'Oh child, my child Sadhan, don't let the *dom* tear up my insides.'

'Nobody tears up innards, Ma.'

'They do, son. What do you know? You're just a little boy. The *dom* tears up entrails, rips out the heart. Doctors keep hearts in bottles, son.'

'But why, Ma?'

'What would you know, son? You're just a little boy. In these evil days, this human body is not for burning, don't you know?'

'What are you saying, Ma!'

'I say what's true, son. But when relatives, friends or masters die, they perform rites, place them on funeral pyres, am I wrong?'

'True.'

'All of them doctors-physicians-*doms*-midwives, they stare like vultures?'

'Ma!'

'They stare and stare. Once they get an unclaimed body, they all have a share in it. The *dom* gives the innards and heart to the doctor. The midwife takes the clothes. The *dom* lets the flesh rot, sells the bones to makes money.'

'Silly, would I ev[illegible] happen?'

'Don't let it happ[illegible] your *shanjh-shokaal*[illegible] don't let me get killed in the hospital.'

MAHASWETA DEVI

In the name of the mother

TRANSLATED BY RADHA CHAKRAVARTY

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Fiction/Women's Studies

In the Name of the Mother

FOUR STORIES

Translated and Introduced by
Radha Chakravarty

> His mother's gone, there's no one to cook hot rice when it's evening . . . No one to say, 'Son, sit near my lap and eat.'

'Ma, from Dusk to Dawn' is the story of a woman from a nomadic tribe, catapulted by her circumstances into the role of a spiritual mother whose so-called mystical powers depend upon her denial of maternal affection towards her own son during daylight hours. 'Sindhubala' describes the anguish of a childless woman forced to play the role of a semi-divine healer called upon to save other people's offspring. 'Jamunabati's Mother' offers a stringent critique of a consumerist society indifferent to those on the margins and 'Giribala' presents the plight of a village woman whose daughters are trafficked by their own father, to pay for the house he dreams of building.

The stories in this volume are linked by a common thread: the idea of the mother. They represent a range of responses to the concept of the maternal, exposing how the traditional deification of motherhood in India often conceals a collective exploitation and attempt to restrict women to their socially prescribed roles while denying them the right to articulate their individual needs and desires. At the same time, they also show the strategies evolved by women to survive and circumvent the repression inflicted on them by social norms. The maternal thus emerges as an ambivalent concept, with both restrictive and emancipatory potential.

Rs 275

mahasweta devi

IN THE NAME OF THE MOTHER

The Selected Works of Mahasweta Devi

Mother of 1084
Translated by Samik Bandyopadhyay

Breast Stories: Draupadi, Breast-Giver, Behind The Bodice
Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Five Plays: Mother of 1084, Aajir, Urvashi and Johnny, Bayen, Water
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mahasweta devi

IN THE NAME OF THE MOTHER

FOUR STORIES

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Radha Chakravarty

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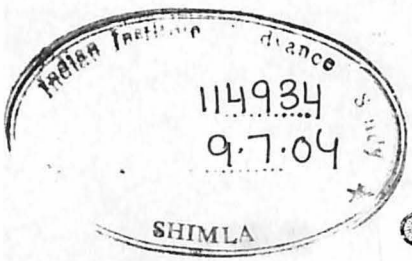
'Sindhubala' was first published in 1971
'Jamunabati'r Ma' was first published in 1972
'Giribala' was first published in 1982



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Introduction: In the Name of the Mother

MAHASWETA DEVI'S AVOWED COMMITMENT to the cause of tribal communities in India has deflected attention from other aspects of her work, such as her interest in the idea of motherhood. From Jashoda in 'Breast Giver' to the unnamed mother in 'Jamunabati's Mother,' her fiction offers an array of maternal figures, as well as diverse figurative constructions of the maternal idea. Taken together, these works demonstrate how the traditional deification of motherhood can often conceal a collective attempt to circumscribe women within socially prescribed roles while denying them the right to articulate their individual needs and desires.

Her interest in the idea of motherhood links Mahasweta to a long tradition of writing about maternity in India, particularly in Bengal. Jashodhara Bagchi traces the 'ideology of motherhood'

from its sources in ancient Vedic cults of the mother goddess, as well as from local religious practices and folktales.[1] Bagchi describes how the image of the mother, associated with concepts of the motherland, mother nature and mother-tongue, came to represent the nationalist aspiration in colonial Bengal, simultaneously 'taking away real power from women and creating a myth about her strength and power' (Bagchi). The narrative of nationalism sought to create an abstract, homogenized figure of woman as mother, to serve a particular political agenda, without any real concern for the needs of actual women in different sectors of society. Motherhood was taken as a figure for the spiritual essence of national selfhood, as distinct from the material sphere of progress, thereby providing the nationalist solution to the dilemma of accepting modernization without surrendering the uniqueness of an 'authentic' national identity.[2] In the definition of ideal womanhood that has evolved in the decades following Independence, the elision of femininity and maternity has become a determining feature. Motherhood is deified, but paradoxically, the myth of mother's quasi-divine status is premised upon her capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice.

Rejecting the traditional use of myth as mystification, Mahasweta claims that she is a chronicler of truth. 'My approach is forensic [. . .] everywhere, my search is for what lies behind.'[3] Although her writing seeks to lay bare the truth, Mahasweta does not eschew myth altogether, for her fiction often engages in myth-making as a way of envisioning alternatives to social ills. Her representations of the maternal thus reveal a deep ambivalence. While seeking to expose the hypocrisy latent in discourses of maternity, she does not reject the values of love, care, and responsibility that are traditionally associated with the maternal role. Instead, she reappropriates these values for her radical project,

locating in them a moral 'core' that contains the possibility of female self-empowerment. This ethical dimension links Mahasweta's writing to her activism, because both express her emancipatory vision.

As a writer with a conscience, Mahasweta sees herself as a rebel against the Bengali literary establishment. In the Preface to *Bashai Tudu*, she castigates the writers of her time for their lack of social awareness.[4] Unlike her literary predecessors, who placed their female protagonists within narrow, apolitical social frameworks, Mahasweta perceives women's oppression as linked to larger issues of social exploitation. Most readers are struck by the strong political commitment that sets Mahasweta apart from earlier Bangla women writers, such as Giribala Devi, Jyotirmayee Devi, Ashapurna Devi, Lila Majumdar and Pratibha Basu (Chattopadhyay 7–16).[5]

When scrutinized more objectively, however, Mahasweta's creative writings actually display a 'literariness' that belies her denial of links with literary tradition. Her fiction differs from her other writings in this respect, in spite of a common ethical-political framework. Although she writes of the dispossessed and marginalized, her sophisticated use of language, narrative, and figuration indicate her access to intellectual resources beyond the reach of the common people who form the subject of her fiction. Her education, especially her Bachelors and Masters degrees in English literature and her monograph on Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, are not to be discounted when assessing her position within literary history.[6] Mahasweta's embeddedness in tradition is as important as her self-conscious rebellion against it, for the one enables, even as it appears to contradict, the other.

The stories in this volume present a range of responses to the discourse of motherhood, exposing in particular the intersecting

forms of exploitation to which women in certain underprivileged sections of Indian society are subjected. The stories also describe the strategies often evolved by women to survive and circumvent the forms of containment inflicted upon them by society. In more than one story, the central figure is a woman who awakens, through a painful experience related to motherhood, to a deeper awareness of the social injustices she ought to resist. The maternal thus emerges as an ambivalent concept with both restrictive and emancipatory potential.

'Ma, from Dusk to Dawn' is the story of a woman from a nomadic tribe, catapulted by her circumstances into the role of a spiritual mother whose so-called mystical powers depend upon her denial of maternal affection towards her own son during daylight hours. Ironically, she is exploited in both roles: as the holy Thakurni, she must provide succour to all those who cast themselves at her feet; and as Sadhan's *shaanjh shokaaler Ma*, she must supply the rice to feed his insatiable hunger, even after her death.

'Sindhubala' describes the anguish of a woman forced to play the role of a divine healer, called upon to save the lives of other people's offspring while suppressing her own physical and emotional needs. Like a fruitless tree, Sindhu craves for the fulfilment that her plain appearance has placed beyond her reach. Discarded by her husband and exploited by her mother, she awakens too late to the realization that her divine status is premised upon hollow self-denial.

Through the eyes of an impoverished woman who dreams of pampering a little daughter visibly starving to death, 'Jamunabati's Mother' offers a stringent critique of a consumerist society unsympathetic to the needs of those outside the mainstream. The story's eponymous protagonist cherishes dreams of buying her daughter a

golden-haired doll or a gorgeous red dress, but in the eyes of society, she and her family are utterly redundant, a blot upon the face of the city that aspires to beautify itself by purging itself of unwanted poverty.

'Giribala' presents the plight of an innocent village woman whose daughters are sold into the flesh trade by their own father, to pay for the house he dreams of building. The rhetoric of gender discrimination rationalizes the exploitation of the girl-child: a daughter, after all, is dispensable, lost if she's dead, lost if she's wed. The story raises issues of female choice: having chosen to have an operation to sterilize herself after the birth of several daughters, Giribala must pay the penalty for her failure to produce male offspring. Her husband claims the right to sell off his daughters as an act of retribution.

In each of the stories, motherhood functions as a way of addressing larger issues pertaining to societal double standards with their economic and political underpinnings. Each narrative indicts the collective stereotyping that perpetuates the myth of divine motherhood, even as it recognizes the value of genuine mother-love. Several other maternal figures in Mahasweta's fiction demonstrate a similar complexity. Two versions of the maternal are played off against each other in 'Bayen' (1971), the story of a mother branded as a witch and separated from her son by an act of collective scapegoating. The image of the bayen, whose very gaze spells death to all children who encounter her, is a product of the unacknowledged fear of female power. Her expulsion from the dom community typifies the rejection meted out by a patriarchal society to individualistic women who threaten the stability of existing social codes. But although Chandi acquires the outward semblance of a bayen, she never quite sheds the traditional 'motherly' attributes of responsibility, love and protectiveness.

Responsibility is also the key issue of *Hajar Churashir Ma* (1974), a novel about 'the awakening of an apolitical mother'.[7] In the subjectivity of Sujata, bereaved mother of a political revolutionary, public history and private trauma become inseparable. Through Sujata's newfound vision at the end of the story, the narrative suggests that only those with a moral and social conscience deserve to bear offspring. Mothers are thus invested with a political duty: that of creating future citizens capable of building a better world. Unlike mythical archetypes, Mahasweta's construction of this maternal ideal is rooted in particularities: instead of unthinkingly valorizing the idea of motherhood, it vests agency in the mother as a conscious and contributive force in the construction of a better society..

A similar visionary dimension animates 'Stanadayini' (1982), which first appeared in English translation as 'The Wet Nurse' (1986). The title of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subsequent translation, 'The Breast Giver'(1987), draws attention to Mahasweta's use of the maternal breast as the governing metaphor of the entire narrative. To remain a professional foster mother, Jashoda, a poor woman, must keep up her supply of milk by continuing to produce children as a biological mother. The process confounds the traditional polarization of the biological ('natural') and the socio-economic ('cultural'). Represented as a means of livelihood, the maternal is detached from its traditional sentimental associations with the nurturing instinct. What is lost in the process of commodifying motherhood is the possibility of love, duty and mutual caring beyond the logic of economic necessity. Jashoda's acutest feeling in the moments before her death is indeed this need for love, to be cared for. Despite Jashoda's extreme naivete, it is impossible for the reader to dismiss her outrage at the collective ingratitude that isolates her in death. In this shared

outrage lies the moral clue to Mahasweta Devi's 'parable'. While dismantling the iconic status of the mythical Jashoda to expose its ideological underpinnings, the text simultaneously activates the same myth to hint at a latent visionary possibility.

Not all the mother-figures in Mahasweta's fiction are powerful role-models. The target of her transformative ethic is not the fictional character but the reader, who must actively reconstruct the value-systems implicit in the text. Although the stories in this collection are based on maternal subjects, the ethical force of Mahasweta's writing resides in a combination of textual strategies, of which characterization is only one. Sometimes, the moral charge of the narrative is located in other textual features, such as irony, a combination of realism and myth, the interface between history and fiction, or the manipulation of different registers of language.

In Mahasweta's fiction, chaste and colloquial Bengali jostle with tribal dialect, snatches of song and doggerel, erudite allusion, Hindi phrases and English terminology. Instead of a seamless texture, her writing acquires a dynamic disruptiveness that reinforces the thematics of separation and struggle. Dissonance represents the irreducibility of difference. An extraordinary feature of her writing, Mahasweta's linguistic virtuosity poses a problem for the translator. The stylistic and tonal variations tend to become flattened in English translation, diluting the nuances of the original. Nevertheless, English translations of Mahasweta's stories serve a political purpose, invoking national and global frameworks that expand their range of reference. As a crossing of cultural boundaries, translation opens up questions of location, difference, context, authorship and authority. Only by keeping these questions alive should English translations of Mahasweta's texts be approached, for they make us aware that reading, like translation, can also be a potential mode of critical intervention.

Notes

1 See Jashodhara Bagchi, 'Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal,' *Economic and Political Weekly* (20-27 October 1990), p.66.

2 See Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question,' Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid ed., *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 233–53.

3 Mahasweta Devi, interviewed by Radha Chakravarty, Calcutta, 8 August 1999.

4 Mahasweta Devi, Preface to *Bashai Tudu*, tr. Samik Bandopadhyay and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Calcutta: Thema, 1990), pp. xvii–xviii.

5 See Maitreyi Chattopadhyay, 'Mahaswetar Nari Jagat' (Bangla) in Tapas Bhowmick ed., *Mahasweta Devi*, Special issue of *Korak*, 1993, pp. 7–16.

6 Mahasweta Devi completed her B.A. in English (Honours) from Santiniketan in 1946. She acquired her Masters degree in English Literature as a private candidate in 1963. Her monograph on Tarashankar was published by the Sahitya Akademi in 1975.

7 Mahasweta Devi, quoted in Samik Bandopadhyay, 'Introduction', *Five Plays* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1997), p. ix.

Ma, from Dusk to Dawn

WHEN THE PARCHED EARTH cracked beneath the scorching Baishakhi sun, Sadhan Kandori's mother Jati Thakurni died.

Before she died, Jati Thakurni's stomach and neck had swollen up, barrel-like. Sadhan Kandori had carried his mother to the hospital in a sling made out of bamboo.

'Don't put me in hospital, Sadhan. In the hospital, the *dom* will pull my innards apart, child.'

'Doctor says to take you to hospital.'

'Oh child, my child Sadhan, don't let the *dom* tear up my insides.'

'Nobody tears up innards, Ma.'

'They do, son. What do you know? You're just a little boy. The *dom* tears up entrails, rips out the heart. Doctors keep hearts in bottles, son.'

'But why, Ma?'

'What would you know, son? You're just a little boy. In these evil days, this human body is not for burning, don't you know?'

'What are you saying, Ma!'

'I say what's true, son. But when relatives, friends or masters die, they perform rites, place them on funeral pyres, am I wrong?'

'True.'

'All of them doctors–physicians–*doms*–midwives, they stare like vultures?'

'Ma!'

'They stare and stare. Once they get an unclaimed body, they all have a share in it. The *dom* gives the innards and heart to the doctor. The midwife takes the clothes. The *dom* lets the flesh rot, sells the bones to makes money.'

'Silly, would I ever let that happen?'

'Don't let it happen, son. I'm your *shanjh-shokaaler Ma*! Don't let me get killed in the hospital.'

'Stop talking, Ma.'

Sadhan Kandori had scolded her. Once, Jati Thakurni had conceived him in her womb. They're an ancient tribe, descendants of Jara the hunter. They are known as the Pakhmaras, or the bird-hunters. Jateshwari, a woman of that tribe, had nursed Sadhan in her belly for ten months before giving birth to him.

How a natural mother became a dusk-to-dawn mother, now that's an amazing story. Sadhan was only a year-and-a-half-old when Jateshwari was possessed by divine power. Then Jati, in the daytime, became Jati Thakurni. From sunrise to sunset, the thought of Thakurni as a mother–wife–sister was forbidden. To address her by any of those names, that too was forbidden.

Jati had warned Sadhan.

'Don't call me Ma, son, my own dear son.'

'Never?'

'No, son. Late at night, before sunrise, call me Ma. After sundown too you can call me Ma.'

'Only at dusk and dawn, right, Ma?'

Yes, son.'

'At dusk and dawn you're Ma. And in the daytime you're Thakurni?'

'Yes, son. I'm your dusk-to-dawn mother, your *shanj-shokaaler Ma*.'

This *shanj-shokaaler Ma*, Jateshwari, how she crossed the railway line to come to Jadavpur, how she got her son a rickshaw—now that's a long story.

Sadhan Kandori knows of nothing other than his mother. An idiot boy, his brain remained undeveloped even at thirty. Built like a bull, his body contains nothing other than the stomach. No lungs, no heart, red like hibiscus petals, no intestines, slippery, snake-like, no genitals, flower-soft, like the early morning *dopati*; his body contains none of these. There's only the stomach.

And there's hunger. Just by tempting him with food, his master's young wife gets him to split firewood, draw water from the tube-well, break up mounds of coal.

The master's wife is young, beautiful, demure.

'Sadhan, don't look at the master's wife.'

'No, Ma.'

'When you do, think of her as your mother, all right son?'

'Yes, Ma.'

Sadhan agrees to all his mother's instructions. His mother is the whole world, the sun and moon in his sky. When this same mother's body swelled up, when she suffered endlessly from fever, diarrhoea, bile, cough, Sadhan said to his master, 'Give me money, sir, give me money.'

'Why Sadhan?'

'My mother is dying, sir.'

'What's the matter, is she sick?'

'Yes sir. Ma's seeing shadows in the daytime, says she's eaten sugar after tasting salt. This afternoon, she said, "Call me Ma, Sadhan." '

'She said so!'

'Yes sir. I'll call a doctor, give me money.'

Sadhan Kandori's master handed him ten rupees and said, 'Get your mother treated, Sadhan. All said and done, she's carried you in her womb.'

'My mother is not human, sir. Ma is Thakurni, she's divine.'

'You call a doctor.'

Anadi-*daktar* had been beaten up, hounded out of the colony because all his patients would end up dead. Anadi-*daktar* has now set up shop beside the canal, across the railway tracks. At the moment he has plenty of income. Of late, for large sums of money, he's been passing off the corpses of murder victims to the cremation grounds, issuing a death certificate that reads 'died of heart failure'. It's convenient that the attendants at the crematorium can also be bought at a price, these days.

Anadi-*daktar*'s prosperity was predicted by Jati Thakurni. It was for that reason perhaps, or perhaps the fear of his sins, of all the foeticides, abortions, fake certificates, that the brahman Anadi-*daktar* pays obeisance at Jati Thakurni's feet with offerings of oil–coconut–rice–salt.

So Anadi-*daktar* hurried off to visit Jati Thakurni. A terrible stench fills Jati's room. On the wooden bed, a dirty cloth, red the colour of blood, covers Jati Thakurni as she lies stretched out on her back like an ogress from a fairy tale. Her abdomen swollen high, her limbs spread-eagled. Only her eyes still lit by that

extraordinary, mystical gaze. Anadi-*daktar* had never imagined that rheumy, bloodshot eyes could possess a gaze so beautiful.

Even more beautiful than the eyes of all those young women who lie on Anadi-*daktar*'s table in helpless agony. Only impending death can stain human eyes with such beauty.

Anadi-*daktar* was stunned. Examining her pulse, her abdomen, his eyes fill with tears.

His heart feels a pang when he remembers how, once or twice a year, he would visit Jati Thakurni to annul his sins.

'Ma, I've gone and sinned, Ma.'

In the daytime nobody addressed Jati Thakurni as 'Ma', they had to call her Thakurni. Anadi would visit her at night, his face hidden deep in the darkness.

'What sin, oh my son, what sin?'

'The girl died, Ma.'

Jati Thakurni would sigh and say, 'She was a great sinner. How would you know, son, that her soul would be thrashed by the demons of hell? Didn't she blacken her father's name by her great sin? A gentleman's daughter, and yet such wickedness?'

'What'll happen, Ma?'

'Take this, son. This amulet's got the bone from the neck of a lizard. Keep it under your pillow and sleep. And for three evenings, sprinkle Ganga-water in your room, all right?'

For sinners and miscreants like Anadi, who else would collect nails from a dead newborn, bones from the neck of lizards, oil from hornbill birds? No money, not a single cowrie shell, only a *pali* of rice was what Jati Thakurni asked in exchange. Come dusk, Thakurni would become Sadhan's Ma again. The rice she earned as Thakurni, she would then cook as Ma and feed to her idiot son.

Now who would look after Anadi? Anadi's eyes filled with tears. He said, 'Sadhan, take her to hospital. Thakurni's condition is not good at all.'

Anadi handed out some money. He said, 'Take her in a taxi.'

Sadhan was terrified out of his wits. Money in hand he ran to the sweet shop. Stuffed himself with *muri-batasha-gaja*, feeling wretched, sitting in the shop itself. Drank glasses and glasses of water.

The taxi driver refused to take Jati. He said in Hindi, 'She's dead. She'll die in the car.'

Then Sadhan's master gave him some bamboo from the bamboo thicket. Making a sling, Sadhan carried Jati Thakurni to Bangur hospital.

The hospital is strange, overwhelming. Such a big building, so many people. 'Bhai Balaram!' Sadhan cried, 'I'm so scared my limbs are glued to my gut. So many doors, I don't know which way to go. How to take Thakurni inside?'

'You're such a hopeless fellow, Sadhan.'

Balaram, Jagadish and Uddhab call the doctor. They're dead set on having Jati Thakurni admitted. The more the doctor insists, 'The old woman will die right now', the more Sadhan wails, 'Save Thakurni, sir! Without Thakurni my world is empty! Alas! When it's dusk, Thakurni turns into Ma, I tell you! My hair's turned to grey but Thakurni still loves me so! She goes hungry just to feed me, Sir!'

'What are you saying? I can't understand a word.'

'Oh Doctor-babu!'

Sadhan writhes on the ground like a bull being sacrificed.

Balaram has married into this neighbourhood. He's a man of the colony, not scared of gentlemen. The sight of a gentleman had never angered Balaram as long as he had been poor. His body, then, still cool from the river Dhaleswari, his nature, then, still stained the gentle green of the paddy-fields.

Now a house in the colony, a rickshaw of his own, a rice-field

in Baruipur. Now Balaram has changed. When he sees a gentleman, encounters polite behaviour, hears sweet words, he feels like spitting in disgust. Balaram knows that this Bengal no longer belongs to men like him but to men who are powerful.

Balaram stepped forward. Spoke sharply, 'She's no ordinary person, okay? She's a holy woman, we respect her, on auspicious days we make offerings to her. If there's room, why not admit her, sir? Hospital *seats* don't belong to me or to you, they're for the general public, right?'

In the end, the hospital admitted Jati Thakurni.

The doctor had felt pity for the sobbing Sadhan. The doctor had been embarrassed. The doctor had never seen such a huge, full-grown man cry like this for his mother.

'Thakurni won't live, Doctor-babu?'

'Let's see, Sadhan. Don't be impatient.'

'She has no ailment, sir! She's no human, she's a goddess. No disease dare touch her.'

'Of course.'

'All through the daylight hours she's Thakurni, see sir! Becomes my mother from dusk through dawn. When she bathes in Ganga-water, when she wears the red cloth, she's Thakurni then. Then I too am like the rest of them who come to worship her!'

'Is that so?'

'But how my heart bursts, how I long to call her Ma, sir! Then! When it's dusk, I'll put my head in her lap, call her Ma, Ma, Ma! To my heart's content.'

The doctor stared at Sadhan in amazement. The nurse smiled slightly, said, 'You put that big head of yours in her lap?'

Sadhan's voice was overcome with emotion, 'I'd put my head there, call her Ma, we'd have such fun! She has devotees in the daytime. But at night, she has nobody but me.'

'What would she eat in the daytime?'

'What'd I know, sir? She'd take, say, tea, ganja, Ganga-water. Would a holy body need food and water?'

'And in the evening?'

'She'd cook rice, feed me, take a tiny bit herself. Like a small child.'

'That's why she's ill, Sadhan.'

'No, sir. She's not ill. Can sickness touch a body that's divine? Seems some folks got jealous and did black magic.'

'Let's see, we'll see.'

'*Daktar*-babu!'

'What?'

Sadhan scraped his toes against the floor and said, 'Goddess Lakshmi's blessed your household, sir. Mountains of rice, oceans of dal. So, could you give me her share of rice? She doesn't eat no more.'

'That's not possible, Sadhan.'

The doctor couldn't stop staring at Sadhan in amazement. Never before had the doctor seen the body of a human inhabited thus by the simple instincts of an animal.

But Jati Thakurni couldn't be cured. 'Tell me, sir, what's wrong with her?' Sadhan would ask, pestering the doctor.

What could the doctor say? They gave Jati Thakurni glucose, gave her saline, fed her with a tube because her throat had dried up. They tried everything.

Jati Thakurni's condition didn't improve. Whenever she'd regain consciousness, she would say, 'Don't keep me in hospital, my son. My own son Sadhan! That doctor will tear up my innards, the *doms* will sell off my skull and bones. Take me home.'

On the third day, the doctor diagnosed Jati's condition. Jati's disease is highly contagious. Even today, in the land of India, no

cure has been found for it. The name of this disease is starvation. Eating nothing, starving, feeding all the scraps to Sadhan, Jati Thakurni's nerves had dried up.

'This is a divine illness, Sadhan, I don't know the cure for it.'

The doctor joked feebly.

'Then shall I take her away?'

'Take her away.'

Jati Thakurni also, opening her eyes, said, 'Oh my foolish Sadhan! Don't you know my history? Don't you know which tribe I belong to? Take me home, I'll die at home.'

She was brought back home ceremoniously by Balaram, Jagdish, Sadhan and several others. There was a neem tree in front of Jati's house. Jati was placed under its shade.

'The shade of the neem tree is good, Sadhan. We're all here. You go sit next to her.' At Balaram's suggestion, Sadhan went and sat near Jati Thakurni.

'Call a brahman.'

'There's one, a brahman.'

'Who's that?'

'Anadi-*daktar*.'

'Call him. Sit him down next to Thakurni.'

Anadi-*daktar* came, sat near Jati Thakurni. Sadhan was overwhelmed, beseeching.

'Say something before you go, oh my dusk-to-dawn mother!'

'I will.'

Now, in her last moments, Jati has recovered consciousness.

'Go on, say something.'

'Your father is a Kandori. You belong to a race of *bediyas*. You roam the woods, roam the forests, weave marvellous mats.'

'And you?'

'Me?'

Now, the sun in the sky. Now, the time is ten o'clock. When Jati was well, by this time she'd be sitting in her room, receiving offerings from her devotees. By this time Sadhan would be wishing for Jati to become Ma, and say, 'Sadhan, come to me.'

Jati too would wish she could call Sadhan to her. And say, 'Oh Sadhan, come close.'

Jati could have said it. But Jati didn't. Now there are so many devotees around her, so many people. They come to her, touch her feet, give her respect. They're the ones who supply the rice all year round, keep Sadhan alive. One day, Jati had turned Thakurni at her own will. And it is as Thakurni that she must die today.

'What are you, then?'

Sadhan asks with simple faith. Who is Ma? Who is Jati? If Sadhan's father is a Kandori, then is Jati different? Sadhan, Balaram, Jagdish, all of them, the circle closes in, deep around Jati.

'You're not ordinary folk, son. Your line is great, very great.'

'And you?'

'Our tale is most incredible! My ancestor is Jaara the hunter, himself. Heard of him?'

'Jara the hunter?'

'We say Jaara the hunter. Our tongues sound different, *daktar*.'

'Deep delirium,' Anadi-*daktar* diagnosed, fearfully. How could the hospital discharge such a delirious patient? Why do so many people crowd around her? Jara the hunter was as old as the Mahabharat, he was the stuff of legend.

'No delirium, doctor. Truth or falsehood I can't say. But I've heard . . .'

Jati began an extraordinary tale.

'In a country . . . somewhere . . . the sea . . . somewhere . . . a place. Dwarkapuri. Jaara the hunter went there and used his arrows to kill.'

'Kill whom?'

'Krishna. Haven't you read the old books?'

'Everyone knows.'

'It's the king of all sins, the greatest sin! Killing a god with an arrow, there can be no worse sin. Later Jara's descendants left, came to these parts.'

'Where?'

'Hijli–Kanthi–Tamluk–Medinipur.'

'Then?'

'Our community is very wretched. We roam the cremation grounds, catch snakes, drink water from cremation vessels.'

'Shame!'

'We trap birds, we're known as Pakhmaras.'

'What community's that, Pakhmara? Never heard of them.'

'We don't allow marriage outside our society. But my heart had gone and settled on that father of Sadhan's. There would have been talk in the community, so we went away, had our *sanga*.'

Jati couldn't explain clearly. The first time is called a marriage. The second is called *sanga*. According to the religious custom of the Pakhmaras, every girl is married to their god immediately after birth. First they offer water and coconut to the god, and then they come to keep house for the mortals.

'Then many, many days later, I became Thakurni. Possessed by the divine force, from dawn through dusk.'

'Jati Thakurni! Water, do you want water?'

'No, my dears. Now I'll go joyfully to heaven. But Sadhan . . .'

Jati hiccuped.

'What? What are you trying to say?'

'I had become Thakurni. Look, the sun's overhead.'

'Now it's daylight.'

'It's not your mother, Sadhan, it's Thakurni that's going to heaven. It means you'll have to give many offerings.'

'What offerings?'

Everyone was now agog with curiosity. Sadhan's unpaved courtyard was crammed full with neighbours. Such a large crowd, as though some highly-respected, eminent personality lay dying, not some low-born, poor, hapless woman.

Everyone grew silent. Held their breath. What would Jati Thakurni ask for in her final moments?

'If I died at dusk or at night, it wouldn't cost you anything, not a broken cowrie shell. Now, you have to give me an elephant. At my funeral. You'll offer up an elephant.'

'I take a vow.'

Driven mad with sorrow, with grief, bewildered by the strange turn of events, the idiot boy Sadhan said, 'Listen everybody, at her funeral I shall offer an elephant.'

'And a h-h-horse.'

'That too.'

'Rice–cloth–land–gold–silver. In plenty.'

'That too.'

Sadhan burst into loud sobs, cried out, 'I'll give everything! Don't leave me and go away. I'm all alone!'

'Your w . . . w . . . w . . .'

The words stuck in Jati's throat. Jati could not tell Sadhan to bring back his wife, the one who had run away to her parents. Her head lolled over before she could say any more.

Shrouded in unbleached fabric, bedecked with flowers and sandalwood paste, Jati Thakurni was carried to the cremation ground with great fanfare. Anadi-*daktar* bore all the expenses. Anadi-*daktar*'s first thought upon gazing at the dead Jati's face had been, 'Well then, no need to give rice every day now.' When the

price of rice soared sky high, even then Anadi had visited Jati, offered rice at her feet. His wife would be terribly angry, 'She's holy no doubt, but how her devotees suffer, doesn't she see that?'

Anadi was overcome with grief. He pressed some money into Balaram's hand and said, 'Eat what you will. But Thakurni must be cremated on a sandalwood pyre. Yes, smell the wood to make sure before you buy any. Offer flowers, strew puffed rice, scatter coins, okay? Didn't your sister's husband have a band of kirtan singers?'

Jati's death seemed nothing short of a supernatural occurrence to Balaram and the others. In her dying moments, through her deep delirium, through her fevered mind, every word that Jati had uttered now clung to their minds like the word of god. So Balaram said, 'If they don't come, I'll tear off their heads.'

Rarely does Balaram speak this way. Hearing him speak so his sister's husband arrived at once. Sadananda—or 'ever cheerful'—by name and by nature, he was a peon at the government office.

'To hell with my job. No casual leave. But you can't lose a government job for not going to work.'

He knotted a *gamchha* round his waist. Combed his hair, strung a garland of paper flowers around his neck. Then he and his companions carried Jati Thakurni away, singing, 'With Hari's name written on your body, follow the footsteps of Hari.'

Two

The transformation of Sadhan's dusk-to-dawn mother, from ordinary woman to divine being, now that's an amazing story.

They are gypsies, the Pakhmaras of Medinipur. They claim to be descended from Jara the hunter. His punishment for killing a

god had placed them all under a curse. They had been forced to come away from their land, from far-off Dwarka.

They are not supposed to have homes of their own. They trap birds, they sell birds. Their households no more than small piles of clutter beneath the trees at the crematorium. New brides and bridegrooms loll on the cots that once carried corpses, make love. The flames of the funeral pyre don't prompt them to lofty philosophical thought. Instead, mothers tease their sons, husbands and wives sit side by side, sing together.

The salt mines, the cashew orchards in Medinipur, have many such people coming from the South. Many such who come, who go, who do the work.

They are not supposed to marry outside the community. But Jati's had been an extraordinary beauty. Coppery complexion, blue eyes, reddish hair. Tying it in a knot on top of her head, Jati would wind a necklace of red stones around it. She loved seeing her face reflected in the river, loved winding a dark blue cloth about her body.

It had been winter then, when Jati and the others visited the delta of the Subarnarekha. On the sands, a flock of migratory birds. Laying traps in the jungle of reeds, Jati would trap the birds by whistling for them.

It was there that, one day, she met Utsav. Utsav was a Kandori by caste. By profession, inherited over the generations, he wove reeds into delicate mats. Utsav had been thirty, then. Short, sturdy and dark-skinned. Shoulder-length curly hair. Utsav would compose songs, sing them.

Seeing Jati, he'd composed a song.

'O fair maiden in the blue sari,
Look and see,
For you my heart is on fire.'

The blue-throated wagtail had struggled in Jati's net.

Jati turned around to face him. Snapped at him, 'Heart is on fire! Listen to the wretch's song. Made all my birds fly off!'

'Of what use chasing those birds, dear?

My soul-bird, I'll bring here

To fling at your feet,

Alas, for you my heart is on fire.'

Utsav had replied by bursting into song.

He was enjoying himself. The girls in his community were never so spirited! They didn't enchant the gaze so! Her face—those eyes, those lips, that nose—as though chiselled in stone.

'Wretch!'

Jati cursed him and began to walk away. Utsav leapt up to grab her hand.

'Why did you curse me?'

'Why did you make up a song? Sent my birds flying?'

Utsav had roared with laughter. Then he had seized the net from her hands, catching her off-guard, and released the blue-throated bird trapped in it. Then casting the net over a stunned, seething Jati, he had said, 'You're my bird. Would you run from me? You're my soul-bird.'

Jati had burst into tears. Throwing off the net, Jati had run away. Utsav's laughter followed her for a long time.

The next day, Utsav had come up to their encampment. Kneeling before Jati's grandmother, he had said, 'Would you give me a bit of medicine? I roam the woods and forests, my chest hurts. You are gifted people, you deal in medicines. Can you help me?'

Jati had hissed, 'Thrashing is the best medicine for that wretch. He let my birds fly away, do you know?'

Jati's Thakuma had laughed. She'd cussed Jati and asked her

to go about her own business. Boys and girls of their community were not supposed to look elsewhere for mates, were meant to keep to their own kind. Jati's restlessness now made her grandmother anxious.

Utsav had not visited their settlement again. He had taken to following Jati around, colouring her mind with all sorts of exotic dreams.

Dreams of a home, barrels of paddy in the loft, babes in wicker cradles. Her reflection in the mirror, silver ornaments to wear. Saris in red-blue-so-many colours hanging, drying in the courtyard.

In designs even more bewitching than those on his mats, Utsav wove his net of dreams and then cast that net over Jati.

Jati had not thrown off the net to run away, this time.

They had run away together.

From Kharagpur to Digha. Daily labourers in the cashew nut season, preparing *shutki* fish in the fishing season.

Had they not run far, far away, the crow-hunters, the *kaowa-maras*, would have pierced them with arrows for daring to leave the bounds of their accursed community.

Utsav hadn't quite succeeded in making the dream come true. But Jati had been very happy. What a life! Just cook a bit every now and then and eat and make love. When there's cash in hand, buy clothes. Red and black *kunch* seeds strung into necklaces, bangles of lac, girdles of pewter. Do up your hair differently, wear your sari differently. After all, you're not a crow-hunter any more. Now you've risen in caste, changed your class.

'Our caste's not to be treated lightly, Jati. We give dowry when we marry, offer rice and meat to the community.'

'Let those things be.'

Jati would be frightened at such talk. If only this home, this

love, would last! Cursed were they for all time, they who had killed a god, pierced his ankle with their arrow. Doomed were they, to wander the earth, homeless, till life's end.

Jati had escaped that life.

What if her angry Thakuma killed her with an arrow? What if Ma made straw effigies of Jati and Utsav, then stuck a sharp spike through them? Ripped them apart?

Jati would be frightened then, whine to Utsav, 'Don't talk of them now, talk to me of other things.'

'Are you scared?'

'Wretch!' Jati would say softly. Then turn around and sit down to braid her hair. Is this what it meant to lose one's caste, to move up from down below? Then why couldn't Jati find strength enough to speak? To say, 'Go to hell'?

Once in a while only the deep thrumming of the drums would make Jati start.

That's how the Pakhmaras come, lightly slapping their dhols. They roam about in a pack, live together like bees in a hive.

This community life was of utmost importance to them.

They're no ordinary folk, after all, but descendants of Jara the hunter. The hunter had been no common person, having killed no less than Lord Krishna himself. The Lord's friends-neighbours-family had committed such sins, were being punished so severely, that he withdrew in sorrow to a solitary spot, to rest for a moment or two. His feet, glowing, like lotus blooms.

'Glowing, like lotus blooms!' Jati's Thakuma would say, shaking her head. 'Espying them from behind a bush of reeds, it was like Jara lost his mind! Let off his arrow with a twang! That was it! Do you know what happened then?'

The sky went dark, the sun hid his face. In anguish, the sea disgorged all its creatures. Even men who had drowned in fishing-boat

accidents cried out as they came to life again. Trying to milk their cows, milkmen found blood flowing instead. It had been a clear morning. But now the sky grew dark as night, the stars ablaze.

Then came that divine decree.

Those who slay God shall be homeless forever. So went the divine decree: 'Jara oh Jara! Hunter ho! To this world God comes again and again. Each time, a butcher like you pierces him with an arrow. Those who commit such deeds, they're not permitted homes to live in. Go now, take your kinsmen, your people, and depart. Understand?

'Where do I go?'

'Wherever your eyes lead you.'

'Do I take the whole community?'

'Would you leave them behind, then? Yours is now a community of great sinners. It's certain death for anyone who marries his offspring to your people. So understand me now, marriages must be kept to within your own folk. Look after your people. And look here. Jara oh Jara! Hunter, ho! Does my voice reach your ears?'

'It does.'

'Every boy, every girl—none should leave the tribe. Because your sin makes them sinners too, after all. At birth, marry them off to god.'

'We shall.'

Jara had agreed tearfully. Alas! Who would want to leave Dwarka and go away! How beautiful is the city of Dwarkapuri! On the shores of the blue sea, what beautiful houses, their domes made of gold! Jara of course lives in the woods and forests, watches everything from afar, but the joy of observing others' happiness, others prospering, was that any less joy too?

And later, had Jara not been punished severely? Not been

forced to wander lands on end, his people following him, their belongings bundled up, their hunting dogs trailing at their heels?

From Satyaputra to Keralputra to Chola to Pandya, one to another, drifting, ceaseless. No place to rest, no shelter.

'Yes! Killed a god with your arrow, now you've come to ruin our land as well! Oh my wily fox! Turned the city of Dwarka into ashes, come to kill us now, have you?'

Jara finds no home. Jara finds no rest. The king of gods sighs in his heavens, time rolls on. The *Dwapar Yuga* ends, the *Kali Yuga* begins. The eternal wanderer Jara, now millions of years old. Filaria ails his legs. His body weary and aching. Someone takes pity on him, tells him one day, 'Heard of Rarh? Banga? And Gaur? Go there. Where the Ganga meets the sea, go to that place. All the sinners–penitents–greedy–deceitful–rascals find refuge there. It turns no one away. Go there, why don't you?'

Jara came to this land.

Weddings within the community, honeymoons on cots that once carried corpses to the cremation ground, rice cooked by the women in pots used for the last rites, ladled out before their kinsmen. Very independent they are, these people. Each of their women an incredible beauty. Their hair knotted atop their heads, then draped with strings of coral. A strange transparence to their beauty, as though carved from stone. For generations they haven't married out of kin. They have wedded within their own people. Their blood has remained pure through the ages, through their history. Hence their beauty.

Dwindling in number, dying away, just a few hundred of them remain. They never break away, never leave the bounds of their community.

Along the streets of the city, following the paths of the village, they walk on, their drums thrumming, *dum-dum-dum-dum.*

There go the Pakhmaras! There go the Pakhamras!

They never set foot in the cities.

Sometimes, once or twice a year, they come to register their names at the tribal welfare office. When someone dies, they leave the name on record.

In the official records, they're supposed to be a protected tribe.

Thus Jati used to listen to Utsav's words with one ear, with half her mind. The other ear would be listening, the other half of her mind would be waiting, for the drums, their sound.

If they came?

Mother–father–Thakuma–kinsmen?

If they said, 'Come with us. Back to the forest, back to the community'?

What would Jati do?

Utsav would laugh at her fears. He'd sing one of his songs.

'O you needn't fear.

Needn't fear so to be caught in the trap of love!'

'Wretch!' Jati would say.

Utsav would say, 'As long as I'm alive, who dares take you away? Them forest folk of yours? Do they know Utsav? Just a word in the inspector's ear and he'll fix them once and for all.'

Jati's fears would not leave her. But ever so slowly, Utsav made her forget many of them. Jati gave birth to a chubby, dark-skinned boy, his head covered with black hair. One glance was enough to know that he was Utsav's son. His face the very likeness of his father's. Only his eyes were like his mother's. Clear, bluish, limpid.

Utsav's ambition to elevate his caste grew stronger. He had, after all, raised Jati to his caste. In his heart of hearts, Utsav knew that he was by birth a weaver of fine mats, of a higher caste than

the Pakhmaras, the bird hunters. And now that he was working as a labourer—this was yet another step up.

Utsav, now the father of a male child, yearns to climb even higher. Doesn't want to be part of the larger community of the poor, the beggars. But wants a place, a corner to himself, in the tiny community of the gentlemen, the elite.

Utsav explained it all to Jati.

'Jati oh Jati, Jateshwari! Been to the BD office, do you know what the BDO-babus said?'

'What?'

'Nothing to stop us now. I can spend money, go to court, change my name any time I please. All this Kandori-Mandori, everyone can tell right away that we're low in caste.'

'You'll change your name!'

'Why not? How does Utsav Kandori sound? And Utsav Das? Sadhan Chandra Das? Then just get some other job, go to the big city, and you've made it.'

'Why!'

'The big city is Puri, Lord Jagannath's Srikshetra. No one asks after anybody there. The name's enough, they'll think this must be a high caste fellow. Or else why Das after his name?'

Listening to Utsav, Jati felt a sudden rush of joy. Arms akimbo, she'd broken into dance. 'Come, come. Let's go right now, become high-caste.'

Utsav said affectionately, 'Silly! Not now. Let the boy be old enough! Let's have the rice ceremony first, send offerings to holy places.'

Jati had been struck by a sudden thought. If one's ancestor had killed a god, can one then worship any god other than the one designated to their tribe? Was it not a sin? Would that not cause harm?

Then she had felt that what Utsav said was right, after all. If she left everything behind, ran away, if she went to court, changed her caste on official paper, then she would finally be beyond the reach of her mother, beyond the clutches of her grandmother.

'That's fine!' Jati had said, her eyes shut.

Had he laughed then, the god who had cursed Jara the hunter, he who had laid down the divine decree upon the ancestor of the Pakhmaras?

Life followed their plan. Sadhan was fed rice for the first time, ceremoniously. Utsav was working as a coolie at Kharagpur station. He fed rice and meat to the coolies. Then after a bellyful of the local booze, began to vomit and thereafter died in hospital.

Utsav was gone. Gone too were the dreams he had woven, the heart that loved her so, the voice that broke into song. Jati was now alone. Jati was now free. Jati could now go wherever she wished. But what about the boy who lay in the cradle, blinking at her?

Jati realized what she would have to do. Return to her community. Weep at her grandmother's feet. Jati knew that Utsav had been felled by her grandmother's arrow. No matter what the doctors said, what the police believed!

A frightened bird, her son clasped to her breast, Jati went back to her community.

Oh lord! Where are all her kinsmen–family–relatives? Where the clothes of many colours–goats–dogs–bundles piled on the backs of donkeys–grandmother's cackling laugh?

Not in the cremation grounds, not on the platforms around the pyres, nowhere. Jati went running to the tribal board office in the city.

'Sir, give me the address of the Pakhmaras, I beg you,' Jati beseeched, tried to touch the peon's feet.

'Go look in the cremation grounds, the burning platforms! Go see where they've gone to rot.'

Jati's eyes filled with tears. From this community to that, from low caste to high, how Utsav had tempted her and then left, robbing her of her clutch of dreams.

What was Jati to do now?

The beautiful, the healthy, the youthful Jati went and sat at the station. Her little son beside her. Her chin clasped in her palm, Jati sat there, lost in thought.

Jati thought of her son. Some others began to think about Jati.

What was Jati to do now, where was she to go? Jati went to the Hanuman shrine in the heart of the coolie slums, to the sannyasi there, to ask his advice.

'Stay here,' the sannyasi said to her, his eyes still closed. An old man. His fortunes have of late taken a turn for the better because of his unstinted devotion to this Hanumanji. After a life spent in worshipping other gods.

Jati came to stay there and the crowds increased at the shrine. The sannyasi sensed trouble looming.

A few days later, three of four men paid Jati a visit. They said, 'Why put up with that old man? Come with us. We'll show you the city.'

It was not in vain that Jati had the blood of ancients coursing through every vein in her body. She was familiar with the woods and forests, the jungle creatures; she was afraid of strangers.

'Get lost, you wretches,' Jati abused them.

Perhaps they were the ones who complained.

A few days later, a policeman came, threatened the sannyasi, his tone severe. He said, 'We've got news of everything.'

'News, what news would you get, sir? I'm a sannyasi. Keep busy with god.'

'Busy with god or with a goddess?'

'*Chhi*, *chhi*, may your mouth rot . . .'

'You keep a woman here. All sorts of wicked goings-on. Selling of illicit liquor, gambling.'

'Lies!'

The sannyasi's fair face had flushed crimson.

The policeman was a householder, a simple man. He had said, 'You know as well as I do that it's untrue, all of it. That woman's the cause of all this trouble! Why don't you get rid of her!'

'Then she'll fall into their clutches. That's what they want.'

'Then go to hell.'

The policeman strode off angrily. Leaving, he had said, 'Why anger those goondas, those ruffians? If you keep honey, the bees will keep coming. As long as that woman remains, men will flock here. They rule the place these days. If they come and drag her away, who's to stop them, I'd like to know?'

The sannyasi had been deeply troubled. But Jati had realized that staying on here meant danger for the old man, danger for her.

'Here, these pots and pans were mine when I had a home. Keep them safe, my security, and now give me some money.'

'Where will you go? And your boy?'

'Don't know.'

In the end, the old man had sighed, gifted her a length of red fabric. The kind that the people of Bihar shroud their corpses with.

A red cloth and a small trident, both of these the sannyasi gave her. He said, 'My heart tells me that one day the jackals and the vultures will devour you. Will tear you apart. Still, take the cloth and weapon and go. The *Kali Yuga* rages on but sadhu-sannyasis can still travel third class, nobody troubles them.'

'If they ask?'

'Say you're Jati Thakurni.'

'Thakurni?'

'Yes, who's to know?'

'Thakurni!'

Really, nobody had asked Jati anything on the train. Her beauty, the red cloth, the boy wrapped in a bundle on her back, the trident in her hand—everyone had stared, dumbstruck.

Jati had been gazing out through the window, her eyes flooded with tears. How the people respected her, honoured her. Was this what it was like, then? To move up in life? Alas, if only Utsav were present, he could see how no court, no official paper had been needed. Only a cloth and a trident had promoted Jati's caste, elevated her class.

Another man observed her. He sang songs on the train, sometimes in the name of Kali, sometimes in the name of Hari. Thin, elderly, a lonely man.

Seeing Jati, he had said, 'Reached Howrah, dear. Now where?'

Jati had said nothing.

Jati was agape, before her the Howrah station, the endless swarm of people. So this was the Srikshetra of which Utsav had spoken! So many people here, countless, without number. No tree in the forest would have so many leaves. So many people, where would Jati go?

'So where will you go?'

The man had asked again.

Jati had replied, 'I don't know.'

The man had said, 'Will you come with me?'

'Where?'

Jati had not been afraid of him. Within her, all those ancient instincts, inherent, were still alert. She could tell in the blink of an eye who was to be feared and who not to be. Seeing this man, she had felt no fear. And besides, her eyes were still full of all the incredible sights around her.

'With me.'

'Where?'

'My home. I sing on the trains.'

'Sing?'

'Yes, dear.'

The man had explained everything. He sang and begged for money. If Jati accompanied him, Sadhan in her arms, it would become even easier to get alms.

'Where's your home?'

'Look here, got no time to waste, just come if you will.'

For a year, things go well. Jati accompanies him, he sings on the trains. Taking the money home in the evening, Jati buys some rice, cooks it. The man sleeps in the verandah, Jati sleeps in the room, her door locked.

'Sadhan oh Sadhan! Son oh son!'

Jati's love, wild, carefree, makes the boy restless. Besides, seeing the Nepalese and Bhutanese women selling necklaces–amulets–roots–birds' feet–frogskin near the station, she too has grown wise to the ways of the city.

When someone asks, 'So dear, you're a sadh'ni. Know any cure for rheumatism?' Jati doesn't pull a face, doesn't curse. Instead Jati tries to recall the antidotes and remedies learnt from her grandmother and prescribes medicines from time to time.

Things were well, things could have gone on well enough, but one day the man left his place on the verandah and wanted to sleep inside, in her room. How much longer could he lie outdoors? Did Jati know how hard it was to sleep on the verandah?

Jati picked up the trident. She said, 'Do you know who I am? Which tribe I belong to? Do you know who my father is, my mother, my kinfolk? You dare make such filthy suggestions? Do you know, I can strike you dead with my arrow?'

The very next day Jati left, abandoned her shelter. After much thought she became Thakurni. Or else Jati could not have saved her idiot son. She could not have saved herself from the eyes of men.

Jati realized that without donning the armour of the supernatural, she would have nothing to protect her.

'Curse this beautiful face!' she whispered.

Three

'Sadhan! You must organize a shraddha, son.'

So many suggestions, so much advice.

'I shall, I tell you. Give my mother elephants–horses–land–gold–wealth. Everything. That was my vow.'

Everyone looks at each other, silent. Sadhan's words, like the ravings of a madman. Yet it was no lie that Sadhan had indeed taken a vow.

Besides, Jati had been no ordinary person, after all. She was Thakurni, guarding the gates of the supernatural, standing on the threshold of the corporeal world.

'Do you know what you've done, Sadhan! Do you know how much money is at stake?' Balaram spoke, his voice heavy with anxiety.

'But I took a vow.'

'Now go, go and beg. From door to door, beg.'

Sadhan went off, the dhoti's edge wound about his neck.

His mother's gone, there's no one to cook hot rice when it's evening. No one to roast *shol* fish, skin it, mash it with ginger juice, lime-juice, chilli, salt and oil, no one to say, 'Son, sit near my lap and eat.'

Tears in his eyes, the dhoti's edge round his neck, a torn blanket round his waist, Sadhan went begging.

But nobody wants to give. One door to another, Sadhan walks the streets until his feet begin to blister. Collects only twenty-one rupees. And one *pali* of rice. One *pali* of rice from Anadi-*daktar* who thus severed all his connections with Jati.

Finally Balaram went to Kalighat. Prostrating himself before the poorest, most wretched-looking priest, he said, 'Need help, Thakur. Not for me, but for my friend. Let's see you cough up an idea that kills the snake yet spares the rod.'

'How? What's the matter?'

The scope of the problem had the brahman doubled over with laughter. Balaram said, 'All your lives, you lot offer molasses where there's honey, and coins where there's gold. Now let's see you search the scriptures for a solution.'

The brahman took a pinch of snuff and said, 'Can you pay the price?'

'How much?'

'Say, a hundred rupees.'

'If I could afford a hundred rupees, would I come to a five-paisa brahman like you?'

'Eighty?'

The brahmin stared at him with greedy eyes. Tighten the screws now and perhaps some more cash will flow? But in what hope does he barter thus? The lot of the Kalighat brahmans is now no better than starving vermin. For five rupees they'll give away the whole of India, oceans and all. Balaram mulled over things for

a bit. Travel expenses, a bit of liquor on the side, how much to deduct, how much to keep? Making up his mind, he spoke sternly, 'Look Thakur, I'll give you eighteen rupees in hand. You have to get the job done. Otherwise, I'm off. Any lack of priests if you throw money around? Don't ants come crawling when you scatter molasses? Think, is it to be yes or no? There's not much *tine*. I don't have the *tine* to argue and bargain with you.'

'Go bring your friend. But son, the holy cloth, cloth for ancestors, ghee, flowers, wood, sesame seeds, five kinds of grain, five kinds of milk-produce—you'll bring everything with you?'

'Oh my clever man! If I had all that, then why come all this way to suffer the stink of your dirty *gamccha*?'

Balaram came back with Sadhan.

The priest had kept everything ready. He was sitting in the verandah of his house, all the arrangements made.

'Sit facing south!' The priest said, his voice rough. On the other side sat a man, cropped hair, red eyes, ashen skin, the colour of a faded umbrella.

'He's the *Agradani*, the first recipient. He'll take the offerings.'

The man opened his eyes, 'Now come on, Mama! It's a thousand rupee funeral, right? Let's see you finish it in ten minutes. I have to go somewhere.'

'Here we are! Here, son, start with the purifying water.'

The water is sprinkled. The shraddha begins. The priest touches Sadhan's hand with an item, then snatches it away with lightning speed. Eighteen one-rupee notes before him, Balaram sits, watching once in a while.

The rites for the ancestors are run through swiftly. Tearing out one thread at a time from a four-anna *gamccha*, Sadhan donates countless garments to all the unknown people, unnamed spirits of the past. Then the priest asks, 'Say, what did you want to give your mother?'

'An elephant, sir.'

'Here, son, throw a five-*shika* coin. This earns you the sacred virtue of donating an elephant, do you understand? Substitute price for item. This kind of donation is allowed, do you understand?'

Balaram writes the word 'elephant' on a piece of paper, and next to it, he adds 'Five *shika*.'

Sadhan is bewildered, stupefied. How incredible! A five-*shika* coin, and one reaps the sacred benefits of a promised elephant donation? If he'd known this, would Sadhan have . . .

'Another five *shikas*, for the horse.'

Then begins an amazing competition. Sadhan chants, 'Horse–land–gold–paddy–clothes–utensils.' The priest chants, 'Five *shikas*. Five *shikas*.' Balaram only checks to see that this unlimited donation-ceremony adds up to eighteen rupees.

'Thakur-mashai, the cow-donation to the brahmin's got to be five annas,' Balaram calls out.

Screwing up his eyes in the smoke, the *Agradani* asks, 'Can you get cattle for five annas?'

'If not, then the pair of you will be left sucking your thumbs! Doesn't the honorarium have to be paid?'

Sadhan wears his mother's tattered red cloth. He now looks somewhat like a mad bull. On the fire that burns, a wee earthen pot. A few grains of rice have been boiled, the *shradhanna*, a must for the shraddha. As the smell of rice invades his nostrils, Sadhan's senses begin to twitch, grow restless.

'Come Sadhan, sprinkle the water, touch the brahman's feet and get up.'

Sadhan stands up. His eyes glued to the floor. There, tied in Sadhan's *gamccha* is the one *pali* of rice given by Anadi-*daktar*. Why didn't the brahman cook all the rice? The rice was offered to

his mother after all, so what's the meaning of cooking only a few grains? Sadhan is suspicious. Makes a snorting sound in his nose.

'You wretch, gave me eighteen rupees, and you think you've become Harishchandra?'[1]

Balaram, about to laugh, stops short. Sadhan, bent low, is tying up the rice in the *gamccha*.

'What are you doing, what are you doing, son? That rice is my due.'

'Shut up, bastard!'

Sadhan curses the brahman. Hasn't this brahman made him donate unlimited, unparalleled wealth in Jati Thakurni's name? Isn't Jati Thakurni whizzing off to heaven now? To the feet of the very same god who was killed by her ancestors? To the celestial sphere? Why had Sadhan forgotten everything?

'Sadhan what are you doing?'

'Let me take the rice, I'll cook it.'

'Oh no, that's the shraddha rice, not to be eaten by you!'

'Shut up, Balaram!'

Sadhan began to yell like an enraged elephant. 'No money at home to buy and cook such rice. Would I let this rice out of my hands?'

'You idiot, you big fool!'

'The rice is mine! Balaram! Don't run after me.'

Screaming in impotent fury, the priest said, 'Taking the shraddha rice to cook and eat? You wretch, this shraddha's ruined.'

'Why ruined? Haven't I donated elephants? Haven't I given cows? Gold, silver, clothes, haven't I given all that? Which bastard dares ruin my mother's shraddha, I'd like to know?'

The bundle of rice held close to his chest, Sadhan lurches off into the distance. Now Sadhan will go home, light the stove, cook the rice.

The smell of rice, such a lovely smell. The smell brings his mother close, once again. As long as Sadhan cooks rice, eats hot rice, his *shanj-shokaaler Ma* will stay close, safe and secure.

Trying to remember his mother, Sadhan's eyes fill with tears of regret as he recalls his rudeness with the priest. 'Ma, you make your own way to heaven. Sadhan will cook rice now, eat it. Please forgive him.'

Notes

1 Harishchandra: King of the Surya dynasty, renowned for his charity.

Sindhubala

SINDHUBALA. PLAIN OF FACE, dark of skin. Women visit Sindhubala's courtyard whenever their little children are sick. At birth, you enter the world head-first. Sindhu, it is said, had entered the world feet-first. Ever since, Sindhu's feet have been deemed very auspicious. Even now, lots of people believe an ailing child can be cured by a touch of Sindhubala's feet.

The strip of canal at Garia is stagnant in places, and in others, criss-crossed by bamboo bridges. Across one such bridge lives Sindhubala. Her father was a mason. In the daytime he worked for the builder. At night, he'd filch a couple of bricks from someone or a bit of sand from someone else.

Sindhu's father had raised an enormous wall running right around their house. An ambitious man. 'Today's apprentice is tomorrow's mason.' From mason to builder. Become a builder, get

masons to labour for you. Sindhu's father would say, 'From a mason, I'll become a builder. I'll build courtyards, brick buildings, schools.'

'Yes, you'll build monuments!'

Sindhu's father would laugh at the taunt. He'd tell his wife, 'Don't curse the girl for being dark. A daughter's better than a son.'

'How better? Can she feed her parents while they live? Can she perform the last rites when they die?'

'What would you know?'

'Seen the girl's face? Bulging forehead, snub nose, black skin?'

'I'll bait a son-in-law with hard cash. And I'll build them a room or two on the roof.'

Long before building those rooms for Sindhu, her father fell off the scaffolding and died.

The marvel of Sindhu's healing feet was yet undiscovered. Her mother raised her on *muri* and *khoi*. Then she got Sindhu married to Sanneshi, son of Ramdas the mason.

The wedding was no ordinary affair. Accompanied with pots and pans and mats and rugs. A good many people sat in the courtyard and ate *shol* fish, rice and *kalai* dal. The fourteen-year old Sindhu left for her in-laws' home.

Barely three years later, the mother-in-law brought Sindhu back. She said, 'Sanneshi hasn't taken to her at all. First he goes off someplace. Then he goes someplace else. Everyone says, "Sanneshi's Ma, if you don't get a beautiful bride, how will Sanneshi stay home?" '

'And your son? What does he say?'

'Can a son ever defy his mother? And to top it all—what shame, shame Ma—your daughter even tried wearing amulets.'

Sindhu tearfully intervened, 'Your son had bought it for me.'

'Why?'

'I had asked him to.'

'Why?'

'To help have a handsome son.'

The mother-in-law had brushed aside Sindhu's words. Sindhu's mother had snarled and sworn at the woman. Then she told her daughter, 'Don't worry, Sindhu. I'll bring home my son-in-law.'

For a while, Sanneshi would come and go. Sanneshi was a quiet and timid fellow. After a few days he came no more. By and by his name became unmentionable in that house. Sindhu's mother would get angry. She'd say, 'Is there no God? Sanneshi married her himself, didn't he? And see, how his sons have all died, now? Throwing out my blameless Sindhu, no punishment for that?'

Sindhu's mother gave no more thought to her son-in-law thereafter. Struggling to survive, she found it hard enough to live from one day to the next.

One day Manudasi brought the Hindustani bahu from the lumberstack to meet her. The bahu, it seems, is looking for somebody like Sindhu. At Gaya or Naogaon, there had been an old woman like her. She'd keep children safe from ailments by touching them with her feet. Hearing about Sindhu, the bahu had brought along her youngest son.

Sindhu had shuddered to touch the little boy with her foot. But the woman gave her a *gamchha*. Before she left, she touched Sindhu's feet and left behind a coin and some *batashas*.

Manudasi used to be a midwife in this area. Now, she wanders from house to house, selling cowdung cakes for fuel. It's Manudasi who tells everyone about Sindhu's supernatural powers.

Sindhu's mother told her daughter, 'There, see now. Is there a god or what? Now listen, whoever comes, I'll do the talking. Don't you go opening your mouth.'

When Sindhu feels deeply about anything, her eyes brim over with tears. One eye is out of focus. She looks even uglier. She's very timid, scares at the slightest thing.

'Won't it be a sin, Ma?' Sindhu asked fearfully.

'Why?'

'Touching someone with my feet. What if some child falls ill? If something bad happens?'

For as long as her years have permitted, Manudasi has been selling girls, dispensing medicine when girls in the neighbourhood got into trouble. A long time, she's bought and sold more things than she would care to remember. Manudasi said, 'That's not for you to worry about, girl. If you see a sickly boy, say, "I can't open my door today, the Lord has forbidden me." '

'Lord? Which Lord?'

'Who's going to ask you that?'

In the end, that's exactly what happened. Sindhu's mother now asks for the money in advance. If somebody says, 'Panchumi, raised the price of your daughter's kick?' Sindhu's mother replies, 'Bless the lot of you, Ma, bless you. The rice which cost three rupees a *pali* you buy at three rupees a kilo. Spend the money with your eyes closed. What's getting cheaper these days, Ma, tell me?'

Sindhu's father didn't have a head for business. But her mother understands which way the wind is blowing. In a corner of the courtyard, she's broken the wall and opened a shop. There she sits, frying *khoi-muri-chhola*. She makes popcorn and sells it to the vendor.

Work hard never rest
Your fortunes will prosper
Your home'll be blest

Sindhu's mother says this every now and then. Sindhu helps her mother sometimes. At other times she sits on the verandah, her

cheek cupped in her palm. Some wall her father had raised. With the door shut it seems as if Sindhu is sitting in a silent, separate world.

On the other side of the door, the children noisily make their way to elementary school. Sindhu often watches them through a crack in the door. That boy is Ram Tewari's son. That boy's father pulls a rickshaw. All those boys had been brought to Sindhu by their mothers in the month of Jaishtha, on the sixth day of the lunar fortnight that was auspicious. Perhaps they've lived, grown, because Sindhu had touched them. They're the ones who come. Those who are 'babus' to the Sindhubalas, they don't come.

But one day Manudasi brought along a plump lady. And her granddaughter. The girl's parents would be horrified if they ever knew. They're not home so she's secretly smuggled the child to Sindhu.

The little girl is just like a soft fluffy doll. She smells heavenly. Sindhu suddenly feels terribly ashamed. Her feet so dark, the skin cracked, the very sight of them is repulsive.

The lady had said, 'It can't be helped, dear. Born divine, a *devangshi* girl, so you're touching a brahman's granddaughter with your feet. But I must say my dear! Your mother does take money. It's hardly free. Can't you at least keep your feet clean?'

Sindhu had cringed in embarassment. Right after that, Manudasi had brought her a pair of rubber slippers. She said, 'The babus' daughters wear them. Keep them on at home. They'll keep your feet soft.'

Sindhu scrubs her feet with a loofah, rubs them with oil, trims her toenails. Always wears clean clothes, puts vermillion in the parting of her hair.

'Are you a married woman?'

If anyone asks this question, Sindhu's mother says, 'Isn't she

a *devangshi* girl? Now how was I supposed to know that, then? Wedded her once, but that's nothing really. The girl said, "Ma, don't burden me with a household." '

Sindhu remembers those words, remembers them often. Especially when she's alone. All by her self. Aimlessly circling the courtyard in the eerie drowsy silence of the afternoon. Is this all there is, then, to Sindhu's life? Is this what God wanted? Then why had she been married? After all, Sanneshi used to come to work for her father. He'd sought out Sindhu on the sly. After the wedding Sanneshi had told her ever since he'd secretly had his palm read, he'd known all along that they were destined for each other.

Why had he said that? And then, why had he stopped coming? Why is her body still so firm? Why, when the dry winds of Spring blow does she, still, grow so restless?

All these questions bewilder Sindhu. There's a loose brick under the chowki on which she sleeps. In that hollow, she saves money. For whom does she save? Money, for whom? Tempted by the prospect of getting more money and jewellery, her mother-in-law had thrown out Sindhu and brought home a new bride. Sindhu is saddened when she thinks of Sanneshi. How he has suddenly made a name for himself in the mason trade, made money.

Had he not, perhaps Sanneshi would have come back to her.

These thoughts make Sindhu miserable. She goes to her room and lies down, her bosom pressed hard against the cool bare floor.

How would it be if Sindhu were to take her money and go back, to live with them? Or if she were to go off, wherever she wanted? If there are children at home, one feels like going about one's daily chores. Sindhu's home seems much too ordered, much too clean and sparkling.

This sterile, barren household. The old mother, her middle-aged daughter and their crows–cats–pigeons–and–parrots.

This sterile, barren body. This body that flourishes like a fruitless tree. No sons, no daughters, no birthing pains to break this body. With this body, unmarred and throbbing, Sindhu doesn't always enjoy sitting around as a *devangshi* woman. She wonders, will she end up like the women Manudasi talks about? One of them lived in this very neighbourhood. Nobody knew who she was in her prime. When she died, they found her house full of only cockatoos and parrots.

The woman had screamed for water, of course, but the frightened birds had squawked even louder and so nobody had heard her. One bird had been saying 'Kishta, Kishta, Kishta' in a harsh, squawking voice. Over and over again.

The very thought of it sets Sindhu's body afire. But just then her mother calls out, 'Sindhu, get up. It's Saturday. Time for the evening prayers.

Sindhu gets up. Changes her clothes, does her hair. Applies *alta* on her feet, sindur in her parting. In a corner of the courtyard, she places the oil-lamp under the auspicious tree. Then she sits on the low wooden stool.

On Saturdays and Tuesdays, someone or the other is bound to turn up. Sindhu greets them with folded hands, offers them a mat to sit on. Then she says to her mother, 'Bring the platter, Ma, to place my feet on.'

Feet on the platter, eyes shut, Sindhu prays to the Lord. Then she says, 'Come, bring the boy close. Scared of my teeth? Don't be scared dear, nothing to be scared of. Here, like some *mowa*?'

As she speaks these words, she slowly slides into a trance. She feels, she really feels that her feet are possessed of an extraordinary power. Manudasi chants a litany in a low, singsong voice, 'Ailment that's lethal, ailment that's catching, Ma cures all, all shall be well.' Every word like a drug. Listening, Sindhu's trance deepens. She sits

there, smiling a little every now and then, her body swaying gently. Her mother whispers, 'She's possessed, now. You can tell, see?'

A strange, frightening intoxication. The supernatural is as destructive a drug as power. Sindhu has spent many years of her life addicted to this drug. This addiction is an invisible enchanted wall. A wall that stands between Sindhu and all of life's realities.

Then, one day, the wall crumbles.

Sindhu's mashi, her mother's sister, brought along a lovely young girl. Ever since Sindhu was pronounced *devangshi*, her relatives have been nothing but envious of her. Sindhu's aunt is envious too. Her sons pull rickshaws, engage in trade unions. They don't believe in Sindhu's quackery. When they need magic and miracle, they go elsewhere.

The lovely young girl carries a little boy.

'Recognize her, Sindhu?'

'How would I?'

'I've married off no less than three boys, but I never came to you, my dear. This girl Phuli was brought to you by her mother once. Remember Renu?'

'That girl? So grown-up?'

'And why not? She's all grown up, now she's my daughter-in-law. Her mother's asked us to come by and meet you.'

'Renu's daughter? Grown up so soon?'

'What would you know, dear? You're not so young yourself anymore. Possessed of divine powers so your hair hasn't greyed. When people turn householders, they have their troubles, you get my meaning? Come, touch the boy with your feet. Phuli has come to say something to you.'

Phuli's mother was Renu. The same Renu whose sister had been Sanneshi's second bride. That too must now be, what, twenty or twenty-two years ago? Overwhelmed, Sindhu shook her head.

She touched Phuli's son with her feet, and then, how strange! She brought a rupee from her room and pressed it into the boy's hand.

Mashi was looking around, burning with envy, eyeing the brass utensils under the bed, the clothes on the shelf, the gold bangle on Sindhu's arm.

'You've made a good business out of it, Sindhu.'

'Don't say that, mashi. Not when you've brought your grandson!'

Sindhu smiled sweetly as she spoke. Be it only on Saturdays and Tuesdays. Be it only for a few hours. Still, Sindhu does become a part of divinity, doesn't she? So many unbelievers, so many doubters come to her. She always speaks with the same sweet smile.

With the same sweet smile, she now said, 'What do you have to say, my dear?'

There was something in Sindhu's smile that filled Phuli with awe. She said, 'It's about my mashi.'

'Which mashi?'

'The one married to mesho, your husband.'

'What about your her?'

'She had some disease, her children kept dying, they wouldn't live. Mashi had gone funny in the head. After a lot of treatment, she's finally cured. She has one son, four years old.'

'What can I do?'

'Mashi keeps saying you're a sorceress. Your evil spell caused all this. She says it all the time.'

'I don't cast spells on anybody.'

'Mashi was wondering if, if one day you'd come to our house, just see the boy . . .'

Sindhu was angry, saddened, offended, and then angry again. But was Sindhu an ordinary person, to be so quick to show her rage?

'Why would your mesho allow me to?'

'He wouldn't know.'

Sindhu's mashi wriggled uneasily and said, 'Sindhu, please say yes. Look, don't go telling your mother. She can't stand the sight of me. And how could she? A few years ago, didn't Sanneshi come to me? He wanted to speak to you, to take you back.'

'Mashi, what are you saying?'

'Ask your mother. She said, "A *devangshi* woman can't keep house for a man any more. My daughter now sits at home and raises a hundred rupees' worth of clothes and money. Why would we say goodbye to all of that?"'

Sindhu asked, 'How many years ago was this?'

'About ten years or so. You'll visit my house, won't you?'

'But this is my place, mashi. Don't mention whose boy he is. Bring him here. How can things work if I am not here, in my place? What's the boy like?'

Sindhu wanted to know whom he resembled. Mashi said, 'He's thin. And a glutton. Keeps falling sick all the time. These are good chillies you've grown. I'm taking a few.'

Mashi brought the boy, had him touched by Sindhu and took him away.

Usually, Sindhu would touch devotees with her feet and send them off. But she blessed this boy many times, placing her hands on his head and body. 'Get well, get well,' she said over and over again.

But the boy didn't get well. Mashi had come at the beginning of the rains. The boy didn't last through the season.

'What have you done? Sindhu, what have you done?'

How Sanneshi raged and threatened when he visited Sindhu's courtyard. 'You've cursed him, you've cast an evil spell on him!'

Sindhu was amazed to see Sanneshi. This grey-haired, hollow-cheeked, middle-aged man, was this the same Sanneshi?

'I didn't cast an evil spell on your son.'

'You've killed him, I'll have you sent to jail. Why did Khoka's mother ever send him to you?' Sanneshi left in tears. He swore to put the police onto her for being a quack, for being a fraud.

It was as if Sindhu's world fell apart. She couldn't forget the anger and accusation in Sanneshi's eyes, the abuses that he heaped upon her. Sanneshi had broken down the wall, left her exposed.

'Ma! Did your son-in-law come to get me, once?'

'He did.'

'You didn't let him?'

'No, Sindhu . . .'

Sindhu couldn't figure out why Sanneshi had come to get her when he already had a wife, a household. Did Sanneshi realize that he had treated Sindhu unfairly, that if he brought Sindhu home it would absolve his sin? 'Would you go there once, Ma?'

'Sindhu, have you gone crazy? Have you seen your face in the mirror, my dear? If Sanneshi had seen that face in his youth, he'd have had a fainting fit. Aren't you forty now?'

'Then I'll send mashi. Why did he say I killed his son?'

Upon hearing the proposition, Sanneshi took fright and began nodding his head vigorously, 'My goodness, can anybody live with that woman?' He'd lived with a *devangshi* woman for just a few days, hadn't that wreaked enough havoc on his world?

A few days later, everybody was in for a surprise. It seemed Sindhu was turning away anybody who came to her. She would no longer try to heal people by touching them with her feet. Sindhu would only make *khoi-muri* and sit around, getting older.

Ma said, 'Shame!'

Manudasi said, 'Shame!'

The neighbours said, 'Shame!'

Sindhu didn't listen to any of them. If you're human, you must burn. If you're holy, then too you must burn. If life has the same end for both, then why should the woman Sindhu spend her days pretending to be a goddess?

Jamunabati's Mother

AN ENDEARING NAME, but the girl is wholly expendable. If she had never been born, it wouldn't have mattered to anyone, anywhere. She doesn't know this, of course. Just two years old, she's happy enough to have made it into this world.

Her father cleans bottles at a chemist's. The mother goes from shop to shop, selling incense sticks. They too are expendable. For even her parents don't seem to be of any apparent use to either society or the world at large.

The girl is redundant, and her parents, no more than the brackets in a mathematical equation. If you don't get rid of them, you can't begin to solve the problem.

Jamunabati is thin, dark-skinned, with wisps of curly hair, a coin tied around her waist. Her father is thin, timid, an amulet on his arm. The mother is even thinner, even more timid, with amulets on both arms.

Even if they had once been of some use, in these times of reckoning, in this age of solving problems, it is clear that they're redundant. Now it's necessary to get rid of them.

Because they exist, water from the Farakka Barrage doesn't reach the Hooghly, the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority can't beautify the city, electricity doesn't light up every village.

Several lakhs of people like them must be immediately discarded, so that this country, this city, might become beautiful.

Hundreds of decisions and thousands of promises may then be fulfilled. These people are just garbage blocking the path to success.

Her parents don't know this. So they love their daughter very much. Perhaps they even love themselves.

Someone tells the mother, 'Oh what a nice name.'

The mother smiles, embarrassed.

'What a poetic name. Who chose it?'

'Her aunt.'

Her mother doesn't say, of course, that the name was chosen by their part-time maid Rakhali. After all, if Rakhali calls her 'Didi,' then she is as good as the girl's aunt.

Ever since the girl was born, Rakhali has been working at their place. Exactly at noon, when Jamunabati's mother returns home, she hears Rakhali singing off-key:

Jamunabati, Saraswati, blessed siblings these,
The sondal *flower goes pitter-patter on the* bakul *trees.*

That same Rakhali had said one day, 'Why don't you call her Jamunabati?'

So the name Jamunabati stuck.

Jamunabati's mother gets up in the morning and somehow

manages to feed her daughter some barley boiled with powdered milk. Then she eats a couple of leftover rotis from the previous night, gives a couple to the girl's father. Four rotis must be kept for Rakhali. The girl's mother sets out at seven. The father leaves at nine. Rakhali finishes her chores in other houses as quickly as possible, to be here and look after Jamunabati. For this, she must be paid an extra two bucks.

That's why money doesn't collect in Jamunabati's mother's coin-pot.

Because she has no savings, she tries doing something else.

With Rakhali's help.

Rakhali buys old newspapers from a few households. The girl's mother stays up nights, folds them into paper bags. Rakhali supplies these to Lala's shop. Takes a share of the money.

This time, the savings add up to eight rupees. Jamunabati's mother decides to buy the doll.

In the evening, the mother takes her daughter to the bazaar. In the evening, if you walk down the dirty lanes behind the bazaar, you can get cracked eggs, half-rotten potatoes, stale brinjals, very cheap.

And you can stare into the big stores through the glass windows. The toy shop is right on the corner. The other day, walking past the shop, the girl had suddenly pointed to a doll, said, 'Want that.'

A doll with rosy cheeks, red lips, golden hair. Under the bright lights, its hair was glowing, dazzling gold. It cost nine rupees, sixty paise. Returning home, the mother had immediately checked the coin-pot. It held only six rupees.

At that point of time, Jamunabati's mother had a reckless dream. Her coin-pot is full. She's bought that doll for Jamunabati.

The girl's father is telling her, 'That money is our mainstay. You spent it on a doll?'

'I spent it on a doll.'

Jamunabati's mother answers boldly. Other thoughts cross her mind while she dreams. Why must she suffer all this hardship—hawking incense sticks door-to-door? You're not a man worth your salt, isn't that why?

But even in her dream, she is unable to utter these truths to the man.

The man is so timid, thin, defeated.

Waking up, she decides to buy that very same doll. Buy it with money from the paper bags. That's why she's been telling her daughter, every now and then, 'See, my child. Just a couple of days, and I'll get it for you.'

But one day, the girl comes down with fever. The fever lingers. The girl's terribly weak, emaciated. The doctor asks, 'What do you feed her?'

'Barley, some rice and rotis.'

'Can a child live on barley? Give her good things to eat.'

'What should we give her?'

The doctor prescribes her diet. Jamunabati's father returns from the doctor's looking grim. The mother says, 'What do we have to feed her?'

'That stuff. Haven't you seen it in the movies? Twenty-three vitamins stuffed into a single container?'

'How much does it cost?'

'Fourteen rupees.'

'Fourteen rupees!'

Jamunabati's mother grows thoughtful. Then she breaks open her coin-pot, and places the coins in front of her husband. She says, 'I've got eight rupees here. Can't you manage the other six?'

The father takes the money. But his eyes grow moist.

Later, when the girl's fever goes down, Jamunabati's mother notices that the doll is no longer in the shop window. She is relieved. If the doll had still been there, she would have been distressed. As long as she had plans of buying the doll, she would imagine caressing it, cradling it. As if the doll was her daughter. A beautiful, fair, golden-haired Jamunabati. She, too, would become beautiful in her dream. As would Jamunabati's father. Happy, good-looking, aristocratic. How could the daughter be beautiful without good-looking parents?

Again she starts saving money. Now, it's not just money from paper bags. This time, Rakhali brings her some betel nut. She says, 'It's easy to dice. Why don't you chop it very fine. I'll take it across to that shop.'

Jamunabati's mother now chops betel nut, and makes paper bags as well. Now she herself has picked out a red dress in a shop. The dress costs twelve rupees. Only if she keeps this goal in mind can she bear to keep the *kupi* burning, sitting up late to make paper bags. Or chop betel nut. Otherwise, her body can't cope. Her back hurts. Her chest aches. Her vision blurs.

Now she looks even thinner. Even more worn-out and emaciated. As she walks through the throngs on the pavement, one look is enough to convince us that it is because of lakhs of people like her that the country can't achieve self-sufficiency in food, that free school education up to Class Eight remains an impossibility, that the quota for rationed rice doesn't increase.

Nowadays, Jamunabati's mother dares to dream even while wide awake. They are not useless and unwanted in this city. While everyone else takes taxis through the milling crowds, the three of them don't trudge through the streets. They also ride taxis. They too

walk under the bright lights. In this dream, Jamunabati is wearing the red dress. Her parents are well-dressed in gorgeous clothes. All purchased from proper shops. Not bought from the dimly-lit pavement at one-and-a-half, three-and-a-half or two-and-a-half-rupee bargains.

The savings in the coin-pot now add up to nine rupees.

But this time Jamunabati's illness is more serious. Again, they visit the doctor.

Now they learn that her lungs are weak, her liver is bad. Even the marrow in her bones isn't forming properly.

The father says, 'Should we give her a tonic?'

'You could.'

The doctor scribbles the name of a tonic. This time, it's her father who first thinks of breaking open the coin-pot. The tonic is bought for eleven rupees. Many thoughts cross Jamunabati's mother's mind. But she doesn't utter a single word. It's not as if the man is timid, thin and meek only in her dreams. He is timid, thin and meek in reality as well.

Now even Jamunabati's mother begins to think of the three of them as somewhat expendable.

She only says, 'The girl will get well, won't she?'

'Let's see.'

'Why do you say that? What did the doctor say?'

'He said . . .'

'What?'

'Do you know what she needs? Children like her need a constant supply of milk, eggs, butter, fish, yogurt, apples, bananas, meat, vegetables, and much more. Otherwise . . .'

'Otherwise?'

'The body doesn't get nourishment. She's malnourished.

When you take her on your lap, don't you feel how little she weighs? Can't you see how lifeless her eyes are?'

'If we give her all that now, won't she get well?'

'How can you? Come on, don't be crazy.'

Rakhali says with a dark look, 'If such a variety of foods is the answer, why would the babus' kids fall sick at all? Come on! Finish your chores quick. I'll just go for a dip in the Ganga and bring the water which washed Ma Kali's scimitar. Give her some. When the parents are so thin, how can you expect the girl to be roly-poly?'

But it's the same Rakhali who brings her a small sour apple from Kalighat. How the girl laughs when she sees it! Does she think mashi is being silly?

Rakhali plays with her and in a harsh, off-key voice sings:

Jamunabati, Saraswati, blessed siblings these . . .

As she makes her way home, that song makes Jamunabati's mother feel that everything is right with her world.

Now Jamunabati's father, her mother, bring her a fruit, a sweet, every now and then. The more she sees these things, the more the girl breaks into giggles. Does she think her parents are teasing her?

Now her mother no longer dreams of a doll or a dress. Now she thinks of all the fruits and good food in the market. Now she doesn't dream in her sleep or when wide awake. Now she tells her husband, 'You never had nutritious food, neither did I when I was pregnant. Is that why this happened to her?'

Now all she wants to do is grab and snatch food for herself and her family. Why doesn't she have any money? Why does the money never last? If she has no money, why is the market so full of glistening red apples, emerald green vegetables, silvery fish, fresh meat? So much rice, health food, baby food, Cadbury chocolate-

equal-to-a-glass-of-milk? Pictures of children grabbing fistfuls of Amul butter?

So many posters, so many slogans plastered across the walls and lampposts? We shall build a happy West Bengal. You are the leading light of our age. Progressing fast on the track of socialism? Threats of *garibi hatao*?

She doesn't understand that because she exists—because there are still several lakhs of people like her in the fields and farms, on the streets and pavements, beside the railway tracks—these promises cannot be fulfilled.

This city just isn't becoming beautiful. The decisions made everyday are not being successfully implemented.

She doesn't realize how the look in her eyes is changing. These days her eyes are angry, jealous; they ask questions. And seeing this, her employer asks, 'What's happened to you?'

'I'm upset, my daughter is ill.'

'What's wrong?'

'I don't know. They've asked us to give her a balanced diet.'

'Oh!'

Her employer scratches his ear. Then he says, 'What have they asked you to feed her?'

'A variety of things. No money, so . . .'

'Don't you get a commission on the incense sticks?'

'I do. It's not enough.'

Her tone is brusque. The employer is surprised. Jamunabati's mother had always sounded meek, her eyes pleading, tearful, like the eyes of a beggar. Remembering those eyes, the employer gives her a ten-rupee note. Says, 'I'm no different from you. Barely making both ends meet.'

Jamunabati's mother puts the note in her coin-pot. She

decides she won't spend it on anything. She'll gather a lot of money making paper bags and chopping betel nuts. Then the three of them will have milk, eggs and fish every day. Brinjals from Baruipur, potatoes from Tarakeshwar, bananas from Chandannagar, fish from Canning, they'll have everything. They'll glow with good health.

Then, seeing them walk past, people will not think them expendable. There will be no need to get rid of them in order to carry out the pre-election promises, the post-election decisions. Their existence won't make a difference to your plans. The Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority could carry on beautifying this city. There would be no hindrance to laying underground railway lines. Everyone would find jobs, farmers would get land. Nobody would need to leave rural Bengal before the Pujas to crowd the pavements of the city, during the autumn festivities, like garbage.

All this would be possible even if the likes of Jamunabati lived.

With these assorted thoughts her mother puts the money away.

But one day, the world comes crashing down on her.

The day Rakhali no longer sings the familiar song, the day they don't visit the doctor—the doctor visits them instead. The day all the co-tenants of the same house, even those they were unacquainted with, gather in their courtyard. The day Rakhali's agonized, uncivilized wailing disrupts the civilized quiet of the morning for the respectable families in the neighbourhood.

The day the two of them crouch, pleading, 'Oh Jamunabati, look up once, my dear! Give us a smile.'

But with her face flushed after days of dengue fever, Jamunabati just lies there, eyes shut. The day she doesn't part her lips smelling of tablets and medicine, doesn't smile at all.

Then, much, much later they walk to the cremation ground by the river. Today, Jamunabati is in her father's lap. Her mother, Rakhali and Rakhali's nephew walk alongside.

Rakhali's nephew says, 'We've to pay a lot for the wood, mashi. Why don't we . . .'

Eyes bloodshot, Jamunabati's mother stares wide-eyed at the shiny, silvery door. She is awestruck, unblinking. What a lot of aluminum in that door! She says, 'How much do we have to pay, Kanai?'

'Ten rupees. For that, and . . .'

Now Jamunabati's mother tells her father, 'Go and get it from the coin-pot. There are exactly ten rupees.'

Jamunabati's father goes home. Her mother sits and waits. Now her eyes don't look as meek and timid as before. Now there are no questions in her eyes, no anger, no jealousy. Her eyes are swollen, bloodshot, stupefied, disturbing, frightening. Now her eyes look amazed, truly amazed. Now she has realized that unless she and people like her are discarded, there is no future for this city, this country. They were obstacles, garbage on the road to progress.

From the amazement in her eyes it is clear that she is thinking, if this is so, why then should she live? She turns around, looking at the hundreds and thousands of names on the walls in memory of the people cremated there. Getting rid of folk like them is quite possible. That's the proof.

Now she doesn't look expendable any more, nor does she appear useful.

Incredibly unfamiliar, strange and terrifying she looks—for this morning, at this very moment in this pilgrimage, she has understood all about herself and others like her.

Now it seems that without getting rid of her and others like her, this city, this country, this life will never look beautiful. Because they exist, there are so many obstacles in the path of progress. It seems that, for people like her, some immediate, emergency measures are necessary. With so many scientists, so much planning, such a lot of gas and so many chambers—was it not possible to arrange something?

Giribala

GIRIBALA HAILS FROM TALSANA VILLAGE in the Kandi subdivision. It had never struck anyone that Giribala might have a heart and mind of her own. Our Giri is neither beautiful nor ugly, just ordinary. But her eyes are full of life. She'd catch your eye because of those eyes.

In their community, even now, it is customary to pay for the bride's hand in marriage. Aullchand had handed over eighty rupees, heifers, calves, so much stuff, to Giri's father. After that, he had married Giri. Truth be told Giri's father had also presented his daughter with four *bharis* of silver, pots and pans, floor mats and a cartload of bamboo. And why not? Giri's father owns several bamboo groves. Aullchand had said, 'It's only because the hut's burned down that I'm leaving your daughter behind. Give me some bamboo, I'll build a home, then I'll come to fetch my wife.'

Aullchand left and was never seen again. After a few days

Bangshi Dhamali, the ED peon, came to Giri's house. Bangshi Dhamali is ED peon at the Nishinda sub-post office. Because he can't support his household on a hundred and forty-five rupees, Bangshi spends his evenings helping the doctor at Nishinda treat his patients. The doctor is attached to a hospital and so of course he lures patients away for his own private practice. As a result Bangshi too has plenty of clout over the neighbouring villagers. They know, it's only via him that anyone can get to the doctor.

Having watched the doctor at work, Bangshi has himself begun to spout words of medical wisdom. As a result, he is now held in even greater esteem.

Bangshi addresses Giri's father as Mama. Nobody can remember exactly how this came to be. Bangshi Dhamali said, 'I'd been to Bethuadahari. A couple of other places as well. What do I hear? You've gone and married off your daughter to Aullchand?'

'He came along and I agreed.'

'Indeed! And how much has he paid you?'

'Eighty-one rupees, and some things.'

'Can you handle the risk?'

'What risk?'

'What can I say! I'm a government servant, the doctor's right-hand man as well, couldn't you have asked me just once? Aullchand's not a bad sort. Smoked a lot of ganja with him, that's not to be denied. But that money and that calf—it all belongs to Chan'an. Chan'an's marriage was fixed for Kalhat. So Aullchand, being Chan'an's paternal uncle, went to pay the bride-price.'

'What!'

'Well, Chan'an's mother was in tears. She'd begged and borrowed to get her son married. What kind of man is this fellow, tell me? Neither land nor property, lolling about Chan'an's house all the time . . .'

'No land or property?'

'No, no.'

'He took a cartload of bamboo to build a hut.'

'That's what I'm trying to tell you. After selling the bamboo to Chan'an's pishi, his father's sister, for a hundred rupees, he's gone off to the Banpur fair.'

Giri's father sinks to the floor in despair. Bangshi Dhamali continues to list Aullchand's exploits. Finally he leaves, saying, 'The boy isn't bad. But just like I told you. No land or property. Roams about from fairground to fairground, singing. Otherwise, he's not bad.'

'But Mohan never told us any of this. It was he who proposed the match, after all. He never breathed a word.'

'Why should he? They're best friends.'

Giri's mother said, 'I'll get my daughter married all over again. Cheat, scoundrel. I'm not sending my daughter to him.'

But when Aullchand turns up a year or so later, he doesn't give them a chance to refuse. He brings an enormous sweet tuber, new clothes for his bride, a stool made of jackfruit-wood for his mother-in-law, four new jute sacks for his father-in-law. Of course, Giri's mother does repeat all the things Bangshi had told them. Aullchand merely beams magnanimously and says, 'Can't live in this world by Bangshi-dada's words, Ma. Your daughter's going to live in a new hut now. That's not a lie, is it?'

Giri's mother braids her daughter's hair, dresses her. Then she says, weeping, 'This man, my child, like the tree with a thousand roots. Growing right in the heart of the house. Every time you uproot it, it grows back again. Every word he speaks is a lie but oh, how cleverly he plays with those words!'

Giri says nothing. The groom is supposed to first pay bride-price to the bride's father. All this is true, no doubt. But still, she's

a girl. A girl's by fate discarded, lost if she's dead, lost if she's wed. Giri senses that hard times lie ahead. She sobs silently, alone. Then she sniffs, wipes her eyes and says, 'Bring me home when the deity is worshipped. You will, won't you? Feed the brown cow. I've chopped the straw. Don't forget to water the hibiscus.'

And so, at the age of fourteen, Giri goes to keep house for her husband. Her mother packs pots and pans for Giri's new home. Aullchand says, 'Just add a bit of rice and dal, Ma. Got a job with the babus. Have to report for duty as soon as I get back. Won't have time to go to the market.'

Giri takes rice, dal and salt. Then leaves home. Aullchand walks at a rapid pace. Says, 'Now let's see you move those legs of yours.'

Aullchand takes her to a hut made of brick, once they enter the village of Talsana. Mango, jamun, guava, all kinds of trees in the babus' orchard. In one corner is a ramshackle hut meant for the keeper. Aullchand says, 'I'll build us a place to live in, sure enough. Ever seen anything like this? There's the pond, over on that side. Let's see you nip down to fetch some kindling, and put some rice on the boil.'

'But it's getting dark! Isn't there an oil-lamp?'

'Lamp? Now where would I find a lamp?'

The babus' maidservant, arriving suddenly, comes to Giri's rescue. The woman swears at Aullchand, gets an oil lamp. Takes Giri to the pond. Says, 'Have your parents hearts of stone, tell me? To leave such a tender little girl in the hands of that ganja fiend? What's he got to feed you? Grazes the babus' cows, works as a day-labourer. Hardly earns a pittance every month. Works sometimes, sometimes goes off, god knows where. Girl, if you've got even a grain of good sense, then listen to me, go to your parents' tomorrow itself, leave those bits and pieces of silver there.'

Even then Giri doesn't run back home the next day to keep her jewellery. She is seen instead lovingly plastering clay on the ramshackle hut, its frame protruding, at the corner of the orchard. From the babus, Aullchand gets hold of a piece of tin sheeting. Fashioned with a bamboo frame, that becomes the door of the hut. Very soon, Giri gets to work in the babus' household for a meal wage. After a few months, Aullchand says, 'Wife, made a householder out of me, you have. No parents, never known a home and family, drifted from one place to another.'

'Get help from the babus to build your own hut, get hold of some land.'

'You think they'll give?'

'Why not? A newcomer's expected. Will he be born in another's home? Even the wretched *boshtoms* have dwellings of their own.'

'You're right. My heart too aches for a home of my own. Never felt this way before, though.'

A home, how they yearn for a home of their own. But their first daughter, Belarani, is born right here, in this same hut. The girl is barely a month old when Giri returns to the pond to wash the babus' mosquito nets, sheets, rugs. The mistress of the babu household can't help commenting, 'That girl's quite crazy about her work, I must say. Works well, too.'

Overcome by an immense magnanimity, she gives her boys' old clothes to Giri's daughter. She tells Giri, 'Let your work be. Let the child have your milk. Or how will you cope?' Belarani, Paribala, Rajiv, are born to Giri at intervals of one-and-a-half to two years. And when the youngest daughter Maruni is born, Giri has an operation to prevent future childbirths.

Meanwhile Aullchand has prodded and pleaded with the babus and acquired two *kathas* of land. Even built a hut of sorts.

Now he wanders from place to place, working as a day-labourer. He is enraged. 'Had an operation, did you? That's a sin. Why did you do it? Go on, tell me?'

Giri remains silent. Aullchand grabs her by the hair, hits her a couple of times with his fists. Giri suffers the beating silently. Then she says, 'They said for you to go to the panchayat. They're building a road, men are needed. They'll give grain.'

'Why don't you go to your father, tell him to give us some bamboo.'

'What for?'

'Dying for a home weren't you, and look at the mansion you live in! Some bamboo would give us a house to speak of.'

'We'll work hard, make our home.'

'How?'

'We'll have to try.'

'The silver, if we were to pawn it, or sell . . .'

Giribala stares, unblinking, at Aullchand. Aullchand lowers his head before her gaze. Giri has placed her few *bharis* of silver in the hollow of a bit of bamboo, entrusted it to the mistress of the house. Even now, she works at that house. From the age of eight Belarani has been running a thousand errands at that same house for a meal wage. Even she is ten years old now. Fed on the rice of the babus' house, the girl grows rapidly, flourishing like a weed in the rains. To get the girl married, that bit of silver will be required. That bit of silver, and twenty-two rupees earned through hours of bone-wearying toil.

Giri says, 'I won't sell the silver to build a house. Baba gave all he could. Provided a cartload of bamboo for the hut. The price of that bamboo, even in Nishinda, was then a thousand rupees. One hundred and sixty-two bamboos.'

'The same old story.'

'Won't you get our daughter married?'

'A daughter means a female slave for someone else's house, after all. When he read my palm, Mohan had said that the fifth time onwards there'd be only boys. You've gone and turned barren, you want to go astray.'

Giri had gripped the *bonti* tightly. She'd said, 'Speak such evil and I'll slash the children's throats and then my own.'

'No, I didn't . . . I won't say such things . . .' Aullchand had quelled his tongue. He spent the next few days worried and anxious. Perhaps it was then that Aullchand began hatching his plan. The root cause of this too was Mohan.

Mohan appeared out of the blue one day. Lots of work in every village with the bus route from Krishnachowk to Nishinda now to be an asphalt road. Both Giri and Aullchand have been going to work. They earn grain, the mouths are fed. Mohan has also been working. Still the same vagabond, hasn't married, hasn't settled down. He sells the wheat and buys rice, pumpkin, fish. At night, he sprawls out on Giri's verandah. Wandering through cities, drifting through villages, a complete *bohemian* in speech and manner. Looks at Aullchand and clucks sympathetically, 'Stuck in the mud, are you, pal? Clean forgotten the life you had?'

Giri says, 'Stop your churlish nonsense.'

'My friend had such a great singing voice.'

'That he did. That brought money too. But that money never got home. Wouldn't buy food for the children.'

It was Mohan who said one day, 'No girls at all in the land of Bihar. Yet the bride-price's very high there. So, those folks are coming here, taking our girls away. Paying so much! Sahadev Bauri got five hundred rupees for his daughter.'

'Where is that?'

'Would you know if I told you, pal? Very far away, indeed. And they don't speak Bangla.'

Aullchand said, 'They paid five hundred rupees?'

'Sure.'

The conversation ends there for the moment because just then a fire breaks out in the cowshed of Kali-babu of the panchayat, sparked off from a pile of smouldering hay, the smoke from which acted as a mosquito repellent. A huge uproar. Everybody rushes in that direction.

Giri forgets the conversation, Aullchand does not. Who knows what Giri was thinking, for her husband's words caused her no alarm. Because one day, Aullchand said, 'Who wants your jewellery? We'll get Bela married, then fix our house with brick and mortar. Fed and fattened in the babus' house, how nice my daughter looks!'

Even then, no warning bells rang in Giri's mind. She said, 'Looked for a boy?'

'Just watch how it all takes care of itself.'

Giri said, 'The hut's sagging to one side. Need to prop it up a bit. How else will it stay up?'

It was with this idea in mind that Giri went to visit her father for a few days. Carrying Maruni in her arms. Holding the hands of Pari and Rajiv. Bela had wept a lot. Because she was leaving her behind, Giri had pressed eight annas into her hands. 'Buy yourself some sweets, girl. You want to visit your grandparents, you can go another time. Now work hard. We're gone four days at most.'

How could Giri know that she would never see Bela again? If so she'd have taken her daughter along. If so she'd have clasped her, kept her so close. Making the girl slog at the babus' since she was seven, was that mere fancy? Couldn't feed her, couldn't clothe her. A kiss on Bela's forehead and Giri left for her parents'.

A girl's by fate discarded, lost if she's dead, lost if she's wed. Still, their daughter, after all! The father has bought three bighas of land with his profits from the bamboo trade, been apportioned another two bighas as his share of property. The father says, 'Couldn't bring you home, *khuki*, but stay a few days now that you're here.' The mother says, 'Let me fry some *muri*, pick some arum. What kind of a marriage is this, child? How your skin used to glow. And now, turned soot black! Your lovely hair gone, your bones sticking out! Spend a few days looking after yourself. Let your health improve.' The brother says, 'Why not stay, didi. Even for a month—I'll make sure there's enough to eat.'

Lots of pampering, lots of care. The father says, 'Bamboo? Of course. You're here for a bit, take some when you go. How can you have good in-laws without a good home? They'll see the house, know they've married into a good family.'

Giri could have gotten more out of her father if she had wept and pleaded. The mother said, 'Girl, just ask for a maund of rice.' But Giri hadn't asked. Why should she? Give, if you've a mind to. Why should I ask? Giri had slowly walked over to the hibiscus bush. See, so many flowers. She had planted that bush. How nice the courtyard looked, freshly plastered with cow-dung, the roof newly thatched. If her mother agreed, Giri would leave Rajiv here so that he could go to school. She bathed her children, scrubbing them with lots of soap. She bathed too, washed her hair clean. Then she'd gone for a walk about the neighbourhood. This little respite, as though unimaginable bliss. The mother had sent her brother to the canal to catch fish. A single irrigation canal had transformed the area. Raise two crops a year, catch fish all the year round. Giri was content. Her mind at rest, at peace.

Bangshi Dhamali had come. 'Poor, poor Giri! How you suffer at the hands of that Aullchand! Doctor-babu's built a house in

Baharampur. The sons study there, the wife lives there too. Had Aullchand been a man, he'd look after his children. You could work there, kept your youngest with you. A part-time job in the neighbourhood too, after your work at the babu's. Could have set up house with your children. All of them could've worked for a meal-wage. Can city ways be village ways?'

Giri had smiled a little, 'Dada, let those things be. Now tell me, all the riff-raff are getting land, so can't your Rajiv's father get some too?'

'Has he tried? Come to me? Said anything about it? I work for the government, I'm the doctor's right-hand man, sure enough I could have done something.'

'I'll send him to you.'

To Giri it all seemed like a dream, unreal. They're to have a house, perhaps some land as well. She knows only too well that her husband's an absolute vagabond. Yet her heart filled with pity as she thought of him. No home, no land, how can such a man be a householder? How can he settle down? 'Tell me, dada, should I send him to you?'

'Can't you see your father? As good as gotten into the panchayat. And Mama, what about you? Surely you should arrange for Aullchand getting a bit of land, first of all?'

'I'd tried, but he insulted me in public and stalked off. Said he could get it on his own.'

Giri knows nothing of all this. 'Oh Bangshi-dada! I beg you, please tell me what needs to be done. He knows no better. A roof over our heads true, but through which the moon shines at night and the sun mocks us in the daytime. No leaves to thatch it with, no straw. Bela's to be married, but where will the groom's folks sit? Find us a match for her.'

'There is a boy, haven't you noticed? My own paternal cousin. What a nice shop the boy's set up. Sells groceries.'

Giri was relieved at this news. Rajiv had said, 'I can go everyday to Jamai-dada's shop then, get oil and salt on credit, right, Ma?'

Giri had rapped him sharply on the head. 'Growing to be your father's son. Eat on credit and twiddle your thumbs.'

The two days rolled into six. As they depart from her father's home, Giri dressed in a new sari, the children clad in new clothes of the Bangladeshi brand 'Nilam! Nilam', stamped with the dead-sahib symbol, a bundle of rice on Giri's head, Bangshi Dhamali floats in like a straw in the wind, breaks the bad news. 'Disaster or blessing, call it what you will. Tremendous news, oh Mama! Aullchand said, "Come Bela, let's go to your Mama's." Took her to Kandi on that pretext, with Mohan's connivance. Married off that mother's pet, that timid twelve-year-old girl there, to a stranger from another land. They're strange folks, live in Bihar. Five of them have married five such Belaranis and gone back to their land. It's all part of the girl-trafficking business, oh Mama! All the addresses they've left are fake. It's a common racket nowadays. Aullchand's got four crisp, hundred rupee notes. Now Mohan and he are sitting at home, getting drunk. Aullchand is weeping "Bela! Bela!" and Kali-babu from the panchayat is swearing at him, calling him names.'

Giri's world falls apart. She bursts into wails of despair. Her father says, 'Let's go, I'll take some men with me. We'll find the girl, thrash that father of hers. Cripple him for life. And we'll fix that Mohan for good as well.'

Mohan is nowhere to be found. Aullchand boxes his own ears in remorse and laments loudly, occasionally blustering, 'It's my daughter I've married off, so what's it to any of you?'

They search high and low. Giri goes crying to the babus with her silver necklace. 'Please speak to the police, oh Babu! Tell it on the radio. My Bela knows nothing beyond Talsana. You also know that my man's a monster. Why did you leave my daughter to him?'

The babu explains to Giri's father, 'Thana-police is lots of trouble, very expensive too. The damage is done. This is a new racket that's begun. All this talk of marriage is just a front for girl-trafficking. The racket's in full swing all over Murshidabad. They come, give a few hundred rupees. A few crisp notes are enough to make the beggars lose their heads. The police won't touch a case that's full of holes. They'll tell you, if the father gets his daughter married, what can the thana do? Poor Bela, curse her fate!'

Father, neighbours, the babu's wife, everyone offers the same explanation to Giri. 'Fate rules over everyone. What can you do? It would have been good were you fated to keep her with you. She's a girl, not a boy. A girl's by fate discarded, lost if she's dead, lost if she's wed.' Her father sighs, says, 'Your daughter's sacrificed her own life, as if she's given her father the money for the house.'

Crazed with grief, Giri sighs, 'Don't you send any more bamboo, Baba. Let the devil do what he can.'

'No use going to thana-police, child.'

Giri leans against the wall and sinks to the floor, silent. Shuts her eyes. Amidst this numbing grief, the truth suddenly flashes across her mind. Nobody is willing to give much thought to a girl-child. She, too, should not worry. She, too, is female. Her father too had surrendered her to a monster without making any enquiries first.

Aullchand senses the change in the air. So he says, 'Your daughter's not all that innocent either. To hunt for the girl, the necklace is produced. If she'd given her jewellery earlier, the house would have been built, daughters would not have to be sold. And

look, what a shameful thing to have done. She has an operation, comes back barren. Says, "You can't even feed us, what would you do with a son?" Well, I've shown what I would do. Even the daughters can yield so much profit, see how much money I got . . .'

Giri beats her head against the wall overwhelmed with rage, with grief. Everyone rushes to stop her.

Over time the uproar dies down. The babu's aunt is a wise lady. She says, 'An adolescent girl's her father's property. What use is it for you to shed tears?'

Giri doesn't sob any more. Grimfaced, she leaves Pari at the babus' house. Says, 'If your father comes to get you, I'll chop you to pieces if you go with him.'

And if Aullchand tries to speak to her, she doesn't answer him at all. Just stares unblinkingly at her husband. Aullchand gets scared. He says: 'It's a–l–l for the house. So we can build a home, right?'

'Right. Tell Mohan to find out where they eat human beings. Why not sell off these three also? Enough money then for a cement house. Can't Mohan find out?'

Aullchand says, 'Never met someone as heartless as you, wife. Asking me to sell the children? No wonder you made yourself barren. Or else how could you speak this way? And your father was willing, so why didn't you take the bamboo?'

Giri leaves the room, sleeps on the verandah. Aullchand whines for a bit, then falls asleep.

But time's a great leveller after all. Over time Giri accepts everything. Aullchand buys bamboo matting and makes a hut. The roof remains thatched with palm leaves. Rajiv becomes Kali-babu's apprentice and Maruni grows up, playing about the courtyard. Looking at Pari, Giri cannot stifle the fire in her heart that burns so. Just like Bela. The same smile, the same gaze, the same tilt of

the head. The mistress says, 'What a good girl she is. Loves her work so.'

Because she loves her work, Pari sweeps the babus' huge rooms and verandahs ten times over, carries the paddy-sacks to the pond for washing, plasters the courtyard, so huge, like a field, with cowdung. Giri feeds Pari some *muri*, fried chickpeas or sweetened chickpea balls, then roams around in the babus' orchard collecting leaves and branches. In the middle of the afternoon, she is surrounded by rustling leaves, scurrying squirrels, a gentle breeze ruffling her unkempt hair. She remembers then, the plaintive appeal in Bela's voice, 'But Ma, you're frying *muri* today! When they call from the babus' house, will you tell them that Bela will go to work tomorrow? Today she'll stay home?'

Such a big girl, and she still liked to sleep with her face pressed into her mother's bosom. The low wooden stool on which the babus' aunt used to sit for her oil-massage had fallen on Bela's foot, grazed it. In the end, warmed-up oil from the lamp had been applied to soothe the pain. If Giri had fever, Bela would ask for time off from the babus' house to run home and cook the rice before going back again.

Bela, Belarani, Beli
Not discarded, our dear Beli
Beli's her name I said
Lost if she is dead,
Lost if she is wed.

Gone, gone where? How far? Which place? Remembering, wondering, Giri would whisper in memory of her lost daughter, 'There, there! Wherever you may be, stay well, stay safe, my girl. If I knew where you were, I'd fly to you like a bird. But I don't know, little one! I took the address and had Babu write a letter. That address was fake, my dear!'

Back home, Giri cooks rice. Eats with Maruni. Aullchand's rice stays in the pot. The days he doesn't go to work he lies stretched out on the verandah. The days he does, it's mostly on small-time jobs. Buses now ply on the Krishna-Chowk-Nishinda busway they had built. Get onto the bus, and you'll reach Kandi in an hour-and-a-half. Now there's work going on, digging a drainage outlet from the irrigation canal. The babu's son now throws his weight around there. Working as an overseer, he has managed to extract a bus-permit as well.

It's there that Giri catches sight of Bangshi Dhamali. With quite genuine concern, Bangshi exclaims, 'Oh dear, Giri. I didn't recognize you. You look like such a wreck! Pining after that daughter of yours I suppose . . . well, what can you do about it, after all?'

'Oh that's not it, dada. It's because Pari is ten years old now.'

'Ten years?'

'Why! The time your doctor-babu built a brick-and-mortar building, the time *electiri* came to Nishinda, that's the time Pari was born.'

'True enough.'

'If we'd only listened to you then, moved away, all of us! Even the boy's working as an assistant. If we'd moved then, they could have gone to school.'

'Don't know about school. But the *town* is like an ocean now. Your children would have been working by now.'

Giri understands that Bangshi is angry at the suggestion that her children could go to school.

'Let it be, dada. They'll have to earn by the sweat of their brow. What's the use of some two-bit reading and writing? So why don't you find a match for Pari?'

'I'll let you know, let Aullchand know.'

'No, let me know.'

'This is an empty grudge you bear, my dear. He's done something foolish once, can there be no forgiveness for that? Can wedding arrangements be discussed with a woman? The other party will wonder if there's something wrong with your family. When you arrange a match for your son, his prospective in-laws would listen to you. But will they listen when it's your daughter's marriage in question?'

'I should know what happens.'

'Let's see. There's a chap, plies a rickshaw at Keshtochowk. Quite old, though. Say about twenty-five.'

'That's okay.'

'The girl will live in Keshtochowk itself. No land or property, but the rickshaw's an asset. Even that brings in money for four or five days. In the evening, the chap rolls bidis. But she'd have to keep house. Got no one to cook and clean for him so he wants a wife.'

'Let's see. If it works out, we'll fix the wedding for this Magh itself.'

The heart that had broken over Bela's loss now sees a ray of light. A glimmer of hope. Giri says, 'Whatever I've got, I'll give it all. No point keeping it. I'll worry about Maruni later. My own daughter, how can I sing her praises! She slogs at the babus' house true enough but a meal a day and see how pretty she's grown. Who'd take her for a ten-year-old? Come dada, have some tea.'

Sipping tea, it's Bangshi who says, 'So Mama's got two more bits of land, two more granaries. Really, Mama has done well for himself. Such a feast for the eyes. But they never come here, after all, never bother to find out how you are. It's a painful thing for you to hear, sister, but even your own folks aren't always your

own. Mama mixes with his equals now. Not with someone in your station in life.'

Giri sighs. Undoes the knotted corner of her sari tucked at her waist, takes out some money to pay for the tea. Says, 'Oh dada, remember Pari.'

'I'll remember.'

Aullchand meets Bangshi, they speak about the rickshaw-puller. Aullchand is delighted. He says, 'Dada, it's a rickshaw-puller that I've in mind as well. He plies a rickshaw at Baharampur. Head-full of hair, complete with beard and bristling moustache, all dressed up in *coat-pant* stamped with the dead-sahib brand! Don't you worry about this any more.'

Later, when Bangshi meets Giri, he says, 'I've spoken to Aullchand. You don't have to worry any more.'

Aullchand goes in search of Mohan. Mohan's is the brain that guides Aullchand. Lalbagh, Dhuliyan, Jangipur, Ziaganj, Farakka, is there any place he has not been? In Delhi, Meerut, Dhanbad and Tatanagar, the flesh trade is rampant, flourishing. A great demand for nubile young girls from West Bengal. The rich clients, the traders, are fond of tender flesh. If fed and fattened, a girl can be used to recover all costs within a few years.

Mind you sir, the wedding game needs to be played. If you offer money outright the village folks will mob you. So it needs to be said, 'Girls are scarce in Bihar . . .'

The wedding ceremony is performed, priest and all. Then one must say, 'I'll complete the remaining rites and rituals back home, and then we'll have . . . what's called conjugal relations. With your kind permission, let me take away the bride.'

There have been several instances when girls have been taken away with the excuse of, 'I've come from Bihar to get married.' Now a new ruse is required. The local *tout* can locate the girls.

Even he doesn't get to know the full story. Although he senses that there's something fishy afoot. But he'd rather not know where exactly the fraud lies. He's been asked to supply brides and that is all that he does.

The parents–brothers–uncles of the girls don't suspect a thing. All they know is they're giving the girl, they're getting the bride-price. The groom's a foreigner and so the need to keep it secret. People are no longer well-meaning, after all. If they know how much money we're getting, they'll throw a spanner in the works. A foreign groom is best for us. Bengali grooms pay the bride-price still, in communities where that's the custom, but then they ask for a watch, a bicycle, a radio—five-seven thousand rupees gone before you know it.

Aullchand goes looking for Mohan. After the Belarani debacle, Kali-babu had said, 'No more odd jobs for you any more. You won't find work at the panchayat.'

Armed with his education (up to fourth-grade), Mohan has now set up operations around the Nishinda Block Office. Selling off fertilizer as soon as the farmers acquire some, grabbing a share in the agricultural debts—now he has a lot to do.

Aullchand's tale has him shaking his head in vigorous denial. 'No thank you. Mohan Mandal wants nothing more to do with your affairs. Done with charity, enough's enough. Getting a girl married is an errand of virtue. You got the money, what did I get? At least those folks gave me forty rupees. And you? Took the money and built a house of bamboo-lath. I'm scared of your wife, mister.'

'Don't worry, she's the one who's suggested this.'

'Is that so?'

'Just you listen,' Aullchand says, 'Why the rickshaw-puller from Keshtochowk? You keep to the background. Send out feelers. Aren't there rickshaw-pullers in the city? Wished for the longest

time to have in-laws in Baharampur *town*. Increases my esteem in the village, also gives me a toehold in the *town*.'

'A rickshaw-puller from the *town*?'

'Yes, mister. Give it a try. But make sure you look in Baharampur. No more folks from that Bihar place. Must be a rickshaw-puller from *town*, my daughter will stay in *town*. We'll come and go, bring her home sometimes. Bela's mother is still grumpy with me. Now her doubts will finally vanish.'

'You want to get friendly with your woman?'

'It's better that way. That bitch doesn't think I'm human. I want to prove that I can get a daughter properly married, too. I can't manage that without your help.'

Mohan laughs. He says, 'Go on, then. But I won't be seen anywhere. I'll just provide the contacts. You're asking for a son-in-law from the *town*, what if he hands you a list of demands?'

'I'll have to borrow money.'

'Got it, now go.'

Mohan realizes that this time he'll have to tread very carefully. The 'just-arrived-from-Bihar' *party* will remain backstage. In the forefront will be the rickshaw-puller. He will be the groom at the wedding. And a good thing, too. This time, five girls must be procured. Rickshaw-puller . . . rickshaw-puller . . . now, who can do the job? A visit to the *town* is on the cards.

The business of Pari's marriage brings Giri and Aullchand a little closer, once again. Finally Mohan tells Aullchand, 'I've found a groom.'

'What's the deal?'

'Has a watch. Owns a radio. Plies a rickshaw, so he doesn't want a bicycle. Groom's clothes, bridal wear, mat–umbrella–shoes, hardly very much.'

'Will he pay bride-price?'

'A hundred rupees.'

'Any place to live in?'

'A rented room. But the rickshaw is his own.'

Aullchand and Giri are delighted. When the boy comes to see the girl, Giri stays out of sight but looks him up and down carefully from her hidden vantage point. The boy's name is Manohar Dhamali. Sturdy of build, bearded, and a moustache too. There really is a rickshaw-puller called Manohar Dhamali in Baharampur. This boy is actually Panu. Just acquitted for lack of evidence in a robbery case. Even Aullchand doesn't know this. After coming out of jail, Panu has married two Paribalas, one in Farakka and one in Jalangi, and handed them over to his new masters, the 'we-are-from-Bihar' gang. For five weddings he is owed five hundred rupees, not bad at all. Panu's next stop is Siliguri.

Last time, for Bela's wedding, they couldn't invite the relatives. This time Giri's parents come. The conch shells are blown, the women ullulate. Giri, oily and sweating, cooks rice and meat in the kitchen. She's dressed Pari in the jewellery she'd kept safe with the babus. Her mother has given her new clothes to wear. The babus have offered fifty rupees by way of help. Her father has brought rice. The groom arrives at the wedding in a bus, with five companions. Smeared with turmeric and *alta*, Pari looks very much like Bela.

The next day they hail a bus from the main road and leave.

When she left, that's the last time they see Pari. The next day, Aullchand goes with Rajiv and Giri's brother to *town*, to see his daughter. They're gone for the longest time. Afternoon turns into evening. Then night. The hours roll by. Giri hears the scrunch of shoes in her courtyard. At once, warning bells ring in her mind. She opens the door to see Bangshi Dhamali. Bangshi's clutching Rajiv. Rajiv sobs, 'Ma!' And Giri knows at once that disaster has

struck again. She gazes at him, silent. Her brother says, 'Didi! I'll explain.'

There's not much to tell. The Manohar Dhamali who lives in *town*, he's a middle-aged man. They'd tried asking around. 'Didn't find your man at his address? How will you? Sounds like Panu. Yes, yes, he's been going around, getting married quite a few times these last few days. Seems to have joined some kind of racket.'

Giri interrupts, asks, 'Isn't Mohan involved in this?'

'He's the ringleader.'

'And Rajiv's father?'

She runs off to find Mohan. Everyone says Mohan's made five to seven hundred rupees out of Pari's wedding. Need girls, want money, he's lost his head as well!

A big crowd collects in Giri's courtyard. 'Get hold of Mohan, thrash him.' 'Get the thana-police involved.' 'What about the law of the land, after all?' Many words, much noise.

Aullchand returns in the wee hours of the morning. Overwhelmed by the gravity of the situation, Aullchand has come back drunk. Where did he get the money? 'Yes yes, my name is Aullchand Sardar, sir! Could Mohan escape me? I wrung his neck and squeezed the money out of him. And why shouldn't I, tell me? Isn't the girl my own daughter? Didn't you go sell her off on false pretences? And you want to take the money? Why should I let you? Where is Pari's mother? Why did you have that operation, wife, the more daughters you produce, the more money you acquire. If I don't build a thatched house for you . . . Pari my child!' Aullchand bursts into loud sobs, then lies down on the verandah and is asleep in an instant. Her mouth dry, Giri forces out the words, 'Please go back to your own homes.'

Everyone moves away, goes home. They wonder what Giri will do. Maybe she'll die, maybe she'll drown herself. Everyone says, 'Maruni will have the same fate. What a scandal over a girl's

wedding, I tell you! Go, Giri, plead with the babus, tell the thana-police.'

Giri stares at them, her eyes widened in surprise. Shakes her head, no. No, she won't do anything.

Aullchand's made money, let him do something. Giri shakes her head, disagreeing, 'No, no.'

Bangshi Dhamali says, 'Who knows what God had in mind. One daughter got them walls of bamboo and the other, a thatched roof.'

Giri stares at him.

Aullchand thatches the roof even as he weeps for his daughter. The more his eyes fill with tears, the more Giri's eyes stay dry.

The babu's pishi says, 'She's the mother of a girl-child, after all! They say, a girl's by fate discarded, lost if she is dead, lost if she is wed. And your fate, no different. Don't I know why you shed no tears? Small sorrows make you weep but great grief turns you to stone. Let's see you get to work. You'll get used to it all, my girl, but you've got to feed that mouth at the end of the day.'

Giri stares at her as well. Then says, 'Speak to the mistress. Give me my dues.'

Giri takes the money and knots it into the corner of her sari. Returning home, she stands in the courtyard. Not a bad house. Walls made of bamboo plastered over with clay, a thatched roof, not a bad home. Just the kind of house she'd wanted, after all. Perhaps she had wanted too much. That's why Beli and Pari had to be handed over to the pimps. To be prostitutes, to those men, pimps. Were any of those girls bought to play wife? Never.

What a house! Aullchand glances at Maruni furtively. Then carries on with his work. Giri stares at him, unblinking. Aullchand thinks to himself, no matter how sad she is, she must love the way the house is now.

When they get up in the morning, everyone is dumbfounded. How extraordinary, how very extraordinary. Giribala has gone to *town,* boarded the bus from the main road in the early hours of the morning. Maruni in her arms, Rajiv's hand clasped in her own. Later they come to know that getting off at Nishinda she'd told Bangshi Dhamali, 'Tell Pari's father, he can rot for all eternity in his house.' Giri will work in the *town* as a maidservant, bring up her children. If Aullchand tries to look for her, Giri will lay her body across the railway tracks.

The news amazes everyone, sets their heads shaking in disapproval. What happened to Bela and Pari was common practice these days. But why leave your husband and go away? What kind of woman was that?

Everyone is convinced that it's not Aullchand but Giribala who's at fault. An indescribable relief fills them, all of them, when they reach this conclusion.

And walking through the streets in *town*, Maruni clasped to her bosom, Giri thinks to herself, 'If the heart'd mustered up courage earlier, I'd have left then, long ago. Would Pari have been lost to us then, or Bela?'

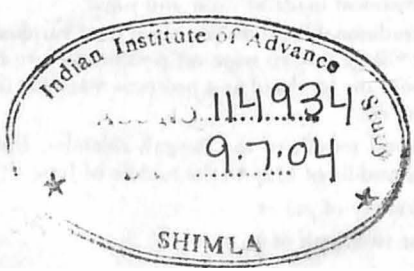
Tears stream down her face as she remembers. But she walks on.

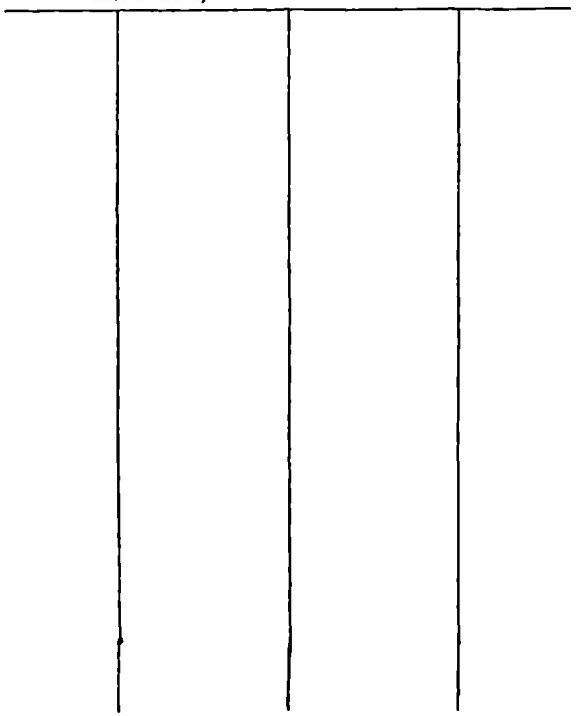
Glossary

Note: Certain words which have been italicized in the text to denote the way they are used in Bengali do not appear in the glossary

alta	lac-dye used by Hindu women to outline the soles of their feet
Baishakh	the first month of the Bengali calendar, from mid-April to mid-May
batasha	a small convex sweet drop either coloured white when made from sugar or brown when made from molasses
BD office	Block Development Office
BDO-babu	Block Development Officer
bediya	a nomadic tribe
bhari	unit of weight equal to 180 grains
bonti	curved blade fixed on a narrow wooden base; used by Bengalis to chop vegetables or fish while squatting/sitting on the floor
boshtom	derogatory/colloquial for Vaishnav
chowki	low wooden platform
daktar	doctor
dom	Hindu low-caste; untouchables who burn the dead and tend to the cremation grounds, in this case, those who help with dissections and post-mortems in the hospital
dopati	balsam (impatiens balsamina)
ED peon	Extra Departmental postal peon, a casual post as opposed to a regular governmental post
gaja	sweetmeat made of flour and sugar
gamccha	a traditional hand-woven towel used variously by village folk to wipe off perspiration, to tie about the forehead as a protection against the sun, etc.
Jaishtha	second month of the Bengali calendar, from the middle of May to the middle of June
kalai dal	a variety of pulses
kathas	one-twentieth of an acre

khoi, muri	varieties of puffed rice
khuki	affectionate pet name for a girl
kunch	red and black seed of a climber (abrus precatorius), used as a weight by goldsmiths
Magh	tenth month of the Bengali calendar, from the middle of January to the middle of February
mowa	parched/puffed rice rolled into balls with jaggery
pali	old measure of weight, equivalent to about two and a half kilograms
shika	currency equivalent to a quarter of a rupee; no longer in use
Srikshetra	lit. 'the consecrated ground', the town of Puri where the Jagannath temple is located





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