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RAJARSHI TANDON OPEN UNIVERSITY

MAEN-116

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION: AN ANTHOLOGY

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We are in the process of obtaining copyright permission from others included in this volume and grateful thanks are due to them. The entire material in this Anthology is meant as the basic textual material for the students of MA English programmes of IGNOU.

INTRODUCTION

The Anthology of prescribed texts for **Contemporary Indian Literature in English Translation (MEG 14)** is in your hands. It contains, in English translation, short stories, poetry, and non-fictional prose in the form of excerpts from biography, autobiography, pen-sketch and travel writing — all except the two novels, *Tamas* by Bhisham Sahni and *Samskara* by U.R. Anantha Murthy and the play *Tughlaq* by Girish Karnad.

This collection will save you the bother of going to a library in search of the basic texts. The two novels and the play mentioned earlier have been left out for obvious reasons. You will be well advised to buy the editions of the texts used by us in the Blocks of the course.

Here are the full details of the course:

Block 1 **Background Studies**

Block 2 **Novel (*Samskara*) by U.R.Anantha Murthy (Kannada)**

Block 3 **Novel (*Tamas*) by Bhisham Sahni (Hindi)**

Block 4 **Short Story — I**

Mahasweta Devi — *Salt* (Bengali)
Vaikom Muhammad Basheer — *Birthday* (Malayalam)
Nirmal Verma — *Birds* (Hindi)
Ismat Chughtai — *Tiny's Granny* (Urdu)
Gopinath Mohanty — *Tadpa* (Oriya)

Block 5 **Short Story II**

Indira Goswami — *The Empty Chest* (Assamese)
Motilal Jotwani — *Very Lonely, She* (Sindhi)

Afsar Ahmad — *Headmaster, Prawn, Chanachur* (Bengali)

Vijay Dan Detha — *The Compromise* (Rajasthani)

Block 6 **Poetry**

K.S. Nongkynrih — *Requiem* (Khasi)

Yumlembam Ibomcha Singh — *The Last Dream* (Manipuri)

Chandra Kanta Murasing — *The Stone Speaks in the Forest* (Kokborok)

Haribhajan Singh — *Sage and the Tree* (Canto I, sections 1-4) (Punjabi)

Raghuvir Sahay — *The Stare* (Hindi)

Dina Nath Nadim — *The Moon* (Kashmiri)

Padma Sachdev — *The Moment of Courage* (Dogri)

Kondepudi Nirmala — *Mother Serious* (Telugu)

K. Ayyappa Paniker — *I Met Walt Whitman Yesterday: An Interview* (Malayalam)

Ramakanta Rath — *Sri Radha* (sections 1 and 7) (Oriya)

Shakti Chattopadhyay — *Just Once Try* (Bengali)

Sitanshu Yashashchandra — *Orpheus* (Gujarati)

Namdeo Dhasal — *A Notebook of Poems* and *Autobiography* (Marathi)

Block 7 **Drama**

Girish Karnad — *Tughlaq* (Kannada)

Block 8 **Non-fictional Prose**

Amrit Rai — *Premchand: His Life and Times* (Chapters 12, 19, 25 and 33) (Biography, Hindi)

Bama — *Karukku* (Chapters 4 and 8) (Autobiography, Tamil)

Saadat Hasan Manto — *On Ismat* (Pen-sketch, Urdu)

Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay — *Manimahesh* (Part 1, subsections 8-11) (Travel writing, Bengali)

All-India Character of the Course

This is an innovative course. As you see, literatures in as many as nineteen languages of the country have been included in it. These include languages from Kashmiri in the north to Malayalam in the south, from Gujarati and Rajasthani in the west to languages of the Northeast like Khasi (in Meghalya), Kokborok (in Tripura) and Manipuri — all in one volume. This gives the course a truly all-India character. And reading through the anthology will be a journey of discovery for you — it will open a window for you on the rich variety of genres and themes of modern Indian literature. To use Dryden's words about Chaucer, here is 'God's plenty'. In spite of the many differences, you will also discern an underlying unity in the fare provided. Fed on a diet consisting mostly of Western literature and Western critical concepts, students of English literature are often unaware of the treasures lying nearer home. This course will unlock these treasures for you and fill you with surprise and elation. In addition, the course will introduce Indian writers and their indigenious writing to the world outside.

Poetry, said the American poet Robert Frost, was what was lost in translation. However, we like to believe with Shrikant Verma, a Hindi poet from Chhattisgarh that really good poetry was what can survive translation. And this applies not only to poetry but to drama and novel and short story and prose as well. English may once have been the language of India's imperial masters but we have made use of it as a language of translation to serve our

needs of reaching a wider audience in India and abroad. Translation is important in any society but for a multi-cultural and multi-lingual society like ours, it is indispensable like the breath of life.

We begin by introducing you to three key areas — concept of Indian literature, and issues in literary translation in English and the need for comparative literature studies. The discussions of these key areas will unable you to come to grips with the complexities of Indian literature, its true character and rich possibilities of its exploration.

We then move on to texts. First short stories — as many as 9 of them representing some of the best writers in the field. The first block introduces you to five writers — Mahasweta Devi from Bengali, Basheer from Malayalam, Nirmal Verma from Hindi, Ismat Chughtai from Urdu and Gopinath Mohanty from Oriya, each a great writer with an established reputation. There is a second section on short stories that presents four well-known writers — Indira Goswami from Assamese, Motilal Jotwani from Sindhi whom we unfortunately lost only in January this year, Afsar Ahmad from Bengali and Vijaya Dan Detha from Rajasthani. Together these short stories present different facets of the Indian cultural kaleidoscope. Interestingly women bulk large in many of them. I am sure you will be able to discover other commonalities of motifs, images, concerns and themes.

The world of Indian poetry is large, particularly when the choice has to be made from the literatures of so many languages. However, the poems chosen for your study are representative of both form and content. Where the choice fell on longer poems, we have been careful to keep the excerpts manageably short. Three poets from the Northeast — Nongkynrih from Khasi,

Ibomcha from Manipuri and Chandra Kanta Murasing from Kokborok have been included in an MA English programme for the first time. As Chandra Kant Murasing says in an interview, inspite of there being grave unrest in the region, poetry still 'develops in the lap of hills and descends from there in the cascade of rhythm.' The Indian poets' penchant for philosophy is reflected in two poets like Haribhajan Singh from Punjabi and Ramakanta Rath from Oriya. Other poets with other pressing concerns are: Raghuvir Sahay, Dina Nath Nadim, Padma Sachdev, Ayyappa Paniker, Kondepudi Nirmala, Sitanshu Yashashchandra and daht poet Namdev Dhasal.

We have has taken care to include samples of non-fictional prose writing also. These include excerpts from a biography of one of the greatest writers of modern India, Munshi Premchand, from an autobiography by a Christian dalit woman writer, Bama and from a travelogue by a well-known travel writer, Umaprasad Mukhopadhyaya on a visit to Manimahesh in Chamba in Himachal Pradesh. In addition there is a fine pen-sketch of Ismat Chughtai by the great Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto.

Altogether the anthology is meant to be a small treasury of writings that will give you a new understanding of what it is to live in India in transition, - it will widen your sympathies, offer you new insights, and finally delight you, something that you would like to preserve as a keepsake after you have done with your examination.

Each text is followed by a brief note on the author and his/her works, glossary of difficult words in the text and questions on the text. These questions are meant to direct you to important features or facets of a text and to make you think critically.

Everyone has his or her own method of studying and we wouldn't like to legislate for you. But it would be advisable if you read the text first and then the questions and finally the critical material on it and then come back to the text. **But whatever you do, give yourself a chance. Also, remember, everything in the course — study materials, questions, commentary and readings — is woven round the text and nothing is more important than the text. The text is at the centre of everything.**

In addition to the Anthoiogy and the Self-Instructional Study Materials (SIMS), we hope to prepare a few audio-video programmes that you can watch on DD 1 and Gyan Darshan every Friday and listen to the audios on local FM channels (23 stations). The telecast/broadcast information can be had from the IGNOU website www.ignou.ac.in

Happy reading

Prof. Renu Bhardwaj
Dr. N.K. Jain

SHORT STORY I

SALT*

Mahasweta Devi

Translation : Sarmistha Dutta Gupta

UTTAMCHAND Bania had vowed to finish them not bodily or by depriving them of their bread, but through sheer denial of salt. He was both a trader and a moneylender, and his family had been the masters of the Jhujhar belt for generations. He hadn't imagined that the local Koles and Oraons would answer him back ever.

But the incredible happened one day when this government came to power. Never before had such a thing happened as each government replaced the other over the years.

Jhujhar is a tribal village, nestling along the Palamau Reserve Forest. The villagers are allowed to graze cattle, collect twigs from the forest ground for fuel and leaves for thatching their houses. Besides, they also steal tamarind leaves, bamboo shoots and other edible roots and tubers. The forest department pretends to be unaware of all this. The tribals hunt birds, rabbits and hedgehogs too. The census count of such birds and beasts in these forests being not exactly accurate, officials turn a blind eye. But the hunters barely succeed in trapping the animals for meat. Even beasts are cautious these days. It's not easy to entrap them.

The village rests along the reserve forest on the small patch close to the bank of the Koel. However, the land belongs to Uttamchand. His ancestors were among those Hindu traders who

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* Source: Sahitya Akademi

came into the region after the Kole Revolt of 1831. Uttamchand had bought nearly all of the tribals' arable forest land. It was extremely easy then as it is now, to evict these tribals by buying off their land. In those days they were very scared to go into legalities. calculations, documents and so on. They remain the same now. So the people of Jhujhar do not even know when they had land of their own, when they used to take home the crops they raised.

The entire village is shackled by Uttamchand into forced labour without wages. For generations, year after year, they walked twelve miles to Uttamchand's village Tahar, to repay the unwritten debts of their forefathers. For just a few morsels a day and a meager share of the harvest they till his land without pay. Their share of crop too is added to their debts. They were not even aware that the system was illegal till the officer of the tribal department told them so. Of course, that did not stop them from pledging their labour free, for they knew it would not be possible for them to go up to the court to file a complaint against the extortionist Uttamchand. Was it possible to go all the way to Daltongunj? Where would they find a lawyer who would advise them? Even the tribal department was beyond their reach! The department had its office in the city. But they lived in the village. That too a remote one, not linked by bus or rail routes. Only a small village of seventy six people belonging to seventeen families. The government didn't even know of their existence till the third general elections after independence. They began casting votes from the fourth elections. Election days were good times. Uttamchand offered, "Why walk all the way from the forests? Here's a rupee for each of you, my brothers and sisters. I am here to cast the votes for you".

Such was the system since the fourth general elections. Things changed only in 1977. The nearest primary school teacher,

Balkishan Singh began visiting Jhujhar. He persuaded them to send three of the boys from that village to school. It was he who explained how important the sixth elections were. That they should cast their own votes. The money fetched per head? Balkishan arranged much more investment for the village. Jhujhar got its first well through funds from the panchayat. Quite a big well with enough water. Until then, the river was their only source of water and in the dry months it became really scarce.

Uttamchand was first annoyed with the election issue.

The new ministry came into power after elections. The existing officers and the existing departments began playing their new roles. There was no metallic road except a pathway to Jhujhar. Organized youths walked all the way to the village to note the ancestral history of their debts which made them work without wages. Purti Munda happened to be the most vocal person and personality of the village. He was the only man there who had been as far as Ranchi and Daltongunj and had worked as a coolie in Dhanbad. As luck never smiled on him anywhere, he spit on the world and returned to Jhujhar. He said, "What's the point in asking us? Uttamchand has all the records. Ask him".

"Do you know that forced labour is against the law?"

"There's not much use knowing that. He won't lend us money otherwise".

"He will be served right this time".

"You see to that".

"Why don't you come along?"

"All right".

The boys threatened Uttamchand in front of Purti Munda. "No tribal of this region will work without pay from this year. If anyone is forced we'll see to it that the matter is sorted out in the courts".

"As you please". Uttamchand said so and was forced to stick to his words. He couldn't even disallow people of Jhujhar from tilling his land. The youths said, "They had been tilling the land for more than twelve years now. They deserve half the share now".

"The other half is mine".

"After harvest the committee will divide the share in your presence".

"That's all right".

All of a sudden Purti Munda begged the boys, "Lend me some money. Let me wet my throat before going home. What a day it was! Whose face did I first see in the morning?" They refused, "No. You must give up drinking. The tribals have ruined themselves by drinking". On his way back, Purti Munda parted with half a rupee he had on him and drank *Tari**. Caressing the vessel he thought aloud, "Ruining our lives! What do the babus know of it? How else would we douse the fire in our stomach?"

Uttamchand, inspite of his defeats, pledged to avenge himself. He vowed to finish them off by deprivation of salt. Of course, such an aggressive decision befitted him. The people of Jhujhar

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* A very cheap country liquor

come for their weekly market to Palani or Muru. All the grocery shops of these two markets belonged to Uttamchand. He said, "Let them have a taste of saltless gruel. Such ingratitude after being fed by me for so long!"

At first Purti and his lot did not realize the significance of not getting salt at the weekly markets. When they did, they ran to Daltongunj to the office of the youth committee. One of the boys was listening to the transistor there heard everything and said, "This is not within our jurisdiction. If the shopkeeper doesn't want to sell salt, what can we do? Now we are running around all over. We have got to tackle so many bigger problems".

Purti and these young gentlemen didn't share common wavelengths of mind, they never do. Purti tried in vain to explain to them that life without salt was impossible for them. They spiced their leafy meals only with salt. Sensing trouble, they bought ten kilos of salt with the bus fare they had, walking home for 18 miles. Distributing the salt to each household they said, "Have it sparingly".

But ten kilos of salt did not last an eternity. Now Purti decided to talk to the forest contractor. "Give us work. You needn't pay us. Just give us salt".

"Give you salt?"

The contractor couldn't help feeling bewildered at the idea, as even today, after so much hike in prices, salt remains cheapest in India. Immediately, he thought it important to find out the whereabouts of these people. He knew they tilled Uttamchand's land, so he went to Uttamchand. What he learnt proved beyond doubt that these men were troublesome indeed. They used the

young urban radicals to sort out a revolutionary agreement with the Mahajan they have known all their lives. The contractor would be inviting trouble if he gave them work. So he turned out Purti's lot and those swarthy men walked with their heart down across the white sands.

Thereafter, they tried to barter crops during harvest in exchange of salt. As a result they lost all the crops for a small quantity of salt. Everyone began to blame Purti — "Why did you go the Mahajan's house at their behest? Now arrange for our salt. You were out to prove your manliness then. Wanted to be a leader!"

"Would our forced slavery have stopped otherwise?"

"We could have carried on as before".

"Could we have gained rights over the crops?"

"We might as well have starved".

To the folks of Jhujhar, the days of toiling without wages, of getting no share of crops, seemed golden. In their thoughts they weighed the merits of both. Wiry brackish salt weighed heavier on the scale. Abolition of the system of forced labour and getting a right share of the crop seemed to weigh much lighter.

The village headman said, "We may still manage to have gruel without salt. But why do we tire so easily? Our limbs hardly move!" To all of them it seemed that salt was only secondary to the situation, basically it was the Gods who were angry. The headman sighed, "Everyone feels the same. It's time to offer prayers to Haram Deo. Purti, get some salt from the forest guard by selling off the couple of hens I reared. Let's have the taste of

salt one day". The forest guard was delighted with such a weird proposal. He said," Wait. I'll get you salt from the stores".

"But you won't get the hens cheaper than eight rupees".

"All right".

How much salt can eight bucks fetch?"

"Sixteen kilos".

"Get that then".

The salt was very brackish and dark indeed.

"So dark?"

"It's for the elephants and the deer. Do they distinguish between black and white?"

"Do they have salt? Salt?"

"Of course. But from the salt lick".

"What happens otherwise?"

"They shrivel up".

"Where's the salt lick?"

"There are places".

Purti kept thinking about this on his way home with the salt. Elephants and deer got it from the salt lick. The news kept him so engrossed that he didn't realize that the weight of salt on his

back couldn't be as much as sixteen kilos. They had a feast with meat on the day of the Puja. Later Purti went and sat on the river bank. He drank all by himself and kept staring at the forest. The elephants were usually out at dawn and in the evenings. They could hardly be spotted during the day. Where was the salt lick and when would they go there? The forest is huge. Purti planned combing the forest in search of the lick.

Shops in the weekly markets were not selling them salt. The youth committee did not totally ignore the news. They kept it at the back of their mind and one of them asked a medical representative of the area how omnipotent salt was in the human body. The representative was new to his job and was not get much scope of applying what he had learnt. His explanations bewildered the young man. It went like this — salt and water are the inorganic minerals of the body. These are absolutely essential and play an important role in cell formation. The basic salts are Chloride, carbonate, Bicarbonate, Sulphate and Phosphate. Potassium, Calcium and Magnesium combine with Chloride to form chemical compounds of iron, Carbon Dioxide, Sulphur and Phosphorous. Generally, the functions of salt in the human body are regulation of the osmosis level; maintenance of the balance of water and blood volume; maintenance of acid-base balance; supply of the basic essential elements to bones and teeth and maintenance of proper irritability of muscles and nerve cells. It was also essential for coagulation of blood. Salt formed the basic element of some hormones and enzymes systems too. It regulated capillary permeability and cell membranes of the body. All this seemed Greek to him and he asked, "But my friend, did I enquire for the purpose of studying for an examination?"

"Why else would you ask?"

"What harm could a saltless diet bring?"

"But there are so many who take in hardly any calories!"

"Of course the food habits of Indians are not healthy".

"But I am talking of those...'

He understood there was no point in tiring himself by scuffling with a shadow. The tea stall of Daltongunj wasn't millions of miles away from Jhujhar. But the two places were located in two different constellations of the Universe and it is common knowledge that in spite of all the songs and poems composed on the stars, they are actually more fiery than a million suns. The sky in between only keeps apart by millions of miles the burning revolving stars. Daltongunj basked in the warmth of timber trade. Jhujhar burnt, scorched in the deprivation of some unfortunate tribals banished from modern India. The attempt to explain Purti Munda's problem to the terry-cloth attired, powder-painted. smart lad was as vain as shadow-play.

"Who are you taking of?'

"They survive only on gruel or *Maroa*[*] or boiled corns or fruits. Meat or fish sometimes".

"Don't they take salt? Why?"

"They don't get it".

"What nonsense. It's the cheapest thing"

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[*] A kind of gruel

"That's a lie".

"What would happen if these people who have low calorie meals didn't take salt?"

"Who? Have you seen the new film?"

"No. Why don't you tell me?"

"How can I explain to a novice?"

"Why have you learnt so much then?"

"Listen, salt controls the fluid level of the body, also of blood. Lack of salt may increase blood coagulation. The heart will find it difficult to pump the thickened blood and the outcome would be breathlessness. Muscle cramps may be frequent. Moving about will be strenuous business. Bones and teeth will definitely wear off. The body will generally decay. Anyway, forget all that. Come, let's go and watch the film".

The film featured Amitabh Bachchan, a voluptuous *tangewali*, fierce gangsters and a lot of violence. But when the young man returned home chewing Banarasi pan after Amjad Khan was punished by law, he still couldn't forget the Jhujhar problem. The next day he went over to Uttamchand's place in Tahar. Hearing his complaint, Uttamchand said that the tribals didn't lie so much before. Now they had become real bastards.

"Why?"

"I am not selling them salt you mean?"

"Well, I am selling salt to none at all. There is no profit in it. So I am not supplying salt to the weekly market for some time now. Didn't I sell them salt so long? What nonsense! Didn't I sell small quantities? Rubbish! Now the shops are out of stock perhaps".

"But why aren't you selling it?"

"It's a total loss".

"Are you being fair?"

"Since I am Uttamchand, a trader, have voted the Congress so far, whatever I say is wrong, whatever I may do is unfair".

"You misunderstand me".

"No Sir, I have supported the Congress; a poor, naïve grocer like me can't survive if he doesn't help the party in power. When you asked me to stop employing them without wages and give them a share of the crops, I did so. The Congress workers never said that. If they did, I would've done the same. But how can I listen to you now? You would be forcing me to sell something that brings no profit".

"Are they coming to you to borrow money?"

"Why should they? They are getting a share of the crops and give me just a token bit of it".

"The land hardly yields much".

"What am I to do about that? Am I to be responsible for the low fertility of the soil too? And there's something else. Even if they came for loan I wouldn't lend them".

"Why?"

"That's simple. Your government thinks it's unfair to recover the money lent. But too many laws are no good. Such laws existed in the past too. But the Congress government didn't take much interest in implementing these because they understood the people's problems. They knew that the poor tribals would starve to death if the Mahajan didn't lend them money. But you fail to realize that. Well, you must be having good reasons to do what you're doing. All's well that ends well. I won't lend them money".

The young man returned home defeated and made a noble vow to open cooperative stores in the Jhujhar belt at the first available opportunity. Later he became busy in resolving a dispute over an illegal liquor shop elsewhere and forgot about Jhujhar.

In spite of all the good intentions on their part, Purti and his folks continued to remain in utter darkness. However, Purti didn't sit idle. He surveyed the forest silently everyday. The deer lick was found to be near the forest office. Finally, one day while chasing a hare, he discovered the elephants' salt lick. The scene was extremely significant. Purti climbed atop a tree in fear. The herd of elephants licked salt at some distance. Rocky salt. Sprinkled on the rocks with a mixture of earth.

"A field of salt! Purti thought.

Then as darkness descended the elephants left the place. The elephants of Betla understood "show business". At dusk, tourists came out in jeeps to catch a glimpse of the animals. They were used to seeing herds of elephants feeding on bamboo groves. The elephants turned that way. After all the animals left, an old elephant arrived with quite a warning. It displayed no domesticity about its ways, though elephants were generally very mild animals. "Loner," Purti told himself and clung to the tree in fear. A young one must have thrown this one out and become the leader of the herd. Such elephants are called "Ekoyas" and avoided by all. Ekoyas are generally unpredictable. Their behaviour and attitude becomes irresponsible as a result of being overthrown and driven out of the herd. The loner wet the salt lick before he left. Purti realized the animal's wicked brain behind its mischievous act.

He returned home with some salt tied to his waist cloth carefully scraped from the dry parts of the lick. Pouring the rock salt in boiling water, he told his wife, "We'll have to see tomorrow how much salt remains after sedimentation".

"Shall we get salt from the water?"

"Yes".

In the morning they found both salt and clay sedimented at the bottom of the vessel. Purti sighed, "It's salt after all. The markets don't sell any". He drank the dirty, brackish water; after filtering it through a cloth and gave everyone the news, warning them of the loner elephant. The village headman said, "Be very careful. Remember what happened last time?" All of them did. A herd of elephants used to come every year from Saranda to Betla forest. A few years ago, an unscrupulous tribal youth shot an arrow at a

young one and killed it. This enraged the herd and the elephants moved around the dead body in a solemn pledge nearly incomprehensible to humans.

Then they began avenging the death. The tribals of Jhujhar and Kolna fled their homes. The elephants ravaged the two villages. Next year, they came from Saranda and killed two of the forest labourers working in the forest. In the third year, they trampled a bus and a car near the Betla Forest Bungalow. They stopped only after satisfying themselves by avenging the human race for three consecutive years. They couldn't be declared "rogues" and killed for they always moved around in groups and the older ones mainly took revenge. The Betla forest was bound by barbed wires. The elephants are extremely intelligent and they realized and obeyed the ban imposed by the barbed wires.

The headman warned, "For heaven's sake don't come in the way of these elephants. Specially the Ekoya. They never forget". The youths could no longer pull their tired bodies. With a sullen face they said, "Of course we'll be careful. The Puja has made the situation no better. We feel breathless, it aches to pull a load". They went carefully. Stole the rock salt with care. They remembered Purti's advice. "Don't climb down the trees before making sure all the elephants have left".

Then the salt lick got shifted possibly because of the Ekoya. It was made in two-three pockets. Much later, when an answer was sought to the Ekoya, plus Jhujhar tribals, plus salt lick equation, the forest department's explanations was rational indeed.

The department was in charge of the elephant population, both herds and loners. This Ekoya proved particularly wicked. It used to wet the salt lick after licking away salt. So the department

hoped if the lick was split in different pockets the Ekoya might go to one while the rest could go to the others. But the Ekoya made all calculations go haywire. It went hither and thither. Since it didn't move about with the herd, its sense of time also varied. Apart from dawn or dusk it visited the lick at odd hours too. Its habit was changing. Maybe it figured out that salt was being stolen from the lick. Sometimes it came and stood on the highway and didn't budge even at the headlights of jeeps. The jeeps had to turn around. Did it begin to suspect men? Did it try to sense the presence of humans through its radar-like trunk?

A tension was growing and building around the elephant among the forest workers. Such loners can suddenly be very irrational. Unless it is denoted as "mankiller" or "rogue" with ample proof the forest department does not have powers to kill an elephant of the reserve forest.

Everyone waited tensely for something to explode. The forest labourers said they were scared to go to work when the Ekoya was around. They had seen the Ekoya observing them from a distance and had run away in fear. The Ekoya had become suspicious. So had those who went there to put salt on the lick. They had not seen the salt being pawed off to the last bit ever before. They couldn't imagine anyone stealing something as cheap as salt. No, they didn't report. They never thought this could be anything worth reporting. There was so much salt stacked in the stores! Even the elephants were puzzled and discontent. Salt kept vanishing from the lick. They couldn't make out what was going wrong. It seemed everything was baffling. Purti and two other youths were responsible for it, for this entire situation. In the beginning they were careful, very careful. They would cling atop trees at dusk. After the elephants left and even the Ekoya, they would come down to take salt. Possible due to

this renewed supply of salt, their muscles were toned up swifter and attained normal mobility. The osmosis of the body became stable and the blood coagulation normal thereby enabling the heart to pump the blood easily. The electrolyte balance became regular too.

Possibly. And with this, the human brain started having naughty designs. They forgot to be careful and began stealing salt in the late afternoon, even before the elephants could come and have their due. They didn't know the Ekoya had seen them. Suddenly the Ekoya's presence in the forest became hardly noticeable. It was found that at dusk, the elephant stood on the white sands of the river bed and stared at something in the distance.

What did it see?

The tribals crossing the river.

The news wasn't comforting at all. But the forest department felt relaxed when it learnt that the animal had changed its target of attention. However, it was announced that any information on the elephant's activities must be reported.

A few days later, work on the acacia catechu tree had to be abandoned. The trees were clustered in the heart of the forest on the way to the old Palamau Fort. It was learnt that the Ekoya was roaming around the old fort.

The Palamau Fort was once the fortress of the autonomous rulers of Palamau. The sight of the huge, towering stone-and-brick structure in ruins in the dense Betla forest is frightfully eerie. Much taller than the tallest Sal tree in the green forest, one is unprepared for such a gigantic man-made structure in this ambience. So the sight of the fortress is really scary.

The forest labourers saw the Ekoya going past the fort even more stealthily than a tiger, sending its trunk out as if in search of something. Instantly, they abandoned the place. Purti Munda and his compatriots possibly didn't get any chance to learn all this because they used to always disperse and get lost in the forest as soon as they heard footsteps of the forest workers close by. To those workers, the quantity of missing salt hardly mattered. But Purti and his folks always avoided facing them for the same. They feared being caught as "salt thieves". While such misunderstandings persisted, the Ekoya deprived of its share of salt to lick and wet, had begun searching for the culprits. It was right — there was a link between Jhujhar and the salt lick. So it stood on the white sands of the river bed and stared at Jhujhar in the dark. The scene was very symbolic. Palamau Fort in the backdrop, river, sands, sky, night, the lonely elephant. Very peaceful and eternal. The only difference was that the thoughts crossing the elephant's mind weren't particularly conducive to flying white pigeons.

A few days passed. Then, one night when no one was around, the elephant waded across the sandy water to Jhujhar and stood by the side of the village well. When the night was over, all opened their doors and came out for their regular morning chores to be greeted by the sun rising behind the elephant. They shut the doors immediately and were petrified. Observing the animal through a gap in his window, Purti Muna kept praying, "O god! Let no one dart an arrow. My Lord! Let nobody hit him".

No one shot an arrow and the elephant left the village and went across the river apparently confirming its doubts. They came out only after the Ekoya disappeared into the forest and the headman said, "So I was right. You all must have been careless. He must have seen you. Otherwise why did he come?"

"Of course not. If he saw us we would have known or seen him. An elephant is not like a rabbit".

"Like an ant, a butterfly, like air. With that huge body he can tiptoe if he wishes and trample over your head before you even realize. You fool! You shitworm! You didn't see him, but he saw you. Why else would he have come?"

"Forget what's happened. Tell us what to do now".

"Purti, I wonder what punishment you deserve. Those tribals who leave the village for mines or cities to work as porters remain there. But you came back. You failed and thought that you knew the world much better. So you took up cudgels against Uttamchand. He is a tiger. Besides, you have now earned the wrath of the elephant".

"Tell us what to do".

"No one will go to the forest to get salt. All of you breach the roofs of your houses so that you may escape if the elephant arrives".

Purti asked, "Shall we fence the village with thorny bushes as they do in the forest? Elephants are scared of that".

"Such barren, rocky land! How would you fence it? Which side would you block?"

"Then?"

"Don't go for the salt. Maybe he will forgive".

They listened to the headman. No one went to fetch salt. Strangely, the elephant didn't come back again. One day Purti told the Forest Beat Officer, "The Ekoya had come to our village some days ago. We were really scared".

"We were afraid too. But we haven't seen him for a few days. Maybe he has returned home".

Everyone presumed he must have gone back like an unidentifiable animal vanishing into the green forest. Usually, an animal count is taken on the basis of footprints near a water hole. The forest department thought that the Ekoya had disappeared without taking a look at the river bed of *Kamaldaha*.*

The Ekoya watched and tried to make out things from the bamboo grove which leaned towards the water where the river kerbed. The salt lick remained untouched, unspoilt by man's unholy presence. Was this a new strategy for attack? Perhaps the elephant knew man is basically an irrational animal. To anger the elephant and get salt would be irrational. To abstain would be rational. But men are not capable of acting logically for very long. The Ekoya knew the same would apply for Purti and his lot too.

They went ahead with the irrational act. The strangest thing was just a week before they did it, Uttamchand had again begun selling salt at the weekly market thinking "enough is enough". It is not known whether Purti's folks were aware of it. Perhaps not. Or may be they knew but couldn't believe that Uttamchand would sell them salt. Maybe they were tempted to steal salt by fooling the Ekoya or getting it from right under the elephant's nose. They wanted to prove their masculinity and skill by doing what they thought was a heroic act. Perhaps. They also might

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* A famous lake in the Palamau region

have wanted to outwit the forest department. What they actually thought could not be known. After a lengthy probe it came to light that Purti and two others went out with sacks at the crack of dawn. They hushed up their wives, assured them of returning safely and said they would scrape salt only after the elephants left and the sun rose.

As they proceeded the Ekoya advanced too. The elephant is the largest terrestrial animal. But if an angry elephant decides to outwit man, it could tread more softly than an ant. Taking care not to crush dry leaves under its feet. Being unbelieveably cautious. So when Purti turned around it seemed the old Palamau Fort was approaching them. An elephant looks much bigger than its size as it gets nearer though. The elephant silently used its trunk and feet but the three men screamed madly. Their cry disturbed the elephant herds far and wide and scared the deer. Silence quickly replaced the human shriek. Then the Ekoya left, trampling the forest and renting the air with a wild trumpet in an almost human rejoicement.

It couldn't be ascertained why such a thing happened. Trampled and crushed human bodies couldn't help as witnesses or evidence. They died stealing salt? Salt? Everyone kept wondering and the tribals' behaviour seemed inexplicable to them. Finally the police inspector said they must have done it in an intoxicated state.

No one complicated the matter by asking whether it was the right time of the day for the tribals to be drunk. The entire business of stealing salt seemed so strange! Something as cheap as salt! Why would they do something so irrational unless they were drunk?

They went to steal salt from the elephant's lick and died! The words of the inspector became an epitaph for the dead proving that the tribals of Jhujhar were not trustworthy at all.

Herbivorous animals needed salt. What if men begin to steal that too! This unnatural act of Purti and his kinsmen again emphasized the difficulty of preserving wildlife without human interference.

The Ekoya was declared a "rogue" without its knowledge. Since it was a loner the elephant-herd wouldn't be enraged if it was killed. A commissioned hunter came and shot it dead. This became a small news items in the papers and the Jhujhar folks went to have a look at the dead Ekoya. The headman somehow felt vaguely uncomfortable. Apparently it was clear that the elephant had killed men and got killed in turn. But the indirect cause seemed to lie somewhere. So much for salt! They were not sold salt. Three men and an elephant wouldn't have had to die if salt was available. Someone else was responsible, someone else. The one who didn't sell salt? Or some other rule? Some other system? The rule and the system which allowed Uttamchand to go scot-free for not selling salt? He was extremely inarticulate and his vocabulary was so limited that he couldn't explain it to anyone.

"This has not been fair at all". He could toss only these few words at the babus present there and left the place with his villagers to return to Jhujhar, crossing the white sandy river bed in a file. He kept shaking his head knowing fully well that the urbanites would never understand how salt could be the root of a life-and-death battle and therefore they would always consider it unbelievable. So he did not for once turn around to look back. Gradually their figures looked diminutive over the white sands. They walked fast. They would feel at ease only after returning to their own way of life which is bereft of mistrust, which does not try to simplify Purti's death and does not attempt to use such oversimplifications to deny the reality of their existence. To that life.

About the author

Mahasweta Devi (1926 —) is a celebrated Bengali writer and a tireless activist in the cause of rural tribal communities and women and dalits and de-notified communities. Born in a middle class family in Dacca, now in Bangladesh, she had her early education at Shantiniketan, graduated from Calcutta University and passed her M.A. in English from Vishwabharati University. She began teaching in Bijoygarh College in 1964, where her students were working-class women. A visit in 1965 to Palamau, a remote and impoverished village in Bihar, gave a new direction to her: to work for the tribals. In her Bengali fiction she has depicted the brutal oppression of tribals and untouchables by landlords, moneylenders and government officials. The reason and inspiration for her writing, she says, comes from those people who are 'exploited and used and yet who do not accept defeat'. She goes on: 'For me, the endless source or ingredients for writing is in these amazingly simple, noble, suffering human beings'.

She has written novels, short stories, plays and also prose pieces.

What the citation for The Magsaysay Award said sums up her entire career. The Award, it was said, was 'a recognition of her compassionate crusade through art and activism to claim for the tribal peoples a just and honourable place in Indian national life'. 'Salt' is a typical story which deals with tribals and the rapacious money lending class.

Awards: Jnanpith Award, the highest literary award (1996). Also won Sahitya Akademi award, Ramon Magsaysay award (1997) and Padma Vibhushan (2006).

A 27-minute film on her entitled: **Mahashweta Devi: Witness, Advocate, Writer** was made by Shaswati Taluqdar in 2001.

Works: Her writings include the following:

Hajar Chaurasir Ma [No.1084's Mother] (1975); **Aranyer Adhikar** [The Occupation of the Forest] (novel) (1977); **Agnigarbha** [Womb of Fire] (1978); **Choti Munda evam Tar Tir** [Choti Munda and His Arrow] (1980); **Breast-giver** (1998); **Dust on the Road** (Activist writings of Mahashweta Devi); **Our Non-Veg Cow and Other Stories (1998)**; **Imaginary Maps** (1995) (translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak); **Rudali** (later made into a film).

Glossary

Oraons: name of a tribe in Jharkhand, Chhatisgarh and Orissa

Kamaldaha: a famous lake in the Palamau region

Koel: a river in Jharkhand

Kole Revolt: During the Kole Birodh, the Larka Hos raised their voices against the British. Other groups joined the protest. The rebellion was suppressed and pacified by Wilkinson's Law, now prevailing in the Kolhan area of Jharkhand

Maroa: a kind of gruel

Palamau Fort: a sixteenth century fort built by the Adivasi king Medini Ray. Palamau is in the Daltonganj district of Jharkhand

Tari: a very cheap country liquor

Questions

1. How does Mahashweta Devi use salt as a metaphor for the process of exploitation as represented in the story?
2. Discuss the significance of Ekoya in the critique of contemporary structures of power in Mahashweta Devi's "Salt".
3. Comment on the deployment of history as an instrument of social criticism in the narrative.
4. "Salt" combines stringent political comment with sophisticated literary technique. Discuss.
5. Discuss the significance of the title "Salt".
6. How has the writer presented the theme of exploitation?
7. What does the elephant Ekoya symbolize for you?

2
BIRTHDAY*

Vaikom Muhammad Basheer

Translation :*The author*

It is the eighth day of Makaram — today is my birthday. Contrary to my usual practice, I woke up at dawn and bathed and performed my morning ablutions, and having put on a ḳhaddar shirt and dhoti and white canvas shoes, I lay on the reclining chair with a heavy heart. Seeing me up so early my next-door

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* Source: Sahitya Akademi

neighbour Matthew, a student in the B.A. class, showed great surprise. With a smile he greeted me.

"Hullo! Good morning!" he said in English.

I said, "Yes, good morning".

He asked, "Why are you up so early? ... Going somewhere?"

"No," I said. "Today is my birthday".

"Your birthday?" in English.

"Yes".

"Oh, I wish you many happy returns of the day!"

"Thank you".

Matthew entered the bathroom with a toothbrush clenched between his teeth. There were shoutings and bustle all around, interspersed with love-songs. They were students and clerks. Did any of them have a worry? For them life was pleasant. But I was thinking of how I could get a cup of tea. The midday meal had been assured: yesterday, when I was going to the bazaar, Hamid had invited me to a meal, without any reason. He is a minor poet and a very rich man. But I could not be without tea till lunch-time. Sitting in my room I could guess that Matthew's old servant was busy making tea for him — my room was the store-room of Matthew's kitchen. The owner of the house had rented it to me for eight annas a month. It is the smallest room in the building. With my easy-chair, table, shelf and bed, there is hardly any breathing space left. In all the rooms of the three buildings

within the walled compound students and clerks live. I am the only person whom the landlord does not want. The reason is that I do not pay rent regularly. There are two other parties who do not like me; the hotel keeper and the Government. I do owe some money to the hotel keeper, but I owe the Government nothing; still the Government cannot bear my sight. I have spoken of my residence, food and country; now I have to speak about my clothes, shoes and my lamp. [Before I write any more I have to make a point clear. It is past midnight now. I wandered for a long time in this town, having left my room with paper and pen in hand. No special reason for this except that I want to write my diary for the day from beginning to end. There is in it all the material for a fairly unusual short-story. But there is no oil in the lamp in my room; and there is a great deal to write. That is why I got out of my bed and have come and sat under this lone lamp near the lakeside and began to write while things are still fresh in my mind]. Like clouds about to precipitate my heart is heavy with the events of this day as though it would burst. There is nothing unusual about today; but it is my birthday. I am far from home. I have no money and there is no way of raising a loan. The clothes I wear belong to many friends. There is nothing I can call my own. When Matthew wished me many returns of such a birthday there was a little pain in the core of my heart.

I remember:

It was seven o'clock. Lying in my easy-chair I thought to myself: at least this day I must guard against any misdeed. I must not borrow from anyone today. Nothing must go wrong on this day. The "I" of today must not be like the hundreds of different Me's that I see in the black and white chain links of past nights and days. How old am I today? I am a year older than last year... Last year? ... Twenty-six. No, thirty-two; or is it forty-seven?

My mind was greatly upset. I got up and looked into the mirror. Not too bad. A fairly distinguished face. A high and broad forehead; steady eyes; a thin moustache like a curved sword. Not bad on the whole... While thinking this, I saw something that gave me a shock: a grey hair. A white line amid the black hair above my ear. With great effort I pulled it off. Then I was stroking my head: it was quite smooth at the back. But as I was stroking my head I felt a slight touch of headache. Could it be because I hadn't had any tea?

Nine o'clock: When the hotel keeper caught sight of me he withdrew inside with a sour face. The dirty urchin who prepared tea demanded payment in cash.

I said, "Oh, I'll pay up tomorrow".

He didn't trust me. "You said that yesterday," he retorted.

"I thought I'd get some money today".

"I have been ordered not to serve you tea until the old bill's paid".

"Oh?"

Ten o'clock: My lips were dry, there was no moisture in my mouth. The great heat of midday. The great weight of weariness was growing within me. Just then two thin and sallow-faced Christian boys, eight or ten years old, came to my door vending wooden clogs. Only three annas a pair.

"I don't need them, children".

"But, sir, if people like you don't buy, who will?"

"Children, I don't want any ... I've no money".

"Oh!"

There was disbelief in their faces. They were too innocent to know the real truth behind appearances. Look at my clothes and the easy chair in which I recline; I am addressed as 'sir' But easy chair, shirt, dhoty, shoes — none of these is mine. I have nothing. Even my naked self — is it my own? Wandering in every city of India, in what different places and in what different forms have I lived: My blood and my flesh and my bones belong to India. From Cape Comorin to Kashmir, from Karachi to Calcutta — indeed in almost every part of India I have friends. I bring to mind today, one by one, my friends, male and female. Let my love spread and overflow India like the fragrant light of the full moon. Love! Is there anyone who knows me and loves me? Knowledge, it seems to me, is the lifting of the veil of mystery. If one's shortcomings and weakness are taken away, what is left? To love and to be loved one needs something attractive. How quickly times passes. I, who used to reach up to my father's forefinger and play about childishly; I, who used to hang on to my mother's sari-end saying, "Uma, I'm hungry"; I, today ... oh, how terrible is the passage of time! How many imaginary bombs of ideals fell and exploded in my heart; my heart is a terrible battlefield. Who am I today? Revolutionary, seditionist, blasphemer, communist — I am all sorts of things. But who am I truly? Oh, how ill I feel! There is a splitting ache in my head. Is it because I haven't had any tea? I can hardly keep my head up. I better go and get my meal. I have to walk a mile with this headache. But at least I shall have a full meal.

Eleven o'clock: Hamid was not in his shop. Had he gone home? It would have been more appropriate for him to have taken me with him. Maybe he forgot. Suppose I go to his house?

Eleven-thirty: The metal gates of Hamid's double-storeyed house were closed. I knocked on them.

"Hey, Mr. Hamid!"

No answer.

"Hey, Mr. Hammee ... d!"

An angry woman's voice answered, "He isn't here!"

"Where's he gone?"

Silence. I knocked on the gates again before I gave way to weariness and started to walk back. Then I heard the footsteps of someone approaching; and the jingle of bangles. The door opened a little. A young woman!

I asked, "Where is Hamid gone?"

"He had to go somewhere urgently".

"When will he be back?"

"Late in the evening".

Late in the evening!

"When he returns please tell him that I came and enquired".

"Who, shall I say?"

Who am I?

"I .... Oh .... Nobody; It's not necessary to say anything".

I walked back. The sand was like hot dry sugar. Then the expanse of lake-water shining like glass. There was darkness in my eyes and head. I was in great misery. My bones were burning. Thirst, hunger. I was famished. I was famished enough to swallow the earth. The sharpness of my hunger was whetted by the knowledge that I had no means of getting any food. Endless days and nights lay ahead of me with no prospect of any food. I might drop down with exhaustion.

Twelve-thirty: My acquaintances passed me by without seeming to see me. "Oh my friends, this is my birthday. Wish me happiness on my birthday," I whispered in my heart. The shadows passed me by. Why was it that my friends did not speak to me on seeing me?

A CID man after me! That was why.

One o'clock: I went to Mr. P., formely the editor of a paper and now a shop-keeper. I could hardly see. I was famished. P. said, "How far away's the revolution?"

"It is quite near".

"Ha-ha! Where are you coming from? Haven't seen you for some time".

"Ha-ha".

"Anything special?"

"Oh, nothing; just like that".

I sat near him in a chair. Many articles of mine had been published in his name. To show his former glory he had bound several old papers into a volume. I picked it up and kept looking into it with my head reeling. My heart was beating fast saying, "I want a cup of tea; I am very tired". Why wasn't P. asking me? Couldn't he see my tiredness? He is sitting solemnly near his cash-box. I dumbly looked towards the street. Two beggar boys were fighting for a piece of 'dosai' lying in the rubbish heap. Dumbly my whole self begged, "A cup of tea". P. opened his box. From among rupees and small change he picked out an anna and gave it to a boy.

"Bring tea," he ordered.

The boy ran. My heart began to cool. P. took the cup of tea brought by the boy and turned to me:

"Do you want tea?"

I said, "No". And I bent down pretending to tie my shoelace, lest he saw my face and the agitation of my heart!

P. complained, "You haven't given me any of your books".

"I will".

"I have been reading reviews of them".

"Good". I tried to smile. But how can the face smile when there is no light in the heart?

I got up and walked into the street.

That CID was following me.

Two o'clock: I was lying in the easy chair in my room, tired and helpless. A well-dressed, perfumed, strange woman came to my door. She came from some distant region. Her home town had been destroyed by floods. She needed some help. She looked at me with a light smile. She looked at me with her breast pressed against the door-post. A seed of desire fell into my heart. There was nobody in the other rooms. I thought I could hear the beating of my heart. It was a moment of danger;

"Sister, I have nothing with me. Go and ask someone else. I have nothing".

"Oh!" She went away disappointed, walking coquettishly.

The perfume that she left behind her!

Three o'clock: What if I borrow from someone? The exhaustion was extreme. A terrible helplessness. Whom could I approach? Many names came to my mind. But borrowing hurt one's self-respect....Shall I kill myself? What would death be like?

Three-thirty: My tongue sank in my mouth. If I could immerse myself in a cool sea. As I was lying in that state, letters from some editors arrived. They wanted stories — by return post!

Throwing the letters down I lay helplessly. The servant boy of the bank-clerk Krishna Pillai came for a match box. I sent him for a glass of water and drank it.

"Isn't master well?" the boy wanted to know.

"I'm all right".

"Then ... hasn't master eaten?"

"No".

"Why is that? Why haven't you eaten?"

That little face, those dark eyes, and the blackened piece of cloth in which he was wrapped: He was waiting to know. I closed my eye. Gently he called me: "Sir!"

"Um," I opened my eyes.

"I've got two annas".

"So?"

He said with embarrassment, "It will be good enough if you return the money before I go home next month".

I was deeply touched. "Bring it," I said.

He ran almost before he had heard me.

Just then my friend Gangadhar came in. He wore a white khaddar dhoti and a white khaddar jubba, and had a blue shawl

thrown over his shoulder. He had a grave look on his dark full face. Seeing me lying unconcernedly in the easy-chair this leader said to me, "You have become very bourgeois!" Although my head was reeling I laughed. I wondered who owned the clothes that this leader was wearing. The picture of every national worker known to me passed before my mind's eye.

"Why are you laughing?" Gangadhar asked.

"Oh, nothing, son; I just laughed seeing this ensemble of yours!"

"Stop joking and listen to me. There is great trouble: Some three thousand workers have gone on strike. They have been starving for a week and a half. There may be great trouble".

"How is it that I did not read about this in the papers?"

"There is an order that newspapers mustn't report this".

"That's fine! Well, what do you expect me to do about it?"

"There is a public meeting in this connection. I am the chairman. I need an anna for ferry-fare to get there. I haven't eaten anything today. You should come with me".

"Son, it's all very well, but I haven't got a pice. It is several days since I have eaten a morsel. Today is my birthday. I haven't eaten anything so far. Still, let's see; wait a moment".

Then Gangadhar spoke about the working men, the national workers and the government. I spoke about newspaper editors and writers. Meanwhile, the little boy returned. I took one anna from him and asked him to get tea, 'bidi', and dosai with the

other. He brought a dosai that looked like a small 'pappad', some two ounces of tea, and a few bidis. On the scrap of American newspaper in which the dosai was wrapped there was a picture which attracted my attention. Gangadhar and I ate the dosai. We drank a glass of water each, and then the tea. Then I lighted a bidi and gave Gangadhar one anna. As he was leaving he said to me jokingly: "Today is your birthday, isn't it? Have you any message for the world?"

I said, "Yes, son; one connected with the revolutuion everywhere; Let the present social order be burnt down and let a new world be born!"

"Good. I will give this message to the workers".

Gangadhar walked away briskly. I thought about various national workers and various writers. How did they all live? As I lay thinking, I picked up the piece of newspaper in which the dosai had been wrapped. Just then I saw the owner of the house cross the threshold towards me with an angry face. Wondering what excuse to make to him I looked at the picture. There was a great city filled with sky-scrapers; standing among them with his head held high was a man. He was bound down to the earth with iron chains. But he was not looking at his chains or towards the earth; he was looking into a great source of light scattering its rays in infinite space in the great distance above and beyond the heavenly bodies. At his feet was an open book; on its two pages was written his, and indeed all men's, history. It was as follows:

"Although bound to the earth as by chains, he looks beyond time and space to the splendid progress to be".

"Well, Mister," the cold voice of the landlord said, "can you pay up today?"

I said, "I havn't received any money yet; I shall pay you one of these days".

But he was not prepared to hear any more excuses.

"What's the use of living like this?" he asked.

That was true. What's the use of living like this? It is some three years since I first came into this building. I had the three kitchens repaired. Each of them is now fetching a good rent. Now that I have made this fourth store-room fit for habitation, he tells me there are people who would pay a bigger rent for it. It is not enough if I agree to pay a bigger rent myself — I must vacate it!

No, I am not prepared to vacate the room!

Four o'clock: I am tired of this country. There is nothing in this town to attract me. I see the same roads, the same shops, the same faces day after day, and hear the same things. How fed up I am .... I cannot write a word.

Six o'clock: A beautiful evening. The setting sun was like a blob of blood swallowed by the sea ... The western sky was filled with golden clouds. The ocean seemed shoreless. Nearer, the rippling lagoon. Its shore was so peaceful. Young dandies, smoking cigarettes, were promenading there; and young ladies dressed in gorgeous saris, with glancing looks and shy smiles on their faces, were resting there. One could hear heart-easing broadcast songs from erotic films. The gentle breeze carried fragrance from flowers ... But I was almost fainting.

Seven o'clock: A policeman came to my place and took me along with him again. I was asked to sit before a dazzling petromax. As I answered the questions that were put to me, the

Deputy Commissioner was walking up and down, carefully observing the expression on my face. He never took his eyes off my face. What haughtiness! As though I had committed some terrible crime. I was questioned for an hour: Who are my friends? Where do I get letters from? Am I not the member of a secret organization which seeks to overthrow the Government? What new things have I been writing? I must tell the whole truth!

"You know that I have the power to exile you?"

"I know. I am quite helpless. If a mere policeman takes it into his head he can arrest me and put me in the lock-up".

Seven-thirty: I returned to my room, sat in the dark and perspired profusely. No light in my room today. How can I get some kerosene oil? And I must have something to eat to abate my hunger. Who will give me food? I cannot borrow from anyone. Suppose I ask Matthew? No. I will borrow a rupee from the bespectacled student who lives in the next building. He had spent a lot of money on injections during his recent illness; but finally it was with my four-anna-worth medicine that he was cured. In return, he once took me to a cinema show. If I went to him and asked for a rupee, would he refuse?

Eight forty-five: On the way I enquired about Matthew. He had gone to a cinema show. Hearing loud conversation and bursts of laughter I went up to the upper storey of the other building. The smell of cigarette smoke. The light of a gas lantern.

About the author

Vaikom Mohammad Basheer (1908-1994) has been a doyen of Malayalam literature. He had his schooling in his native village and became fluent in English. Gandhi's visit to Basheer's village Vaikom in 1924 proved a watershed in his career. Later he

switched from Gandhi's non-violence over to terrorism in the footsteps of Bhagat Singh and comrades. Then followed a long period of incognito travel all over India to avoid arrest. Among the various things he tried doing was the agency of sports goods in Kerala. But the venture didn't succeed.

Love for a Hindu Nair girl proved abortive. His health failed and he had fits of depression and bouts of insanity. Later, when he was nearly fifty, he was persuaded to marry a Muslim girl named Fatima Bi, a girl half his age whom he fondly called Fabi.

Basheer's career as a writer and journalist began with the publication of his first story that was published sometime between 1937 and 1941. He wrote extensively for literary journals like *Jayakevlam* and *Narmada.* Like Thakazi Pillai (1912-), Kesav Dev (1904-1983) and Pokunnam Varki (1908-), Basheer wrote on socialistic themes — on poverty, unemployment and hunger drawing upon his own experiences of sordidness and poverty.

He was the first Malayalam writer who treated writing as a profession and demanded payment for it. Though he didn't believe in art for art's sake, he believed that 'the ultimate end of life and art was 'Nanma' — goodness, the betterment of the self and humanity'.

Works:

Some of his works are: *Balyakalasakhi* **[childhood friend]** (1944), *N 'te Uppooppakkoru* **[Me Grandad 'ad an Elephant]** (novel) (1951), and *Pathummayute Adu* **[Paathumma's Goat]** (Novel) (1959), *Sabdangal* [Voices], **(A Long Story) (1947)**. *Kathabeejum* [a play] (1945).

Glossary

Makaram: a month of the Malayalam era from mid-January to mid-February.

C.I.D man: member of the Criminal Investigation Department; secret police.

Jubba: Kurta

Anna: a coin, now obsolete, the equivalent of $1/16^{th}$ of a rupee.

Mundu: a long cloth wrapped around the lower torso by men and women alike, of all communities in Kerala, until a few decades ago; even now prevalent mostly among the older population.

Umma: the kinship term 'Mother' used by the Muslim community; used as term of address too.

Dosai: a particularly South Indian eatable made with leavened rice flour.

Pappad: a light, crunchy item taken usually along with a main meal, and occasionally as a snack.

Bidi: local version of cigarette, made of dried tobacco shavings rolled in a specially cut leaf.

Questions

1. Discuss the use of irony and humour in the story.
2. Do you think Basheer is an optimist in spite of his depiction of abject poverty in the story?
3. Discuss the significance of the title.

3
Birds*

Nirmal Verma

Translation : Jai Ratan

PASSING through the dark corridor Latika stopped short. Supporting herself against the wall she raised the wick of her lamp. On the steps her shadow began forming a shapeless, ragged shape. From room no. 7 strident laughter and the chatter of the girls could still be heard. Latika knocked at the door. The noise ceased at once.

"Who's there?"

Latika stood still. For some time muffled sounds of whispering went on in the room. Then came the sound of the latch clicking. Latika went in. In the flickering flame of the lamp, the girls' faces emerged like close ups frozen on a movie screen.

"Why is the room dark?" There was an edge to Latika's voice.

"The lamp ran out of oil, Ma'am".

It was Sudha's room, so Sudha herself had had to answer. She was perhaps the most popular girl in the hostel. For on all

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* Source : Mrs. Gagan Gill

holidays and everyday after dinner, the girls from the other rooms crowded into hers. The chatter and the leg pulling would go on till late into the night.

"Why didn't you ask Karimuddin for oil?

"Ma'am, I've told him so many times. He just doesn't remember".

A ripple of laughter ran from one corner of the room to the other. The oppressive air of discipline that swirled in with Latika's entry, suddenly drained out. Karimuddin was a servant in the hostel. Stories of his laziness and shirking had been circulating among generations of students. Latika suddenly remembered something. Holding up her lamp she ran her eyes over the room. The girls sat in a circle, huddled against each other. Familiar faces all. But in the lamp's pale light it was as if something had changed, as if she was seeing them for the first time.

"Julie, what're you doing in this block so late?"

Julie was sitting at the head of a bed, near the window. She lowered her eyes. The lamp light shrank and fell on her face.

"Have you signed the night register?

"Yes, Ma'am".

"Then....? Latika's voice hardened. Abashed, Julie started looking out of the window.

Ever since coming to this school, Latika has felt that despite scolding and harsh words, this particular rule of the hostel was never obeyed.

"Ma'am, our vacation starts from tomorrow and we decided that tonight..."

Without completing her sentence, Sudha looked at Hemanti and started smiling.

"Hemanti is going to sing for us tonight. Won't you also join us for a while?

Latika felt a sense of unease. Was she really a kill-joy? For years she had been living in this hill station, yet each year she failed to mark the moment when time gliding past the beleaguered days of summer and autumn curled up into the lap of the winter vacation.

Feeling like a thief she stepped silently out of the room. Her face lost its tautness. She smiled to herself.

"Is none of you going to stay back to see the snowfall with me?"

"Ma'ám, aren't you going home for the holidays?" The girl's eyes were fixed on her face.

"Nothing's decided yet. I love the snow".

Latika recalled that she had said the same thing last year and perhaps the year before too. She felt that the girls were watching her with suspicious eyes, as if they didn't believe her. Her head reeled, as if from some unknown corner, a cluster of inky clouds was about to rise and enfold her. She laughed a little and then tossed her head.

"Julie, I want to have a word with you. See me before returning to your block. Well, good night". Latika closed the door behind her.

"Good night, Ma'am. Good night, good night".

Instead of descending the steps from the corridor, Latika stood leaning against the railing. She turned down the wick of the lamp and put it in a corner. Outside the blue layers of fog had thickened. The rustling of the pine trees on the lawn outside flowed in, now gently, now sharply. Feeling the first friendly nip of cold in the air, the thought of the holidays beginning from tomorrow, strayed again into Latika's mind. She closed her eyes. She felt that her legs were tied to her body like bamboo stilts, the joints slowly coming undone. The dizziness in her head had not yet left, but now it seemed no more confined to her head, but to have become a part of the fog outside.

The sound of voices on the stairs served to wake Latika from her reverie. She wrapped the shawl round her shoulders and picked up the lamp. Dr. Mukherji was coming up with Mr. Hubert, humming an English tune.

The stairs were dark, and Mr. Hubert had to grope with his walking stick, his way up the stairs. Descending a few steps Latika lowered the lamp. "Good evening, Doctor. Good evening, Mr. Hubert!" "Thank you, Miss Latika! Mr. Hubert's voice rang with gratitude. Walking up was a strain for him, and as he leant against the wall, he was panting. In the light of the lamp the pallor of his face had acquired a copper-like hue.

"What are you doing here all alone, Miss Latika?" The doctor whistled softly, under his breath.

"Just checked up on the girls. What brings you up the stairs at this time of night, Mr. Hubert?"

Hubert smiled and tapped Mukherji's shoulder with his stick. "Ask him. He's the man who has dragged me here".

"Miss Latika, we were coming up to invite you. Tonight we are having a small concert in my room, at which Mr. Hubert will play Chopin and Tchaikovsky and then we shall drink coffee with cream. And then, if time permits, we shall confess all the sins we have committed this year". A smile rose and played on Dr. Mukherji's face.

"Doctor, please excuse me, I'm not feeling too well".

"Good. In that case you would have had to come to me anyway". The doctor held Latika by her shoulder and turned her towards his room.

Dr. Mukherji's room was at the other end of the block, almost jutting into the roof. He was half Burmese, which was evident from his somewhat depressed nose and small, vivacious eyes. After the Japanese attack on Burma, he had sought asylum in this small hill station. Apart from his private practice he also taught Hygiene and Physiology at the Convent School, for which he had been given a room in the hostel. Some people said that his wife had died on the trek back from Burma, but nothing could be said of this with certainty, for the doctor never talked about his wife.

In the midst of a conversation, he sometimes said, "Before I die, I shall definitely visit Burma once". And for an instant his eyes would film over. Even though she wanted to, Latika could never

ask him any question. She felt that the doctor did not want anybody raking up his past or showing sympathy for him. The very next moment, dispelling his sombreness, he would into break a laugh, a dry wan laugh.

Homesickness is the only ailment for which no doctor has a cure. They set out a table and some chairs on the roof. Inside the room, Dr. Mukherji put some water in the percolator for coffee.

"I hear that in the next two or three years we shall have electricity in this place". Dr. Mukherji said, lighting the spirit lamp.

"I have been hearing that for years! The British too had made some elaborate plans, don't know what became of them". Reclined in his easy chair, Hubert was looking at the lawn outside.

Latika brought two candles from the room. Fixing them at the two ends of the table, she lit them. The darkness on the roof shrank before the pale light of the candles. A dense soundlessness spread all around. The sighing of the pine trees in the wind threw trails of whistling echoes down and up, in the gorges and over the cliffs.

"This year the snow will be early perhaps: there's already a dry chill in the air". Dr. Mukherji's cigar glowed like a red dot in the darkness.

"I don't know why Miss Wood has to insist on this theatrical Special Service," Hubert said. "Is it necessary for the girls to listen to father Elmond's sermon before going home on vacation?"

"I've been listening to him for the last five years. Not a word changes in Father Elmond's sermon". The doctor couldn't stand Father Elmond.

..

Leaning forward in her chair, Latika poured coffee into the cups. Every year before the school closed for vacation, these were the two fixtures in the programme: a special service in the chapel and then a picnic in the afternoon. Latika recalled her first year at school when she had gone to the club with the doctor after the picnic. The doctor had gone into the bar. The ballroom was filled with the officers of the Kumaon regiment. After watching a game of billiards they glanced into the library on the right, when Dr. Mukherji came up from behind. "Miss Latika, this is Mr. Girish Negi," He paused amidst the din of guffaws and loud laughter from the billiard room. A finger on the page of a book. Girish Negi was looking out of the library window. "Hello, Doctor, he turned back, At that moment...

Just at that moment, one did not know why Latika's had shook slightly and a few hot drops of coffee spilled on her sari. In the dark nobody noticed that a sleepy vacant look had overspread her face.

In the gusts of wind the candle flames flickered looming above the roof level. On the Kathgodam Road, the last bus of the UP Roadways went, carrying mail. In its headlights the bushes around cast shadows on the house walls and gliding along, disappeared.

"Miss Latika, will you be staying here during the vacation?" The doctor asked her.

The doctor's question remained suspended in the air. That very moment Chopin's Nocturne, gliding from under Hubert's fingers, slowly began to dissolve in the darkness on the terrace like soft whirlpools glinting on the surface of water and rippling far, far away towards some distant shore. Latika felt that from far off peaks of snow, flocks of birds were descending and flying away to unknown lands.

These days she often did see them through her window — like bright tops tied to a string they flew in long zig-zag lines, away from the solitude of the mountain ranges towards the strange cities where she would never perhaps go.

Latika started dozing in her chair. Dr. Mukherji's cigar was silently glowing in the dark. The doctor wondered was she getting old? The face of Miss Wood, the principal, swam before her eyes: toothless, hollow cheeked woman with bags of flesh swinging under her eyes, roused to irritated anger at the slightest provocation and screaming raucously. Everybody called her Old Maid. In a few years, Latika too would become exactly like her — a tremor ran down her body, as if she had touched something dirty. She recalled that a few months ago she had received a love letter from Hubert — sentimental, full of pleading and a lot of god-knew-what. She had not understood a word. She had felt amused at this childish antic of Hubert's, but she had also felt pleased at heart — she was not yet past the age at which she could attract people. Hubert's letter did not make her angry: it only made her compassionate. If she wanted to, she could have cleared the misconceptions he was labouring under, but some force stopped her from doing so, some force that helped keep her confidence in herself, as if her illusion of happiness was linked to Hubert's misconceptions.

Why Hubert alone? Could she love anyone with the fervour which she no longer had, which hung over her like a shadow, neither fading away nor giving her release? She felt as if the cluster of clouds were again descending over her, her legs again becoming cold and lifeless.

She got up with a jerk from the chair. "Excuse me, Doctor, I'm feeling very tired..." Without completing her sentence she went away.

For a while the terrace was steeped in silence. The candles were on the point of going out. Dr. Mukherji took``a fresh pull at his cigar. "All girls are the same — foolish and sentimental".

Hubert's fingers lost their tautness on the piano's keyboard. A hesitant echo of the last bar stayed fluttering in the air for sometime.

"Doctor, have you noticed that for some time past Miss Latika has been behaving in a strange way?" In Hubert's tone was a studied note of indifference. He didn't want the doctor to have even an inkling of his feelings for Latika. The doctor would turn to ridicule with one bellow of laughter the tender sentiments that he had been harbouring so long.

"Do you believe in destiny, Hubert?" the doctor asked. Hubert waited with bated breath. He knew that before saying anything the doctor philosophised. The doctor leant close against the railing of the terrace. In the pale moonlight the shadows of the pine trees fell on the lawn. Sometimes a glow-worm disappeared in the air after spraying green light into the darkness.

"I sometimes wonder why human beings live. Don't they have anything better to do? Thousands of miles away from home, I am

washed up here. Who knows me here... I may even die here. Hubert, have you ever thought that to go as an alien to a foreign land is quite dangerous...?"

Hubert looked at the doctor with some surprise. This was the first time that he saw Dr. Mukherji in this light. He had always been reserved about his personal affairs.

"There's no one dependent on me, this gives me a strange carefree feeling. But some people's death remains an enigma till the very end. Perhaps they expected too much from life. We can't even call their lives tragic for till the last breath they are not conscious of the phenomenon of death".

"Doctor, who are you talking about?" Hubert asked, upset.

The doctor kept smoking his cigar, then fixed his eyes on the dying candle flames.

"You know there was a time when Latika used to go to the club regularly. She got acquainted with Girish Negi there. He told me everything the night before he left for Kashmir. I have never told Latika about that meeting. But that day who knew that he would never come back? And now... now what difference does it make? Let the dead die". The doctor's dry, wan laughter was filled with a hollow vacuity.

"Girish Negi? Who was he?"

"He was a captain in the Kumaon Regiment".

"Doctor... Latika..". Hubert could say no more. He suddenly remembered the letter he had written to Latika. How meaningless

and laughable, each word wrenching at his heart. Slowly, he rested his head on the piano. Why hadn't Latika told him about it? Wasn't he worthy even to be told?

"Latika... she's a child, and silly. Does one die with the dead?"

After a short silence the doctor again repeated his question.

"But Hubert, do you believe in destiny?"

In the gust of wind the candle flames flared sharply and then died. On the terrace, Hubert and the doctor could not see each other's faces but still they were looking in the direction of one another. The sound of a mountain stream flowing along the ground some distance from the school, was heard clearly. When, after a long time the bugle of the Kumaon Regiment sounded, Hubert got up hurriedly. "I must be going, Doctor. Good night".

"Good night, Hubert. Excuse me. I'll go to bed only after I finish my cigar".

In the morning the sky was overcast. No sooner had Latika opened her window than a balloon of fog entered her room as if it had been shuddering all night in the cold, waiting just for this moment when it could trespass into her room. Above the school the road leading to the chapel was hidden in clouds: only the cross was visible, silhouetted against the screen of fog as if in pencilled lines.

Latika averted her gaze from the window, and found Karimuddin standing in the room with the tea tray. Karimuddin had served in the army as an orderly, so after putting the tray on the table, he stood to attention. Latika sprang to attention herself. Ever since

she had woken up she had been dozing fitfully, out of sheer lethargy. To get over her embarrassment, she said, "Chilly, isn't it? Don't feel like leaving bed".

"Ah, Mem Saheb, this is no cold, let Christmas come and your teeth will keep chattering with the cold. That's the real winter". Putting his hands under his arms Karimuddin shrank into himself as if the mere thought of those days had given him the shivers. He had dyed his hair round the edges of the bald pate, making it look tobacco brown. Whatever the talk, he had the knack of bringing it to a level at which he could express himself freely.

"One year there was such a heavy snowfall that the entire stretch of road form Bhowali to the dak bungalow was totally blocked. So thick was the snow, Mem Saheb, that even the branches of trees wrapped themselves against the trunks of the trees — like this". He demonstrated by bending low and assuming a hen's posture.

"What year are you talking of?"

"That I can tell you only after calculations, Mem Saheb. But I very well remember that the British were still here. There was no national flag on the cantonment buildings. Very smart these British were, within two hours they had had the snow cleared. Those days just one blast of the whistle drew out fifty horsemen from nowhere. Now, all the sheds are lying deserted. Those people knew how to make others wait upon them. Now everything is different". With a sad expression Karimuddin looked out of the window.

This was not the first time that Latika had heard about the good old days of the British Rule from Karimuddin — the Angrez Bahadur who had made the place a heaven.

"Mem Saheb, are you spending your vacation here this year too?"

"So it seems, Karimuddin. I'm afraid I'll be pestering you.

'What are you saying, Mem Saheb? Your being here keeps my spirits up. Otherwise in vacation time the dogs have a free run of the place".

"Tell the mason, please, to repair the roof. Last year, water or snow kept leaking out of the crevices". Latika recalled that last winter whenever snow fell she had had to retreat to a corner of the room to sleep.

Picking up the tray, Karimuddin said, "Hubert saheb may leave tomorrow. Last night he again took ill. He came and woke me up at midnight. Complained of pain in the chest. Winter doesn't seem to suit him. He said that he would try to leave tomorrow by the girls' bus".

Karimuddin closed the door and went out of the room. Latika thought of going to Hubert's room and inquiring about his health. But then, she didn't know why the slippers kept dangling from her feet and she kept looking out of the window at the rushing clouds. When Hubert's face looks at her and becomes shy and pleading, she feels that he is reproaching her in dumb, helpless supplication — she can neither dispel his misconception nor say anything about herself in self-justification, she feels that

whichever strand she catches hold of in order to extricate herself from the web turns into a knot.

It had started drizzling, the tin roof became noisy with the pitter-patter of rain. Latika got out of bed. She re-made it neatly. Then dragging her feet in her slippers to the big mirror, she sat on the stool before it and undid her hair. But for some time the comb remained sunk in the hair and she looked at herself in the mirror with unseeing eyes. She had clean forgotten to tell Karimuddin to keep putting aside fuel-wood. These days wood was cheap and dry. Last year her room had got filled with smoke and she had had to keep the window open even in the bitter cold.

Latika looked at her face in the mirror — she was smiling. Last year, to escape the chill and dampness of her room she often went to sleep in Miss Wood's room on the sly. Miss Wood's room stayed warm even without a fire. She fell asleep as soon as she lay down on the downy, springy sofa. The room remained empty during vacations, but Miss Wood did not have the common humaneness to give it to her for use for the two months. Every year she stuck a lock on the door. Last year she had forgotten to lock the bathroom door from within, so Latika had used it to steal in.

The first year she had been frightened to be alone. During the vacation the whole school and hostel rooms boomed with a ghostly silence. When her fear became too much and she could not sleep, she would keep Karimuddin engaged in small talk, and when she started dozing, he would extinguish the lamp and slip out. Sometimes she would call the doctor on the pretext of illness and force him to sleep there, having an extra bed made up for him in the adjoining room.

She extracted a bunch of hair form her comb and walked to the window to throw it out. Outside, the rain water was falling in thick streams from the sloping roof onto the lawn below.

In the overcast sky, the mountain peaks disappeared and appeared again behind the scudding clouds as if they were being seen from a moving train. Latika put her head out of the window and blinked as a cold blast of wind hit her face and as she remembered each task she had to attend to, her lethargy mounted. Money had to be given to the school peon to reserve bus tickets for the girls. The luggage they were leaving behind had to be stored in the godown. Sometimes she had even to help the smaller girls pack their things.

She does not really hate these tasks. Everything gets done in time. A lapse here, an oversight there, all get set right later. Every chore leaves behind some anxiety and strain but sooner or later it does get done.

But every year when the last busload of girls leaves she feels out of sorts — aimlessly she wanders through the empty corridors, now entering one room, now another. She doesn't know what to do with herself - the mind doesn't get involved with anything but wanders, always wa nders.

And then everyone asks her facilely, "Miss Latika aren't you going home during the vacations?" What can she say?

Ding! Ding! Ding! The special service bell rang in the school chapel. Latika withdrew her head from the window. Slipping out of her sari, she threw a towel over her shoulder and entered the bathroom in her petticoat.

Left-right-left-left-

A formation of the sepoys of the Kumaon Regiment was marching in fours on the road leading to the cantonment. The heavy and rough thud of their army boots bounced off the chapel walls and went reverberating through the prayer hall inside.

"Blessed are the meek.". Father Elmond was reading the Sermon on the Mount in a rasping voice, chewing each word. Under the statue of Jesus Christ the light of the candles on both ends of the candelabrum fell on the girls sitting in the front rows. The rows in the back were enveloped in darkness. There sat the girls, heads bowed in prayer, whispering among themselves. Miss Wood had already delivered her valedictory address, congratulating the students and staff on the conclusion of a successful school session — and now, sitting behind the Father, was muttering something to herself as if prompting him.

"Amen!" Father Elmond put down the Bible on the pulpit and picked up the Prayer Book. For a moment the silence of the hall broke. Standing up, the girls pushed back the benches purposely, making a grating sound. The sound of laughter rose from a corner of the hall. Miss Wood's face became taut and her brows knitted. Again a hush fell over the hall — through the bleak shadows of the hall, Father Elmond's sharp, splintery voice was heard, "Jesus said, I am the light of the world. He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life..".

Dr Mukherji yawned with boredom and fretfulness. "When will this business end?" He asked Latika in such a loud voice, that she looked the other way in embarrassment. All through the special service, a special, ironic smile lingered on Dr Mukherji's face; and he kept softly tugging at his moustache.

Father Elmond's costume sent a ripple of amusement through Latika. When she was a small girl she often wondered whether these padres wore anything under their robes. What if the robe accidentally got lifted?

____Left... right... left! The sound of the marching army boots receded from the chapel — only the echo hung in the air.

"Hymn No. 117," Father Elmond said, opening his Prayer Book. Each girl in the hall opened the Hymn Book kept on her desk. The sound of rustling pages slithered from one corner to the other.

Getting up from a bench in the front row, Hubert sat down on a stool at the piano. Being the Music Teacher, he had to accompany the school choir on the piano every year. Hubert blew into his handkerchief. He always did this to hide his nervousness. Casting a glance over the hall with stealthy eyes, he opened The Hymn Book with trembling hands.

Lead kindly light...

Muffled and shy, the notes of the piano met together. Hubert's long, yellow fingers, covered with thick down, opened and closed. The voices of the girls forming the choir, locking with each other, fused into soft-sweet waves.

Latika felt that her bun of hair had come loose, as if hanging, at the nape of her neck. Avoiding Miss Wood's eye, she carefully re-secured her hair with hair clips.

"What an obstinate man... In the morning I stopped him from attending chapel, yet he's turned up".

Latika remembered what Karimuddin had told her... the whole night he had coughed...and was talking about leaving tomorrow...Crooking her head to one side, Latika tried in vain to get a glimpse of Hubert's face. From her seat behind, nothing could be seen clearly. Only Hubert's head could be seen bent over the piano.

"Lead kindly light..". The notes of the music seemed to have climbed a high mountain, and, scattering wisps of breath into the vast emptiness of the sky, were climbing down. The soft, rain-drenched light is glistening on the oblong glass panel of the chapel window. And one single ray of light falls aslant on Jesus Christ's Image. The smoke from the candles traces a blue line in the light, now floating in the air. In the momentary pause of the piano, Latika hears the murmuring of leaves, from somewhere far away. For a moment she had the illusion that the chapel's dim darkness, winding back from the four corners of the prayer hall, had encircled her thickly — as if someone had brought her to this place blindfolded, and had suddenly whisked away the bandage from her eyes. She felt there was nothing solid or real in the smoky illumination of the candle — the ceiling of the chapel, the walls, the doctor's strong and supple hand on the desk and that the notes of the piano piercing the fog of the past had themselves become part of the fog.

A crazy memory, an elusive feeling — beyond the glass of the chapel, in the dry mountain wind, the trembling branches of the weeping willows bending in the wind and underfoot, the soft, familiar rustling of pine leaves ... Just there Girish is standing, holding a khaki military hat in his hand. Broad, upraised shoulders. If you put your head on them he would withdraw into

himself. Charles Boyer,* that was the name she had given him. It made him laugh with embarrassment.

"Who selected you for the army? You are a major in rank but you are worse than girls. Your face turns red at the lightest touch". All this she had never said, just thought — thought she'd say tt some time, but that some time never came.

Rhododendrons you have brought, haven't you?

Liar!

His khaki tunic carried war decorations on its pocket. From out of it came a wilted red flower.

It has withered.

Hadn't even bloomed.

How clumsy!

Girish's hand is entangled in her hair. The flower doesn't stay, then he secures it under the clip.

"There!"

She turned round. But before she could speak plonk came Girish's military hat over her head. She stood there spellbound.

Girish's hat is on her head — a small red mark on her forehead.

On it is a flying strand of hair. Girish has touched the red mark with his lips, he has enfolded her now unhatted head in both his hands.

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* A famous Hollywood hero of the sixties.

"Latika!"

"Man-eater of Kumaon!" Girish teased her. She had started laughing.

"Latika, listen!" His voice sounded, like what?

I don't hear anything.

"Latika, I'll be back in a few months".

"No... I don't hear a thing".

But she does hear — not what Girish is saying, but what he is not saying, what never got said afterwards.

"Lead kindly light".

The girls' voices rose and fell to the sound of the piano.

For a fleeting moment, Hubert turned his head and looked at Latika. Eyes closed, she was standing like a statue in meditation. Was this stance and emotion for him? Has Latika made him her companion in these moments? Hubert took a deep breath, and from the breath swirled a mass of weariness.

"Look, Miss Wood is dozing in her chair!" The doctor whispered under his breath. It was the doctor's favourite joke that Miss Wood slept under the pretence of praying.

Father Elmond gathered the ends of his robe from his chair and, closing his Prayer Book said something in Miss Wood's ear. The

sound of the piano was fading and Hubert's fingers lost their tension. At the conclusion of the service Miss Wood read out an order. The unexpected rain had called for an alteration in the programme. It would not be possible to go to Jhula Devi temple for the picnic. Instead, after breakfast, the girls would assemble in Meadows, just some distance from the school. They would have to take their lunch packets from the hostel kitchen. Only the evening tea would be prepared in Meadows.

Rains in the hills are unpredictable. A short while ago smoky clouds were thundering, the whole town was shivering and wet — now the sun-washed blue sky was emerging from behind the fog and spreading. Latika came out of the chapel, and saw glistening rain-drops falling from the branches of the weeping willows.

After coming out of the chapel the girls collected in the corridors in small and big groups. Breakfast was still three quarters of an hour away and no girl was in the mood to go back to the hostel. The vacation had not yet started but precisely for this reason perhaps, they wanted the foretaste of freedom in these last moments of stockaded discipline.

Miss Wood frowned at the girls' noisy behaviour, but she could not give them a talking-to in Father Elmond's presence. Suppressing her anger, she smiled and said, "Tomorrow all these girls will be gone and the school will be deserted".

Father Elmond's long, impressive face had taken on a deeper red hue in the chapel's oppressive heat. Hanging his walking stick on the corridor railing, he said, "Who's staying behind in the hostel during the vacation?"

"It's only Miss Latika who's been staying behind for the last two years or so".

"And Dr Mukherji?" The Father's upper lip stretched slightly.

"The Doctor stays here all the year round — summer and winter". Miss Wood gave Father Elmond a surprised look. She could not understand why Father Elmond had brought the doctor into the conversation.

"Doesn't Dr Mukherji go anywhere during the vacation?"

"It would be hard to visit Burma in a two month vacation, Father," Miss Wood laughed.

"Miss Wood, I don't know what you think. But I cannot understand why Miss Latika should stay in the hostel all by herself".

"But, Father, it is a rule in our school that any teacher can stay in the hostel at vacation time, at her own expense".

"I am not talking of school regulations at the moment. Miss Latika will be left alone with the doctor and to tell you the truth, Miss Wood, I don't have a very high opinion of Dr. Mukherji".

"Father, what are you talking about? Miss Latika is not a child". Miss Wood had not expected Father Elmond to harbour such dark thoughts about anyone.

Father Elmond was a little taken aback at her vehemence. "Miss Wood, I don't mean that," he said evasively. "You know there

was quite a scandal over Miss Latika and that military officer. How long does it take for a school to earn a bad name?"

'Poor fellow, he is no more. I knew him, Father. May God rest his soul in peace". Miss Wood made a sign of the cross.

Father Elmond was so put off by Miss Wood's stupidity that he didn't say anything further. He had never got along with Dr Mukherji, therefore he wanted to run down the doctor in Miss Wood's eyes. But here was Miss Wood shedding tears for Latika. To continue was useless. He took his walking stick from the railing and, looking up at the clear bright sky, said "You changed your programme unnecessarily, Miss Wood. No sign of rain there".

When Hubert came out of the chapel his eyes were momentarily blinded by the glare. He felt that someone had suddenly sprayed a handful of bright, boiling light into his eyes. The notes of the piano still fluttered in his head, like strands of wispy cotton-wool. Playing the piano always put a heavy strain on the lungs and his heartbeat increased. He felt that in the effort of transmitting one note of music to the other, he was crossing a dark chasm. What I experienced in the chapel today, how extraordinary it was, he thought. I felt that each note of the piano, emerging from the dark caves of eternal silence, cutting through and chiseling the blue spreading fog, extracted some half forgotten meaning out of it. Every descending pause was a small death, as if a trail had got lost in the trembling shadows of a dense cluster of trees, a small death which bequeathed the remnants of its cadences to the coming notes ... which dies but is not destroyed, therefore alive even in death, immersing in the other notes.

"Doctor, does death come like this?" If I ask the doctor he would laugh it off. I feel, that for the last few days he has been hiding something from me. I do not like the echo of sympathy in his laughter. Today he tried to stop me from coming to the special service. When I asked why, he slurred it over. What is this something that the doctor fights shy of telling me? Perhaps I am just becoming suspicious by nature, that's all.

Hubert saw the rows of girls descending onto the road leading from the school to the hostel. In the bright sun, their van-coloured ribbons, blue frocks and white belts shone. Some girls of the Senior Cambridge class had plucked roses from the chapel garden and tucked them into their hair. The sepoys from the cantonment were making lewd remarks at the girls, sometimes head bent lightly, whistling.

"Hello, Mr Hubert!"

Startled, Mr Hubert turned his head. Latika was standing there, a fat register under her arm.

"Are you still here?" Hubert's gaze remained riveted on Latika's face. She was wearing a full-sleeved, cream-coloured woollen jacket. Her neck was round like the Kumaoni girls. Under the hot sun her wheat-coloured complexion had turned slightly rosy as if even after constant washing some scattered rose spots had stayed.

"Had to take down the names of the girls who are leaving tomorrow... I have to stay back. You too are leaving tomorrow, Mr Hubert?"

"That's my intention as of now. What would I do here? Are you walking towards the school?"

"Come along!"

The crowds of girls had increased on the macadam road. So they took the footpath circling the polo grounds.

The wind had risen. With every gust of wind, pine leaves fell from the trees and rose on the footpath in sudden big heaps. Hubert made a way through the heaps with his walking stick. Latika watched him, standing behind each time. Baby clouds coming from the Almora Valley veiled the sun like silk handkerchiefs, and then drifted away with the breeze. In this game the light became dim sometimes, sometimes spreading out its bright mantle, gathering the entire city into itself.

Latika suddenly walked ahead of Hubert. Hubert's breathing grew heavy, and he followed her, panting. When they left the cemetery, Latika stopped for Hubert to catch up with her. She recalled that during the vacation when time hung heavy on her, sitting in her room, she often walked up to the cemetery. Climbing the hill which bordered the cemetery, she would watch the pines from whose snow-laden branches snow fell like fluffs of cotton. In the bazaar down below, the children sleighed. Standing on the hill she would visualise the road — now buried under snow — that passed by Father Elmond's house, led to the military hospital and the post office, and then got lost somewhere outside the church steps. The thrill one gets from solving jigsaw puzzles, Latika got by tracing roads buried under snow.

"Miss Latika, you walk very fast". Hubert's face had wilted with tiredness. Beads of perspiration shone on his forehead.

"Were you ill last night?"

"How do you know? Do I look ill?" There was an edge in Hubert's voice. Why did every one talk about his health. he wondered.

"No, I wouldn't have known but for Karimuddin. He told me about it in passing". Latika was slightly abashed.

"No, it's nothing serious. The same pain began again. I'm perfectly all right now". In confirmation Hubert threw out his chest and slightly accelerated his pace.

"Did you speak to Dr. Mukheiji?"

"He came in the morning. I just don't understand him. He always contradicts himself. He said that I must take leave for six months and have complete rest. But if I'm alright, where is the question of taking rest?"

The touch of anxiety in Hubert's voice did not escape Latika's notice. "You worry for nothing, Mr Hubert," she said, dodging his question. "The season is changing, even perfectly healthy people can fall ill".

"Do you think so?" Hubert's face beamed with happiness. He gave Latika an intent look. He wanted to set all doubt at rest by making sure that she was not saying this merely to console him.

"That's just what I was thinking, Miss Latika. The doctor's advice gave me a scare. What would I do alone with six months' leave? In the school, the children divert me. To tell you the truth it is hard to get through even these two months in Delhi".

"Mr Hubert... you are leaving for Delhi tomorrow...?"

Latika suddenly stopped in her tracks. In front spread the polo ground, at one end of which, military trucks were heading for the cantonment. Hubert felt as if Latika's eyelids had dropped and half-closed, as if a forgotten dream had slipped into them.

"Mr Hubert, so you are going to Delhi". Latika did not repeat it as a question — In her voice was just a sense of immense distance.

"Many years ago I went to Delhi, Mr Hubert. I was very young then — I don't know how many years ago it was. I have lost count of the years. My aunt was married there, in Delhi. I saw many things, but now the memory has faded. I remember that we climbed the Qutab. We looked down from the topmost storey — a strange sensation it was! The people walking below looked like clockwork toys. We threw monkeynuts at them, and were very disappointed that none of them looked up at us. Perhaps my mother scolded me, and I got scared just looking down. I hear that Delhi has now changed beyond recognition..".

They resumed their walk. The wind subsided. The fleeting clouds now seemed to relax, their shadows falling on the hills of Nandadevi and Panchchuli. As they neared the school the pine trees receded into the distance, here and there around the apricot trees the red burun flowers shone in the sun. In getting to the school they had covered the entire length of the polo ground.

"Miss Latika, why don't you go somewhere in the winter vacation? In winter this place must be desolate".

"I like it here now," Latika said. "The first year the solitude oppressed me somewhat. But now I have got used to it. On Christmas Eve there is a dance. At the club they run a lottery. And there is singing and dancing till late in the night. On New Year's day, the Kumaon Regiment puts up a carnival on the parade ground. There is skating. and the military band plays under a lot of coloured balloons; the army officers take part in a Fancy Dress show — all this happens every year, Mr. Hubert. Then a few days later, the English tourists start arriving for winter sports. I am introduced to them and they promise to return the following year, but I know they won't, and they know it too. But that does not make any difference to our friendship. Then after some time the snow starts melting on the mountains, the vacation draws to a close and you people start coming back — and, Mr Hubert, I don't even realise when the vacation started, when it ended".

Latika saw that Hubert was looking at her with consternation. She fell into an embarrassed silence, as though all this while she had been prattling in a mad, delirious way.

"Forgive me, Mr Hubert, sometimes I get childish and get carried away".

"Miss Latika..". Hubert said in a low voice. He stopped walking. Latika was startled at the heaviness of his voice.

"What is it, Mr Hubert?"

"That letter ... I'm ashamed of it. Please return it to me. Consider it never written".

Latika understood nothing. Lost and transfixed, she stared at Hubert's yellow, troubled face.

Hubert gently placed his hand on Latika's shoulder.

"Yesterday the doctor told me everything. If I had known I.. .I..". Hubert's voice faltered.

"Hubert..". But Latika, too, could not speak further. Her face had turned white.

For some time they stood in silence at the school gate.

Meadows — a small island surrounded on all sides by goat tracks, leaves and shadows, like a nest ensconced between two valleys. Immediately on entering it, stones charred by picnickers, semi-charred branches of trees, old newspaper sheets spread out to sit on, scattered in all directions, meet the eye. It is a favourite spot for tourists and picnickers. A crooked mountain stream cuts through the meadow, looking from a distance like a white ribbon under the bright sunlight. There is a bridge over the brook, made of old logs of wood.

The girls are teetering across the bridge.

"Dr Mukherji, you are going to send up the whole jungle in flames!" Miss Wood said, stamping with her high-heeled sandal a burning matchstick which Dr Mukherji had carelessly flung on a pile of pine leaves. He was sitting a little away from the brook, under the interlocking shade of two pine trees. In front of him, a goat-path led towards a small village down below, where, in the lap of the hill, terraced fields of beet could be seen. In the

stillness of afternoon the sound of sheep and goat came floating down with the breeze.

Remaining stretched on the grass, Dr. Mukherji smoked his cigar.

"Have you seen a jungle on fire, Miss Wood? It slowly spreads like an intoxication in all directions.

"Have you seen one, Doctor?" Miss Wood asked. "I feel terribly afraid".

"Many years ago I saw cities burning," the doctor looked at the sky, lying on the grass. "One after the other, houses fell like a pack of cards. Unfortunately, it is only on rare occasions that one sees such splendid sights".

"Where did you see it, Doctor?"

"In the war. I saw my own city, Rangoon, burning".

It gave Miss Wood a jolt, but her curiosity did not wane. "Your house — was that too burnt down?"

The Doctor was silent for a while. Then he said, "We left ... and came away. I don't know what happened afterwards". To speak about his personal affairs was very difficult for the doctor.

"Doctor, don't you ever think of going back to Rangoon?"

The doctor yawned and then, turning on his side, lay face down. His eyes closed and strands of hair fell across his forehead.

"What is the good of thinking, Miss Wood? When I lived in Burma, did I ever imagine that I would spend the fag end of my life here?"

"But, Doctor, say what you will, one never feels at peace anywhere but in one's own country. You may live here for any number of years and yet you will feel like an outsider".

The doctor slowly blew the cigar smoke in the air. "For that matter, even there I would be regarded as an outsider, Miss Wood. After so many years who would recognise me now? To start a new life at my age would be difficult. I won't be up to it".

"But Doctor, how long can you vegetate in this hill town? If you have to live in this country set up practice in a big city".

"Where will I knock around to expand my practice? Miss Wood, one can find patients wherever one lives. I came here only for a few days, and then I stayed on and on. Whenever I get bored I shall move on. If one does not put down roots anywhere, one leaves nothing behind. I have no illusions about myself, Miss Wood. I am happy".

Miss Wood did not pay much attention to Dr Mukherji's statements. In her heart she regarded him as something of an eccentric, careless and self-willed. But she had faith in his character — she didn't know why, because she could not recall the doctor wittingly or unwittingly, ever having given evidence of it.

Miss Wood sighed deeply. She always thought that if the doctor had not been so lazy and indifferent, he would certainly have

made a mark in his profession. That was why she was angry with him and at the same time felt sorry for him.

She took out a ball of wool and knitting needless from her bag and then prised out a flat coffee tin wrapped in newspaper in which egg sandwiches and hamburgers lay compressed. Pouring coffee from a thermos, she said, "Doctor, the coffee has gone quite cold".

The doctor muttered, still stretched out. Miss Wood bent down to see. Resting his head on his elbow, he was sleeping. The upper lip had stretched a little and turned, as if he was smoking a cigar. His cigar, pressed between his fingers, dangled upside down.

"Mary, Mary, what do you want?" The second standard student Mary, raises her alert vivacious eye as a circle of girls advanced and receded in rhytham.

"I want — I want blue!" Swinging her arms in the air, Mary shouted. The circle broke like water. The girls ran helter-skelter, tumbling over one another, to touch a blue-coloured object.

Lunch was over. Small groups of girls were scattered all over Meadows. The girls of a senior class had climbed up some trees to break twigs and build a fire to boil water for tea.

In the afternoon hour, Meadows seemed to be dozing languidly. A stray gust of wind, and the pine trees set up a rustle. Sometimes, to get over its lethargy, a bird flew down from a tree and settling down on the bank of a channel and plunged its head in the water; rising up, it wheeled around aimlessly, and than lurked again in the bush.

But the silence of a jungle is never voiceless. Sounds and voices, like dreams in deep sleep, keep furrowing the light gossamer curtain of stillness, flutter in the air like mute waves, as if someone on tiptoe glances in, and goes, making an invisible sign — look I'm here.

Ruffling Julie's short hair, Latika said, "I called you last night".

"Ma'am, I went to your room, but you weren't there".

Latika recalled that last night she had sat a long time on the doctor's terrace when Hubert was playing Chopin's Nocturne on the piano.

"Julie, I want to ask you something". She felt that she was trying to shield herself from Julie's eyes.

Julie raised her face, eagerness and curiosity in her brown eyes.

Do you know anybody in the officers' mess?

"Julie, I'm sure you will not tell a lie".

Julie shook her head in a confused way.

Latika stared at her with fixed eyes for a while.

The curiosity in Julie's eyes now changed to fear.

Taking out a blue envelope from her jacket pocket, Latika tossed it into Julie's lap. "Whose letter is this?"

Julie stretched her hand to pick up the envelope, but for an instant her hand trembled, and remained arrested in the air.

The envelope bore her name and her address.

"Thank you, Ma'am. It's a letter from my brother. He lives in Jhansi". Nervously Julie hid the envelope in the fold of her skirt.

"Julie, show me the letter". Latika's voice had hardened and shrilled.

Julie helplessly surrendered the letter to Latika.

"Does your brother live in Jhansi?"

This time Julie made no reply. Her lost, unseeing eyes kept gazing at Latika.

"What's this?"

Julie's face was drained of colour. The seal of the Kumaon Regimental Centre was staring her in the face.

"Who's he?" Latika asked. Some vague rumors had already travelled down to her that Julie had been seen with an army officer in the club. But such rumours were common and she did not believe them.

"Julie, you are too young for all this".

Julie's lips trembled. There was entreaty in her eyes.

"You may go. I will talk to you after the vacation".

Julie looked at the envelope with yearning eyes. She was on the verge of saying something, but she went away wordlessly.

Latika stayed looking at Julie for a long time, till she vanished from sight. Am I in any way better than an old spinster? Why am I venting my frustration on others?

Maybe — who knew — perhaps this was Julie's first introduction to that experience which a girl guards and keeps close to her heart. An indescribable joy which carries pain, a high-tide which drowns joy and pain, a pain which rises from joy and gives pain.

Under this very pine tree she had felt the same pain when Girish asked her, "Why are you quiet?" Eyes closed, she was thinking about, no, living it, that moment which was pressed between fear and surprise — a bewitched, mad moment. If she turned back now, she could see Girish s nervous smile, and the past from that day to this afternoon would break like a bad dream. This was the pine tree on which she had carved Girish's name with a hairpin. The pin got blunted again and again, the bark of the tree wouldn't peel, and then Girish had etched her name under his own. When a letter came out crooked, she would laugh, and Girish's trembling hand trembled more.

Latika feels that what she remembers she wants to forget too, but when she really begins to forget, she gets afraid lest something of hers be taken away from her, something be lost forever.

In her childhood, whenever she lost a toy, she would go very quiet and try to remember where exactly she had put it. When she found it after a lot of searching around, she would pretend that she was still searching and had not found It. Skipping the place where the toy was lying, she would look for it in all the

other nooks and corners of the room. The lost thing was not lost anymore, so there was no fear of forgetting where it was —

Today, why couldn't she play the childhood game of make believe? Make believe — perhaps she does make believe, the make believe of remembering him who is getting beyond remembrance. Days and months pass, and she remains entangled, without being aware of it. Girish's face fades. She tries to remember, but it is like wiping dust from the glass of an old picture. Now the pain is not like before, she just remembers, in a matter-of-fact way, something that used to exist. Then she dislikes herself. She deliberately scratches the wound that is healing of itself, despite her resistance.

The faded names on the pine tree stared at Latika with a silent, helpless expression. In the heavy stillness of Meadows, the voices of the girls at play on the other side of the stream came echoing "What do you want?... What do you want?"

Butterflies, glow-worms, crickets, cicadas — in the descending evening shadows of Meadows, it was difficult to tell one voice from another. The voices which one could recognise individually in the afternoon had got merged into an undifferentiated monotone. Wiping his feet on the grass, somebody lithers along. From the thickets of foliage and bush, somebody springs up in flight, fluttering his wings - but look up, and there's nothing. The sound of the gurgling stream of Meadows - like a train going through a dark tunnel in a rush, and the screams of whistles and wheels lingering long as echoes do...

The picnic would have gone on a little longer. But layers of clouds were climbing on each other thick and fast. The picnic things began to be gathered together. The girls who had

dispersed to the corners of Meadows gathered around Miss Wood. They brought with them various odds and ends. Some had thrust birds' feathers into their hair, some had made sticks of branches of trees with pocket knives, and some girls of the higher classes had trapped in their handkerchiefs small fish from the brook, and were secretly showing them to each other, evading Miss Wood's eye.

Miss Wood walked ahead with the groups of girls. From Meadows to the tarred road was a four-furlong or so climb. Latika started panting. Dr Mukherji lagged behind everybody. He stopped at Latika's side. Going down on both knees, and bowing to her, he said in courtly Elizabethan English, "Madam, wherefore dost thou look so worried?"
Dr. Mukherji's dramatics brought a tired, limp smile to Latika's face.

"Dying of thirst I am, and this climb doesn't end".

The doctor took his thermos off his shoulder, and handing it to Latika, said, "There's still some coffee left in it. It may help you somewhat".

"Where were you all this while, doctor? I did not see you at the picnic".

"I slept the whole afternoon -- with Miss Wood. I mean Miss Wood was sitting near me. I think Miss Wood is in love with me". Before making a joke Dr Mukherji chews one end of his moustache.

"What does she say?" Latika swallowed the coffee from the thermos.

"She might have said something, but unfortunately I fell asleep. Many such beautiful moments of love in my life have been left incomplete because of this wretched sleep of mine".

And as they walked on, bantering, the rows of pines and bamboos climbing up Meadows and the motor road, began to sink in the evening dusk, as if they had quietly bowed their heads in prayer. Somewhere above these trees the chapel cross stood lost amidst clouds. Below it, along the mountain terraces, the fields looked like running squirrels suddenly arrested in motion in expectancy of someone.

"Doctor, Mr Hubert did not come to the picnic?"

Holding a flashlight Dr. Mukherji was walking ahead of Latika.

"I advised him against it".

"Why?"

In the dark, apart from the crunching of the pine leaves underfoot, nothing else was heard. Dr. Mukherji coughed slightly. "For the last few days I have been suspecting that Hubert's pain in the chest is no ordinary pain". The doctor laughed a little, as if he did not relish his gravity of tone. He waited, perhaps Latika would say something. But Latika kept walking silently behind him.

"It's just a suspicion. I may be wide of the mark. But he would do well to get his lungs X-rayed. It will at least set all doubts at rest".

"Have you talked to Mr Hubert about this?"

"Not so far. Hubert even worries over even trifles so I have not had the courage to tell him".

The doctor felt that the sound of Latika's footsteps following his had suddenly stopped. He turned back and saw, in the dark, Latika standing like a shadow in the middle of the road.

"Doctor..". Latika's voice sounded blurred.

"What's the matter, Miss Latika? Why have you stopped?"

"Doctor, is Mr Hubert...?"

The doctor flashed his light on Latika's face. It had turned pale and she was trembling.

"Miss Latika, what's the matter? You're looking bad".

"It's nothing, Doctor. I... I . . . suddenly remembered something".

They resumed their walk. After walking some distance they raised their eyes to the sky. In the smoky sky was a flock of birds flying towards them in a triangular formation from behind the mountain range. Latika and the doctor watched the birds. Latika remembered that every year, just before the winter vacation, these birds flew towards the plains, breaking journey for some days at these hill stations, waiting for the snow, then flying downwards to strange, unknown lands...

Were they also waiting for something — she, Dr Mukherji, Mr Hubert? But waiting for what destination? Where would they go?

No reply came to her in the darkness, except for the ghostly sound of the brook of Meadows, and the rusting of the pine leaves. Nothing else was heard.

Latika gave a start and looked about her. Leaning on his walking stick, the doctor was whistling softly.

"Miss Latika, let's hurry. It is about to rain".

By the time they reached the hostel, lightning was flashing. But that night it did not rain for a long time. The showers would hardly get a start, when buffets of wind pushed the clouds away. The next day, the bus had to be caught early in the morning and, therefore, after dinner the girls went to their rooms to sleep.

When Latika entered her room the bugle of the Kumaon Regimental Centre was playing. Karimuddin was pumping gas in her lamp, humming a hill refrain. Latika lay down without changing, doubling her pillow under her head. Karimuddin gave her a fleeting glance and then resumed his work.

"How was the picnic, Mem Saheb?"

"Why didn't you come? The girls were asking for you". Latika felt that the day-long tiredness was clinging to her tissues. Involuntarily her eyes closed under the weight of sleep.

"If I had come who would have looked after Hubert Saheb? I sat the whole day glued to his bed. And now he has disappeared".

Karimuddin removed his soiled towel from his shoulder and started polishing the lamp's glass chimney.

Latika's half-closed eyes suddenly opened. "Is Hubert Saheb not in his room?"

"God knows where he is wandering about in his state of health. I had gone out to heat some water and when I returned the room was empty".

Karimuddin went out muttering. Without getting up from the bed Latika took her slippers off her feet.

Where had Hubert gone at this hour of night? But her eyes closed. The day's fatigue locked out all worries and questions, as if, after a day-long game of blind-man's-buff, she had touched the "target" in her room. She was safe now. In the four walls of her room nobody could catch her. In the bright light of the day, she was witness, she was defendant, everything in her was in conflict, while now, in this solitude, there was no complaint, no grievance, no recrimination, all struggle ended. What was her own, had now become her very own, indubitably her own; what was not her own was no cause for pain, and left her little time to make it her own.

Latika turned her face towards the wall. The shadows of the trembling curtains shook in the dim night of the lamp. In the flashes of lightning the window panes threw a blinding glare and the doors rattled as if someone was knocking at them from outside. Laughter and snatches of talk from the girls passing the corridors to their rooms — then everything stilled, but yet, in shallow sleep, she kept hearing for a long time the hissing of the lamp. She was not aware when the hissing sound too stilled, after becoming a part of the silence.

After some time she felt subdued voices coming from the stairs, somebody crying out at intervals, and then, the cries slowing down.

"Miss Latika, please bring your lamp here". It was Dr Mukherji calling from the bottom of the stairs.

The corridor was dark. She descended three or four steps, and lowered the lamp. By the balustrade stood Mr Hubert, resting his head on it. One arm was dangling, while the other, which the doctor had clutched firmly, was swaying above the doctor's shoulder.

"Miss Latika, please lower the lamp a little more... Hubert... Hubert!" Supporting him, the doctor pulled him up. Hubert raised his head. A strong whiff of whisky cut through her. There were red streaks in Hubert's eyes, his collar was upside down, the knot of his tie had loosened and slipped. Latika placed the lamp on the stairs with trembling hands and stepped back against the wall. Her head reeled.

"In a back lane of the city there is a girl who loves **me**". Hubert set up a hum between hiccups. "Hubert, please, please". The .doctor enclosed Huberts lurching figure in his strong grasp. "Miss Latika, please walk in front with your lamp". Latika picked up the lamp. On the wall began swinging their three shadows. "In a back lane of the city there is a girl who loves me". His head pushing into Dr. Mukherji's shoulder, Hubert was climbing up the dark stairs with teetering steps.

"Doctor, where are we?" He suddenly shouted so loudly that striking against the corridor's ceiling" his unsteady voice reverberated for a long time in the air.

"Hubert...!" The doctor lost his temper suddenly, then was annoyed at his own loss of control, and patted Hubert on the back. "It's nothing, Hubert, old boy. You're just tired".

Hubert fixed his eyes on the doctor's face. In them was the pleading of a frightened child, seeking an answer from the doctor's face.

Reaching his room, the doctor laid him on his bed. Hubert allowed his shoes and socks to be removed without resistance. When the doctor began removing his tie, Hubert rose on his elbows, kept staring at the doctor for a while. Then he held him by the hand.

"Doctor, am I going to die?" he asked.

"What kind of talk is this, Hubert?" The doctor released his hand, and laid Hubert's head on the pillow.

"Good night, Hubert!"

"Good night, Mr Hubert!" Latika said in a shaky voice.

But Hubert did not make any response. He fell asleep immediately on turning on his side.

Returning to the corridor, Dr. Mukherji stopped by the railing. Outside, whenever the layers of cloud thinned under strong blasts of wind, the moonlight, like smoke from a dying fire, spread over the hills.

"Where did you find Mr Hubert?" Latika leaned over the other end of the railing.

In the club bar. If I had not come along, he would have kept sitting there, for I don't know how long". Dr. Mukherji lit a cigarette. He had yet to call on two patients. He stood there, debating if he should cancel the visits. Sitting in his quarters downstairs, Karimuddin was playing on old film tune on his mouth organ.

"The sky remained overcast the whole night, but it did not rain beyond a drizzle".

"Till Christmas, perhaps, the weather will continue this way".

They stood silent for some time. The crickets' calling from the lawn stretching in front of the school, made the pervading silence still more dense. Sometimes the soft whimper of a dog came from the motor road above.

"Doctor, did you speak to Mr Hubert about me last night?"

"Nothing in particular... only what people already know. Something which Hubert should have known too but didn't". The doctor looked at Latika. She was still leaning on the railing.

"Each of us has some kink or other". Doctor Mukherji smiled in the dark. "Some people iron it out, others nurse it to the end". Dr Mukherji's smile had a touch of stoicism.

"Sometimes I think, Miss Latika, that if it is wrong to be unaware of something, it is wrong not to forget it, to stick to it like a leech. When my wife died on the way from Burma I thought my life was useless. But, as you see I am still living, and hope to live for quite some time more. Life is quite interesting. If it weren't for my age I would perhaps have married again. In spite of this, who can say that I did not love my wife? I love her even today..".

"But Doctor..". Latika's voice became strained.

"Yes, Miss Latika?"

"Despite everything that happens, Doctor, what is it that keeps us going? Even when we stop, we are carried forward by its momentum". Latika felt that she was not able to say what she wanted to, as if something had got lost and could not be found, and perhaps never would be found.

"Only Father Elmond can tell you about that, Miss Latika". All his idiosyncrasies, bordering on irreverence, surfaced in his hollow laugh.

"All right, I must be going, Miss Latika. I'm quite late". The doctor struck a match and looked at his watch.

"Good night. Miss Latika".

"Good night. Doctor..".

After the doctor was gone, Latika stood leaning close against the railing. The mist which gathered in the corridor trembled in the rising wind. The heaps of old note-books, newspapers and wastepaper that the girls had put outside their rooms, while packing the evening before, had now scattered in the strong wind down the corridors.

Latika picked up her lamp and moved towards her room. Walking along the corridor, she saw a thin ray of iight coming through a chink in Julie's door. Holding her breath, after a while, she knocked. No sound came from within. Latika gently pushed open the door. Julie had forgotten to put out her lamp. Latika took out the blue envelope from her pocket and gently pushed it under Julie's pillow.

About the author

Nirmal Verma (1929-2005) Love for literature and the arts ran in the family in which the leading Hindi writer of our times was born. He had his education at St Stephen's College, Delhi. His first short stories appeared in the Hindi magazine of the college. But he made his professional debut in the journal *Kahaanee* [Short stories] published in Allahabad in 1950.

In 1959 he went to Prague on invitation from the Oriental Institute to learn Czeck and translate the writings in that language into Hindi. He travelled extensively in Europe and also went to England. His story *Maya Darpan* [Magic Mirror] was made into a film in 1970, which was adjudged the best film of the year. In 1959, he won the Sahitya Akademi award for his anthology of short stories *Kavvey aur Kalapaani* [Crows of Deliverance].

When asked about the predominance of women characters in his fiction, he said: 'I think and also believe that just as there is in philosophy what we call the essence of knowledge, there is in art the essence of experience, which I see in a high degree through the medium of woman'. This marked feature of his fiction can be seen in ' Birds'.

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Interview

Verma, Nirmal. 'Nirmal Verma Key Katha-Desh Mein' [In the Story space of Nirmal Verma]. An Extended Interview — Conversation with Nirmal Verma by Ashok Vajpayee, Madan Soni, Dhruv Shukl and Udayan Vajpayee at Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal in 1988. Included in *Nirmal Verma* by Ashok Vajpayee. Rajkamal Prakashan. New Delhi. 1990.

Glossary

Chopin's Nocturne: Full name: Fryderyk [Frederic] Chopin (1810-49). Polish composer and pianist. He became famous as a pianist and his piano music represents for many, the perfect expression of poetry in music. 'Nocturne' is a short composition of a romantic nature, usually for piano. His nocturnes are known for their dreamy lyricism.

Tchaikovsky: Full name: Pyotr Tchaikovsky (1840-93). Russian composer.

Lead kindly light: The opening words of a famous hymn.

Questions

1. Do you think 'Birds' is a story that ends happily? Write an answer giving your personal response to the story.
2. Why does Latika do what she does at the end of the story?
3. Discuss the suitability of the title of the story 'Birds'.
4. What part does memory play in the story?

4
TINY'S GRANNY*

Ismat Chugtai

Translation : Ralph Russell

God knows what her real name was. No one had ever called her by it. When she was a little snotty nosed girl roaming about the alleys people used to call her 'Bafatan's Kid'. Then she was 'Bashirs's daughter-in-law and then 'Bismillah's mother'; and when Bishmillah died in childbirth, leaving Tiny an orphan. She became "Tiny's Granny' — and she remained 'Tiny's Granny' to her dying day.

There was no occupation, which Tiny's Granny had not tried at some stage of her life. From the time she was old enough to hold her own cup she had started working at odd jobs in people's houses in return for her two meals a day and cast-off clothes.

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* Source : Sahitya Akademi

Exactly what the words 'odd jobs' mean, only those know who have been kept at them at an age when they ought to have been laughing and playing with other children. Anything from the uninteresting duty of shaking the baby's rattle to massaging the master's head comes under the category of 'odd jobs'. As she grew older she learned to do a bit of cooking, and she spent some years of her life as a cook. But when her sight begun to fail and she began to cook lizards in the lentils and knead flies into the bread, she had to retire. All she was fit for after that was gossiping and tale bearing. But that also is a fairly paying trade. In every *muhalla*[*] there is always some quarrel going on, and one who has the wit to carry information to the enemy camp can be sure of a hospitable reception. But it's a game that doesn't last. People began to call her a tell-tale, and when she saw that there was no future there, she took up her last and most profitable profession; she became a polished and accomplished beggar.

At mealtimes Granny would dilate her nostrils to smell what was cooking, single out the smell she liked best and be off on its track until she reached the house it was coming from.

"Lady, are your cooking aravi[†] with the meat?" she would ask with a disinterested air.

"No, Granny. The aravi you get these days doesn't cook soft. I'm cooking potatoes with it".

"Potatoes! What a lovely smell! Bismillah's father, God rest him, used to love meat and potatoes, and now" (she would heave a sigh) "I am getting anxious, Lady, have you put any coriander-leaf in with the meat?

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[*] A ward or quarters of city.
[†] A root vegetable

"No, Granny. All our coriander was ruined. The confounded water-carrier's dog got into the garden and rolled all over it".

"That's a pity. A bit of coriander-leaf in with the meat and potatoes makes all the difference. Hakimji's* got any amount in his garden".

"That's no good to me, Granny yesterday his boy cut Shabban Mian's† kite string and I told him that if he showed his face again he'd better look out for himself".

"Good heavens, I shan't say it's for you". And Granny would gather her burqa‡ around her and be off with slippers clacking to Hakimji's. She'd get into the garden on the plea of wanting to sit in the sun, and then edge towards the coriander bed.

Then she'd pluck a leaf and crush it between her fingers and thumb and savour the pleasant smell and as soon as the Hakimji's daughter-in-law turned her back, Granny would make a grab. And obviously, when she had provided the coriander leaf she could hardly be refused a bite to eat.

Granny was famed throughout the *muhalla* for her sleight of hand. You couldn't leave food and drink lying unwatched when Granny was about. She would pick up the children's milk and drink it straight from the pan; two **swallows,** and it would be

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* Hakim — one who practices the traditional Arab (originally Greek) system of medicine. Ji is a suffix indicative of respect.

† Shabban Mian is the son of the lady speaking.

‡ A loose, flowing garment worn by Muslim women who observe pardah completely enveloping them from head to foot. The eyes are covered either by a cloth mesh or by material thin enough to be seen through from the inside. Some have a veil which may be thrown back over the head when not in use.

gone. She'd put a little sugar in the palm of her hand and toss it straight into her mouth. Or press a lump of gur* to her palate, and sit in the sun sucking it at her ease. She made good use of her waist band too. She would whip up an areca nut and tuck it in. Or stuff in a couple of chapattis†, half in and half out, but with her thick kurta‡ concealing them from view, and hobble away, groaning and grunting in her usual style. Everyone knew all about these things, but no one had the courage to say anything firstly because her old hands were as quick as lightning, and moreover when in a tight corner she had no objection to swallowing whole whatever was in her mouth: and secondly because if anyone expressed the slightest suspicion of her she made such a fuss that they soon thought better of it. She would swear her innocence by all that was sacred, and threaten to take oath on the Holy Quran. And who would disgrace himself in the next world by directly inviting her to swear a false oath on the Quran?

Granny was not only a tale-bearer, thief, and cheat, she was also a first-rate liar. And her biggest lie was her *burqa* which she always wore. At one time it had had a veil, but when one by one the old men of the *muhalla* died off, or their eyesight failed, Granny said goodbye to her veil. But you never saw her without the cap of her *burqa*, with its fashionably serrated pattern on her head, as though it was stuck to her skull, and though she might leave it open down the front (even when she was wearing a transparent *kurta* with no vest underneath) it would billow out behind her like a king's robe. This *burqa* was not simply for keeping her head modestly covered. She put it to every possible and impossible use. It served her as bed clothes: bundled up it

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* Brown unrefined sugar, usually in cake form.
† Round, flat cakes of unleavened bread.
‡ A shirt-like garment worn outside the trousers.

became a pillow. On the rare occasions when she bathed, she used it as a towel. At the five times of prayer, it was her prayer-mat. When the local dogs bared their teeth at her it became a serviceable shield for her protection. As the dogs leapt at her calves, it would find the voluminous folds of Granny's burqa hissing in its face. Granny was exceedingly fond of her burqa, and in her spare moments would sit and lament with the keenest regret over its advancing old age. To forestall further wear and tear, she would patch it with any scrap of cloth that came her way, and she trembled at the very thought of the day when it would be no more. Where would she get eight yards of white cloth to make another one? She would be lucky if she could get as much together for her shroud.

Granny had no permanent headquarters. Like a soldier, she was always on the march — today in someone's verandah, tomorrow in someone else's backyard. Whenever she spied a suitable site she would pitch camp, and when they turned her out, would move on. With her *burqa* laid out under her, and the other half wrapped over her, she would lie down and take her ease.

But even more than she worried about her *burqa*, she worried about her only granddaughter Tiny. Like a brooding old hen, she always had her safe under her sheltering wing, and never let her out of her sight. But a time came when Granny could no longer get about, and when the police of her *muhalla* had got wise to her ways — as soon as they heard the shuffle of her slippers approaching they sounded the alert and took up the positions of defense; and then Granny's broad hints and suggestions would fall on deaf ears. So there was nothing that Granny would do except put Tiny to her ancestral trade doing odd jobs in people's houses. She thought about it for a long time, and than got her a job at the Deputy Saheb's, food, clothing and one and a half

rupees* a month. She was never far away though, and stuck to Tiny like a shadow. The moment Tiny was out of site she would set up up a hullaballu.

But a pair of old hands cannot wipe out what is inscribed in a person's fate. It was mid-day. The Deputy's wife had gone off to her brother's to discuss the possibilities of marrying her son to his daughter. Granny was sitting at the edge of the garden taking a nap under the shade of a tree. The lord and master was taking his siesta in a room enclosed by water-cooled screens. And Tiny, who is supposed to be pulling the rope of the ceiling fan, was dosing with the rope in her hand. The fan stopped moving, the lord and the master woke up, his animality was aroused and Tiny's fate was sealed.

They say to ward off the failing power of old age the *Hakims and Vaids*†, beside all the medicine and ointments which they employ, also prescribe children broth — well, the nine-year-old Tiny was no more than a chicken herself.

When Tiny's Granny awoke from her nap, Tiny had disappeared. She searched the whole *muhalla* but there was no sign of her anywhere.But when she returned tired out to her room at night, there was Tiny in a corner leaning up against the wall, staring about her with listless eyes like a wounded bird. Granny was almost too terrified to speak, but to conceal the weakness she felt she begun swearing at Tiny. "You little whore, so this is where you've got to! And I've been all over the place looking for you until my poor old legs are all swollen. Wait till I tell the master, I'll get you thrashed with an inch of your life!"

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* At that time, about two shillings.

† Those who practice the ancient traditional system of Indian medicine

But Tiny couldn't conceal what had happened for long and when Granny found out, she beat her head and shrieked. When the woman next door was told, she clutched her head in horror. If the Deputy's son had done it, then perhaps something could have been said. But the deputy himself... one of the leading men in the *muhalla*, grandfather to three grandchildren, a religious man who regularly said his five daily prayers and had only recently provided mats and water vessels to the local mosque, how could anyone raise a voice against *him*?

So Granny, who was used to being at the mercy of others, swallowed her sorrow, applied warm clothes to Tiny's back, gave her sweets to comfort her, and bore her trouble as best she might. Tiny spent a day or two in bed, and then was up and about again. And in a few days she had forgotten all about it.

Not so, the gentlewomen of the *muhalla*. They would send for her on the quiet and ask her all about it.

"No... Granny will smack me". Tiny would try to get out of it.

"Here, take these bangles.... Granny won't know anything about it". The eager ladies would coax her.

"What happened? How did it happen?" They would ask for all the details, and Tiny, who was too young and innocent to understand entirely what it all meant, would tell them as well as she could, and they would cover their faces and laugh delightedly.

Tiny might forget, but Nature cannot... If you pluck a flower in the bud and make it bloom before it is ready, its petals fall and only the stump is left. Who knows how many innocent petals

Tiny's face had shed? It acquired a forward, brazen look, a look older than its years. Tiny did not grow from a child into a girl, but at one leap became a woman, and a practiced hand, but one like a figure on whom some giant with feet two yards long had trodden — squat, fat, puffy, like a clay toy which the potter had knelt on before it had hardened.

When a rag is all dirty and greasy, no one minds too much if someone wipes his nose on it. The boys would pinch her playfully in the open street, and give her sweets to eat. Tiny's eyes began to dance with an evil light.... And now Granny no longer stuffed her with sweets: she beat her black and blue instead. But you can't shake the dust off a greasy cloth. Tiny was like a rubber ball: hit it and it bounces back at you.

Within a few years, Tiny's promiscuity had made her a pest to the whole *muhalla*. It was rumoured that the Deputy Sahib and his son had quarreled over her....then that Rajva the palanquin-bearer had given the Mullah a thorough thrashing...then that she had taken up regularly with the nephew of Siddiq, the wrestler. Everyday, Tiny came near to losing her nose* and there was fighting and brawling in the alleys.

The place became too hot to hold her. There was nowhere where she could safely set foot anymore. Thanks to Tiny's youthful charms and Siddiq's nephew's youthful strength, life in the *muhalla* became intolerable. They say that in places like Delhi and Bombay there is an abundant demand for their kind of commodity. Perhaps the two of them migrated there.

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* Cutting off the nose was the traditional punishment inflected on a loose woman. In this context, it would be the act of a jealous lover, punishing her for her promiscuity.

The day Tiny ran away, Granny had not the slightest suspicion of what was afoot. For several days the little wretch had been unusually quiet. She hadn't even sworn at Granny, but had spent a lot of time sitting quietly on her own, staring into space.

"Come and get your dinner, Tiny," Granny would say,

"I'm not hungry, Granny".

"Tiny, it's getting late. Go to bed".

"I don't feel sleepy, Granny".

That night she began to massage Granny's feet for her. "Granny... Granny, just hear me recite the *subhanakallahumma*[*] and see if I've got it right". Granny heard it; Tiny had it off pat.

"All right, dear. Off you go now. It's time you were asleep". And Granny turned over and tried to sleep.

A little later she could hear Tiny moving about in the yard. "What the devil is she up to now?" She muttered. "What boy has she brought home now? Little whore! She's got to use even the back yard now!" But when she peered down into the yard, Granny was filled with awe. Tiny was saying her *isha* prayer[†]. And in the morning she was gone.

People who return to our place from journeying far afield sometimes bring news of her. One says that a great lord has made her his mistress and that she is living in fine style like a lady,

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[*] Part of the words reited at each of the five times of prayer

[†] The last of the five daily prayers.

with a carriage and any amount of gold. Another says he has seen her in the Diamond Market.* Others say she has been seen in Faras Road or in Sona Gachi.

But Granny's story is that Tiny had had a sudden attack of cholera and was dead before anyone knew it.

After her period of mourning for Tiny, Granny's mind started to wander. People passing her in the street would tease her and make jokes at her expense.

"Granny, why don't you get married?" my sister would say.

Granny would get annoyed. "Who to! Your husband?"

"Why not marry the Mullah? I tell you he's crazy about you. By God he is!"

Then the swearing would begin, and Granny's swearing was so novel and colorful that people could only stare aghast".

"*That* pimp! — Just see what happens if I get hold of him! If I don't pull his beard out, you can call me what you like". But whenever she met the Mullah at the corner of the street, then, believe it or not, she would go all shy.

Apart from the urchins of the *muhalla*, Granny's lifelong enemies were the monkeys — "the confounded, blasted monkeys". They had been settled in the *muhalla* for generations and knew all about everyone who lived there. They knew that men were dangerous, and children mischievous, but that only woman were afraid of them. But then Granny too had spent all

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* The names of prostitutes quarters is various big Indian cities.

her life among them. She'd got hold of some child's catapult to frighten them with and when she wound her burqa round her head like a great turban and pounced upon them with her catapult at the ready, the monkeys really did panic for a moment before returning to their usual attitude of indifference towards her.

Day in and day out, Granny and the monkeys used to fight over her bits and pieces of stale food. Whenever there was a marriage in the *muhalla*, or a funeral feast, or the celebrations that mark the fortieth day after childbirth, Granny would be there, gathering up the scraps left over as though she were under contract to do so. Where free food was being distributed she would contrive to come up for her share four times over. In this way she would pile up a regular stock of food, and then she would gaze at it regretfully, wishing that God had arranged her stomach like the camel's so that she could tuck away four days supply at one go. God had ordained that her food supply should be utterly haphazard. So why had He provided her with a machine for eating it so defective that if she had more than two meals supply at any one time, it simply couldn't cope with it? So what she used to do was to spread out the food toddy on bits of sacking and then put them in a pitcher. When she felt hungry she would take some out end, crumble it up, add a dash of water and a pinch of chillies and salt, and there was a tasty mash all ready to eat. But during the summer and during the rains these recipes had often given her severe diarrhea. So when her bits of food got stale and began to smell she would, with the greatest reluctance, sell them to people for whatever price she could get to feed to their dogs and goats. The trouble was that generally the stomachs of the dogs and goats proved less brazen than Granny's and people would not take her dainties as a gift, let alone buy them. All this notwithstanding, that these bits and pieces were dearer to Granny than life itself, that she put up with countless kicks and

curses to get them, and that to dry them in the sun meant waging holy war against the whole monkey race. She would no sooner spread them out than the news would, as though by wireless, reach the monkey tribes, and band upon band of them would come and take up their positions on the wall or frisk about on the tiles raising a din. They would pull out the straws from the thatch and chatter and scold the passers-by. Granny would take the field against them. Swathing her burqa round her head and taking her catapult in her hand, she would take her stand. The battle would rage all the day, Granny scaring the monkeys off again and again and when evening came she would gather up what was left after their depredations, and cursing them from the bottom of her heart, creep exhausted into her little room to sleep.

The monkeys must have acquired a personal grudge against Granny. How else can you explain the fact that they turned their backs on everything else the world had to offer and concentrated all their attacks on Granny's scraps of food? And how else can you explain the fact that a big, rascally, red-behinded monkey ran off with her pillow, which she loved more than her life? Once Tiny had gone, this pillow was the only thing left in the world that was near and dear to her. She fussed and worried over it as much as she did over her burqa. She was forever repairing its seams with stout stitches. Time and again she would sit herself down in some secluded corner and start playing with her pillow like a little girl playing with a doll. She had none but the pillow now to tell all her troubles to and so lighten her burden. And greater the love she felt for her pillow, the more stout stitches she would put into it to strengthen its seams.

And now, see what a trick Fate played on her. She was sitting leaning against the parapet with her burqa wrapped round her, picking the lice out of her waist band, when suddenly a monkey

flopped down, shipped up her pillow, and was off. You would have thought that some one had plucked Granny's heart out of her breast. She wept and screamed and carried on so much that the whole *muhalla* came flocking.

You know what monkeys are like. They wait until no one is looking and then run off with a glass or a katora,* go and sit on the parapet, and taking it in both hands, start rubbing it against the wall. The person it belongs to stands there looking up and making coaxing noises and holding out bread or an onion; but the monkey takes his time, and when he has had his bellyful of fun, throws the thing down and goes his own way. Granny poured out the whole contents of a pitcher, but the monkey had his heart set on the pillow, and that was that. She did all she could to coax him, but his heart would not melt and he proceeded with the greatest enjoyment to peel the manifold coverings off the pillow as though he were peeling the successive skins off an onion — those same coverings over which Granny had pored with her weak and watering eyes, trying to hold them together with stitching. As every fresh cover came off Granny's hysterical wailing grew louder. And now the last covering was off, and the monkey began bit by bit to throw down the contents...not cotton wadding but...Shabban's quilted jacket.... Bannu the water carrier's waist cloth.... Hasina's bodice.... The baggy trousers belonging to little Munni's doll.... Rahmat's little dupatta†.... And Khairati's knickers.....Khairan's little boy's toy pistol...Munshiji's muffler.... The sleeve (with cuff) of Ibrahim's shirt... a piece of Siddiq's loin-cloth... Amina's collyrium bottle and Batafan's Kajal-box...‡ Sakina's

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* A metal drinking-bowl

† A piece of muslin or other fine material worn by women across the bosom, with the ends thrown back over the shoulders.

‡ Lamp-black, used as a cosmetic

box of tinsel clippings... the big bead from the Mullah's rosary and Baqur Mian's prayer-board... Bishmillah's dried naval string and the knob of turmeric in its sachet from Tiny's first birthday.... some lucky grass, and a silver ring... and Basir Khan's gift medal conferred on him by the government for having returned safe and sound from the war.

But it was not these trinkets that interested the onlookers. What they had their eyes on was the previous stock of stolen property which Granny had got together by years of raiding.

"Thief!... swindler!... old bag!... Turn the old devil out!... hand her over to the police! Search her bedding, you might find a lot more stuff in it!" In short, they all came straight out with anything they felt like saying.

Granny's shrieking suddenly stopped. Her tears dried up, her head drooped and she stood there stunned and speechless... She passed that night sitting on her haunches, her hands grasping her knees, rocking backwards and forwards, her body shaken by dry sobbing, lamenting and calling the names of now her mother and father, now her husband, now her daughter. Bismillah, and her grand daughter Tiny. Every now and then, just for a moment she would doze, then wake with a cry, as though ants were stinging an old sore. At times she would laugh and cry hysterically, at times talk to herself, then suddenly, for no reason, break into a smile. Then out of the darkness some old recollection would hurl its spear at her, and like a sick dog howling in a half human voice, she would rouse the whole *muhalla* with her cries. Two days passed in this way, and the people of the *muhalla* gradually began to feel sorry for what they had done. After all, no one had the slightest need of any of these things. They had disappeared years ago. And though there had been weeping and wailing over them at the time, they had long

since been forgotten. It was just that they themselves were no millionaires, and sometimes on such occasions a mere straw weighs down upon you like a great beam. But the loss of these things had not killed them. Shabban's quilted jacket had long since lost any ability to grapple with the cold, and he couldn't stop himself growing up while he waited for it to be found. Hasina had long felt she was past the age for wearing a bodice. Of what use to Munni were her doll's baggy trousers? She had long passed the stage of playing with dolls and graduated to toy cooking-pots. And none of the people of the *muhalla* were out for Granny's blood.

In olden days there lived a giant. This giant's life was in a big black bee. Across the seven seas in a cave there was a big chest, and in it another chest, and inside that was another box, in which there was a big black bee. A brave prince came... and first he tore off one of the bee's legs, and by the power of the spell, one of the giant's legs broke. Then the prince broke another leg, and the giant's other leg broke. And then he crushed the bee, and the giant died.

Granny's life was in the pillow, and the monkey had torn the enchanted pillow with his teeth, and so thrust a red-hot iron bar into Granny's heart.

There was no sorrow in the world, no humiliation, no disgrace, which Fate had not brought to Granny. When her husband died, and her bangles were broken,* Granny had thought she had not many more days to live; when Bismillah was wrapped in her shroud, she had felt certain that this was the last straw on the camel's back. And when Tiny brought disgrace upon her and ran away, Granny had thought that that was the death-blow.

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* As a sign of widowhood

From the day of her birth onwards, every conceivable illness had assailed her. Small-pox had left its marks upon her face. Every year at some festival she would contract severe diarrhea.

Her fingers were worn to the bone by years of cleaning up other people's filth, and she had scoured pots and pans until her hands were all pitted and marked. Some time every year she would fall down the stairs in the dark, take to her bed for a day or two, and then start dragging herself about again. In her last birth Granny must surely have been a dog-tick; that's why she was so hard to kill. It seemed as though death always gave her a wide berth. She'd wander about with her clothes hanging in tatters, but she would never accept the clothes of anyone who had died, nor even let them come into contact with her. The dead person might have hidden death in the seams to jump out and grab the delicately-nurtured Granny. Who could have imagined that in the end it would be the monkeys who would settle her account? Early in the morning, when the water-carrier came with his water skin, he saw that Granny was sitting on her haunches on the stairs. Her mouth was open, and files were crawling in the corners of her half-closed eyes. People had often seen Granny asleep just like this, and had feared she was dead. But Granny had always started up, cleared her throat and spat out the phlegm and poured out a shower of abuse on the person who had disturbed her. But that day Granny remained sitting on her haunches on the stairs. Fixed in death, she showered continuous abuse upon the world. Her whole life through she had never known a moment's ease, and wherever she had laid herself down there had been thorns. Granny was shrouded just as she was, squatting on her haunches. Her body had set fast, and no amount of pulling and tugging could straighten it.

On judgment day the trumpet sounded and Granny woke with a start and got up coughing and clearing her throat, as though her

ear had caught the sound of free food being doled out... Cursing and swearing at the angels, she dragged herself somehow or other doubled up as she was over the Bridge of Sirat and burst into the presence of God the All Powerful and All kind ... and God, beholding the degradation of humanity, bowed his head in shame and wept tears of blood. And those divine tears of blood fell upon Granny's rough grave and bright red poppies sprang up there and began to dance in the breeze.

About the author

Ismat Chugtai (1911-1991) has been one of Urdu's most courageous and controversial women writers in the twentieth century. She had her education at Aligarh and at Isabella Thoburn College. Lucknow. I.T. College was a liberating influence for her and the seeds of her literary career were sown there.

Chugtai wrote novels, plays and travelogues but she excelled as a writer of short stories. Her story 'Quilt' raised a storm in literary circles for its daring delineation of female sexuality and she was tried for obscenity but was later acquitted.

What the famous novelist and short story writer Kishan Chander says about her style describes her works accurately:

"What one is reminded of by these stories is horse race, i.e., speed, movement, briskness and acceleration, to the extent that the reader is left far behind, cursing the writer in his mind. Not only does her story seem to be running, but the sentences, images, metaphors, the sounds and sensibilities of the characters and their feelings — all seem to be moving along in a cluster with the force of a storm".

Works:

Novels and Novellas

Ziddi (The Wild One, 1940), *Masooma* (The Innocent One, 1942), *Terhi Lakeer* (The Crooked Line, 1945), *Dil ki Duniya* (The Heart Breaks Free, 1964), *Saudai* (The Trader, 1964), *Ajab Aadmi* (A Strange Man, 1970), *Jangli Kabootar* (Wild Pigeons, 1970), *Ek Qatra-e Khoon*, (A Drop of Blood, 1975), *Teen Anarhi* (The Three Novices, 1988), *Naqli Rajkumar* (A Fake Prince, 1992) and *Kaghazi hai Pairahan* (Papery Raiment,1994).

Collections of Short Stories

Kaliyan (Buds, 1941), *Choten* (Wounds, 1942), *Ek Baat* (One Thing, 1945), *Chhui Mui* (Touch Me Not, 1952) *Do Haath* (A Pair of Hands, 1955), *Badan ki Khushboo* (Body Fragrance, 1979), *Amarbel* (Eternal Vine, 1979), *Thorhi si Pagal* (A Wee Bit Crazy, 1979), *Aadhi Aurat Aadha Khwab* (Half Woman Half Dream,1986).

Glossary

Isha prayer: the last of the five obligatory daily Muslim prayers done at night

Faras Road and Sona Gachi: prostitute quarters of Mumbai and Kolkata respectively

Judgement Day: the Muslim belief that on the Day of (Final) Judgement all human beings will be made accountable for their actions in the world.

Bridge of Sirat: (*pulsirat*) (According to the Muslim belief), the bridge the believers must cross before entering paradise.

Questions

1. Discuss the significance of the last scene in the story in which Tiny's Granny is in the presence of the Almighty.
2. Comment on the elements of humour and irony in the story.
3. Can you think of some poor old men or women around you whom you have seen making desperate attempts to survive?
4. Comment on the merits of Ismat Chughtai as a short story writer with special reference to "Tiny's Granny".
5. Write a note on Ismat Chughtai's art of characterization giving illustrations from "Tiny's Granny".
6. Attempt a character sketch of Granny. Does her plight evoke your sympathy?
7. What is the role of Tiny in the story?
8. Write a note on the elements of humour and irony in the story.
9. Who is the principal narrator in the story? Are the narrator's opinion necessarily the author's?
10. Can this story be read as a social document? Comment on the ending of the story.

5
Tadpa*

Gopinath Mohanty

Translation : Sitakant Mahapatra

Tadpa was his name. Like all names, a symbol which was also a justification. Otherwise it meant nothing. But in the rules of his language maybe it was not related to a person in the minds of those who assigned names. After all he was a Kondh and his

*Source: Sahitya Akademi

language was not Oriya. In his society, parents can't freely choose any name. All the villagers would gather. The priest would go on reciting an almost endless list of names, the ritual worship would go on with offerings of fowl, unbroken rice, coloured powders and raisin. The *Kalisi*, the woman possessed would be throwing one rice grain after another into a pot of water reciting *mantras* all the while. The name, the mention of which would make a grain stand erect, would be picked up by the *kalisi*. That is how Tadpa got his name. To understand it one had to go back into the past when an encyclopedia of names was prepared. If one asked the Dongria Kondhs of Niyamgiri hills as to who prepared it, you would get the answer, like answers to so many questions in research, that it was Mahapru, the one who had made night and day, the hills and valleys. And you may be admonished: Don't you know who made all this? Why then query like a child?

So it was Mahapru who had created all this including the five thousand feet Niyamgiri hill in Koraput district and the Dongrias living there, their language and society. He too had created this beautiful name Tadpa. And the man Tadpa got it as per His will.

An endless memory of axe falling with thud on tall trees and Tadpa remembered how miles of hill-slopes were shaved clean and then planted with oranges, pineapple, jack fruit. Elsewhere, the run-off of the top soil exposed only dark stones where not even a blade of grass grew, only moss covered it and dried up. Somewhere else there were awesome forests with stout creepers and bamboos. At intervals of six to ten miles, a small village of five to fifteen houses and then, once again, the jungle.

The people from outside were coming down such a fearsome slope on the hill when they met Tadpa. It was nine-thirty at night,

a day towards the end of Aswina. As it was, Niyamgiri was cool even in summer. And now the warmth of walking could barely counter the cold outside. They were seven people and they really had no time to feel the cold as they walked on a footpath which looked like a small tunnel descending in curves across stones. They had to walk with careful steps. Along the road, hidden away by tall and dense trees, there was a rushing hill-stream deep down below. One could hear the sound of its falls. A slight carelessness and one could stumble and land on its waters. One small torch light showed the way. After a week in the hills, the batteries were weak. There was always the fear of a tiger, whether suddenly springing from the dense forest or standing majestically in front of the road. So though they sometimes talked to one another, often they walked in silence. Sometimes, too, through a chink in the wall of trees, they could sight the gurgling stream in the moonlight, with a million moons floating down its waters. On the other side, the cultivated hill face had maize, *bajra* and *mandia* all melted into the haze of moonlight. And in front, there hung a picture extending almost to the end of the horizon: several forms and shapes, hills, valleys, trees, hillocks, light, darkness, solid shapes and shadows — a silent massive picture. They would stop awhile, look at that landscape and in a moment merge into it. Silent, lonely, full, timeless, unmoving, there, yet not there, almost lost. Once again along the narrow path they walked down, all the while a hidden fear inside, as to when the journey might suddenly end. Wild animals, accidental fall, unknown dangers. These lurking fears sometimes made one breathless.

They came to see Dongria Kondh villages on Niyamgiri for a serious purpose. The Development Officer Parshuram was in front — thin, tall, and experienced. He had roamed many hills while planning the welfare of these hill-people and had come

from Bhubaneswar. Behind him was the anthropologist Bharat; he had studied the social system of many tribes, published some books and was eager to know and learn more. He was around forty, small looking, well built and full of enthusiasm. Behind him was the local offical Hari Pani; his work was at the foothill but it was going to be extended to the hill-slope and so he was there. His thirty year old body was like stubborn black granite. Behind him was Madhusudan, the forest guard nearing fifty-eight, dwarfish, weak. He had long been in the Niyamgiri hills and so was considered a good guide. And finally, the three *chaprasis,* Makara, Najiru and Ramaya, seven in all.

Setting out from Bisamcuttack railway station, they climbed the Niyamgiri hills, and after halting in several villages they now intended to get down near Muniguda railway station. Fifteen miles straight across, but through the hills it was forty-five miles trekking and seven days. There were no regular roads and one had to negotiate narrow and sharp bends, steep climbs going up from fifteen hundred to five thousand feet. Dizzy heights and descent, getting up and down hill slopes and spending nights on the narrow verandahs of the Dongria Kondh houses looking like caves and accepting their intimate hospitality. The drinking water was from the hill-stream, which carried the washings from the upstream hamlets including that of buffalo meat; for almost every third day a buffalo was slaughtered in a Kondh village. There was no dispensary, no post office, no shops, no police station, no well or tank and not even a tile-roof of 'civilization'. Only the hills, the forests, the fruit orchards and the crops and those primitive people known as Dongria Kondhs. With them also lived the Dombs, who had come up from the valleys in the course of time to earn a living. They offered liquor and occasional cash to the Kondhs and in exchange their fruit trees were mortaged. One bottle of liquor could bring a fruit-bearing

orange tree or four jack fruit trees for a year. Two rupees could fetch a huge banana plantation. And twenty rupees, two acres of pineapple orchard. Likewise, fields of turmeric, *arhar* and other crops. The Kondh would raise the crop, hoeing the fields, protecting the crops from predatory animals by keeping awake in winter nights and the Domb would take the harvest to the market and garner all the profit. The Kondhs and the Dombs lived according to the way of their societies. The Domb houses had wide verandahs, large rooms, fairly neat and clean and sculptured wooden doors. They **dresstd** well, like people at the foothill: sarees, blouses, coats, **shirts**. The house front was always swept clean in the morning **and** the children read and became literate. Some recited *Puranas* and some wove clothes. The main occupation was carrying goods to the market place, a job in which both sexes participated. There would be subsidiary ones too, like illicit liquor distillation, purchasing cattle from the valleys which were sold to the Kondhs etc. The Dongria carried on in his ancient ways. The menfolk wore a loin cloth which was embroided by the women in their small looms. The women wrapped a six-feet saree round the waist and when they went out covered the whole body with it. The Dongria's clothes were dirty, the hair on the head unkempt. The men wore rings on the nose and shells and small beads in the ears. The portion just above the forehead was shaved clean and the hair was made into a knot around a comb. They wore chains of colourful glass beads round the neck, a pick-axe on the shoulder, a six-inch long knife tucked at the waist and a sturdy stick of local wood embroidered in part. The women wore garlands of thin glass beads of many colours and other ornaments of brass and alloys. The men were addicted to liquor. The *salapa* tree sometimes provided it. But more often, all the earnings went to the mahula wine available for purchase. He would get drunk and lose his senses. There were endless festivities in the village, rituals and worships, buffaloes

given as sacrifice to gods and then consumed in a community feast. Working hard round the year, he produced many diverse crops and fruits in great volume. And yet, the Dongria remained as poor as ever, dependent for the four months of rains on mango seeds and greens, bamboo shoots and powdered *salapa* tree-trunks, sometimes only with a dash of mandia or other millets. They had by now a detailed look at the Kondh life-style, the officers and the anthropologist, talking to the Dongrias, to the extent possible through the forest guard, Madhusudan, they had taken down notes in their diaries. For a week, they had discussed and debated what needed to be done for the Dongria's good. Their sincerity was so intense, that for that week they thought only of the Dongrias of the Niyamgiri hills and obsessed with that thought, they roamed the villages and observed details. That explained why they could leave Mutaguni village only at four in the afternoon, though the labourers carrying their luggage had set out an hour earlier. Madhusudan had said that the way down via the Muniguda hills was around six miles. But then they had landscapes to view, matters to discuss and Professor Bharat had to take photographs on the way. The problems were known; it was only a search for a solution.

Madhusudan gave his opinion: 'Sir, I have seen them for my entire life; they are today as they were before. You cannot get better or more considerate people, they won't go anywhere near injustice or falsehood. They are totally wedded to their commitments, but they won't change. They won't brush their teeth, perform ablution, go to school or give up drinking. All advice falls on deaf ears'.

Hari Pani had a different view: 'Everything changes and they too will change, Sir. But first, you need regular roads to go into the interiors of Niyamgiri. When forests open up, civilization comes

in. Those who come from outside to serve among them — and you need plenty of them — need housing, drinking water and other facilities. All these must begin together with twenty or twenty-five lakhs investment: school, dispensary, piggery, orchards, some factories. And if fortunately, some mineral deposits could be discovered then another Rourkela could be started and it would take very little for these people to change'.

Professor Bharat looked at the problem differently: 'We have to consider what would be in their interest. The objective is not change for the sake of change. And they cannot prosper till exploitation lasted. The trouble is you cannot just throw out the exploiters, for they too are the citizens of this country. So it is necessary to go to the heart of the exploitation, which is made possible both by the capacity of the exploiter and the vulnerability of the exploited. Whatever we saw of the Dongria on this visit, has been fashioned by centuries of belief and world-view. It is not the creation of yesterday. Who can prevent him from propitiating his ancestors and the gods with liquor and buffalo meat? Living on hill slopes in deep winter, with inadequate clothings, his body needed the warmth of liquor. For him there was also no other entertainment. And as long as this goes on, he will be throwing away all his earnings and inviting exploitation. With education his taste could change, but he has a fear that once educated, his children won't grow crops. That explained his resistance for sending children to school and it was not wholly unfounded for there was no occupation other than primitive agriculture on these hills and if one gave it up, one had to migrate. Briefly, there seemed to be no escape from a programme of education coupled with cultivation of restraint and new attitudes. This needed time, heavy investment and trained workers. If instead of changing his attitude and world view, we

imposed a change on him, it would only unsettle and destroy him despite our good intentions'.

And then Parashuram added: 'Should we then continue to look on helpless till adequate funds were available, the Dongria children were educated, were new men and themselves build a new society? Should they, till then, remain like this: poor, illiterate, exploited, vulnerable, almost like animals? What then was the use of our knowledge about him? Was it mere intellectual curiosity? Or we got going at least somewhere? Let it not be all villages but only a few. Let us build relationships, explain, persuade. Let them sell to the government whatever they have to sell and buy from the government channel all their needs. Let a few shops be opened for that purpose. Let the government grant them their minimum requirement of loan and let workers centres be opened, schools established. Once they see that this way their earnings increase, they would come to accept it. And by coming in touch with outsiders, their taste and nature will also change. Along with this, there has to be training for better cultivation, provision of better seedlings and soon there will be a bit of light in the darkness'.

Professor Bharat replied: 'If only that could solve the problem! They may earn more but the habit of saving will take ages to be developed. The exploiter will only devise new strategies of exploitation: may be instead of the crops and products of his orchards, liquid cash will go straight to liquor. There would be new ways of exploiting him. His goodness and simplicity will be lost in the process of coming in contact with outsiders. The trouble with such contacts is that the vulnerable first picked up all the undesirable qualities of the exploiter. They will become opportunists, will no longer replay loans and purchase with cash from the market and on credit from government shops. They will fall repeatedly into the traps of new exploitation. Their present

simplicity and honesty were perhaps only due to ignorance and superstition and not born out of a conviction, or an ingrained idealism. Even idealists sometimes falter, stumble, have doubts but one does not notice any such thing here. It is all a picture of liquor, meat and dedication to cheap pleasures. And if he still speaks the truth, it is perhaps because he cannot manage a falsehood all along the line. And inside him there are many unknown fears. Once he finds the way, he too will become a cheat, a liar, an exploiter. I feel pained by his misfortune but it is not merely of his economic condition. It is also of his mind. We need a strategy that will preserve his innate goodness and prevent the sprouting of the evil aspects of change. But I still find no way as to how to go about it'.

Parshuram said: 'That problem of the mind is not merely of the Dongria, but of all men everywhere, in greater or smaller measure. If one could overcome that, there would be no wars, no violence, selfishness, falsehoods. So many thinkers have spoken of ways to solve the impasse, and that too for thousands of years and yet, things have not changed. Is that any reason why we should not begin somewhere and leave these people to remain helpless and poor as ever, all their earnings being eaten away by exploiters? We have to develop their economy and slowly there would be an improvement in their mental make-up, their society. That is why I am thinking over in my mind; seeking a way. So let us put our minds together. We have to make a beginning. We can't allow this destitution to last forever while we continue to discuss theories. Or else there could be disastrous developments which would totally uproot them'.

Madhusudan said 'Sir, they really live in great misery'. Hari Pani added, 'There is no doubt about that. But who can help, till roads and other facilities are created? Will they ever come to us, climbing across the hills or can we go to them every now and

then? Whoever comes to work here would find the going tough in the midst of disease, danger and inconveniences. After all everyone is a human being. So what is needed is minimum facilities for work. Without that everybody will pay only lip service, but for real work no one will come forward. Surely, something need to be done, for it was a blot on everybody that even today some people live in such misery'.

They had debated the issues openly, had expressed themselves as they spoke and then became silent. They were thinking about it and as they did that, they forgot the fear and the strain on their bodies. It was forgetting personal misery in thinking about the other's grief. Once again that receded to the background and the thought of the dangers on the way took precedence.

Suddenly in the dense forest they spotted a shadow. It was moving and then became steady. Everyone came to a halt. Parashuram flashed the torch. They could see a person, bare-bodied but for a loincloth, an axe on the shoulder. A Dongria Kondh, about twenty-five years old.

'Who are you?' Parashuram queried. He said, 'I am Tadpa. Were you coming, Babu, or returning?'

The group came near him. He entreated: 'Give me one *bidi*'. Madhusudan took one out. Parashuram gave a matchbox. He lighted the *bidi*, held the matchbox tight and said, 'I am taking this'. Hari Pani said, 'We would have difficulty without it'. 'I won't hear that. If a child cannot take a thing from his parents, from whom then can he take?' he replied.

Parashuram said, 'Let him take it. Surely Bharat Babu would have another?' Bharat Babu nodded. Tadpa looked happy and said, 'While coming down there near the waterfall, I sat down

and smoked. So I could know when you all were coming. I waited, but you people were late. I felt that you are not able to walk, and in a forest you might lose the way. Anyway we never saw people like you at this late hour of night. I guessed that you were afraid and so walked slowly. I thought that if I am with you, you would have no fear and also not lose track. So now come on'. Hari Pani asked, 'Are there tigers in this forest?' Tadpa laughed and said, 'You could as well ask if there is fish in the water or stars in the sky. Of course there tigers are. Where else could he go?'

'Has it eaten up someone?'

'Eaten?' Tadpa said. 'When you are hungry don't you eat? It has eaten many and it lives, near that waterfall'. 'But you are going alone, are you not afraid?'

Tadpa said, 'When you go on the road, are you afraid? Don't people die, run over by cars. I know that. That is your road, this is ours. I am not afraid'. Parashuram said, "But why go out at night? Can't you do without it?' 'How can one?' Tadpa looked surprised that someone could even think that way! He laughed and said, 'I climb the hill at night to guard my crop. Whenever there are other needs I walk into the forest. And today there is such a great need'

'But what is it?'

'The work?' he said and seemed to think. And then added; 'As such nothing; for at night you can't hoe the soil, nor fell a tree or break stones. Just like that'. 'But you said there was some need,' Madhusudan queried.

Tadpa laughed loudly and then said, 'Yes, it is for a *dhangdi bent*, I am on the way to Penubali village'. Madhusudan also smiled. Everyone else looked at each other's face. Then Madhusudan explained that he was going to get a bride. They have the custom of *dhangdas* of one village going to a neighbouring village to dance with the *dhangdis* of that village. They were looked after well, spent the night singing and dancing and returned in the morning. In the midst of songs and dances they chose life partners and marriages were solemnized thereafter.

'You are laughing so much, Babu'. Tadpa asked Parashuram. 'No doubt today you are old but surely someday you were a *dhangda?*'

'Yes, I was a *dhangda* but have never done *dhangda-bent*, that custom is not there in our society'.

Moonlight fell on them from the left side and from the top. Everywhere there were shadows of different shapes. The sound of running water was like the prelude played in a musical instrument.

Tadpa looked curiously at Parashuram and said, 'In an area where there is no *dhangdi-bent*, the people there must be animals or human beings'. Anthropologist Bharat asked, 'Why?' Tadpa replied, 'only when two persons come to know each other through songs and dances, laughter and play, only then can they build a proper relationship. Otherwise, how can they make it? No acquaintance, no love and yet set up a house like those people at the foot of the hill?' He raised up his nose, the rings on the nose shone in the moonlight, as he added, 'We are not like that. We

are Dongria'. Madhusudan said, 'Dongria is the King of Niyamgiri'.

Tadpa said, 'So you know it all'.

Bharat enquired, 'Is it true that the *dhangdi* does not sit in your lap? Instead you sit in the *dhangdi's*'.

Tadpa was serious. He nodded his head and said, 'Correct, quite correct, we sit in the lap of the *dhangdi*'.

Then he looked inspired and asked for another *bidi*. Bharat put a cigarette in his mouth and lighted it. In one breath he finished off nearly half of it and then patted him on the shoulder and the back and repeated his answer adding, 'Have you not done so?'

Bharat cautioned everyone not to laugh and yet there were indications of suppressed laughter. Hari Pani said, 'We know the son sits in the lap of the mother'.

Tadpa threw away the cigarette and said, 'Nothing stronger? Give me a *bidi* if you have. Yes, the son sits in the lap of the mother. But is not the *dhangdi* a mother? Say, are you and I mothers? We are sons. *Dhangdi* is the mother. When a child, we sit in our mother's lap? When we grow up, we sit in the lap of the *dhangdi* who chooses us'. Hari Pani said, 'Then, in whose lap do you sit when old?'

Tadpa said, 'When I am old and drop dead, I will sleep in the lap of another mother. Don't you know who she is?'

Hari Pani asked, 'Who?'

Tadpa said, 'Who? This *Dhartani, Basumati*; she is the mother of all of us, who else? And she is inside the mother who gives birth and also the *dhangdi*'. Bharat told Parashuram, 'Oh, it is so complex!' Parashuram replied, 'Strange indeed'.

They started walking.

Parashuram asked Tadpa, 'So you are going for song and dance with the *dhangdis*. You have already done ten miles and you are to do another six miles or so! Your need must be very urgent'. Tadpa laughed and said, 'I gave my promise to go last Wednesday in the *haat*, how can I break it?'

There was now a sharp descent and a completely dark forest. Tadpa walked ahead and said, 'There is no cause for fear, just follow me'.

Parashuram said, 'Wait, let me go ahead and flash the torch'.

Tadpa said, 'I don't need it. I am young and I can see the road'.

He refused to be persuaded and continued walking ahead. He added: 'These forests and hills are our home and you are our guest. So should I lead you or should you lead me? What would our village elders say if they heard of it? What would Bisi Majhi, the headman say? They would say, "Tadpa you were there and you spoiled our good name".

Bharat said, 'There could be wild animals'.

'They are like our brothers. No fear from them'.

They went further down. Now they were on the Sakata river, fairly wide, which skirted the hills. Tadpa entered the river and

asked the others, 'Don't go in there; for there the water is deep. Please allow me'. It was only knee-deep water. The forest now thinned down. Tadpa said, 'I take your leave. You have nothing to fear now, for a little further you will be out in the open. Your road is to the left, mine to the right. On the hill another four miles and I will be at Penubali. Now your road is straight. Let me go'.

They halted. Parashuram gratefully thanked him. Bharat said, 'You have done us such a good turn'. Tadpa came to Parashuram and said, 'Give me twenty-five paise, I will eat something'. Parashuram and Bharat laughed. He entreated; 'Come on, if I can't take money from my parents for something to eat, from whom shall I take it?' Parashuram took out two ten paise coins from his pocket. Bharat brought out another. It was given to him. He thanked each one profusely and left with a rapid stride. His song was heard in the distance. They kept walking. Tadpa had vanished into the dark in no time. A little ahead something sparkled on the ground. Bharat bent down to see. There was one ten paise coin. Next to it was another. They halted a while and knew it had fallen from his hand.

'If he had no care for money, why did he entreat us so much for it?' Madhusudan supplied the answer, 'That was his way of honouring you as his parents. Dongria is like that: with so much intelligence, almost like a child. It is enough for him to get whatever he needed at a given time. Money is like pebbles in his eyes'. They looked back a little. Wrapped in hazy moonlight Niyamgiri hill seemed to be asleep. As if it was a dream and not a reality. The road lay ahead of them. Parashuram suggested that they discuss a little more the strategy for Dongria Kondh development. The discussion continued.

About the author

Mohanty, Gopinath (1914-1991) Oriya novelist, short story writer. Gopinath Mohanty was born in a family that had once been rich but later had fallen on bad days. The early years that he spent in his village shaped his sensibility and gave him a sense of rootedness to one's land. His job as a civil servant in Orissa took him to various parts of the state, particularly to the inaccessible areas of it. He grew fond of the Kondh tribes and learnt their ways. His later writings were devoted to depicting the life of these underprivileged people.

He received the Jnanpith Award in 1974. He is among those few writers who have written about the tribals.

Works:

Some of his works are: Novels — *Managahirara Chasa* (1936), *Dadibudha* (1944), *Paraja* (1945), *Amrutara Santana* (1947), *Apahancha* (1961), *Saratbabunka Gali, and Danapani.*

Glossary

Subaltern: According to the dictionary the word subaltern means any commissioned officer in the army below the rank of the captain. The word was used by the Marxist thinker and Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) to mean a subordinate. He used it specifically to refer to unorganised groups of rural peasantry in southern Italy who had no social and political consciousness as a group. The concept was further developed by a group of historians lead by Ranjit Guha (1923 -). This group defined the

term subaltern as 'the general attribute of subordination in south asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of caste, age, gender or office or any other way'. This group thought that the term included rural peasantly the working class and the untouchables.

Spivik expands the term by including women both from the lower class and the upper middle class among the subalterns.] [To be taken to the study material on Tadpa.]

Dhartani and Dhartani and Dharmu: The God of Ancient Earth, according to the Kondhs. Dharmau, is the Kondh God of Justice.

Kondhs: The Kondns, also described Kandhas, Khonds and Konds are the largest group of tribals in Orissa. They are mostly concentrated in Koraput, Phulbani and Kalahandi districts. According to Macpherson the name of the tribe is derived from the Telugu word Konda which means a hill.

Dhangada and Dhangadi: Dhangda is a young male lover and Dhangdi is a young female lover. According to Sitakant Mahapatra, youth dormitories play an important part in the life of the Kondhs. These dormitories are known as *dhandgar basa*. They are

organized institutions meant for socialization of the youth, the unmarried boys and girls. For the love poetry of the Kondhs, see Sitakant Mahapatra. *The Awakened Wind: The Oral Poetry of the Indian Tribes*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1983, pages 35-82.

Questions

1. How does the author try to evoke sympathy for Tadpa?
2. Why is it easy for writers to stereotype the tribals?
3. Compare this story with 'Salt' by Mahasweta Devi.

SHORT STORY-II

6
THE EMPTY CHEST*

Indira Goswami (Mamoni Raisom Goswami)
Translation : Pradipta Borgohain

No one got up at this hour, not even the people who had come to live on the fringes of the cremation ground. A few bulbuls chattered in the hijol tree in front of Toradoi's shack. A flock of yellow-billed garubok had just flown past, heading for the horizon to the east of the Brahmaputra. The stench of burnt human flesh stole across the cremation ground to mingle with the sweet scent of distant lemon blossoms.

As she came out of her shack, Toradoi saw Haibor, the firewood vendor from the crematory, standing under the hijol tree. Again! His spindly legs stuck out from beneath his black shorts. His white teeth gleamed like the chewed-up remains of sugarcane sticks.

Toradoi darted back into the house.

"What is left in this body to keep drawing you here?" she muttered. "Why don't you leave me in peace?"

How well she remembered his words. They fell on her ears again, like hammer-blows. "It will be a long time before that drunkard of yours comes out of jail. That is, if he ever comes out! After all, he has killed not one, but two people by running them over. It has been proved that he was drunk while driving.

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*Source: The Author

But I am here, don't worry! I will help, just keep your door open at night. This way, at least your two children won't starve to death!" Haibor had said. Since then, lured by the prospect of seeing Toradoi's door open to him, Haibor would come, even before daybreak, to stand under the hijol tree where the birds chirped and sipped honey from the flowers above his head.

When finally Toradoi went out again and looked around, Haibor was nowhere in sight. No, the firewood vendor was not one of those who came furtively to see the wooden chest she had scavenged from the cremation ground. She peered around. Was someone still prying?

What kind of people were these who liked to sniff at each other the way starving dogs do? Shameless bastards! As if they would not strip you naked it they could. The zamindar of Chakroad had died just the other day. Now, doesn't chowkidar Haladhar's hag of a wife sleep on the zamindar's bed made of uriam wood? And doesn't woodcutter Sukura's wife puff away at the hookah scrounged from this cremation ground? Some people had even salvaged gold rings from the charred remains of cremated bodies, but no, no one kept track of *those* things. No one had the morbid curiosity to see how Haladhar's spectre-like wife slept on the zamindar's bed. The belongings of the dead lay scattered in all the shacks and shanties in and around the crematorium. Various opulent objects leered from these incongruous settings. Yet all eyes were only on this black box of hers!

Toradoi returned to her shack. Her eyes fell on her sleeping children. One could count their ribs. Their trousers hung loose like the hides of goats strung up in a butcher's shop. But there, next to them, lay the wooden chest! Its very existence gave strength to Toradoi. She ran her hands over the chest, caressing

it. The bakul flowers, beautifully engraved on its sides, seemed real. She pressed her cheek to the flowers. Then, as on other days, she wriggled into the huge chest and lay there, leaving its cavernous mouth open.

Strange! Strange indeed! Revelling in the incomparable pleasure she felt, Toradoi lay inert for a long time in this chest which had been flung aside after it had been divested of its dead passenger. When she had scrounged the chest from the cremation ground she had had to take some bloodstained pieces of ice out of it. She had almost forgotten about that. Toradoi wept.

After some time, a police jeep roared past her hut. No vehicles other than police ones passed this way, usually. Were the certificates concerning the handing over of the bodies of people killed in the shooting in order? Was it true, as the chowkidar's report would have it, that someone had burnt a bastard child here without obtaining a "hand-over" certificate? And what about the unregistered corpses? Such were the matters that drew the police to this area. These and the trade of the prostitutes of Satgoan that flourished here. It almost seemed as if the higher the flames devouring the dead rose, the greater was the heat generated by the bodies of these prostitutes. Yes, there were so many things that the police had to attend to, so many matters that ensured a continual movement of police cars, that led to altercations between the police and members of the crematorium committee.

Toradoi woke up with a start at the sound of the police jeep. Vermilion and flowers, which were meant for decorating one's hair, lay scattered inside the chest. Strange! How had her very being become so inextricably entangled with this inanimate chest? She felt she was spending the night on the same bed with the "adored one". This wooden chest bore the imprints of her

personality — her hair, oil, vermilion. Last night, she had again taken her wedding blouse from the pile of tattered clothes and put it on. It was the only piece of her clothing which was still intact. Looking at her reflection in the mirror in the flickering light of a kerosene lamp, she had combed her hair with frantic eagerness, as she had done ten years ago. She had not even felt the comb grate against the bones on her shoulder and neck. In those days she had hardly been aware of the existence of bones, buried as they were under her pliant flesh. Now people counted her amongst the numerous living skeletons who lived off the cremation ground.

Was anyone looking?

These days people peeped through crannies and gaps between doors and windows and walls. Her boys, now sleeping peacefully, had complained that people spied all the time. "Shame, shame! Sleeping in the box that carried the dead! Throw it away!" the voices seemed to say.

Toradoi snuggled into the chest. This experience was unique.

Suddenly, someone gave a massive kick to the door. Startled and flustered, Toradoi got up. Straining her ears, she heard the booming voice of her brother, Someswar, who worked in the police. "Toradoi! Toradoi!"

As soon as Toradoi opened the door a man dressed in police uniform burst in. Sturdily built, he had an imposing moustache. He wore a pair of huge ungainly boots and carried a sizeable stick.

"I haven't been able to find the time to see how you are. Today my duty was in these parts. That woman from Satgaon has

virtually set up shop here. It seems virtue is totally extinct. The other day Barua died and his two sons brought his body to the crematory. While one was busy performing the last rites, the other slipped out and was in that prostitute's room in a flash. Really, we have fallen on evil days!"

Suddenly Someswar gasped and retreated a few steps, as if he had seen a snake. He gaped at the massive, elaborately decorated wooden chest. Going closer, he tapped it with his stick. Then he walked around it. Finally, he knelt down by its side and, taking out a handkerchief, rubbed his eyes. The man who had rushed in like a storm a few moments before now resembled a dejected and defeated soldier

He looked at Toradoi and asked in a broken voice, "Is there some water in the house? Get me a glass of water, will you?"

He gulped down the water and then said, his head downcast, "What I heard is true, then. Saru Bopa's corpse travelled here in this chest. I accompanied the family a part of the way from the airport. Yes, this is that chest, all right".

With a level and direct look at Toradoi, he continued, "Don't think I don't remember that you worked for them. Everyone knows what a great help you were when Saru Bopa's father, the Thakur, was ill. Washing all those clothes stained with blood and pus. And Saru Bopa?" Someswar's voice grew heavy with emotion. "He was so fond of you. Wasn't that the time when he was bent on marrying you? What a fracas there was in the Thakur's household over that! Then came the hasty transfer to Upper Assam....and then, the accident".

Toradoi asked suddenly, "What killed him?"

"A jeep. What a fine figure of a man he was! After removing the bloodstained pieces of ice, I had helped hoist his body on to the funeral pyre. With these two hands of mine. Fresh young blood on my hands..." Looking at Toradoi standing like a statue, he could not complete his sentence. The big, black box with its open mouth was like some mysterious cave, separating and alienating the two from each other.

All of a sudden Someswar stood up and bellowed. There was a hint of the theatrical in his gesture. "Toradoi, the days of sahebs marrying the daughters of labourers are gone. The grass now grows tall over the bones of Jenkins Saheb who married a labourer's girl. The big saheb's son, Saru Bopa, vowed he would marry you. But could he do it? Was he able to take you away from this hovel and give you a place in a house with a tin roof?"

A sigh that seemed to wrack her whole being escaped Toradoi. "He stayed a bachelor only because he couldn't marry me. For twelve whole years. He would probably have never married at all".

The huge constable glared at Toradoi. Beating a staccato note on the floor with his stout lathi, he stood up, cursing Toradoi in a deep, rumbling voice, "You are still as much of an idiot now as you were when you gave yourself completely to the Thakur's son. I work in the police, so I have heard everything and have come prepared".

Toradoi looked helplessly at her brother. She had managed to salvage something precious from the ruins of what had once been. Would her brother deprive her of even that?

[

By this time the sleeping children had got up. The three of them — Toradoi and her sons — huddled together, looking like

phantoms from the cremation ground. Someswar started rummaging in his pocket. The boys thought he was going to come up with something for them, like that man who always waited for their mother did. After all, he was their uncle, though he had not once come to inquire after them when their father went to jail.

The three continued to stare at Someswar. Toradoi could almost hear her own heartbeat.

Someswar dug out a bundle of letters from his pocket and flung them in her face. "Here, take his wedding cards," he declared. "Seeing the way things have been, I came prepared. Saru Bopa was not planning to stay an eternal bachelor because of you. His wedding had been fixed. Cards had also been printed. Read them. Read them! In fact he was on his way home to get married when the accident happened. Read them and pray for the peace of his soul".

As he was about to rush out of the room, he suddenly noticed the boys clinging to their mother. He searched for some coins, but his mind was already on other things. Toradoi could hear him mutter, "If I find that woman who peddles her body to mourners or catch Haibor red-handed, I can make this trip worthwhile. That bastard Haibor passes off worm-eaten wood as sal wood".

Taking out a fistful of coins, Someswar thrust them into the eager hands of the boys and left the way he had come. The moment their fingers closed around the coins, the half-starved urchins streaked off to the nearest shop.

Toradoi remained rooted to the spot near the pile of wedding cards. She reached out for them like one who gropes for the

bones of the dead in the ashes at a crematorium. Yes indeed, they were invitations to a wedding.

Toradoi did not venture out for many days. Tormented by unbearable hunger, her sons were driven to beg from the people who came to burn bodies. Someone had tied a gamosa — which must have been worn by some person performing last rites — around the younger boy's head. The boys had managed to scavenge two empty liquor bottles from the cremation ground. They had washed these and filled them with water from the well near the statue of Yama astride a buffalo, and this they drank to quench their hunger. The neighbours knew that Toradoi's hearth was cold.

The big back chest lay with its mouth yawning open like the cavernous mouth of hell.

Under the hijol tree Haibor kept up his unceasing vigil.

One morning, while the gloom of night still clung to the sky, Toradoi and her two sons could be seen dragging the wooden chest towards the cremation ground. Toradoi put the box at the spot where the bastard child had been controversially burnt. She set fire to it.

The bulbuls on the hijol tree started chirping noisily. The sun rose above the Brahmaputra. Wreaths of violet and brown clouds clung to it, making it look like the pinched and pale face of a hapless prostitute, blushing at the thought of having to spend time with an unwanted stranger. The clouds seemed to lay bare the strange combination of helplessness and indomitable strength on this face.

The cinders of the burnt-out chest were scattered all over the place. In the morning sunshine it resembled the hide of a freshly butchered goat, spread out on the earth to dry.

Toradoi came out of her shack.

She wore no chadar.

The man who always stood under the hijol tree was not there.

About the author

Indira Goswami [Mamoni Raisom Goswami] (1942 —). Born in an orthodox family in the south Kamrup district of Assam, Indira married Madhavan Raisom Iyenger. Unfortunately she lost her husband in a road accident just after one year of marriage. But undeterred she decided to pursue her studies and completed her Ph.D. in 1973. She is Professor in the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi.

Indira Goswami is a celebrated name in the field of Assamese literature.

According to a distinguished Assamese critic Prof Hiren Gohain, Mamoni Raisom Goswami is the most extraordinary thing to have happened to Assamese literature. She has written 25 novels and a hundred short stories. In 2000 she was awarded the prestigious Jnanpith Award for her contribution to Assamese literature. She has won many awards besides.

In most of her writings she has a female protagonist and she depicts her sufferings and feelings and desires very boldly. This is true of the story 'The Empty Chest' alao.

Works:

Most of her works have been translated into Hindi and English. Some of them are:

Novels: *Chenabar Sont* (The Stream of Chenab) 1972; *Nilakanthi Braja* (Blue-necked Braja) 1972; *Dontal Hatir Une Khowa Hawda* (The Worm-eaten Hawda of a Tusker) 1988; *Tez aru Dhulire Dhusarita Pristha* (Pages Stained with Blood) 1995; *Adhalekha Dastabez* (Unfinished Autobiography) 1988.

Short Stories: *Çhinaki Maram* 1962; *Kaina* 1966; *Hriday ek Nadir Nam* 1990; *Nirbachita Galpa* 1998; *The Shadow of Kamakhya: Stories by Indira Goswami* 2001. (all collections). ('The Empty Chest' is on pages 31-38.)

Glossary

Hijol:	It is an indigenous tree. Its wood is used for making furniture.
Garubok:	Crane. A long legged, yellow-billed white bird.
Uriam:	A kind of timber tree (*Bescoffla Javanica*).
Bakul:	A fruit-bearing tree. The tree has small white fragrant flowers.
Satgaon:	Name of a place.
Lathi:	A long, big stick.

Sal: A kind of hard wood tree (*Shorea Robusta*).

Gamocha: Assamese hand-woven towel.

Yama: God of Death in Indian mythology.

Chadar: A long sheet — a part of dress worn by Assamese women around the upper body.

Questions

1. Discuss the title of the **short** story.
2. Discuss the narrative technique used in the story.
3. How do you respond to the story? Write a short note.

7
VERY LONELY, SHE*

Motilal Jotwani

Translation : Nandlal Jotwani

Manohar knocked at the door, certain that Pooran Mausi would be awake even at that early hour. Looking around him, he saw that the street had not changed much in the past ten years — the chipped-off walls of public structures, the relatively better-off private houses, and the heaps of garbage — yea, things had not changed much. Before he could knock again, the door opened and Pooran Mausi stood at the threshold, holding a **broom, asking,** "Who is it?"

"Mausi, it is me, Manohar, **from Delhi**..." Manohar touched his Mausi's feet.

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* Source : Motilal Jotwani

Pooran Mausi strained to have a closer look at him. "Oh, Manohar! From which side has the sun risen today!" she said, as she patted his back and blessed him.

Manohar smiled. "I had gone to Bhopal and was on my way home. Peering out of the window, this morning, I realized the train had halted at Agra Cantonment. So I picked up my briefcase and hopped off to meet you".

"You did the right thing, son... Now that you are here, the neighbourhood will know that this old woman is not uncared for". Mausi's eyes were wet.

Manohar entered the room and pushing his briefcase underneath the cot sat down and undid his shoelaces.

"Yesterday night, I missed your mother, Sug'uni, very much ... I couldn't help thinking that after she died, her sons too had forgotten their Mausi ..."

"Mausi, we met only six or seven months ago in Delhi, remember?"

"Of course, we did. I visited my in-laws' house in Rajèndra Nagar and then yours in Lajpat Nagar. But no one really asked me over. It was the first death anniversary of my eldest brother-in-law. I went there a year ago too, when the poor man passed away. I visited you then, too. But my in-laws sent me neither a telegram nor a letter. I learnt about the death from some visitors. Delhi folks do not have time for their kin".

Manohar heard his Mausi's voice quiver. Then she stood up abruptly, "Put your feet up on the cot. I'll get you a cup of tea. You don't take sugar **in your** tea, do you?" she said briskly, disappearing into the kitchen.

Manohar drew up his legs and sat cross-legged on the cot like an obedient child. His gaze fell on the framed photographs of his Nana and Nani that adorned the opposite wall. His grandfather's face had a deep wrinkle right in the middle of his forehead, as if some *vaishnava* had drawn a vertical line there. He thought, he had also the wrinkle, which he seemed to have inherited from his grandfather. It was his most prominent identification mark.

He looked at the photograph again. His grandfather looked like a strong man while his grandmother seemed the picture of humility. Together, they had looked after Mausi, their hapless daughter, after she'd been abandoned by her ne'er-do-well husband. While their other daughters had led happy, married lives in different towns of the country, Poorandevi's husband, Moolchand, who hailed from a decent family, and whose brothers all held high positions, had been a loafer even before his marriage. Moolchand's parents had married off their vagabond son to Poorandevi in the hope that he would reform, settle down to a life of happy domesticity. But, that was not to be. He did not stay in the same town, let alone the same house. He'd knocked around pursuing a life of petty crime. Of course, he'd come back to Pooran Mausi in the last years of his life, seriously ill and looking much older than he was. He'd begged her forgiveness and breathed his last in her lap.

Pooran Mausi emerged from the kitchen holding a cup of tea for herself and a mug of tea for Manohar. Manohar was touched that Pooran Mausi remembered he took his tea without sugar, and that he preferred drinking it in a mug. He looked up at her and smiled. "So much tea for me!"

"Don't I know that you gulp down a mug of tea every morning?" his Mausi laughed.

After drinking his tea, Manohar had a bath — Mausi had got some work done on the bathroom; she now had a water connection inside the house. Earlier, she had to fetch water in buckets from the public tap. He changed his clothes and prepared to go out to ring his family in Delhi.

"Since you are going out, get some *dahi* from the *halwai* round the corner. We will have aloo paranthas and curd for breakfast". Manohar was about to ask for a container for the *dahi* but Mausi forestalled him, "These days, you don't have to carry a container. The shopkeeper will pack it in a plastic bag".

When Manohar returned, Pooran Mausi had swept and swabbed the room and **was doing** her *puja* in front of a framed photograph of the Anandpur Sahib Guruji.

At one time Mausi used to manage a *nari-shala* where she taught young girls stitching, embroidery and etiquette. She was better educated than most of the women around and knew a smattering of English. Now that she had grown old, she no longer had the energy for it. On her last visit to Delhi she had told Manohar that she had disposed of the sewing machines. Now she rented out the first floor of her parental house and managed on the rent.

When her *puja* was over, Pooran Mausi, on her way to the kitchen, said, "Manoo, why do you get lost in your thoughts, like that? What on earth, are you thinking about?" Manohar jumped to his feet and followed her into the kitchen and they talked while Mausi quickly lit the gas and rolled out the *aloo paranthas*. She had readied the potatoes when he'd been away.

"Well, Mausi, what made you say that the Delhi folks had no time for you? Did you get this feeling while staying with us there?"

"*Haan bhai*, why would I say such a thing without reason?" Mausi replied, unable to disguise the hurt in her voice.

Manohar braced himself, waiting for his Mausi to say something more but she was engrossed in her work so he went back to the room and sat on the cot. There was no television or newspaper. He wondered how Mausi spent her time, all alone. These days relatives no longer write to each other, preferring to make an STD call when the need arises. But he could not even *visualize* a telephone in Mausi's house. Yes, if there was any urgent message for her, one could phone a distant relative of hers who lived in Manas Nagar, about 12, 15 km away. How did she manage without a newspaper? Had she been illiterate, not getting the newspaper would not have mattered. Manohar decided he would write to his Mausi every week and also mail her some periodicals. Then he thought wryly, when he was back in Delhi, would he really remember?

Mausi set down two plates of *paranthas* and two bowls of *dahi* and settled down on the cot. Manohar saw that his plate had three *paranthas* on it while Mausi's had only one — more a dry chapati than a *paratha*.

Suddenly she said, "Why are you so unusually quiet today? Your laughter used to fill the house".

"Mausi, you must feel very lonely?" Manohar said abruptly.

Mausi said, "*Haan bhai*, how is it that the nephew is suddenly worried about his Mausi's loneliness?"

Manohar paused to consider his aunt's favourite phrase: "*haan bhai*". He remembered that his own mother too used it like a refrain.

It was also his Nani's favourite expression. Since Mausi had stayed with her for so many years, she had picked up the phrase along with all the other things she'd inherited from her. After a moment, Mausi said, "Life becomes the way you mould it. Tell me, what is left of my life any more?" But she quickly brightened. "Now tell me about yourself," she said. "I hope all is well in Delhi. What do the daughters of your younger sister Vimla do? Have they finished their studies, or are they still in college?"

Manohar was startled. The mention of his sister Vimla reminded him of the sudden and sad demise of his brother-in-law, Kumar. *Uffo*, we forgot to inform Mausi.

"What's the matter?" Mausi asked.

Manohar was caught off-guard. He blurted out, "Mausi, we are really sorry. We have not told you. Unfortunately, Vimla's husband passed away a few months ago, of a severe heart attack".

Mausi almost shrieked in grief. "No, no," she muttered over and over, as if in a trance. Then she closed her eyes, probably praying for the peace of the departed soul. When she opened her eyes she said, "*Haan bhai,* you did not send me a telegram or a letter. Such a grave tragedy occurred, and I did not even know. Though I'm alive I am treated as if dead".

Manohar realized that his Mausi was deeply hurt. After the death of his parents, he was the eldest in the family. It fell to him to keep in touch with their relatives. What could he possibly say to her?

"Mausi, what can I say?" Manohar said in deep remorse. "I told you I feel guilty, we all feel guilty. You know we have had two marriages in Varanasi, in the families of our first cousins. They sent

us printed invitation cards, and they also wrote to us ... but we were so grief-stricken and confused that none of us replied to their letters...now when we meet them in person, we will tell them about our predicament and apologize..."

But Mausi's anguish was palpable. She said, "*Haan bhai,* you did not, on your own, tell me about Vimla's husband. It was I who asked you about her two daughters. You probably thought if you tell me about the tragedy, I will jump into the train with you to Delhi to condole..."

"No, no, it's not like that at all. In fact, nobody talked of it and I did not remember it".

"That is precisely what I mean," Mausi's eyes grew misty. "A while ago, you asked me why I had said that Delhi folks have no time for their kith and kin. Why would I say that without reason? When I was leaving Delhi, I had affectionately asked my brother-in-law's son to occasionally visit me and drop a line once in a while. Do you know what he said? He was probably tired of my visits to Delhi. "Chachi, for God's sake, leave us alone". Mausi started to cry. "After that day, I have not stepped into my in-laws' house. I am reconciled to my loneliness. My brother-in-law's son wants to be left alone ..."

Manohar tried to console her. He pleaded with her to forgive and forget. He thought, Mausi is unhappy because of her loneliness, and we, her kith and kin, want to be left alone. His mind worried over the distinction between loneliness and aloneness, between that which was imposed on an individual by society and what an individual sought voluntarily. It is a different matter that aloneness becomes loneliness in time.

He picked up the dishes and put them in the kitchen sink. Then he returned to the front room where he lay down on the cot, a pillow beneath his head. Then he closed his eyes. He did not have the courage to face Mausi's grief any more.

About the author

Motilal Jotwani (1936-2008) Born in 1936 in Sukkar, Sindh (now in Pakistan), he started life as a primary school teacher in Delhi and worked his way up to be Reader in Sindhi in Deshbandhu College, New Delhi. He has written in a variety of genres — short stories, novels, poetry, essays and criticism, besides an autobiography — 55 works in all. He has written principally in Sindhi but has also written in Hindi and English. He likes to describe himself as an Indianist in his thought and writings.

Works:

Sindhi: *PeeleeBattee-a Te* (novel, 1974); *Ihe Rishtaa Nataa* (novel, 1982); *Sanbadhani Je Sarakanui Te* (poems, 1982); *Koth* (novel, 1985; *Sunjaanap jo Sankat* (short stories, 1992); *Te Nadha Novel* (three novels, 1992); *Aatamkatha Je Naale Mein* (autobiography, 1994), *Purush ain Prakriti* (poems, 1997) etc.

Short stories: 'Very Lonely, She' [Akeli Akeli Hoo-a], in *Katha: Prize Stories,* Vol.10. 2000; 'Aakash D'isana Jee Chaanaa', [A Desire to See the Sky] in *20 Short Stories from South Asia* (New Delhi: 2003).

Hindi: *Motilal Jotwani: Pratinidhi Rachnain* (1996), a collection of representative works in Hindi.

Prose and Criticism: *Shah Abdul Karim: A Mystic Poet of Sindh (1970); Shah Abdul Latif: His Life and Work* (1975); *Sindhi Literature and Society* (1979); *Sufis of Sind* (1986); *Dictionary of Sindhi Literature* (1996).

Glossary

aloo parantha:	a kind of fried cake made in several layers, stuffed with potatoes
chachi:	father's brother's wife
chapaati:	a thin cake or bread
dahi:	yogurt, curd
guruji:	preceptor; 'ji' is suffixed out of reverence
haan bhai:	yes, dear
halwai:	confectioner
Mausi:	mother's sister
Nana:	maternal grandfather
Nani:	maternal grandmother
nari-shala:	domestic tailoring school for women
puja:	worship
uffo:	an expression of regret, ah
vaishnava:	devotee of Vishnu, one of the three principal divinities of the Hindu mythology

Questions

1. Write a note on your response to the story.
2. What is the main theme of the story? How has it been brought out in the story?
3. Which story that you have read can you compare this story with?

8
...HEADMASTER, PRAWN, CHANACHUR*

Afsar Ahmed

Translation : Chandana Dutta

I am forced to weave together meaningless activity and thought, and have reached a point where there is no other way out. I must live with them. Without solutions. My body, its numerous parts, strike different meaningless poses, constantly. I lose myself in neverending meaninglessness, seeking refuge in it. And yet, my neighbours, my colleagues, my wife, my daughter — not one of them has found my behaviour or gestures, strange or unreal. Perhaps, they have found an element of truth in all these.

Like now. The doorbell is ringing. I am inside our flat, standing at the front door. Yet, I don't open it. There is no reason for my not opening the door. But, to my wife and daughter waiting on the other side, I present a plausible explanation. I am in the

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Source: "...Headmaster, Prawn, Chanachur" by Afsar Ahmed, was first published in Bangla as "Arthaheen Katha Balar Nirbharata" in *Baromas*, September 1998, Calcutta. The story won the Katha Award for Creative Fiction in 1999. This translation by Chandana Dutta appeared in Katha prize stories 9 and won the Katha Award for Translation in 1999. The copyright for the English translation rests with Katha, a registered, nonprofit society devoted to enhancing the pleasures of reading.

bathroom, or in the bedroom napping, with the door shut, or at this very moment, am pulling on my shirt and trousers to come to open the door. But the fact is, when I went on to the balcony of my second floor flat a few minutes ago, first a splash of red caught my eye, then the flower-laden krishnachura tree, and finally, through the gaps in the branches and leaves, my wife and daughter — my wife had gone to pick up our daughter from school. I came to stand at the door and yet I delay opening it. And to think that I hadn't even bolted the door after Pramita left. As soon as the door closed behind her, I'd come to the door, fiddled noisily with the bolt but left it as it was. I take solace from such meaningless gestures.

Even now, Pramita and Tinni stand outside, sweat drenched, firm in their conviction that I have latched the door and am inside the house. If they push a little, the door will open. But because they consider the untruth of my existence a living truth, these two creatures somehow continue to exist, to think I am in the bathroom, or napping with the bedroom door shut, or pulling on my shirt and trousers. I am getting sucked into the reality of the false.

I make a noise with my hand on the latch. And still the latch remains where it is — at the same distance from the upper edge of the door and the crack between the door and its frame. Then, a slight shove and Tinni hurls into the living space.

I am face to face with Pramita. She is holding a triple fold umbrella in her hand and wearing her sunglasses. Meaninglessly, I stretch my hand towards her and say, "Hello!" Accepting this gesture as true, Pramita retorts, "Don't be stupid," and with her sunburnt, red-radish face, stomps into the bedroom like a reckless, uncaring bull in the streets of an overcrowded market

place. "Uff! Once again today they could not rescue the child from the manhole". Her face is stamped with terror.

I do not wish to acknowledge such talk. Walking a few steps behind her, I stop short. Then I return to the door. I know it is latched, and yet I pretend to latch it.

Pramita is standing at the bedroom door. She turns back to stare at me. "What? Had you left it open?"

I bite my tongue. Then give sound to meaningless words. "One night.....".

"Had you left the door open?"

"...rain..."

Pramita thinks I'm reminiscing about a particular rain-filled night. My silence stops her from probing further. She saves her questioning for another time. But my "one night — rain" had not been intended to start a conversation nor was I keen to share memories or the description of an experience. I had just wanted to say something meaningless. Pratima goes into the bathroom, and I surrender myself to the sentences in my mind.

One night
rain
a lot of rain
the juice-filled fruits are dry
birds fly, their feet pointing downward, their spines ramrod
water crocodiles collect the colour blue at the roof of the banyan
tree as they yawn

the water-borne moss against the mountain face flaps its wings
and chaffs its knees
Oh! my poor birds, don't go into the water, float away like the
clouds
Snake–like evening
ink-filled night
naked breeze
all these in our rooms
pit caves, tar flies, children's lessons
meetings with a mermaid have not yet happened

I lean out a little from the balcony and feast my eyes on the red glow around the krishnachura tree. I enter my daughter's room with its neatly arranged rows of books and exit from the other door. A friend has come to ask Tinni out to play. She goes down to play, bathed in the same red glow of the krishnachura. There are a couple of concrete benches and swings down there. Or perhaps she's playing ball.

"Hanh! I think I remember your saying that one rain-filled night someone had fallen into the manhole. What a country, what a city, the height of being unsafe".

To fuel more false meaninglessness to Pramita's false notions about myself I repeat, "Yes. One rain-filled night" — and then I say, "No meeting with a mermaid happened".

I shake my head and sigh. *No meeting with a mermaid happened.*

"I am afraid of letting Tinni come back from school by herself".

"It is something to be afraid of".

Pramita's remarks cause more meaningless words to silently infuse into my thoughts. *Dak-peon, remark-book, headmaster, prawn, chanachur, swadeshiness, Indianness.*

"Are you never afraid?"

"Of course, I am". *Headmaster, prawn, chanachur.*

"Murders have gone up in the city, so have rapes".

... headmaster, prawn, chanachur.

"The budget session is approaching. Who knows what madness the ministers will indulge in this time".

...headmaster, prawn, chanachur.

Pramita goes to the balcony to pick up the clothes left out to dry. She wears a solemn face. The evening breeze is blowing, the door and window curtains flap and flare. Unknown to her, I pull faces and dance mockingly, brazenly, behind her back. I think about the result of my dancing and my gestures. If only there would be rain. No, there is no rain anywhere, there is no ocean anywhere, there are no trees anywhere, there is no earth anywhere, only this taunting dancing as I kick my feet high in the air. There is no rain anywhere, there are no torrents anywhere at all.

The fragrance of fried hilsa. Shrieks and cries fill the kitchens — Where *are* the hilsas?

There is no rain anywhere.

Pramita descends into my rain-filled thoughts.

"You know, Rajat said the other day, there is a price for everything. Nothing happens anymore without a bribe".

I can't see any rain. But in my mind I see a spray of rain on Pramita's forehead, a few glistening drops waiting to roll off the strands of her hair.

"Wherever there is someone responsible for some work, they are waiting with their hoods raised to take a bribe"

"Where have all the hilsas gone?" I ask.

"You are absolutely correct. Otherwise, how can they buy hilsas worth more than two or three hundred rupees".

"Uff!" *There is no rain anywhere.*

These days Pramita has become quite impossible. Today, more than ever. She has been terrified since last night because some kid fell into a manhole. She had watched the people looking futilely for him. They had searched for him all of last night. So much time has passed today, it is evening, and yet there is no sign of him.

Pramita is feeling bitter, restless. Every once in a while, she shudders. Last week there were two dacoities in this colony. The week before, the police fished out a headless, body of a youth from a canal. Sometime earlier, a young girl from the basti was abducted and gang-raped in the park nearby. And even before that, about a month and a half ago, the police came to this S-7 flat of ours, to this flat where Pramita, Tinni and I live, to look

for a young boy whose limp body hung from a ceiling fan. Pramita had shuddered at what the police told her. On the telephone the police had heard S-7 instead of N-7. Just two blocks away. N-7. The parents are busy doctors. Sanju. What a decent, lively boy. Twenty one years old. One day just hangs himself from the ceiling fan. A social disease has stolen him from us, Pramita had said.

I have stayed in a state of drowning in the meaninglessness of my thoughts, in words like headmaster, prawn, chanachur. I have, of course, been extremely unhappy about this, and yet I have remained sunk in such chanachur-like words. *Wooden plate, knife and fork, bardariya, posta bazar,* I say, taking refuge in meaningless words. in absurd conjunctions, in mismatched half sentences. One and a half months ago, nine days before Sanju's suicide, a young boy took two days' leave from his hostel to return home, to E-3, downed thirty sleeping pills, and closed his eyes **to the world forever.** Even on that day, I did not say, What is the meaning of all this? These things must stop. Instead I thought meaninglessly — *No meeting with a* **mermaid** *happened.*

Then, last evening, the child fell into the manhole, and vanished without a trace. He has not been found till this evening. Pramita is extremely nervous and crabby. But what I'm trying to say is, isn't Pramita's coming into the kitchen after having dumped the clothes on the bed, the scurrying away of the cockroaches as they collide with her anchal, these cockroaches crawling on the kitchen wall, equally meaningless? At least it is not less meaningless than my pulling faces and kicking my feet high in the air.

The police had rung the bell to our flat. I'd opened the door and invited them inside. At a distance, Pramita stood huddled,

holding Tinni behind her. When the police asked to see the corpse, I'd asked them into our bedroom, immediately swinging into an act of meaninglessness, to imbue this typical police endeavour to incriminate criminals, with reality. Pramita had set things in order, pointing out the mistake to the officer. All I had wanted to do was to use my meaninglessness to present the police with all the evidence of a suicide in my bedroom.

Later, I fell into a beguiling daydream of N-7 and S-7. To do this well, I prepared myself several times, to imagine my lifeless body hanging from the ceiling fan in my bedroom. Relishing sense of falseness, I'd stammered in front of a policeman and had looked sufficiently scared for him to take a sharp look at me.

you do?"

"What do

inflate balloons".

What

do you mean? What sort of work is that?"

"You know, blow things out of proportion in a newspaper office".

"What did you do before that?"

I understand that my age and the way I look has aroused his suspicion and he thinks I am hiding a dark political past. But what good would it do for the police to hunt for such a person?

"What period are you referring to? It is four years since I left the work of a schoolmaster. I taught for ten years," I say.

"No, no, before that, when you were younger, in your adolescence or early youth".

"Headmaster, prawn, chanachur ..." The words escape my lips and the police officer goes away laughing.

I am yet to understand what sense of reality these three words had given him for he had left hugely satisfied about something. This was a big surprise for me. To this day I have not been able to understand why these three meaningless words gave him such a sense of peace, why they seemed to liberate him. The police officer's abrupt departure appeared to me like that of an irritating lunatic who immediately leaves you when you ask him to stay. Maybe, the self-realization of his own youth dawned on him through those three words. *Headmaster, prawn, chanachur.*

That night I could not sleep for a long time. Kept looking up at the ceiling fan. The scene of the police officer, almost fleeing our house, perplexed me. What sort of self-satisfaction did he derive from my trio of headless, meaningless words? To me of course these three words were a form of protest against my incapacity to land a smart slap on the right cheek of the policeman. In fact, they conveyed the meaninglessness of protest.

Afterwards I gave two people the wrong number to my flat. N-7. When purchasing a phone from Chandni, I asked the shop to home-deliver it. The phone has now reached the home of the parents of the only son who had committed suicide. The parents are convinced that the boy had ordered for the phone before his death. Now my phone instrument rings beautifully in their house. It sounds like the cooing of a strange bird. I haven't breathed a word of this to Pramita. A phone purchased for my flat, coos like a bird at N-7 and showers consolations from relations and well-wishers, pours requiems for the dearly departed.

Standing in the dark balcony of my flat I hear the cooing of this bird. Whenever I wish to sleep restfully in my bed, it echoes strangely in my ears. During the day sometimes, I stand on the tarmac below N-block so that I can hear my bird trill every time a call comes through. The phone instrument which could have been mine, had I so much as reached out for it, is now in the room of a recently dead youth. His parents have embraced this falsity as being so deeply true that I don't stand any chance of introducing myself as the rightful owner now. I have no existence there.

The second person whom I gave the wrong address to was someone I bumped into after a long time, just like that, in the street. I ask him home. The same trick again. His name is Ananya, a friend from my heady political days. Nearly forty. No longer so young. Works on a lathe machine. A machine-mate, working on strictly specified and accurate dimensions. But he still retains the dreams in his eyes. He enters N-7 straight away. Bends down in pranam to the doctor and his wife, thinking them to be my parents. Introduces himself as a friend of their son. The parents burst into tears. Ananya stands face to face with the news of my suicide, shouldering the grieving wails of my parents.

When Ananya is walking below the krishnachura tree, returning from N-7, with reddened eyes and a saddened mind, I am sitting in the balcony with a newspaper in my hand. I have just woken up from a dawn to noon nap, after being on duty the previous night.

"Ananya!"

He looks up. "Arupda? You here?"

"Yes".

"But why are you here? You are supposed to be..."

"Headmaster, prawn, chanachur".

"Arupda, you ... here?"

"Yes, I live here".

"But then...

"I am dead, right?"

"Arre Arupda, what a strange thing this is..."

"Don't come upstairs. It is more fitting for you to return home in mourning".

"Yes, I should return home. In any case, I'm not able to understand this..."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes I'm afraid, but I do not understand what I'm afraid about".

"Perhaps it is some kind of miracle, hain Ananya? You should remain in the reality of N-7 to which you had gone".

"How are those two people related to you, Arupda?"

"My parents".

"And the one who has committed suicide?"

"Their only son".

"Then ..."

"There is no then. Just go back home. I will now peruse eight newspapers perched on the commode. From these I will search for an advertisement for a post and will then quickly write out an application ..."

Scared, Ananya hurries away.

Later, while buying a cigarette on the road below, a jeep stops behind me. Looking back I find the police officer peering out of the jeep. "Headmaster, prawn, chanachur!" he guffaws and drives off.

Recently, a rape case, a murder, and two robberies in the area have left Pramita deeply agitated, worried about the lack of security. She raises questions about our democracy, the negligence of the administrative system. She talks about corruption, about social decadence, about the dangers of forming a new government. But, I alone cannot vote for millions of people. This helplessness leads me to depend on meaninglessness.

Today is a holiday for me. I am settling down for another bout of sleep after having slept through the entire day. All arrangements have been made for this. Pramita has fixed the mosquito net. The curtain flutters in the breeze. As on every night, Pramita is finishing her chores before turning in. The bird continues to coo at N-7, my cigarette continues to smoulder between my fingers.

"Can you hear it?" I ask Pramita, in a hushed aside.

"Hear what?"

"The bird, the cooing of the bird, the bird of our house".

"Oh, that is not a bird, that is a phone ..."

"Is that not a bird? A bird's voice?"

Whenever Pramita is busy, she cuts the conversation short, putting off the talk for later.

The nightly television news bulletin has just announced that efforts to extricate the child from the manhole have not yet been successful. I do not like to think about the implications of such things.

I cling to my dependence on meaninglessness as I grind out my cigarette in the ashtray. As if I have escaped to an enchanted hill. Or to a lonely lake on whose cool waters bob many a road. The lotus leaves are all water-like below the waters.

The fire is more imaginative than the ants
when the clouds enter Patal, the legs grow increasingly itchy
a hundred pins are afloat on the closed door
red radish, burns, carpet
chicken pox, eye-grime
mixture, abortion, ashshaora trees, haritoki
a planked floor
temple of the Union, ankle bells, beef
stockings, cut-lips, mask, insurance, pickles, mankochu
One rain-filled night

manhole
the ringing of the phone as if the bird is alive
the meeting with the mermaid never took place
Patal spreads out in the hot sun

Pramita says, "The police are really terrible, aren't they?"

"When the clouds enter Patal, the legs grow increasingly itchy". I respond.

Pramita laughs.

"Why did you laugh?" I am amazed to find Pramita making sense of my meaningless words.

Pramita laughs again. "When the clouds enter Patal the legs grow increasingly itchy," she repeats nearly in splits. "But suppose that policeman returns and rings the bell on such a night?" she asks sobering up.

"Then he will go back laughing deliriously as if somebody has tickled him, when I utter a few of these words".

"But why should he come?"

"He will come. He will come to take down the bodies of the suicides from the ceiling fan. It satisfies him. He is suspicious of you only when you want to live, and then he immediately becomes serious. The extremists are becoming active. Otherwise, the police is fun-loving. Either they eat laughter or have the human brain for breakfast".

"I thought you had stopped talking like that".

"I had"

"Then why did you say that now?"

"It was a mistake. Ananya had come the other day and was standing **below** our balcony, under the red krishnachura tree. I asked to turn around and then landed him a kick on his rear. He was terrified and fled".

"Terrified" Terrified of what?"

"A hundred pins are afloat on the closed door".

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. That which does not have any meaning may have several meanings. *A hundred pins are afloat on the closed door.* Maybe you can derive your own meaning from this".

"Well, I am able to and then again am not".

Can you hear the phone ringing in a bird's voice in Sanju's parent's flat?"

"Yes"

"That phone was supposed to ring in my flat. Instead, it is making consolatory noises to Sanju's parents. After that address became mine, Ananya visited that flat. He conveyed his pranams to my parents and expressed sorrow at my suicide. He became terribly afraid when he saw me alive in this flat. But he could never comprehend my desperation to remain alive. I had wanted

to tell him that the ants are more imaginative than the fire. This would have helped him understand the fact of my existence. But instead he became afraid, not being able to understand the sheer helplessness of these unbearable times. Having asked him to turn his back to me, I had to give him a resounding kick. That completed the whole episode. But if Ananya had tried to come up directly to my flat, I would have welcomed him by saying that the ants are more imaginative than the fire. The point is, why should he go to a wrong address, just because somebody gave it to him? Are you feeling sleepy?

"No, go on. I am scared".

"Scared?"

"Yes".

"If you separate me from my flesh, blood and marrow, you are certain to feel terrified. Obviously you will feel scared if you see me dead. Just try to see me both alive as well as dead. Maybe you will get something from it".

"Rajat was saying that an elderly friend of his, Niharda, was terrified when he saw the breakdown of the way hospitals function".

...red radish, buttocks, backside, carpet, chicken pox

"Shikha's brother-in-law died because of a wrong operation".

...ashshaora, haritoki, a planked floor

"The son of your colleague could not be traced for the last five months".

...ashshaora, haritoki, a planked floor

"They are fed heavy doses of politics and religion, and people are also happily devouring this".

... red radish, buttocks, carpet, chicken pox

"Communalism is on the rise".

...headmaster, prawn, chanachur

"Sleeping?"

"No, one rainy night..."

"Then?"

"The fire is more imaginative than the ants".

"That sounds good".

"When the clouds enter Patal, the legs grow increasingly itchy".

"Are you saying something?"

"I am trying to say something without saying anything".

We fall asleep.

Next morning we are woken up by a police officer. Sitting on my only sofa he says, "I thoroughly enjoyed your words, sir, really, headmaster, prawn, chanachur". And he laughs as if someone had mercilessly tickled him.

I circle him twice. Then, bringing my face close to his I inhale the stink of his body, a stink which comes from the constant handling of putrefying corpses.

The police officer says, "This is the smell of genuine foreign scotch whisky, my dear man".

"Right".

"I want to inspect your bedroom".

Pramita stands at a distance, her eyes reflecting her terror, shielding Tinni behind her.

"Have you got orders to inspect my bedroom?"

"Orders? What orders? I just want to see your bedroom. You know what the times are like these days?"

"What do you want to see?"

"I just want a look," the police officer advances towards my bedroom. "Your bedroom walls have a very pleasant colour"

"The colour that you see is not really **the** colour of the wall".

The officer turns his head towards me. "Are you acting fresh with me? Do you know what I can do to you? How dare you joke, saying that the colour of the wall is not really the colour of the wall?"

"I am not joking at all.Maybe I can explain... Do you see the krishnachura tree below? The color of its blossoms are reflect on the wall giving it an altogether different shade".

"Arre! Really are right. It had me completely fooled. That tree must be felled tomorrow. Now tell me, what is the height of your ceiling from the floor?"

"It is not more than the usual height".

"So, what is your height?"

"You can see for yourself".

"No, I want to hear it from you".

"Five seven".

The police officer looks up at the ceiling fan, "Very beautiful".

"What?"

"Your wife and daughter".

"The flies from the oven alight on the cheeks and the flies from the cheeks are snapped up by the cat!"

"That sounds so lyrical".

"Really?"

"I mean, it is like a song. The flies from the oven alight on the cheeks and the flies from the cheeks are snapped up by the cat. If you sing it in tune, it will sound even nicer".

"One night, rain..."

The officer is excited, "Yes, go ahead".

"One night rain, a lot of rain, the juice-filled fruits are dry, birds fly, their feet pointing downward, their spines ramrod..."

"It sounds beautiful, tell me more".

"Water crocodiles collect the colour blue at the root of the banyan tree as they yawn; the water-borne moss against the mountain face flaps its wings and chaffs its knees..."

"Really, this is very beautiful. Your meaningless words are beginning to intoxicate me".

"Why don't you take off your cap and scratch your bald head once? It will make you feel even better".

The officer takes off his cap, scratches his head, and sighs in pleasure. "Brilliant!"

"There is vulture shit on your head".

"Every now and then I have to go to the morgue. I have pet vultures close to the morgue. It must be their shit". He bursts into laughter. "Fact is not all corpses in the morgue can be disposed off properly. We also do not always hand over the corpses to the next of kin".

"How do you live with dried bird shit on your head?"

"Oh, my dear sir, we too are types of vulture".

"Are we?"

"Are you scared?"

"Why don't you take a cigarette? It makes you look a little human".

The police officer lights a cigarette, inhales deeply and blows out some smoke. "You have three ashtrays, don't you? One in this room, one in the bedroom and one in the bathroom".

"Headmaster, prawn, chanachur"

"You know, I have to keep tabs on you".

"Headmaster, prawn, chanachur".

"But you are more dangerous at home. Can you guess why?".

"Oh! My poor birds, don't go into the water, float away like the clouds..."

"Look here, I am beginning to fall in love with your kind of talk, but I have to go take charge of the corpses soon. Something of that nature is about to happen".

"What is stopping you from fishing the child out of the manhole?"

"Oh, there's a problem in it. Unfortunately I cannot tell you everything about it. Suffice to say my dear friend, it is a conspiracy against the police. So long, I am leaving now. I will come again".

"Headmaster, prawn, chanachur".

The officer hoots wildly, beside himself with joy, at my rejoinder. He walks out and I slam the door behind him forcefully, as if kicking him in the butt.

"Did he say he will come again," Pramita asks in a frightened voice.

"Certainly he will". I do not care to think about the stark implications of such conversations. Because I am helpless.

I open the door and step out.

"Where are you going?" Pramita thrusts her face out of the door.

"In the shade of the sun in the netherworld".

"Why are you going?"

"Because I am not able to do anything".

"When will you return?"

"I will be back soon. I will be back because I will not be able to do anything. And then I'll go again".

"What are you thinking of?"

"Some meaningless things, like ..." I say, illustrating my point by lapsing into silence.

I go down the stairs. But, at the bottom, right in front of me, I find another flight of stairs. Climbing up the new staircase, I find myself at the door of my bedroom. A funny way to return to base, I think, feeling my senses come alive.

About the author

Afsar Ahmed (1959 —) Afar Ahmad did his M.A. in Bengali from Calcutta University. He began his literary career as a short story writer but later took to novel writing. He is working with the West Bengal Bengali Akademi. He has received several awards. About his literary aims he said: 'I wanted to convey through my story that basic human rights cannot be violated in a democratic society'.

Works:

Short stories: *Afsar Ahmeder Galpa* (1989); *Shreshtha Galpa* (1999); **Novels:** *Gar-Garasti* (1982); *Basabas* (1988); *Alowkik Divrat* (1999); **Children's book:** *Bagnaner Bhoot* (1996).

Questions

1. What is the story about?
2. What is the source of humour in the story?
3. Who is the narrator of the story?
4. What part does insanity play in it?

9
THE COMPROMISE*

Vijaydan Detha

Translation : Shyam Mathur

As age advances, the events in one's life get buried under the ashes of time. However, there may be an incident of the distant past that does not get extinct and is found glowing as before under the ash. Today I am known as a writer but at that time I was just a reader. No sooner did I find a book worth reading than I would guzzle it through my eyes. I was studying probably

* Source: Sahitya Akademi and the author

in the eighth [or ninth?] class. I used to live in my own house but I frequented the Charan Hostel for the pleasure of meeting my friends. Generally human nature differs from one individual to another but Aaskaran of village Ransi had a typically whimsical nature — and a queer countenance. A round, smooth head, like a water melon, topped with a long tuft of hair, a flabby body, a round face full of pimples. Small and narrow eyes as if they were fitted there after making incisions. A loner, he had few contacts. Even when someone talked to him he hardly spoke. He was always caught in his own idiosyncrasies. Whenever he wished he used to keep a mirror in front of him and talked for long to his own image in the mirror, making gestures with his hands. His companions often teased him but he did not pay any heed to them, as if it were a stone that was addressed.

Aaskaran used to be the topic of discussion in all the rooms of the hostel and I had collected a lot of amusing material out of these discussions. He used to stare at his own face in the mirror as if that was another boy and talked to it freely as if talking to a friend.

Once he picked up the mirror, dusted it and kept it on the table. He himself sat on a chair opposite to it and for a long time gazed at his image. Then he said in a mumble, "Tell me, why did you fail in the quarterlies this time?"

Wearing a long face he replied in a feeble voice, "I'm not the only one who failed. More than half of the boys in my class failed".

The fellow gave a stern look and said in a harsh tone, "Let the others go to hell. What've you to do with them?"

"One should be aware of one's means. You don't know the kind of hardships that your family is facing in order to pay for your schooling. They don't even eat properly. And on your part, you are not the least bothered".

"The question papers were difficult".

"Were they difficult for you alone? How did some others pass?"

"I do work quite hard but I get fever at the very mention of examination. I forget whatever I know".

"After coming to the town you have begun to talk a lot. You can make your own life happy only if you study seriously. Now listen carefully, you will have to bear the consequences yourself if you make a mistake in future".

On another occasion, when he got up late in the morning, he felt very bad. He rushed to the mirror and without even wiping it began to talk to it with clenched teeth.

"Why did you return so late last night? Must've gone to a movie".

"Whenever I get a little late you suspect me of having been to a film show".

"Then you tell me the truth. Where did you go?"

Looking ruffled, he thought for a while. Then he said, "I had gone to see Masiji. Inspite of my refusing, she didn't allow me to leave without having dinner there. After dinner I dozed off for a short while but I ran straight for the hostel as soon as I came out. If you don't believe me, you may...".

"Believe you? I have found out everything. My Lord had gone to Charbhuja talkies with Karnidan and Rambaksh. So many times I have advised you not to keep company of such rogues. Are you trying to tell me stories?"

"If you like I can put them before you!"

Hearing this, the face of the image in the mirror turned pale. He lowered his eyes and looked sideways. Then he held his ears with both hands and said, "I made a grave mistake yesterday. I'll never do such a thing again. Excuse me this time".

"On the contrary you will get further spoiled if you are excused. We can get assured that you'll be fine for some time if you get a good spanking. You are so shameless that you have no concern for anything. The kinspeople in the village are worse than enemies. If they had their way they would make us leave our village. The family have pinned all their hopes on you'.

"Their sufferings may bear fruit if you can somehow do your law. Otherwise not only will it frustrate their hopes, it will put you to no less trouble. For you it will be the same sickle and the same grass. The same axe and the same wood. The same plough and the same sun. The same sweat, the same hot winds and the same hut of thatch. If you don't study properly and sincerely, you will stew in your own juice".

His small eyes widened and he looked into the mirror, "What's there to feel offended about? When I tell you something for your own good you find it bitter. Time will fly swiftly. You'll have endless troubles afterwards"

Suddenly, to his surprise, the face of a donkey appeared in the mirror. He turned back hesitatingly to see if a donkey stood

there. He did not find any. Turning to the mirror again he could see his own face clearly. Pimples all over. Next he saw his ears growing long like those of a dog.

He closed his eyes and when he opened them again he found the ears in their original shape. He held them by the lobes and pulled them repeatedly. He had such hallucinations quite often. He would then scratch the inside of his ears with the little fingers and pick some ear wax out.

Once, his otherwise small eyes appeared widened after he consumed some country liquor. The mirror showed the face of a stranger. He stared at it and said, 'Who are you, man?'

"I'm what you are".

"You are what I am!"

"Yes".

"Then why couldn't I make out?"

"You'd know it better. May be the colour of the eyes has changed due to drinking".

Have you drunk again/

"Not me, you've drunk".

After the conversation he sat for a while holding his head in both hands. Then he somehow gathered courage to look again at the mirror. To his surprise he saw two horns grown on his head. He could not bear the sight and at once rose from the chair. He took

a beedi and the match-box that he used to keep hidden and returned to the chair. He lighted the beedi on the thinner end and had a few quick puffs. The rings of smoke blurred the mirror. This time the head of a goat appeared. Long, drooping ears and pointed horns. Perhaps the tone of the mirror had changed. He felt exasperated, lay down on the bed and did not look into the mirror for a long time after that.

One day he returned infuriated. He unlocked the room, kicked the door open and threw his books on the bed.

He turned the mirror in front of himself and sat on the chair. There was a thick layer of dust on the mirror. A face sprang up in it. As he chanced upon the same he said, "These days my Lord has started chasing girls! I think it's all over now. Tell me whatever is the truth. Otherwise you will be in deep trouble".

"I don't have the sole right for using the public roads. So many people walk on them. Who all can I keep an account of?"

"But you have cared purposely for someone in particular and made a chase. That's the reason I am so annoyed. Earlier I never made a complaint. When did you learn this new art? You shameless one! The parents trusted you when they sent you **here** And this is what you have done. Yet you dare to show me **your** face, you ungrateful one!"

"If that's so, why do you look at me? Even I am **afraid to face** you but what can I do if you don't agree".

"You, impudent one! You dare to speak so much before me! Beware, I shall pull out your tongue if you talk too much".

Saying this he began to bite his lips in anger.

Then he dusted the mirror by flipping the duster over it a couple of times. The image started to stare back at him.

What an audacity!

"If there is any moral sense in you then you should be ashamed of yourself. Your people at home are somehow living on just whey and coarse meals and yet they send ghee and rich sweets for you. And on your part you are belying their dreams by running after girls".

"Even I have my dreams".

"What sort of dreams?"

"Dreams like dreams are. Dreams proper to my age".

"Then what will be the fate of the dreams of your family?"

"That they should know".

"Don't you know anything?"

"No, I don't care about anything other than my own dreams".

"You, rascal! Where did you learn such things?"

"They come by themselves, one doesn't have to learn them".

"Will you stop this nonsense or should I give you a couple of slaps?"

He got enraged and began to slap his cheeks in quick succession. He **cheeks** turned red and the eyes brimmed with tears. He did

not have the courage to look in the eye any more. For a while he sat bowing his head. Then he raised it again and glanced at the mirror with half-closed eyes. The cheeks were still red, a few pimples having burst.

At last, he lost his patience and issued a final warning.

"I'll twist your neck if I find you chasing girls again".

There was no reply this time.

Looking into the eyes of the image, he sat before it until the face in the mirror slowly dissolved. Then he rose reluctantly. "How strange! I can't see my face in the mirror," he muttered.

He rushed out of the hostel like a mad man and brought two piences of confectionery from the halwai shop.

As he sat in front of the mirror again he could see his face in it clearly. The redness of the cheeks had considerably reduced.

"Now stop fretting. Here, have some sweets".

"I won't eat anything. Why did you beat me?"

"Well that was nothing. I'll beat you more if **you misbehave** again".

"Then why this show of affection? Beat me till your hands are tired".

"Now take this and eat it or else you'll get beaten again".

The image in the mirror made a long face and said, "No, I won't ever eat it. Do whatever you like".

"You idiot! I'm taking all this trouble for your good".

"Are your good and mine two different things?"

"Aren't you different from me?"

"No we are one. It's this mirror that's the root of all problems. Take my word. I brought the sweets to please you. Here, have it".

"Please break this mirror first and throw it away. I shall never disobey you after that".

"So, do you promise that?"

"Yes, I do promise".

Only God knows as to what kind of a madness descended upon him that he broke the mirror into small pieces, threw them out and ate the sweets fondly.

After that day whenever there was an occasion to eat sweets he never showed any reluctance. From that very day the two had made a solid compromise.

It is the miracle of the same compromise that in spite of his being a humble Station Officer in the police, people estimate his assets in many lakhs.

About the author

Vijay Dan Detha (1926 —) Vijay Dan Detha was born on 1st September 1926 in a village called Borunda in Jodhpur district of

Rajasthan.. Being a member of the Charan caste, writing and reciting poetry was a tradition at home. His father and grandfather were both connoisseurs in the art of conversation and were held in high esteem in the village.

He began to write in Hindi but later switched to Rajasthani. In 1960, he along with Komal Kothari, founded the Roopayan Sansthan for fostering folk literature. He brought out a unique 14-volume collection of Rajasthani folk stories called *Bataan ri Phulwari* (A Garden of Folktales). In 1974, he won the first ever award for Rajasthani literature, given by the Sahitya Akademi for the tenth book of this collection. He has also re-written folktales. Besides this Detha has written original stories in Rajasthani, which he later translated into Hindi. All India fame came to him with the publication of *Duvidha va Anya Kahaaniyan* in Hindi, which was later translated into English as *The Dilemma and Other Stories*. The film *Paheli* (2005) was based on a folktale. Mani Kaul had made a film on this very folktale in 1973 also.

Detha has made a signal contribution to the development of Rajasthani literature. He writes in Marwari, one of the four major varieties of Rajasthani spoken in his area.

Works:

Bataan ri Phulwari, 14 parts (1960-76); *Duvidha va Anya Kahaaniyan*, trans. into English as *The Dilemma and Other Stories* (1979) by Ruth Vanita; *Chaudhrain ki Chaturai* [The Cleverness of the Chaudhri's Wife] (1996); *Ujaley ke Musahib* [The Friend of Light] (2000); *Antaraal* [Interval] (1998); *Maha Milan* [The Great Union] (1996); *Mero Dard na Janey Koi* [None knows my pain] (1998); *Pratishodh* [Revenge] (2002); *Lajvanti* (2001); *Rukh* [Tree] (1987).

Glossary

Charan: The name of the community in Rajasthan and Gujarat / the members of which composed and sang encomiums of their rulers.

Questions

1. Discuss the contemporary relevance of 'The Compromise'.
2. Is the story an allegory? If so, in what way?

10

REQUIEM (Khasi)*

(Remembering Meri)

Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih

Translation : The poet

"The Moving Finger writes: and, having writ
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all thy tears wash out a word of it."
Omar Khayyam

I

The moans that floated
into the still autumn nights
were borne by the cold winds
onto the season of carols.

I heard them nightly,
beating against the window panes
like disembodied tenebrios
pleading to be let in.

I heard them as I went to sleep
and heard them as the rooster
sounded his first call to the sun.

I heard them as the clocks
summoned school boys to their texts
and heard them as the muezzin
loosed his azaan into a murky air.

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* Source : Sahitya Akademi, 197

What was wrong with Meri?

Her very name calls upon God to protect
but there she was moaning
as naturally as a sleeper snoring.
No doctor came....

And finally, only two titanic tarantulas,
one black, the other with a crimson chest,
crept with slow hairy steps, like skulkers
of the night, and hauled her off
to their invisible lair.

II

Love broke into loud lamentations.
The mother cried for divine explanations.
Mourners swarmed her death-bed.

A tent was erected, the couryard illuminated.
A tearful vigil was kept up
for two consecutive nights.
Packs of cards were bought
reconteurs joked, sympathisers guffawed.
Her body was bathed and scented.
Utensils were rented.
She was dressed in her favourite clothes
adorned with her favourite trinkets.
A funeral feast was hosted.
Church elders were invited.
The cortege assembled.
Prayers were offered.
Kwai in dishes was ordered.

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* Areca-nut taken together with betel-leaf and lime.

Sermons were shouted.
Gossips were floated.
Palms were read.
Tea and biscuits were distributed.
Then, her sudden demise was sadly lamented:

such a young girl
such a sweet girl
such promise....

But the eschatologists offered some comfort.
They were happy she went so peacefully.

About the author

Nongkynrih, Kynpham Sing (1964 —) Khasi poet. Born on 4th April 1964 in Cherrrapunji in the East Khasi Hills district of Meghalaya, he taught as a lecturer of English in Sankardev College Shillong and edited the English daily *Apphira* during 1994-96. He is now Reader in English at NEHU, Shillong. He has published two books of poetry in English: *Moments* (1992) and *The Sieve* (1992) and three in Khasi. He has also translated ten books for children into Khasi. His poetry has been widely published and anthologized.

His poetry is wide-ranging in its themes. He uses irony very effectively as a means of making satirical comments. He was awarded a 'Fellowship for Outstanding Artists 2000' from the Government of India, as well as three bursaries for Khasi texts from the Government of Meghalaya. He also received the first North-East Poetry Award in 2004 from the North-East India Poetry Council, Tripura.

Some of his poems have been translated into Welsh, Swedish and several Indian languages while others are being studied for the

MA programme in English in NEHU and the Nagaland University, Kohima.

The poem 'Requiem' is a dirge on the death of a young woman called Meri.

Glossary

Omar Khayyam (d.1123) Persian poet, mathematician and astronomer: Known for his *rubais* [quatrains] that meditate on the mystery of existence. The quatrains were translated and adapted by Edward Fitzgerald and published as *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1859) in which he concentrates on the pleasures of the fleeting moment.

Muezzin: a Muslim crier who calls the faithful to the prayer at fixed times from a minerat.

azaan: the call for prayers

tarantulas: a large hairy tropical spider

skulker: to skulk is to move stealthily especially in a cowardly way.

cortege: a funeral procession

eschatological: the part of theology that is concerned with death and final destiny.

Questions

1. What is the central theme of the poem?
2. Comment on the images used in the first section.

11

THE STONE SPEAKS IN THE FOREST (Kokborok)*

Chandra Kanta Murasingh

Translation : B.S. Rajkumar

The pretty golden deer grew restless
And suddenly came running
Into this amlaki grove
Looking for a mate.
The stone did not speak,
The deer will leave now.

One day the king arrived, lights played
He stood, with his foot
Pressing the forehead of the stone
And looking — to find which way
His prey was on the run
The weight of feet tormenting the hill
The stone was silent because
The pain was not his alone.

A man with a broken heart came today
Accompanied by his lady love
Sprayed dreams and tears on the stone
And went away rowing upstream.
They will build their home in the deep forest.

Water runs the *laidom* leaves quiver
Hachukrai drags his bamboo raft
There is a market downstream, on a sandy islet.
Wondering, who will respond now
The stone speaks in the forest
Bow and arrow in hand.

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* Source: The poet

About the author

Murasingh, Chandrakanta (1957 —) Born on the first of April 1957, Murasingh is a bilingual writer writing in both Kokborok and Bengali. A deeply sensitive poet, Murasingh is essentially concerned with what Wordsworth calls the 'humble and rustic life'. His world is the world of the commoner as against the urban elite.

He has published five collections of poems: *happing-Garingo Chibuksa Ringo* [The Python Calls in the Desterted Tong House], *Holong Kok Sa — O Bolong Bisino* [The Stone Speaks in the Forest], *Lok Chethuwang Lok* [Rise up Chethuweng Tree], *Pindi Watwi Pin* [Sprinkle the Rain] and *Rufei Ni Buduk Ani Nogo* [The Silver Pope in my Room]

A motif that is pervasive in 'The Stone Speaks in the Forest' is that of search.

Glossary

laidom: Wild and swinging leaf.

Hachukrai: Name of a villager.

Questions

1. Write a note on the central idea of the poem.
2. Explain the significance of the stone image.

12

THE LAST DREAM (Manipuri)* (Section 2)

Yumlembam Ibomcha Singh

Translation : Udayan Ghosh

Lifeless fields stretch scorched and dry
Like death in silence
The thick smoke of cowdung-cakes envelope
Up and down the *hollow* souled village.

2

Villagers have been carrying a coffin
Through the narrow village paths
Their hearts in their mouths
Not able to make anything out

Have no idea how many years ago
Must be quite a long time ago-
One day they had already cremated
The old woman on the funeral pyre
On this very bank near the village
All of her flesh and bones
They had consigned to the flames
But how she continued living
No one can understand

The old woman had been beckoning
Across the banks
O Villagers
O Villagers
That weak old woman looking at us

---

* Source : The poet and Sahitya Akademi

Across the wide of water
Yes she was the ancient goddess of the village
So
Swimming across the water
She was brought to her former home
That can't be
That can't be
She had died many years ago
She cannot live any longer
Villagers rush onwards
And put inside the coffin
The vaguely staring old woman
Thus brought her
Through the narrow village paths

Now
Building a funeral pyre
They have laid the coffin atop
Then
They had pressed her down
Piling up log after log on her
A hundred tongue of all consuming flames
Have sprung into life
Villagers watch in a circle

Useless old woman this is
Very wicked old woman this is
The village was laid waste by her
Hunting ghosts she had sent

The villagers say to one another
The old woman inside the fire becomes infuriated
Whenever a word is spoken of her
She flings out her hand

Plucking it out of the socket
At another word
The leg is flung out
Thus one after another
Eyes nose head every limb
In her body she flings out

Thus was cremated the old woman
Darkness of the night embraces
The wide forehead of the village
Sleeping they cannot change positions
In the early hours of daytime
Up and down the village
They are all having nightmares
The old woman looks on wet eyed.

About the author

Ibomcha, Yumlembam (1949 —) Manipuri poet. Born on 21st August 1949, Ibomcha has two collections of poems. They are: *Sandrembi Thoraklo Nahum Ponjen Sabige* (1973) and *Rajkumari Amasung Ucheck Machashing* (1992). He is also a short story writer having written as many as 90 short stories. His collection of short stories is entitled *Numitti Asum Thengjillaklee.* Besides, he has written prolifically for literary journals and newspapers. These included *Malaya* and *Meirik* (both journals) and *Poknapham,* a Manipuri daily. According to one estimate, 'if his writings that have appeared in literary journals and newspapers are compiled together then it will come out to be thirty volumes at least'.

Part of a group of 'Angry Young Poets', his early poetry was rebellious and protested against social oppression and violence of the 1980s. Later however his poetry took surrealistic overtones and he has used dream-like images.

Ibomcha received the Manipur State Kala Akademi Award in 1974 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1991.

The poem 'The Last Dream' is a poem on the theme of death. The death of an old woman is conflated with the burning of the goddess of the village and is used to comment on the contemporary human condition.

Works: As above.

Questions

1. What is your personal reaction to the poem? Pick out the lines that you like.
2. Who do the villagers kill and why?
3. Why is the old woman in the last line wet-eyed?

13

TREE AND THE SAGE (Punjabi) (Canto 1, Section 1-4)*

Haribhajan Singh

Translation : J.S. Rahi and Rita Chaudhry

1

I am a tree walking about within my house
I sleep and awaken too
I feel my own fragrance as well
Fruits also have I borne
Though oblivious of their names am I
Illusion has it always been
That it is a very precious fruit
And the illusion is not yet shattered.

---

* Source: Mrs. Kirpal Singh; J.S. Rahi and Rita Chaudhry

Like the tree have I strayed outdoors too
Yes, the people have freely sheltered in my shade
The immature stoned me at will
The lovers carved their signatures
Into the bark of my frame
Others used me as a cover
To meet their mundane needs.

The seasons have swept past me
Rains showered to give me bath
Winds played with my locks
Leaves too were torn apart
At times water oozed in saline drip
From my wounded shoots
I regret no season
Because over and over again
Have I resurged
Never did I know
When the fall hit me
And when I regained the green
Anew, afresh.

And now with my spring bloom
I wish to go somewhere else
"It has been too long a stay here
Now is the time to move on"

2

I am *no kalpa birchh*
Though some wishes I did grant
I offered shade to the sun-shrivelled
The evergreen fruits have I been bearing
Whoever had the nerve
Picked them and went away.

The fragrance of those who drifted
Has been reaching me
Never have I called back the departed
His fragrance lingers still
His fame continued trickling.

Never did I need to dote
The world has no dearth of the sun-shrivelled
The fruit pickers made daily trips
He who earns his bread from the depths of soil
Never knows want.

The soil may parch into fissures
But the rivers swell and swing within
The mother's treasures never shrink
The sun and I would awaken together
The sparrows chirping within my head
The wisdom of sages from far and near
Reached me through their beaks.

The pages of scriptures fluttering in the air
Would perch on my leaves
The songs of the sparrows
Weaving into my tresses
Became my way of life.

3

The tree am I in the cycle of lives
Rooted in the earth but free from bondage
It is neither a miracle
Nor an achievement divine
Nor even a calculating benevolence.

Fruits make me bow
And then I crave to be
Sweet
And linger on a palate.

When a bird's beak
Pecks at my fruit
I feel a pleasant little itching
With a joy akin to the mother suckling her child
The language of fruits and flowers has been mine
The fragrance filtering through my tender shoots
Is my utterance.

The shade spreads quietly in the courtyard
Some sun-scorched fellow walks in for rest
That is my joy
Picking gently at the sun-prickles
From his body
Is my natural task.

4

Most beauteous in the world is thirst
Precious, indeed very precious
The blazing heat of high summer
Inducing thirst
Sharp like the edge of a sword
Prickles in the body
The crimosn of deep desire
Flushing the forehead
The desire for shade of some distant tree
The vision breeds fascinating dreams
Of streams, waterfalls, and cascades
And awakens the thrill of descending undaunted
Without the rope and the chain

Into deep, very deep wells
Learning effortlessly
To pour down like the monsoons.

Those alone are the real wells
Which are free yet
Of the pulley and bucket
The waters that sustain
Are the ones
Whose single sip
Even at the risk of losing life
Feels dear like a kindred soul.

Thirst is to plunge headlong
Without learning to swim
Without a barge and a pole
Into the roaring whirlpools.

About the author

Haribhajan Singh (1920-2002) Punjabi poet, critic, teacher. Born in Lamding, in Assam, Haribhajan Singh had his education at Lahore and later at Delhi.He did his M.A. Hindi in 1948 and M.A. English in 1951. His Ph.D was on the study of Hindi poetry written in Gurmukhi script. Starting his career in school, he became a college teacher in Hindi and later switched over to Punjabi in 1968. becoming Professor of Punjabi in the University of Delhi. He retired as Head of the Depatment of Punjabi in 1984.

His first book of poems *Laasan* was published in 1956 which created a stir because of a distinct poetic style. The following year he published *Taar-Tupka*, a poetic play on atomic war. In

1962 came his collection of lyrics *Adhraini* in which his awareness of folklore made them different. In 1967 he published *Na Dhupe Na Chhaven* which proclaimed his modernism.He continued writing but his great work came out in 1995 as *Rukh te Rishi*.

He was also a significant literary critic and translator. Among his translations were Aristotle's *Poetics*, Sophocles' *King Oedipus and* a portion of *Rg Veda*.

His *Tree and the Sage* [Fukh te Rishi] is a long narrative poem based on his own experiences. In this poem he uses three signs — Rukh [tree], Man and Rishi [Sage] meditating on Man's destiny as also on the relations between Nature and Culture.

Canto one (Section 1-4) is meant for detailed study.

Works:

Laasan (1956), *Taar-Tupka* (1957), *Adhraini* (1962), *Na Dhupe Na Chhaven* (1967). *Sarak De Safe Ute* (1970), *Alph Dupehar* (1972), *Matha Deeve Wala* (1982), *Rukh Te Rishi* (1995) and also translated Aristotles Poetics and other works.

Haribhajan Singh, *Tree and the Sage* (tr. by Dr. J. S. Rahi and Rita Chaudhary) Ajanta Publishers, Delhi, 2000.

Glossary

Tree: The tree in the Indian subcontinent has been an existential necessity through the ages. It assumes philosophical significance

as it serves as a meeting place for the community and also provides shade for travelers in high summer.

Kalpa birkhh: Kalpa Vriksh-a tree that granted whatever one asked it.

Questions

1. Give a summary of Canto 1 of the poem *Tree and the Sage*.
2. Discuss Haribhajan Singh's growth as a poet.
3. Comment on the writer's use of the image of Kalpa brikhh.
4. Pick out the lines from the poem that you particularly like. Also ask yourself why you like them.

14
THE STARE (Hindi)*

Raghuvir Sahay

Translation : The poet

Today's lesson: Common facts about death.
There are several, note !
Death does not come to all of us in the same manner
nor do the dead become equal in death
for they were not so before.
The body is the residue of struggle
incorporating in itself one battered eating bowl,
one soiled hair comb and the breakage within
the only element to escape is a cry

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* Source: Mrs. Vimleshwari Sahay

which in essence, is an undetermined internal matter
still under study.
In the end, we send it for printing.
Not the corpse but the cry--
In the very end it is turned out as a poem in a
native language
meant to be rendered into the world-wide English
language.

What were the words on my lips when I died.
You seem to know them better than I.
You wrote: I had said 'Help'
May be I had said 'Liberty'
now that I am dead I cannot remember.

When a living literate people pass through
a crisis of their own
with the object of giving direction to the crisis,
in a tribe of half-dead illiterates
--you know how jocular the dead can be if they wish--
Yet I spare you the question:
What makes one hundred fat heads hang--
The load of wisdom?
The weight of reverence?
The burden of shame?
No, I would continue to stare
at the one hundred bald pates in silence.
The fixed stare of my dead machinegun.

About the author

Raghuvir Sahay (1929-1990) Hindi poet, journalist. Born in Lucknow in 1929. Raghuvir Sahay did his M.A.English in 1950. He began his career **in journalism** in 1949 when he became

Assistant Editor of Daily *Navjeevan*. Later he went over to *Prateek* and then to Daily *Navbharat Times* and rose to be the editor of *Dinman* in 1968. He was also associated with All India Radio.

Raghuvir Sahay published his first poem in 1947. His long poem *Sayankaal* came out in 1948 in *Prateek*, a known magazine of those days. He published his first collection of poetry in 1960 — *Sirion Par Dhoop Mein*. It also included short stories and essays. His next collection of poems was entitled *Atmahatya ke Virudhh* published in 1967.Then came out *Haso Hanso Jaldi Hanso* in 1975 which included the poem 'Taktaki' and which satirized the establishment and the situations that led to the emergency. Here he wrote of the fear in people's minds. Altogether he published five volumes of poetry. His first short story collection *Rasta Udhar Hai* came out in 1972. He visited USSR, UK and Germany in 1970. He translated *Macbeth* in 1979. He received the Sahitya Akademi award in 1984 for *Log Bhool Gaye Hain*.

'The Stare' [Taktaki] was written in 1972 and was published the same year in *Dharmayug*. It is a satiric poem in which the speaker is a dead person who is more alive than the living.

Works:

Sirion Par Dhoop Mein (1960), *Atmahatya Ke Virudh* (1967), *Hanso Hanso Jaldi Hanso* (1975) [Taktaki is included in this collection], *Kuchh Patte Kuchh Chithhian* (1989), *Ek Samae Thha Sahay* (1995); Short Story: *Rasta Idhar Se Hai* (1972).

Glossary

The fixed stare of my dead machinegun: Note the striking image of the stare of a dead man

who can do little else than only stare. In this he is like a machinegun that remains silent or dead.

Questions

1. What is your personal response to 'The Stare'? State the reasons for it.
2. Which aspect of Raghuvir Sahay's poems do you like?
3. Discuss the satire in Raghuvir Sahay's poetry with reference to the poem 'The Stare'.

15
THE MOON (Kashmiri)*

Dina Nath Nadim

Translation : J.L. Kaul

The moon looked like a pancake as she rose
Behind the hills. She looked dull as a robe
of pampore tweed worn off theadbare and torn
at the collar-band out of which peep the scars
on a marble breast, and pale as a counterfeit
silver coin which robs a coolie of her mite.

The moon looked like a pancake and
The hills looked hungry; and the clouds put out
The fire in westen skies. But in the east
The wood nymphs lit the moon's cooking stove
In whose soft glow shoots of the steaming rice
Seemed to spring upon the hills. I whispered
Hope to my hungry belly, and gazed and gazed
With hungry looks, at the moon-flooded sky.

---

* Source: Sahitya Akademi

About the author

Dina Nath Nadim (1916-1994) Kashmiri poet. Born on March 1916 in Srinagar, Dina Nath lost his father early. The entire burden fell on his mother who remained his best friend and teacher till his death. Poverty and weak health troubled him all his life.

He passed his matriculation examination in 1929 from a Government School where he formed a lifelong friendship with Ghulam Hassan Arif who later became his mentor. His economic condition forced him to quit S.P. College Srinagar and he graduated as a private student giving private tuitions to needy students. He rose to be the Principal of Lal Ded Memorial School, Srinagar.

He was inspired by three Russian writers, Gorky, Checkhov and Mayakovsky. He became a member of the Communist Party of India in 1950 and joined the Progressive Writers' Association of which he was the General Secretary for some time. He won several awards.

Nadim was inspired to write Kashmiri operas or dance dramas after watching one such performance in Peking. He wrote *Bombur ta Yambarzal* [The Bumble bee and the Narcissus] after he saw the classic Chinese opera *The White-haired Girl* in Peking in 1953.When the Russian leaders Bulganin and Khrushchev saw the opera in Srinagar they congratulated Nadim for his great achievement. He wrote the next opera, *Heemal ta Naagirai* in collaboration with Noor Muhammad Roshan.His *Dal Bathy Bathy* [Along the Shores of the Dal Lake] expresses the pain of the dispossessed. His third full-length opera *Vitasta on JHELUM* came out in 1977.

Shikil Kul won him the Sahitya Akademi award. *Chaary Kath* [The Tale Told by an Idiot] also came out in 1977. Nadim also experimented with the Japanese Haiku form.

'The Moon' [Zoon] deals with the romantic subject with a startlingly new realism.

Works:

Shihi Kul (The Shady Tree) (1960); Opera: *Bombur ta Yambarzal* (The Bumble-bee and the Narcissus) (1953), *Heemal ta Naagirai* and *Vitasta* (1977).

Glossary

Pancake: something like a chapaati or poori.

Questions

1. What is new about Nadim's treatment of the Moon?

16
THE MOMENT OF COURAGE (Dogri)*

Padma Sachdev

Translation : Iqbal Masud

To the right of our hill
There is a well
Shining, brimful.
Last year summer covered it with
The green of mango blossoms.
It tempted a calf
Which fell in and drowned.

---

* Source: Sahitya Akademi

Since then
No one drinks
of that well.
At night like a thief
I bathe in it.
I cup my hands and drink.
But love is not quenched
Nor thirst.
In the deep dark of the well
There are wistful shadows waiting
For the maidens who hung
A rope on its nail
But never came back to draw water.
The dark of the well
Longs for that moment of courage
When in full sight of all
My hands will stretch out
For a drink.

About the author

Padma Sachdev (1940 —) Dogri, Hindi poet, writer, translator. The first Dogri poet of national stature, Padma Sachdev as a young girl used to add stanzas of her own composition to the folk songs she sang. Nobody realized the trick played by her and she was too shy to claim the verses to be her own.

Padma Sachdev has married twice, first to a fellow Dogri poet Ved Pal Deep but the marriage failed. She then married Surinder Singh, the younger of the Singh Bandhu classical singers.

She won the 1971 Sahitya Akademi award for her first collection of poems *Meri Kavita, Mere Geet* written in 1969.Then followed *Neherian Gallan* (1983) and *Pota Pota Nimbal* (1988). She has

written poems, novels, short stories and an autobiography in Hindi also.

She has also translated from Dogri into Hindi and from Hindi into Dogri.

Besides the Sahitya Akademi award she has won the Soviet Land Nehru award and other awards.

Early in life Padma discovered the charm of the Dogri language and its treasure of folk poetry and this confirmed her conviction that one should write poetry only in one's mother tongue. Her desire to introduce Dogri to a wider audience has encouraged her to write Hindi prose. 'The Moment of Courage' is a sensitive poem about a village well in which a calf has got drowned. This has resulted in everyone avoiding visiting the well for drawing water, for bathing and for a drink. The moment of courage is the moment when the poet will dare to extend her hands to it for a drink of water.

Works:

A Handful of Sun and Other Poems, New Delhi, Sahita Akademi. Meri *Kavita, Mere Geet* (1969); also got awards for *Naherian Galian* (1983) and *Pota Pota Nimbal* (1988); has published three other collections of Dogri poems. She writes in Hindi also.

Questions

1. Do you like this poem? If so, why?
2. What themes does the poet deal with in *The Moment of Courage*?

MOTHER SERIOUS (Telugu)*

Kondepudi Nirmala

Translation : K. Damodar Rao

I will give a reply
to your unasked question.
Strangely you all seem
expecting it.
I have no wish to live
any longer, dear son!
With hollow words of
empty concern
with loveless strokes,
you gave me a gulp of water.
Quite unfeeling your hands are!
My life-flow
rolling down my eyes —
"She may not go now
shh! She will hear! Be silent!"
No need to move,
to open my eyes.
My ears like twin-boats
carry the weight of
your words?
Remember?
You were a small boy
and I breasted you
even in your sleep.
Now I will give my reply
I have no wish to live
any longer!

---

* Source: Sahitya Akademi

I hear the sounds of
many foot-steps
running here and there.
In stark day-light
I open my eyes
piercing through
layers of darkness.
How many figures?
You ask me to tell
them by name.
Like the dot
in a question-mark
I am slipping down memory lane
And you give me
a brain-teaser!
You better ask this
dream-sucking pillow, this
tear-smelling heart
They give you a big desert on a platter.
Am I losing my eye-sight?
Memory?
Life?
Do you know
how real hell it is
if ears are alive?
Now I feel
my life,
even if eased like the
cotton that touches the navel blood
of an infant,
under the weight of my ears,
will break down.

About the author

Nirmala, Kondepudi (1958 -) Telugu feminist poet. Nirmala had her education at Vijayawada. She discontinued her study of journalism in Osmania University to become a working journalist and take up creative writing. She was inspired by the veteran Gunturu Seshendra Sarma, the late Devarakonda Balagandhara Tilak, Aloorui Bairagi and the renowned bhaava poet Devulapalli Krishna Sastri.

Poetry, she believes, is powerful weapon. The shape of the weapon could change but never the target.

The poem chosen for your study 'Mother Serious' was first published in the poetry column Saudamani in *Udayan Weekly on 1st December 1989.* She has published four collections so far.

Works:

Sandhigdha Sandhya [Hesitant Twilight] (1988), *Nadiche Gaayalu* [Walking Wounds] (1990), *Baadha Sapta Nadi* [Pain-accursed River] (1994), *Multinational Muddu* [Multinational Kiss] (2000). Has one several awards including Kumaran Asan award for her dynamic writing in 1990.

Glossary

Dot in the question mark: at the bottom

Questions

1. Write a note on the significance of the title of the poem.
2. 'Ssh! She will hear! Be silent!' Comment on the use of the quotation marks.
3. Who is the speaker of the poem? Are there more speakers than one?

18

KITCHEN*

Vimala

Translation : V.V.B. Rama Rao

This kitchen: how wonderful!
wafting aromas,
how it makes mouths water,
Like an open shop of sweets.

It breathes spices,
incense from the *pooja* room,
wakes in the morning
to the noise of churning butter,
of, vessels being scrubbed.

The earthen oven gets a fresh much-wash,
decks herself for the burning.
from the small change
in the box of spices and seasoning

We bought ourselves sweets,
played house, played at being cooks.
With jaggery and lentils.
It was a magic world.
The kitchen snared my childhood,
remained a spell, a passion.

Wisps of childhood shadows lifted,
it's no longer a playground.

---

* Source: Dr. V.V.B. Rama Rao

They taught me 'kitchenness' here,
my shaping started here.
Mother, Grand mother, all the mothers
in the house, they say,
Learned their motherhood here.

Our kitchen now is a graveyard
with corpses of all kinds
tins, dishes, sacks.
It hangs there in the smoke,
clouds from damp firewood.

Fears, despair, silence, lurking there,
Mother floats like a spirit
she looks like the morning kitchen herself.
Her eyes ran out of tears long ago,
Her hands are worn out with endless scrubbing.
Look, she does not have hands any more.

She looks like a ladle, a bowl,
A piece of kitchen bric-a-brac.
Some times she looks like a flaming oven,
sometimes a trapped tigress
Restless, she paces the kitchen floor,
bangs pots and pans.

How easily, they say, with the flick of the ladle!
the cooking gets done
None comes this way, except
to eat.

My mother is empress of this kitchen empire,
But the name on pots and panes is my father's.

Fortunately, they said, I fell into a good kitchen:
gas stove, grinder, sink and tiles.
I make cakes and puddings,
not old-fashioned things like mother:
Still the name on everything is my husband's.

My kitchen wakes
to the whirr and hisses of the grinder,
the hiss of the pressure cooker.
I move like my modern kitchen;
a wind up toy.
My kitchen is like a workshop,
it's like butcher's shop with its babble.

Washing what has been washed endlessly
cooking and serving, cooking and serving,
scrubbing and washing
there's a kitchen in my dreams:
the smell of spices even in the jasmine,
Damn this kitchen.

Inhuman, it sucks our blood, robs us
of hopes and dreams,
a demon, a vulture
eating into us bit by bit all or lives.
Kitchen culture, Kitchen talk,
Reduced to kitchen maids and cooks

Let's smash these kitchens
for making ladle-wielding our duty.
No more names on kitchen things.
Let's uproot these separate stoves.

Our children are about to enter
these lonely kitchens.
Come, for their sake,
let's demolish
these kitchens now!

About the author

Vimala (b. 1963) was from a middle class family in Hyderabad. She was brought up in a fairly liberal environment where she was left to be mostly herself in matters of study, thinking etc. She was inspired by Marxist ideology. He father was active in the Telengana struggle. Right from her student days, Vimala had a flair for organization. She worked in student organizations.

She took to writing after her graduation in 1983. In 1986 she set to work to revive the Progressive Women's Organization. She was the editor of Vimochana, a women's rights journal for nine years. She was committed to the cause of emancipation and empowerment of women. She has been associated with Asmita, an organization of women for women's uplift. Her collection of poems Adavi Uppogina Raatri has made an intense impact with revolutionary fervour. The poem 'Digambara ooregimpu' (Procession of the naked) is a powerful indictment on patriarchal violence.

Works: Her collection of poems is called Adavi Uppogina Raatri.

Glossary

aroma: here, the sweet smell of cooking

earthen oven: mud *chula*, The 'ritual' of cooking used to begin with giving the mud 'oven' a cow-dung wash in traditional homes in the past.

snared: caught in a net or cage

scrubbing: washing the soot off the cooking vessels, laborious morning and evening chores for women

Questions

1. When was the kitchen 'wonderful' for the speaker of the poem?
2. What were the wisps of childhood shadows remembered in the poem?
3. What do you think of the expression 'kitchenness'?
4. Comment on the line: "it's no longer a play ground"
5. What is the positive suggestion made by the poet Vimala to save women?

19
I MET WALT WHITMAN YESTERDAY : AN INTERVIEW (Malayalam)*

K. Ayyappa Paniker

Translation : A.J. Thomas

1

Yesterday—or the day before—I met Whitman:
met Whitman talking aloud in solitude
about the populace.

---

* Source : Sahitya Akademi and A.J. Thomas

Casting his long shadow across Long Island
the poet-patriarch was counting waves;
each wave, a generation.
Each bore the semblance
of the American people.

Naked Whitman
    Hairy Body
    Grey Beard
    Sparkling eyes.

All other limbs
enveloped by the rocking mother sea.
Wailing seagull.
Lilacs blossoming forth.
Frenzied drum beats.

Hey, Whitman!
I call out.
My friend—the voice had drawn near--
look, he said,
Columbus' geographical error,
history's gain.

Vigorous handshake.
    Sturdiness.
    Squeeze of rough fingers.
Paniker, I knew you would come again.
I feigned surprise.
The rebirth of the human soul
is nothing new to me....

2

I met Walt Whitman yesterday
The poet-patriarch coming from Long Island,

stretching long hands,
weeds of thought entangled on his hairy person.

How many questions!

Why do your people
get away when they meet your people
as if they are not your people?
Do you prefer whites to blacks?
Have you assigned for others
the ironical humour in buying machinery here
talking all the while about
the glorious heritage of your ancient past?
Do you have in your land still
those sages, who,
eating only their silences,
counsel their rulers?

Have you gone in search of Himalayan caves,
you, who hurry now to Niagara?

Atom or Atman--
which of these do your scientists
strive after?

We both are preoccupied:

You and I have no time
to think of all these.

We are trying to go
faster than time.

The glow of
the Vedic culture of old;
Emerson, Thoreau, Martin Luther King and I
have cherished its sweetness, as countless others.

The earth here speaks of the same things to us.
Those who have ears do not listen.

Grasses, rivers, hills, clouds, woods, clouds,
woods, hills, rivers, grasses, hills, clouds and rivers,
woods, bridges, rails, airports and cars,
factories and telephones....
Come, let's walk up to the Pacific coast.

About the author

Ayyappa Panikar, K. (1930-2006) Malayalam poet, critic, teacher. Born in Kaavaalam, a small town situated amongst the idyllic backwaters of Kuttanad, Alappuzha district of Kerala, Ayyappa Panikar did his M.A. from Kerala University. He obtained his Ph.D. from Indiana University and did postdoctoral research at Yale and Harvard universities. He taught English at the Kerala University and retired as Head, Institute of English and Dean, Faculty of Arts of the University.

He has published four volumes of poetry in Malayalam--*Ayyappa Panikerude Krutika,* Volumes 1-4. His collections of poems in English translations are: *I Can't Help Blossoming* (2003), *Days and Nights* (2000), *Selected Poems* (1985) and *Kurukshetram* (1960).

He also has several collections of critical essays in Malayalam and English. Among other things he has edited *Kerala Kavita,* an

annual journal that has been known for publishing promising poets. The poem 'I met Walt Whitman — An Interview' is a dialogue poem based on his American experience.

He died on 6th August 2006.

Works:

Malayalam: *Ayyappa Panikerude Krutikal, Vols. I-IV*; English: *I Can't Help Blossoming* (2003), *Days and Nights* (2000), *Gotrayanam* (1990), *Selected Poems* (1985) and *Kurukshetram* (1960). Has also written critical essays in Malayalam and English. Has been Chief Editor of Medieval Indian Literature. Published by Sahitya Akademi. Has won several awards and Honours including the Padma Sri.

Glossary

Long Island: An area in New York

Frenzied drums: the image comes from Whitman's poetry.

Walt Whitman: American poet (1819-1892)

Emerson, Ralph Waldo: American philosopher and poet (1803-82)

Thoreau, Henry David: American writer (1817-62) best known for his book *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. (1854)

King, Martin Luther: Black Baptist minister and American civil rights leader (1929-68)

Populace: local inhabitants; the common people; masses

Semblance: outward appearance; resemblance.

Lilac: a shrub which has large sprays of purple, fragrant flowers. The lilac is a recurring image in Whitman's poetry; "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" is a famous poem by Whitman.

Atman: the Universal Soul, Absolute Reality or 'Parabrahmam' which Indian thought has projected over several millennia.

Questions

1. Evaluate Paniker as an innovator in form in the light of the present poem.
2. Critically analyse the poem, "I Met Walt Whitman Yesterday".
3. How is Whitman portrayed as a 'poet-patriarch' and why?
4. What are the peculiar situations in which an expatriate Indian finds himself/herself in the U.S., as described in the poem?
5. Bring out the paradoxes enumerated by Whitman in his questions.
6. Has Ayyappa Paniker succeeded in making the reader aware of the ironical situations we Indians are in, when encountering the U.S, as represented by Whitman and his questions?

20

'SRI RADHA (Oriya) (Sections 1 and 7)*

Ramakanta Rath

Translation : The poet

1†

The morning today
is somehow very different.
What impudence in the sunlight!
The wind's thoughts are wandering,
as though it has seen the long-banished lover;
living in disguise
in the neighbourhood.

Last night
was a night of terrible rain and thunder.
There were mountains of leaves and flowers.
I drew myself to myself,
afraid of the lightning's luminous assault
of my eardrums.

Maybe the darkness of the last night
fought a bloody battle in the ultimate moments
of its empire of silence or meaningless words.
The small residues of its existence
are already crumbling.

The morning today
tells me it shall take away all consciousness
from this life

---

* Source: The poet
For detailed study

and all the other lives I have yet to live.
It says all this in a strange language —
in words different from all the words I've known.

The river, and the forest across the river
no longer look the same.
How long can my sickly firmament
remain immutable?

Such tumult in the heart
is altogether new.
I do not know if
on a bend of my life
or of the path to the river
a discomfiture lies in ambush.
I do not know if a love
annulling all other loves
will suddenly arrive
and command my destiny of old age, disease and death
to stop and retreat to
wherever it came from.

7
When, for the first time,
I thought I'd touch you,
my hands froze .
There was darkness everywhere.
You, too, like each of my thoughts.
were lost in that darkness.
Before I could make up my mind
if I should go ahead and touch you, or if I should put it off and retreat,
my breathing almost ceased

as though I saw the river's onrush
towards where I stood,
as though the wind ceased in all the universe
and as though all my days hereafter would be filled
with the terror
of dreams materialising.

If I touched you,
you would be lost somewhere in my blood.
You would no longer walk behind me
with a flute in your hand.
You would no longer hide yourself
to look at me when I
came out of the river
with a wet saree draped on my body.
You would no longer be around
to lead my thoughts away
from the way this body of mind
must one day wither.

You would be nowhere.
The wind that dries my wet saree
would burn up my body.
I would be ready to listen, but
the river would stop speaking.
And as soon as I came near them,
birds would fly away.
Does looking unceasingly at oneself
always throw one
into a condition where nothing exists?
Does one then become, in course of time,
an immobilised vampire
inhabiting an inaccessible cave
and feeding on her own flesh?

So, in this condition then the best —
you forever standing near
and forever unreachable?
You forever tempting me to touch you,
and I dying
in a lifelong moment of indecision?

I then thought,
if you forever stood there,
near and yet far away,
I would someday come to believe
you had never belonged to me,
I did not belong to you, all you gave me
was the vision of an unreal image,
its eyes, lips, arms and the waist,
all unreal — like the rainbow.

I then collected
all half-formed desires,
joined them together,
rushed towards you like a gale
and entwined my fingers
in your fingers.

About the author

Rath, Ramakanta (1934 —) Poet, civil servant. Born at Cuttack, Ramakanta took the name of his foster parents Biswanath Rath and Durga Devi belonging to a village in Puri. He obtained his Master's degree in English in 1956 and joined the IAS where he rose to be the Chief Secretary of Orissa. After

retirement he became the President of the Sahitya Akademi. His reputation as a poet is based on his seven collections.

His *Saptam Ritu* got him the Sahitya Akademi award. But he is best known as the writer of *Sri Radha.*

Sri Radha is a long poem having 61 sections. They could also be read as independent poems. Though named Sri Radha, he denies that his Radha has anything to do with the Radha as portrayed in literary or mythical tradition.

Works:

Kete Dinara (*Long Ago*, 1962), *Aneka Kothari* (*Many Rooms*, 1967), *Sandighdha Mrigaya* (*The Dubious Hunt*, 1971), *Saptam Ritu* (*The Seventh Season*, 1977), *Sachitra Andhara* (*Darkness Illustrated*, 1982), *Sri Radha* (1985), and *Sri Palataka* (1996).

Glossary

***Sri Radha* :** About the connection between the mythical Radha and the Radha of his poem Ramakanta Rath says "I don't think *Sri Radha* is a myth-based work. After two or three poems, the rest of the poems were written on their own and while writing those, Radha was not in my imagination. My objective, then, was to note the feelings of shock and anxiety of an individual, who was perplexed, while searching for the proper place of his endless love in this mortal world.... The Radha I have taken efforts to characterize,

is not the Radha portrayed in literary and religious tradition. She is the beloved whose love-lorn feelings are so deep that every aspect of her life unconnected with love, even death remains irrelevant".

Questions

1. Summarize the what the poet says in section 1 and section 7?
2. Which lines are images do you find particularly striking?

21
JUST ONCE TRY (Bengali)*

Shakti Chattopadhyay

Translation : Sibnarayan Ray+

Just once try to love —
You will see stones drop and scatter, in the river, from the heart of fish,
Stones and stones and the waters of the river and the sea
blue stones turn red, red stones blue
just once try to love.

It's good to have some stones in your heart — the cry is then echoed back.
Since all roads are slippery the stones may be spread on them one after another
like the naked use of poetry, or waves, or the image of the goddess of Kumortuli with all her sparking brocade and tinsel.
I can reach and see the distant doors of the pale star of autumn.

---

* Source: Sahitya Akademi
+ Meenakshi Mukherji

It's good to have some stones in your heart
there is no letter-box — messages can be left between stones —
besides, one sometimes feels like making a home.

The stones in the heart of the fish are slowly finding their
place in your hearts.
We need everything. We shall build houses and home — shall
raise a lasting pillar of civilization.
When the silvery fish is gone scattering stones in water
just once try to love.

About the author

Chattopadhyaya, Shakti (1933 - 1995) Bengali poet. Shakti was born in village Baharu in South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal and spent his childhood days in a rural environment. This had a formative influence on his poetry. He lost his father early in 1940, which may have been responsible for the images of death in his poetry. His education was irregular; he first joined the City College, then Presidency College and thereafter the newly established Comparative Literature course at the Jadavpur University but he completed his graduation only in 1960 as a private student. He was associated with the Communist party also for a brief while.

His first poem was published in *Kavita,* a quarterly magazine edited by Buddhdev Bose. Eventually he grew to be one of the outstanding poets of his time. His poetry reflected the frustrations and self-indulgence of the younger generation. Later he took to writing lyrical poetry. Some of his publications are: *He Prem, he Noihsobdyo* (1957), *Hementeer Aranye Ami Postman* (1969), and *Chaturdaspadi kabita* (1970). His famous long poem *Dharmeo Acho Giraffeo Acho* was written in 1965.

He won the Sahitya Akademi award for *Jete Pari Kintu Kano Jabo* (1983).

Since 1970, he had been a journalist, attached to *Ananda Bazar Patrika*. His last brief assignment was teaching at Shanitniketan where he had a fatal heart attack. He has translated Rilke, Heine, Lorca and Neruda and also Kalidasa, Omar Khayyam and Ghalib.

The poem 'Just Once Try', originally called 'Akbar Tumi' was included in the volume entitled *Parer Katha Matir Bari* [The Blanket of Borders, The House of Mud] was published in 1971.

Works:

Hey Prem, Hey Noishobdo (1961), *Dharmeo Achho* (1965), *Jete Pari Kintu Kano Jabo* (1983); *Kuyotala* (novel) (1961). Has published more than 20 volumes.

Glossary

Kumortuli: A place that is famous for sculpting earthern idols of Gods and Goddesses.

Questions

1. Why does a male poet impersonate a female persona?
2. How successful is he, if at all, in representing a female self?
3. Why does the poet choose the framework of a myth in all this?
4. How does a late 20th or early 21st c reader accept the re-invention of the myth?

ORPHEUS (Gujarati)*

Sitanshu Yashaschandra

Translation : The poet †

The eagles crying out in shart shrill notes,
The eagles, confused, are looking for their lost beloved.

Layers of rock slide on each-other, lava liquid flows cascading down,
Cave roofs are pushed and splintered, mistakes and fine follies howl,
Every eye begets its many dreams,
And no King's ordinance is here honoured.

In a sudden torrential descent the unforeseen eagles rain down,
The sky-eagles burst into the under-world.
The world there is ruled cruelly by venomous snakes,
They heard the Enemy's songs; they were so pleased,
They began to die, they granted the boon;
The beloved is yours, but do not look behind.

The blind eagles, quite incapable of looking behind;
Grieving eagles who never ever had any loved one;
The eagles who never ever had any loved one;
The eagles crying out in sharp shrill notes;
The eagles of the under-world burst into the sky.

About the author

Mehta, Sitanshu Yashaschandra (1941 —) Gujarati poet, dramatist, critic. Born in Bhuj, Sitanshu joined St Xavier's

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* The poet

† E.V. Ramakrishna and Anjana Desai

College Mumbai to study science. But after two years he switched over to literature and completed his M.A. (Gujarati) in 1965. He holds a doctorate in comparative literature. He went to USA as a Fullbright Scholar and later received the Ford West European Fellowship and spent a year in Paris studying the Theatre of the Absurd.

He published his first collection of poems entitled *Oddysseusnun Halesun* in 1975 followed by his second collection called *Jatayu* in 1986 for which he received the Sahitya Akademi award. His collection of essays on comparative literature called *Seemankane Seemollanghan* came out in 1977. His doctoral work on aesthetics was published in 1979 and his lectures on theory of literature in 2000. The poem Orpheus which you have to study was published in *Jatayu* in 1986.

Eight of his plays were published in 1998. Several of them have been staged in different places in Gujarat. His poetry, criticism and plays have been much acclaimed and have earned him the prestigous Ranjitram Suvarna Chandrak award.

The poem 'Orpheus' makes use of the Western myth of Orpheus as a point of departure for the poet's depiction of the condition of modern man.

Works:

Poems *Odysseusnun Halesun* (1975), *Jatayu* (1996) (Sahitya Akademi award), Criticism *Seemankan ane seemollanghan* (1977), *Ashya Sargavidhao*. Plays: *Aa Manas Madrasi Laage Chee, Kem Makanji Kyan Chalya? Khagras* and *Ashwatthama, Jaagine Joun To*...Narasanyo (2007).

Glossary

Orpheus: Appears in Greek mythology as a singer who with his magic lyre sang and played so wonderfully that wild beasts and birds and flowers aand rocks and rivers were spellbound by his music. His beloved was the wood nymph Euydice who while running away from her pursuer stumbled upon a snake that bit her and she died.Orpheus went to the underworld, Hades and was able to win her back to life on condition that he never looked back till he was out of the underworld. He however failed to keep this condition and lost her.Orpheus provides the title of the poem as also the background of this poem.

Eagle: Garuda in the Gujarati original. In modern times Garuda or eagles have replaced Orpheus.

Blind eagles: The reference is to the deterioration that has taken place in modern times. In the Orpheus myth Orpheus won Eurydice on condition that he must not look back. In modern times the eagle has replaced Orpheus and is incapable of looking back.

Questions

1. What use has the poet made of the Orpheus myth? Why is it important for him?
2. What kind of images does the poet use in the poem? Why?

3. Why are the eagles blind?
4. Comment on the symbolism in the poem.
5. The poem has been translated by the poet himself and also by E.V.Ramakrishnan and Anjana Desai. Which of these is better in your opinion? Do you wish to try your hand at it?
6. Do you agree with what the poet says in the poem?

23
A NOTEBOOK OF POEMS*

Namdeo Dhasal

Translation : Santosh Bhoomkar "Kavitechi Vahi"

You do not open the door
Though I have arrived at the destination
How can I write the alphabets of constellations
On the old paper?

I have handed over, my notebook of poems
long back to Kabir.
There is no Kabir in this market.
Only I stand here.
This tradition does accept
The promise of liberation,
The wings of desire are just growing
In this empire of darkness!

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The shaky image in the mirror of water is my own.
The pure, white mass of foam on the top of the waves
Touchingly pass through space and time.

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* Source: We are waiting permission from Indian Instutute of Advanced Study, Shimla

The bulwarks of hellish agony slowly collapse.
After making myself miserable
I sit on this shore of misery
Carving the shapes of wounds.
The transparent clothes of existence flutter
With the wafts of breeze.
The game of darkness and light arouse commotion.
The transparent birds of dream
Make the shapeless sky nostalgic.
Flowers, without fragrance of innermost awareness
Suddenly begin to bloom.
Even I shed off my skin like a snake.
This chill touch of water snaps the rope of desire.
Don't blow the water.
The face of my autobiography will be lost.

("Atmacharitra", 1995)

SUNFLOWER-GIVING FAKIR

Turning their backs to the sun, they
journeyed through centuries
Now, now, we must refuse to be pilgrims of
darkness,
That one, our father, is bent from carrying,
carrying the darkness,
Now, now we must lift
that burden from his back.
Our blood was spilled for this glorious city
And what we got to eat was the right to eat stones
Now, now, we must explode that building
which kisses the sky!
After a thousand years we were blessed with a

sun-flower-giving fakir;
Now, now, we must, like sun-flowers,
turn out faces to the sun"

About the author

Namdeo Dhasal (1949 —) Marathi dalit poet. Born in a small hamlet in Pune district, Namdeo grew up in a shabby settlement called Dhor Chawl near Golpitha, inhabited by prostitutes. The place was full of small time smugglers, drug traffickers, professional murderers and thieves and goons. He studied up to the S.C.C. He was a brilliant student but could not continue his studies. He was an avid reader and read Ambedkar and Marx and came under the influence of Ram Manohar Lohia.He married Mallika, daughter of the Communist folk singer and poet Amar Sheikh. Later Dhasal became disillusioned with Lohiaite socialists, communists, naxalites and the Congress and felt they were all restricted by their high caste leadership. He then became co-founder of the militant dalit movement called **the Dalit Panthers** on the lines of the Black Panthers in the US. He attempted to motivate the dalit youth with a rebellious social, political and cultural agenda.

Today he is associated with Bal Thackeray and the Shiv Sena.

His first collection of poems was called *Golpitha* in 1972 which gave voice to the *lumpen* and was hailed as a landmark in Marathi poetry.Other collections followed including *Murkh Mhataryane Dongar Halawala* [The Mad Old Man Shattered the Mountain], *Tuhi Iyatta Kanchi* [What is your standard?] and *Gandu Bagicha* [The Sodomized Garden]. His *Golpitha* and *Tuhi Iyatta Kanchi* won the Soviet Land Nehru award.

Among other literary endeavours of his is his interesting memoir *Those Magical Days of Dalit Panthers* and *Ambedkari Chalaval*.

The poem in your course is called 'Kavitechi Vahi' in Marathi and appears in the collection called *Ya Sattet Jeev Ramat Nahi* [The Heart does not enjoy this Existence]. The Marathi poem has three stanzas whereas the English translation has two.

Works:

Golpitha (1972), *Murkh Mhataryane Dongar Halawala, Priyadarshini — Amchya Itihasatil Ek Apariharya Patra, Tuhi Iyatta Kanchi, Khel, Ya Sattete Jeev Ramat Nahi.*

Glossary

Kabir: The referece to the saint — poet Kabir recalls a couplet by him which says

Kabira Khada Bazaarmen Sabko Mange Khair
Na Kahunse Dosti Na Kahunse Bair

(Kabir is standing in the bazaar,
Wishing well to everyone!
He has friendship with none,
And enmity with none!)

This reference is a fine example of intertextuality.

Questions

1. Write critical appreciation of the poems 'A Notebook of Poems' and 'Autobiography'.
2. Describe the nature of imagery in Namdeo Dhasal's poems.

24
PREMCHAND : HIS LIFE AND TIMES (Chapers 12, 19, 25, 33)*

Amrit Rai
Translation : Harish Trivedi

[Chapter] 12

Accompanied by his wife and three-year old daughter Kamala, broken in health, and laden with bag and baggage, Premchand left Basti to arrive in Gorakhpur on 18 August 1916, at about five in the afternoon.

The residence he had been allotted was to be vacated only the next day, and he would therefore have preferred to travel a day later. He had never been one to enjoy travelling, and was, on this occasion, also encumbered with the whole family and all the household effects.

But his wife had already packed everything, and they had to leave when they did. However, Premchand remained apprehensive about the night they must spend stranded between their previous home and the next one.

And his fears, indeed, proved true. Right on that verandah where they had been accommodated for the night, his older son Dhunnu (formally to be called Sripat) announced his intention to be born! It was a strange place, and the dead of night, with not a single

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* Source: Oxford University Press, New Delhi

friend or acquaintance around, and they hadn't the least idea even of where to find a doctor or a midwife. Quite a crisis it was, but all went well thanks to the great help spontaneously offered by many of his new colleagues. One of them was even kind enough to take them all home and put them up in his house. Such a warm introduction to the new place left Premchand utterly grateful. It was only gradually that he was to discover that such warmth on the part of his colleagues was due as much to the personality of the headmaster Bechan Lal as to a sense of community that prevailed in the school generally.

Bechan Lal was quite as warm and affectionate as Bhikhan Lal, the headmaster at Basti, had been curt and rude. Not only was Bechan Lal kind of heart but also sweet of tongue. As for discipline, all he was concerned with was that all his colleagues should work hard and attend to their duties — and he trusted them completely to do so.

Premchand had been appointed the Second Master, immediately below Bechan Lal, on a salary of sixty rupees per month. His free and candid temperament was fully matched by his headmaster's, and the two got along famously. Due to Bechan Lal's kindness, Premchand shortly received a raise of ten rupees per month, after he had spent a month in Allahabad being trained in First Aid; Bechan Lal had not only recommended his name for this course but actually pushed him into it, notwithstanding his wife's poor health. And a little over a year after this, he also appointed Premchand the superintendent of the school boarding house, which meant a further raise in salary of fifteen rupees per month.

Premchand was well contented. A kind headmaster, friendly colleagues, affectionate and obedient pupils and such a nice

place to live and work in. He had taken to it at first sight. Even when he had visited the place for just a day about six months previously, he had felt tempted.

This Normal School sprawling over scores of acres of land was a very different proposition from the noisy and crowded neighbourhood in the heart of Basti. On one side of the school there was the large open ground of the local Idgah, and on the other, the collector's bungalow. And there were wide spaces in between.

Of course, Gorakhpur wasn't new to him. He was familiar with each one of its ways and by-ways. This was where he had spent several years of his childhood, roaming about, listening to and later reading the tales from *Talism-e-Hoshruba* and *Haremsara*, and watching for hours altogether bouts of kite-flying in Bale Miyan Ka Maidan, all the while feeling miserable because he had no money for kites himself. Also, it was here that he had smoked his first cigarette, at the age of thirteen, and here, too, that he was probably initiated into the delights of filthy talk in the company of the usual street urchins. And it was here again, that he had learnt his first lessons in English, at the Rawat Pathshala.

He associated Gorakhpur, thus, with a number of bitter-sweet memories from his past life. He had just passed his eighth standard examination here when he had to accompany his father back to Banaras. Just as he had enrolled himself in the ninth standard, he had also been married off. His father had died shortly afterwards. And, with one thing following another, a lot of water had since then flown under the bridge. And now, here he was, back in Gorakhpur again. And he liked being back, feeling somehow a little lighter both in mind and ir **body.**

However, the domestic feud between his wife and his step-mother still persisted. The root cause for it still was the unwillingness on the part of the latter to relinquish any of her former rights and privileges. On the other hand, it was preposterous to expect his wife not to want to be the mistress of her own house. While Premchand understood the situation perfectly he hardly knew how to help it. After all, all his wife's endeavours were directed ultimately at ordering the household better and improving the domestic economy. That was, surely, an end much to be desired. It would free him, eventually, from daily domestic worries in order to devote himself more fully to his work. He already owed a great unexpressed debt to his wife for her efforts in this direction. However, it was best not to offend anybody. That was why he had, with the passage of time, grown more and more aloof from this discord. And yet, he was but human. Somewhat short-tempered himself, he would on occasion grow terribly annoyed and sometimes would even burst out in anger. But soon, he would get back to his work. That was his true refuge and salvation. That work alone was the true joy of life was a conviction he had long held. Constant and ceaseless occupation with work was the only road to happiness. It also left him relatively unmoved by these constant in-law quarrels.

But once, he did lose his temper with his step-mother. Having failed twice the school leaving examination, Mahatab, his step-brother, had proceeded to Lucknow in order to take a one-year course in typing and book-keeping. As always, Premchand had paid for him. But when he returned to Gorakhpur at the completion of his course, Premchand seemed to detect in something said by his step-mother the undertone of a suggestion that he, Premchand, now planned to appropriate a part of his step-brother's salary in recompense for what he had spent on him earlier. This infuriated Premchand and he had a mighty row with

the step-mother. This was ingratitude of the worst kind, a cruel innuendo which was beyond his forbearance. Still enraged, he came and declared to his wife that he'd rather take poison and end his life than ever have to live on someone else's wages!

His anger soon blew over, however, and the episode left no rancour behind in his heart. He continued to be as affectionate towards Mahatab as before and as responsible for him. And on his part, Mahatab, though he might not have got along too well with Premchand's wife, always was respectful to him and ever retained for him a great deal of natural love and affection.

Premchand could now see a marked improvement in his circumstances. His health was better, which was a major gain, and he found the school more congenial as well. He had come to know Mahavir Prasad Poddar, and through him, a new language, Hindi, lay open to him. Premchand had great expectations of it. Unlike Urdu, Hindi wasn't a language in which the author had to pay himself for the publication of his book, and thereafter be impelled by the desperately low sales to keep prodding the publisher to do better. The sale of two hundred copies of a book in a whole year could be regarded as a remarkable achievement in Urdu. The situation in Hindi was bound to be better, Premchand reasoned to himself, or else his publisher wouldn't be chasing him so vigorously. He had already produced for him a short book on Sheikh Sa'adi, as well as translations of some stories by Tolstoy. The Hindi *Prem Pachisi* was in press. And these must have been selling well, Premchand inferred, or else the publisher wouldn't have asked him for a new novel!

All this was, naturally, gratifying. What more could any writer wish for than a situation in which he himself felt a zest for writing and found, too, that writing came easy, with a publisher

waiting at the door-step, and his fame spreading beyond one language to several others. Besides the Hindi version, *Prem Pachisi* was soon going to come out in Marathi as well and some of his stories published in various journals were getting translated into Gujarati. Heady stuff, all this!

And, to top it all, there was now, after long days of weary despondency, a new development in national life. What a strange coincidence that a downward phase in the national movement synchronized more or less with a downward trend in Premchand's health, and that a new awakening in the nation was now felt by Premchand literally on his pulse. The upward swing in his health was definitely due, in part, to this resurgence of the nation.

But that's what he was like. He had never been known to confine himself in a narrow and individualistic world. He was inveterately a family man — a man of the family and for the family. He would gladly embrace all its worries and problems and responsibilities rather than be alone and carefree.

And the nation for him was one large family. All its joys and sorrows were his joys and sorrows. The thread of natural affinity that bound him to his own family was what bound him to this larger family as well.

Someone like him should perhaps have turned to active politics, as an agitator, as an organizer. But Premchand was aware of his weaknesses as well.

His weakest spot, as it happened, was the condition of his household; two little children, wife, step-mother and step-brother, and he himself the sole bread-winner. Another weakness

was his own temperament. He was most unlike the seasoned political campaigners, who were all masters of the art of wheeling-dealing and manoeuvring. That was, in fact, another world altogether. He would have been utterly at a loss there.

Undeniably, he was moved profoundly by public events. What this signified to him was that if he were to try he might be able, in turn, to move many others equally — not through public oration but through his pen. His intimate interest in politics was reflected in his writings. It was through his writings that he gave of the best of himself in the cause of the nation's freedom and its future.

The next annual session of the Congress was to be held in Lucknow. It proved to be extraordinarily successful. The Congress and the Muslim League were reconciled at it, as were the rival factions of the Moderates and the Radicals within the Congress. On the same dais now sat Rasbehari Ghosh and Surendranath Bannerjee, together with Tilak and Kharpade. This was the same Rasbehari Ghosh who hadn't allowed Tilak to even speak at the session in Surat nine years ago. It was gratifying to see such bitter enemies now sharing the same platform. Mrs. Besant was there, too. The Muslims were represented by the Raja of Mahmudabad, Ejaz Rasool, and Jinnah, among others. Also present was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, whose fame had preceded him.

It was here that some representatives from Bihar met Gandhi and narrated to him the tales of woe of the peasants of Champaran. Their exploitation by the indigo planters staggered belief. The peasants were worse off than even slaves. They had to take it all without even a murmur of protest. Occasionally, a white Saheb would openly shoot dead a peasant, with no one to ask any questions.

Eventually, Gandhi went to Champaran and launched his first satyagraha movement in India. It met with extraordinary success.

Next, Gandhi went to Kheda in Gujarat and waged a battle on behalf of the peasants there.

These were the latest episodes in the national awakening, and were watched closely by an observer far removed from the world of active politics. As soon as Gandhi had arrived on the scene, Premchand had begun to follow his activities with keen interest. Some intuition had told him that this new leader was destined to acheive great things. Utterly different from the usual armchair politicians, Gandhi interpreted politics to be a mode of serving the people. He moved among the poor and the wretched, tried to understand their problems, shared in their sufferings and sorrows, and inspired them to form the front-line of the nationalist struggle. It was just such a patriotic *mahatma* that Premchand had created in his novel *Jalwa-e-Isar* in the character of Bala Ji. Bala Ji was Vivekananda. Bala Ji was Tilak. Bala Ji was Gandhi. With the change of times his image changed too, though the substance remained very much the same.

The ideals of truth, non-violence and renunciation which Gandhi was now advocating to the nation were precisely the ones Premchand had cherished, for he too had travelled the same path, more or less, in order to arrive at them. He too, had read the moral tales of Tolstoy and been influenced by them in his writings. He had also adapted twenty-three of these stories to the Indian context and published them in a volume under the title *Prem Prabhakar*. Nearly all the best-known moral tales of Tolstoy were included in this collection, including 'That Whereby Men Live', 'Neglect A Fire and It Will Not Be Quenched', 'Children May Be Wiser Than Their Elders', 'How

Much Land Does A Man Require?', 'The Grain That Was Like An Egg', and 'The Godson'.

The moral precepts embodied in these stories were no more *clichés* for Premchand but truths which he had rediscovered for himself through experience and reflection. These truths had permeated so deeply into his sensibility as to become a part of his creed and his vision and they are manifested naturally in his writings. Stories like 'Shankhanad', 'Panch Parmeshwar', and 'Mahatirtha', which were written during this period, are inspired by this vision and would not but have arisen from the profoundest convictions on the part of the author.

Nor was there any gulf between his life and his writings. The very stuff of daily life was transmuted into literature, when endowed with vigour and vitality, tried in the clear fire of reason, and lent the hue of dreams. Literature represents a nobler version of life, and a writer may often seek to achieve the same nobility in his own life. For it is the writer's own life which imparts to his literature such force as it has.

As for Premchand, he has adopted for himself the quietly disciplined life of a peasant who sets off for his fields with his oxen and plough even before the crack of dawn.

He gets up before sunrise and having washed and dressed goes out for an hour's walk, for which he need not now go beyond the huge grounds of the school. By the time he gets back, the rest of the household is up and about. He then attends to some domestic chores, for he doesn't wish to depend overmuch on the servant. He makes his own bed and washes his own clothes. His wife doesn't approve, but he would not change his habits. He hasn't forgotten that he was himself once employed at the paltry salary

of five rupees a month, and was hardly better off that a servant. In any case, where's the harm in attending to one's own daily needs.

For writing, the time that suits him best is early in the day. Until it is time for him to go to the school he sits at his desk, writing. He then gets up and gets dressed, and is off.

Punctuality has become second nature with him. It's doubly important now, for he must set a good example before his students who are trainee teachers and will shortly be required to provide examples of this kind themselves in their own schools. They must grasp that to waste time is a crime. No nation has ever progressed which hasn't valued punctuality.

One of his students, Manjoorul Haque, recalls:

> Premchand was generally in the habit of arriving in school on the dot. As soon as the bell rang, he'd set out at a nice leisurely pace such as is usually associated with poets. He came to school usually with his head uncovered, his hair dishevelled, and wearing a *dhoti* and a coat which was often unbuttoned. He thus made quite a picture. The students respected him more than they respected anyone else. He taught my class history. Often, he would read a passage from the text-book and then cite evidence from other sources in order to controvert the given version. He would also point out that several of the episodes narrated in the book had been included merely for the purpose of creating divisions between the Hindus and the Muslims ... And, before the bell rang, he would clarify that all that he had said was for our personal benefit and not to be reproduced in the examinations, unless we wanted to fail!

The school had its own restraints and risks, but these did not prevent Premchand from giving a nationalistic content to his teaching as far as possible. For example, he pointed out one day what had hardly been noticed in those times some sixty years ago, that the incident of the Black Hole of Calcutta was a total fabrication, a mere invention on the part of an English officer designed to provide some kind of a moral justification for the English annexation of Bengal.

In short, his lectures were a source of all kinds of fascinating information. He spent his energy not in dictating notes to his students nor in drawing all kinds of maps and figures on the black-board, but in trying to make his students sound in body and mind. And when he set out for his rounds of inspection in the boarding house, the inmates would not fear him but welcome him as some elder relative with whom they could freely talk about their comforts as well as discomforts.

As time passed his students grew increasingly fond of him, and would want to serve him in some way or the other. But Premchand, as someone who didn't even relish the idea of putting his own servent to work for him, would have none of it, except in one matter. He would freely and frequently ask one or two of his students to prepare fair copies of his stories, and this was all the *gurudakshina* or tribute he would ever accept from them. He would be highly pleased with a student who did this job well. If this was a kind of bribe, he was only too happy to accept it.

Another of his students writes :

> As soon as he entered the class, an air of keen expectancy would prevail and everyone would be all ears. He did not always restrict himself to the prescribed syllabus but very

often would rather begin to talk about whatever he happened to be interested in or whatever his students requested him to talk about. If anything amusing came up in the course of the lecture, he would laugh freely and without restraint. He did not stand in awe of anyone. Once, some official came to inspect our school. Our headmaster Babu Bechan Lal, who was a meek and simple man, was a little worried. Several students, too, put in an unusually smart appearance, but not out dear teacher who looked just the same as always — bare-headed, dishevelled, and with his coat unbuttoned. The inspector visited our class, without any perceptible effect on our teacher. The two exchanged a few words in English, after which the inspector went away.

Such natural simplicity and such a candid temperament are relatively rare, and these were the very qualities which attracted his students irresistibly to him. In his conduct he was just and impartial to everyone. It was by dint of these virtues that Premchand proved to be a highly successful superintendent of the boarding house for full three years, for temperamentally, he must have been quite unsuited to the job. He was entirely devoid of any administrative ability. But where administrative ability fails, goodwill may succeed — and he had a large measure of goodwill towards everyone.

Jokhu was his personal servant. Though officially employed by the boarding house, he also served as a domestic servant for some extra payment. Subhan, a Muslim, was a cook in the school mess. Muhammad worked as the book-binder for the school. And Premchand treated all of them with kindness and sympathy. Often, he would even help them financially. Muhammad the book-binder was a particularly sad-looking fellow, and

Premchand even wrote a story based on his life. ("The story 'Daftari' is taken straight from life. There's hardly any invention in it." Premchand to Imtiaz Ali Taj, 25 Septempber 1919). Muhammad had married twice. He had little money and many mouths to feed. To make matters worse his wife was vain, querulous and a spendthrift. He would often be short of money, and there'd be constant rows in his home. Premchand would help him out and many others like him. He would never remind him to repay the loans, but wait for him and other similar beneficiaries to pay him back when they could. Sometimes, a loan would turn out to be a bad debt. But what Premchand would mind then was not the loss of money but his wife's displeasure and her admonitions.

With the march of the times, his nationalist feelings had also grown stronger. The concept of Hindu-Muslim unity had now taken deep roots in his mind. And, just as any principle that he came to believe in was soon fully reflected in his conduct, so in this case as well, he left no stone unturned during his three-year term as the superintendent of the school boarding house to promote a fraternal feeling between students of the two communities. As Mohammad Hanif Khan, a student of his during this period, records:

> He was a great supporter of the idea of Hindu-Muslim unity. Of the 150-odd students who were undergoing teacher's training at the Normal School, Gorakhpur, at this time, about thirty were Muslims. During the academic session I spent there, from July 1916 to April 1917, there wasn't a single incident of discord between the two communities. If ever anyone did something which might provoke communal sentiments, he not only

put down the incident but also endeavoured to eradicate the very basis of such differences.

Considerations of high and low, Hindu and Muslim, and untouchability were all anathema to Premchand. He never imposed any restrictions, either now or later, on the company his childrean kept or the friends they made. Not only had he himself grown up in a similarly free atmosphere, but he also believed that to encourage this kind of discrimination in the minds of his children would have been a grave social injustice. He believed that it was best for the healthy mental development of children to have the freedom of being able to associate and play with just anyone they liked, and that to limit this freedom in any way was to do them a serious disservice.

His daughter Kamala preferred to spend most of her time at Subhan, the Muslim cook's house. Whenever possible, she would pick up her younger brother Dhunnu, now two or three years old, and reach Subhan's house where she would spend hours altogether. Both Subhan's daughter Sariya and his son Siraju were close friends of hers. So, for that matter, was Khuddan, son of the book-binder, also a Muslim, but she felt most at home at Subhan's.

When their mother gave Sariya and Siraju something to eat, she would also give some to Kamala. One day, Kamala returned home with a *chapati* still clutched in her hands. Her mother was greatly enraged, and slapped Kamala several times. But the incident had been forgotten within a few days, and everything went on as before.

There was some open space in front of his house which Premchand himself would often sweep with a big broom. It had

several mango, *neem,* and jackfruit tress. A few chairs and one or two charpoys always lay in their shade. This area served as Premchand's drawing-room as well as a resting place.

On returning from school in the early afternoon Premchand would take a light tea and would then go to the town to buy vegetables and groceries though this would not be neccessary every day. On coming back, he would settle down in the shade of the tree, glance at newspapers and magazines, converse with friends and visitors, and have the whole place resounding with his loud laughter. At sunset he would retire to his study within and spend some time in reading and writing. He would then have dinner and after walking for a little while in front of the house, would go to bed at about ten o'clock. As a chronic sufferer from digestive disorders, he wasn't permitted to stay up late nor did he wish to, for he preferred, on the other hand, to get up early.

Such was his daily routine — day after day after day... A highly well regulated life, which was more the life of a peasant than that of an 'artist', with the difference that instead of a spade he wielded a pen.

[Chapter] 19

Begun on 1 October 1922, the Urdu draft of *Chaugan-e-Hasti (Rangabhumi)* was completed on 1 April 1924.

Whether one considers it a fault or a virtue, topical relevance was the chief characteristic of Premchand as a writer. He lived in the present and wrote for the present, for the good reason that he cared for the future. There is no short cut to the future, except through the present. As soon as one foresakes the present the future turns into an impossible dream-land. Just as the present is

the basis and the substance of the future, so is the future the natural direction of the present and its destination.Time is continuous and eternal, as is man with his joys and sorrows. It is an ever-flowing stream from the beginning to infinity — and we who are conditioned by time and space can merely gather up in our palms a little measure from the stream and dedicate it to the sun, the source of life, and then restore it to the eternal stream. With a peaceful and tranquil heart we can float a little earthen lamp on the eternal waves, and that is our tribute to the future. That is all that is required of us, and that is all that we are capable of, and we mustn't attempt anymore for that is the way to extinction. No one has ever conquered time by turning away from the present. We must accept life as it has been given to us, answer the questions that our age poses before us — questions of what is just and unjust, what is beautiful and what is not — and forget the rest. All the life's a stage and all of us are players with our little roles to play. Why must we expect applause all the way, for doesn't that come right at the end when the play is over? Life is a battle-field, and we are all mere soldiers. A soldier must look only to the battle before him. A soldier who fights with his eyes on a medal or some other similar gain is no more than a speculator who has strayed into the wrong field. He had best leave, for this is no place for him. For here, such rewards as there are, are all posthumous.

It's not as if Premchand doesn't aspire to fame. He does and quite keenly, too. But that is not what motivates him. In any case, it's a small enough motivation on which to build a life. However small may be his powers, Premchand wishes to achieve something that will give him the satisfaction of having contributed his mite to the reawakening of the country, rather than having contemplated his own navel.

For about eight months before Premchand began this novel, the national movement had been at a standstill with Gandhi thrown into prison to serve a six-year sentence. By the time the book was finished Gandhi had been released due to his severe illness, but this brought about no quick change in the situation. The movement lay dormant. It was a phase of defeat and depression. One consequence of this was the Hindu-Muslim riots which frequently flared up these days all over the country. And another consequence was the move away from mass movement to participation in the government through entry into legislative councils.

While Premchand observed these developments keenly, he still went his own way. Answering a question from Munshi Dayanarayan, he wrote on 17 February 1923 (while he was the headmaster of the Kashi Vidyapeeth School):

> You ask me which party I support. I do not support either party. Because neither is at the moment doing any effective work. The party I am a member of is that party of the future which will devote itself to the political education of the lower classes. The constitution which the Swarajya-Khilafat party has jointly put out is something with which I agree entirely. What surprises me though is that only one of two parties should say this. I should have thought that both the parties were in agreement on this.

Such is the strength of his feelings on this issue that instead of using the familiar word *awamunnas* which means the common man, he coins the word *kotahunnas* which would mean the lower classes.

To the best of his ability and in tune with the needs of the times, Premchand has contributed ceaselessly to the national effort.

Over the previous three or four years, through articles and notes and stories propagating non-cooperation and pamphlets on the advantages of independence, as well as through a novel like *Premashram* and plays like *Sangram* and *Karbala*, he has commented relevantly and forcefully on the issues of the day. He is a soldier in the service of his country, a soldier required to fight on several fronts at once.

Before the movement began the need was to prepare people psychologically for it, and after it had started it was neccessary to keep up their enthusiasm and morale. And now, when the movement was in doldrums and pessimism swept over the country the need was for something that would cut through this despondency and revitalize the people, and inspire them not to another sudden burst of action but sustain them through a long struggle. For, a fight for freedom isn't won or lost in a day. It is long and arduous and has its ups and downs. Before success comes at last, one has to suffer many defeats and yet not lose heart, for that would be to give up the battle. In order to achieve such resolution one needs a discipline of the mind and steadfastness such as that of the true *yogi*. A touch of the philosophical is needed for that, but that is not very rare in India.

In *Rangabhumi,* Subhagi, the much tortured and bashed-up wife of Bhairo, eventually leaves him and takes shelter with Surdas who is a beggar. For this Surdas is reviled and intimidated and pressure is brought upon him to throw Subhagi out. When he doesn't oblige, Bhairo, enraged at this insult to his masculine vanity, sets fire to Surdas's hut and it is reduced to ashes. Surdas is saddened not so much because his hut has been burnt down but because Subhagi is now left without shelter, and he begins to cry.

> Suddenly he started. He heard someone say, 'Look at this cry baby, crying because he has lost!' Mithua could be

seen coming back from Ghisu's house. Ghisu had probably beaten him up and was now adding insult to the injury by saying, 'Look at this cry baby, crying because he has lost!' Surdas, engulfed as he had been in the unfathomable waters of despondence, regret, worry and agitation, heard this admonition and felt as if someone had taken him by the hand and pulled him out to the shore. Fie! here I am, crying because I have lost. What a shame.... A true sportsman never cries though he may lose round after round and suffer blow after blow. He may be knocked about all over the place but he still stands firm without a crease on his brow. Why should one cry on losing in a game! For a game is for entertainment and amusement and not for crying.

Surdas stood up and in a wave of triumph and pride began to rake up the heap of ashes.

Within a moment Mithua, Ghisu, and a host of other boys from the neighbourhood had gathered all around the mound of ashes and had begun following his example. It was soon like a shower of ashes. In no time all the ash had been blown away and all that remained was the black and scorched spot of land.

Mithua asked him: Grandpa, where are we going to stay now?
Surdas: We'll build another home.
Mithua: And if someone were to burn that down, too?
Surdas: We'll build yet another.
Mithua: And if that too were burnt down?
Surdas: Then we too will build yet again.
Mithua: And if it were to be burnt down a thousand times?
Surdas: Then we'll build a thousand times.

Children have a special fascination for numbers. Mithua asked again: And if it were burnt down a hundred million times?

With the same childlike simplicity Surdas answered: Then we too will build a hundred million times.

This is a conversation between two children, one of whom happens to be old and blind and a beggar and the grandfather of the other child. But if we read between the lines we shall find history speaking through them. How many times was this country razed to the ground and then rebuilt, and all due to the might and resolution of men like the one speaking here. It is not he who speaks but the eternal spirit within us and its revolutionary determination. What was needed at this time was just such determination as this.

And this determination is no mere wishful projection but has behind it a profound vision of life acquired not in a day but through a life-time of intense suffering. The character of Surdas may be based on a blind beggar whom Premchand had observed going round the streets of Banaras, but surely he also reflects on what had been going round in the alleys of his own mind for some time before that. Thus, what he observed without, was in fact merely a recognition of what had lain within. Through this creation of his, he speaks his own life-long suffering and his own understanding of life. The barriers between the creator and the creation have here come down; the letter and the spirit have become one. Premchand has created Surdas out of his own heart's blood, as he had not created any character before. Within the skeletal and tenacious body of Surdas beats the heart of Premchand himself. The whole discussion of life presented through Surdas here, in terms of its justice and injustice, its truth

and falsity, its beauty and ugliness, can be identified directly with Premchand himself. *Rangabhumi* is the epic of Premchand's own life upto this point and Surdas is indeed Premchand. He is an ideal *satyagrahi* not merely in the limited political sense but in the wider context of all the aspects of life. Whatever it might mean to others, *satyagraha* for Premchand stood for some eternal values, such as kindness, forgiveness, helping others, love, humility, renunciation, a fearless faith in truth, and opposition to injustice, all of which had their origins in the temperament and character of Premchand himself while they also connected him through Tolstoy to Gandhi. Each of his stories revolves on these virtues which, in their sum, are *satyagraha.* Admittedly, *satyagraha* had a purely political dimension as well but as a story-writer, Premchand was but little concerned with that. For he operated on another level, which concerned the character of an individual and the formation of this character.This was the sense in which he naturally and instinctively adopted *satyagraha.* However, in his depiction of it so far, many of these ideals had seemed a little hollow and lifeless for the reason that his grasp of reality hadn't been firm enough. But *Rangabhumi* is very different. Here, his grasp of reality is strong, and his embodiment of the ideals through the character of Surdas both apt and profound.

With all his human frailties, the simple, meek, fearless, truth-loving Surdas can be identified in his quotidian aspect with Premchand, and in his sublimer aspect with Gandhi. For it was as a sublime manifestation of all his own virtues that Premchand had ever regarded and idolized Gandhi, and it is not unlikely that he might have had him in mind while delineating the character of Surdas. That he was hinting at some great national figure through the character of Surdas is also indicated by what Vinay says at one point in the novel: "This is not merely your hut but also a

temple of our race. We can't sit idly by while it comes under the spade."

The struggle to save it enters another phase. Now the Gurkhas have been called in.

> In place of the demolished houses now stand hundreds of tents constantly patrolled by the Gurkhas. No one can get through to them. A crowd of thousands stands all around in a circle like spectators at some grand performance. In the centre is Surdas's little hut like a stage. Surdas himself stands in front of it, leaning on his staff, like a *sutradhar* about to start a play.

In this small but symbolic battle Surdas is the ideal *satyagrahi* and one can clearly see a resemblance between Gandhi and him. This supposition is strengthened by many other symbols through which Premchand has presented Surdas. For example, he is described at one place as "some sightless Greek god surrounded by his worshippers."

On an occasion, when these supporters are highly agitated and seem ready to resort to violence, Surdas says to them:

> Friends, please go back home....It's no use your collecting here to bait our masters. If I am destined to die none of you standing here will be able to save me. And if I am to be saved I'll escape unhurt even through cannon fire. In fact, you have come here not to help me but to oppose me. Any notions of pity and right conduct that our masters and the army and the police might have been likely to entertain have been turned into anger by your collecting here. Alone, I might have shown our masters

> how one poor blind man is sufficient to repulse a whole army, to spike the mouth of a cannon and to blunt the edge of a sword! I had wanted to fight this battle on the strength of my right conduct...

This could well be Gandhi speaking.

Eventually, "a bullet hit Surdas in the shoulder, his head fell forward, and he began to bleed. Bhairo couldn't support his weight and he fell to the ground. The strength of the spirit proved no match for brute force."

But was Surdas finally vanquished? In the preface to *Karbala* Premchand had written:

> The pathetic tale of the hero isn't sufficient to turn a play into a tragedy. We do not so much grieve at his catastrophe as we celebrate his moral triumph, for here the apparent defeat of the hero constitutes in fact his victory. A tragedy presents a peculiar amalgam of the emotions of grief and joy. We shed tears to see the hero die but these are tears not of pity but of triumph. A tragic play is the story of self-sacrifice and self-sacrifice is a matter not only of pity but also of pride.

These two tales of self-sacrifice, one in the form of a play and the other in the form of a novel, were both written at the same time, depicting the moral triumph of the Prophet Mohammad in one battlefield and of Surdas in another. Eventually, each has commanded reverence, even from his enemies. Even someone like Thakurdin, one of those who had forsaken Surdas in the midst of his struggle, was to say: "That blind man could see into the future. He knew that our selfish ways would catch up with us

one day. He himself laid down his life rather than give up his land....."

Throughout Surdas's last speech runs the metaphor of life being a game and in his very last words he describes himself as "a sportsman departing a play-ground." And after he is dead, the narrator sums up:

> He wasn't a sage, he wasn't a *mahatma,* he wasn't a god, he wasn't an angel. He was a poor little soul, beset by worries and obstacles, and with his share of both virtues and faults. His virtues were few and his faults many. Anger and greed and temptation and vanity.... On the other hand, he had indeed but one virtue, call it a sense of justice, love of truth, charity, sympathy, or what you like. He felt bound to act against injustice and he couldn't tolerate inequity.

And that's why people respected him and honoured him and idolized him.

> In the bright moonlight the statue of Surdas stood holding a staff with one hand and with his other hand spread out before him as if in supplication to some invisible benefactor. It was the same emaciated body, bent and with the ribs protruding, and with the same old meekness and simplicity on his face. It seemed indeed to be Surdas himself.

Or Gandhi himself, as seen in the famous photograph?

> He looked as if he were a beggar in heaven asking of the gods the gift of the welfare of the world.

Through this symbolic representation of his hero, Premchand has presented here a picture of the contemporary politics of mass movement whose hero was Gandhi. That movement at this point lay dormant, and this story of a struggle for one's existence was narrated with a view to reviving and revitalizing the movement. Here too, as in *Karbala,* this meaning is expressed obliquely. In one, the immediate context is that of religious conflict, and in the other, on a smaller scale, that of personal survival, but the true meaning of each relates to the larger struggle for independence which for Premchand was not only a question of a transfer of power but also a question of certain moral values and of a whole life-style which had two main aspects: the preservation of whatever was valuable in the old pattern of life in the villages, together with the creation of a new pattern of life in such a way that it could assimilate all the new dimensions of progress without losing its essential and eternal spirit.

In the characters of Kunwar Bharat Singh and Vinay, father and son in this novel, there are constant hints of Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru. Vinay goes to Rajasthan with a group of Sewa Dal volunteers. In the then situation of princely States, any social work such as this was interpreted as sedition, and the consequence is that Vinay is promptly put into jail. A similar fate had befallen Jawaharlal Nehru at about this time, when he had entered the state of Nabha in Punjab and had been arrested there, an incident which he was later to recount in some detail in his *Autobiography.* Similarly, one can see some resemblance between Dr. Ganguli, a friend of Kunwar Bharat Singh in this novel, and Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, both in the moderate political stance of Dr. Ganguli as well as in his eventual disenchantment with politics altogether. And, as Premchand himself later acknowledged in a letter, the character of Sophia in this novel is modelled on Annie Besant.

While *Rangabhumi* won great acclaim on its publication early in 1925, it also raised a long-drawn and unseemly critical controversy in which it was suggested that a very different kind of inspiration altogether lay behind this novel. Awadh Upadhyaya, a mathematician by training, published a series of articles in *Saraswati* in the latter half of 1926 in which he sought to demonstrate, through formulations which look more like algebraic equations than literary criticism, that *Rangabhumi* was a copy of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. The following is an example of the method by which Upadhyaya sought to prove his case:

Vinay	=	Osborne + a very small part of Dobbin
Sophia	=	Amelia + a very small part of Rebecca
Indu	=	A small part of Rebecca
Surdas	=	John Sewak = Amelia's father
Mahendra Kumar	=	Rawdon + Joseph
Ganguli	=	Sir Pitt
Rani Jahnavi	=	A representation of the aristocratic ideas of Osborne's father

Through similar ingenious equations, Upadhyaya also sought to establish that an earlier novel of Premchand's *Premashram* (1921), was a copy of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, while the novel that followed *Rangabhumi, Kayakalp* (1926) was seen by him to be a copy of *The Eternal City* by Hall Caine.

As it happened, these imputations coincided with the publication of one or two articles in some other literary magazines in which similar charges were made against some others of Premchand's works. It was alleged, for example, that his story 'Vishwas' was also based on *The Eternal City* by Hall Caine, that the model for his story 'Abhushan' was a story by Thomas Hardy, and that his

Urdu article 'Hansi' published in *Zamana* was no more than a translation of an essay originally published in Marathi.

Premchand naturally was much distressed by all this, though not so much by the fact that such heinous attacks should have been mounted against him, as by the fact that not even a single voice was raised in his defence in this controversy. Eventually, he felt constrained to take up his pen in his own defence. In the *Samalochak* of Winter 1926-27, he wrote a rejoinder in which he acknowledged that the article 'Hansi' was indeed a translation from Hindi of a piece originally published in Marathi, except that he had clearly indicated to the editor of *Zamana* that this was in fact so; that he hadn't even read *Resurrection* by Tolstoy so that any resemblance between it and his own *Premashram* was not only fortuitous but perhaps also a matter of some pride for him; and that though there was in fact a resemblance between his story 'Abhushan' and a story by Thomas Hardy, there should be nothing surprising in two authors arriving at the same observations independently.

As regards *Rangabhumi* and *Vanity Fair*, he said that only a schoolboy who hadn't even read his novel could have found any similarity between the two. He pointed out that, among other things, *Vanity Fair* was a social novel while his own book was a political novel, and that however humble it might appear before the English classic it was all his own. In another rejoinder published as a letter to the editor of *Sudha*, Premchand played off the allegation that his novel *Kayakalp* was a copy of *The Eternal City* by Hall Caine against the charge by another critic that his story 'Vishwas' was also a copy of the same English novel, and went on to say that though 'Vishwas' did reflect those parts of *The Eternal City* which had left a deep impression on his own mind, there was much in it that was also his own.

If the purpose of all this mud-slinging was to hurt Premchand, it succeeded in its objective perfectly. In a private letter Premchand even suspected that these attacks on him were part of the Brahmin vs. Kayastha rivalry which then was believed to be rampant in the Hindi literary circles. In any case, he seems to have come out of the whole affair pretty well, and the few blots that remained were also wiped out by the passage of time as well as by the growing recognition of his merits. In fact, the Hindustani Academy prize for the best book of the year was awarded to *Rangabhumi* the very year following this controversy.

But all this is to anticipate a little. When Premchand finished writing *Rangabhumi* on 1 April 1924, he found the printing press hanging round his neck like a millstone. It had belied all his great expectations. In fact, no sooner had he started the press than he had begun looking out for a job for himself! One day he suddenly received a telegram from Babu Bishan Narayan Bhargava of the Navalkishore Press, Lucknow. It was a job that he was offering but when Premchand wrote back seeking some clarification of the terms and conditions, he met with a resounding silence. He was both disappointed and annoyed but could do little except put up with it.

On 17 February 1924 he had written: "The press is carrying on. It's not yet making a profit but it can sustain its own losses. By the end of the year it may perhaps begin to show a profit." It would be difficult to beat Premchand at day-dreaming.

In the same letter he also wrote the following with some banter at his own expense: "The new arrival should be with us any day. I rue my folly and, like the poor beggar who can't take it out on anyone but himself, am both embarrassed and ashamed."

This new arrival was a daughter born on 8 March. She was destined only to be a cause of sorrow. She lived for only three months, departing this world in fact on the very day on which she completed three months. It was a great blow in Premchand's middle age. The parents were both stunned with grief. While the father somehow bore up with it, the mother was quite shattered.

This wasn't the end of their troubles, either. As Premchand wrote to Munshi Dayanarayan on 28 June: "Ever since our little daughter died, my wife has complained of weak digestion which has now manifested itself in the form of acute diarrhoea. As we live in the village and the *hakim* lives in the town, I can't describe to you what hell we undergo on our visits to him on alternate days in this terrible heat." Many *hakims* and doctors were tried but none could help. Her condition worsened to such an extent as to seem fatal. Eventually, fed up with all the treatment, Premchand one day concocted his own prescription and got it compounded at a *hakim's* pharmacy. After all, he himself had been an old and chronic patient of digestive disorders. Whether because practical knowledge is superior to theoretical knowledge or because it was simply so destined, his wife began to respond to his treatment right from the first dose.

Even in the midst of all these troubles, Premchand had kept up his writing at a prolific rate. *Chaugan-e-Hasti* had been completed on 1 April, and on 10 April he had already begun working on *Kayakalp,* this time originally in Hindi. Simultaneously, he was also busy turning *Chaugan-e-Hasti* into Hindi, and the manuscript of *Rangabhumi* had been completed within about four months time, on 12 August 1924.

The state of affairs at the press had shown no improvement and Premchand constantly regretted having started it. In a letter dated 2 August he had written to Munshi Dayanarayan :

> The press is causing so many problems that I am quite fed up with it. I had planned that both the books [*Karbala* and the collection of short stories *Prem Prasoon*] would be out by September or October. The outstanding dues would have been realized. The books would have sold. The scarcity of money would have been remedied. But all these hopes have been dashed. Neither are the books ready nor have the dues been realized; in fact, they have been accumulating each passing month. My efforts now are to sell off at cost price the printed books to some publisher or bookseller and to pay off my creditors with the proceeds.

Such a deal was eventually made with the Ganga Pustakamala, Lucknow.

Dulare Lal Bhargava of this publishing concern was on the look out for a literary adviser while Premchand on his part was on the look out for a job. It wasn't long before this deal was finalized, too, and the very next month Premchand left to take up his new job at Lucknow at a salary of one hundred rupees per month. He put up, with his wife and three children, with Dulare Lal in his house at 32 Latouche Road.

Rangabhumi was now in press. Written origianlly in Urdu it was being published first in Hindi, just as *Seva Sadan* and *Premashram* had been before it.

The letter that Gandhi had written to the Viceroy on 2 March 1930, brought a very cold and curt and bureaucratic reply: We regret that Mr. Gandhi is contemplating a course of action which will clearly be in violation of the law and a threat to public peace....

Gandhi replied: I had gone down on my knees to beg for bread, and what I have got instead is stone. The only language that the English understand is the language of force. The Viceroy's reply did not surprise me. He and his kind know only one kind of public peace and that is the peace of the public prison. The whole of India is one vast prison. I refuse to acknowledge this (British) law and consider it my sacred duty to shatter the scorching monotony of this compulsory and coercive peace which is stifling the nation.....

A *mahabharata* is about to begin. On the field of Kurukshetra the two armies are arrayed against each other. The bugle is about to blow.

Premchand sitting in a little corner in his house is also preparing for the *mahabharata.* The nation needs no less soldiers who wield a pen, and he is one such. As the Urdu poet Akbar has said, when you are confronted with a cannon, bring out a newspaper. And this is no mere witticism.

Around the end of 1929 and the beginning of 1930, Premchand had sent out messages to the effect that he was planning to bring out a literary-political monthly under the title *Hans* (The Swan, the mythological vehicle of the goddess Saraswati, the poetic Muse).

On 12 February 1930, he wrote to Munshi Dayanarayan: "Beginning in the month of Phagun i.e. the New Year [according to the Hindu calendar] I am going to bring out a Hindi journal, *Hans*. It will have 64 pages and will contain largely fiction. I know it is sheer folly, with a lot of headache and no gain, but I feel tempted to be foolish. All my life I have gone from one folly to another, so why not one more."

Thus, Premchand did not lag behind in making his own preparations for the battle ahead. The Dandi March of Gandhi began on 25 March 1930. A fortnight before that, Premchand already joined the fray with the inaugural March issue of *Hans*. Announcing the manifesto of his journal he wrote:

> It is a matter of great good fortune for *Hans* that it is being born at this auspicious hour when a new era dawns in India and when India struggles to break free of the chains of bondage. The memory of this day will cast a long shadow in the history of the nation...

As the legend has it, when Lord Rama was building a bridge across the sea numerous beasts and fowl had contributed their mite by bringing in little portions of earth. The battle that rages in the country now is far fiercer. India has blown the bugle for a peaceful war. *Hans* too abandons the serenity of its legendary abode, the Mansarovar, and with its little beakful of earth goes forward to bridge the sea and contribute to the battle for independence. The expanse of the sea is daunting, but it takes heart from the strength that lies in unity.

We shan't get merely for the asking either Dominion Status or *Swaraj* (full independence). The powers that can snatch away

Dominion Status can also take away *Swaraj*. For England both are the same. Dominion Status entails the rigmarole of Round Table Conferences, and while India is still entrapped in them England can continue to rule for a long time. And then, it will come in instalments. And the period of each instalment can be extended to a thousand years. One can see, therefore, why Dominion Status presents no problems to England.

Now *Swaraj* has no room either for instalments or for Round Table Conferences and that is why it is anathema to England; but what we cannot understand is why there should be difference of opinion among our own brethren on this question. They are not so stupid as not to be able to see through the English strategy. And if they can see through it and yet prefer Dominion Status, this would hint at something else altogether. If you scrutinise Dominion Status closely you will find in it a predominant role for our nawabs and princes, for our *zamindars,* and for our richer brethren. Is this because they fear that under *Swaraj* they would not have the upper hand? That the voice of the peasants and the workers will not be so feeble under *Swaraj*? And is it that voice that makes them quake? At least this is what we can surmise. They must know in their heart of hearts that their interests can be best protected only under the British rule. *Swaraj* will not allow them to crush the poor and suck their blood.... *Swaraj* is the demand of the poor, and Dominion Status the demand of those who fatten themselves by exploiting the poor....

Premchand is an inveterate rebel. A passionate fighter for freedom — though he fights with his pen — he will not accept any checks or restrictions on what he thinks. He is always a step or two ahead of everyone else. Doesn't matter if the people aren't, or dare not be, with him today; they will surely be with him tomorrow when they have shed their fear.

And so he sits down at his desk, to man his post, concentrating all his attention and energies like a yogi on the present battle, and his pen begins to flow. Each month brings forth a story and one or two articles, and sometimes, even two stories ('Juloos', 'Samar Yatra', 'Patni Se Pati', 'Sharab Ki Dookan', 'Maiku'), and an editorial seething with restrained anger.

A new novel, too, had been announced in the first number as due for serialization from the next number, but that did not materialize in the rush of the other work, and only a glimpse of its characters and plot could be seen in the story 'Samar Yatra'. The time for the writing of *Karmabhumi* [The Field of Action] eventually came when the national struggle had entered a more hectic phase and assumed a clearer direction, while the summoning of a bond of security from his press and the arrest of his wife had brought the field of action right within his home!

Through these days of the Salt Tax agitation Premchand lived in a house near the Aminuddaula Park. The local office of the Congress, that is, the headquarters of the agitation for the city, was right next door. In front was the Aminuddaula Park, the point at which all the political processions in the town ended and the venue of a public meeting almost every other evening. That was where illicit salt was made, and that was where bonfires of foreign-made cloth were lit. Countless persons were sent off to the Park to make salt after Premchand had put a khadi cap on their heads and put a *paan* in their mouths and his wife had applied *tilak* on their foreheads.

The agitation grew stronger day by day. Alert at his post, Premchand continued to wield his own weapon, a cultural weapon but a mighty one and one totally dedicated to the

national cause. Now chastising the people and now cajoling them, now persuading and now exhorting them, he dealt blow after impassioned blow at the enemy while he considered various aspects of the whole issue in turn.

In the second number of his journal Premchand wrote in an essay under the title 'Whom will Swaraj Harm?':

> There can be no doubt that the Swaraj movement is a movement of the poor. Under the British rule the condition of the poor, the peasants, and the workers has deteriorated, and continues to deteriorate, to a greater extent than of any other section of society. Though members of the Congress and even others may from time to time plead the cause of the peasants in the name of justice and morality, they cannot have the same poignant realization of the pain and suffering of peasants as does a peasant himself.... It is not therefore incorrect to say that swaraj is a demand of the peasants, and an essential condition so that they may live. But why is it assumed that because swaraj will be beneficial to the peasants it will also be harmful to all the other sections of society?

As the movement grew stronger and better organized, so did the authorities resort to greater repression. Searches, arrests, lathi-charges and firings grew daily more frequent. And this continued to be so throughout the year 1930. Jawaharlal Nehru was arrested on 14 April, and Gandhi on 5 May. On 8 May, the population of Sholapur uprose to take command of their town. In Lucknow itself, police and white officials camped in strength in the twin parks of Aminabad, and Section 144 of the Penal Code was promulgated prohibiting all public assemblies. As Premchand reported to Banarasi Das Chaturvedi on 3 June, "The new policy of wielding the baton has quite daunted the people."

But it did not daunt Premchand. Provoked to greater anger he wrote the same month an article on 'Dandashastra' (The Law of the Baton):

> While England has over the last hundred years made numerous great and wonderful inventions, besides expounding many important philosophical and scientific matters, the single most wonderful invention which it has made in conjunction with the Indian bureaucracy, and which will keep aloft forever after the banner of its fame, is that miraculous and epoch-making political invention called Batonism.... How easy and simple it has rendered the whole art of administration!.....No need now of law and order, the Councils and Assemblies have all become redundent, and courts and government departments are all a waste. For what cannot the omnipotent and all-conquering Baton do!

All you need is a tough and unyieldidng bunch of Baton-wielders, and all your problems are solved....

Aha! What a wonderful scene have we here! A crowd of several thousand is marching down a road shouting patriotic slogans and waving flags. They include children and women and also old men, for there are no age limits when it comes to patriotism. And here we have baton-carrying, spenr-carrying and rifle-carrying policemen all straining at the leash like a pack of hunting dogs... And if perchance some stray stone were to be hurled towards them, even if on purpose by one of their own plain-clothesmen, all hell would break loose. They'd promptly be ordered to fire. The guns would begin to rattle, felling the marchers before them like nine pins, and the officers..... would clap in glee. Bravo! What courage! What discipline!

This proved to be a bit more than the authorities could swallow, and they demanded a bond of one thousand rupees as security from the press. Four numbers of *Hans* had come out so far, and four forms of the fifth number had been printed. As it was the press and not *Hans* which had been asked to furnish the security, Premchand tried to have *Hans* printed elsewhere. But no press was willing and even the fifth number could not be completed.

The day after he had been asked to furnish the security, Premchand wrote to Munshi Dayanarayan:

> I too have fallen a victim to the Press Act. A security of one thousand rupees has been demanded. I leave for Banaras tomorrow. It seems to me a risk to bring out *Hans* under security. I think I should close the magazine down, and the press with it.

While all this was going on, Swarup Rani Nehru visited Lucknow on 20 July 1930. A simple housewife, she too had felt compelled to step out of her home by the call of the movement. Her son Jawaharlal had been arrested on 14 April, her husband Motilal on 30 June, and she felt she could no longer sit back at home. For the last few months Gandhi had been exhorting women to come out and join the movement, in particular by picketing liquor shops and shops selling foreign cloth. The women of Lucknow, who hadn't come forward so far, were now galvanized into action by this visit from Jawaharlal's mother.

And Shivarani Devi, too, feeling freer perhaps after the wedding of her daughter, now came out to join the fray with a Congress bag in her hand, though without letting her husband know for she was still weak in health. As soon as Premchand had gone off to

his office and the two sons to school, she would set out too with a bunch of women friends to work for the Congress.

One day while collecting money she and her friends chanced upon a truly formidable woman. A veritable hag, this old low-caste woman abused them left, right and centre in her choice tongue, and wouldn't part with a penny. But Shivarani too was adamant. All the women in the group sat down to picket this woman. Eventually at her wits' end, the woman in sheer exasperation threw a one-anna piece at them, but the coin rolled off into a gutter. No one was prepared to pick it up, and at the same time no one wanted to let go of this terribly hard-earned contribution. At last the coin was retrieved somehow, and the group of women volunteers moved on singing and shouting.

However, they also came in occasionally for a pleasant surprise, as for example when they called on Lady Wazir Hassan. It took some courage to approach the mansion of this lady whose husband was a knight of the British Empire but Shivarani Devi dared one day, telling herself that the worst that could happen was that she would be refused. So she and her group went round to call. Lady Wazir Hassan, who might possibly have seen Shivarani Devi somewhere before or heard of her, asked her, "So, what has brought you out today, sister?" and Shivarani.....Devi replied, "But how can we not come out, sister?" If we were all of us to sit at home....".

But Lady Wazir Hassan did not allow her to complete the sentence. She asked them in and led them to her room where they saw, to their utter surprise, a spinning-wheel and lots of balls of home-spun thread.

The number of women volunteers swelled gradually from seven to seven hundred, a Mahila Ashram was duly established which

carried on as an independent organization after the Congress had been legally banned, until it too in turn was banned, and Shivarani Devi who had become very popular among her colleagues due to her fearless and rustically robust temperament, came to be appointed the captain of her group. Premchand probably even mentioned this to Mohan Lal Saxena, whom he regarded most highly of all among the local Congress leaders, to express his unhappiness at this development, for it seemed to portend to him her eventual imprisonment for which he thought her to be too weak physically.

On 9 November, Shivarani Devi was arrested while picketing. As it happened, Premchand was away from the town for four or five days, probably on a visit to Banaras.

On the 11th, he wrote to a nephew to give him the news:

> Your aunt was arrested on the 9th while picketing a foreign cloth shop. I saw her yesterday in prison and found her cheerful as ever. She has left us all behind and I now appear smaller in my own eyes. She has gone up a hundred-fold in my esteem. But until she comes and relieves me, I shall have to bear the burden of running the household.]

Shivarani Devi was tried on 24 November and sentenced to two months imprisonment. Premchand wrote to Jainendra the following day: "All this has kept me busy and worried for the last fortnight. I was planning to go to jail myself, but she beat me to it and barred my way".

The Round Table Conference was to begin on 12 November. Premchand wasn't terribly interested, hoping only that if no

honourable agreement was possible, the delegates would at least come back without any agreement at all.

The Press Ordinance had by now been lifted and after the temporary oblivion of about four months, Premchand returned to take up his old charge in November in his familiar style. The movement was now on the ebb and people had grown dispirited. Premchand, however, remained as undaunted as ever. Never having believed the numerous assurances of the political leaders that Swaraj could be won in a jiffy, he wasn't now in any way disappointed. This long battle was in some ways like a chronic illness, and those he knew only too well from his own experience.

The first priority on his return after four months of silence was a stock-taking of the developments of this period, and in an article titled 'Who is Winning in the Battle for Independence' Premchand made a thorough and full-blooded attempt to raise the morale of the people:

> We see all around us signs of our victory and if we continue our efforts in the same way we shall surely achieve our objective..... When bureaucracy begins to tread underfoot laws enacted by itself it must be thought to resemble a madman who bites himself with his own teeth and tears out his own flesh. Such a person cannot last long. The cup of his life is full. What was, in the event, the result of all those special ordinances? None other than what could be expected. The government tried to suppress picketing. But picketing has gained in strength every passing day. The government did admittedly suceed in closing down some newspapers, but this success was well and truly soured by those

cyclostyled news-sheets which came out in utter defiance of the law. The movement grew stronger a hundred-fold, and the government was frustrated here as well. The wearing of *khadi* was declared to be an offence in one place, and the use of the *takli* (a hand spinney) in another. If Lord Irwin approved of these antics of his subordinates he was thought to be a puppet in their hands, and if he disapproved but still didn't speak out, he was thought to be ineffective. But let us bear no grudge against either him or his subordinates. May they long wield batons, and may we long field them.

The *zamindars* as a class had kept away from the Congress. It would strengthen the movement considerably if they could somehow be brought within its fold. Though Premchand entertained no hopes of the older members of this class he was rather more optimistic of converting the younger ones. He now addressed them in an article written with a pen dipped in fire:

> If you are a true *kshatriya*, then act like a *kshatriya*. Do we need to tell you what the duty of a *kshatriya* is? You know it better yourself. You have been born with this duty as your natural heritage. Does one teach a duckling how to swim or a lion cub how to hunt? Do we need to teach the young *kshatriyas* of today what their duty is? Remember how your ancestors had performed this duty?.... They were ever willing to lay down their lives in the cause of truth. The mighty dared not exploit the weak and the poor in their presence, for they would have drunk the blood of those exploiters. A plea from the weak and the poor went straight to their heart. Any kind of bullying made their blood boil. Their valour wasn't confined to arranging shooting parties or games of polo for white officials.

Will you too support a policy by which the earnings of the poor are squandered in entertainning officials, and those who are rich and in authority feast off the blood of the weak and the poor? No,.... for you are the harbingers of a new age, you are young and aware and yet untainted by mean self-interest; you still hold your heads high, you haven't yet learnt to genuflect, and you are still full of passion.

[Chapter] 33

Within ten days of his return from Purnea, he was all set to go to Delhi. Jainendra had sent an irresistible invitation, in connection with the setting up of a Hindustani Sabha there. And this was a cause for which Premchand would ! gladly gone running not only to Delhi but even to Timbuctoo.

The festival of Holi marks a day on which, traditionally, people visit and meet together and embrace each other. For the meeting of Hindi and Urdu and for their confluence, no more auspicious day could have been chosen. Premchand spent the day of Holi at Jainendra's house in Daryaganj.

> Premchandji was sitting in the sun on a cot picking his teeth with a *neem* stem. Breakfast was over, and he was completely relaxed. He had on a *dhoti* and a vest which could barely hide his pale and thin body. It must have been about half past nine. Suddenly, a group of Holi revellers burst into the house and treated him to such a squirt of coloured powder that Premchand was initially quite shocked. In a flash he had been soaked through with coloured water. He got up a little dazed, hesitated for a moment, took in the situation, and then gave such a loud

laughter that I can still recall it today. He said, 'But look, Jainendra, I am supposed to be a guest!...'.

But when the group that had burst in refused to protect this guest from similar onslaughts by other groups yet to arrive, Premchand said, 'Fine then, I am not going to get out of these clothes. I'll remain on this cot here, and let them come who may!']

The same evening he inaugurated the Hindustani Sabha at the Jamia Millia. The function was well attended, and Premchand was greatly pleased. He wrote in the following issue of *Hans* (April 1936):

> For the first time probably anywhere in India, Urdu and Hindi litterateurs and writers of Delhi met at the Jamia-Millia, Delhi on 8 March to found together a Hindustani Sabha, whose aim it will be to bring together writers from both languages, to promote love, sympathy and unity among them, to provide opportunities for them to understand and appreciate the thoughts and sentiments of each other, and to organize the development of the Hindustani language. There was a time when even though knowledge and art were not so highly developed and there wasn't such political consciousness as now, there was yet great mutual love in the hearts of people.... But the times changed and Hindi became identified as the language of the Hindus and Urdu of the Muslims. The Hindus turned their back on Urdu, and the Muslims on Hindi. Two separate camps were formed, and the two languages and literatures became politicised...Literature has no truck with politics, for its subject is man, and a man remains a man whatever label he may affix to his forehead. But ours is an age of politics, and there is no

field of human endeavour which is not susceptible to political insularity.

For Premchand, this is not merely an academic question, nor a question of literature alone, but the question of national unity. This is an attempt by him to set right what the veterans of politics could not accomplish, or, rather, what they did their best to ruin, for the success of an effort like his would lead to peace and harmony and its failure to untold destruction and disaster.That is why Premchand is so obsessed with it. It is also a task for which he is specially well qualified, as a bilinguist and an interpreter who can explain the point of view of one party to the other. It is an enormous enterprise of nation-building, and Premchand has taken up the challenge, with his limited resources, in the last phase of his life. The Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad is the answer to that parochialism which keeps raising its head here and there, while the movement for Hindustani is the answer to that peculiar issue in Indian history and society, and the issue of Hindu-Muslim relations, which cannot possibly be skirted or avoided. All his life Premchand has breathed and used this very language and this very culture, but it seems that is not enough. There comes a time when it becomes necessary to shout from rooftops, and this is precisely what Premchand has been doing for the last year or two, prepared to travel the hardest distances in order to be able to say just this one thing, about which he also wrote to Banarasi Das Chaturvedi on 31 March.

> But how to bridge this widening gulf? It is useless to expect anything of these politicians. It is futile to expect them to be large-hearted. It is writers who must show the way. And they can do it better as friends than as enemies.

Premchand returned to Banaras on the night of 10 March to find a letter from Sajjad Zaheer waiting for him. It was proposed to hold a conference of the Progressive Writers' Association simultaneously with the session of the Congress in Lucknow, and Premchand had been requested to preside over it.

He replied, "As for the Presidentship, I am not fit for it. I say this not out of modesty but because of my short-comings." He suggested, instead, the names of K.M. Munshi, Dr. Zakir Hussain, and, best of all, Jawaharlal Nehru, though he also acknowledged that each of them was likely to be up to his neck in politics with hardly a moment to spare for literature. He then thought of another name. "But why don't you try Pandit Amaranatha Jha? He is also interested in Urdu literature, and he may agree to preside."

The local meetings of the Association were held regularly in Jha's study, and he might have agreed if pressed. But the members of the Association wanted Premchand more than anyone else, and Zaheer wrote again and again persistently. Finally, Premchand agreed in a reply he sent on 19 March:

> If we cannot find some other suitable president, then you can have me. My problem is that I'll have to write out the whole address.... Please indicate which issues you would like me to discuss in my address. I fear that my address may turn out to be unduly pessimistic. Please write to let me know today so that I may have prepared my address before I leave Banaras.

The reference seems to be to a meeting of the Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad scheduled to be held at Wardha on 3 and 4 April, but this was later postponed to coincide with the convention of the

Hindi Sahitya Sammelan at Nagpur, and was eventually held on 24 April.

The Progressive Writers' Association was to meet on 9 and 10 April. As for the organization, let us hear Sajjad Zaheer himself:

> As the dates of the conference drew closer, our panic increased in proportion. Due to lack of funds, we couldn't even arrange to lodge and board our delegates. We had arranged to put up some of them with our personal friends and relatives. Many others had gone to stay at the camps set up by the Congress, where a hut could be hired for only a few rupees and food was cheap. Some others stayed in the vacant rooms in the university hostels.

Nor could we have arranged to welcome outstation delegates at the railway station. After all, how much could just the three or four of us have done? Even so we had decided to meet at the station our president Munshi Premchand. As Mahmood was busy elsewhere, Rashida and I had decided to go to the station. We had even borrowed a car for a little while.

The train was due at nine in the morning and we had planned to leave for the station at half past eight. We were having a cup of tea at about eight o'clock when we heard a *tonga* driving in, even as a servant came in to say that some one was asking for me. I came out to find Premchandji.....

But even before I could say a word, Premchand laughed and said, 'It's with some difficulty that I have found your house. Have been going round in circles for some time!'

Rashida too had come out in the meanwhile and both of us now began to offer excuses....We discovered that we had been

misinformed about the time of the train's arrival..... The time-table had been revised with effect from 1 April. But now Premchandji began to offer his excuses. 'Yes, I should really have sent you a telegram, but then I said, where's the need? If I don't find anyone at the station, I'll just take a *tonga* and come straight to your house.....'.

All the while, I was thinking of how grand receptions are organized for presidents of other conferences, how they are garlanded as soon as they get off the train and are then taken out in a procession amidst much shouting of slogans, while here was our president Munshi Premchand who had bought a ticket out of his own pocket and arrived quietly with no one even to direct him much less to meet him at the station. Sitting in an ordinary *tonga* he had himself arrived informally enough at the house of the organizers, and far from complaining, didn't show even a wrinkle on his brow....

After breakfast, when Zaheer enquired about his address, Premchand pulled it out and handed it to him with a loud laughter. Zaheer glanced through it and then said, "But isn't your language here just a trifle heavy?"

Premchand laughed again and said, 'Well, I said to myself — let me write a language that will show them....'

And after a pause he added, "After all, I am the son of a *kayastha*, am I not!"

The Urdu he had written was, indeed, very heavy which hardly any non-Urdu speakers could have followed, and it was only fair that they took Premchand to task for it.

So far, Premchand had in connection with this movement been associated and corresponded with only Ahmad Ali, Sajjad

Zaheer, Abdul Haque, Josh Malihabadi, Firaq Gorakhpuri and Aijaz Hussain, and the impression had somehow formed in his mind that this was going to be an Urdu writers' conference. Accordingly, he had brought along an address written in a highly refined and pure Urdu steeped in Persian.

But what he had to say was very simple, very straight-forward and very sincere, and he said it with great passion and vigour:

> Language is a means, not an end.... The purpose of poetry and literature is no doubt to enhance the intensity of our experiences, but, at the same time, the life of man is something more than love between a man and a woman.... Morality and literature have but one aim — they differ only in the method of their preaching. Morality attempts to influence our mind and hearts through arguments and preachings, while literature has chosen for itself the area of emotions and mental states..... In old times the reins of society were held by religion..... and the means it adopted were the concepts of sin and good deeds..... Now literature has taken over this function, with the love of beauty as its means.

The nearly two-hour long address was largely devoted to an exposition of the elements of the true, the good, and the beautiful in literature, but it wasn't a highly complex or a merely academic exposition. Through each word of it could be heard the experience of a life-time of an illistrious writer; each word of it was imbued with the strength of his passionate convictions.

Talking of beauty, Premchand said to his rapt audience :

> The question is what is this thing called beauty? We have seen the rising and the setting sun, we have seen the red glow of dawn and of twilight, we have seen fragrant

flowers, we have seen birds singing in sweet tones, we have seen murmuring streams, we have seen dancing water-falls — and all this is beauty. Why do these scenes have the power to gladden our hearts? Because there is a harmony in them of colour or sound. It is the symphony or a blending together of various instruments which is the secret of the fascination of music. We ourselves have been created through a proportionate harmony of elements, and therefore our soul constantly seeks a similar balance and harmony.

Premchand went on to declare plainly and unambiguously enough, and fearlessly, his own passionate convictions:

> I do not hesitate to say that like all other objects I weigh art too on the scales of utility. We must change our criterion of beauty.... Art has been, and still is, taken to mean a narrow aèstheticism..... Its view is not yet wide enough to comprehend the sublime beauty of the battle of life... For it, beauty lies in a lovely woman, but not in that plain poor mother of many children who has put her baby to sleep at the edge of the field and is now sweating in toil. But this is the defect of a narrow vision. If this view of beauty undergoes an enlargement, it will be found that if painted lips and cheeks hide vanity and heartlessness, these parched lips and the tears on these withered cheeks reflect self-sacrifice, reverence and forbearance.

This is a new, balanced and vital vision of truth and beauty which was being so clearly expounded here perhaps for the first time in this country.

Finally, Premchand came to a point which had rankled with him before but had ceased to rankle any more, for it had now found a quiet repose in a sublimated view of life:

> The Temple of Literature has no place for the devotees of wealth and splendour. For here are needed worshippers who have made service the sole meaning of their life, and whose hearts have sympathy for the suffering and the passion of love. As for honour, it is what we make of it. If we serve the society with sincerity and devotion, honour, prestige and fame will all kiss our feet. Why then should we bother about honour and prestige? The spiritual joy of service should be our true reward. Why should we hanker after impressing upon the society our greatness, or want to hold it in our awe? Why should we be afflicted by the desire to live in greater comfort than the others? Why should we want to rank among the rich? For we are foot-soldiers, marching on with the banner of society in our hands....

The Rifah-e-Aam Hall was packed to capacity and listened in pin-drop silence. This was new ground; this was a new language.

Busy with all these journeys and engagements, Premchand had written not a single story over the previous three months, except 'Kafan' published in *Jamia.* And it wasn't as if this hectic round of activity had now come to an end. Writing to Munshi Dayanarayan on 1 April to tell him that he won't be able to come to Kanpur from Lucknow now for a couple of days as he would have liked to, Premchand explained that he was scheduled to preside over an Aryabhasha Sammelan at Lahore the very day after the conference at Lucknow ended!

However, Munshi Dayanarayan himself made it a point to come down to Lucknow, and the two friends met, and Dayanarayan also took the opportunity to snap up for his *Zamana* the presidential address by Premchand which has cast such a spell on

everyone who had heard it. On the night of the 10th Premchand left for Lahore.

Premchand was accorded a tremendous welcome in Lahore. He was put up with the people who produced Amritdhara, a popular medicine. Scores of persons came to call on him, dozens of meetings were held for him, and for the first time Premchand realized what a large number of readers and admirers he had in Punjab among both men and women.

In his address to the Arayabasha Sammelan, Premchand began appropriately enough by extolling the Arya Samaj:

> As for myself I regard the Arya Samaj as no less a cultural organization than a religious organization. Indeed, if you will forgive me, I should like to add that its cultural achievements are far better known and appreciated than its religious achievements....The Arya Samaj was the first to take steps for the uplift of the *harijans*. It was the first to realize the need for education of women. It was the Arya Samaj which proved that our cast-system was based not on distinctions of birth but on difference of professions. The credit for abolishing caste distinctions and the various orthodox injunctions on cooking and taking food within the caste also goes to the Arya Samaj.

Proceeding then to his main theme, that of Hindi-Urdu unity, Premchand said:

> The development of our language bears the stamp of our culture, and where there are various shades within the culture there are bound to be as many shades within the

language. The language that you and I now use is the language of the area around Delhi..... It was the Muslims who raised this dialect of the Delhi area to the status of language, which it hadn't enjoyed before, and who through their use of it made it the language of the court, so that wherever the courtiers and nobles of Delhi went they took this language with them. That is how it reached the Deccan and it was in the Deccan that it spent its childhood..... As you may know, the first literary compositions in Hindi are by Amir Khusro who lived even before the Mughals during the Khilji dynasty.

He went on to lay the blame for dividing this common language into two on the policies of the British:

> It was all the doing of the College at Fort William, which gave recognition to two styles of the same language as being different languages. We cannot say whether there was some kind of politics at work even then, or whether the two languages had already diverged substantially. But the hands which then split our language into two also thereby split our national life into two.

This divergence of ways, due to which the one language was forcibly Sanskritised and the other Persianized-Arabicised, was fatal for both of them:

> The reason for this partition is probably this that our educated elite is getting increasingly isolated from the mass of the people and isn't even aware of how the people express their thoughts and sentiments. A language which is written and understood by only a small educated minority becomes artificial, lifeless and ponderous. It

loses all power to reach the heart of the people or to deliver its message to them. It is like a pond which has marble steps leading down to it and lotuses blooming in it but whose water is stagnant. Can this water be as fresh, as invigorating and as clear as a flowing stream? The language of a nation is that which the nation understands, and which reflects the soul and the spirit of the nation. If the language of the educated elite must be the language of the nation, why don't we then accept English as our national language, for my experience shows that the educated elite of today speaks English with an ease and writes English with a fluency with which it cannot speak or write either Urdu or Hindi.... These are the people who have reached such heights that they are quite untouched by the heat and the dust below. Let them remain suspended in mid-air. As for ourselves, we cannot ascend those heights even if we tried our hardest. We must live and die in the midst of this very heat and dust.

To these worshippers of English suspended in mid-air, Premchand addressed a Persian quartrain by Iqbal to the effect that they must learn to fly free on their own wings rather than cling on to the wings of others, while to the common man like himself he said:

The chief cause of the gulf between our languages is the gulf between our hearts. We must bridge this gulf through mutual intercourse..... It is neccessary for both the sections among ourselves to learn both the scripts and both the languages. When we can sacrifice fifteen years of our life in acquiring English, can't we spend even a month or two on learning a script and a literature on which may depend not only the progress of our nation but its very existence?

This is a lifelong dream which has arisen out of Premchand's own practice and experience and which is now being shattered before his eyes. He must save it somehow..... And it is in order to preserve this dream of unity that the travel-shy Premchand has been wandering footloose all over the place, to Bombay, Madras, Delhi, Lahore, Mysore, Bangalore, Allahabad and Purnea....

He stayed in Lahore for ten days or so and addressed dozens of meetings, on the twin themes of the movement for progressive literature, of which he was the recently acclaimed president, and of the Hindustani Sabha of which he was the founder and the chief spokesman.

He spoke about the Hindustani Sabha at some length at a meeting presided over by Bakhshi Tek Chand and attended by Imtiaz Ali Taj and Bashir Ahmad among others. Such was the impact of what he said or such the change in atmosphere caused by his speech that at that very meeting many Urdu writers ventured to use some Hindi words while some Hindi writers also incorporated Urdu words in their speeches. The results were not always perfect and were indeed occasionally even comic, but the gesture was significant and touching and it was the geture that mattered.

A Hindustani Sabha was formed, an executive committee was elected — but would it last?

The annual session of the Congress was scheduled to be held at Nagpur the following week, and conventions of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan and the Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad were to be held simultaneously with it.

At 9 a.m. on 24 April 1936, the first (and last) convention of the Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad got under way in the Convocation Hall of the Nagpur Unviersity with Gandhiji in the chair. Among the literary and political luminaries present on the occasion were Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, Babu Rajendra Prasad (currently president of the Sahitya Sammelan), Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, Seth Jamnalal Bajaj, Chakaravarti Rajagopalachari, Purushottam Das Tandon, K.M. Munshi, Kasturba Gandhi, Mrs. Kamalabai Kibe, Maulana Abdul Haque, Kaka Kalelkar, Jainendra Kumar, Makhanlal Chaturvedi, Jayachandra Vidyalankar, Shankararao Deo, and Munshi Premchand who had probably come rushing straight from Lahore.

Gandhi began in his characteristically light and informal vein:

> .....Kaka Saheb has said that our objective is to spread patriotism among our villagers, and to propagate the literature being written in one province in the other provinces. What it means is that we have to propagate a homely language and that is perhaps why you have installed me here as a homely enough president..... How can I presume to have a place among litterateurs? I don't even know much of Gujarati literature, to say nothing of Hindi literature..... [But] Munshiji [K.M.] tells me that I alone can do this job, for litterateurs are each like a lion. They are safe only when in their cages. Bring them together, and you will have a fight..... As for me, I am, of course, a Mahatma. You have assumed that a Mahatma can do anything.

Nor were people wrong to assume this, but such was the irony of fate that it was something which the Mahatma himself said

which provoked a battle royal, due to which the Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad lay cold and dead within a very few months.

What happened was that when the Subjects Committee met later the same day at the same place, there was a long debate right at the start on which language the Parishad should adopt as the medium of its proceedings. Gandhi proposed that this language should be identified by the name of "Hindi or Hindustani", for the use of 'Hindi' alone connoted a language replete with Sanskritic words while 'Hindistani' on the other hand suggested an Urdu laden with Arabic and Persian. Therefore, the most appropriate term for describing the medium of the Parishad would be "Hindi or Hindustani".

While Gandhi said this and went away, the controversy raged on and in fact spread beyond the Subjects Committee even into the open session the following day. As Premchand was to explain later in an article in which he reported the proceedings of the convention, the crux of the matter was that the word 'Hindi' was anathema to Urdu just as 'Urdu' was anathema to Hindi. An in-between form of the two languages was Hindustani which also claimed to be the language of the man in the street. But when the Parishad proposed to use the term 'Hindi' or 'Hindustani' instead of simply 'Hindustani', this raised the hackles of all the Urduwallahs present, who suspected that "Hindi or Hindustani" was no better than another name for 'Hindi'.

In any case, when the matter came up in the open session the following day, Gandhi's proposal was vehemently opposed by the few Urdu-speaking delegates. As Muhammad Aquil later wrote:

It was a delicate situation in which no one was prepared to come out against Mahatmaji. But Premchand then stood up and made a strong and impassioned speech in favour of the use of 'Hindustani' as the medium of the proceedings of the Bharatiya Sahitya Parishad. It was rumoured among the Urdu circles that this made Premchand highly unpopular among the Hindi writers. I do not know how far this is true. But he did on the occasion act with great boldness and courage, which pleased the Urduwallahs very much.

Maulvi Abdul Haque also corroborated this when he later wrote that while so many big shots in the Congress had fallen silent after Gandhi's speech, Premchand stood by the supporters of **Urdu** right till the end.

And yet this did not dispel the rancour that had entered the heart of Maulvi Abdul Haque, nor did it prevent him from going on to write in his journal *Urdu*:

> The day has been when Mahatma Gandhi had written in his own hand a letter to Hakim Ajmal Khan in Hindustani, that is, in the Urdu language and in the Persian script, while today the time has come when, to say nothing of Urdu, he is not even prepared to write or hear the word 'Hindustani' by itself. Not once but repeatedly in his speech he said that if the word 'Hindustani' alone were used in the resolution it would be taken to mean Urdu, but this hadn't struck him, it seems, when the National Congress itself passed a resolution with the word 'Hindustani' alone. But what could be the reason for this? What has happened in the meantime which could account for this breath-taking reversal? On

reflection it appears that the cause of all this departure and deviation, chopping and changing, and tricks and wiles is the hapless politics of our country. So long as Mahatma Gandhi and his followers hoped to be able to arrive at a political agreement with the Muslims, they kept chanting 'Hindustani, Hindustani', which proved to be a good lullaby for putting us to sleep. But when they could no longer entertain such a hope or when they no longer felt the need for such an agreement, they cast off their cloak of deception and came out in their true colours. Let him now propagate Hindi as much as he likes. If he cannot let go of Hindi, we cannot let go of Urdu either. If he is proud of his vast resources, we are not entirely helpless either.

This was like putting a match to a heap of dynamite. How long had Premchand waited to see the day when Urdu and Hindi would come together and unite, and what had he not done to bring it about and now the whole edifice was about to go up in smithereens!

He sat down to reply to Maulvi Saheb, not in anger but in a tone of supplication, as if begging for mercy on a newborn babe:

> We were pained to see these words from the pen of an aged, thoughtful and sagacious elder like Maulana Abdul Haque. The meeting that he took part in had a majority of Hindiwallahs. There were not more than three representatives of Urdu in it. Even so, when the question of only 'Hindustani' against 'Hindi-Hindustani' was put to vote, the number of votes cast for 'Hindustani' were just under half the total votes cast. If my memory serves me right, the division was fifteen for to twenty-five

against. In a Hindi-dominated meeting where the representatives of Urdu numbered only three, the fact that fifteen votes were cast in favour of Hindustani amounts to a victory in defeat. Very likely, 'Hindustani' would have gained further ground at a later meeting. Nor is it really surprising that there weren't any more supporters of 'Hindustani', which has not yet been put into practice. Even those who hold a brief for 'Hindustani', and among them the present writer is one, have themselves not yet been able to devise a viable form of 'Hindustani'.....

In conclusion, Premchand again made a tender appeal:

> We pray to Maulana Saheb.....kindly not to call into question anyone's motives or integrity. What appears to be something tremendously difficult now may quite possibly turn out to be something simple and easy in a year or two.

By the month of June the printing of *Godan* had been completed. On the 10th of this month, Premchand wrote enthusiastically to Jainendra: "*Godan* is out. A copy will be dispatched to you tomarrow". And again on the 22nd:

> I am today sending you *Godan*. Read it and if you like it, write an article somewhere, in *Arjuna* or *Vishal Bharat* or *Hans*. But if you don't like it, just write to me, and don't write the article.

What an extraordinary man! He says that he should, and also what he should not!

In his messianic fervour, Premchand has hardly regarded what a heavy toll his recent incessant travels have taken of him. His body —, and his mind-are now utterly tired and run down. He does not feel well, and his digestion is playing up again. This is no way to go on.

Now even *Godan* has been finished. Now he should take a long rest.

About the author

Amrit Rai (1921 – -) Son of Munshi Premchand, one of the most important writers of the country, Amrit Rai is a novelist and short story writer in his own right. He is also the author of a seminal academic study of Indian linguistic history which appeared in English translation as *A House Divided: The Origin and Development of Hindi/Urdu* (Oxford India Paperbacks, 1991).

But the work by which he is perhaps best known today is his biography of his father, *Qalam ka Sipahi,* which appeared in Hindi in 1962. Its English translation is by Harish Trivedi and has appeared as *Premchand: His Life and Times* (Oxford:1990). Biographies in Hindi, Amrit Rai says, were like the untouchable standing outside the door. But he tried to give respectability to the genre and also bring a breath of fresh air in biographical writing by being both objective and dispassionate. His pioneering biography is said to be the foundation of all subsequent work on Premchand.

Works:

Amrit Rai. (1962) *Premchand: Qalam ka Sipahi* [The Soldier with a Pen]. Allahabd: Hans Prakashan.

(1982; 2002) *Premchand: Life and Times.* Trans. Harish Trivedi. New Delhi: Oxford.

(1984). *A House Divided: The Origin and Development of Hindi/Urdu.* New Delhi: Oxford.

Some other works: *Subah ka Rang* (1950), *Lal Dharti* (1952), *Agnishiksha* (1954), *Geeli Mitti* (1955), *Bhatiali* (1969), *Chaturang* (1973), *Dhuan* (1977) and *Meri Shreshtha Vyang Rachnayen.*

Glossary

Abdul Haque, Maulvi (1872-1960): Urdu writer, journalist and critic.

Amir Khusro (1255-1324). The first Hindi writer who used khariboli.

Caine, (Sir Thomas Henry) Hall (1853-1931): Novelist whose melodramatic novels were popular in their day but weresoon forgotten.

Chakbast [Brij Narain Chakbast] (1882-1926): Lucknow lawyer, Urdu writer known for his book of poems *Subah-e-Watan* (The Morning of Motherland).

Chaturvedi, Banarasi Das (1892-1985): Hindi journalist, edited *Vishal Bharat* of Ramanand Chatterjee, and *Madhukar.*

Dominion Status: a term used to refer to self-governing territory of the Brtish Commonwealth equal in status...united by common

allegiance to the Crown. The British government offered dominion status in 1929 but the Congress demanded purna swarajya or complete independence in its session at Lahore in 1931.

Hardy, Thomas (1840-1928): Well-known English novelist and poet.

Imtiaz Ali Taj (1899-1975): Urdu writer and liberal nationalist. Well-known for his play *Anarkali* (1927).

Jainendra Kumar (1905-): Hindi novelist and short story writer Among his twelve novels are *Parakh, Sunita, Tyagapatra, Muktibodh and Jayavardhan*

***Karbala*:** a play by Premchand written in 1924.

Lady Wazir Hassan: Wife of Sir Syed Wazir Hasan (1872-1947). UP judge and politician.Three of their five sons were Ali Zaheer, Sajjad Zaheer (1905-76) and Hussein Zaheer.

Munshi Dayanarayan Nigam: founder of the journal *Zamana* who later came to be an intimate friend of Premchand.

Sajjad Zaheer (1905-1976): Progressive Urdu writer

Sheikh Sa'adi: Persian poet of late 13th century, known for his *Gulistan* and *Bostan.*

Thackeray, William Makepeace (1811-63): English novelist. His *Vanity Fair* came out in monthly serial parts in 1847-48.

Timbuctoo: A town in Mali in Africa; any distant or remote place.

Tolstoy, Leo (1828-1910): Russian novelist, short story writer His *Resurrection* came out in 1899.

Questions

1. In what sense was Premchand a commoner extraordinary?
2. What makes Amrit Rai's biography so unique and distinctive?
3. How was Premchand's vision of truth and beauty different from the traditional concept of these values?
4. What induced Premchand to launch the journal *Hans*?
5. In what sense does Amrit Rai call Premchand a soldier?

25
KARUKKU * (Chapters 4 and 8)

Bama [Faustina Mary Fatima Rani]
Translation: Lakshmi Holmstrom

[Chapter] 4

From the time that I was a small child, I saw people working hard; I grew up amongst such people. At home, my mother and my grandmother laboured from sunrise to sunset, without any rest. And to this day, in my village, both men and women can survive only though hard and incessant labour.

There is work of various kinds. If you look at agricultural labour, there's ploughing, manuring, watering, sowing the seed,

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* Sources: Macmillan, Chennai and Bama

separating the seedlings and planting them out; then, weeding, spraying the fields with fertilizer, reaping the grain, working on the threshing floors, planting groundnut, selecting ripe coconuts. All this. Apart from this work in the fields, there's construction labour: digging wells, carrying loads of earth, gravel and stone. If even this is not available, then people have to go up to the hills to gather firewood, or they must work with palm-leaves, or at the kilns making bricks. People have to do some work in order to eat.

More than three quarters of the land in these parts is in the hands of the Naickers. People of our community work for them, each Paraya family attached to a Naicker family, as pannaiyaal, bonded labourers. As far as I have seen, it is only Palla and Paraya communities who work in this way. Other communities don't have to work so hard. The Koravar or gypsies, and leather-working Chakkiliyar would sweep the streets, dredge and clean the drains, and make a living that way. Sometimes they wove winnowing trays, boxes, baskets for carrying paddy, and chicken coops, and earned a few coins that way. Everyone in my community had to work hard for their livelihood. Only a few of the teachers' families lived with any degree of comfort.

Everybody said that my Paatti was a true and proper servant. She worked as a labourer to a Naicker family, but she was also a Kotthaal — she hired labourers for them, brought them to work regularly, supervised them, and made sure they recieved their wages. Except for Sundays, she went to work every single day. Sometimes, if the Naicker insisted, she would rush through Pusai before daylight on Sunday, and then run to work. She'd rise before cock-crow at two or three in the morning, draw water, see to the household chores, walk a long distance to a Naicker's house, work till sunset and then come home in the dark and cook a little gruel for herself.

When I was a bit older, Paatti used to take me to the fields with her. We were not a household with many comforts or conveniences. During the school term, as soon as lessons were over, I'd go and collect such things as the thorns used for fences, or palmyra and coconut-palm stems and fronds for fuel. I would collect fresh cowdung and pat it into flat cakes for burning. Sometimes I would go into the fields and pick up dried cowdung.

During the school holidays, I would go with Paatti or some other woman to work in the fields. Most often I helped to pull up the groundnut crop and to clean and sort the pods.

To pull up the groundnut crop and to clean and separate the pods, you had to wake up very early, well before cock-crow, pour some millet porridge into a carrying vessel, and run with it. In the fields, you had to pull up a heap of groundnut plants, and then sit down to pulling off the pods. At mid-day break, we would drink our kuuzh along with a mouthful of fresh nuts. We would separate and clean the pods until sunset time, and then carry them to the Naicker's granaries. There, the Naicker's pannaiyaal would measure the cleaned groundnuts by the marakkaal, and pay us five or ten paise for eack marakkaal. However hard you strained yourself, it never came to more than five rupees in all. We'd take what we were given, and come home only at dusk. After we came home, we'd buy a little rice, light the hearth and cook some gruel.

If we were going to glean the last of the groundnut crop that was left over in the fields, we would go somewhat later. We'd go here and there all over the fields where the groundnut crop had been pulled up, and use our shovels at random to hammer into the earth and rake it, so that we could pick up all the stray

groundnuts. The Naickers were never happy about this, though. They would chase us, throw stones and pieces of wood at us and drive us away. Occasionally, some of the Naickers would allow us to glean and strip the fields on condition that we gave them half or a third of what we had found. If we found any groundnuts, well and good. If not, we had nothing. In any case, the Naickers would only let us go home in the evening, after they had taken their share. We would take what was left to the chekkadi, the bazaar where the oil-press was at one time, sell it to the tradesmen there and buy some rice or a little broken-grain. You couldn't put the broken-grain gruel in your mouth. It stank so much. But if we had no money, broken-grain gruel was all we could eat. Sometimes I sold my groundnuts and brought the money home to my mother. Sometimes, I just gave her the groundnuts.

We'd go at daybreak to the Naicker's house to shell the groundnuts. Here they would measure out the dried groundnuts to us, by the marakkaal. We'd sit in the cattleshed, take up the groundnuts in both hands alternately, and break the shells by smashing them against the floor. If we were in a great hurry, we's use both hands as well as our teeth to shell the groundnuts. If you used your teeth, your mouth would fill with dust and your throat would choke. But could one afford to bother about all that? We had to work as hard as we could to shell all the nuts. At the same time we had to be careful not to crack the nuts themselves. If too many of the nuts were broken, the Naicker would be really angry. You can't use broken nuts as seeds, can you, that's why. If we chatted in between shelling, or ate one or two of the nuts, that was it. The Naicker would be furious and swear at us, using every term of abuse he knew. They paid us five to ten paisa per marakkaal. So we didn't make that much money this way either. At the very most, we'd make five or six rupees. Even so, I went with Paatti to shell groundnuts.

If none of this work was available, I'd go off to collect stray onions left in the field or thorny twigs. Some days I'd go with other children to collect firewood from the mountain jungle. On such days, I'd wake up early in the morning, pour some kuuzh into a carrier, and collect four annas from my mother to give to the 'Guarder' or forester. If we didn't give any money to the Guarder he would not allow us to collect any firewood. He lived in the forestry bungalow and had a habit of coming round on inspection unexpectedly.

It wasn't that easy to go into the jungle. We had to climb the steep mountain slopes one by one, pick up the dried pieces of wood that lay here and there, and then tie them together into bundles. Before you could manage to do this, the twigs and thorns would scratch and tear your face, your hair, your arms and legs. Sometimes your skin would be all torn and bleeding. But if you worried about all this, there was no way you could gather firewood. Sometimes your hair would get all entangled in the branches and nearly split your skull apart. You never knew which way to go forward. What roads or paths were there for you to take? We had to push and shove and crawl our way through bushes and briars.

After all this struggle and hardship, you couldn't just tie up your bundle, lift it on to your head and walk home. Something would pull you back here, a tree or a creeper would block your way there. So you could never climb down the hill easily. You had to creep along gradually, slowly rolling the firewood bundle forward. Having reached the base of the hill one way or another, you could then carry your bundle on your head and walk home, by which time, what little energy that was left in you would have ebbed away, and the load would feel really heavy. It wasn't a short distance, after all, between the mountain jungle and our

village. The others would bring their bundles to the Naicker street and sell them for seven or eight rupees each. But I never actually sold a bundle of firewood. I took mine home for our use.

In those days, my mother too used to go collecting firewood. On one ocassion she brought home a bundle of firewood, leaned it against the wall and then began vomiting vast gobs of blood. But it was only by toiling like this, without taking any account of their bodies as human flesh and blood, that people of my community could even survive. As soon as children grew up to be ten or twelve years of age, they'd go and find some way of making money. Until that time, they'd go about carrying their younger siblings on their hips. They'd even gather a few twigs and sticks, and learn to boil a little gruel. It was always the girl children who had to look after all the chores at home. The older women would come home in the evenings after a day's work, and then see to the household jobs. If there were boys in the house, they would graze the sheep and cattle. When they grew a bit older, they'd go off to work in the fields like the older men.

When it was harvest time, we used to take a wide winnowing tray and stiff broom, and go and stand by the lake shore or even by the bank of the filthy canal, so that we could sweep and gather up the ears of the grain falling off the sheaves that were bing carried to the thrashing floor. We'd winnow the grain we collected and take it home. But it was only the young children and old women who did this. Grown up girls and women in their prime, though, went directly to the fields, winnowed the grain there by the basketful and were paid in kind.

In this way, whatever we made, either by picking up the scatterd grain with great difficulty, or from winnowing it in the f ields, we then took to the shops. There were Nadar men who would set up

shop in our streets, weigh the grain and take it in exchange for tapioca or some such other goods. And at that time, we never realized how badly we were swindled during these bartering sessions.

In exactly the same way, when the cotton pods burst, we'd bring the cotton we gathered, and exchange it for goods. The tradesmen always managed to collect several bundles of cotton or grain for themselves by cheating us. Our hard work was exploited half the time by our Naicker employers. The rest of the time we were swindled by these tradesmen. So how was it possible for us to make any progress? It seems that it is only the swindlers who manage to advance themselves. But there is no way at all for the Dalit who sticks to fair methods, and who toils hard all her life, to make good.

Until the time that I was in eighth class, I worked in my village in all these ways. All the time I went to work for the Naickers, I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed. But there was nothing that I could do. They belonged to a higher caste. They had the money. We had to listen to what they said. However furious or resentful I felt in my heart, I have stepped aside for them, along with the other women of my community.

I was admitted into the convent school in the nearby village so that I could attend the ninth class. There I did not have to work all the time like this. I ate my meals, and I studied; that was all. During the holidays I returned to my own village. Children who boarded at the convent and studied there certainly had a special status in our village. All the same, when I went home I did all the chores that fell to me customarily.

After the tenth class, I finished my final exams and went home. My mother was walking from the street of the Naickers with a bundle on her head, made up of mango wood which she had gathered and tied together. I went along with her, back and forth, with two or three headloads of firewood which I gathered for her. To come to our part of the village from the Naicker street, you had to cross the Nadar street, the Thevar street, and then come past the oil-press and bazaar. Some people who had seen me carrying the firewood said to my mother with astonishment, "Your daughter has finished her schooling at the convent, yet she doesn't mind carrying firewood like this". I don't know why they were so surprised. In those days I really enjoyed that kind of hard physical labour. It is only recently I find I cannot do it any more. Because I've been to other places and have been engaged in studying different things, I find that my body isn't as flexible as it used to be.

When I saw our people working so hard night and day, I often used to wonder from where they got their strength. And I used to think, that at the rate they worked, men and women both, every single day, they should really be able to advance themselves. But of course, they never received a payment that was appropriate to their labour. And another thing. Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They always paid men more. I could never understand why.

Even though they worked so hard and suffered bodily pain, our people laughed and were cheerful. This is a community that was born to work. And however hard they toil, it is the same kuuzh every day. The same broken-grain gruel. The same watery dried-fish curry. It seems they never ever reflect upon their own terrible state of affairs. But do they have any time to think? You

have to wonder how the upper-castes would survive without these people. For it's only when they fall asleep at night that their arms and legs are still; they seem to be at work at all other times. And they have to keep working until the moment of death. It is only in this way that they can even half fill their bellies

Mind you, things get steadily worse and worse. In the old days, it is true, even tiny tots would hold on to sheep and cattle, and look after babies as they tumbled about in the streets around their houses. Nowadays, poor things, they go to work like adults. At the crack of dawn, even before the Madurai bus makes its appearance, these days, the van from the match-box factory will arrive. These tiny crab-like children pour their kuuzh into their carriers half asleep, totter along to the van, climb in and go off to work. They work at sticking on match-box labels; they make firecrackers and use chemicals; and they return home exhausted, at seven in the evening. At an age when they should be going to school, studying like everyone else and playing about in the evenings, they are shut up inside the factories instead. There are two or three schools available for the children nowadays. But these little ones' fate is the smell of match-box solution, not the smell of knowledge and learning. How can they afford to study, when it is such a struggle even to fill their bellies?

[Chapter] 8

I was born in a small village as a Dalit girl, I grew up, I studied, I worked for five years, and then, as I have said before, I entered a convent. Before I entered it, though, I read about the woman who founded that order. When I learnt how this woman had loved the poor and the lowly, with what steadfastness she had educated the children of the poor and helped them to go forward, I was greatly drawn towards her. I entered the convent with a deeply felt desire

that I too should do my utmost to live my life usefully and meaningfully.

It was only after I had joined that I became aware of the true state of affairs there, very gradually, and little by little. Both family members and others whom I knew outside my home had done their best to dissuade me. They had warned me that once inside, I would find that everything was different from the claims that were made. It was I who went in, dreaming that I was about to achieve something tremendous. It was only after I had entered the convent that I came to realize that what they had warned me about was entirely true. But I stayed, thinking to myself, well let me try and deal with this as best as I can.

The convent was a world in itself. We talked a great deal. We spoke about Lord Jesus, Our Lady, the disciplines of the order. At due times we ate good meals. We muttered our prayers according to our discipline. We celebrated this holy day and that, we feasted throughout the day on such occasions. There was such a variety of good things then that one could not make up one's mind what to eat and what to forego. Often, I didn't even know the names of these good things. And if I did, I couldn't even pronounce those names. The comforts and conveniences were such.

If the food was like this, the buildings were even better. All the people of my community from my village could have lived there. It was such a huge convent building, such a big school. I felt very strange about it. I felt a kind of shame. At the same time I felt as if I had gone into a Naicker house. I couldn't act or speak, or even eat independently. That was my feeling.

Then, was there the chance that you could just eat and sleep and go about your own buisness? Not a bit of it. There were such

arguments and dissensions going on within. There were such jealousies, such competition, such arrogance that one could only survive by one's own strategies, guile and cunning. People accused you of thinking thoughts that you had not thought; of speaking words that you had not spoken. Until you made your final vows you had to run about like a young child, dance to everyone's tune, take upon your own head every menial task which they pushed at you with their feet. I became fed up with it. I asked myself, was this why I chose to come here? I too have my own goal, I thought, I came here for the sake of my people; let these others go their own way.

In time I realized there was no real possibility of this. Always the discussion was at the level of what to prepare, what to eat, what to celebrate and how to enjoy, what to build and what to break, what to buy where and how to sell it. Why do people suffer, What is the state of this country, What did Lord Jesus actually do for people, Why did we become nuns, How can we undo these injustices — such questions never came out of their mouths.

Although the convent was so well-endowed, every time we went home on leave, we were expected to bring back some kind of gift. Was it possible for me to bring anything that would be appropriate to their status and position? Did we have such wealth or property? If someone brought them fancy gifts, whatever seemed appropriate to the convent's style of life, they made much of that person. If not, nobody took the slightest notice of who and what you were. There was definitely a special value attached to someone from a wealthy family, with influence among the upper castes. Otherwise, nobody bothered to come near you.

If you are inclined to think, well all right, the convent was like this, but at least the school would have been good, I have to say,

no, actually it was worse. Each class was full of children from wealthy families. They sat in rows, sleek and well-fed. All they had to do was to be light-skinned and to arrive in cars. Even the smallest children would eat meals which were brought to them by servant boys and girls, and whom they grandly ordered around.

As a token gesture they took four or five poor children into the school. These wretches usually shunned the rich ones and lurked in corners, trembling. Every now and then there would be complaints about them. The rich children would say, We don't want to sit next to these ones, they are dark-skinned, they are poor, they are ugly, they don't wear nice clothes. Even in a play or a dance performance the rich children didn't want to put on the costume of the poor. It seemed to me that it was a waste of my time to teach such children. I couldn't speak of this to the others in the convent. Had I spoken about it, they wouldn't, in any case, have listened to me.

As soon as we woke up in the morning there were prayers and Pusai; there were prayers at midday, and in the evening and at night; prayers throughout the day. But there was no connection between these prayers, the life we led and the work we did. On the one hand all these prayers were, as if done as a duty. On the other such power and status which can't ever be described as truly Christian.

The nuns are required to make three vows, of poverty, chastity and obedience. They teach that these vows liberate them and enable them to lead lives that are centred around ordinary people. But in truth, the vows become a means of control and enslavement.

When I was outside, I had experienced poverty, and had lived among those who suffered from poverty. But inside the convent I could not see even the traces and tracks of poverty. We could only go round and round, always within our luxurious cages, trapped in comfort.

They spoke so eloquently that we should love everyone, for we are all God's children. Yet the people they chose to talk to, those whom they admitted into their schools, those with whom they claimed relationships, were all rich. If we should challenge them about this, they said in explanation that God's calling is not just for the poor; the wealthy too are God's children. They explain that God had said, "The poor are with you always." You have to wonder whether you should laugh or cry.

They go on and on about the vow of "obedience" and force us into submission so that we can scarcely lift up our heads. We are not even allowed to think for ourselves in a way that befits our years. They want to think for us, and instead of us. We are not allowed the independence and rights that even small children are entitled to. When I thought to myself, towards the end of my time with them, never mind, let it all go, and asked only to be sent to a village or anywhere to a school with ordinary and poor children, they intimidated me by talking of "obedience" and "faith". They insisted I could go only where I was sent, I must only do as I was told. They exhorted me to see with the eyes of faith. All I could see was their authority flying high like a flag. People like me were to be sacrificed in order to maintain it. I simply could not understand how I could see all this with my eyes of faith.

In fact all three vows of theirs serve only to separate them from ordinary people, and the reality of ordinary lives, to put them at a great remove, as if they belonged to different world.

There is a lengthy training and preparation before one becomes a nun and decides to stay in the convent. What they taught us at that time was truly admirable. They told us each one of us is different, each one is unique, there is no one else at all like us in the whole world. It was good to hear that God created each one of us in a very special way.

But when it came to actual practice, it was not like that at all. They expected us to behave as if we had all been made from the very same mould. Nobody was allowed to think differently or speak differently. We had to accept only what our superior told us, as if it were God-given Scripture. If you didn't accept it, or spoke differently, then that was the end of you. They said there was something wrong about your childhood, some gross mistake in your upbringing. They said there was some fatal flaw in your family, as if they were looking at your horoscope.

And what is more, in the end they discovered that "obedience" and "humility" did not apply to you because God had not called you after all. In all, it seems as if they wanted to change us to fit various ideas into which they had been indoctrinated during their studies in Europe and in America. If we could not fit within the framework that they had devised, then they concluded that it was doubtful whether we truly had a vocation. We had to change. In the final analysis, we could not be ourselves. They wanted you to be destroyed utterly and remade in a new form. Where else can you find such madness?

Many people in the convent did not even know what was meant by Dalit. And those few who knew had an extremely poor opinion about Dalits; they spoke ill of us. When they spoke about Dalits in such terms, I would often shrink into myself. They did

not know then that I myself was a Dalit, and in those early days, I did not have the courage to tell them. I was afraid of how they might talk to me or behave towards me if I told them. When I heard them speak in such a way about the oppressed Dalit people, I used to wonder how these people could bring into being God's kingdom where there are neither the high nor the low.

Some of the things they said about Dalits:

"How can we allow these people to come into our houses? In any case, even if were to allow them, they would not enter our homes. They themselves know their place".

"There is nothing we can do for these creatures. And we shouldn't do anything for them. Because to do so would be like helping cobras".

"Even if we were to do something for them, they will never make progress. Their natures are like that".

"These days these peoples go about reasonably dressed. So you can't even make out who they are, sometimes".

"The government goes and gives these people all sorts of privileges. Why do illiterate people need all these things?"

If ever they had to speak about something unpleasant or ugly, they tended to categorise it as Harijan. What service can people with such tainted minds render? And all the time, my conscience kept hurting me, that although I heard, observed, and experienced all this, I too lived a privileged life like an upper-caste person.

After three years, I was transferred to a different place. Then, within a month I was moved five times. They assured me that all this was done because they were guided by the Spiritus Sanctus. Only I couldn't understand why the Spiritus Sanctus was so indecisive.

Well, I hoped that after all the moves and uncertainty, there would be a firm decision at last to place me in a small school or village. But instead, in the end, they sent me to teach in yet another big school for wealthy children. I was shattered. Was God's calling neccessary, I wondered, to take up this meaningless task of being a teacher to rich children, to help then get ahead? It struck me more and more that I might as well be a teacher in the outside world in that case. In that school I would have to act according to the rich children's demands. In fact the entire school was ruled by their demands. When you questioned this, you found out that the convent's income came largely from this source. So it seems one just had to close one's eyes and allow oneself to be dragged along.

I thought to myself, how can you run a school just for profit? Their justification was that from the income they made out of this school, they could do real service elsewhere. When I said, Well, you get on with making your profit, only send me elsewhere and amongst others, once again I was intimidated with "obedience" and "faith".

For some five months I gritted my teeth and gave it a try. I couldn't brave it out after that. For how long can you live in disguise? For how many days can oil and water stay mixed together? In the sixth month I decided I couldn't stand the torture any more, packed my box and walked out of the convent. The Lord only knows what I went through before I managed to do

that. Nor would they let me go easily. Somehow I struggled through it all and came home at last. And my difficulties since my return have not been trifling ones either.

About the author

Bama [pseudonym of] (Faustina Mary Fatima Rani) (1958–)
A dalit Christian, Bama was born in the village of Putthupatti in Tamilnadu. Her favourite sport during childhood was kabaddi. She explained in an interview: '*I liked the whole business of challenging, crossing over and vanquishing the opponent*'. After college she became a schoolteacher because she wanted to educate poor girls. At 26 she became a nun but her experience was disillusioning and she walked out after 7 years.

At the suggestion of a friend she wrote her autobiography *Karruku* (1992). The term *karukku* means palmyra leaves, whose serrated edges make them like doubled-edged swords. She compares them to her own life. Her next work was *Sangati* (1994) which was followed by *Kisumbukkaaran* (1996) (short stories and *Vanamam* (novel). As the Tamil writer Ambai, says, Bama is more than a writer, she is a chronicler and recorder of Dalit life and struggle in Tamil Nadu.

Works:

Bama

Karukku. (Tamil, 1992) Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Macmillan, 2000; *Sangati: Events*. (novel) Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Oxford, 2005; *Kisumbukkaaran* (short stories)(1996); *Vanama* (novel); Behal, Suchetra. 'Labouring for the cause of Dalits', Interview with Bama, *The Hindu*, March 6, 2003.

Glossary

Ayya: a term of respect like sir, derived from the word Ayyar, brahmin.

kuuzh: gruel

marakkaal: a measure

Nadar/Naickers: both names of agricultural castes, higher than dalits in the caste hierarchy

Pannaiyaal: farming

Parayas: dalits, outside the caste fold.

Paatti: grandfather

Pusai: puja

Questions

1. What major hurdles did Bama face as a dalit girl?
2. What is your impression of Bama as an autobiographer?
3. What according to you can be done to raise the dalit girls to a level of social equality with girls of other so-called higher castes?
4. What was Bama's experience of life in the convent?

26
ON ISMAT*

Saadat Hasan Manto

Translation : Shobhana Bhattacharji

About a year and a half ago I received a postcard from Hyderabad. It went something like this: "Why is it that Ismat Chughtai didn't marry you? Manto and Ismat — it would have been fantastic if these two personalities could have come together. But alas! Ismat married Shahid, and Manto..."

There was a Progressive Writers Conference in Hyderabad going on at that very time. I didn't attend it but I read a report of it in a Hyderabad newspaper, which said that a number of girls had surrounded Ismat and asked her, "Why didn't you marry Manto?"

I don't know whether the report was true, but when Ismat returned to Bombay, she told my wife that when a girl asked her whether Manto was a bachelor, she had replied somewhat sharply, "Indeed, no". Whereupon, according to Ismat, the female, embarrassed at her faux pas, kept quiet.

Whatever the truth, it is curious that in all of Hindustan, it is only in Hyderabad that men and women alike have been anxiously concerned about the marriage of Ismat and myself.

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* Source : *'On Ismat' by Sa'adat Hasan Manto was first published in Urdu as Ismat Chughtai (Monograph), In Naye Adab Ke Mayma:. Qutb Publishers Ltd. Bombay, 1949. This translation by Shobhana Bhattacharji appeared in Ismat: Her Life, Her Times in 2000. The copyright for the English translation rests with Katha, a registered, nonprofit society devoted to enhancing the pleasures of reading.*

I didn't think much about it at the time, but now I wonder. If Ismat and I had in fact become husband and wife, what would have happened? This "if" is a little like asking if Cleopatra's nose had been an eighteenth of an inch longer, how would it have affected the history of the Nile valley? But Ismat is not Cleopatra, nor Manto, Mark Antony. It is certain, though, that if Manto and Ismat had married, the disaster would have been catastrophic for the history of contemporary narrative literature. Incidents would have become fictional stories, stories would have been twisted and curled into riddles. The milk in the breasts of delicate diction would have dried into some weird powder or burnt to ashes; and it is even possible that their signatures on the marriage contract would have been the last movement of their pens. But who can swear with his hand on his heart that there would have been a marriage contract at all. It is more probable that both would have written stories on the marriage contract and then signed on the qazi's forehead by way of certification but...

"Ismat, the qazi's forehead is like a takhti".

"What?"

"What's wrong with your ears?"

"Nothing's wrong with my ears — your own voice is stuck in your throat".

"This is the limit... just listen to her! I said, The qazi's forehead is exactly like a takhti".

"But a takhti is flat"

"And isn't this forehead flat?"

"Do you know what flat means?"

"No, of course I don't".

"Flat is what your forehead is — the qazi's forehead is..."

"Very handsome".

"It is, indeed, very handsome".

"You're just saying that to tease me".

"*You* are teasing *me*".

"I say that you are teasing me".

"I say that you are teasing me".

"You will have to accept that you are teasing me".

"Indeed! You are already behaving like a husband".

"Your Honour, I will not marry this woman — if your daughter's forehead is also like yours, marry me to her".

"Your Honour, I will not marry this apology for a man — if you do not have four wives, please marry me. I like your forehead very much".

In his preface to *Chotein*, Krishan Chander writes: "In disguising courage, drowning their readers in astonishment and restlessness, and then all of a sudden, finally converting this restlessness into

happiness, Ismat and Manto are very close to each other, and in this regard very few Urdu short story writers can compete with them".

Had we two thought of getting married to each other, then instead of immersing others in this astonishment and restlessness, we would have ourselves drowned in it, and on recovery, as far as I can make out, would have found the anxiety and surprise changed not into happiness but into a kind of a joke — Ismat and Manto, wedded and married. What a ludicrous idea!

In "Chhoti Apa" Ismat writes, "In this world of small love, so many Shaukats, so many Mahmoods, Abbases, Askaris, Yunuses, and who knows who else have been shuffled and scattered like a pack of cards. Who can tell who is the knave? Shaukat's eyes brimming with hungry stories, Mahmood's limbs crawling like snakes, Askari's merciless hands, the black mole on Yunus's lower lip, Abbas' distracted smiles, and thousands of broad flat chests, big, spread out foreheads, thick dense hair, muscular lower limbs, strong arms — all lie jumbled like a heap of tangled twine. I gaze at the pile in desperation but I don't know where to begin unravelling it, so that I could use at least one of its strings to fly beyond the horizon, taut and stretched like a kite".

Again, in "Takleef" Manto says, "I only know that for you, loving a woman and buying land is the same thing. So instead of falling in love... buy a small piece of land and live securely upon it for the rest of your life... Only one woman for a lifetime... why, then, is the world so fulsome? Why are there so many tamashas? Why didn't Allah Mian stop at creating wheat? Take my advice and use it well — this life which you have been given You are the sort of customer who will amass wealth all his life to

procure one woman and still think it is insufficient. I am the sort of buyer who will have transactions with many women in his life. You want to love in such a way that when love fails, some low level writer writes a book about it which Narayan Dutt Sehgal will then print on yellow paper and sell for the price of wastepaper in Dabbi Bazaar... I want to become a termite and devour all the pages of the book of my life so that there is no record of it. You want life in love, I want love in life".

Had Ismat found the end of a string in that tangle of twine, which she could pull free and use to soar beyond the horizon, taut and stretched like a kite, had Manto become a termite and successfully devoured even half the pages of the book of his life, their art, today, would not have made such a deep mark on the title page of literature. She would have remained tautly fluttering far beyond the horizon, and Manto's sympathizers would have stuffed the remainder of the book of his life into his belly and shut him up in a glass cupboard.

Krishan Chander writes in his preface to *Chotein:*

"As soon as Ismat's name is mentioned, male short story writers have fits. They are embarrassed. They cringe inwardly with shame. This preface is an attempt to wipe out that sense of shame".

What I am saying about Ismat here is not because I want to wipe out any sense of shame. I am repaying a debt with a very small interest.

I cannot for the life of me remember which of Ismat's stories I read first. Before writing this piece, I dug around in my memory but it was of no use. It is almost as if I'd read her stories before

she put them down on paper. This is why I never had fits. But I was severely disappointed when I first saw Ismat.

The weekly *Musavver* had its office on Chamber Clair Road, Flat No. 17, which Shahid Lateef entered with his wife. This was in August 1942. Mahatma Gandhi and all the senior Congress leaders had been arrested and there was turmoil in the city. The atmosphere was full of politics. That is why we spoke for some time about the struggle of independence. After that, the discussion took another direction and short stories began to be discussed.

A month earlier, while I was an employee of All India Radio, Delhi, Ismat's "Lihaaf" had been published in *Adab-e-Lateef*. After reading it, I remember telling Krishan Chander, "It's a very good story, but the last sentence lacks in art. Had I been the editor instead of Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, I would have clipped it off". That is why when the discussion about short stories began, I said to Ismat, "I liked your story "Lihaaf" very much. An economical and appropriate use of words is characteristic of your writing. But I was surprised that you wrote that pointless sentence at the end of the story '... even if I am given a lakh of rupees I would not tell what I saw when the quilt lifted an inch'".

Ismat said, "What is wrong with that?"

I was about to say something in response when I noticed the same embarrassed expression on her face which you see on the faces of simple, well-brought up girls when they hear something that is not usually mentioned in polite society. I was acutely disappointed, because I had wanted to discuss every detail of "Lihaaf" with her. After Ismat left I said to myself, "The wretch turned out to be a woman through and through".

I remember that the very next day following this meeting, I had written a letter to my wife: "I met Ismat. You'll be surprised that she is just the sort of woman you are. This meeting left a bad taste in my mouth, but you are sure to like her. As soon as I mentioned the quilt risen by an inch, the wretch grew embarrassed at the very thought of it".

A long time later, I thought seriously about my extraordinary initial reaction and learnt the tough lesson that it is very necessary to stay within the limits of one's nature for the sustenance of one's art. Where is Dr. Rasheed Jehan's art today? Some of it has been chopped up along with long hair and thrown away, and some has been stuffed into trouser pockets and forgotten. In France, George Sands abandoned her beautiful feminine garments and chose to live an artificial life. I thought, even if a woman fights shoulder to shoulder with men, climbs mountains, writes short stories and becomes an Ismat Chughtai, she should occasionally apply henna on her hands. The clink of bangles should be heard on her arms. I feel sorry that I had then said to myself, "The wretch turned out to be a woman through and through"

Had Ismat not been a woman through and through, we would never have got to read tender and sensitive stories like "Bhool Bhullaiyan," "Til," "Lihaaf," and "Gainda". These stories present woman in her varied expressions — neat, transparent, unsullied by artifice. These are not the sort of airs and coquetry that beautiful women use as arrows to pierce the hearts of men. They have nothing to do with the crude movements of the body. They are spiritual signs which point to the human conscience, with which they must eventually embrace the mysterious yet tender nature of woman. In "Bhool Bhullaiyan" she writes, "Their mood altered: Poor child... perhaps his father is dead.

Curse you... God forbid! I clasped the little one to my heart.
Bang! The child found an opportunity to fire his gun.
Rascal... shoot your father, will you! I snatched the gun".

And people say Ismat is a freak, a witch — the asses! In these four lines Ismat has wrung out and presented the soul of the women, and these people judge her by the litmus test of polite society. They should be shot, the crooked minds!

"Dozakhi" was published in *Saqi*. My sister read it and said to me, "Saadat, how crude this Ismat is. The creature hasn't even spared her dead brother. What rubbish she's written".

I said, "Iqbal, if you promise to write exactly this kind of an article when I die, then, by God, I am ready to die today".

Shahjahan had the Taj Mahal built to keep the memory of his beloved intact. Ismat wrote "Dozakhi" in memory of her beloved brother. Shahjahan had others to lift the stones for him, had them carved, and erected a gigantic monument over the corpse of his beloved. But Ismat herself collected her sisterly emotions with which she raised a high platform upon which she tenderly laid her brother's bier. The Taj seems like a naked marble advertisement of Shahjahan's love. But "Dozakhi" is an absolutely sensitive, pure and beautiful sign of Ismat's love, that paradise about which the title gives no indications, but which fills the entire article.

My wife read the article and said to Ismat, "What is this nonsense you have written".

"Shut up! Tell me, where is the ice?"

Ismat loved to eat ice. She'd hold a lump in her hand and chomp it loudly between her teeth, just like a child. She wrote some of her stories this way. She'd lie angled across the bed, propped up on her elbows. On the pillow in front of her lay an open notebook. A fountain pen in one hand, and a piece of ice in the other. The radio blared and her pen and mouth moved busily.

Ismat would get writing fits. Months could pass without her writing a thing but when she would get into one of the her fits, hundreds of pages emerged from her pen. She forgot to eat, drink, or bathe. She would just lie, angled across the bed, propped up on her elbows, transferring her thoughts onto paper in her carefree hand, unrestrained by the rules of grammar and spelling.

She completed an entire full length novel like *Terhi Lakeer* in, I think, seven or eight **sittings.**

About the pace of Ismat's **work, Krishan** Chander writes:

"One more thing that comes to mind regarding Ismat's stories is horse racing. In other words, their movement, agitation, light, speed (I think by this Krishan Chander meant the speed of light) and quick pace. It's not only the story that seems to gallop, but sentences, metaphors and symbols, voices and characters, ideas and feelings seem to rush in and advance like a storm".

Ismat's pen and tongue are both very fast. Often when she starts writing, her mind races ahead, leaving words panting far behind. When she speaks, words tumble over each other. If she ever enters the kitchen, just to prove a point, that's the end of the matter. It is in her nature to always be in a terrific hurry, which is

often would rather begin to talk about whatever he happened to be interested in or whatever his students requested him to talk about. If anything amusing came up in the course of the lecture, he would laugh freely and without restraint. He did not stand in awe of anyone. Once, some official came to inspect our school. Our headmaster Babu Bechan Lal, who was a meek and simple man, was a little worried. Several students, too, put in an unusually smart appearance, but not out dear teacher who looked just the same as always — bare-headed, dishevelled, and with his coat unbuttoned. The inspector visited our class, without any perceptible effect on our teacher. The two exchanged a few words in English, after which the inspector went away.

Such natural simplicity and such a candid temperament are relatively rare, and these were the very qualities which attracted his students irresistibly to him. In his conduct he was just and impartial to everyone. It was by dint of these virtues that Premchand proved to be a highly successful superintendent of the boarding house for full three years, for temperamentally, he must have been quite unsuited to the job. He was entirely devoid of any administrative ability. But where administrative ability fails, goodwill may succeed — and he had a large measure of goodwill towards everyone.

Jokhu was his personal servant. Though officially employed by the boarding house, he also served as a domestic servant for some extra payment. Subhan, a Muslim, was a cook in the school mess. Muhammad worked as the book-binder for the school. And Premchand treated all of them with kindness and sympathy. Often, he would even help them financially. Muhammad the book-binder was a particularly sad-looking fellow, and

This peculiar stubbornness or refusal to accept is also generally evident in Ismat's male and female characters. Badly ensnared in love, they carry on professing hatred. Wanting to kiss a cheek, they thrust a needle deep into it. Where a gentle pat is required, they give a thump that makes the victim whimper. This aggressive and negative love in Ismat's stories starts out as a game, and generally ends evoking pity.

If Ismat's own end is something like this, and if I live to witness it, I will not be surprised at all.

I have been friends with Ismat for five or six years. Considering how fiery and explosive we both are, we should have quarrelled hundreds of times but surprisingly, in all this time, there has been only one argument and that too a mild one.

I like Ismat, she likes me, but if someone were unexpectedly to ask, "What is it that you like about each other?" I think that for some time both Ismat and I would be at a loss.

Ismat's looks are not captivating but she is the sort of person who settles into the heart. My impression of her when we first met lies secure in my heart and mind. She was dressed very simply. A white cotton sari with a narrow border, a well-fitting blouse with plain black stripes on a white background, a small purse in her hand, her feet in flat, brown slippers, small but sharp and inquisitive eves peering from behind spectacles with thick lenses, short curly hair parted at the side. The slightest smile brought dimples to her cheeks.

I did not fall in love with Ismat but my wife was imprisoned in her love. If Safiya were ever to mention this love to Ismat, she is

bound to say something like "And who are you to get imprisoned in my love... Even the fathers of girls of your age have been captured in my love".

In fact, I too know of a senior writer who worshipped Ismat for a long time. The man began to declare his love through letters. Ismat kept encouraging him, but eventually she rebuffed him so soundly that the poor man saw stars. This is one true story I think he will never write.

At the invitation of Shahid and Ismat, my wife Safiya and I had gone to Malad (an area of Bombay where Shahid stayed when he was working with Bombay Talkies). After dinner, during the course of conversation, Shahid said, "Manto, you still make mistakes in language".

Till half past one I would not accept that there were any language mistakes in my writing. Shahid got fed up. At two o'clock, Ismat argued her husband's case. I still did not accept their criticism. Then suddenly, while saying something, Ismat used the word dast-daraazi. I immediately said, "The correct form is daraaz-dasti". It was now three o'clock. Ismat would not acknowledge that she was wrong. My wife went to bed. To settle the argument, Shahid fetched a dictionary from the next room. There was no dast-daraazi listed under "d". Daraaz-dasti and its meaning, however, were included. Shahid said, "Ismat, now you will have to accept defeat". Now husband and wife began to argue with each other. The cocks began to sound the morning azaan. Ismat picked up the dictionary, flung it aside and said, "When I compile a dictionary, the correct form will be dast-daraazi. What is this daraaz-dasti... daraaz-dasti".

And so the debate of daraaz finally ended. After that we have never quarrelled; in fact you could say that we have never

allowed the occasion to arise. Whenever a dangerous moment occurs in the course of a discussion, either Ismat changes direction or I step down.

Ismat and I used to seldom talk to each other for fear of clashing. If a story of mine were ever published, she would read it and praise it. She was unusually enthusiastic in her appreciation of "Neelam". "Truly, what is this rubbish about adopting a woman as a sister... you are absolutely right. It's an insult to a woman to be called a sister".

And I was left thinking — she calls me Manto Bhai and I call her Ismat Behen — God alone knows why.

There is no incident in our five or six year old friendship that is worth talking about. Once we were both arrested for obscenity. I had already experienced this twice but for Ismat this was her first time, which is why she was furious. It turned out that the arrest was illegal because the Punjab Police had arrested us without a warrant. Ismat was delighted but how long can someone destined for trouble celebrate her good fortune? Eventually she had to appear in a court in Lahore.

The journey from Bombay to Lahore is long, but Shahid and my wife travelled with us. There was commotion throughout. To tease us, Safiya and Shahid joined forces and started attacking our obscene writing. They outlined proofs that were sure to convict us and provided glimpses of life in jail. Ismat eventually shouted, "They may crucify me but this throat will only utter the truth".

We went to Lahore twice in connection with the case. Both times several groups of students came to the court, curious to see Ismat

and myself. Ismat said to me "Manto Bhai, tell Choudhury Nazir to charge an entrance fee so that we can pay for our fare to and from this place".

We went twice to Lahore and both times we bought ten or twelve pairs of shoes and sandals in a variety of designs from the Karnal Shop. Somebody asked Ismat in Bombay, "Did you visit Lahore in connection with a court case?" Ismat replied, "Indeed no, we went to buy shoes".

About three and a half years ago, on Holi, Shahid and I were having a drink on the balcony at Malad. Ismat was urging my wife: "Safiya, these people blow up so much money on this luxury, why don't we join them?" For an hour, the two of them tried to summon the courage to have a drink. In the meantime there was a sudden commotion, and the film producer Mukherji from Filmistan, his enormous wife, and some others came and attacked us. In a few moments we were all beyond recognition. Ismat lost interest in the whisky and focused on the Holi colours: "Come on, Safiya, let's also colour them".

We all went into the bazaar. Holi was well under way on Ghorh Bunder Road. There was a virtual shower of blue, yellow, green and black. Ismat was in the forefront. She even rubbed tar all over a fat Bengali female's face and at that moment I was reminded of her brother Azeem Beg Chaghtai. Then, in the manner of a general, Ismat cried, "Let's mount an attack on the house of Pari-cnehra".

In those days Naseem Bano was working in our film, *Chal Chal Re Naujavan*. Her bungalow was nearby on Ghorh Bunder Road. Everyone liked Ismat's suggestion. And so, in a few minutes, we were all inside the bungalow. As was her wont, Naseem was

fully made up and draped in a bright georgette sari. She and her husband Ahsan came out when they heard the racket created by us. Looking like a multi-coloured monster, Ismat said to my wife who, I think, wouldn't have looked very different with some extra colour on her, "Safiya, Naseem is indeed a beautiful woman".

I looked at Naseem and said, "Yes, there's beauty there, but a cold one".

Ismat rolled her small eyes behind her colour drenched glasses and said softly, "Cold things are good for hot temperaments". With that she stepped forward and in a second, the fairy-faced Naseem turned into a circus clown.

Ismat and I occasionally think of odd things: "Manto bhai, I now feel like writing something about the romance of cocks and hens". Or she would say, "I'm going to enlist in the military and learn to fly aeroplanes".

A few months ago Ismat and I were returning home by electric train from Bombay Talkies. In the course of the conversation I said to her, "I have noticed that two things recur in Krishan Chander's stories... rape and rainbows... qaus-e-quzah, which Krishan wrote as qaus-o-quzah".

Ismat said delightedly, "That's true".

"I think I'll write an article titled "Krishan Chander: Rainbow and Rape". But I was also wondering, what is the connection between rape and rainbow?"

Ismat thought for a time and then said, "From the point of view of aesthetics, there is a fundamental beauty and attraction in the

colours of the rainbow... but you are thinking about it from some other viewpoint".

I said, "Yes, I was... Red is the colour of blood and fire. In mythological iconography, Mars, the hangman, is depicted in this colour... it could be that the only connection between rape and rainbows is this colour".

"Possibly — you must write the article".

"But in Christian art, red symbolizes God's love... no, no..." something flashed in my brain. "The intense passion of the crucifixion has been depicted in red, and the Virgin Mary's robes are also red — it signifies ismat, chastity".

As I spoke, my eyes happened to fall on Ismat's white clothes. She smiled. "Manto Bhai, you must write the article... it will be fun... but drop rape from the title".

"Krishan will object because that violent act is the basis of all his lamentations".

"He laments over nothing. How do we know that his victimized heroines don't enjoy precisely this crime?"

"God would know better".

Many articles have been written about Ismat's work. Less for, more against. Some are extremely hostile. In a handful of them a lot of highfalutin things have been said.

Even Patrus Sahab, whom the literary contractors in Lahore had closed up in a box, stuck his hand out, grabbed a pen, and wrote

an article on Ismat. The man is talented, witty and fair, which is why his article is quite interesting and balanced. Referring to the label "woman," he writes: "Another respected critic (Salahuddin Sahab) has, I gather, separated men and women prose stylists in his assessment of prose writing. Of Ismat he says, that among Urdu writers of her sex, she has more or less won the same position of greatness that George Eliot had in English literature once upon a time. As if literature was a tennis tournament in which men and women play separate matches! George Eliot's greatness is unquestionable, and writing about her like this is ugly, but even if I question her greatness, will it die? It is a separate issue whether there is or not any distinguishing mark — which is not unreasonable and debatable and incidental, but essential and natural and fundamental — that divides good prose literature by men from good prose literature by women. And if there is, what is it? Whatever the answer to these questions, it cannot be the basis of which writers can be lined up in two separate rows according to their sex".

It is very unlikely that the answer to these questions will be of the sort that can become the basis of separating writers according to their sex and making them stand in separate rows. But while answering, people are bound to wonder who asked the question — a man or a woman — because once the gender is known, the instinctual and basic point of view of the questioner will become obvious to a great extent.

Patrus Sahab asks: "Is literature a tennis tournament in which men and women play separate matches?" This is a typical Patrus witticism. Tennis tournament, not literature. But, then, to have separate matches for men and women is not unliterary.

When Patrus Sahab lectures in a class, he does not address male and female students separately. But if he had to consider the

mental development of a male and a female student, as a responsible teacher he would not hesitate to take their gender into account.

If a woman becomes a George Eliot or an Ismat Chughtai it doesn't mean that the effect of her being a woman is not to be considered in her writing. In connection with literature by eunuchs, would Patrus Sahab also ask whether there is an essential, natural and fundamental mark by which we can separate good prose literature by eunuchs from good prose literature by men and women?

I think to put the label of woman on a woman and man on a man is absurd. To place a sign outside a mosque or temple, announcing that it is a place of worship and holy obedience would be equally ridiculous. But when we compare the architecture of a mosque and temple with that of some ordinary residence, we do not banish the holiness of the mosque or temple from our minds.

Ismat's being a woman is present in every detail of her writing and guides our understanding of her work at every step. The positive and negative points of her writing, which Patrus Sahab has dealt with very impartially in his article, cannot be separated from the gender of the writer, nor is there any critical, literary or chemical method available for doing so.

There is an Aziz Ahmed Sahab who, commenting in *Naya Daur* on Ismat's ***Terhi Lakeer***, writes: "Ismat has only one way of examining the body and that is through sexual contact. Consequently, from Rasheed to Taylor, the several men who appear in this novel are judged by their physical or mental sexual activity. Most often, the emotion of sexuality is passive. In

Ismat's writing, sexuality alone can reckon men, human beings, life, creation itself. Through clouds of quilts, Abbas's hands strike like lightning and tiny shivers leap and scatter amongst the group of girls. Rasool Fatima's mouse-like hands are an aspect of an obscure, dark sexuality. A half obscure version of it is the revulsion and love felt by the Matron. She is surprised that the girls do not imagine the eyes of those hoodlums crawling over their thighs. In an episode of sexual contact, Shamman's feminine side (Patrus Sahab, pay attention here) responds to the caress of fingers on the thigh, et cetera".

The viewpoint of Aziz Ahmed Sahab, that the only way of examining the self in Ismat is thorugh naked sexual contact, is wrong. First of all, it is wrong to call it sexual contact at all. In fact, it is an act or an action that continues for a while. Ismat is an extremely sensitive writer for whom the slightest touch is enough. In Ismat's writing, other physical senses too are seen to be active. For example, the sense of smell and hearing. Sound, as far as I can tell, has a deep relationship with her work. For example, in "Puncture", "Ghrr ghrr — phfttt shhoon. The car was buzzing angrily in the veranda outside". "They kept twisting the radio. Khrrh-khrrh shdd-shdd, ghrr-ghrr. It brought tears to my eyes". Tnn-tnn — a cycle bell rang — I knew Edna had arrived..." "And if I tried to doze off for a while, there would be thumping on the roof, mocking me". "And the stomping and tinkling daughter-in-law came down the stairs".

In "Saas", "Mm-mm, mm-mm. The daughter-in-law hummed". "A fly — thnnn thnnnn it went, and flew off". In "Safar Mein," "The child would whimper and begin to smack his lips". In "Lihaaf", "Lapping sounds, like a cat licking a plate, arose". In "Til", "Tik-tik, tik-tik. Her heart began to work like a clock". "Fat droning mosquitoes". "Jhhari Mein Se", "A heavy, mystery

laden, graveyard sigh trembles in the air" In "Pesha," "The sound of ankle bells and claps insinuate themselves into me and beat like a thousand pulses".

Similarly, the sense of smell is evident all over the place:

"And just look at the stink — it's the stench of the hookah — yecchh".

"The smell of Kavvam had settled in so thoroughly that it wouldn't let her sleep". ("Daayin")

"On the eight day, mustard oil give out a sour smell". ("Neera")

"And the body would give off whiffs of the peculiar smell of anxiety".

"The scent of hot perfumes made them burn all the more".

"I flared my nostrils and sniffed the air. Except for the hot odure of perfume, sandal and henna, I smelt nothing". ("Lihaaf")

"He had even shown how deep sighs and delicate perfumes could be transformed into colour". ("Til")

"They had rotted with sweat and had begun to exude the stench of death". ("Jaal")

"A man's shirt — steeped in the stink of cigarette, malodorous". ("Hero")

"Down below, she plucked the tiny green leaves of coriander and began to inhale their scent". ("Mera Bachcha")

All of Ismat's senses work in their specific contexts as and where required. They are used well. Aziz Ahmed Sahab says that sex permeates Ismat's work like a disease. This may be true for him, but let him not prescribe cures for the disease. Come to think of it, writing itself is a disease. On the whole, a healthy man, whose temperature remains at 98.5 ^{0}F, will sit all his life holding the cold slate of his existence in his hands.

Aziz Ahmed Sahab writes:

"The biggest tragedy of an Ismat heroine is that she has not been desired by the heart of any man nor has she ever desired a man with her heart. Love bears the same relation to the body as electricity bears to wire. But press the switch and this love lights up with the intensity of a thousand candles. It works that fan in the searing hot afternoon wind. It turns the wheels of life's intricate machines with the strength of thousands of demons, and sometimes it caresses the hair and irons the clothes. Ismat Chughtai is not a writer who is acquainted with this sort of love".

Obviously, this saddens Aziz Ahmed Sahab, but this love which he appears to be acquainted with, seems to have been prepared by him under a five year plan and he wishes to impose it on every human being. To please Aziz Ahmed Sahab, I will suppose that Ismat's heroine was familiar with the AC and DC currents of his kind of love... but then how could this tragedy have occurred, of no man desiring her nor she desiring any man with her heart?

Ismat is actually ignorant of Aziz Ahmed Sahab's type of love, and this very ignorance is the foundation of her writing. If today the electricity of that love could be connected to the wires of her

life and the switch pressed on, it is entirely possible that another Aziz Ahmed would be born, but the Ismat who wrote "Til", "Gainda", "Bhool Bhullaiyan" and "Jaal" will definitely die.

Ismat's dramas are weak. They sag at several points. When she divides a plot into scenes, she doesn't measure and separate them neatly with scissors; she simply rips them to shreds with her teeth. The world of parties is not Ismat's world, she remains a stranger to it. Sex sits on every nerve of her writing, like a disease. Ismat's childhood was riven with ill health. She is extraordinary at describing in detail what happens behind the purdah. She is concerned with personalities, not society as such. Not personalities but persons. Ismat has only one way of judging the body and that is through sexual contact. There is no direction to Ismat's stories. Ismat's extraordinary power of observation leaves one astonished. Ismat is obscene. Gentle satire and humour are predominant virtues of Ismat's style. Ismat walks on the edge of a sword.

A lot has been said about Ismat and will continue to be said. Some will like her, others will not; but more important than people's like or dislike, is Ismat's creative power. Bad, good, naked, covered, whatever she is, she should continue unshaken in that vein. Literature has no geography. As far as possible, it should be protected against being pigeon-holed in maps and categories.

A long time ago, one well-known Vaish of Delhi did something extraordinarily uncivilized. He published an anthology entitled *Auron ki Kahani, Sun Meri Zabani* — "Many will benefit from this". The book included a story each by myself, Ismat, Mufti, Premchand, Khwaja Mohammad Shafi and Azeem Beg Chaghtai. The preface contained a harsh attack on Progressive

writing, which was wide off the mark, and this wonderful book was dedicated to his two tiny children. He sent a copy each to Ismat and myself. Ismat was repelled by his uncivilized and crude action, and wrote to me in great anger:

"Manto Bhai, have you seen this book by Vaish? Tell him how furious you are and send him a notice in your personal capacity that he must pay a fine of two hundred rupees for every item or we will sue him. Something must be done. Tell me what we should do. This is a fine thing. Whoever feels like it, slings mud at us and we take it quietly. Harass the creature. Upbraid him for becoming the standard bearer of obscene literature. He's published our stories only to sell the book. It's an insult to us. Keep all I have said in mind and write an article. You will ask, why don't I write it and my answer is that you take precedence".

When I met Ismat, I responded to her letter: "Actually, Choudhary Mohammad Hussain of Lahore takes precedence. If we request him, he is sure to have a case started against Mr. Vaish".

Ismat smiled, "Good idea, but the problem is that we'll also be dragged in".

I said, "So what? The court may be a dry place but Karnal Shop is quite an interesting place... we'll take Mr. Vaish there and..."

Ismat's dimples deepened.

About the author

Manto, Saadat Hasan (1912 — 1955) Manto is one of Urdu's most powerful writers of the 20th century. He is a short story writer par excellence. Brutally, subversively realistic, some of

his stories like 'Toba Tek Singh', 'Khol Do,' 'Titwal ka Kutta' and 'Thanda Gosht' are among the best. Along with Ismat Chughtai, he was tried for obscenity in her story 'Lihaf' [The Quilt]. Eventually both were acquitted though he had to pay a fine.

He has written most sensitively on partition and the carnage that followed it. For some time he was employed with the All India Radio. Later he was connected with the film industry also. Following partition he migrated to Pakistan.

Besides short stories, Manto has written pen-sketches in Urdu. The pen-sketch on Ismat is a fine example of the genre. Among the sketches that might interest readers are those he has written on two actors, Ashok Kumar and Shyam of yesteryears.

Works:

Some of the works are: *Dastavez Manto* (in Hindi) in four vols. New Delhi: Rajkamal, 1993, eds. Balraj Manra and Sharad Datt; *Mantonama* (in Hindi), ed. Devinder Issar. Delhi: Indrapastha Prakashan, 1991; *For Freedom's Sake: Selected Stories and Sketches of Sa'dat Hasan Manto* by M. Asaduddin. Karachi, OUP, 2001 and *Black Margins: Manto* by M. Asaduddin. New Delhi: Katha, 2004.

Glossary

Ahmed Nadeem Qasimi: Ahmed Nadeem Qasimi (1916-) is a kind of father figure in Pakistani literature. He started his professional career as a sub-inspector in the Excise department, but left it soon enough. An autodidact, Qasimi

wrote largely in the realistic mode about people in the countryside, their joys and sorrows, the exploitation of the poor by the rich, the pangs of urbanisation and loss of simplicity in rural life. He spearheaded and nurtured the Progressive Writers Movement in Pakistan. In addition to creative writing, he has also edited four literary journals — *Adab-e Lateef*, *Savera*, *Nuqoosh* and *Funoon*.

Upendranath Ashk: Upendranath Ashk (1910-1996) was a well-known Urdu-Hindi novelist and short story writer. His corpus also includes poetry, criticism and translation. He was a prolific writer who left behind him nearly a hundred volumes of writings. He is mainly known for his seven-volume novel *Girti Divaren* (Falling Walls, 1947-96).

Krishan Chander: Krishan Chander (1914-1977) was one of the most popular and prolific short story writers of Urdu. He produced well over 80 volumes of literary work, which include thirty collections of short stories and twenty novels. He was a committed Marxist, and the Secretary-General of the Progressive Writers Association in India for a long time. He wrote about a wide range of contemporary issues. Among his better known collections are — *Nazzaré* (1940), *Purané Khuda* (1944), *Kitab ka Kafan* (1956), *Dadar Pul ké Peeché* (1965). The

stories in the collection, *Hum Wahshi Hain* (1987) deal exclusively with the theme of partition, among which the story "Peshawar Express" has been appreciated because of its vivid imagery and its unconventional style. He wrote a number of novels among which *Shikast* (1943), *Jab Khet Jaagé* (1952) *Ek Aurat Hazar Deewané* (1957) and *Ghaddar* (1960) have received wide acclaim. His politically engaged novels—*Ek Gadhe ki Sarguzasht* (1957), *Gadhe ki Wapsi* (1962) and *Gadha Nefa Mein* (1962) set a new trend of political satire in Urdu in which animal and men locked horns to highlight some bitter contemporary realities.

Shahid: Shahid Latif, Ismat Chughtai's husband who was a film maker.

***Dast darazi*:** 'dast' means hand; 'dast darazi' means violence, oppression, violation (of honour)

***Chotein*:** The second collection of Ismat Chughtai's short stories published in 1942.

Azim Beg Chaghtai: (d. 1941) Urdu writer

Patras, Ahmad Shah Bukhari : (1897-1958) Urdu writer

Questions

1. What is a pen-sketch? What are its essential elements?
2. Discuss how Manto compares his own temperament, artistic disposition and writings with those of Ismat Chughtai.

3. What qualities of Chughtai's writings appeal to Manto most?
4. What is your final impression of Ismat Chughtai as a person and a writer after reading this sketch?
5. Write a note on the various things you like about the piece on Ismat.

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MANIMAHESH (Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11)*

Umaprasad Mukhopadhyay

Translation : Sanjukta Dasgupta

8

We trekked ahead into the strange land of the Gaddis — to Goderan, Varmore. We were eager to explore their Shivbhumi. How would it be — this snow mountain — Manimahesh — Chamba's Small Kailash — in whose lap nestled a snowy lake!

The road followed the curves of the river, in a serpentine manner. Sometimes, the river was close by, sometimes high above. The river veered to the east, so the road too followed it. Now, the mountains on either side were far apart. Wide valley. As if Iravati had stretched her limbs and was relaxing. There was a waterfall next to the road. As it had rained for a few days, water was cascading down in torrents. Wooden bridge. Our faces and eyes were being sprayed with droplets of water.

It wasn't an uphill climb. So there was no physical strain. Even the rays of the sun seemed mild in the morning. We advanced happily. After travelling for about four miles, on the left side we saw a huge bridge over the river. The route from Varmore

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* Source: Sahitya Akademi

crossed the bridge and went over to the other side. There was another route which went towards the east. We heard that this other route went beyond the mountain in front of us, connected with Aju road and then reached Jogindranagar.

We crossed the bridge and reached the other side. We couldn't see any human habitation. But we saw a few people walking to and fro. The name of the place was Kharamukh.

Himadri said, "So this must be the same Kharamukh, where according to the myth, Rajkumar Jayastambha had been met by the Saint Agrachari".

I smiled and said, "Let's go ahead. Maybe, someone is waiting somewhere to welcome you".

On the other side of the bridge, the road turned to the left, and followed the southern bank of the Iravati. As we advanced a little further, we saw that a mountain river joined the Iravati from the right hand side. Our route too followed the direction of the river, turning right. This was the place where we were turning away from the main course of the Iravati river. A new companion appeared — this river was called Budhul, Bhudul or Bhundul. This was a tributary of the Iravati. It originated from the Kugti Pass. It flowed through a thirty-mile valley — it was known as Varmore or Bhudol valley. The road was on the left of the river cut alongside the steep mountain. Black rocks. These were black rocks which looked as if hooded snakes were hanging over our heads. It seemed as if we were walking through a tunnel. There was a moist darkness around On the other downward side too, the steep walls of the mountain could be seen. The gorge of the river lay in the middle. But the upper areas of the mountain opposite did not seem all that steep, those seemed to have risen

more gently. On that side there were a few clusters of trees, green grass and the surroundings were without the overhanging shadows. It looked bright in the morning sun. The two banks of the same river were so dissimilar.

Gradually, we travelled beyond the slim course of the river and reached the open space of the mountain ranges. Then we realized how the road had slowly reached the top of the ranges. The river valley was much lower down. All around stretched a ring of snowy mountains. The mountains seemed to be smeared with snow as they raised their heads towards the sky.

After getting the Bhudol river as our companion, we advanced another three miles and came upon a small shop. There were fields of corn all around. On the other side of the way too, the farmlands climbed up the mountain in steps. A few houses could be seen in that direction. The village was named Lahul.

Himadri introduced himself to the shopkeeper. He had once worked for the military. He had even lived in Barrackpur for some time. So when he heard that we were coming from Kolkata he wanted to prove his familiarity with the town and said that he had seen the Howrah bridge, Mother Kali in the Kali temple and had been to Burrabazar.

There was someone else in the shop too. The village schoolmaster. Hearing that we were travelling to Manimahesh, both of them expressed their concern. They said, "Pilgrimage to the place was over a few days back. Now there was no permission for anyone to travel on that route. Snow has started falling. Just look, the mountaintops of those parts are already ice capped. Manimahesh is even higher. You'd only be exerting yourselves for nothing. You won't be able to reach there". We

were aware that as it had rained in the lower areas, in the higher regions naturally there would be snowfall. Now once again the sun was up, the sky was clear. It seemed at least for a few days the weather would be all right. The snow that had fallen lately would also melt.

So I said, "Let's see, we have come such a distance — all the way from Kolkata. Let's try and see how far we can make it. If Manimahesh eludes us, so be it".

Masterji said, "Yes, that's right. There's a temple of Mother Kali in our area too, do you know?"

Then he came out of the room and showed us a lane on the mountain face on the opposite side of the Bhudol river. He informed us that the lane went straight to the Tunda Kalidevi temple. The Kali Shaw Pass was twenty miles ahead. If we climbed from that direction, we would come upon the Trilokanath temple in the valley of Chandrabhaga.

Hearing him, I looked around eagerly. I had been harbouring a desire of visiting Trilokanath temple for a very long time. I had thought that maybe that hope would never be fulfilled in this life.

But then that desire came true during another trip several years later. Not while I was travelling through Chamba. It was through Kulu, crossing the Rotang pass and through Lahul.

Himadri was focussing his attention in another direction. He was staring longingly at the fresh corncobs that grew in the farm adjacent to the shop.

I understood. I asked, "Could we buy two *bhuttas* and get them roasted?" There seemed to be an oven in the shop.

The shopkeeper however did not agree. He said very seriously, "It is not permitted to pluck corn from the farmland yet — it's not yet time".

Surprised, Himadri said, "Why not? They seem ready enough for eating".

The shopkeeper answered, "I am not talking about it being ready to be eaten. It's a tradition here, that when the corn is ready for use, first it is offered to the Gods in a ceremony, only then can it be eaten".

Himadri said, "A good practice. Then, offer a couple to God and then pass them on to us as prasad, we'll give you a donation too".

He said, "How is it possible to do that? There's puja to be performed, a festival with all the villagers will take place, only then. I cannot give them to you now".

Himadri was not to be discouraged. He asked, "I've heard that there are many bears in these jungles?"

The shopkeeper said, "A whole lot. Don't they ruin our farms? Once the corn is ripe, they become a menace. We have to guard the farm round the clock. That's what I am doing now".

Himadri felt at last he had hit upon a solution. He said, "Is that so? So sometimes the bears come and eat up the corn stealthily too?"

The shopkeeper replied, "Of course. Only a few days back they ate some on the other side of the farm".

Himadri heaved a sigh of relief and said, "Then assume that the bears have eaten a few more today".

Masterji laughed. He told the shopkeeper, "Go get two for them. After all the village boys were also plucking and eating the corn".

Ultimately, the shopkeeper smilingly went and plucked six corncobs. These were roasted with care in the oven. He just refused payment for them. We went on our way, munching the freshly roasted corncobs. Our coolie also got a share. The corn was very tasty and juicy. It alleviated our hunger and thirst. The joy of travelling in the Himalayas was shared by the tongue as well. I told Himadri, "Just see what a warm welcome you have got, you have not conquered a land but have won the corncobs".

All over Chamba corn was the staple food. All around there were farmlands growing corn. There was quite a profuse harvest. In every village, on all the rooftops of the houses ripe corn was spread out for drying. From afar it seemed as if the roofs were covered with golden sheets. They made corn flour. Everyone here consumed *rotis* made from corn flour, for all twelve months of the year.

Cheld Ghar was about three miles from Lahul. Masterji warned us that at Cheld Ghar a huge landslide had occurred, so the road was closed, "A little before you reach that place you will find that there's a narrow lane on your left that proceeds downwards in the direction of the river. Follow that path, after meandering for about two or three miles this path will meet the high road".

As he turned the bend of the mountain, we saw the immense landslide of Cheld Ghar. It seemed as if someone had clawed off a huge portion of the mountain face.

Amidst the green trees all around, the mountain stood, with severe wounds on its body.

We came upon the narrow lane on the left. We noticed that the path went down to about five or six hundred feet into the valley, where there were a few village houses.

In the distance we saw that a group of coolies were repairing the road. I thought to myself, once again to have to walk down the slope and then walk up again. that is walking around for some extra three miles — what was the need? Instead. it was preferable to take the road under repair, if needed we could ask the coolies for help.

A huge landslide. At some places steep mountains. Waterfalls were cascading down these mountains. The water was cloudy, mixed with clay. The workers came towards us on their own They held our hands and helped us cross the dangerous sections of the road.

In a relieved mood, we began walking towards our destination once again. There was a herd of sheep and goats in the middle of the road. They were covered with very long hair. They had such wavy horns. Close by on the rocks sat a few Gaddis. They had the same cords around their waists. They were smoking hookahs.

As we walked another three miles, far away we could see Varmore. This tableland was almost seven thousand feet high up, on the mountain top. A very wide expanse of plains. Farmlands. Large houses. There were some tall trees raising their heads in between. In the distance, behind the town, there rose the snowy mountains. It seemed, they were close by. Above the town, along the mountain face there was a forest of Chir trees.

This secluded, inaccessible area of the Himalayas seemed ideal for establishing a capital town.

We reached at four thirty in the afternoon.

At the very entrance to the town there was a waterfall. As it had rained for a few days, the current was flowing speedily. From afar I saw that someone was roaming around wearing coloured clothes. As I came closer I saw, that a portion of the farmland had crumbled due to the strong currents of the waterfall, three or four people were busy repairing the damaged parts. Next to them stood a Sadhu. Saffron clothes. Tall and strong physique. Fair complexion. He went from one spot to the other, instructing the men about how to go about their work. He himself, sometimes either removed a rock or placed one I was pleased to see the supervision of the Swamiji. It wasn't any ordinary ordering about, nowhere was there any impression of dominance. He seemed to be an embodied inspiration.

Varmore was the gateway to Manimahesh, the pilgrim spot. I thought to myself, to be able to see a Sadhu just at the gateway was a matter of great fortune.

9

We advanced ahead and entered the town. The roadsides were lined with rows of houses. We made inquriries at the Forest Department. The Range Officer's house was situated higher up in the mountains. They escorte us there. A single storied elongated building. A flower garden in front. Afar stood the snowy mountains as a baclground. Lower down there were the town houses. Tall deodar trees and some temples stood under th shade of the deodars.

The officer was lazing on the verandah, in the fading light of the late afternoon. He got up when he saw us. He welcomed us. His name was Hemraj Sood. He informed us that he got to know about our coming from the Dalhousie office. He assured us that he would make all arrangements for our journey, and asked us not to worry. Then he requested us to relax and have some rest.

We asked, "Where's the forest bungalow? Can't we go there and rest?"

He told us that the chowkidar there had been informed, but the bungalow was situated about a mile away from the town. If we had no objection, we could put up in his bungalow. There were several rooms lying vacant. He was living on his own. There were great advantages of staying here, we wouldn't have to do any running around. We would be able to stay here and plan our trip.

I told him, "We don't want to bother you. Please make arrangements so that we can start on our trip tomorrow. Everyone is of the opinion that we are rather late and it has begun snowing and we might not be able to make it".

He smiled and reassured us, "The people of the hills express these fears as a rule. Please don't worry. You will have an easy trip. Look at the North East side of the sky". A snowy mountain spanned the skyline. It glitters in the falling light of the late afternoon. Sood said, "That's the Manimahesh peak!"

I stared at it. I was thrilled. It seemed to draw me towards it. Sood assured us, "It has snowed a bit in the past two days, but it isn't much at all. I'll arrange for a few people to go with you. But

I want you to stay with me here. Being a bother is out of questopn. I just languish in this forest, it's such a matter of happiness to have visitors who have come from so far away and you want to go and stay in that far off bungalow? No, I won't let you go".

He called his helpers. Tea and some food were served. We sat with him and made plans for our journey next morning. A coolie would go with us carrying our baggage. All our extra baggage we would leave behind in the bungalow. Only those items essential for the next three days we would take along with us.

Sood said, "I have informed my forest guards too. They will be with you when you go through their particular areas. Tomorrow the guard here will accompany you".

Now then we sat down without further anxiety weighing on our minds, and formal introductions began.

He asked, "Where are you coming from?"

"Kolkata".

"From Kolkata? The local doctor here is also a Bengali".

From my previous experience I knew that people of the hill region often mistook people of Eastern India as Bengalis. So I asked, "What's the doctor's surname?"

"Chatterjee".

No further doubts. Sood stretched his head and tried to look a little downwards. He exclaimed with excitement, "There he goes.

His house is on this side". He yelled out: "Doctor Sahib, Doctor Sahib" — he gestured to him to come up to where we stood.

He had greying black hair. Very fair skinned. Quite well built. He was wearing a coat and trousers. The gentleman came upwards to where we stood by taking slow steps. Serious face. As he entered through the garden gate from a little afar he called out to Sood and asked, "Why are you calling me?"

I got up from my chair and advanced towards him. I clasped my palms together in a gesture of *Namaste*. I said, "Please come, let's get introduced, I never imagined I'd meet a Bengali so deep in the Himalayas".

He looked at me with surprise. He said, "Really, you are a Bengali? I did see you coming from my house. I thought you were Punjabis. I had heard from Sood that a party was on its way here en route to Manimahesh. You are coming from Bengal — just can't think of it. At this age, you have come all the way to this difficult place? You have a lot of courage! Is this person your companion? I have been staying here for quite some years, haven't seen a Bengali coming here like this before".

The gentleman's face lit up into a smile. He drew up a chair himself and sat down. He asked Sood to order another round of hot tea. Then he said, "Tell me, where are you coming **from**? I haven't yet asked your name".

I inquired, "Tell me first, where are you from?" I looked at Sood and said, "Sood Sahib, I hope you won't mind if we speak a little in Bengali?"

Sood said, "No, no, why should I mind? I called him because he is from your part of the country".

The doctor said, "Where else could my home be? Calcutta. Bhawanipore. Education in Calcutta. What about you?"

I hesitated a bit. While travelling I did not feel like introducing myself, I did not think it's needed either. Yet, I had to tell him my name. The doctor recognized me right away as soon as he heard my name. He happily said, "See what a strange encounter. Both of us lived so close to each other in Calcutta, but we didn't know each other there, — where do we get to know each other? In the secluded, inaccessible Himalayas!"

Sood looked at us, surprised. He said, "This is the first time I am seeing Doctor Sahib smiling. Did you know each other previously?"

Then he laughed and said, "Try and see whether you can find ou anything about Doctor Sahib. We stay next to each other. We meet almost everyday. We are known to each other but he never calls me over to his house, and if I want to go over, he stops me from doing so. He himself comes over — to this room of mine. He lives alone, who knows what he is up to. He never goes to Calcutta nor does anyone come to visit him — yet he has been staying here for several years. He doesn't mix with the people here either, he talks to me sometimes, but he doesn't tell me anything about himself".

Though he was a serious person, I became quite friendly with the doctor, we even laughed and joked together. Sood watched us and seemed more surprised. The doctor said, "Just see! What shall I tell others about my own self? What's there to say anyway? I took up a job and came away here — so far away. Days are passing by, what's wrong in that? This is a calm place,

there are no problems or commotion, and I just do my own work. Every month I send money home — regularly. What else? Is it possible for anyone to come visiting, so far away? If anyone came, the person wouldn't be able to stay — the children have to study. Last year I had to go to Delhi once, then they had come too, we met — forget it. Tell me about your preparations for the Manimahesh trip. Sood Sahib, I hope you have appointed an efficient person to go with them?"

Sood explained the preparations that he had made. The doctor and Sood told us many anecdotes about Varmore and Manimahesh.

10

Sood said, "Come let's go down to the town and you can meet the Naga Baba along with me. He is a great mystic".

I said, "I noticed a Swamiji as I was entering the town. But he wasn't a Naga, he was wearing saffron clothes".

Hearing the complete description Sood said, "Then you must have seen the same person. He is not only Varmore's but he is also the heart of all Chambal. Maybe due to the rains in the past few days, some farmland has been damaged, as soon as he has heard about it, he rushed there to help, accompanied by some of his followers".

Then we heard anecdotes about the Swamiji. Yogi Sri Sri Jaikisan Giri Maharaj. The people here called him Naga Baba. No one knew how old he was. He had meditated in the snowy mountains of the Himalayas for a long time. During those times he did not wear any clothes. Then he shifted his place of stay to

Varmore. He has been living here for about sixty years. When he visited areas where there was human habitation, he wore the bare minimum of clothes, like a loin cloth or *koupin.* The whole year he bathed in melting icy water — even during the winter when everything was covered with snow. An extremely strong and determined person. There is not a single person in the whole of Chambal who is not aware of his name and fame. Everyone worships him like a god. Whatever might be the nature of their work, big or small, they sought his advice and blessings. Though he was occupied in meditation, day and night, if he heard that some one needed help, he would rush to be of aid, on his own accord. There was a folk saying, that in the Chambal province, even a blade of grass would not move, till he gave orders.

Sood remarked, "What you saw today, merely his helping with minor repair work is just nothing! Whatever development there has been in the Chamba and Varmore areas, that's due to the Naga Baba. Due to lack of maintenance the ancient temples were on the verge of being ruined, he saw to it that they were repaired and their pristine glory was restored. The travellers to Manimahesh faced the problem of accommodation — a dharmasala was built. In the inaccessible hilly areas, commuting was a strenuous job — risky and dangerous to the point of losing one's life — roadways were constructed. Children went without education — so schools were set up. In order to attend to the water crisis, tapped water facilities connected to the water falls were installed. Patients were going without proper treatment, hospitals were opened. Travellers to Manimahesh faced a lot of problems, pilgrims crowded this route in search of benediction, and a lot of Sadhus and Sanyasis came too. Every year, it is he who has been organizing the pilgrimage to Manimahesh. A lot of money is required for work on such a scale. Wherefrom is the money procured, how such mammoth work is organized in such

a disciplined manner — everyone is absolutely amazed. The residents of Chamba do not call him Naga Baba as a sort of namesake, they earnestly believe he is like a father figure to them, they respect him, and love him. They depend on him in their days of sorrow or happiness, during days of crisis or prosperity they turn to him always. He too seems to hold them to his bosom. Such a tough and rigid discipline of a Sanyasi's life, yet what profound love and affection for others. Come let's go and see him".

We seemed to have heard an elixir of words, *katha-amrita*. Our hearts bounded with joy. I reflected, that I hadn't known anything about this great man. Yet, from afar, just a glimpse of his benign appearance had touched our hearts.

Sood continued, "I can narrate many stories about the power and influence that the Naga Baba commands over the whole of the Chambal province. Let me tell you about a small incident. Let alone ordinary people, even the Raja of Chamba as well as senior officers would seek an audience with him and ask for his blessings. They even sought advice about their formidable jobs. Once a well-known businessman got the permission to open a liquor shop in Varmore. A location was identified. Quite close to the temples. It was the area where most of the people lived, that was where they had their daily transactions, day in, day out. The people of the hills were very excited at the prospect of a liquor shop being opened in their neighbourhood. But some well-meaning people of the neighbourhood raised objections. On the other hand, the businessman had great clout in the administrative offices in the town. Apart from money power. So no objections were heeded. He quite brazenly made all arrangements to open the proposed shop. There seemed to be a possibility of a riot too. As a result, the Commissioner Sahib had to come over to

investigate. On arrival the first question he asked was 'Where is Naga Baba?' He went straight off to meet him. He narrated everything to him. Hearing everything, Naga Baba expressed the view that if you have to permit the shop to be opened in this area, then it cannot be located in the vicinity of the temples, or even the markets — it has to be located in the outskirts of the town'.

The Sahib without further consultation with anyone else gave orders according to the advice of the Naga Baba. He said, "It's Naga Baba's orders. It can't be overruled". Though he, himself was the Sahib Commissioner! The liquor shop thus came up five miles away from the main town.

The doctor who was sitting quietly with a serious face now spoke out, "This is a strange place, gentlemen. We won't be able to understand them by applying our value systems. Naga Baba is not only a very powerful person here, he is like a Raja of this place. But it is difficult to figure out even the ordinary things that happen here. So now, I have begun to believe in all this. You have arrived at the wrong time for a journey to Manimahesh. Only a few days ago, during Radhastomi, people trekked to Manimahesh.The journey commences during Janmastami and ends during Radhastomi. You could have experienced so much if you had come then".

I informed him that I did not like crowds, so I had deliberately chosen to come during the so-called off-season for trekking to Manimahesh.

The doctor agreed that if one desired to be totally focussed in one's bid to reach the spot of pilgrimage, then of course this was the way to do it. "But while journeying to Manimahesh, odd

incidents can occur. Let me tell you what I experienced. The travellers all assembled here in Varmore. All the paraphernalia of the pilgrimage, the fairs, songs and dances were routine apart from the usual euphoria. Everything centered round Naga Baba — it was he who gave meticulous advice about what had to done and when. All the functions began a few days before the pilgrimage. Pujas went on. A devotee would be possessed by the gods — this was known as a devotee game. A simple ordinary person would change totally — once the god had possessed him. He would have seizures, then he would become bloated, then he would get up and start dancing, he would start speaking in a different voice — it's an amazing sight. From the possessed person the pilgrims have to take permission as to who can go for the pilgrimage and who can't. If this "god" said "no", there was no way of going then. I live here as a government doctor. My pilgrimage is an 'on duty' stint. Therefore, there was no reason why I should seek permission. Yet, as it is the norm, I too had to queue up with the other pilgrims. The god saw me and said, 'No, he can't go'. I smiled to myself. Who can stop my going? I made all arrangements for the journey. It was the day before the journey. Suddenly, I fell down and sprained my foot. I couldn't stand up. Fracture. So going was impossible. For a few months I became immobile with a plaster cast on my leg. How can I not believe? Next year, I got the permission and everything went off smoothly".

Sood said, "Why? Tell them about last year's incident".

The doctor recounted. "That was an experience also. If it hadn't happened in front of my eyes I wouldn't have believed it. The devotee game was continuing, as is the practice. Someone asked, 'How will the pilgrimage go off this year?' The god replied, 'More or less ok. But four people will die'. Amazing. That was

what happened. Suddenly there was a landslide on the route. Rocks rolled down from the top. Commotion. People panicked. Some people were injured, there was death too — not three, nor five, just four people died".

I agreed, "Yes, it's an amazing case".

Sood said, "Do you know the story of Manimahesh? I heard this from Naga Baba. You too will hear about it from him. Amarnath moved here after the oppression by the Muslims in Kashmir. Then he took a new name — Manimahesh. He lived in the snow-clad Himalayas. No person could reach him. Once a Gaddi came upon him while grazing his sheep. Shiva's new Kailash that he had selected himself, its natural beauty was fabulous. The Gaddi person was overwhelmed. He seemed to be in a trance. Suddenly he seemed to hear a voice from the skies asking him, 'Where are you going, what do you want here?'

Startled the Gaddi started looking all round him — no human being in sight, who was it that was speaking? Suddenly there came in front of him a huge man with matted hair. Again the Gaddi was asked what he wanted. The Gaddi was totally confused. He suddenly said, 'I want a thousand sheep'. And then what's this! His wish came true, but he lost interest in sheep tending. He did not take care of them or even look at them. He seemed to be abstracted always. He just wandered around.

One day a Mahatma came to visit Manimahesh. He asked the same Gaddi to show him the way. The Gaddi refused. After a lot of persuasion he agreed to take him along. His sheep and a dog also accompanied them. When they were half way up the mountain suddenly they heard a divine voice call out - 'Though I had forbidden you, still you are escorting people here? You just

stay where you are, from now on". The Gaddi was unable to move backwards or forwards. Out of fear he started sacrificing the sheep in the name of Manimahesh, one after the other. When there were just two sheep left the voice could be heard again, 'As you are, now you will turn into rocks and remain there forever'. Since then, the Gaddi, two sheep, a dog and the Mahatma have been there. Unknown to them a snake and a crow had also accompanied them, they too were turned into stone. Since then the Gaddis have been sacrificing thousands of sheep as offerings to Manimahesh during the festive fair times. The forest guard who will accompany you, he will show you those rocks. You will also see the horns of sheep scattered on the banks of the lake. But, let's not delay anymore, let's go down. You must see Naga Baba, every evening we go and sit with him for a while. It's a fabulous way to while away the time. The mind gets filled with a sense of peace. Since you'll start your journey tomorrow morning, you should also look around the town today".

The doctor got up from his chair. He went to attend to his duties. He said, "We'll meet again later".

Sood said, "Doctor Sahib, Let's all have dinner together tonight. I won't listen to any refusal, you must come".

The doctor responded with a serious face, "Ok, we'll see".

He did come later in the evening. But he did not have dinner with us.

11

From Sood's bungalow almost 200 ft down the mountain stood the village centre of Varmore. It seemed as if a Brahmini had hidden a very ancient precious stone within the depths of the forest.

Along the slope of the mountain, houses stood in terraced formations. Built of wood and stones. The terrace was covered with slate rocks, Down there everything was entirely different. A wide tableland in the lap of the mountain, 7007 ft above sea level. A calm and quiet environment. The gigantic deodars had created a dense shadowy canopy. In that half-light one could see temples scattered here and there. They bore the evidences of the architectural artistry of olden times. The temples seemed to look like monks in meditation in the sacred woods. Head erect, perennially silent. Tranquil and neat surroundings. On one side of the temples there were a few shops. Some dwelling places. We heard that this central part of the village was called — Chowrashi. There were some folk anecdotes about the place getting its name.

The Brahmni Devi had her house in this area. High up in the mountains, where now her temple is situated, she used to live in that same area. Almost near the mouth of the Brahmininala. Brahmini Devi had a son. A peasant had killed her son's pet *chokor* bird. The son was so overpowered by grief that he died of sorrow. The Brahmini took her own life by jumping into the funeral pyre of her son. From then onwards the villagers were oppressed by the spirits of the dead mother and the dead *chokor* bird. The villagers became scared. They hailed the mother as 'Devi' and started offering puja to her. They established a temple in her name. After some time Mahadev came there with 84 holy men on a pilgrimage to Manimahesh. They took sheiter near the house. They lighted a fire there and rested themselves. Brahmini Devi was enraged to find strangers in her territory. She appeared before them taking on a gigantic form. She ordered Shiva to quit the place at once. Bholanath, as Shiva was called, implored that they be allowed to spend the night there. Devi gave them permission and entered her own temple. As day dawned it was

discovered that the 84 holy men had been transformed nto 84 lingas. From then onwards the place was called Chowrasi, or eighty-four. Even now one will be able to find 84 small and big temples over there.

But Shiva blessed Brahmini Devi and laid down the rule that pilgrims to Manimahesh would have to bathe in the Brahmini fall and pray in the Brahmni temple before proceeding to Manimahesh or else their pilgrimage would be unsuccessful.

The area thus derived its name from the Brahmini Devi, that later became Brahmapur and then the present name Varmore came about.

Pipes have been installed to supply Varmore with water flowing from the Brahmni waterfall. It supplies Varmore with water throughout the year. Now we get to hear that the water will be used to generate electricity.

Himadri asked Sood, "Has the Devi's permission been taken?"

We came and stood on the platform of Chowrashi. We went around looking at the temples.

This was not the thrill of exploring the inaccessible Himalayan forests. This was like catching a glimpse of an ancient, invaluable, many splendoured manuscript that had been treasured with great care. Words had been chiselled into the hand-carved stonewalls. Very intricate designs on stone. These carved scripts came into use enabling learning about the ancient civilization at Chamba. Also, from the genealogical histories of Chamba and Kulu it was possible to know about the kingdom founded by Moru or Jayastambha and the many kings who ruled over these

areas. It is a long regal history. In the 10th century the capital was shifted to Chamba, prior to that the place was administered by the kings of Chamba from Varmore, for about three to four hundred years. The history of this line of monarchs went back to fifteen hundred years. I am not aware of any single royal family continuing to rule for such a long time. I know of Austria's Hapsburg in Europe. The dynasty lasted for six hundred years.

The bronze and stone scripts on the walls that record the dynasty, apart from the oral tradition and folklore — all these weave together the ancient tale of Varmore, and the temples seem to recite the same in the arena of the green woods.

Among the ancient kings in 620 AD, King Aditya Burmanor Adi Burman took over the responsibility of looking after the kingdom. He was the first king to adapt the title of "Burman" But the king who became the most renowned for his achievements in this dynasty, he came in 680 A.D. His name was Meru Burman. Though he extended the territories of his kingdom by winning wars, his permanent achievement that he left behind was some exquisite temples in Varmore. Even after such a long time these temples stand there quietly. Manmahesh or Harihar, Lakshmana Devi, Ganesh and Narsinghadev — all these temples were built during his times. In front of the Manimahesh temple there is a brass life-size image of an ox — and there are stone inscriptions on it as well. It is also believed that the Suryamukh temple was established during his times. It was the practice — that if a Chamba Raja came to visit he would have to worship at the Suryamukh temple first before proceeding to enter the palace. Apart from Lakshmana Devi temple all the others were partially destroyed by the foreign aggressors, known as "kira"

The stone inscriptions also mention the name of the architect of these temples — Guga. The beauty of the temples is his only

introduction; there are no further details about him in the inscriptions. The patterns on the woodwork of the Baghavati Lakshmana Devi are extremely fascinating. In the Ganesh temple the image of Gajanan is made out of eight metals. Apart from these all around there were numerous Shiva temples. There is a *kunda* or pool cemented on all sides as well. The myth goes this way — One day Shiva and Parvati were strolling around with Ganesh in tow. Suddenly, Parvati remembered that it was the auspicious day for having a holy dip in Gaya — the pilgrim spot. She expressed the desire to go to Gaya. But Shiva refused to journey all the way from the Himalayas to Gaya at that moment. Parvati became sad. Ganesh who was devoted to his mother then pierced the earth with his bow and arrow. Water spouted out in seven streams. This pool held the waters of all the holy rivers and lakes of India, it was believed. It was even given a name — Ardha Gaya.

Detailed descriptions of these temples are available in Herman Goetz's book *Early Wooden Temples of Chamba.*

In 760 AD Ajiya Burman became king. Some **scholars** believe that it was during his rule that the Brahmins and **Rajputs** who came from Delhi to the Himalayan region, they were the actual ancestors of the present day Gaddis.

In 820 AD King Mushan Burman became king. He had quite an eventful life history. During the last part of the 8th century, his father Lakshmi Burman became king for sometime. But the foreign aggressors, the 'kiras' attacked and killed **him** and took over his kingdom. Mushan Burman was still in his mother's womb then. The Wazir and Raj Purohit escaped to Kangra and had the Rani carried with them in a palanquin. Midway the Rani had to take shelter in a cave, tormented by labour pain and she

gave birth to her child in the cave. She was so terrified about being killed by the aggressors that she abandoned the infant and came to where the Wazir and Raj Purohit were waiting for her. They learnt about the incident by interrogating her. They went back to the cave to find that the infant was being guarded by a number of *mushiks* or rats. That is why the king was named Mushan Burman. Later the queen and her infant son took shelter in the house of a Brahmin in Kangra, and accepted the Brahmin as a Guru. Suddenly one day the Brahmin noticed the foot imprint of the child, and it looked like the imprint of a royal foot. He asked the queen about the matter. He came to know the actual details as a result. He went and met the King of Suket and informed him. Since then they were given shelter at the Suket palace. Later Mushan Burman was married to the princess of Suket. He assembled a regiment of soldiers, marched to Brahmapur-Varmore — and won back his own kingdom from the aggressors. Though nothing is known about the period after Mushan Burman regained control of his kingdom, but after he became king he issued orders putting a ban on rat killing in his kingdom. Even in modern times in the Chamba royal dynasty the practice continued. Even in the palace or in the houses though rats were sighted, the ban on rat killing remained effective.

I remembered the village of Deshanok located in the Bikaner District of Rajasthan. There was a famous temple of Karani Mata there. It was made of marble. Clean and neat. But all over swarmed countless rats — in the courtyard, the sanctum, all around. But there was a ban on rat killing. Rats scrambled over the feet of the pilgrims. Entering within the temple one had to be very careful about placing one's foot in the dark — so that no rat was crushed underfoot, unintentionally.

I am not aware, whether there was any connection between these two instances on the ban on rat killing.

In AD 920, Sahil Burman became king. It was during his reign that the capital was shifted from Varmore to the town of Chamba. I have already narrated tales about his daughter Chamba Rani and also some others. He was the victor of many battles. The territories of the kingdom of Chamba were also extended. A yogi named Charpatnath was the constant companion of Sahil Burman during his war expeditions. This yogi was the main counsellor and supporter of the king in connection with the administration of the kingdom and the foundation of a new capital. In the town of Chamba near the Lakshminarayan temple a temple of Charpatnath was also established. The currency, Sahil Burman introduced, had the image of Charpatnath inscribed on the coins.

Sahil Burman handed over the responsibility of the kingdom to his son Yagakar and once again returned to Varmore, and it was here that he, along with Charpatnath and other ascetics, led the life of a sanyasi.

I ruminated about the strange evolution of Varmore! The capital of the king's kingdom thus became the ashram of the same king who renounced his throne!

The ancient palace of the kings of Varmore has disappeared. A little above Chowrashi there is a maidan — called Chowgan. It was believed that the palace was situated there.

In the Chowrashi area, some of the old houses were now used as government offices. The houses had become very dilapidated after the earthquake of 1905. Urban culture had also made an entry. Now the total population was 750, 381 men, 339 women.

About the author

Mukhopadhyaya, Umaprasad (1902-1998) A lawyer by training, Umaprasad Mukhopadhyaya gave up his legal practice in pursuit of wanderlust. His special passion was the Himalayas. He was associated with the *Bangabasi Patrika* throughout his literary career. He is a prolific travel writer. His minute observations and authentic narration in his *Manimahesh* (1969) won the Sahitya **Akademi award** for him in 1971. This account tells us of the writer's travel to the lake and peak of Manimahesh in Chamba district in Himachal Pradesh.

Works:

Some of his works are:

Five volumes of his travelogues, called *Bhraman Omnibus*. are available in Bengali. Some of his writings are: *Himalayer Pathe Pathe* (1962); *Triloknather Pathe* (1971), *Sherpa-der* ***Deshe*** (1974), *Afridi Mulke* (1976), *Kaberi Kahani* (1979), *Baishnode**bl** o Anyayana kahini* (1979) and *Arabsagarer Tirey* (1992).

Glossary

Varmore: sub-tehsil of Chamba district, seat of the Gaddis, originating from the name Brahmapore. Another name of the place is Gaderam or Goderan.

Cords: a forty to sixty yards belt made of wool around the waist, weighing 2-3 kgs, which is a trademark of the Gaddis. In the Bengali narrative, it is called a 'dora', and in the 7th part, a detailed description is given. Even women wear it, and use it to

tie sheep and goats, pitch tents, and to pull up animals which have fallen off the mountains. The ropes are so strong that they can be tied to rocks and trees and one can climb up with their support. These 'dora's are also called 'Shivji ki jata' because these people are all devotees of Shiv. Varmore is also called Shivbhumi.

Gaddis: An ancient tribe of Varmore, which is also called Shivbhumi. This area is also called Shiv's 'gaddi' or seat, and that is how the tribe has acquired its name. They do not look Pahari. Their ancestors were Shakas, akin to Aryas. They used to roam about with horses and sheep, but when the Huns attacked them, they fled in all directions with their animals. Some of them travelled southwards, towards India. Some of their branches went to the plains and even established little kingdoms there. But those who still tame animals are still in the Himalayas. Their blood is nomadic. Some roam in the Bushahar and Tehri regions of the Himalayas with buffaloes. They are called 'Gujjars', and have embraced Islam. Others wander around Chamba, Mandi, Lahul etc. They are called 'Gaddi'. They tame sheep and goats. In emulation of Vasudev, the grandson of the Shaka king Kanishka, they adopted the Hindu religion. They are also agricultural people, build huts, and have their separate land and social life.

Questions

1. Elaborate the myth surrounding the origin of the name of Brahmapur or Varmore.
2. What does the writer say about the Naga Baba? What is his attitude towards him?
3. Discuss the stylistic aspects of this essay.
4. What do you learn about the history of the territory surrounding Brahmapur from the excerpt in your course?
5. In what way is *Manimahesh* a personal memoir rather than an objective travellers' guide to the land and its people?
6. *Manimahesh* tells us about the religion, customs, staple food and culture of its people. Discuss.
7. *Manimahesh* is about a site of immense natural beauty, and yet that beauty is punctuated by other vibrant happenings in a way that it does not pall. Do you agree? Discuss.
8. Enumerate some of the historical legends and myths about the valley surrounding Manimahesh.

Notes

Notes