Cannot see. Nothing reaches her. All day she sits in a daze, you see. And every fifteen minutes, what time is it? What time is it? But she's no trouble. When it's meal time, you serve the food and put the plate in front of her. When it's night, you put her to her bed. Such a calamity in the house. It's her own son gone. But does she know, do you think? Happy person really. Well, will you have some tea at least? Or not even that . . .
- SUDHIR. Yes, I'll have tea.
 VAHINI. I asked because tea may keep you awake. Anjali, you better finish your bath while I make some tea.

Both of them leave. Sudhir stares at Dadi. Then all of a sudden a light shower of dust falls on Dadi's body. . .

- DADI. Son! Isn't there anyone here?

Sudhir thinks of going up to her, but changes his mind. Sits. Prabha comes in.

- SUDHIR. Where were you all this time?
 PRABHA. I was sitting in the store room. Thought you better finish your business. All of you are so very unhappy, aren't you! I am not sorry or anything like that.
- SUDHIR. So you have started on that note already?
 PRABHA (*choked voice*). Till the last day, Tatyaji did not speak to me.
- SUDHIR. Now don't cry.
 PRABHA. I won't cry, OK? Vahini cried when Tatyaji was gone. She cried more than Aai did! And Bhaskar actually threw himself to the ground. I had gone to the library, at the Panchayat. No one thought of sending me a simple message. Parag and Ranju were at home, though. They could have sent one of them.
- SUDHIR. Listen, it might not have occurred to them.
 PRABHA. Go on. Take their side.
 SUDHIR. As soon as I have come, you have started your bickering.
 PRABHA. When a father dies, the daughter has no future—has she?
 SUDHIR. What do you lack?
 PRABHA. Now I shall have to survive on whatever little you throw at me in charity. What do you care? You will collect your share

and will be off to Bombay. I tell you, Sudhir, it's not even five days since Tatyaji is gone. Five days. In these five days Vahini has changed. There was no delay in the house keys reaching her waistband. And no delay before Aai was shoved into the darkness of the back room. When Tatyaji was alive, one could not hear Vahini's steps in the veranda, ever. Within five days you hear her commands from outside the mansion.

SUDHIR (*bored*). I shall have my bath.

PRABHA. Anjali has gone for a bath. Sit down. Have you brought my books?

SUDHIR. Prabha, have some consideration.

PRABHA. Just say yes or no.

SUDHIR. Don't be stupid. Is this the time? Such a calamity! A misfortune like this and . . .

PRABHA. I had sent you a list ages back. I wrote to say, bring them when you come. I thought you might have bought the books earlier and would bring them with you. You do not visit this place for three or even four years.

SUDHIR. I had bought shawls for Dadi and Aai. I didn't bring them either. At such a time . . .

PRABHA. For Dadi! Has anyone ever given her a new piece of cloth? It's more than enough to put an old rug round her body. Her shawl will disappear into Vahini's trunk. One really must not live up to such an old age.

SUDHIR. Do you think you are going to miss out on old age?

PRABHA. Who is going to live that long?

SUDHIR. As if you can help it.

Anjali comes in.

ANJALI. I have kept water ready for your bath. Aren't you going?

Sudhir goes.

PRABHA. Do you have to wear torn clothes?

ANJALI. Oh that! My sari got caught on the tractor outside.

PRABHA. Or is it deliberate to show us how badly off you are?

SUDHIR (*off stage*). Can I have my towel please?

ANJALI. Coming!

Goes. Silence. Dust falls on Dadi's body.

DADI Venkatesh . . . All the mice running about—just see.
 Venkatesh.

*Prabha goes on looking at Dadi. Then she is absorbed in thought.
Light slowly fades.*

Scene 2

*Morning the next day. Everyone is having tea Ranju comes in
playing with her tresses.*

RANJU. Tea for me . . .

BHASKAR. Tidy up your hair first.

SUDHIR. Go and wake Parag up . . .

RANJU. I want my tea first.

VAHINI. Parag went out early in the morning after his tea.

SUDHIR. Does he do exercises or what?

BHASKAR. Exercise! Yes. His exercise is wallowing in the filth of the
 village.

VAHINI (*changing the topic*). Anjali, why don't you stitch up your sari ?
 What a long strip has come off the sari. She has barely
 arrived and our tractor has already given our sister-in-law a
 gift.

BHASKAR. Arrey baba Sudhir, see if you can find a buyer for this tractor
 in your Bombay.

VAHINI. Dear God! Do people in Bombay go to their offices on a
 tractor or what? You are the limit.

BHASKAR. Don't you know? There's a market for everything in
 Bombay.

SUDHIR. Who will buy it in Bombay, Bhau? And besides, what is left
 of it now? More than half of it is sunk in the ground where
 it stands. I find it a little more sunk every time I come here.
 The plates are so rotted they are falling apart.

BHASKAR. It has not been used in the past twenty years!

SUDHIR. All that money wasted. You should have sold it long ago.

BHASKAR. Did I have the courage to say I wanted to sell it, when
 Tatyaji was alive? He had to have it. Let's buy a tractor, he
 went on and on. And then bought it. I felt then that since it

was there, it would be useful. But how could that be? First of all, all our lands are with the tenants. They thought, now that the landlord has bought a tractor he is going to till the soil himself. So all were against it. And once that happened, nothing could be done.

VAHINI. Do you think you can get hold of a mechanic in the village? Forget it. So it is just lying there. That's all.

SUDHIR. You should have hired it out to the villagers at least.

BHASKAR. Arrey. Who has big fields in the village? Two acres, five acres. Twelve acres is the limit. Who is going to use a tractor for that much land? I tried of course. But then people should be able to afford it also. At that time I told Tatyaji—I told him then, it's much better to buy twelve or fifteen buffaloes than the tractor. Let's start a dairy, I said.

RANJU. Instead of all that why didn't you buy a groovy car?

BHASKAR. Because your father does not know how to milk a car, that's why, you idiot.

VAHINI. Didn't rich people have elephants parading in their courtyards in the earlier days, Bhavji? Now in these modern times the Deshpandes have a tractor on show in front of their house. Whether they need it or not. What matters is that you show your wealth. In the front yard you have the tractor and at the back you have the palanquin.

BHASKAR. Have you forgotten how you arrived as a bride in that very palanquin?

VAHINI. How can I? Both of us, the palanquin and I, have been in the backyard ever since. Want some more tea?

SUDHIR. No.

VAHINI.. Tell me if you want some. I am going to the kitchen where I belong.

SUDHIR. Do you cook?

VAHINI. Who else then?

SUDHIR. Where is Gaja gone?

VAHINI. It's three years since Gaja left. Said he was going to cook in the hotel near the bus stand. It's a big handicap not having anyone to do the cooking.

BHASKAR. The son of a bitch is ungrateful. His father and his grand-father took care of the kitchen of the Deshpandes all their lives. He doesn't think of that.

VAHINI. Who does? Haven't they all gone one by one? Once there

- were four servants for each person here. They have a point. Do we pay them as much as they get outside?
- BHASKAR. Who stood by them in their hour of need? And we would have done the same in the future also. I sent a message to that Gaja. I said we are in mourning, help us out till the ceremony of sprinkling water for peace is over. But the son of a bitch did not come.
- SUDHIR. Doesn't Aai mind when you mix up things during the period of mourning? The things which are supposed to be pure and the ones which are not?
- VAHINI. What can she do? She has to adjust.
- BHASKAR. It's quite a nuisance with all the fuss that Aai makes. You have no idea. You are all right far away in Bombay. (*Looking at Dadi*) With her it's all the same. Pollution, purity, sacred, unholy—she, poor thing, is free from all that.
- VAHINI. I, too, do not accept it really. But what can one do, the times being the way they are. (*Getting up, to Ranju*) Get up. Don't sit like a dolt. Have your bath and come to the kitchen to help.
- RANJU. I want to hear the radio. Time for Listeners' Choice.
- VAHINI. Look at this brat!
- ANJALI. I am coming—
- VAHINI. Don't. You'll find it too confusing in our upcountry kitchen.
- SUDHIR. Is she a new bride, Vahini? It's twenty years since we got married.
- VAHINI. Old or new! Why don't you take care of the groceries when Chandu Bhavji brings them in? You can arrange them in the store room. (*To Bhaskar*) We have to get the groceries today. Chandu Bhavji . . .
- CHANDU. I will bring them.
- VAHINI. Bhira has cut the wood, but he has not brought it in . . .
- CHANDU. I'll bring it in.
- VAHINI (*to Bhaskar*). You better send Bhavji to Nagarmal Sheth for the groceries. Write a note.
- BHASKAR. Whatever for? (*Awkward silence. To Chandu*) What's the matter?
- CHANDU. Bansilal wants his dues.
- VAHINI (*to Sudhir*). Yesterday Chandu Bhavji went there to get two matchboxes but he sent him back without them.
- BHASKAR. Tell that son of a bitch that no Deshpande of Dharangaon

has died leaving his debt behind. Tatyaji is dead, so what? Aren't we all here? Tell him I shall pay him back even if I have to sell the tiles on my roof. When his father came here from Marwar with only a water jug to call his own, he set up his home in our stables. He has forgotten those days. And why did you have to take that nonsense from a man not worth half a penny?

VAHINI. Does he speak up in front of anyone? Really, Sudhir Bhavji, tell us what we should do. (*Silence. Bhaskar and Sudhir are confused, taking in the situation.*) I will go get the bags out. (*As she goes in*) Now for the next week or fifteen days it's only expenses and more expenses.

BHASKAR (*getting up*). I am going ahead. You come with the bags. Bring a sack for the sugar. . .

Goes. Chandu goes in.

RANJU. What time is it, Kaka?

SUDHIR. Eight o' clock.

RANJU. Eight? I have missed my Listeners' Choice. Where is our transistor?

Runs in. Bumps into Chandu who is coming out with the bags.

SUDHIR. Are there going to be a lot of groceries?

CHANDU. We have to bring everything for the Shradh ceremony.

SUDHIR. Hm. (*Chandu goes.*) Did you get it?

ANJALI. Speak low . . .

SUDHIR. They expected me to cough up the money.

ANJALI. Don't drag me into this business.

SUDHIR. What do they think? And what do they do when we are not here?

ANJALI. Why are you bothering me? When the time comes you do not have the courage to speak up. Why nag me for nothing?

SUDHIR. I am going to speak up this time. Whatever it costs me.

ANJALI. I have been hearing this record for the past ten years.

SUDHIR. Then Tatyaji was alive . . .

ANJALI. Now Aai is here . . .

Chandu comes in.

SUDHIR. Arrey, I thought you were going to the grocer's.

CHANDU. Yes. Bhau sent me back.

SUDHIR (*getting up*). Will you get me my shaving kit . . .

CHANDU. Sudhir . . . (*Sudhir looks inquiringly.*) Well. Bhau sent me back to you. (*Confused.*) He asked for seven or eight hundred rupees if you can spare it.

SUDHIR (*looks at Anjali. She looks at him. As soon as their eyes meet she turns away*). Seven or eight hundred? Arrey, where will I get that much? I was in such a great hurry to get here after receiving the telegram that I had no time to go to the bank . . .

CHANDU. Don't worry. I'll ask Vahini.

Sudhir goes in. Chandu goes to the back room where Aai sits on a mat. As Chandu is about to pass by her she looks up.

AAL Chandu.

CHANDU. Coming.

AAL Have you got the groceries?

CHANDU. No.

AAL Have you had anything to eat since the morning?

CHANDU. No . . .

AAL Have a bite, son. Puffed rice—anything. How long will you go hungry? (*Vahini comes from inside all of a sudden.*)

VAHINI (*voice slightly raised*). Aai. No one has had anything to eat yet!

AAL You see, yesterday he fasted, it being Thursday. He did not have dinner last night. That is why I said he should have a bite before . . .

VAHINI. Was he the only one who observed a fast yesterday? You should now stop worrying about these things.

CHANDU. Vahini, we have to do something about the money.

VAHINI. Now what has happened?

CHANDU. Bhau sent me to Sudhir for money. He does not have so much money.

VAHINI. And where do I get it from?

CHANDU. All the groceries have to be bought. Bansilal says, no credit. Need at least seven, eight hundred.

VAHINI. Take my teeth away.

AAL What kind of talk is this? This is the last expense on his account. The ceremony should be done properly.

VAHINI. Aho. I agree it should be done properly. But is there any harm if we all share the expenses? He was a father to us all, wasn't he? Or do you think it's only our responsibility to

uphold the prestige of the Deshpandes? Go and tell your brother to come home and take away the jewellery his wife is wearing.

AAI Wait, bai, wait a little. Let me see. (*Aai gets up. Opens a trunk lying in a corner. Takes out a few notes kept in the folds of a sari and gives them to Chandu.*) Will these do? I have only this much.

CHANDU. Aai. It's your money, keep it for yourself.

AAI Arrey. What do I need it for? He had given it to me before he died. I had kept it away so that it would come in useful at times of need. His money. Let it be used for his Shradh.

Vahini watches all this. Flounces past into the house.

CHANDU (*as he goes out*). You didn't have to give it . . .

AAI (*low voice*). Eat something at the hotel at the bus stand.

Chandu leaves with the bags. Prabha has been watching all this but does not say anything. Darkness in the back room. Lights in the veranda.

PRABHA. Did you see how quietly he went? All day he toils like a servant in this house.

ANJALI. Why doesn't he get a job somewhere?

PRABHA. Then who will work at home? You will come once in four years and only for four days. Like a visitor. You will not understand anything of the situation here . . . (*Pause.*) When you go back to Bombay this time I shall go with you.

ANJALI (*alert*). What about Aai? Shouldn't there be someone with her?

PRABHA. We shall take her also with us. It will be a change for her. Didn't you notice? Vahini waited till Aai brought the money out. They will eat her up here . . .

ANJALI. Tell your brother. I have no say in such things. I shall do what he says.

PRABHA. You seem to be absolutely deferential to my brother.

ANJALI. You know his temper well. He is a Deshpande through and through. Over and above that he has this problem of blood pressure. (*Pause.*) You must think that we live a great, fulfilled life in Bombay. But I tell you, believe me, we alone know what kind of life we lead. If we manage to have a cover for the head, you will find the feet are bare. If the feet are shod the head remains without protection. That's

how it is. What a tremendous effort we had to make to get a small flat—barely two rooms. And now all our effort goes in paying the instalments. Here, at least you have your own house, a roof overhead and also the paddy from our own fields.

PRABHA. Now don't you start wailing about the poverty you live in. No one will go to your house—will that satisfy you? You really are a diehard Konkani . . .

ANJALI. That's not what I meant to say. You can come for a few days and see for yourself. You always twist the meaning of what I say into something totally different. That's why I never want to say anything.

PRABHA. How come your sister stayed on for years with you?

ANJALI. Oh that! Her college was quite near our place so she used to stay with us sometimes. She has never really stayed a long stretch with us. Whoever gives you such information?

Sudhir at the door.

SUDHIR. Where have you kept my shaving kit?

ANJALI. It's in the case—on the left side.

SUDHIR. Get it out for me. I can't find it.

He goes in.

ANJALI.(to Prabha, in an indulgent tone). Deshpande. . ! Catch him doing one thing for himself . . .

PRABHA. Well, go on with your bickerings.

Light in the room where Anjali and Sudhir are.

ANJALI. It's here.

SUDHIR. Don't sit there chatting. Vahini has already lit the stove for cooking.

ANJALI. The lady does not want me hovering in the kitchen. If I make a little mistake in anything, she comes out with such taunts. I've had enough of it in the past.

SUDHIR. So what! It does not hurt you physically, does it? Some people have the habit of . . .

ANJALI. She always taunts me about my upbringing as a Konkani. I am used to cooking the way we do it in Bombay. Here, there are so many people, I can't manage. If there is a shortage of something that's enough of an excuse for her to

start on my forefathers from Konkan. . .

SUDHIR.

Vahini is good at heart, really.

ANJALI.

That she is, as far as you are concerned. Do you know what happened in the back room a little while ago? Ask Chandu Bhavji. Why does Chandu Bhavji work so hard—like a coolie—?

SUDHIR.

What happened in the back room?

ANJALI.

I am not going to tell you. Once again you'd say that the Konkans are always instigating quarrels.

SUDHIR.

You have a complex about being a Konkani.

ANJALI.

Haven't you got one—about being a Deshpande from Vidarbha?

SUDHIR.

So what . . .

ANJALI.

Have you been round the house? You must. The rooms upstairs are all locked up. There are huge cracks in the wall of the back veranda. It's standing only because of the support given to it. I ask you—aren't they afraid? Such a huge mansion but there is no upkeep—no repairs, not even a coat of paint!

SUDHIR.

It's a hundred or hundred and fifty years old. When you first saw it you were so impressed you could not utter a word.

ANJALI.

Then the mansion was still so impressive. Tatyaji had a lot of enthusiasm. I have been noticing things. Every time you come you find one thing or another missing. There were exactly twelve chandeliers in the veranda. Not one remains. Broke, they say. Last time I asked for one just to keep as an antique piece. But Bhavji was so upset! And all you are interested in is maligning the people of Konkan.

SUDHIR.

How would that chandelier look in your ten by twelve room in Bombay? Things look well only where they belong.

ANJALI.

There were four very large cotton durries. There were carpets, rugs, mirrors, copper pots, huge utensils to serve food in . . . Where does it all go anyway?

SUDHIR.

What do you want those huge utensils for? Do you want to open a hire purchase shop or what? Supply them for weddings and feasts?

ANJALI.

I don't want anything from your house.

SUDHIR.

Then don't grumble. (*Pause.*) For the past ten years, Tatyaji had nothing to do with the household except to do puja, nor did he pay any attention to the affairs here. This is

- all Bhau's doing.
- ANJALI What is left now anyway! God knows what they have done with things. Sold them or given them away. . .
- SUDHIR. To hell with it.
- ANJALI I admire these things because they are antiques in Bombay. You would have got thousands for each of these things.
- SUDHIR. You Bombayites are the limit. You only look at things from the point of view of making money.
- ANJALI I tell you. . .
- SUDHIR. Tomorrow you will say how much money you would get if you sold the jewellery. . .
- ANJALI Yes, only if there is any jewellery left to be sold . . .

As both look at each other, the second scene closes.

Scene 3

Afternoon. Prabha and Dadi are on the veranda. There is a low whistle from outside. Prabha becomes alert, then suddenly gets up and goes out. Comes back after a few minutes. Vahini comes out of the back room.

- VAHINI. Who was it?
- PRABHA. The teacher.
- VAHINI. Then why did he go away? Ranju. . .
- PRABHA. I asked him to leave —
- VAHINI. What about her tuition?
- PRABHA. I say, are you blind?
- VAHINI. It's her tenth class. The girl has failed twice. She must get through this time—the nuisance.
- PRABHA. Get rid of this teacher first. He comes to teach—whistling.
- VAHINI. So what?
- PRABHA. He teaches free. Ranju is getting on to seventeen. Think about it.
- VAHINI. Don't talk nonsense.
- PRABHA. You will regret it. I tell you all this because as it is Ranju is interested in other things. You will find her in front of the mirror all the time. Or she is gadding about town. We were

not allowed to step out of the door.

VAHINI. I am also telling you, Wance, do not go on and on about Ranju.

PRABHA. Why should I go on nagging about her?

VAHINI. I do not know about that. You are the judge. I can only say that it is not good to be so suspicious about anyone. I know my child. Please remember that.

Sudhir at the door of the veranda.

SUDHIR. Prabha. . .

PRABHA. Don't you interfere in this.

VAHINI. See Bhavji—just watch! When she was small she would insist that only I do her hair. And now she quarrels with me.

SUDHIR. How can you quarrel? Think of the occasion, think of the atmosphere in the house. . .

Parag comes from outside. Seeing his uncle he immediately goes in.

PRABHA. There s occasion and atmosphere for you! Why don't you take a little more care of your angelic kids?

VAHINI. Arrey. Won't you talk to your uncle? Normally all the time it is 'Kaka' and 'Kaka'. The boy did not even come for lunch today.

SUDHIR. What's wrong with Parag this time? He spends most of his time outside, it seems.

VAHINI. He is ashamed to come in front of you. Abhay is younger than him, but has left him behind in studies.

SUDHIR. I had heard something. . .

VAHINI. What?

SUDHIR. Let it be.

VAHINI. That he drinks, isn't it? See how people meddle in others' affairs. They take the news right up to Bombay. . .

SUDHIR. Is it true then? Vahini?

VAHINI. Oh! It did happen once or twice. But then immediately all the relatives were ready to eat him alive. Bhavji, he is like Abhay to you.

SUDHIR. Something has to be done.

VAHINI. There is no school here after the tenth class. He could have stayed in Bombay with Abhay.

SUDHIR. I tried hard to find out the possibilities of his getting admission in Bombay after his results came out. But with such poor marks where can he get admitted? Even those who get 80 to 85 per cent have to queue up for hours.

VAHINI. Where do the dull boys of Bombay go, then? I feel worried. He does nothing. Doesn't go to the farm. Not even once in a while.

SUDHIR. Isn't he afraid of Bhau?

VAHINI. He has become like this only because he is terrified. If you shout at them all the time, why should the children stay at home? They are out the whole day. He has got into bad company. That's what has happened. He terrifies the children. That's his nature. How the hell can I look after everything?

SUDHIR. He disappeared the moment he saw me.

VAHINI. But when he wants to—he is so good you won't believe, and he is so affectionate. He insisted on grinding Tatyaji's betelnuts. . .

SUDHIR. He has always been affectionate. He would always come running to me. Would follow me wherever I went.

VAHINI. Even now he is very fond of you. It's always Kaka, Kaka's home, Kaka's letter, Kaka did this, Kaka did that. He's wasting in this village. First, the bad company. Then he is not too bright in his studies. So. . .

SUDHIR. I will take him to Bombay for a few days.

VAHINI. Take him, he is your child.

ANJALI. But he has to agree first.

SUDHIR (*sternly*). Go and get my bath ready.

Involuntarily Anjali makes a face and goes to the middle room.

SUDHIR. If he stays with Abhay for a few days he'll improve.

VAHINI. He admires Abhay such a lot. Abhay looks so good. Abhay has such smart clothes. Abhay plays cricket so well. If Abhay does well in his studies over there, he dances with joy here. See what blood ties mean?

SUDHIR. Abhay too is very fond of him.

VAHINI. Why shouldn't he be? The only two brothers. Each has only the other to depend on. If your letter just had 'blessings to Raghoba' the boy would be so pleased. But we are not supposed to call him Raghoba. That name is reserved for

Sudhir Kaka. We are expected to call him Parag. So you see what kind of a person he is. How is Abhay?

SUDHIR. He has changed completely in the past three years. You wouldn't recognize him if you see him. He has just completed sixteen but is already six feet tall.

VAHINI. Has he put on some weight?

SUDHIR. Yes. He's quite the strong man. He wouldn't miss his gym even for a day.

VAHINI. That's good. Also it's lucky he has taken after Anjali in looks. Why didn't you bring him? If he stays on in Bombay he will not have any feelings left for us.

SUDHIR. That is not so. He always remembers this place. And he is so fond of Parag. Parag taught him to swim here, in the well. He remembers that very well. The two of them used to have real fun romping all over the house . . . didn't they?

Bhaskar comes in.

BHASKAR. Has the prince returned home as yet?

SUDHIR. Bhau. . . .

BHASKAR. See for yourself what your Raghoba is up to. I told him not to go out, or else. . . . But he could not hold out for the ten days of mourning. Where is the rascal?

VAHINI. He is asleep. He panicked the moment he saw Bhavji. Don't say anything to him right now, please.

BHASKAR. This is it. Your indulgence—that's what spoils him. If he had been spanked at the right time, we would not have had to see these days.

VAHINI. Sudhir Bhavji is taking him to Bombay. He will improve once he is with Abhay.

BHASKAR. He? Improve? Are you out of your mind? Abhay will be spoiled in his company.

VAHINI. Don't speak like that about him all the time.

BHASKAR. Do you think I enjoy saying these things? What a handsome golden boy he was. Now he looks like a skeleton.

VAHINI. Listen. . . .

BHASKAR. We work all day till we are ready to drop dead. And he? He wanders about the whole day or else he is sleeping like a log.

SUDHIR. Let it be. Don't scold him while we are here, at least.

- BHASKAR. You won't understand how it hurts.
- SUDHIR. Now sit for a while. Vahini, sit down. Ever since we have come, both of you have been busy. We haven't had a chance to talk, to relax. . . Sit down, please.
- VAHINI (*sits*). Talk. What do you want to say? (*Silence.*) See what happens! Once you decide to talk, you don't know where to begin.
- SUDHIR. The mansion looks really dilapidated. Can't any repairs . . . ?
- BHASKAR. Repairs? Arrey, if there had been just two rooms repairs could have been done. This colossal mansion—where does one begin? Just polishing the wood with oil and water needs a whole tin of oil. (*Pause.*) As a matter of fact, we all have to think and decide. . .
- SUDHIR. We are five hundred miles away. . .
- BHASKAR. True. And over here? We've had difficulties visiting us like guests, one after another. On top of that, Tatyaji's illness, and the boy getting out of hand in all that mess.
- VAHINI. Bhavji says he will take him to Bombay.
- BHASKAR. If you are wise, you won't take our good-for-nothing son. He has turned out to be thoroughly bad. Your son is good. Let him remain so. If anyone is going to carry forward the name of the Deshpandes of Dharangaon—it's Abhay who will. Let not even the shadow of this boy who has disgraced his family ever fall on him.
- ANJALI. Why do you say all this? They are brothers after all.
- BHASKAR. Yes. But see the difference between the two. Initially, we had refused to accept you in the family because you are from Konkan. But your boy has inherited the intelligence along with the fair complexion of the Konkanis. He will get a first class, won't he?
- SUDHIR (*subtly boastful*). He is expected to be on the merit list . . .
- BHASKAR. Let's see . . .
- ANJALI. He works very hard.
- BHASKAR. This again is a virtue of the Konkanis. On the other hand, take us. We cultivated our lands, true. But how? By sitting here on the swing. Idly swinging away, issuing orders. And we lost our estates just by whiling our time away chewing paan. We could never bother even to get up and fetch ourselves a spittoon. If the servant forgot to bring one or was slow in doing so, we just spat out the betel juice

ANJALI. towards the corner—sitting where we happened to be.
Really!

Ranju enters.

BHASKAR. Where were you all this time, young lady?

RANJU. I was studying. . .

BHASKAR (*sarcastically*). Your love for studies is just brimming over, isn't it?

VAHINI. Your teacher came here. . .

RANJU. I met him on the road. He says I should go to his place for tuition.

BHASKAR. No.

RANJU. He says, you have visitors at home. So you won't be able to study.

BHASKAR. I said No.

VAHINI. Let her go, if she wants to. The teacher's mother is always at home.

BHASKAR. Deshpande girls do not go anywhere and everywhere just like that. You have been married thirty years now. You should know at least this much.

VAHINI. I, too, am a Deshmukh daughter. I know everything. If the girl passes her exams this year we can get her married off. The poor man is grateful to us for favours done in the past. So he coaches her for no fees.

BHASKAR. What kind of teacher is he! The blighter loiters all over the village like a transvestite Hindi movie actor with his hair all puffed up. Day and night you will find him hanging around at the bus stand, chewing paan and spitting. And that transistor hanging from his neck like a sacred thread, day in and day out. Is he a teacher or a bloody dancer?

VAHINI. These days every one is like that. Why should good boys stay on in the village? Only the dregs stay on. We have to adjust. What else can one do?

BHASKAR. No tuition from tomorrow. You will not go to him. He will not be allowed to come here. (*To Ranju*) Now why are you crying?

RANJU. I am weak in English.

BHASKAR. Let it be. You are not expected to go and have tea with the Queen of England. And now tidy up your hair. What kind of sari is that? What kind of hairdo? You should be flogged.

Goes out.

VAHINI (*to Ranju*). You come inside the house. How many times have I told you to cover yourself properly with your sari? You never listen to anyone. Why are you so cheeky? What were you doing in the prayer room then?

RANJU. And is it all right when father goes in there?

Chandu, bent down with the weight he is carrying, comes in.

VAHINI. The groceries have come. (*Noticing blood on Chandu's foot*) Now what have you done to your foot?

CHANDU. I cut myself on the tin of the tractor—as I was coming in.

VAHINI. Put some turmeric on it right away. What a nuisance this tractor is. Why don't we throw it away, right now! (*Going into the middle room.*) For now, put the things in the middle room.

Instead of taking the things from his hands, Ranju hangs on to Chandu.

CHANDU. Ranju. Ranju. Stop it, stop.

RANJU. Chandu Kaka, you look like a hero now.

CHANDU. Go away now, will you?

RANJU. No. We shall not go away. You know, in that film *Coolie* Amitabh carries in things just like this. Why don't you go into the movies, Chandu Kaka?

CHANDU. Then who will do the work here?

RANJU. Take me, now. The moment I get a chance I shall work in a film.

CHANDU. Do that. But for now give a hand to take these inside . . .

RANJU. No. I am a scamp!

Again she clings to him. Chandu staggers. Some things fall. Anjali comes from inside.

ANJALI. Wait. I will take these. What happened to your foot?

RANJU. Hurt—he has bruised his foot—and I have bruised my heart.

ANJALI. What sort of frivolity is this, Ranju? (*To Chandu*) You go in. Put something on that—have you got Burnol?

RANJU. Hey Anju Kaku, have you seen Amitabh?

ANJALI (*busy*). Hm . . .

RANJU. Really?

ANJALI (*alert*). What? Me? Why should I go to see him?

RANJU. When he was ill—I fasted on five Saturdays. If something had happened to him—I would have taken my life. (*Sudhir comes. Ranju hangs on to him.*) Sudhir Kaka!

SUDHIR. Who would you have given your life for?

As they talk, they move into the other room. Anjali follows.

ANJALI. Ranju, what is this? Go away. Let him change his clothes.

RANJU. He is our dear dear uncle.

SUDHIR. Dear niece, away, away. I have to take my shirt off.

RANJU. Sudhir Kaka, have you seen Amitabh?

SUDHIR. Hm. Of course, he comes every day to the milk centre for milk.

RANJU. That's a bluff.

SUDHIR. It's true, really. Jaya too comes to borrow something or the other every other day.

RANJU. But these stars are so rich . . . aren't they?

SUDHIR. Not as rich as the Deshpandes. Go get some tea for Kaka.

RANJU. Kaka, where is the Rajkamal Studios?

SUDHIR. Rajkamal? Right behind our house. Now go, get me some tea.

RANJU. Yes sir. (*Pulls his hair and runs.*)

SUDHIR. This is something new I find in her.

ANJALI. How she clings to people . . .

SUDHIR. She thinks she is the village scamp as they are shown in Hindi films.

ANJALI. She is so flippant.

SUDHIR. Have you seen how they change the subject?

ANJALI. Hm.

SUDHIR. I just have to say something . . . and there begins their record all over again. We have this difficulty. We have that problem—huh!

ANJALI. Hm.

SUDHIR. He does not want the topic brought up at all.

ANJALI. You and your brother do what you like. I refuse to be a party to it. Remember that.

DADI. Venkatesh, Venkatesh . . . No one talks, my dear. (*Sudhir stares at her.*) Dear Venkatesh—I have been calling you for so long. Are you tired of this old woman?

SUDHIR. Dadi—I—(*Shouts*) I am Sudhir. I am not Tatyaji.

DADI. Son! Venkatesh! Is it night? Why am I hungry in the middle

of the night?

SUDHIR (*shouts*). It's not night.

*Realizing it is no use shouting, he continues to stare at Dadi.
Lights fade.*

Act Two

Scene 1

Same day. About ten o'clock at night. A lantern each in all the four areas. The one in the veranda is brighter. Parag is sitting in a corner—feeling awkward, Prabha on the threshold of the middle room and veranda, Chandu, right at the bottom, far away like a servant. The women are shelling nuts. The men are busy preparing paan.

BHASKAR. There is no sign of the rain stopping.

VAHINI. Just see. It looks like the sky has burst. What a nuisance.

SUDHIR. The sky was quite clear in the morning.

VAHINI. I feel very nervous when I see such rains. The upper storey is in two minds, really, to fall or not to. If the whole pompous heap collapses . . .

SUDHIR. Why don't you repair it?

BHASKAR. With what?

VAHINI. What do you know, Bhavji? You Bombayites! Ranju, what are you doing at the gate?

RANJU. I am watching the rain.

VAHINI. Come here at once.

RANJU(*coming*). Sudhir Kaka, when there is a scene showing rain, do they really shoot it in the rain?

SUDHIR. Vahini, her head is full of cinema. What madness is this? I have been noticing it since the morning.

VAHINI. Don't ask me. As soon as the touring talkies arrive and camp here her daily routine is to see the films, not just once or twice—how many times can one see the same film? Nothing else matters.

SUDHIR. But why do you let her?

VAHINI. What other entertainment is there here for the children? The poor kids get bored. And then when she starts crying and sulking, I say, go. Go and see. I do not want to be bothered.

SUDHIR(*unthinkingly*). We have stopped going out to see a film ever since we bought the TV.

He realizes his mistake immediately He looks at Anjali. She behaves as if she has not heard anything. All the others are tense.

- RANJU. Wow! You have bought a TV?
- SUDHIR. Only very recently. I received some arrears . . .
- RANJU. Colour?
- BHASKAR. Must have cost at least ten to fifteen thousand.
- SUDHIR. Not at all, Bhau. Only five . . .
- ANJALI. That too on instalment. One good thing about Bombay is, you get everything on instalment.
- VAHINI. It's good for you. At least you have been able to manage to get things one by one. Over here there is no question of getting a TV in our lifetime. Before we get one, we have to start thinking about getting electricity first.
- SUDHIR. Really. Why don't you get an electric connection and be done with it! It's so dim . . .
- BHASKAR. It's not dim or dark at all. It's a matter of habit. We don't find it dark. And what good will electricity be? Four days out of eight there is no current. People stopped draw wells and fixed pumps to their wells. Now they are repenting. Half of them have had their orange orchards burnt for lack of water. The government is satisfied that it has taken electricity to villages. People are satisfied that they have electric connections. But if you ask me, there is more loss than gain in this.
- PRABHA. As if you will buy a TV once the electricity becomes regular.
- VAHINI. Why shouldn't we? We certainly shall.
- BHASKAR. She feels her elder brother is incapable of buying a TV. He is useless. Don't you think so?
- VAHINI. Ranju, have you gone to the gate again? Come here at once.
- PRABHA. Haven't you sold all the big utensils for a song? You could have had a TV for that amount.
- SUDHIR (*shocked*). Is it true? Have you sold them for nothing?
- VAHINI. Really! All broken utensils. Of no use to any one. Only littering up the store room.
- SUDHIR. There were two copper vessels for bathing.
- VAHINI. Gone. Those are gone. And the buckets.
- ANJALI. Frankly, I wanted to have one. The indoor plants look so beautiful in them.

- RANJU. What can one say about Kaku? She is all freaked out about interior decoration. Just like in a film . . .
- VAHINI. Rubbish. What is there to decorate with broken vessels? All nonsense.
- SUDHIR. Vahini, you could at least have dropped a line to ask us? Leave the decoration aside. But do you know the rate of brass and copper these days? Do you?
- VAHINI. I am sorry—it did not occur to me.
- SUDHIR. What do you mean—it did not occur? There's a limit!
- BHASKAR. Do you think we were happy to sell the utensils? All of them carried the names of our grand- and great-grandparents. But the times were such . . .
- SUDHIR. You should have informed me.
- BHASKAR. This time we did not inform you, that's true. But when we have informed you, what have you done? Do you even reply to letters? There is always a great need for cash during the sowing time. Daily one needs a hundred, even two hundred rupees in cash. On top of that we had to face Tatyaji's illness. Do you think it cost us little, this illness? Sold the utensils, the huge pots . . .
- SUDHIR. For how much?
- BHASKAR. I did not buy an estate out of the sale, I can tell you. Arrey, if we want to sell pots and pans, can we go to the bazaar openly like other people? It had to be done very secretly, without a whisper, by the back door. The pretence of our prestige had to be kept intact . . .
- SUDHIR. These ideas about prestige etc. have to be put aside now.
- VAHINI. Staying in Bombay, it is easy for you to say it, Bhavji. But it will not do if you stay in the village. Only we know how we manage here.
- SUDHIR. Do you think we live in great style, Vahini?
- VAHINI. At least you are never in the difficult straits we are in.
- BHASKAR. Your clothes, and your things, but why that, your suitcases are enough to dazzle us.
- SUDHIR. When you stay in a city, you have to have these things. Do you expect us to come here carrying tin boxes on our heads instead of a suitcase? You see our clothes. But do you know that both of us have to toil from seven in the morning to nine at night? Only then are we able to manage, somehow. And even so, we cannot afford a spoonful of ghee nor do we

have milk and curds. You come to Bombay and try it out. At every step you need money.

PRABHA. The villagers do not know of our condition, Sudhir. It's just as well at least that that fellow Bansilal does not give any credit. He wants cash down before he lets us have anything . . .

BHASKAR. She can afford to say that. No responsibility. No work. Just goes on lashing out whenever she feels like it.

PRABHA. Since both of you are here I raise the topic. Tatyaji did not want me to study. Very well. Now Tatyaji is gone. Now let me go to college in Amaravati.

SUDHIR. Now? At this age?

PRABHA. I got a first class in matric. That was twenty years ago. I wanted to be a doctor. But a Deshpande daughter could not stay in a hostel alone and study. Their prestige. Their honour. All that would have been hurt. It did not matter that my life was ruined.

BHASKAR. Prabha, all decisions about you were taken by Tatyaji. Why blame us? The fact is, Sudhir too was studying then. And it wouldn't have been possible to pay for two people. If my life has not been ruined—has it turned into gold? I am buried here in the soil. If I had gone for a job, I could have become a Superintendent.

VAHINI. All these things are a matter of luck and destiny.

BHASKAR. That's it. Now we did find a few matches for Prabha, but none worked out. And when they might have clicked Prabha turned up her nose.

PRABHA. All were blockheads, peasants. Not one was educated.

BHASKAR. Your two brothers too are engaged in agriculture, do you mind?

PRABHA. I wanted someone educated.

BHASKAR. Why should an educated person want to marry you?

PRABHA (*a little harsh*). That's right. Why didn't you educate me? And now you want to taunt me for everything. Didn't you have any responsibility as my brothers? What have you to say, Sudhir? Every time you came, you said you were looking for a match in Bombay. Never found any time for me, did you? You could not manage a simple thing like sending me some books . . . ever . . . Do you think I am pining to get married? It's over. The time is past. But that does not mean

that I am not going to hold a mirror to your face and show you up for what you are.

VAHINI. Wance! That will do. Right in front of the children . . .

BHASKAR. Let her have her say.

SUDHIR. What nonsense, Bhau!

BHASKAR. Arrey baba—this farce goes on all the time.

PRABHA. You call it a farce?

VAHINI. You always scold Ranju. Now won't she follow your example?

BHASKAR. Let it be. Enough. Aai is sitting over there, what will she think?

Restless, Ranju has again gone to the gate. Vahini shouts. She comes back and starts crying.

VAHINI. What's the matter? Why are you crying?

RANJU. You are angry with me all the time.

VAHINI. What is there at the gate? At night? Stupid girl.

PRABHA. The teacher may be coming for tuition . . .

VAHINI. Wance!

SUDHIR (*changing the subject*). Now where is Raghoba? Haven't seen him since morning.

Parag has been listening to this from the room inside. He shies away. Silence.

DADI (*very clear and loud*). What is the time, Venkatesh?

VAHINI. What shall I say is the time now? Every fifteen minutes she asks. Oh, it's a bore, this long long life.

ANJALI. That's what we feel. She may not feel so.

VAHINI. Think of the bother for the person who looks after her. (*Noticing Chandu, she is a bit ashamed.*) For that matter, that is Chandu Bhavji's department entirely. He takes care of her.

BHASKAR. He looked after Tatyaji also. I was busy on my fields. So he had to face it all. Now you have a lot of work on hand, Chandoba, for the thirteenth and fourteenth day rituals. That's the last service you will give Tatyaji.

SUDHIR. What's this lot of work anyway?

BHASKAR. Has to be. The whole village will come for dinner.

SUDHIR (*tense*). What?

BHASKAR. What else!

SUDHIR. The whole village?

BHASKAR. Arrey baba, that's the tradition here. On the thirteenth day the whole village is to be fed. Or else we won't be able to show our faces.

SUDHIR. Therefore, four, five thousand will have to be fed?

BHASKAR. There is no way out. We will start serving food in the morning and it will go on till ten or twelve at night.

SUDHIR. Have you any idea of the expense? It will mean at least twenty to twenty-five thousand rupees to feed five thousand people. Where will you get it from?

BHASKAR. That's what I thought we would discuss. You tell me—what is your suggestion?

SUDHIR. I am not going to give anything.

BHASKAR. Whether you do or not, we will have to do whatever we can.

VAHINI. This is the last expense for an ancestor. Shall we invite life in purgatory by refusing to meet it?

SUDHIR. How old fashioned you are, Vahini.

VAHINI. You can say what you like. But it's not good. Didn't Tatyaji mean anything to you?

SUDHIR. I didn't mean to say that. But frankly I won't be able to pay all that much. Where will I get such a large amount?

BHASKAR. Where shall we get it from?

SUDHIR. How do I know?

BHASKAR. We may have to pawn her bangles.

VAHINI. No. I have kept them for Ranju. I won't give the bangles. If tomorrow she gets married, won't we need them for her to wear? Or do you plan to send her off without anything? Who is going to marry your daughter without that gold? It's not as if she is a beauty. I won't give the bangles.

RANJU. You mean to say you will give me only bangles?

BHASKAR. In that case, I will be forced to mortgage the orchard.

VAHINI. It's for you to decide. I am not giving the gold.

SUDHIR. The orchard. Isn't it in the name of the three of us?

BHASKAR. He was the father of the three of us too, wasn't he?

SUDHIR. The orchard is not going to be mortgaged. When have we been able to get a mortgaged field released? Only this piece of twelve acres is left now. Let it remain. Do you think it will ever be possible to buy such fertile land? Besides, in case I need money in the future, I must have my share.

BHASKAR. Suddenly you have started talking about your rights?



Above Aai (Vijaya Mehta) with her eldest son Bhaskar (Achyut Potdar) and daughter-in-law Vahini (Girija Katdare). *Below* The 'Bombay couple'—Sudhir (Uday Mhaiskar) and his Konkani wife Anjali (Swaroop Khopkar). Quiet moments shared as family tensions build.



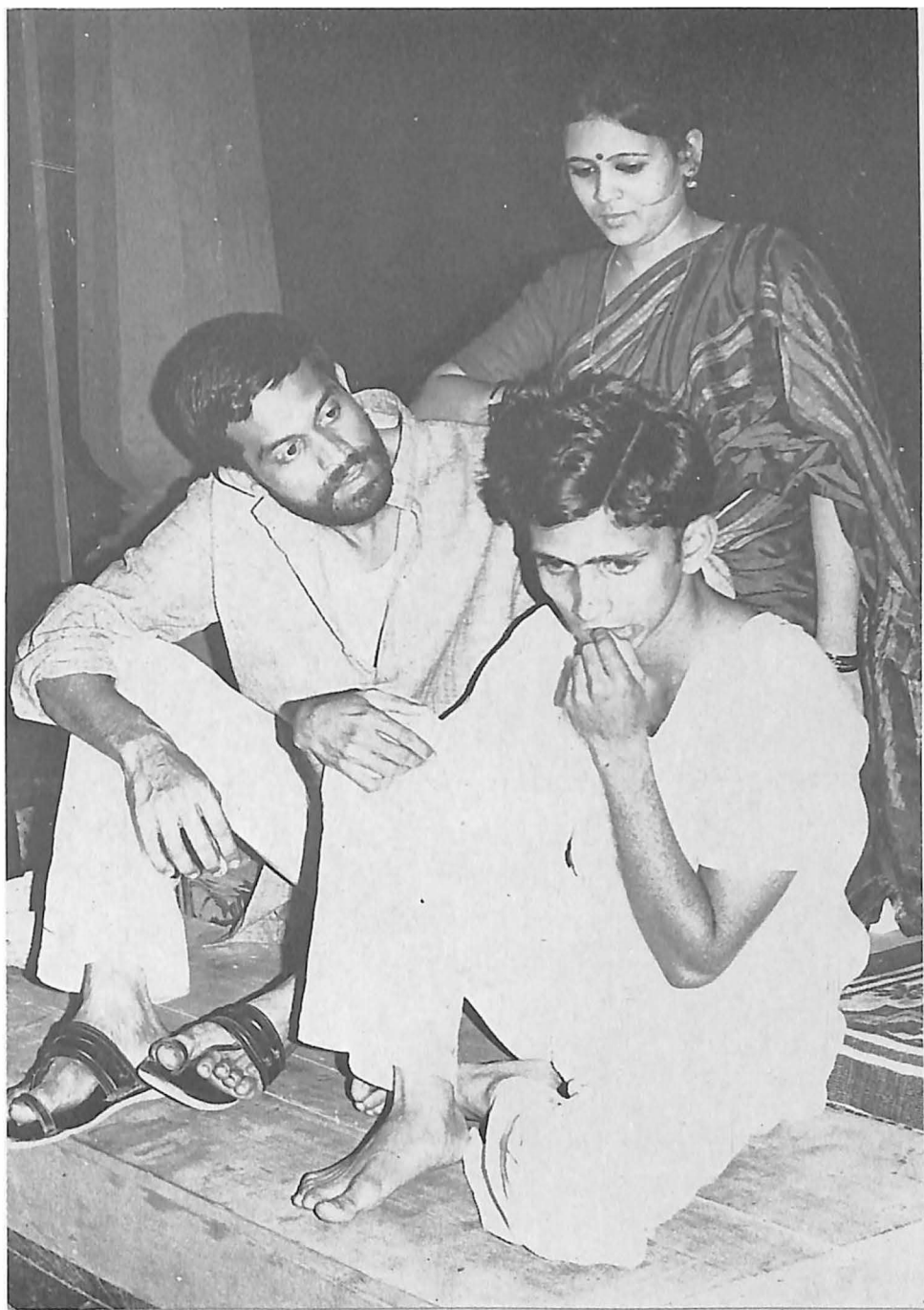
“You should be flogged!” Bhaskar berates his high-spirited daughter Ranju (Suparna Sawarkar) as Vahini watches anxiously.



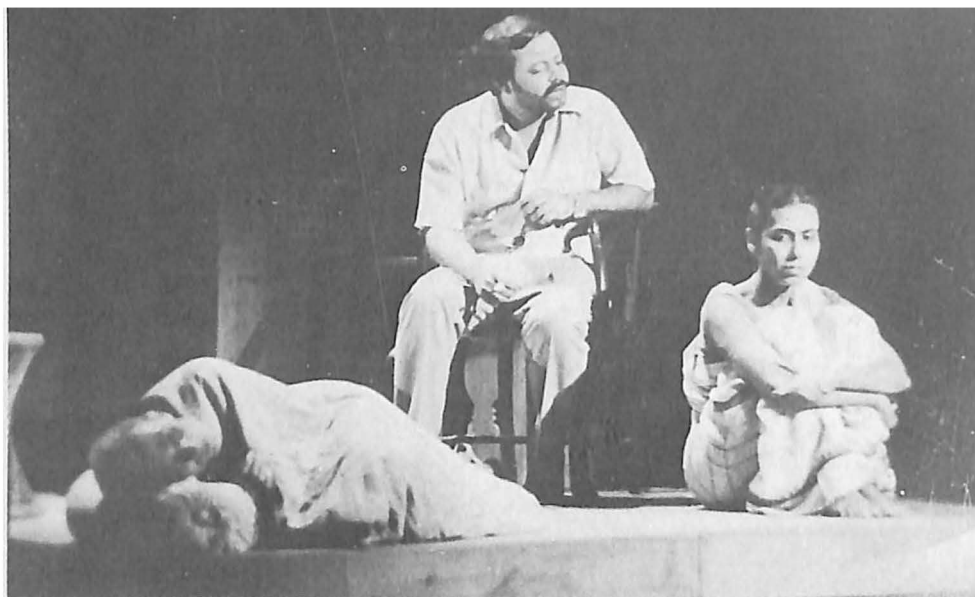
Above The brothers quarrel over rights and responsibilities. *Below* Aai is driven to intervene, her youngest son Chandu (Pramod Pawar) an inarticulate but supportive presence by her side.



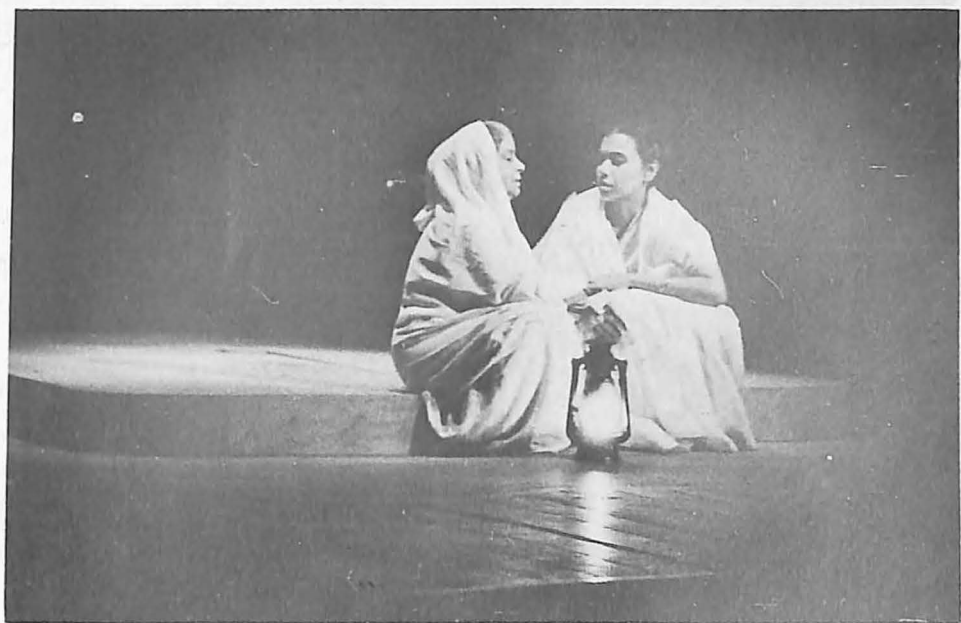
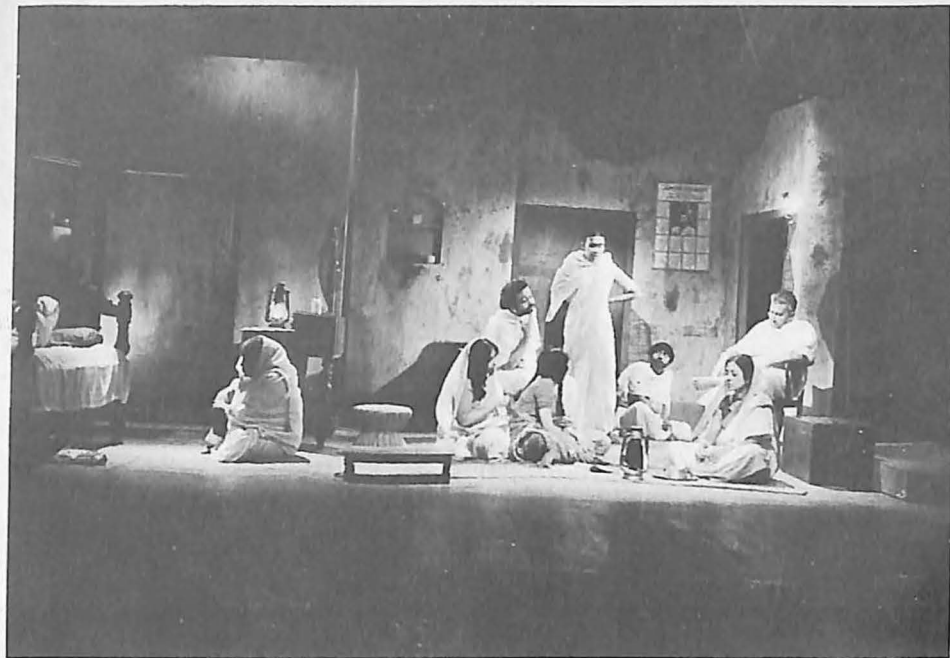
Above Vahini advises her husband to give the others their rightful share. *Below* "This is not just gold. It is something much more than that"—Vahini, entranced, is held by the power of tradition.



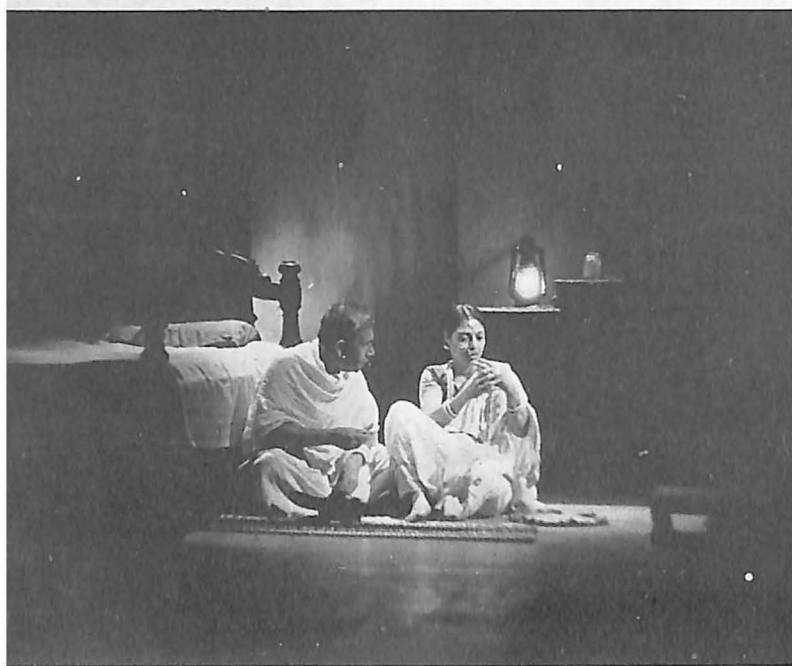
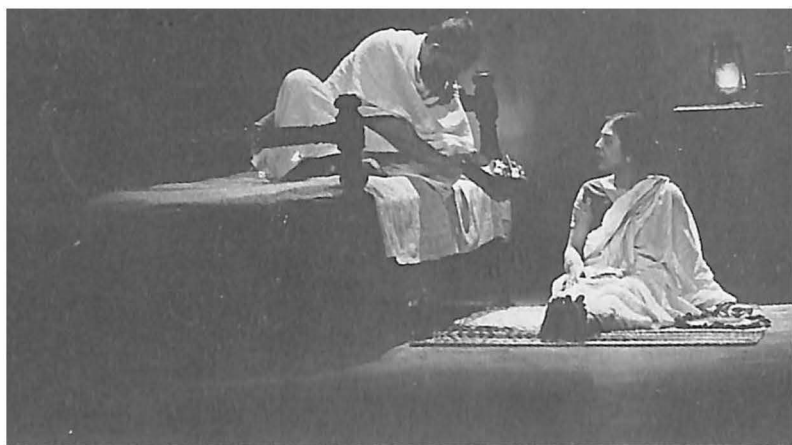
The adored uncle, Sudhir, takes Parag (Shirish Joshi), his shy nephew, to task over his destructive habits, while Ranju looks on.



Above A tense exchange between Sudhir (Tapas Thakur) and his sister Prabha (Swaroop Das), in the silent presence of Dadi (Buddhadeb Samaddar). *Below* A family drifting apart: Bhaskar (Ati Das); Ranju (Sangeeta Chakravarti); Prabha, Vahini (Alaknanda Datta); Sudhir and Chandu (Rajat Sengupta).



Above A bitter Prabha accuses her brothers of callous neglect. Aai (Swapna Mitra) listens from the next room. *Below* A tender scene between mother and daughter, with Aai promising Prabha her support.



Above Bhaskar offers Vahini the brass box containing the family jewellery.
Below He watches, awestruck, as she is transformed into a glowing apparition.

SUDHIR. What's wrong with that, Bhau? We shall have to do these things one day anyway.

BHASKAR. Sudhir, you talk of rights. Do you think your education did not cost anything?

SUDHIR. Tatyaji met those expenses.

BHASKAR. Only in name. You know that very well. He left everything to me. Your education. Your marriage. How much do you think all that cost? And now you demand your share!

SUDHIR. Look here, Bhau. You have taunted me a number of times about this. My education, my marriage. Today you listen to me. You have not spent a penny from your pocket for my education or marriage. Wasn't there anything here that belonged to me, twenty years back? Was it insignificant, the land that belonged to me? You met all my expenses from the produce of that land. And for twenty years now, you have been taking the income from that land for your use. What about that? Why say I have done this, I have done that ! Have you once given me a paisa of that income or a kilo of the produce?

BHASKAR. You should come and take it.

SUDHIR. Are we beggars to come here and take it? The question is, did you have the bigness of heart to give something? Earlier, when I used to come here for holidays, you used to say again and again, 'you save your salary by coming here'. So much so that I decided never to come. If at all, I never stayed longer than four days. For four years I have not come at all. But even that you could not stand. Why do you call me greedy?

VAHINI. Sudhir Bhavji! Don't get excited in front of the children.

SUDHIR. Vahini, I want this to be known. Let even the children know what the truth is. Or else they will say in future that Kaka used to come here for free meals.

BHASKAR. Have you finished? I accept what you say. I did not give you the income from your land, the money or the grain. True. But in all these years did you once feel like asking how the farming was doing? We had to go to Amaravati for mother's operation. We had to stay there for two months. Then Tatyaji's illness. Do you think it did not cost anything?

SUDHIR. Again. The same thing. Why do you think the expenses for Aai and Tatyaji were met by you? Really speaking, all this.

belongs to them. Why blame them? Why make them appear obliged?

BHASKAR. Why don't you come and see for yourself? Manage it. If you have a good harvest one year then it's followed by crop failure for the next three.

SUDHIR. What crop failure can there be in the orchards?

BHASKAR. On top of that, the lands went to the tenants. Had to sue them and go to court. When the case came up, one had to rush to Amaravati leaving all the work here. How much expenditure was that, do you think? From top to bottom they are all brahman haters. Not one case got a favourable verdict. It's beyond me to entertain the people who matter. You have no idea how difficult it is for the brahmans to do farming here in this village.

SUDHIR. How do the others manage then?

BHASKAR. Have you seen how they manage? Do you want to know? There were seven brahman families in this village. Of these three left long ago. Four remain. Of them two are priests. One a school teacher. All in debt. Our show is grand and debts massive. The other castes are well off. They have opened liquor shops and are building bungalows. Some are running trucks. Others are commission agents. If nothing else, there is always politics. Can we manage all that? The times have changed, but here in the house everything remains just the same. The festivals, the family and its obligations, the rituals of offerings to the dead—all of it. You have left all this to me and gone away to Bombay. The Ganapati festival or the Mahalakshmi one alone costs seven or eight hundred rupees, do you know?

SUDHIR. Cut down on all that.

BHASKAR. You come here and show me how to cut down.

SUDHIR. I don't have to come here and show you how to do it. You can do it. I noticed it this morning. Four types of vegetables at lunch!

VAHINI. Aho, you know the fuss people make about food! Someone does not like this. The other prefers that.

SUDHIR. Why do you allow it?

VAHINI. Besides, I too do not feel satisfied unless the *thali* is full. At least in this life, I won't be able to scrimp like a Konkani, say what you like.

SUDHIR. Then show off.

Silence for a long time.

BHASKAR. There's this mansion.

SUDHIR. What nonsense is that!

BHASKAR. No, I am not talking of selling it. If we mortgage it, we can get the money we need.

SUDHIR. No!

BHASKAR. Arrey, then what do we do?

SUDHIR. Why do you think we come here? It's this mansion that keeps calling us. We come running—if this goes, then our home is gone.

BHASKAR. Arrey, when I say mansion, I do not mean the whole of it. The portion at the back, which is dilapidated. We can mortgage that. We have been thinking of repairing that but never got down to it. Meanwhile it has broken down further. Bansilal has his eye on it. As a matter of fact, he wants to buy it.

SUDHIR. How can he ask for it, on his own?

BHASKAR. We have not paid back the credit he has given us for the past three years. What prestige have we, with him? That's why he has the audacity to ask for it.

SUDHIR. Have you already had a talk with him?

BHASKAR. No. That is, nothing is final.

SUDHIR. I can't think of anything, really.

BHASKAR. The problem is, that portion is in mother's name. This portion, where we live, is in the name of all of us children. Tatyaji made this arrangement. The idea was to build small two-room flats at the back and rent them out. That would be her own rightful income. But that never materialized.

SUDHIR. And if we mortgage it, who will do the repairs?

BHASKAR. Not Bansilal. He is waiting hawk-eyed to grab the mansion at the earliest opportunity. And brother, I must tell you, if I have to get it released from mortgage, you will have to share the burden. I won't be able to carry this weight alone.

SUDHIR. Arrey, where will I get the money? Instead, let's not spend all that much on useless rituals.

BHASKAR. And have people laugh at me? Nothing doing.

Aai comes in.

- AAI Bhaskar . . . (*All are startled.*) Sell off that portion at the back.
- CHANDU/PRABHA. Aai . . .
- AAI Arrey, what do I need it for?
- BHASKAR. People will say we ruined our mother.
- AAI People will say anything. They will also talk if you do not feed them: It's his last expense. If everything is not done well I shall regret it all my life. Once it is decided, it's done. Sell that off.
- PRABHA. What does it mean — decided?
- AAI I say so. Where will he get so much money . . .
- PRABHA. My so very capable brothers! Why not wear bangles? Out to sell mother's morsel of food! And these two here—they behave as if they do not belong here.
- VAHINI. Wance, don't talk like that. We never knew anything till this minute.
- AAI Prabha my child, please be quiet. No one has forced me.
- CHANDU (*suddenly*). Bhau, mortgage four acres from my portion of the land.
- BHASKAR. Your four acres?
- CHANDU. Let mother keep her rightful property.
- BHASKAR. Think it over. Tomorrow you may say . . .
- AAI Chandu, son, don't do that. Arrey, how long am I going to live?
- PRABHA. Why don't these elders sell their orchard? Ask them to sell their share . . .
- BHASKAR. Very well, I will sell it. But then what will you eat?
- AAI Arrey, it's not even ten days since he is gone. How does this look? I do not like this bickering.
- CHANDU. Bhau, do not listen to mother. You mortgage my four acres.
- BHASKAR. Chandoba, today you are very generous and offer it. Tomorrow you will go round the whole village saying I forced you to do it. What Aai says is right. What do you say, Sudhir?
- SUDHIR. You do not need the formality of asking my opinion. You have already made up your mind.
- VAHINI. Enough, Bhavji. You have spent twenty years in Bombay but your Deshpande blood still speaks. You are as fiery tempered as ever.
- DADI Venkatesh. Arrey Venkate—sh!

- VAHINI. Look at her. She is beyond all our quarrels.
 SUDHIR. In our house, all have had long lives.
 BHASKAR. What about our health then? You may sneer at our taking four vegetables at a time but then none of us needs a naya paisa worth of medicine. On the other hand, look at you Bombayites. Already suffering from blood pressure and what not. Well, I will go and lie down for a while.
 RANJU. Aai, I have got palpitations.
 VAHINI. What, do you also have blood pressure? How close do you want to sit? What is it? Do you have fever? Why are you behaving like this?

Parag comes out suddenly and sits behind Sudhir so that Sudhir cannot see his face.

SUDHIR (*without turning*). So Raghoba has come. The shy one.

Parag rests his head against Sudhir's back. Sudhir tries to hold his head but Parag won't let it be caught.

- VAHINI. The mouse has come out of its hole.
 SUDHIR. Raghoba, you little fool. Abhay is angry with you because you do not write to him.
 PARAG. I do write. He does not reply. (*Sudhir is able to hold his head, and bring him to the front.*)
 SUDHIR. Look at your hair. Go get it cut tomorrow. . .
 RANJU. Aho, that's the Mithun Chakravarty style he has.
 PARAG. Rubbish.
 RANJU. Of course.
 PARAG. I do not like film stars.
 ANJALL. Just like Abhay. He too does not like them. His heroes are Gavaskar . . . Kapil Dev.
 PARAG. Kaka, does Abhay play cricket even now?
 SUDHIR. He does. But we don't allow him to play a lot. He is in the twelfth class, you know—
 PARAG. Abhay would have been a great player.
 SUDHIR. He wants to be a great engineer. What are you going to be great at?
 BHASKAR (*getting up and going inside*). He is going to be a great alcoholic.
 VAHINI. I say—(*Bhaskar goes.*) He always treats him like this.
 PARAG. Can I go to Bombay, Kaka?

SUDHIR. What will you do in Bombay?

PARAG. I'll study. I'll be a good boy.

SUDHIR. Truly?

PARAG. You will see.

SUDHIR. Raghu, you should be flogged.

PARAG. Do that.

VAHINI. Beat him. From his Kaka, even that will be welcome.

SUDHIR. Why do you drink? (*Parag tries to get up. Making him sit down.*) Do not run away. Tell me.

PARAG. Let it be.

SUDHIR. That won't do. You must tell me. Why?

PARAG. I won't drink any more.

SUDHIR. Let me see. I am here for some time.

PARAG. Please do. Will you take me? If I am good?

SUDHIR. I will take you.

Vahini has tears in her eyes. Wiping them, she picks up the basket and gets up.

VAHINI. Now go to sleep. It's nearly eleven o' clock.

A shrill whistle from outside. Ranju is restless.

ANJALI. Did anyone whistle?

VAHINI. It could be a bird. Go to bed. It's late.

SUDHIR (*to Anjali*). Come to the porch. It's stuffy in here.

They go. Ranju brings her bedding to the veranda.

CHANDU. Why have you brought your bedding here? You go and sleep with Aai in the middle room.

RANJU. Dust falls there from the roof and mice run around all the time.

All go to their respective rooms. Parag and Chandu spread their beddings on the veranda. Ranju drags her bedding close to Chandu's and spreads it there.

CHANDU. Ranju, didn't I ask you to sleep with Aai?

RANJU. It's hot in the middle room.

CHANDU. Now you take your bedding over there. Pull. Not so close to his mattress. Pull it over there . . .

RANJU (*bending over Parag*). Has Gavaskar gone to sleep?

PARAG. Shut up, Dhema Malini. Sleep now.

Chandu goes in, carrying Dadi. Lights go dim for a while. Some time passes. Then lights. Light on the porch. Sudhir and Anjali are sitting on raised ground.

- ANJALI How hot it is! As soon as the rain stops, it gets hot.
 SUDHIR Come closer.
 ANJALI Don't be frivolous.
 SUDHIR What is frivolous about it?
 ANJALI What else? It's open on all sides . . .
 SUDHIR I did not have anything on my mind. It's you who has ideas.
 ANJALI Aho, we are in mourning. Remember that at least.
 SUDHIR So, we have given up eating and drinking because we are in mourning, have we?
 ANJALI Don't fret. (*Giggles.*)
 SUDHIR (*fuming*). Now what's there to laugh at?
 ANJALI Ranju is quite abnormal, you know.
 SUDHIR How does Ranju come into the picture all of a sudden?
 ANJALI You may call her stupid. But she has interest in things in which she should not. She was asking me about birth control today . . .
 SUDHIR A thrashing, that's what she deserves, the idiot.
 ANJALI What happens to you when you come here? You start speaking like the locals . . . Only Prabha Wance speaks correctly over here. Maybe because she reads a lot.
 SUDHIR Oh, you Konkani! How will you know the sweetness of the dialect of Vidarbha?
 ANJALI What have you really decided about Parag?
 SUDHIR We'll take him for a few days.
 ANJALI Parag is sweet. I too like him. But then Abhay is at an impressionable age. Also his studies . . .
 SUDHIR But I have promised him.
 ANJALI You really speak without thinking. What about the consequences? Suppose, tomorrow he lies somewhere dead drunk, where are you going to look for him? It's a risk you shouldn't have taken.
 SUDHIR What do you take him for? An alcoholic? He has been desperately wanting to go to Bombay for the past four years. Where can he stay, if not with us?
 ANJALI You decide. I've told you what I feel. I won't be able to take responsibility for him.

- SUDHIR. If I refuse to take him now, he will be so depressed.
 ANJALI. Yes, he will feel bad for a little while . . .
 SUDHIR. Let's not talk about Parag. We'll see.
 ANJALI. Have you noticed the pillows?
 SUDHIR. They are greasy, I know. Put a towel over them.
 ANJALI. I am not talking about that. I am referring to the cloth. Have you noticed? It's the same cloth we bought to make a skirt for Ranju last time.
- SUDHIR. Goodness. You are the limit. You still remember the cloth you brought last time. That was four years back!
- ANJALI. You do something with love and affection and this is the reward you get.
- SUDHIR. She may not have liked it.
 ANJALI. How Vahini harasses Chandu Bhavji! Have you noticed Chandu Bhavji's foot? It's swollen. And with that, he was busy the whole day bringing and storing firewood.
- SUDHIR. What happened to him?
 ANJALI. He hurt himself. That bit of tin from the tractor. *(Pause.)* At least take him tomorrow to have an anti-tetanus injection. He has put only a bit of turmeric on the wound.
- SUDHIR. Hm. *(Deep in his thoughts.)*
 ANJALI. Instead of Parag, let's take Chandu Bhavji for a few days. He will get some rest and I too will have some help.
- SUDHIR. Hm.
 ANJALI. It's only work, work, work here for him.
 SUDHIR. Hm.
 ANJALI. Now what's wrong with you? Why are you scowling? I say . . .
- SUDHIR. Actually, we should take Aai for a few days.
 ANJALI. She will never come. I asked her in the afternoon. She said she will not leave the mansion for at least a year. *(Pause.)* Besides, I won't be able to tackle all her fuss over defiling by touch. 'Don't touch this.' 'That needs purifying.'
- SUDHIR. What ornaments—yours, that is—have we left here?
 ANJALI. Quite a few. Why?
 SUDHIR. This time we shall take all that is ours.
 ANJALI. That's up to you.
 SUDHIR. Aren't you interested?
 ANJALI. Aho, that gold belongs to your family. What can I say?
 SUDHIR. You do not want that gold! But you were keen to get a

broken bathing vessel. Really, you women! How strange you are.

ANJALI. You are brave. Wanting to carry away the gold. Try asking your brother first. Then plan.

SUDHIR. It's your property.

ANJALI. I don't even know exactly how much there is. Have you Deshpandes ever taken me into confidence? I am going to ask you something only because you have raised the topic. Or else, you will call me names. What things do you, or rather us, own here? What property?

SUDHIR. Four acres of land and a share in the mansion.

ANJALI. Why don't you take a final decision?

SUDHIR. What do you mean?

ANJALI. Do all the accounting, take your share and be rid of it all. We are unable to come here for years. Abhay does not care one hoot for this place, either.

SUDHIR. Do you realize what you are saying?

ANJALI. You are always in confusion and agony. That's why I suggested it. If you like, don't take any money. Give everything away to them and be free—will you?

SUDHIR. I am not going to do anything of the kind. As long as there is something that belongs to me here, I can come with proprietary right. Come here and stay, or else, tomorrow even Parag will consider me a stranger. (*Pause.*) Maybe some day we shall leave those crowded two rooms in Bombay and come and stay here. (*Pause.*) And whatever Bhau be like, he will not keep your gold. He is so proud of you.

ANJALI. Chhi . . .

SUDHIR. Isn't he?

ANJALI (*serious*). Why does he admire my looks all the time? I do not like it.

SUDHIR (*disturbed*). You are a fool.

ANJALI. As soon as the rituals are over, we shall return.

Both leave. Darkness in the porch. Light in the veranda. Ranju is crying.

CHANDU. What's the matter with you?

RANJU. Nothing.

CHANDU. Then why are you crying? (*Ranju cries loudly.*) Tell me. Are you in pain? (*Ranju shakes her head.*) Then? Shall I call

Vahini?

- RANJU. I also feel like dying like Tatyaji.
 CHANDU. You are a silly girl. Sleep now.
 RANJU. I am so afraid, Chandu Kaka, so afraid.
 CHANDU. About what? About death?
 RANJU. I have no one in the world. No one cares how I feel.
 CHANDU. What's the matter, why all this filmi talk?
 RANJU. Baba says I should stop my English tuition. (*Sobs.*) If I fail again? Then everyone will shout at me and scold me.
 CHANDU. Is your English going to improve by crying?
 RANJU. My life is like an untouched page. Do you think you will remember me at all if I die?
 CHANDU. How can I say that now? Sleep now.
 RANJU. Then all of you will know how good I was. I feel that I must go away somewhere.
 CHANDU. Where will you go? To act in films in Bombay? Elope with that teacher?
 RANJU (*shocked*). Oh no. Never.
 CHANDU. Then sleep now, you pest.

The veranda is dark. Light in the middle room. Aai and Prabha are lying there. From the movement of Prabha's body, one can make out that she is crying. Aai sits up.

- AAL Prabha . . . (*Prabha is quiet.*) Prabha, what is wrong, dear?
 PRABHA. Nothing.
 AAL Look here.
 PRABHA. Sleep, Aai.
 AAL Look at me.
 PRABHA. Aai, what is to become of us?
 AAL He up there will look after us, my dear.
 PRABHA. Willingly you gave away your land for mortgage?
 AAL Prabha . . .
 PRABHA. In your own house, you will live like an unwelcome outsider.
 AAL What could I have done? You tell me.
 PRABHA. You are too innocent.
 AAL Say that if you like. But tell me one thing. If I hurt my own children, what is to happen to me? Do you think I do not know what is happening around me? What is being planned? But it was different as long as he was alive. (*Pause.*) Prabha,

I must tell you one thing. Do not be angry. My term is over. Now it's the reign of your sisters-in-law. Keep that in mind. If tomorrow you ask me to mediate between you I am not going to. After all it's they who are going to be in charge. I will have to spend my days with them. Besides, how you snap at them! That's not good, you know.

PRABHA. They are all selfish.

AAI. Who is not, Prabha? Whether you like it or not, once you have set up a home and are part of this world's rigmarole, a person becomes naturally selfish.

PRABHA. Naturally you will think first of your sons and their wives.

AAI. Call it selfishness or what you like, but I cannot afford to hurt them. You better accept that.

PRABHA(*wounded*). Aai, I want to study. Let me at least do my B.A.

AAI. It's not in my hands, Prabha.

PRABHA. Somehow help me to live in the city for four years.

AAI. My dear, even when he was alive, I did not have the right to lift my finger and give something to anyone. And now? Now I am completely dependent on others.

PRABHA. How long will you tolerate it? When Tatyaji was alive, not a day passed when he did not snap at you. How long will you keep all that buried in your mind?

AAI. Prabha, sorrow is not something one puts on display. It belongs to oneself. When it is unbearable—there are many dark rooms in this mansion where one can go and shed tears. Quietly. All Deshpande women have done that.

PRABHA. I won't. I shall fight for my happiness. I shall fight for your happiness, too.

AAI. Prabha, when I could not get happiness, I myself waved goodbye to it. If you do not get something you want, it's best to reject it, my dear.

PRABHA. Aai, let me study. Let me stand on my own feet. Then we can live together. We do not have to pass our days expecting charity from others. Let me go to Amaravati.

AAI. What will Bhaskar say?

PRABHA. Let him say what he likes. Aai, don't you understand? They will take away everything that belongs to you, bit by bit. And when there is nothing left, they will throw you out like a bit of refuse on a heap of garbage. They tolerate you today, because you are able to work, help them out. Tomorrow,

when you are old and tired—what will you do, Aai? What? Those two cannot see beyond their wives and children.

AAI Love always runs ahead, my dear. I have no expectations from anyone. I have only one wish. Let the Lord take me away soon. *(Pause.)* My heart breaks for Chandu. He toils like a beast of burden. Poor boy. He has no education nor a family. He has no one to call his own. Because you did not marry, he too has remained single. He may face bad times in future, he may fall ill, he may be in pain—I worry a lot about him.

PRABHA And who have I got?

AAI Prabha, it's true, really. We have spoiled your life. You were the cleverest of all the children. But then what can one do in the face of a man's nature? He never allowed any opinion but his own to prevail. Education is of no use to a girl, that was his refrain. How many times I pleaded with him. God is my witness. I said, times have changed. How many girls who were with you have studied further, have gone ahead. They are holding jobs. They are earning. I really admire them. But then, we villagers never had that vision at that time.

PRABHA For how many years Tatyaji did not speak a word to me. It's true I refused the offers of marriage. But mother, tell me honestly, what kind of men proposed marriage? All of them were uneducated, full of vices and phoney rich like us.

AAI It's not true, Prabha, that he stopped talking to you because he was angry with you.

PRABHA He used to leave the room the moment I came in.

AAI Now how can I explain? He was ashamed. He was ashamed in front of you. At the end he even acknowledged it. He used to say, I have harmed this child. I shall not be forgiven. *(Prabha cries.)* He too had become quite emotional. But what was the use? *(Pause.)* Will a thousand or two be enough?

PRABHA For what?

AAI Your education?

PRABHA Aai, what is a thousand or two these days?

AAI Then? I have nothing. You know that whatever little I had that too got spent this morning.

PRABHA You needn't have given the money. They would have managed by themselves.

AAI And if they had discovered the money in my trunk, what do

you think would have been the reaction? You know how Bhaskar is in the habit of opening trunks and rummaging. So I gave it away.

PRABHA. Aai, there is my gold.

AAI. Bhaskar has it, dear.

PRABHA. My share is at least thirty tolas. Give me that. Please.

AAI. Prabha . . .

PRABHA. Let me get out of here, Aai. Please. This mansion will devour me. I feel suffocated in the darkness of this place. Let me go to Amaravati, Aai, please.

AAI. Everything is with Bhaskar. When your father died, the first thing Bhaskar did was to remove the keys from his sacred thread.

PRABHA. Where is your gold?

AAI. That too is with him.

PRABHA. You can as well take it as lost for good.

AAI. How you talk! Isn't he your brother?

PRABHA. I know my brother very well. He will shout that it's all stolen and really pocket it all. You will see. That won't do. Tomorrow, you ask him for the gold and give it to me.

AAI. When the Shradh is over, the brothers are bound to discuss their affairs. You ask for yours then.

PRABHA. But you better let him know tomorrow.

AAI. Not tomorrow. Let the thirteen days pass.

PRABHA. You will be afraid all your life.

AAI. This time I am not going to be afraid. You will see. I am telling you. If everything is going to work out well for you I shall fight with him. Yes, Prabha. Yes. *(Pause.)* What will you do with all that gold? Sell it?

PRABHA. Yes.

AAI. I am ignorant, so I ask. Will you really sell it?

PRABHA. I will put the money in the bank, Aai. That gold should fetch fifty to sixty thousand rupees. I will be able to manage my studies from the interest on that amount. I might even look for a small job. I might do tuitions . . . I will do anything, anything. You will see. You will come and stay with me.

AAI. How old that gold is! It represents the honour of our family.

PRABHA. Once I have got my B.A. degree and have started working, you'll leave this village, this mansion, everything, and come

and stay permanently with me. I am telling you in all honesty, I have no desire or hankering now for any gold, for a husband, for a family of my own. Nothing. We shall be free. There is no end to your drudgery in this house. You are past seventy. How long will you sit by the fire trying to light the firewood, with your eyes burning from the smoke?

AAI I will have to do that as long as my hands are capable.

PRABHA. Once I have a job, mother, I shall buy you so much gold, you won't miss what is sold. Then you can give your daughters-in-law as much as you like. (*Laughs.*) You may even make a gold grinding pestle for each of them to wear round her neck.

AAI After how many days you have laughed, my dear. We shall sell the gold. I promise, we shall sell it. How old these ornaments are! They belonged to my grandmother-in-law, great-grandmother-in-law. They have come down to me from them. The Deshpandes sold their lands but, you must remember, never touched the women's property. The gold belonged to the women. Lakshmi was never hawked in the bazaar. Prabha, my dear, the gold is not just money. One generation passes it on to the next. They in turn give it to their children. That is the link we have with our ancestors. When one wore those ornaments one felt—how many hands have touched them! How many necks were adorned by them! I would feel the presence of all the Deshpande women standing around, admiring me when I put on those ornaments. When I first came to this house, I saw your Dadibai looking radiant, her jewellery glittering. She explained each piece, who it belonged to, when it was made . . . (*Sighs.*) But I shall give you what belongs to you. Whatever happens, I shall.

Light in the room. Bhaskar is snoring. Vahini wakes up with a start. Sits up.

VAHINI. I say—

BHASKAR (*startled*). What's happened?

VAHINI. Go out and look. Chandu Bhavji is groaning quite a lot.

BHASKAR. Why should he groan? Isn't my father dead too?

VAHINI. Aho. He is hurt. His foot must be hurting. Perhaps he has fever. It wasn't right his carrying all that firewood. Take him

to the doctor first thing in the morning. It will be terrible if it turns septic.

BHASKAR. Can't he go himself? Is he a small boy?

VAHINI. Aho. The doctor does not see anyone without money. You may be a Deshpande or anybody for that matter.

BHASKAR. We'll see.

VAHINI. We are the oldest. We must behave and do everything keeping that in mind. What will people say? I fret so much all the time. Lest someone call you a wicked person.

BHASKAR. Now, will you let me sleep?

VAHINI (*softly, with fear*). And as soon as the rituals are over, better give the others whatever belongs to them.

BHASKAR. Give away what?

VAHINI. You heard the arguments today. What a farce in front of the children. Besides, when we are not alive, they are the only people the children can turn to in times of need. Give it away.

BHASKAR. But what is there to give away? It's all very well to say 'give it away'.

VAHINI. The share. The share of the property. To each of them. Time we get rid of it.

BHASKAR. When you give away their shares of the twelve acre property, what do you think you are going to live on?

VAHINI. I am not talking about the land. Look at the others. They are really nice people. Our own blood. Anjali too is nice. Last time she brought a piece of cloth for Ranju, to make a skirt. Such a loving gesture. How could I tell her that in this village Ranju cannot walk about showing her legs in a skirt? But she did bring it. That's what matters. I made pillow covers quietly. What else could I do?

BHASKAR. She is quite cunning.

VAHINI. Oh no. Comes from Konkan after all, but has never said, give me whatever belongs to me. The only thing is she does not want to have anything to do with people. She puts them off. And Sudhir Bhavji too. Has never demanded anything. Did not take the ornaments. Said, who parades ornaments on Bombay streets? But Tatyaji was alive then. That was different. It's different now.

BHASKAR. Don't teach me.

VAHINI. If something happens tomorrow? It's a big risk. That safe

was made in 1857. A thief can open it with one jerk.
(*Bhaskar laughs.*) Why do you laugh?

BHASKAR (*takes out a brass box with filigree work from under his pillow*). Take it.

VAHINI (*shocked*). I say. . .

BHASKAR. Are you a fool—? Stupid.

VAHINI. Please put it back where it belongs. . .

BHASKAR. Look here. This contains everything that belongs to us, Aai, Prabha, Sudhir, Chandu, me—I am not going to show all this to Sudhir.

VAHINI. Doesn't he know how much there is and what belongs to each of you?

BHASKAR. If I say Tatyaji sold it, what can he do? On the thirteenth day, I shall open the safe and say, 'Have a look'. Only day before yesterday I brought it out and kept it in the prayer room.

VAHINI. If someone saw . . .

BHASKAR. Ranju went on asking, what's in there, what's in there? I gave her such a scolding. Every night I bring it out and keep it under my pillow.

VAHINI. It's not right, you know. It's not right to make people suffer. It's not right.

BHASKAR. Everything is right. Ultimately it's this that's going to be of any use. Not your beloved brother-in-law, understand? (*Opening the box.*) See. Wear it. Let me see how you look.

VAHINI. Aho, we are in mourning. . .

BHASKAR. My God. You seem to be mourning a lot for your father-in-law. Wear it. Wear it. Haven't seen you with ornaments on for a long time. (*Bhaskar takes out fistfuls of the ornaments and holds them before Vahini. Her eyes sparkle.*) This is a Chandrahar, all of thirty tolas. Wear it. (*Vahini wears the ornaments one by one. This scene is in a very slow tempo, full of enchantment and emotionally overpowering.*) And this is a Mohanmal with five strings, fifteen tolas. This is a Pohehar, fifteen tolas. Chapalahar, fifteen tolas. Putalya, twenty tolas. Thhushi, five tolas. Saree five tolas. Chinchpeti ten tolas. Waki ten tolas. Tode twenty-five tolas, Jodgot, twenty tolas, Gujarati tode, twenty tolas. Patlya—ten tolas. Natha! look at the diamond and rubies! Can't take your eyes off them! Vajratik, Bindi, Sakhlya, Gopha! Three

rings—this one made of diamond, this of emerald and this of nine jewels . . .

Vahini is decked with ornaments from head to foot. Now her personality seems completely changed. Glowing, splendid, grave, aloof, representing Woman whose inherent beauty has come down through the ages.

BHASKAR. You look the owner of lakhs indeed!

Vahini gets up slowly. Goes to the mirror and looks at herself intently.

VAHINI (*in a voice charged with emotion*). Shall I tell you the truth? I feel as if this is not just gold. It is something much more than that. I can feel all the Deshpande women standing around me, admiring me. Dadi's mother-in-law, Dadi, Aai, I feel their loving, tender touch. How many women have worn these? How many have cherished these? How many hands have touched these? How many necks? Tomorrow my Parag's wife will wear these. She too will feel my touch in the same way. When I came here after marriage the first time, I remember how Aai was looking. Resplendent! Sparkling! She explained each piece to me. Who it belonged to. When it was made . . . In this long line, I am one fortunate link—

Long silence.

BHASKAR. You seem to be in a trance.

Vahini heaves a deep sigh. Quietly she takes off each piece and puts it in the box neatly. Closes the box and gives it to Bhaskar.

VAHINI. Keep it near the deity. (*Bhaskar is speechless.*) And first thing tomorrow, give each one what belongs to them.

Bhaskar goes to put the box back. Dust falls on Vahini from the ceiling as the lights dim. Light again, only on the apron. Mystical. Dadi sitting huddled.

DADI. Venkatesh . . . Arrey Venkatesh. Why have you brought me here, my dear? Why do you behave like a child? Are you making fun of me, an old woman? Oh, I am bored. Time never moves. How long shall I live? Why do you laugh? I feel scared, my dear. I feel as if something is wrong here.

The Deshpande household is not running well, I can tell you. The mice trouble me all night. They run all over the house. They have dug up the whole mansion. No one plasters the place. No one fills the holes, my dear. How much can I do? What can I do? I have been driven beyond my depth. The daughters-in-law have come. The granddaughters-in-law have come. Great-grandsons have arrived! Now give me leave. I am through with everything. Nothing is left. Why do you laugh like this? Why, my dear?

Aai comes in. She is frightened. Looks at Dadi. Comes forward and touches her. Lights change.

AAI Dadibai . . .

DADI Who? Soonbai, is it?

AAI Now, how could she reach here? Chandu, O Chandu . . .

DADI Wasn't Venkatesh here just now? Where did he disappear all of a sudden? He was standing there, over there near the engine. Venkatesh . . .

Chandu comes in, limping. His leg is swollen.

AAI Arrey, how did she come here, near the tractor? Lift her, will you? (*Chandu lifts her.*)

DADI Aiyee, who is lifting me? This is not Venkatesh. He was here. I saw him. Now where did he go?

In a flash of intuitive realization, Dadi cries out suddenly. Chandu carries Dadi in.

AAI Careful. She was talking as if in delirium. And what she was saying!

Stunned, Aai stands there. Chandu comes back.

CHANDU. Aai . . . (*Pause.*) Aai . . .

AAI Did Dadibai see any one, do you think?

CHANDU. Nonsense. You come inside the house.

AAI How could she come near the tractor at this time of the night? (*Pause.*) No one is at peace. (*Folding her hands.*) Forgive us if we have made mistakes, if we have failed. They are your children after all. Do not trouble anyone. Are any of your desires not fulfilled? We shall try and do all you wish. Do not look back, please. Do not let your mind linger

here . . . please.

Scene closes. Darkness.

Scene 2

Lights. Anjali enters. Goes to the middle room. Vahini is lying there. She feels her forehead. Requests Parag who is sitting there to eat. Peeps out on the veranda.

ANJALI. Aai. . .

AAL Yes dear . . .

ANJALI. Ask bai to eat some food.

AAL Nothing makes sense till the girl comes back.

Anjali returns to the middle room. Sits near Vahini.

VAHINI. Anjali —

ANJALI. Ranju will be found. You will see.

VAHINI. What sins did we commit? What sins?

Light on the veranda.

CHANDU. Aai, why are you behaving like this?

AAL Chandu, my son, I am scared stiff.

CHANDU. Come into the house. Do you know the time? It's past twelve.

AAL Stay here. We cannot talk inside. *(Pause.)* Have they found Ranju? No one tells me anything inside the house. Four days since Sudhir left. Where has this girl gone?

CHANDU. Sudhir has gone to Bombay to look for her.

AAL I hear that not only has she gone but she has taken away everything. Is that true?

CHANDU. Bhau says so.

AAL Let the gold go. It's a nuisance anyway. As long as the girl is found. God help us. Let not the Deshpande honour be further torn to shreds.

CHANDU. Aai, everything is lost.

AAL Good. The source of all trouble is gone. Root of all quarrels. It's good that it is all lost.

CHANDU. Now what? Aai?

- AAI Arrey, Chandu. Did we earn it? Wasn't all the Deshpande splendour based on the sweat of someone or the other? It's good that it is lost. It's gone back to where it came from.
- CHANDU. Prabha has not opened her door or come out of her room. It's four days now.
- AAI She too is ruined along with the others. What hopes she had. *(Pause.)* Chandu, all the others will manage. But what will become of you?
- CHANDU. Come, come inside the house.
- AAI How much more are you going to suffer? You toil in the house. You toil in the fields. You have held the whole household in the palm of your hand. You run it. What is going to happen to you, my dear? Does it hurt—your foot?
- CHANDU. Yes, Aai.
- AAI Go to the doctor. Your brother will never tell you on his own.
- CHANDU. The doctor wants his fees first.
- AAI How swollen it is!
- CHANDU. Don't touch my foot.
- AAI Why not?
- CHANDU. I don't like it. I should be pressing your legs.
- AAI I hope you remain like this all your life, son. Whatever is lost is gone for ever. Good riddance. But with a heart like yours you will not be in want . . .
- CHANDU. Aai, I wanted to do something very much. I wanted to open a small shop somewhere. You and me could have stayed together.
- AAI Let all these rituals be over. I shall talk to Bhaskar.
- CHANDU. No.
- AAI Why not?
- CHANDU. Bhau said, no. I asked him once. He said it does not become the honour of the Deshpandes. He is right, of course.
- AAI Everything is right. And everyone is right. But my dear, one cannot live in this world without becoming a little selfish.

Sudhir and Ranju enter from outside.

- AAI You have come, Ranju, my child—

Everyone is awake except Prabha. They come out on the veranda. Deep silence. Then Vahini squats on the ground and wails loudly as if a dam has burst.

SUDHIR (*to Ranju*). Go in.

She goes in.

BHASKAR. Where did you find her?

SUDHIR. In Bombay.

BHASKAR. And him?

SUDHIR. Could not find the teacher. As soon as I reached Bombay, I inquired at all the police stations. At Kurla Police Station she had just been brought in by a hotelier. Lucky I reached in time. What a terrible neighbourhood, Bhau!

BHASKAR. And he?

SUDHIR. Ran away. The night they reached Bombay and the next day they stayed at some lodge. They were asking the owner about film studios, where they were located and information of that kind. Then in the middle of the night he left her alone and ran away with the ornaments. She was sitting in the room, frightened and scared. I have filed a complaint. Let's see if they find him. And even if they do find him, it's doubtful if we shall recover what is gone.

Long silence. Then Bhaskar goes in. Locks the door from inside. Vahini looks at the closed door with fear. Bhaskar takes a whip down and hits Ranju. Ranju screams. Then, like a man possessed he goes on hitting her. She continues to scream. Vahini struggles to get up. Goes to the door, but collapses there. Puts the end of her sari in her mouth to stop from screaming. Anjali goes up to her and consoles her. Parag clings to Sudhir, holding him tight. A little later, Bhaskar throws down the whip. Sits on the cot. Sobs without any sound. Silence. Then Bhaskar comes out on to the veranda. Ranju, still crying, stands before the mirror to see how she looks crying. Vahini goes up to her and holds her. Now light only in the veranda.

BHASKAR. Sudhir, brother, how shall I ever repay your kindness?

SUDHIR. Forget it, Bhau. Whatever happened is best forgotten.

BHASKAR. Today you are the big brother, not me.

SUDHIR. We have found Ranju, haven't we? Everything else is unimportant.

BHASKAR. If you had been late by another two days, I could not have shown my face in the village. It's good you came at night. Did anyone see you?

SUDHIR. No. Took a taxi from Amaravati. Didn't come by bus

- purposely. Could not have avoided meeting acquaintances.
- BHASKAR. You did right. We have not stepped out of the mansion for the past four days.
- SUDHIR. Do you really believe that the villagers have not come to know about it?
- BHASKAR. They must know. But it's better if we do not have to speak up.
- SUDHIR. The police station here . . .
- BHASKAR. It's four miles away from here. In the next village. And I have not reported anything. Shall I go and report our disgrace?
- SUDHIR. He has cleaned us out completely. Bhau, we must report this at our local police station.
- BHASKAR. Do not ask me to do that, please. I beg of you, Sudhir. People in the village will spit at us. Let the gold and money be lost. It can be recovered, but not our honour, once it is lost. (*Sudhir, completely shattered and hopeless, heaves a sigh.*) It's good you have come on time. Tomorrow is the ninth day. The brahmans will start arriving. They would have definitely inquired after you if you had not come.
- SUDHIR. Has Bansilal given the money?
- BHASKAR. Yes. Such an expensive piece of land! Had to be sold dirt cheap. Such is the wish of God. Ultimately one gets only what one is destined to get.
- SUDHIR. We too must have erred somewhere. Eventually we reap as we sow.

Bhaskar cannot make out if this is a taunt or not. For a moment, he looks at Sudhir. Gets up.

- BHASKAR. Go and sleep. You must be tired.

He goes in.

- SUDHIR (*to Anjali*). Get me some water, please.

AAL. You couldn't have eaten. There is some food.

- SUDHIR. No mother, we had something on the way.

Anjali goes in.

- PARAG. Kaka, did you meet Abhay?

SUDHIR. Yes. I dropped in for a short time at home. I asked him to come here. He refused. He feels bored in the village.

- PARAG. When I go to Bombay, I shall meet him, won't I?
- SUDHIR. Parag . . . (*He takes time drinking water.*) Parag, I do not think you should come to Bombay this time.
- PARAG. Why not?
- SUDHIR. Arrey, don't you think someone should be near your parents now?
- PARAG. But Ranju is back now.
- SUDHIR. That's true. But . . .
- PARAG. Besides, I have been a really good boy these last few days. Ask Kaku. Not once did I take . . . Kaku?
- ANJALI (*her hand on his back*). We shall take you, Parag. Don't worry. Your Kaka is just teasing you.
- PARAG. Is that so, Kaka?
- SUDHIR. Now go and sleep. We shall see about it later.
- PARAG. No. You must promise. Aaji, see—
- AAL. Kaku has said she will take you. Isn't that enough?
- PARAG. No. Kaka, you tell me.
- SUDHIR. OK. We will take you. Now go and sleep. (*Parag does not believe this. He lies down.*) Aai, go and sleep.
- AAL. What a great load is off my chest, my dear.

Sudhir and Anjali go in. Darkness on the veranda. Light in the room.

- ANJALI. Did you meet Abhay?
- SUDHIR. Yes. I met him. (*Pause.*) I feel so relieved.
- ANJALI. No one could touch food or water over here. Is Abhay studying?
- SUDHIR. Yes, very hard.
- ANJALI. We shall take Parag with us.
- SUDHIR. But . . .
- ANJALI. It's true, he did not stir out of the house the past four days. He was with me all the time. Kaku this, Kaku that. When you said you wouldn't take him, did you see his face? He turned white.
- SUDHIR. But earlier you were against his going. Weren't you?
- ANJALI. True. But think of the atmosphere over here. He is frightened, the pest.
- SUDHIR (*surprised*). What did you say? Pest?
- ANJALI. Oh. It just slipped out of my mouth. I go on hearing it all the time, here.

- SUDHIR. Indeed, my lady from Warhad. (*Pause.*) We cannot take Parag. (*Pause.*) Abhay made that very clear.
- ANJALI. I knew it. He does not have any feelings for Parag. He is always making fun of him. He hasn't dared to do it in front of you. I thought he was young and hence . . .
- SUDHIR. Then why did you raise those slogans of brotherly love?
- ANJALI. Aho. Our people here are so fond of him. What shall I tell them? Tell them Abhay makes fun of you?
- SUDHIR. This time I just mentioned that Parag was coming. He spoke so vehemently against him, I was speechless. He is ashamed of Parag. His clothes, his language—he said he will introduce Parag to his friends as a servant brought from the village.
- ANJALI. You should have slapped him.
- SUDHIR. He is no longer a child. If he had restrained my hand? Where would my prestige be? If we take him in all enthusiasm and Abhay over there ill-treats him—what then? It's better if we don't take him. Parag will feel bad. We'll take him some other time. Pass that pillow over here.
- ANJALI. Tomorrow you must do something. You must take Chandu Bhavji to a doctor. (*Sudhir looks up.*) I think his wound has turned septic. You see the kind of atmosphere in the house. No one has the time to pay any attention to him. Maybe it has not even occurred to anyone. When I tried to give some money to him, Vahini burst out crying. 'Aren't we there to look after him?' she said.
- SUDHIR. Why do you get so involved, anyway?
- ANJALI. How can you say that? When Ranju disappeared, I was worried sick about Abhay. All by himself for such a long time. God knows if he eats well or not. For all you know he sits and drinks beer with his friends. I wasn't myself. It was a bit of a bother certainly—this Ranju affair—but . . .
- SUDHIR. What do you mean, bother? I am down by a thousand rupees. I had to give it to the police. Can I ask Bhau to return it? Over and above that, there's the loss of the gold.
- ANJALI. Don't even think about it now. I am telling you, when Bansilal came and gave the money, Bhau wept.
- SUDHIR. Do you know how much he gave?
- ANJALI. I think fifteen thousand. The deed will be signed after the rituals are over, I hear. (*Pause.*) He is going to start a saw-

mill there. He has already sent for a bulldozer from Amaravati. Bhau pleaded with him to postpone bringing the bulldozer till our Shradh ceremony was over. Do you think he agreed? Never. Said this was an auspicious time for him to start his mill.

SUDHIR. Well. Enough is enough. How much can we do? The moment the rites are over, we shall leave.

Darkness. Soft light on the veranda. Chandu is lying in a corner and Dadi by the wall. The chanting of the ninth day mantra can be heard. The word 'spirit' is heard above the rest. As the mantras are halfway through, the noise of the bulldozer is heard. Then the mingled sounds of the bulldozer and the mantras.

VOICE (off). Having cleansed the mouth, having time and place in mind, having resolved to perform the ninth day's Shradh for the release of Venkatesh, departed spirit of the atri *gotra*, from a ghostly existence, having turned towards the south according to ancient practice, having offered a blade of *kusha* grass, and water for the washing of the feet, and a seat, having placed a *kusha* and a *til* to the left of the *kusha*, and another *kusha* in front of oneself to the right, having placed a vessel before one, and placed a sacred blade of *kusha* in it, having sprinkled water on it in silence, and cast a *til* in it in silence, having made an offering in silence, for his foothold, one should spread a covering of *kusha* on Venkatesh, departed spirit of the atri *gotra* on this day, for the ninth day's Shradh.

After the chanting is over, the noise of the bulldozer continues. As the dialogue begins it drops, but is still audible. The light is on where Sudhir and Anjali are packing.

SUDHIR. Did you pack my shaving kit?

ANJALI. Yes.

SUDHIR. Towel?

ANJALI. Yes. (Pause.) I have left one of your shirts for Chandu Bhavji.

SUDHIR. He will have to be taken to Amaravati.

ANJALI. Why don't you extend your leave?

SUDHIR. How is it possible, Anju? I have told Bhau. If there is any delay he will lose his leg.

Vahini comes in.

- VAHINI. Keep this, dear.
 SUDHIR. What is it, Vahini?
 VAHINI. Some sweets. Take them for Abhay. It's from the offerings made at Tatyaji's rites.
 SUDHIR. When are you coming to Bombay?
 VAHINI. That will be the day. You invite us and we shall come. Bhavji, call Wance.
 SUDHIR. I called her a number of times. She is not coming out.

Bhaskar peeps in.

- BHASKAR. It's time. Get ready. The bus will be here any minute.

Sudhir gets up. Goes in. Light on the veranda. Aai, Dadi, Chandu and Ranju are in the veranda. Parag is lying on a cot on his stomach. Sudhir goes right inside. After a while his voice is heard, 'Prabha. . . Prabha . . . open the door, Prabha!' After a few seconds he comes out.

- SUDHIR. Aai . . .

Bhaskar comes out with the suitcases. Vahini and Anjali follow.

- BHASKAR. Now come along . . .
 VAHINI. He is always in a hurry.
 BHASKAR. I'll go ahead and detain the bus.
 SUDHIR(*touches Dadi and bends down to her. Anjali also touches her feet*). Dadi . . .

All of a sudden Dadi starts weeping soundlessly.

- VAHINI. This is a new thing these days. She has stopped talking, and now this.
 SUDHIR. Aai . . .

Both bend down and touch her feet. Also Vahini's. Vahini lifts the end of her sari to her eyes.

- SUDHIR. Vahini, Chandu must be taken to Amaravati tomorrow. Do not forget.
 VAHINI. Don't worry.
 SUDHIR (*to Ranju*). Now be a good girl. Where is Parag?
 RANJU. He is sleeping.
 SUDHIR. Where?

VAHINI. Let him be, Bhavji.

Complete silence. Then Sudhir goes inside and sits near Parag on the cot. For a moment he looks blank. Then he places his hand on Parag's hair. Comes back.

SUDHIR(*to Anjali*). Come. I'll come again. Soon. We will all come.

VAHINI. Please do. This is your home.

SUDHIR. Let's go.

ANJALI. Goodbye.

Sudhir and Anjali go ahead. Then Sudhir stops.

VAHINI. Bhavji, go now. Don't look back. You will feel worse if you do. Write sometimes. And do come.

Sudhir and Anjali come to the end of the apron. Sudhir is unable to take the next step. He gulps and turns to look back.

SUDHIR. Goodbye.

As soon as he has started walking:

CHANDU(*in a thin and broken voice*). Sudhir . . .

'For a moment a shaken Sudhir is rooted to the spot. Then he and Anjali slowly go out. Light dims, then disappears. There is only one spot of light on Dadi who sits leaning on the wall behind her with Aai next to her. Slowly Aai too starts looking like Dadi. The sound of the bulldozer increases. Darkness.

THE END