

# A CORPSE IN THE WELL

translations from  
Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiographies

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

The Dalit autobiography is a literary form marked by a great quantity of writing equally matched by its quality.

The autobiographies in this first English collection depict varying facets of Dalit life: the struggle for survival; the man-woman relationship; an existence crushed under the wheels of village life; the experiencing of humiliation and atrocities; at times, abject submission, at other times, rebellion.

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# **A Corpse in the Well**

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Modern**

**Marathi Dalit Autobiographies**

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**Arjun Dangle**



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## Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Dalit literature, Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat were

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

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

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

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

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

All the autobiographical extracts in this anthology have been selected because they forcefully convey the 'differentness' of Dalit literature. How deep a chasm there is between the prose of mainstream Marathi literature and that of Dalit literature! We immediately recognize that the language,

experiences and heroes of Dalit literature are totally different.

The Dalit autobiography is a literary form marked by a great quantity of writing; however, its quality is equal to its quantity. The journey from Shankarrao Kharat's *Taral Antaral* (represented in this anthology by 'The Boneseller' and 'A Corpse in the Well') to the young writer Sharankumar Limbale's 'The Bastard' is the whole saga of Dalit social history. *Taral Antaral* is a narration dating from the first generation of the Ambedkarite movement. Many references to that movement are included in it.

In an autobiography like *Athvaninche Pakshi* (from which 'This Too Shall Pass' has been selected), we can see the wounded psyche of a young boy from a backward area such as Marathwada; and in *Bahuta* ('Son, Eat your Fill' and 'We are Kings!' are the extracts selected) the life-story of a young man from the village who has been brought to an urban slum in the quest for employment. In *Gabal* ('The Stragglers' is the extract selected) we get a comprehensive idea of a traditional occupation that has to be resorted to in the absence of any means of making an honest living, and the treadmill of Dalit existence in the present cultural, economic and social system is vividly conveyed.

Dalit women have participated actively in the Dalit movement. Many autobiographies by Dalit women have been published. Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalnachi Chittarkatha* (the extract here is 'Naja Goes to School — and Doesn't') and Kumud Pawde's *Antasphot* (extract here: 'The Story of My Sanskrit') are representative of these. Shantabai Kamble's is a struggle for identity and growth against a rural background while that of Prof. Pawde is set in an urban, educated ethos.

In *The Bastard*, a severe jolt is given to values concerning relations between men and women, and the family structure.

In these autobiographies, relating to different periods of time and set in different levels of society, we see varying facets of the Dalit movement: the struggle for survival; the emotional universe of a Dalit's life; the man-woman relationship; an existence crushed under the wheels of village life; the experiencing of humiliation and atrocities; at times, abject submission, at other times, rebellion.

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

ARJUN DANGLE

SHANKARRAO KHARAT

## *A Corpse in the Well*

I knew clearly the dangers of village duty. It was a perpetual noose around the neck of a Mahar! My father was crushed flat by this duty. Here is the story of one of his experiences — a near fatal one. I still shiver at the thought of it.

It was our turn to do the customary duty at our village, Kamat. We had a house there. It was summer, so I was home on vacation.

A corpse was floating in an abandoned well near the village. It had bloated and risen to the surface. The Patil, the village chief, had already received the news in the evening. The Mahars and the Ramoshis too had got the news. Anna, my father, as the Mahar on village duty, and one of the Ramoshis, had both reported at the place where the corpse lay. Anna and the Ramoshi stayed up the whole night by the well, guarding the corpse.

Then it was the morning of the next day. The head constable and another constable were expected from the police post, to conduct an initial inquiry about the corpse. Till then, as per routine, the Mahar and the Ramoshi would have to guard it. My mother knew this was so. But now the night was over, the morning sun, too, had begun to descend and it was afternoon; yet father had not returned home. So my mother sent me to the well with *bhakri* wrapped in a cloth for Anna to eat. I hopped towards the well like a bounding deer. Seeing Anna sitting close by, I went to him and said, 'Anna! the night is over. The day's nearly gone. Mother is waiting for you! When are you coming home?'

He glanced at the well and replied, 'But the chief constable and the constable are yet to arrive! They will carry out the inquest; only then can the Mahar rest. So go and tell Mother that I'll be very late.'

He took out a pipe from his pocket and filled it with tobacco. He lit it with a flint and started smoking. I felt he was suppressing his hunger with it. I quickly said, 'Anna I have brought *bhakri* for you. Do eat it!'

'No, son, I'll only have time to eat my bread when everything is

over with this corpse. Not before that!’

‘But when will it all be over? And how long will you go without food?’ To my questions, Anna replied, ‘The village chief was here a little while ago. He told me that the head constable has arrived in the village. But he is dining. He’ll come only when he has finished eating and drinking. When the corpse is fetched out of the well, the inquest will be held. Then we’ll be free.’

Looking at the village chief who was sitting under the shadow of a distant tree, I said, ‘Anna! The constable will come after his meal. The village chief has also filled his belly. Then why can’t you too eat your bread? Why must you remain hungry?’

‘Oh, they are officers! How can they work without food?’

‘Then why should we work on an empty stomach? We’re human beings, too.’

‘That’s what village duty is, my boy! Who cares if a Mahar lives or dies?’

Then I suggested a way out. ‘Anna, you have your bread! I’ll stand guard with the Ramoshi till then.’

At this Anna said rather vehemently, ‘No! No village duty for you. It’s bad enough that we have to endure it. Once you’re saddled with the village duty, you’ll be stuck with it for life! That’s the tradition! That’s our doom! You go home. I’ll eat when it’s time!’

While I was talking to Anna two constables in uniform marched up to us, their hob-nailed boots clattering on the ground. No sooner had they reached the well, than the head constable came pounding up on his horse. All the people around made way for him. The Ramoshi paid his respects from a distance. The village chief stood up and saluted him. Anna bowed in a deep *johar*. The Ramoshi tied up the horse to a tamarind tree. Anna fetched water in a pitcher from another well, which was in a field by the stream. He poured it into the iron trough in front of the horse. Since they were expecting the head constable to come on a horse, the Mahar and the Ramoshi had made all arrangements for the horse’s care. They put before the horse a sheaf of green maize shoots which they had brought from the field near the stream. The hungry horse greedily began to munch the fresh green grass.

The head constable, spinning his baton, took a stroll around the well. He peeped into the well, then looked around it and again into it. He walked towards the steps of the well. The upper steps were buried in the soil. Some lower steps had slipped into the water. Some

steps were about to fall away from the level. It was an abandoned well; the structure was old. Inside the rim one could see overgrown, yard-long dried grass; shrubs had sprouted in the dilapidated portions. The upper part of the well had collapsed in ruins and its big long stones were scattered around. Green moss floated on the unused water of the well, and foliage from the trees near the edge had fallen into it and rotted. The well was quite deep. How to remove the corpse from such an awkward well? That was why the head constable looked like a man with a problem. The constable suddenly whispered something to the village chief. The head constable had a secretive discussion with the constable and the village chief about how to remove the corpse. Then coming forward, the constable yelled at Anna, ‘What are you waiting for, Mahar? Jump in. How long must the officer stand here?’

Anna immediately replied, ‘Constable, the Mahar’s village duty is only to guard the corpse. How can we touch it? What would the heirs of this corpse have to say?’

Then the head constable said sharply to Anna, ‘What would they say?’

Anna replied, ‘The heirs will say, “Were we dead, that you touched our kinsman’s corpse?” and they will have a grudge against us Mahars!’

‘But I’m ordering you to! What are you afraid of?’

‘*Sarkar*, you will go away from here. You will leave this poor Mahar to his fate! We want to go on living in this village!’

I was listening intently to this dialogue between Anna and the head constable. Suddenly, the head constable thundered, ‘You lump of dirt! Are you going to jump, or do I have to whip you?’

At these words, Anna remained silent. Seeing that the head constable was enraged, he did not open his mouth. The constable and the village chief started bombarding Anna with threats and curses. They charged at him, overflowing with abuse, but Anna stood like a pillar. Perhaps Anna felt that if he said one word, if he said no, the constable wouldn’t stop till he had drubbed him soundly. That must be why he kept quiet. In those days the oppressive power and prestige of the head constable were tremendous. Against this power, a Mahar was a mere wisp of straw.

Seeing and hearing all this was a shock to my young mind. I heard their curses, their threats, their shouting. I thought, whose dead body is this anyway? Whose well? Why should my father have to be cursed

and threatened because of them? This was rank injustice to my father; I was old enough to understand that and also had some education to my credit. So I could see clearly the injustice being done to my father. He had not done anything wrong. His only crime was being the Mahar of the village. I was enraged at what was happening; my gorge rose with anger. In my rage I pushed into the argument. 'What reason have you got to abuse my father? The corpse's relations will come. They will remove the body. Otherwise, if the government feels like removing it, let them remove it themselves! Are you threatening my father just because he's the Mahar on village duty?' I let out this spate of words in one breath.

Suddenly, like a wildcat, the head constable spat threateningly at me, 'Who are you, you little worm?' And he said to the constable, 'Catch him! Give the bastard a good beating!'

At this signal the constable charged at me, raising his baton. I moved back a couple of steps, closer to my father. Anna clasped me to him. Then he too said in a raised voice, 'Shut up, son. You're not old enough to understand. Don't say a word. I'll have to bear whatever happens.' From Anna's words, it was obvious that he had no alternatives left. Everyone was up against him, pushing him into a corner. He got up, removed his clothes, laid them to one side and put a stone on them. Then he went near the well, looked into it from the side which was still strong, and threw a rope down into it. Then he slid down the rope, about halfway down the well. I stood by the rim of the well looking down at Anna. My gaze wandered over the well. Suddenly, I saw a long, slender creature inside. I shouted, 'Anna, there's a snake below! A snake!' Hearing me, Anna stopped moving and hung dangling on the rope. He looked at the water below. Horrified, I shouted, 'Anna! The snake has moved towards the corpse! From under that stone! See there! See below! Come up. I'll go down.' Feeling the vibrations of my shouts, the snake retreated halfway from the water. He went back into the hole and lay peeping out. Anna was still dangling from the rope, looking at the snake. My shouts had drawn everyone's attention and they were craning into the well.

Looking at the snake, the village chief said loudly, 'O Rama! It's not a snake, it's a reptile! It won't bite!' I answered his words of wisdom with, 'Why don't you go down yourself. You'll soon find out what it is!'

'You talk too much,' the head constable said, glaring at me angrily. He issued a command. 'Mahar! Get down there! I am getting late!'

My blood boiled; I swore at him silently, 'Curse this head constable! Was he born of a man or a beast? Whom did his mother lie under?' I could do nothing else to him. But I looked at Anna and shouted, 'Anna, don't go down. Come up. I'll be down there in a minute. Whatever happens let it happen to me. Our family will be helpless without you.'

Anna looked up at me, and said, in despairing anger: 'Son! If it is to happen let it happen to me! Let the village know that the village Mahar Rama died of snake bite. Died while removing a corpse from a ruined well, while he was supposed to be doing his village duty. Let the village know! Let the government know! Let the whole world know!' With these last words, and without further thought, he took his life in both hands, and climbing down the well, went to the other side. Then he tied the legs and neck of the corpse with another rope which had been thrown down. Tied the knot hard, and shouted, 'Yes! Now pull!' The others on village duty pulled out the corpse, for three other Mahars had by now arrived at the site. Inside the well, Anna had been keeping an eye on the reptile, for fear that it would wrap itself round him and kill him. Now with the agility of a snake, he swiftly climbed the rope. The reptile moved from the hole and went slithering through the water, towards the stairs.

The threat to Anna's life had passed. My terror subsided. My eyes had filled with tears. Then Anna held me close to him. I wiped my eyes.

The dead body was bloated. It looked hideous and smelt foul. All had covered their noses. The preliminary inquiry was conducted on the spot. The Mahars shifted the corpse into the bullockcart brought from the farm, and scattered over it *neem* leaves that covered the body completely. Then they took it along a cart-track to a doctor about eight miles away for a postmortem. Anna as the village Mahar, another Mahar, two Ramoshis and a policeman went along with it. Anna wrapped in a fold of his dhoti the bread which I had brought for him, and said to me, 'Now for heaven's sake go home! Tell your mother that I am going to the dispensary along with the corpse.'

Anna set out. The cart disappeared along the road; then Anna disappeared too. Then I went home, numbed.

A storm of thoughts swept through my mind about the dangerous, deadly work involved in village duty. Why do Mahars do this kind of work? I asked myself. But the Mahars had moved the High Court fighting for the Mahar *vatan* share, a quarter of the share.

Only after I myself had become an advocate did I learn that for the sake of this hereditary right — this worthless right — the Mahars had played the game of litigation right up to the High Court.

*Translated by Priya Adarkar  
An extract from Taral-Antaral*

DAYA PAWAR

### ***'Son, Eat your Fill'***

My father worked in the dry dock in Bombay. I used to call him Dada. Even today, my own son calls me Dada. I don't like the idea of his calling me Daddy or Papa. That would be like a foreign cactus grafted on a native prickly pear.

What was I saying? Oh, yes. In those days we stayed at the Kaavakhana. A ten-by-twelve room. An indoor tap. A common latrine. My mother, grandmother and uncle's family lived there too.

You won't find the Kaavakhana in a map of Bombay today. In those days, the tram that started from the 'Khada Parsi' statue would pass the corner of Foras Road and go towards Girgaum. Aji — my grandmother — remembered seeing a horse-drawn tram. She used to tell us her memories. So when I was small, I would see vividly how the horse must have pulled the tram over the bridge, how he must have foamed at the mouth. The Nagpada area began at the end of the bridge. It was in Nagpada that the Kaavakhana stood. Today there's a massive six-storey building there. At one end of the Kaavakhana there was Chor Bazaar. On the other, was Kamathipura. At the Golpitha was the red-light district. And beyond it was the Kaavakhana which could be reached from either side.

The Mahar community lived in little islands in the surrounding area. They were all from the Ghats, gathered together from Sangamner, Akola, Junnar, or Sinnar. Around them lived Christians and Muslims.

The Mahars' living conditions were wretched. In each little cubby-hole, there were three or four sub-tenants. In between them were partitions made of packing-case wood. In these wooden boxes was their entire world. The men worked as porters. Some went to work in mills and factories.

The women were not kept in purdah. On the contrary, they slaved even more than their men. However much a drunken husband belaboured them, they would look after him, even pander to his addiction. Their occupation was to collect rags, papers, broken glass,

iron and bottles in the street, bring them home, sort them out all night, and go and sell them in the morning. Just nearby was the Mangaldas market where trading in cloth took place. These women would gather the paper swept out of those shops. Each woman had her own appointed shop. There would be fierce quarrels about who should take the rubbish from which shop. And the shop assistants would be bribed in small coin.

Some women washed the saris of the prostitutes in the nearby brothels. Some would cook *bajri bhakris* and *barbaat* for the whores who were bored with eating *kheema* and bread. An occasional quarrelsome brothel customer would demand one of these women. At such a time they would with difficulty guard their honour, fragile as glass, and escape him.

There was another special thing about the Kaavakhana — a club attached to the area. An almost open one, in front of the big hall, made of matting walls with a tarpaulin roof. It was this club itself that was called the Kaavakhana. White men, Jews, strapping Arabs — occasionally a Black among them — such were the rich men who gambled all day in the club. Their games were varied. Cards, poker, billiards. We used to stand and watch that game of billiards through a crack in the closed door, see them pushing around those shining, coloured balls with a smooth-slipping stick.

The men in our tenement never played that game. It was imprinted on their minds that it was not a game for the poor.

We never saw the rich men in this club going to work. They loitered there from morning to midnight, drinking tea without milk. There was another drink they would take too, one made of cocoa beans. They called it 'kaava'. We used to wonder what joy those Jews, red as carrots, could get from drinking that black, bitter brew.

Talking of Jews reminds me — they had a strange ritual method of slaughtering chickens. A Jew killing a chicken never cut its throat clean from side to side with a knife. A chicken with its throat half-slit would be thrown into the *maidan* in front of us. It would spout blood and desperately flap its wings. We couldn't bear to watch such cruel games. This butchery would go on all the time next to the huge Jewish synagogue that was on our road to and from school. Our hair leapt on end when we saw it happen...

Sometimes, the club was a nuisance to the neighbourhood. We could never tell when there would be a riot, when chairs and vessels would be thrown about. All day long words such as 'satta', 'race' or

'betting' would fall on our ears. These men had dealings in thousands of rupees right there where they sat. Some would be fake, some genuine.

When we children, all of my age, woke up in the morning, we would be asked what we had dreamt of in the night. If we had dreamt of fire, that meant a particular number, if water, then another. This would be the topic of conversation in the morning. In this 'China-betting' game, one anna was a sufficient wager. All the adults in the house took part with enthusiasm. Even the mad man lying on the footpath, a heap of dirt on his body, had his worth in the game of 'satta'. Meanings would be read into whatever gestures he made. Someone's fortunes would bear fruit as a result, and the mad man would be respected as an auspicious man.

Adjoining the club was a horseshoe-shaped tenement with a tiled roof. That is where we used to live. Around us lived the four hardworking sons of my grandmother's elder sister. My father's brother was called Jaba, and these four uncles were named Rabha, Naba, Shiva and Kaba. I called one of them Taty, another Baba. One of them pulled a handcart, another was a porter. At first only my father worked in the dock. Then he stuck them on there with him one by one.

Aji, my grandmother, worked in the dogs' dispensary at Byculla. A sahib who knew her had done her this favour. The dogs of the gentry used to come there for medical treatment. Her work was to give them their milk, clean out their dirt, bathe them with soap. I sometimes went to the hospital with Aji. I used to love the newborn puppies, and felt like just sitting and watching them. I enjoyed hearing the slurping, sucking sounds they made as they drank milk out of a wide china dish. I felt like hugging them close to me. But I didn't dare touch them, for fear of what the sahib would say.

There was a real little island of our relations in the Kaavakhana. A man pulls his coat close about him in a strong wind, they say. In the same manner, these relations lived close to one another. Their mutual love and hate were limitless. From their quarrels you would think that these people would never again see each other's faces; that they would scatter far apart in that great metropolis. But nothing like that actually happened. Their condition was like that of beans that are uprooted together when their vine is uprooted from the earth.

When these people came here to stay, the large building opposite was vacant. But because they didn't want the bother of climbing up

and down the stairs, they chose this low-tiled tenement, which had probably been a stable in the past. Even today, I am amused at their ignorance.

Of course, there may not have been just one reason for what they did. Their business was gathering the rubbish of the whole of Bombay. Who would have let them stay in a flat in the building opposite, if that was their trade?

But for that reason, what a hell they lived in! And how many of my growing years did I spend there! Almost all the rooms leaked in the monsoons. All night long, vessels and pans would be put down in spot after spot. It was hard to know when sleep finally came to us across the music of this *jal tarang*.

At first I was the youngest child in all the houses about us, and was petted a great deal. If I made the excuse of a headache and stretched out on the quilt, at once a bright yellow *malpua* from the Irani restaurant across the way would appear in front of me. And at once my headache would stop. They used to make fun of my illness in the house. But no one would scold me.

One pay day came... Dada and Tatyā got paid the same day. I threw a tantrum for a suit and boots. I don't think I was old enough to wear them. I was probably seven or eight years old. But I cried and screamed.

At last they take me to Pila House. I see such huge, shining, glass-fronted shops for the first time. They buy me a woollen jacket and pants and shiny black boots. I can't even wait till I get home; I change my clothes right there in the shop. I don't know what Dada feels as he watches me. A photograph of all of us is taken that day.

I preserved that photograph for a long time. But in these twenty-five or so years of house-moving within Bombay (after the fashion of the scorpion whose house is on his back), somewhere in that confusion the photograph has been lost. Today I feel as if a priceless treasure has been robbed. A rare photograph of Dada and Tatyā. That is the only memento I have of them. But even that memento is lost to time.

I can still remember Dada's face. Dada was dark as black wood, tall and skinny. His clothes were spick and span. A crisp white mercerised dhoti of good quality. A woollen jacket. A high black cap of the 'Gandharva' brand on his head. He had a good smile, and when he laughed, a speck of gold shone on one tooth. He could neither read nor write. But for the photograph, he had a bulky volume in his hands, and a pen was clipped to his coat pocket.

Tatyā was princely in his bearing. His hair was neatly combed back. He was up-to-date in all he did. At one time he used to engage in gymnastics. He played with stick and sword, and could fight with a lathi. He could halve a lemon with ease, with a sword and a stick. Around his neck, on a black thread, he used to wear an amulet for strength.

My grandmother was a simple soul, a fund of anecdotes. Her name was Devkai. She had lost her husband at an early age, and borne her widowhood with great courage. She had scraped and scraped to bring up her two sons. If one asked her:

'Aji, when did you come to Bombay?' she would look off into the distance and reply:

'It was like this, son. Your grandpa Bhaga died of drink. Your pa was just knee-high. Tatyā was a baby. They were very hard on us in the village. Our turn used to come for the Mahars' duties. There was no grown man in my house. So my relations, too, used to be cruel to me. The widow should call out the village proclamations, they said. She should be asked to guard the village gate. She should help carry the carcasses of dead animals. If anyone in the village died, we had to go from village to village, come rain or shine, and give the news. These were the jobs of the Mahars.

'Once the Patil sent me to cry out a proclamation in the village. It was the Holi season. There was smallpox in the village. The cart of the goddess Mariāi was going in procession to the next village. The Mahars used to pull it. If it was stopped at that time, the smallpox would increase. So the Patil told me to cry this proclamation in the village: "Don't stop or delay the cart." I took the stick with bells in my hands and was going round shouting the proclamation. And there was young Kondiba, sitting on the threshold of Vithoba's temple. I don't know what whim he had. Maybe he wanted to make a joke of me. He stood in my way and said: "Catch hold of this Mahar woman. Tie her up in the square. Has she gone mad? She's quite happily saying 'Don't fry or fuck.'" A crowd had gathered. Some were laughing. Some were furious with me. I fell at the feet of the villagers. I swore earnestly about what proclamation I had really been crying out, but they wouldn't listen. My husband's cousin heard about it in the Mahar quarter. He was a little respected in the village. When he came, the villagers finally let go of me.

'I couldn't sleep all night. I thought hard. I didn't want to stay at that place. I took my two sons and came to Bombay, and lived under

the protection of my sister.'

Aji could remember no names earlier than her father-in-law's. We read many people's genealogies in books. The many-branched family trees of others are written in histories. But I don't know any names earlier than my great-grandfather's. They say that the names of people's ancestors are preserved in the books of the *pandas* and other Brahmins at places of pilgrimage. But would my ancestors have gone to such pilgrim centres? If they went at all, they would have gone to Khandoba at Jejuri.

Aji has remained embedded in my memory for another reason. When the breadwinner of the house sat to eat, Aji used to sit by him till he finished, stroking his back and repeating, like a refrain, 'Son, eat your fill.'

While Dada was the breadwinner, and brought home his pay, Aji used to sit next to him. After Dada, came Tatya's turn. He once came home royally drunk. When Tatya sat to eat, Aji's refrain went on, 'Son, eat your fill.' Tatya grew wild with rage that day, he threw his *thali* angrily into the courtyard in front of the house. All the food fell into the dirt. He said furiously: 'Will you say it again: "Eat your fill, son?" Am I a little child?'

For two or three days Aji was quiet. But her habit never left her. Later, when I grew up and started working and bringing home the cash, Aji used to sit by me as I ate. She used to stroke my back and mutter, 'Son, eat your fill.' My eyes would swim with tears.

Today Aji is dead and buried. When I sit to eat I remember her. Her words ring in my ears. If you think of it, Aji never knew a moment's happiness all her life. But today I wonder how harsh reality had not ground out the gentleness and affection in her nature. Old people like Aji and of her generation are vanishing fast. I see around me only people with mercenary motives and bitterness in their pocket.

Translated by Priya Adarkar  
An extract from *Baluta*

DAYA PAWAR

### ***'We are Kings!'***

The Maharwada I saw as a little boy has been destroyed in the last thirty or forty years. But how shall I wipe away the image of it I got as a child? It lingers with me forever.

But one thing is true; the Mahar-dom I saw as a child did not have the character of beggary. The share that the Mahars got in the harvest, they felt, was theirs by right. Legends about the fifty-two rights their ancestors had been given through a deed of gift had been handed down for generations, and everyone had great pride in this tradition.

They had received a grant of land that carried only a nominal tax. This is something you see particularly in western Maharashtra. The piece of land near the house was called the *hadki* or 'little bone.' I don't know why; perhaps because the bones of an animal used to lie in this ground after it had been skinned; hence 'little bone.' The land which was far from the village, in the lee of the hill, was called the *hadvala* (also from 'bone'). I never saw the Mahars from the village ploughing that land. It was said that they used to do so once, before I was born. But the people of the village used that land as the grazing ground for the village cattle, as it was so far away. A nominal compensation was paid for this.

A disturbing story had been handed down among the Mahars about the fifty-two rights. It was that the Muslim king of Paithan and Bedar had given these fifty-two rights to the Mahars. Later I was able to see the wording of the deed of gift in Vitthal Ramji Shinde's *The Untouchable Problems in India*. The deed read thus: 'A bastion was under construction at Purandhar Fort, but the work was not coming to completion. The king had a vision that if someone's eldest son and daughter-in-law were buried in the bastion, the work would be completed. The king woke up as soon as the vision was over, and told the news to Yesaji Naik Chibe. Then Yesaji Naik began to say, "I will give my son and daughter-in-law." Then Nathanak, the son of Bahrinak Sonnak, and his wife Devkai, these two were buried in the orange bastion on the eighth day of Ashwin. And the work of the

bastion was completed.'

Even though this was the official deed granting the fifty-two rights, there was yet another legend about it prevalent among the Mahars. It was about the loyalty of one particular Mahar.

The king has a young and beautiful daughter who has to be escorted to Delhi. In those days there was a thick jungle on the way, and no vehicles. This Mahar, too, is young and he is robust. After he has left the king's daughter at her destination and returned, a suspicion is voiced against him in the durbar. The charge is that he has probably raped the girl on the way. Now, the Mahar has left a little wooden box with the king before his departure, saying, 'It is something valuable of mine; return it when I come back.' The young Mahar now asks for the little box to be opened. In it is his penis, cut off before he went. The king is pleased with his loyalty, and tells the young man, 'Ask for whatever you want.'

The young Mahar says, 'I don't want anything myself, but give my caste something that will last them for generations.' The king gives this deed granting the fifty-two rights. Mahar-dom consisted of glorious traditions like this one.

The Mahar-dom I saw as a child is imprinted on my heart. This part is hard to erase. It will go only when I die. The helplessness you see besmeared on my face is from that time. Scratch it — draw blood even — but it will not be wiped away.

There was no time-table for a Mahar's work. He was tied to it twenty-four hours, the slave of whatever work fell his way. It was called forced labour.

To do this work required little study or skill. Some traditional Mahar jobs had fallen into disuse. But some others still remained, like a yoke on our necks. Taking the taxes of the whole village to the *taluka* town; running in front of the horses of the big people who came to the village, looking after their animals, and giving them fodder and water; making proclamations; if anyone of the village died, going from village to village giving the news; dragging away dead animals; chopping wood; beating the drum for village festivals; doing *aarati* to bridegrooms at the entrance of the village; and so on. These were Mahars' jobs. And what did they get in payment? The *baluta*: a share in the harvest.

I used to accompany my mother without fail when I was a small child, to ask for this share. Each house's appointed servant would set out. Even a shaven widow would go for her share of the harvest along

with the rest of the Mahars, once the grain was stacked in the Marathas' threshing floors or fields. A coarse blanket would be carried along. The farmers would grumble as they handed over the sheaves. They would say, 'You Mahars, you lazy sons of bitches, you're always first to ask for your share. Think it's your father's grain, do you?'

The Mahars of those days were no weaklings. They were coal-black and solidly built. They talked toughly to the Marathas. The Marathas wanted to give us the top portion of the stack of unthreshed grain. Finally, once the stacks had been taken out, the Mahars would spread their blankets over the grain. When it was spread, the villagers would give the Mahars all the grain that was under the blanket. But as they gave it, they would keep up a continuous stream of abuse. And the Mahars would begin to tie up their bundles as if nothing were the matter.

I remember an incident to do with Mahar duties. Once the taxes of the whole village had been collected, a Mahar had to take them to the *taluka* town. This collective tax was called a *patti*. When the *patti* was paid, a receipt had to be obtained from the courthouse clerk.

An old widow from a neighbouring village had come in this manner to pay the *patti*. A simple-minded old woman. She gave the *patti* to the clerk, but forgot to take a receipt. The clerk has no humanity in him. The next day the old woman comes running to the *kacheri* for the receipt. The clerk is a Brahmin. He maintains a complete blank about what has happened. She returns to the village beating her breast in despair. Of course, she is duly accused of and tried for embezzling the money. The old woman makes piteous laments and invokes the village goddess. But no one has mercy on her; all revile her. She is handcuffed and brought to the *taluka* town. The crime of embezzling the village *patti* is established in court. The clerk washes his hands off this affair and goes scot-free. She serves a two- or three-month sentence and returns.

Horrific occurrences like this also take place while doing a Mahar's duties. Once there was a tremendous quarrel between the villagers and the Mahars over the sharing of the harvest. It was like this. The tradition was that when the share of the harvest came in, the sheaves were at once divided. The villagers really did not consider how much of their income went to the Mahars. Just as it was easy to feed dogs and cats, so was the case with the Mahars, was the villagers' simple reckoning. Besides, it was a belief that one earned good karma by feeding Mahars and orphans. The villagers considered it an ornament

to the village to have Mahars in it.

There is a story about a village where the Mahars, tired of their ill-treatment, set out to leave for ever. The villagers stopped their Mahars at the boundary, mollified them and brought them back with all due honour.

The villagers probably feared that if there were no Mahars in the village, there would be some great calamity. That was the incident. So the Mahars and the villagers never let their mutual tensions go to a snapping point.

One year, the Mahars in the village decided that they wouldn't divide the harvest between them. They decided instead to invite the forty villages around them to a big feast. Only the Mahars would come, of course. A huge pile of the Mahars' share of the harvest was heaped up in the *hadki* near the village. Even the village headman did not have such a big amount.

The villagers all stared angrily. The outcry arose in the village: 'The Mahars are growing fat on our labour.' That was all that was required.

Next year the Mahars got no share of the harvest. There were twenty or thirty Mahar households and almost two thousand of the villagers. That was the size of the great quarrel.

There was only one Chamar household in the village. But they did not get involved in the Mahars' quarrels. The business of that household — leather buckets and ropes — depended on the village. By comparison, some families in the Maharwada were quite well-off. Some had bullock-carts on the road, drawn by herd bulls, and milch-cattle in their homes. In the Konkan, they worked as drovers. They would buy good stallions and the local breed of bulls in the villages around, and go down from the Ghats and sell them in the Konkan.

I remember the Mahars I saw as a child. They were tall and sturdy, and black as pitch. The whole village was terrified of them. The reason for the terror was the particular power they had: that of the "Soma Mahar". Soma Mahar was a variety of poison. I once saw some of it tied in a little bundle that Uma-Ajya had. It was pure white. Once the Mahars pulled out this weapon, the cattle in the village would rapidly die off. It was a horrible thing to do. But if any man swollen with his wealth oppressed the Mahars, this weapon was soon drawn against him. What did the Mahars do? They would take a bunch of millet or a piece of *bhakri* and mix the poison with it. This would be fed to the animal at the dead of night when nobody could see. Even the Mahar

child no bigger than your fist would do this work. The Mahars thus killed two birds with one stone. They hit a hard blow at their opponents, and they got the animal's meat and its hide. Once in a way the villagers would teach the Mahars a lesson by not giving them the animal, but digging a grave in the fields and burying it.

However, the village was never united over this issue. Just like the Maharwada, the village, too, had its factions. Two of the factions were fierce ones. They had fallen out only over surnames, Awari and Papal. The Awaris were more numerous, the Papals were fewer in the village; hence the Awaris were always recognized as the village Patils. They were in the forefront at the Pola festival or on religious occasions. The Papals were outsiders who had come to the village. The Awaris treated them like immigrants. When the Papals came, they brought a Mahar with them. That was the Rupavate of our village. We Pawars were the Awaris' watchmen. We asked for our share of the harvest from them, and the Rupavates from the Papals. But if any animal belonging to either family died, all of us Mahars used to butcher it together.

Of course there were turns for that as well. If the villagers turned nasty and started grumbling even a little, the Mahars would forget their divisions and come together. Gleaming butcher's knives would be arranged in the corner of the square. 'I'll tear each one's backside apart' was the aggressive vow each Mahar would take. Then the village would impose a ban on the Mahars. The village was closed to them. So was the road. So was labour. At such a time a sensible villager would try and effect a truce.

I remember such a truce attempt. The village and the Maharwada are at daggers drawn. On the boundary of the Maharwada are arranged heaps of stones and pebbles. A woman from each household stands, arms akimbo, on each heap. Since it looks as if there will be bloodshed in the village, the Mahars are summoned to the temple. Barebodied, ragged men, bearing gleaming knives over their shoulders, go and stand in the courtyard in front of the temple.

There the Patil, the Kulkarni and other weighty citizens of the village are seated. The conversation begins right there:

'Who do you people think you are?'

The strapping young Kashiba, black as night and sturdy-limbed, answers.

'We are kings!'

'Kings of what?'

'Kings of ourselves!'

That day of course there was no truce.

The quarrel over the division of water, however, was smouldering for a long time. The Mahars' well was to the west of the village. If one wanted to fetch water, one had to go through the village, and at that, past the temple of Maruti.

The villagers' well was below the village. By that well, however, there was a notice placed by the local Board, which said, 'This well is open to people of all castes and creeds.'

But the Mahars were never to be seen at this well. The water of the Mahars' well was abundant, dark and delicious. In the summer it was as cold as water from an earthenware pot. As a child I always wondered why the villagers were so stupid. For to tell the truth, our well was at a height and the village well in a low-lying land. The water from our well must have been seeping into theirs. But it was impossible for those Marathas to grasp what I could grasp even at that young age.

The Chamars never drank from our well. They would have lost caste by doing so. The women of the Chamar families used to sit for hour after hour by the Marathas' well to beg a potful of water. The village well had a fine paved floor. The water wheel turned fast; its sound was constantly in one's ears. Our well, however, had no water-wheel. One had to stand on the edge and draw water in a bucket. The favourite summer afternoon occupation of children of my age was to go to the well and stand for hours drawing water and pouring it over ourselves.

The Mahar women's shadow fell on Maruti on their way to and from the well. The god was polluted. So one day the villagers closed the road to us.

To go to the well by another route, one had to walk by the edge of the lake, beating out a path in the mud. And the path was a mile long. The Mahars fought with the village to have the road opened to them. There was legal action. 'We won't give up our right of way. If you want, you can install Maruti elsewhere.'

This was the hostile argument the Mahars set forth.

While this quarrel was in progress, a miracle occurred. A new *mamlatdar*, a Christian, was transferred to the *taluka*. This Christian *mamlatdar* was no other than a former Mahar. He understood the Mahars' agonies. It became embedded in his mind that he should give the Mahars justice.

Once a Mahar became a Christian, he no longer polluted a village. And if the Christian was an official, there was no question about it at

all. The whole village was alert to serve him. The Mahars met the *mamlatdar* and urged him to visit Dhamangaon and put an end to our problem. Today the *mamlatdar* of a *taluka* is treated as a person of no account, but those were the days of the British. The Christian *mamlatdar* agreed to visit the village. He announced, 'I will not stay in the village.' He called for the session to be held in the square in the Maharwada. It was the first time that a *mamlatdar* was to enter the Maharwada. They decorated the Maharwada with garlands and festive pots. They painted up the square. They welcomed the *mamlatdar* with music. They tied an expensive zari turban round his head. The Patil and the Talati of the village attempted to come into the Maharwada and offer hospitality to him. The meeting of the village elders that was called, took place in our square.

The villagers were mightily offended that the *mamlatdar* would not go to the village but came instead to the Maharwada. But if the king beats you or the rain pounds on you, whom will you ask for justice? All of them quietly came to the Maharwada.

Four or five leaders of the village had cases filed against them. They all had to sign a letter of apology. It was taken in writing from the chief among them that they would no longer trouble the Mahars and would not close the road to them.

For a long time, Javjibuva kept this written statement in a tin cylinder, and guarded it with his life. Later on, when I was educated, Javjibuva used to take it out and show it to me; get me to read it to him.

He used to call it a 'bond'. His chest would look swollen with pride. When he died, he left this gift for his son, as one might hand down the priceless legacy of a pot of gold mohurs.

Translated by Priya Adarkar  
An extract from Baluta

SHANTABAI KAMBLE

***Naja Goes to School—and Doesn't***

One day the headmaster called me. 'We want to give you a scholarship. Go home and bring your father.' I went home immediately. Appa was about to take the bull out to graze. I said to him, 'Appa, the headmaster has called you to school. Come quickly.' He said, 'Go, say I'll come tomorrow.'

'Appa, don't do that. I'm going to get money from the government.' As soon as I said this, he tied the bull to a peg. And he came with me straightaway. He said to the headmaster, 'Why have you called me?' The headmaster said, 'Sakharam, we want to give your girl Rs 3 a month for paper, ink, notebooks and so on. You have to put your thumb on the application, so I called you.' 'Sir, this is a good thing you are doing.' So saying, Appa held out his thumb. The headmaster took his thumb impression on the paper. He said to Appa, 'Sakharam, don't keep the girl home. Send her to school every day.' And he said to me, 'Naja, you must study. If you fail, you won't get the money.'

So I worked with all my will. Appa said to Ai, 'The girl is now getting Rs 3 a month.' They were both happy. When I got the money I was happy, too.

I was to get the money till the seventh class. I was then in the sixth class. Shaku, the Brahmin's daughter, was in my class. I liked that because in the fifth class I had been the only girl. All the others were boys. One day Shaku didn't come to school. So the headmaster sent me to her house to fetch her. I went to Shaku's house. There were *rangolis* outside the door. Seeing me Shaku's Ai shouted, 'You daughter of a Mahar; stay there. You'll trample the *rangolis*.'

I stood there scared. I said to her, 'Shaku's Ai, send Shaku to school.' Shaku's Ai said to Shaku straightaway, 'Shaku, the Mahar's daughter is calling you. Go quickly to school.'

Shaku and I came to school but her mother's words were humming in my ears.

'You daughter of a Mahar! Stay there.'

When we came to school the headmaster said, 'Children, study hard; the exam is coming.' So we began to study hard.

Seven days after Gudi Padwa was the village Urus. The same day Bhonde Saheb came to examine the children. We had a holiday for the village Urus.

Saheb said to the headmaster, 'Call the children to school.' The children were immediately called to school. All the children came because it was the annual exam. The exam began. Saheb gave us three sums to do on our slates. I could do two of them. Shaku couldn't do even one. She got them all wrong. Saheb asked all the other questions orally. He finished examining the whole class. Two days later they told us who had passed and who had failed. I passed. Shaku failed. Now I would be alone again in the seventh class. I was feeling very sad. But what could I do?

'I've passed,' I told Ai and Appa. They were very happy. Ai said to me, 'I got three daughters one after the other; and then I delivered again. When the baby's voice was heard, your father asked your granny — "Granny, has she delivered?"

'Granny said, "Yes, Sakha."

"What is it?"

"A girl again."

'Appa said, "All bloody girls. Granny, hand over that girl. And give me the pick and the shovel. I'll go bury her."

'Now that girl has passed the sixth and gone into the seventh.'

Appa heard this and he began laughing.

'She's a good girl. Two sons came after her. She is a fortunate girl!' He hugged me. Stroking my back he said, 'Study hard now in the seventh.'

'I'll study hard,' I told Appa.

I was now in the seventh.

Jalinder, my nephew, he was also in the seventh. Every day we used to go to school together.

Headmaster Patil was transferred. Headmaster Kadam came in his place.

Headmaster Kadam sent for me. And he said, 'Naja, this is an agricultural school. You'll have to do carpentry, iron-work, rope-work. And you'll have to go out to the fields to observe the crops. I don't think you can cope. You'd best go with an application to the girls' school in Pandharpur. You're the only girl in this class.'

When school was over, I came home and said to Appa in a tearful

voice, 'Headmaster Kadam says to me you won't be able to study in the agricultural school. Go with your application to the girls' school in Pandharpur.' Appa said to me, 'Naja, we have no food to eat. We are the poorest of the poor. We know nobody in Pandharpur. How can you go to school in Pandharpur? Forget school now.'

I felt very sad when Appa said this. Schoolmaster had said don't study here. Go to Pandharpur. There was no money to study in Pandharpur. Now I had to forget school. And so, I stayed at home.

When I saw other children go to school I felt bad that I couldn't go. Appa used to say, 'Naja, I too feel very bad that you have to stop school halfway.'

\* \* \*

Akka's daughter Gomi was married into Pilwa. One morning she quietly walked back to Mahud.

Akka said to Gomi, 'Gomi, who have you come with?'

She said, 'I've come alone. Ma-in-law harasses me.'

Akka said, 'Where is your husband?'

'He's there. If there's work, he does it, otherwise he's idle. I came back because I'm fed up with the work. Aye, I'm not going back.'

Her mother-in-law, wondering why Gomi hadn't come home, looked for her here and there. She said to her son, 'Deva, see if your wife has gone off to Mahud.'

He came to Mahud. Goda was sitting in the doorway. Deva saw her, 'Your daughter came away without telling anybody. Send her back with me now.'

Akka said, 'You are making Gomi work like an animal and your mother doesn't give her enough to eat. We don't want to send her back.'

Akka sent her Sheela over home to us. Sheela said to my mother, 'Granny, my mother's calling you, come.'

Ai said, 'Why did you call me, Buka?'

Akka said to Ai, 'Mother, Gomi's come home without a word from Pilwa. And her husband's come after her to take her home. He says send Gomi with me.'

'Why have you come?' mother asked. Gomi said, 'My mother-in-law doesn't give me food. How long do I starve and work? So I came.' My mother said to Gomi's husband,

'What do you say, son? Why doesn't your mother give our girl food?' Deva said, 'My mother was telling some lies.' My mother said, 'Deva just look at the girl! How ghastly she's looking. I'm not sending

the girl. Do what you like.'

Deva returned to Pilwa.

Deva brought four men from Pilwa to take Gomi back. They came and sat in the square. My sister was married into Pilwa. Her husband — my brother-in-law — had also come.

Brother-in-law said to our Appa, 'How did you keep your grand-daughter when she came away without telling anybody?'

Appa said to brother-in-law, 'The girl's husband doesn't look after her properly. Her mother-in-law doesn't feed her.' Another man said, 'We'll tell Deva to tell his mother to treat her properly. But send the girl back.'

Kisnatatya said, 'Send the girl back.'

My brother-in-law said, 'We're not sending the girl back.'

The people gathered in the square returned home.

*Translated by Shanta Gokhale*

*An extract from Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*

KUMUD PAWDE

*The Story of My 'Sanskrit'*

A lot of things are often said about me to my face. I've grown used to listening to them quietly; it's become a habit. What I have to listen to is praise. Actually, I don't at all like listening to praise. You may say that this itself is a form of self-indulgence. But that isn't so. I mean it sincerely. When I hear myself praised, it's like being stung by a lot of gadflies. As a result, I look askance at the person praising me. This expression must look like annoyance at being praised, for many misunderstandings have arisen about me in this connection. But it can't be helped. My acquaintances get angry with me because I am unable to accept compliments gracefully. I appear ill-mannered to them, because there isn't in me the courtesy they are expecting.

Now if you want to know why I am praised — well, it's for my knowledge of Sanskrit, my ability to learn it and to teach it. Doesn't anyone ever learn Sanskrit? That's not the point. The point is that Sanskrit and the social group I come from, don't go together in the Indian mind. Against the background of my caste, the Sanskrit I have learned appears shockingly strange.

That a woman from a caste that is the lowest of the low should learn Sanskrit, and not only that, also teach it — is a dreadful anomaly to a traditional mind. And an individual in whose personality these anomalies are accumulated becomes an object of attraction — an attraction blended of mixed acceptance and rejection. The attraction based on acceptance comes from my caste-fellows, in the admiration of whose glance is pride in an impossible achievement. That which for so many centuries was not to be touched by us, is now within our grasp. That which remained encased in the shell of difficulty, is now accessible. Seeing this knowledge hidden in the esoteric inner sanctum come within the embrace, not just of any person, but one whom religion has considered to be vermin — that is their victory.

The other attraction — based on rejection — is devastating. It pricks holes in one's mind — turning a sensitive heart into a sieve.

Words of praise of this kind, for someone who is aware, are like hot spears. It is fulsome praise. Words that come out from lips' edge as filthy as betel-stained spit. Each word gleaming smooth as cream. Made up of the fragility of a honey-filled *shirish*-blossom. Polished as marble. The sensation is that of walking on a soft velvety carpet — but being burnt by the hot embers hidden in someone's breast, and feeling the scorching pain in one's soul. The one who's speaking thinks the listener can't understand — for surely a low-caste person hasn't the ability to comprehend. But some people intend to be understood, so that I'll be crushed by the words. 'Well, isn't that amazing! So you're teaching Sanskrit at the Government College, are you? That's very gratifying, I must say.' The words are quite ordinary; their literal meaning is straight-forward. But the meaning conveyed by the tone in which they are said torments me in many different ways! 'In what former life have I committed a sin that I should have to learn Sanskrit even from you?' 'All our sacred scriptures have been polluted.' Some despair is also conveyed by their facial expressions. 'It's all over! *Kaliyug* has dawned. After all, they're the government's favourite sons-in-law! We have to accept it all.'

There are some other people I know, who have a genuine regard for me. They are honestly amazed by how I talk, by my clean, clear pronunciation. They speak with affectionate admiration about my mode of living. The food I cook is equated with ambrosia. They detect a Brahminical standard of culture in my every thought and action — enough to surprise them. They constantly try to reconcile the contradiction. It's my good luck that I'm not always being asked to account for my antecedents, like Satyakam Jabali. The main point is that they are trying to understand my evident good breeding in the context of my caste, and that is what makes everything so novel for them.

The result is that although I try to forget my caste, it is impossible to forget. And then I remember an expression I heard somewhere: 'What comes by birth, but can't be cast off by dying — that is caste.'

Beyond the accepters and the rejecters lies yet another group. In wholeheartedly welcoming the admiration of this group, every corner of my being is filled with pleasure. This group consists of my students. Far removed from hostile feelings. Without even an iota of caste consciousness. Away from the prejudices of their elders. Pure, innocent admiration, prompted by the boundless respect they feel, fills their eyes. Actually these girls have reached the age of

understanding. The opinions they hear around them should by rights have made an impression on their mind. But these precious girls are full to the brim with the ability to discriminate impartially. And they keep their admiration within the limits of their gaze; they do not allow it to reach their lips. And that's why I yearn for that admiration. The occasional forward girl who has suppressed her timidity makes bold to express her feelings. 'Madam, I wish your lesson would never end!' And I answer her woodenly: 'But the college doesn't feel that way.' She feels snubbed, but I don't wish to encourage her admiration, in case it becomes a habit.

If the admiration had stayed limited to this individual level, I would tolerate it, but it goes beyond the prescribed boundaries. In other words, it starts to be blazoned even at the official level. As usual they start beating the drum of my caste, and tunes of praise of my knowledge of Sanskrit begin to mingle with the drumbeat. On the Vijaya Dashami day of 1971, the Maharashtra State Government arranged, at Nagpur, a felicitation meeting to honour scholars of the Vedas. According to the wishes of the Honourable ex-Minister of Education, Shri Madhukarrao Chaudhary; I was to introduce these honoured scholars. Of course the inspiration was that of Dr Kolte. The introduction was to be made in Sanskrit. 'In the times of the Aryans it was noted down, and moreover impressed on the minds of the common Indian people, from the Himalayas to the tip of the peninsula, that my ancestors should consider themselves guilty of a crime if they even heard the sound of this language. And that is the language in which I have to speak.' My God! How I was I going to manage? My heart began to beat rapidly. My mind was dark with anxiety, and I was drowned in feelings of inferiority. A conflict of emotions — and once again a confrontation with public praise. 'Whereas our traditional books have forbidden the study of Sanskrit by women and Shudras, a woman from those very Shudras, from the lowest caste among them, will today, in Sanskrit, introduce these scholars. This is the beginning of a progressive way of thinking in independent India.' A thunder of applause. I look towards the sound of the applause. Most of the people here are from the government offices. Looking at them through an artist's eyes, I see what looks like a wild disco-dance of different emotions. The frustration of the defeated, the fury of the traditionalists, the respect of some acquaintances, the hostility and disgust of others, are obvious to my experienced eye. Some gazes ask me: 'Why did you need to make the

introductions in this manner? To humiliate us?'

In response to these hissings of wounded pride, I experience a mixture of emotions. Seeing this hostility and disgust, I slip into the past. This disgust is extremely familiar to me. In fact, that is what I have grown accustomed to, ever since I was old enough to understand. Actually, I shouldn't have any feelings about this disgust, and if I do have any feelings at all, they should be of gratitude. For it was this disgust that inclined me towards Sanskrit. It so happened that the ghetto in which there stood my place of birth, the house where I was welcome, was encircled on all sides by the houses of caste Hindus. The people in our ghetto referred to them as the Splendid People. A small girl like me, seven or eight years old, could not understand why they called them 'Splendid'. And even as today's mature female with learning from innumerable books, I still cannot understand it. That is, I have understood the literal meaning of the word 'splendid'. But not why it should be applied to them, or whether they deserve to have it applied. The girls who studied along with me were Brahmins or from other higher castes. I had to pass their houses. I paused, waiting casually for their company. Right in front of me, the mothers would warn their daughters, 'Be careful! Don't touch her. Stay away from her. And don't play with her. Or I won't let you into the house again.' Those so-called educated, civilized mothers were probably unconscious of the effect of this on my young mind. It wasn't as if I could not understand them.

Every day, I bathed myself clean with Pears soap. My mother rubbed Kaminia oil on my hair, and plaited it neatly. My clothes were well-washed and sparkling clean. The girls of my own caste liked to play with me because it enabled them to smell some fragrance. For my father himself was fond of toiletries. So there was always a variety of oils, soaps and perfumes in the house. The other girls in my class (except for those who lived near my ghetto) also liked to sit next to me. So why should these women have talked like that?

What's more, if one were to compare houses, our house was cleaner than theirs. My mother daily smeared the floor with fresh cowdung. The white-powder borders were delicately drawn. The courtyard was well-sprinkled, and decorated with *rangoli* designs. Almost every fortnight, on the occasion of a festival, the house was whitewashed from top to bottom. Every scrap of cloth was boiled in a solution of soda bicarb before it was washed. The metal vessels were scrubbed to gleaming. On the other hand, one could see water stains and a greasy

film on even the drinking-vessels those girls had. In fact, it was I who didn't like to sit next to those girls. For, from my childhood, my sense-organs had been sharp and vigorous. My sense of smell, in particular, had sharpened beyond limit. Though, of course, the nose that conveyed it was broad and misshapen. The sour smell, like buttermilk, that rose from the bodies of those girls! I couldn't bear the smell of *shikakai* mixed with the smell of their hair. Their bad breath, too, was unbearable. And, in spite of all this, *they* found *me* disgusting? So, even at that young age, this emotion of disgust taught me to think. It inspired me to be introspective. At an age which was meant for playing and skipping around, these thoughts would rouse me to fury.

One event outraged my self-respect. There was to be a thread-ceremony for the brother of one of my classmates. I had not actually been invited but my restless curiosity would not let me sit quiet. I stood outside the *pandal* looking in at the ceremony going on inside. The sacrificial fire was lit; the air all around was filled with the smoke and fragrance of incense and the grain burnt-offering. The reverberations of the Vedic chants threatened to burst through the cloth walls of the *pandal*. I was lost in watching the head-movements that accompanied the chant of 'Svaha!' each time a libation was poured. All this was extremely new, unknown, never seen before, I was totally engrossed, at one with the chants and the incense.

My concentration was suddenly broken. One voice: 'Hey, girl! What are you staring at? Can you make head or tail of it? Here, take a *ladoo* — and be off!' A decked-up woman past her prime, dripping with gold and pearls, stood in front of me, adjusting the *pallav* of her heavily-brocaded sari. Her nose was wrinkled in disgust, like a shrivelled fig. 'What do you take me for — a beggar? Giving me a *ladoo*! Can you see injuries on anyone just because I watched them?' I retorted, and briskly walked away.

Words followed me: 'These Mahars have really got above themselves.' The intonation was the typical superior nasal tone of the Pune Brahmin.

My young mind thought, 'Why was I so wrapped up in watching? What had that ceremony to do with me? And why should that woman behave so bitchily with me?' There was definitely some intimate connection between me and those Vedic mantras. Otherwise why should that woman have noticed my innocent absorption? Why should she have taunted me disgustedly? She must have been unwilling to let

those chants enter my ears. I used to ask my father, 'What language are the Vedic mantras composed in?' He used to say, 'They're in Sanskrit, my girl.' 'Is Sanskrit very difficult? Can't we learn it?' My father used to answer, 'Why shouldn't we? After all, we're independent now. Those days are gone. Learn Sanskrit. Don't I too know the Gayatri mantra?' And he used to say 'Om' and begin to recite the Gayatri mantra. In simple delight, I used to tell my neighbours, 'I'm going to learn Sanskrit.' The educated people next door used to poke fun at me. 'Is Sanskrit such an easy language? It's very difficult. Did our forefathers ever learn it?' Hearing this, I would be discouraged. Seeing my crestfallen face, my father would start cursing those people, sometimes obscenely, sometimes more elegantly. He used to encourage me, and the encouragement would make me glow with confidence once again.

After I entered High School, I took Sanskrit as an elective subject in class nine. The school where I went supported Brahminical prejudices. All sorts of indirect efforts were systematically made to prevent me from learning Sanskrit. 'You won't be able to manage. There will be no one at home to help you. Sanskrit is very difficult,' etc., etc. But I was as firm as a rock. Seeing that no form of persuasion had any effect on me, the persuaders stopped persuading. But how to remove the prejudice in their minds? I did not want to pay heed to every single opinion. I just wanted to keep my teacher, Hatekar, happy. He had been full of praise of me since I was in class six. 'How can this little slip of a girl give answers so fast in every subject?' I asked him, 'Sir, I should take Sanskrit, shouldn't I?' 'Do take it. But you've taken all the Arts subjects, though you're good at maths. Take science and maths, along with Sanskrit.' 'But sir, I don't enjoy maths.' 'But you can become a doctor, can't you?' 'I don't want to be a doctor. I can't bear suffering.' He laughed and said, 'On the contrary, it is precisely those who can't bear suffering, who are fit to become doctors. Won't you be able to help the afflicted? That's what's needed among your people. But it's your decision.'

With great eagerness and interest, I began my study of Sanskrit. As I learnt the first-declension masculine form of the word 'deva', I picked up the rhythm of the chant. I must make special mention of the person who helped me to learn by rote the first lesson about aspirates — my teacher Gokhale. If I omit to do so, I shall feel a twinge of disloyalty in every drop of my blood. Gokhale Guruji. Dhoti, long-sleeved shirt, black cap, a sandalwood-paste mark on his

forehead. The typical robust and clear pronunciation of the Vedic school. And an incredible concern for getting his students to learn Sanskrit. At first I was afraid. But this proved groundless. What actually happened was the very opposite of what I had expected.

I had been sent by the Bhide Kanya Shala to take part in some essay competition or the other. The centre for the competition was the Bhonsale Vedic School. No part of the Mahal area was familiar to me. I timidly explained my difficulty to Gokhale Guruji. He said, 'Why don't you come to my house? [He never addressed us in the second person singular; it was always a respectful plural.] I'll take you along.' And he gave me his address. I reached the address asking for directions repeatedly in the lanes and alleys of the Mahal area. My teacher's house was in fact a sprawling mansion. A huge, well-swept courtyard with a *tulsi vrindavan* and a well, and a small Shiva temple within it. All looked as antique as a well-preserved old Benares brocade. I hesitantly entered. 'Welcome,' he greeted me in friendly tones. Two boys, aged about ten or eleven years old, came out to see who had arrived. From their general appearance — the dhoti, shirt, top-knot and sandalwood mark, as well as their features — they appeared to be Guruji's children. After a while, on being called by Guruji, his wife came outside. She was dressed in silk for ritual purity. Her face brimmed with godliness. Every movement of her body was eloquent with hospitality. The formalities of introduction were completed. She hurried inside, and after a while, the older boy came out bearing plates full of cooked *poha*. I became nervous, fear crept over my mind. Suppose this lady were to find out my caste? Along with sips of water, I swallowed the lump in my throat as well as mouthfuls of *poha*. I couldn't concentrate on what anyone was saying. My only worry was when and how I could escape from there. Suppose someone from the Buldy area were to come there?

'God deliver me from this ordeal!' I kept praying to the Almighty. But nothing terrible happened. For those people were indeed very kind. Open and relaxed in their conversation. My teacher, for one, definitely knew my caste. But I was not made to experience any feeling of inferiority. And I felt a profound respect for him. The broadmindedness of this Brahmin incarnate, with his old-fashioned upbringing, remained constant even towards a student of the very lowest caste. Needless to say, it was evidence of his high thinking and his generous heart. It became my aim to study faithfully as my teacher instructed me and never to anger him by inattention to studies. You

can never tell who will become a shining light to whose life. Guruji was probably unaware that he had the power to add a touch of glory to the life of an insignificant being. After I matriculated, I did not meet him again. Perhaps he won't even recognize me. But I wish to lighten my load of respect by paying back a fraction of my sacred debt with the fee of words. For if Guruji had not shown me that warmth, but had instead shown the base feelings appropriate to his orthodox nature, would I have learnt Sanskrit?

Against all obstacles, I at last matriculated. On seeing the marks I got for Sanskrit, I announced, 'I shall do an M.A. in Sanskrit.' Our enlightened neighbours laughed as they had before. Some college lecturers and lawyers also joined in the joke. 'How can that be possible? You may have got good marks at Matric. But it isn't so easy to do an M.A. in Sanskrit. You shouldn't make meaningless boasts; you should know your limitations.' The discouragers said what they usually do. The point was that the people who discouraged me were all of my caste. But their words could not turn me from my purpose. I didn't reply — I wanted to answer them by action. For that, I needed to study very hard. In order to take an M.A. in Sanskrit, I would have to go to the famous Morris College. I had heard so many things about the college from my friend's sister. About the learned professors with their cultivated tastes, about the mischievous male students, the beautiful girls, and the huge library. My interest was limited to the professors who would teach me, and to the library. And I joined the college.

The Hindus from the high-caste areas used to taunt me. 'Even these wretched outcastes are giving themselves airs these days — studying in colleges.' I pretended to be deaf. I had begun to have some idea of what Savitribai Phule must have had to endure on account of her husband Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's zeal for women's education.

I went through some mixed experiences while I studied. I would call my lecturers' even-handed fairness a very remarkable thing. I was never scared by the prejudice of which repute and rumour had told me. What is more, praise and encouragement were given according to merit. Some people may have felt dislike in their heart of hearts, but they never displayed it. One thing alone irked me — the ironical comments about the scholarship I got. 'She's having fun and games at the expense of a scholarship. Just bloated with government money!' From the peons themselves to the senior officials, there was the same attitude. I couldn't understand. Was it charity they were dispensing

from their personal coffers? They were giving me government money, and if that money was going from them to the government in the form of taxes, then equally, a tax was being levied on the public to pay their salaries. And that tax was collected in indirect forms even from the parents of the scholarship holders. So who paid whom? When the Dakshina Prize Committee used to give stipends, there was no complaint of any kind from any level of society. Then why now? Oh, well.

I passed my B.A. The figures in my B.A. mark-sheet were worthy of high praise. I had got good marks without falling behind in any way. Not only did I have respect for my teachers' fairness, but it made me happy too. But in human life, no joy is unmixed. It can't be attained fully without some little blemish. So now, the story of my M.A.

In the second year of our M.A. we went to the Postgraduate Department in the University. Very well-known scholars taught us there. The Head of the Department was a scholar of all-India repute. He didn't like my learning Sanskrit, and would make it clear that he didn't. And he took a malicious delight in doing so. The sharp claws of his taunts left my mind wounded and bleeding. In a way, I had developed a terror of this great pandit. His manner of speaking was honeyed and reasonable, but filled with venom. I would unconsciously compare him with Gokhale Guruji. I couldn't understand why this great man with a doctorate, so renowned all over India, this man in his modern dress, who did not wear the traditional cap, who could so eloquently delineate the philosophy of the Universal Being, and with such ease explain difficult concepts in simple terms, could not practise in real life the philosophy in the books he taught. This man had been exposed to modernity; Gokhale Guruji was orthodox. Yet one had been shrivelled by tradition, the other enriched by it, like a tree weighed down with fruit. Days go by; you survive calamities; but the memory of them sets up its permanent abode in you. In the inmost recesses of your inner being. I survived even through such a difficult ordeal. I got my M.A. with distinction.

A congratulatory bouquet of colourful, fragrant flowers came from Professor (Dr) Kolte, the former Vice-Chancellor of Nagpur University. I stared at it unblinkingly. In those flowers, I could see Dr Kolte's heart blossoming, petal by petal, with pride. And smell the sweet fragrance of unalloyed joy, thrilling my senses and arousing my self-confidence.

And now I would be a lecturer in Sanskrit! My dreams were tinted with turquoise and edged in gold. The images I nursed about myself were taking strange shapes in my mind.

A high-paid job would come to me on a platter from the government. For I must have been the first woman from a scheduled caste to pass with distinction in Sanskrit. Every nook and cranny of my mind was filled with such hopes and expectations. But those ideas were shattered. My illusions proved as worthless as chaff. I became despondent about the efficiency of the government. I started attending interviews in private colleges. And that was a complete farce. Some said, 'But how will you stay on with us, when you've passed so well?' (In other words, they must have wanted to say, 'How will you work for less pay?') In other places, the moment I had been interviewed and stepped out of the room, there would be a burst of derisive laughter. I would hear words like sharp needles: 'So now even these people are to teach Sanskrit! Government Brahmins, aren't they?' And the ones who said this weren't even Brahmins, but so-called reformers from the lower castes, who considered themselves anti-Brahmin, and talked of the heritage of Jyotiba Phule, and flogged the mass of the lower castes for their narrow caste-consciousness. And yet they found it distasteful that a girl from the Mahar caste, which was one of the lower castes, should teach Sanskrit. When people like these, wearing hypocritical masks, are in responsible positions in society, it does not take even a minute for that society to fall.

Two years after my M.A., I was still unemployed. There must be many whose position is the same as mine. In my frustration I took a bold step to get out of the trap. I presented my case in writing to the Honourable Shri Jagjivan Ram, the noted Minister in the Central Cabinet. I condemned the flimsy pretence of the state government and the administration that flouted the Constitution. My words had all the power of a sharp sword. For they were a cry from the heart of a person being crushed to death under the wheels of circumstance — like the screeching of the eagle Jatayu in his last struggles.

The Honourable Minister Jagjivan Ram placed the letter before Pandit Nehru, who was astonished by it, and sent me an award of Rs.250/-, telling me to meet the Chief Minister of Maharashtra. Accordingly the Chief Minister of that time, Yeshwantrao Chavan, sent me a telegram asking me to meet him. Within a day or two, one wire after another had electrified me into wondering who I'd suddenly become. Getting past the ranks of spearmen and macebearers at the

government office was quite an ordeal. But finally I got to see the 'Saheb'. Now, I thought, I would get a job at once — as a clerk in the government office, at least. A naive expectation. The Chief Minister made me fulsome promises in his own style. 'We'll definitely make efforts for you — but you won't get a job in minutes; it'll take us some time. We'll have to give thought to it; have to hunt out something.'

And with this assurance came a fine speech that qualified as an example of literature. 'A student of Sanskrit is intoxicated with idealism. It is a deeply felt personal desire. You shouldn't run after a job. Involve yourself in research. Pursue your studies.' Now the controls of endurance that restrained me started to break rapidly, and the words that had been bound within me broke out. 'Saheb, if you can't give me a job, tell me so, clearly. I don't want promises. Promises keep false hopes alive. Research is the fruit of mental peace. How do you expect me to have mental peace, when I am starving? And I'm tired of speeches.' I was fed up with life. Otherwise in A.D. 1960 it would have been impossible for a wretch like me even to stand before a dignitary like this, with all the power of *kartumakartumanya-thakartum*, 'to do, omit to do, or do in another way', let alone speak out to him.

Waiting for a job, I passed the first year of an M.A. in English Literature. It was just an excuse to keep myself occupied. That year I got married — an intercaste marriage. That is a story by itself — a different glimpse of the nature of Indian society. Let that be the subject of another story. The surprising thing is that two months after my marriage, I got an Assistant Lecturership in a government college. Deputy Director Sahastrabuddhe, who was on the interview board, was amazed. 'How did this girl remain unemployed for two years?' Dr Kolte's good will remained a constant support here, too. Today, I am a professor in the famous college where I studied, whose very walls are imbued with the respect I felt for that institution. But one thought still pricks me: the credit for Kumud Somkuwar's job is not hers, but that of the name Kumud Pawde. I hear that a woman's surname changes to match her husband's — and so does her caste. That's why I say that the credit of being a professor of Sanskrit is that of the presumed higher caste status of Mrs Kumud Pawde. The caste of her maiden status remains deprived.

Translated by Priya Adarkar  
An extract from Antasphot

SHANKARRAO KHARAT

## *The Bone Merchant*

When I was at school in the village I was always short of money. I'd been getting a scholarship of one rupee a month since class four. But that was spent daily on salt and spice and I could never save even a copper coin from it. Then I would collect gum from the jungle and sell it to a vendor. In summer I picked the fruit of the *karanja* tree and sold it in the market or hunted out honeycombs and sold the honey. Sometimes I worked on daily wages — anything to get some money. Or there would not have been a single coin in my hand.

After my mid-day meal, I went to the meeting place of the Maharwada and sat on the platform under the *peepul* tree. It was well past eleven and the sun was hot. My classmates from school had laid out a game of marbles under the shade of the *neem* tree nearby. 'Here comes the bone-man! The bone-man's here!' At the sound of these words everyone looked around sharply. I looked, puzzled, from one side to another. By that time all the children of the Mahars and Mangs had started searching for bones by the side of the stream near the platform. They ran around picking up whatever bones they could find. I became alert; so did my schoolmates.

The bone merchant used to visit our village to buy the bones of dead animals. He used to halt under the lime tree near the meeting place. If you wandered around and collected a bagful of bones, he would weigh them and pay you a few small coins. But in those days even those small coins went a long way. And the bone merchant was honest in his dealings. He would weigh the bones and pay for them immediately. All the Mahar and Mang men, women and children of the village used to jump at the call, 'The bone-man's here' and start looking for bones far and wide to sell them to the bone merchant. The Mahars of my village had stopped eating meat from carcasses. So entire skeletons of dead animals were left lying around by the side of the stream. And when the bone merchant came, once in a while, the search for bones would begin. Some old Mahars who were aware of

this would collect and store bones in the backyards of their houses. On these rare moments, they got a chance to sell them. They would earn an easy rupee or two which would see them through another week.

Hope flared in me when I heard the bone merchant announced. Dagdu and I moved immediately to search for bones. We decided to bring in the skeletons lying near the stream. As we started, old Sawala shouted at us, 'You brats! Don't go near my backyard! And don't pick up the bones I've collected. I know those bones well!' Sawala Mahar was right. There was a heap of bones in his backyard. Sometimes crows used to sit on fresh bones and peck at the flesh. Kites glided above them. Sometimes the rotting bones gave off a foul smell, and people would hold their noses as they passed. The bones dried in the hot sun and as they dried, the foul smell would go away. Sometimes a hungry stray dog would sit there chewing contentedly at the bones.

Sawala Mahar was always on the lookout for bones. If he found any lying around he would bring them home and store them in his backyard. Shiva Mahar did the same. Bones lay in heaps behind their houses. For Sawala, this was a regular business. Once every few months when the bone merchant came he would get two rupees in exchange for two or three gunnybags of bones — an easy income for him. With those two rupees he could buy a new shirt, and a single rough dhoti. He would discard the rags he had been wearing. The bone merchant's visit gave him new clothes. That's why he looked out for bones and warned us off when he saw us moving to collect them.

The moment they heard that the bone merchant had come Sawala and Shiva Mahar looked radiant. Sawala moved quickly, climbed down the steps and ran towards his house like a hound on the scent. And Shiva Mahar, with a smiling face, hurried to his house at a brisk trot.

Panda and I ran through the bylanes of the Maharwada. But we met on our way some women and children coming towards us with baskets full of bones. Now it would be difficult to lay our hands on any bones in the Maharwada. So, along with Dagdu, I ran towards the stream. I knew where the skeletons were lying because I used to take the goats out to graze there. As we went along, Panda said,

'Shankar! there is a skeleton near the slope!'

'Yes, I know that!' I said and broke some further news to him. 'I saw a buffalo skeleton under the *karanja* tree.'

'I don't know about that.'

But I did. 'Panda! There are skeletons in the cemetery as well!' He was doubtful. 'Whose skeletons? Animals' or dead people's?' 'Who the hell knows?' I replied. 'But there are a lot of bones in the cemetery!'

'They must be human bones!'

'So what? Bones are bones! As long as we get some money for it.'

'True,' agreed Panda.

As we talked, we were scampering towards the stream. Dagdu also came running behind us.

'Wait! Let me come with you!' He came right up to us and said, 'Hey pals! Let's all three collect bones together!'

I remained silent.

But Panda agreed. 'All right! We'll all do it together.' So I nodded and said, 'All right. If it's three, it's three. We'll collect the bones together and share the money between us.' We quickly ran to the other side of the stream and gathered bones lying on the slope. Seeing us collecting the bones crows began to chase us and kites hovered over our heads. And seeing the kites and the crows above us dogs started to follow us, the smell of the bones in their nostrils.

We were absorbed in collecting bones. Suddenly a kite swooped down on the bone in my hand. Its sharp talons stabbed at my hand and a little blood came out. I wiped off the blood and went on collecting bones. Between the three of us we collected a lot of them.

Dagdu said, 'Shankar! Tie these bones into a bundle and put it on my head. I'll run to the bone-man with it.'

It was a good idea. We tied together all the bones we collected and lifted the load onto Dagdu's head. He set off to the meeting place, his feet crunching the gravel of the stream. Then Panda and I ran towards the high bank. Ahead of us Dama was moving fast in the same direction, his eyes fixed on the bank. We were young and agile; we bounded ahead of him through the sand like lambs. We ran past him. We had no idea what he was thinking. As we ran we soon left him far behind. We ran up and caught hold of the big skeleton of an ox. I was delighted to see it. At a sudden breeze, some bluish purple buds from the *karanja* tree fell on my body, and some fell on the skeleton. The skeleton's teeth grinned at us. Its sockets were empty. The hooves and horns were intact. We were very happy; the bone merchant would give us at least a few annas for the skeletons. I caught hold of its rear hooves. Panda grasped its horns. And we swung up the skeleton between us. We set off, one at either end of it. Suddenly Dama Mahar

charged upon us, shouting. Glaring at us, he yelled, 'You rogues! It's my skeleton! Where are you taking it? I won't let you!'

Now here was a dilemma.

I said, 'But we were the first to catch hold of it!'

'You fools, is it your father's property?'

'Is it your property?' I retorted.

Immediately Dama started laying claim with the words, 'Even if it's not my property, it is my share as a Mahar. When the ox died, I dragged it here. You thought it was easy pickings, didn't you?'

And he charged at us. He caught hold of the front legs of the bull and started pulling, we pulled yet hard. The tug-of-war developed into a fight. As we tugged, he came at us to beat us. But we were too canny to let go of the skeleton. Just then Galpa from our Maharwada came by us from his field. Hearing us fight he came up to us and said, 'Why are you fighting for bones like dogs?' And he shouted at Dama, 'You too, Dama! You're behaving like a child! Fighting for bones!'

Dama said, 'But the skeleton's mine!'

'Is it your father's?'

'No, but that dead ox was my share.'

'Then you should have taken the bones at that time.'

'That's true, but...'

'But why must you have it right now?'

Dama told him the truth, 'The bone-man's come to the Maharwada. That's why!'

'Oh! So the bone-man's come!'

'Yes! He's come!'

'Then share it between you. Let these boys too earn something from it,' he offered as a compromise.

Then he yelled at us, 'Boys! Share this skeleton with Dama, half for him, half for you. Let him get a few annas too for his salt and spice.'

We agreed.

Dama stepped up and put his foot on the skeleton's spine. The bone broke like dry wood. Then we started fighting over the horns. In the end Dama got the half with the horns. We got the rear end. Dama took his half of the skeleton on his head and started out. His skin was black; walking by himself in the blazing sun with those horns on his head, he looked like a demon. And walked like one too.

Our load was now reduced. Dama had taken half of what we had. I said, 'Panda! You take this on your head! I'll see if I can get some

bones in the cemetery and bring them along!'

Panda nodded. He took the half skeleton on his head and started out for the Maharwada. I went straight to the cemetery, to see if there were some bones. There were tombs all around. A large, long stone was placed over each dead body. I saw a few bones at one side. They were long bones, parts of a leg. I picked them up and moved ahead. Then I found some small bones. I gathered together some arm bones and leg bones and skulls, tied them with a rope and set out towards the meeting place. There was a big crowd of people, young and old, men, women and children, surrounding the bone merchant under the shade of the lime tree.

I went up to the bone merchant. He had set up a scale to weigh the bones. As he weighed the bones he paid out the money as agreed. The people's faces bloomed with joy as the money was put into their hands. With his small eyes, Dama was counting the coins he had received. His face too glowed with satisfaction. Then we put our bones into the scales, which sagged under the weight. The bone merchant put heavier and heavier weights in the opposite scale.

The scales evened out. Examining the weights the bone merchant put his hand in his jingling purse. 'Twelve annas,' he said and gave the money to Panda. We were very pleased. At last he put into the scale the bones I had collected. Looking narrowly at the bones he growled at me, 'What bones are these, boy?'

'What d'you mean? They're bones, aren't they?'

'Child, you want us to go to jail?'

'That means?' I said, surprise breaking out.

The people around started looking in astonishment from him to me and back again. I couldn't understand what the bone merchant meant.

So he said explicitly, 'Child! these bones aren't from animals! The bones you brought belong to human beings!'

Human bones! Everyone came to attention. Some jerked. Some started. And startled, I stared at the bones. The bone merchant said to me again, 'You want to send us to jail? Pick up these bones at once!' And he added, 'Put them back where you found them. Go! Run! Otherwise the police will catch you too!'

When the bone merchant said this, I trembled where I stood. I quickly picked up the bones from the scale, tied them together and ran fast towards the cemetery. I scattered all the bones and then ran back panting. I was totally out of breath.

I went towards Panda who was standing by the platform. He put

my share of four annas in my hand. I was thrilled at the sight of the coins in my palm. Clenching my fist around the money I went home leaping with joy and gave the money to my mother.

Looking at me in surprise she asked, 'Where did you get this money?'

'I sold some bones to the bone-man and got it.'

'Then let's keep it aside for you to buy something to eat in the market.' And she put away the money in a small jar in a pile of pots. I ran back to the meeting place, jumping gleefully.

*Translated by Priya Adarkar  
An extract from Taral-Antaral*

SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE

## *The Bastard*

I was at that tender age when the milk in my veins hadn't yet turned to blood. An age to eat, drink and be merry, but those days I had fallen prey to vices. I smoked *bidis* and cigarette butts, ran after girls, bathed every day, brushed my teeth and washed myself after a shit.

Our Mahar tenement was made up of over a hundred houses. There were some ten boys my age and seven or eight girls, all under age. I had taken a fancy to Shevanta. Her house had such a desolate look, it would break my heart. The scorching sun, a few dogs, dull-faced boys, an old hag puffing at a *bidi*, ruins of ancient houses, a drunkard tottering on his way — with what else could I amuse myself? But once I made my acquaintance with Shevanta's eyes, even this desolation seemed golden.

Shevanta's mother took up any available work, but her father was an idler. Shevanta looked after the three younger children. About ten years old, she would start her monthly period in a year or two. When her mother went away to work, Shevanta did the baby-sitting. Her little brother was always tucked under her arm and her two little sisters tagged along with her, bawling all the time. Her parents left two *bhakris* for them for the whole day. But then, all the Mahars survived on as much, making do for the rest with large gulps of water.

Shevanta never smiled freely. She had no comforts — not even a drop of oil or water for her head — though she laboured like an ox yoked to an oil press. Shevanta's eyes had the same gentle timidity you see in the eyes of cattle. Her mother wore patched saris and her father's shirts were torn on the back. In the afternoons, Shevanta picked lice from her sisters' hair. I would stare at her — as if at an accident.

When Shevanta was home I sang and whistled at her. On hearing me she came out into the courtyard and made a show of washing utensils. If I went to the river, she followed me, and if she went there, I was not far behind. Otherwise I got restless. Shevanta reflected a

mirror into my eyes. I made signs to her, plucked tamarinds for her. We were getting involved with each other.

I was once taking a dip in the river, playing in the water, waiting for Shevanta. My body was dirty — the fish poked at me, tickling me. When I blew my nose, the fish gathered round the mucus. I scrubbed my body with a black stone. If I saw anybody rubbing soap into his clothes, I would remove mine to soak them in the lather. I helped him put out his clothes for drying, so that he let me use his lather. It was a pleasure washing clothes soaked in soapy water, for my shirt front was always dirty from wiping my nose and the slate.

The river water was full of frog-shit and huge lumps of moss. When I took a dip, I came up with moss on my head. I prayed fervently to God for Shevanta to come to the river.

Shevanta arrived. What was I to say to her? And how? I was scared of her, and a little shy too. We smiled at each other from a distance, but grew nervous on drawing near, our hearts flutter. Pushing the moss aside, Shevanta filled water, filtering it with the fold of her sari. The sky fell into the water — I felt myself dissolving in it.

As Shevanta left, she turned to look at me and smiled. I smiled back and signalled to her to return. She nodded. I was so thrilled, I could have lifted the earth above my head and danced with joy. I felt like running about madly, with the sky under my feet.

Shevanta appeared again. I made up my mind to throw water on her, come what may. The waves lapped the shores, fanning my desires. My hair stood on end with nervous fear. As Shevanta entered the water, I splashed water all over her face, hair, body, as if I were showering flowers. I wanted to pick her up and bask in the sun with her, drench her, give free rein to my feelings. I wanted to fool around with her and take her behind the rainbow.

But Shevanta was alarmed. The water drops glistened like pearls as they trickled down her cheeks. Her eyes looked clearer than the river water. I felt like taking her lips between my palms and drinking from them. But Shevanta was upset. 'Don't throw water on me, Sharan, I don't have other clothes to wear.'

Even with cold water at its base, the sand grew hotter.

In our society, cheating is tolerated but not sins of the flesh. People at home came to know of my affair with Shevanta. Our love grew like a patch of V.D. Santamai promised to ask for Shevanta's hand in marriage. But how was that possible? I was a bastard. Santamai used to tell me the story of Uncle Rohidas. When Uncle Rohidas carried

off a woman from the Mahar tenement, the entire Maharwada was up in arms. They set out with sticks and axes as if to lynch a mad dog. Luckily Uncle Rohidas escaped. Santamai would be greatly agitated as she said, 'The Mahars are bitterly fanatic — they'll cut you into pieces. There's no one to support you — not a single bugger in this entire house. They'll screw us women. Forget Shevanta. You'll have all the Mahars after your blood if you marry a female from their community.'

\* \* \*

Those were summer days, I think. I was still young and innocent but I was wise in many ways. Santamai and I bought liquor from Chungi at the rate of one and a quarter rupees for a bottle and sold it in the village at one and a half rupees. We also added *navsagar*, that is ammonium chloride, and water to it to increase the quantity. Gradually Santamai and Masamai began to operate the *bhattis* — the liquor stills — at home. They had separate *bhattis* and their customers, too, were different. They ran the business like men. The household survived on this business alone. One cup of liquor sold would take care of our morning tea. When there were no customers till the afternoon, we would swallow our own spittle, and wait eagerly for their arrival, as if waiting for God. We sold a cup of liquor at fifty paise; eight cups made a bottle, and six bottles made a gallon.

There were four liquor dens in our tenement — which belonged to Damunna, Mankunna, Hiramai and Kamlakka — besides ours. We stored jaggery and *navsagar* in large earthen pots and left them to ferment in water, stirring the mixture every day. On the seventh day we treated it in the *bhatti*.

It was like this. The jaggery mixture was heated in a tin covered with an earthen pot, with another pot inside and a brass pot on top. When the mixture boiled, the steam escaped to the earthen pot, the edges of which were sealed with cowdung. The brass pot held cold water to cool the steam, which collected in the liquid form in the pot inside the earthen pot. When the water in the brass pot grew hot, we changed it. After performing this operation seven times, we stopped the *bhatti*.

The liquor of the first pouring was very strong. The leftover waste was thrown into the gutter. The sweet, pungent smell filled our nostrils; but we were used to it.

There was a constant stream of customers. In our sleep, too, we could hear them blabbering and brawling. Often, when we ate, they

came and puked right before us. We got the stench and could see what they brought up. But we ate on. Mother cleaned up after them and showered abuse on them. But they sat on, heedless, without a trace of shame.

If a couple or two arrived together, they stayed for hours on end downing cup after cup. They would ask me for salt or send me to get salted gram from a shop. I ran errands for them. Sometimes they brought along *chivoda* and gave us a few grains. At times they tipped us ten paise. Making themselves comfortable, they spat all over the place, making mother wild. Sometimes they tried to take liberties with her, and Chandamai quarrelled with them.

Ever so often, when mother offered them the drink, I saw them grab her hand. I would think, what a business! When mother went out I looked after the sales and gave her all the money on her return. She gave me ten paise and a pat on the back. I felt good and wished that the business would grow in my hands.

We were always scared of the police. We hid the liquor in the garbage and kept watch over it as if guarding a field, taking out the stuff when we needed it. When the police came, we scuttled; they made surprise raids. We threw the liquor bottles into the garbage. Sometimes we poured out all the liquor into the washing place and cleaned it up with a bucketful of water. Or flung the liquor tubes over the roof. The police caught anyone they could lay their hands on.

Once the police surrounded the house of Mankunna and caught hold of him. There were just two bottles of liquor in the house — with these he struck the hand of a policeman like a schoolmaster caning a truant boy and made off. I decided to be as brave as Mankunna. When Mankunna was released from jail he respectfully touched the feet of the elders. All the Mahars asked after him. Mankunna cursed the policeman he had hit, abusing him, questioning his parentage.

After the police raid, we were usually in a sorry plight, what with the losses we suffered. We had to borrow money to start afresh. Sometimes we got wind of the raid in advance.

It was my job to check if the liquor was strong or weak. I would soak a rag in it and light it; it went up in flames. The stronger the stuff, the bigger the flames. Sometimes the *bhatti* would go wrong and the liquor would be weak. When it was a couple of days old it turned sour but gave a good kick. If it was weak, customers did not turn up again. They scolded us, 'This stuff is like water. You've put too much water into it. When you charge us for it, can't you serve better booze?'

But if the stuff was good, the customer would be happy — he would shudder in ecstasy. We would be glad. Mai would say, 'We never mix water into the stuff. We don't like to swindle people out of their money. Don't they say, easy come, easy go?'

When stocks dwindled and customers were one too many, Santamai added water and made two bottles out of one. Sometimes she mixed *navsagar* powder. Young novices would stealthily sneak in. Sarpate, the schoolmaster, owed us money. Once the customer was high, we would palm off water filled in empty liquor bottles.

Sometimes I rode on my bicycle to fetch the stock. I got a potful to sample; the rest of it would be loaded onto the bike. Blind drunk, I would be unable to mount the bicycle. Then some passing shepherd would help me up. Once I was home, Mai would shout at me, 'Can't you drink your fill at home? What if you die on the way?'

One morning Kamalakka, a strapping woman who had left her husband, and Nirmi, a young girl of ten, went to Arali to fetch liquor. It was a six-mile journey on foot, to and fro. They ought to have returned in the afternoon. But it was evening now and they hadn't yet turned up.

We set off for Arali, worried. Had the police caught them? Had someone beaten them? All sorts of thoughts came to mind.

We found Kamalakka and Nirmi, dead drunk. Kamalakka's sari had come loose, but she was beyond knowing it. Nirmi couldn't keep her heavy eyelids open. The tubes lay scattered around them. We ran towards them. Masamai began to wail, 'I harmed the child of my own womb. Why did I send her with Kamli?'

Mai asked me to take away the tubes. Nagi and I trudged back home, while Santamai tried to bring Nirmi back to her senses.

Liquor is the root of all discord.

We all drank at home — it was our tea. While Bashakaka was the *sarpanch* of the village, we got on well. Santamai swept the roads and Dada lit the street lamps. Thus we somehow managed to make ends meet. Dada roamed all over the village, a ladder slung from his shoulder and a kerosene tin in hand. He used the ladder to reach the street lamp, wiped the glass with the kerchief round his neck, brought down the lamp and poured kerosene into it. He filched the oil and used our house to hide it. If we met an acquaintance he made me salute him. To Bashakaka, I said 'Ale Koom Salam'. Santamai and I stayed up in the night till Dada finished his rounds.

*Sarpanch* Bashakaka was a Muslim. Santamai and I spent the whole

day at his house. Santamai did all sorts of odd jobs there like grinding and sweeping. I too felt free to play there. The butcher would come to the Maharwada and Santamai took beef to the Muslimwada. It was in Bashakaka's house that a villager from Basalgaon had once given me new clothes sent by Hanmanta.

Then Ramu was elected *sarpanch*. He sacked Dada because Dada was a Muslim — Mahamud Dastageer Jamadar — while he himself was a *bania* from a party opposing Bashakaka's. Along with Dada, Santamai, too, lost her job. Ramu gave the work to his favourites. Mallu's Sona began to sweep the streets and her elder son Sheshu lit the lamps.

Later came gas lamps. It was a risky job lighting them. Moreover, Sheshu was a drunkard. Shreemant accompanied him on his rounds. One day the gas caught fire and the two were enveloped in flames.

Sheshu, being sprayed with kerosene, began to burn like a straw hut. He ran about frantically in the village square, screaming his head off. Shreemant, who had only shorts on, quickly sat in the drainage water. Half his body was burnt, singed. The whole village gathered, but none dared save the burning Sheshu.

Finally Manik Seth pulled Sheshu out and people poured buckets of water over him. He was carried to the district town for treatment. The village was dark and despondent. Mallu's Sona was mad with grief.

On the third day Sheshu's corpse arrived, covered with *neem* leaves. Sheshu was dead and gone but I could still see, in my mind's eye, the village square on fire and Sheshu covered in flames. At such times I felt relieved that the job had been taken away from Dada.

Dada used to drink and brawl and get beaten up. He squandered the money he earned, tore up the currency notes and abused the *sarpanch*. Even little children made fun of him. 'On Jumma I'll fuck your Amma' was his favourite curse. He would be found lying near some toilet or the other, soaked up to the gills. We would go and haul him up. His dhoti would have come off. Santamai would tie it. He would abuse her and she would snap back at him. Nagi, Nirmi and Santamai would lift and carry him like a palanquin, and I followed, holding his chappals.

Whenever Dada took a drop too much, he picked a fight with Santamai. I would be caught in the crossfire. On one side slept a sozzled grandfather and on the other, a grandmother who coughed all night. Before going to bed Santamai prayed to the Hindu goddesses

Amba and Lakshmi while Dada mumbled a jumble of Hindu and Muslim divine names like Hydrikhaja, Bandenewaj, Hajimling, Langinshavali, Siddhayappa, Allah, Bismillah, Maulah and so on. Sometimes Santamai would be possessed. She screamed and screeched. I would wake up with a start. The noises she made scared me. I would run out, afraid to sleep next to her, and stand shivering outside. Her ululations sounded eerie in the dark. At such times Dada scraped off some dust from the wall and touched her forehead with it as if it were *angara*, holy ash. Gradually Santamai's possession would subside.

Once Dada was drunk, he couldn't resist a quarrel with Santamai. She too drank and rained blows on him. Dada would hurl away his meal-plate, scattering the mess all over the house. That day our dog Champi would have its fill. Dada would ask Santamai, 'Did you see Imam today?' Santamai would then blow up and swear at him. And I would choke with tears.

\* \* \*

When I was five days old, Santamai decided to hold my naming ceremony. Lakshman, her one and only brother, used to earn a living by chopping firewood and selling it. Masamai called him to have a look at the baby but he refused, saying, 'Let me fetch some firewood. We can use it to boil the baby's water.' It was his destiny which beckoned him thus; how could he avoid it?

Lakshman was axing a tree in the backyard. The hacking sound rang out in the air. Chips of wood went flying. This old tree was creepy. It looked as if it would fall on you any moment. When the wind blew, it made a creaking noise, as if grinding its teeth. Dark and menacing, it made one's blood curdle when an owl hooted on it.

Suddenly there was a loud crashing sound. Masamai's heart stopped. The tree was falling. Lakshman began to run away but the tree got him. Lakshman's head was crushed to a pulp. The race of Satubap came to an end. Instead of putting me into a cradle for the naming ceremony, they put Lakshman's corpse into a cart and carried it to Potphadi.

I was looked upon as an omen of bad luck. As it was I was born at midnight. Masamai had put me on her knee. I was wailing. Santamai and Dada woke up with the noise. Startled, Dada ran into the dark with a log of wood. He probably thought that cats were inside the house. Masamai screamed with all her might, 'It's only my baby, don't kill it!'

With no male heir left in the family, Santamai took over the village work. She swept the streets and lit bonfires for the villagers who flocked around them in the winter months. She also had to fetch betel leaves for them. She smeared the public square with cowdung. She would walk ten miles to take government papers to the district town. At the time Dada was on village duty.

One clear night, as Santamai washed her sari in the river, moonlight swirled around in the water. Just then Imam reached there. God alone knows what they talked about. But Dada spied them together. That was enough for him to taunt her all her life, specially when he had had a drop too many. It's years since that incident — their teeth have fallen off, their hair turned grey, their faces networks of wrinkles — yet whenever Dada gets drunk his grouse spills out like a running sore: 'Did you see Imam today?' And Santamai never fails to rise to the bait, tears streaming from her eyes like a falling tree.

Mule Bhimsha was another drunkard of the village. For the sake of drink, he sold off his house, his land, everything. Mhalasha Kotwal, Chandu Pujari, Basu Ajya, Bhallu, Sharanu the tobacco dealer, Hatale Malesha, were some others who drank regularly. Thus the streets of the Maharwada were always sprinkled with intoxication. These boozers had no qualms about downing our liquor, but they would not touch water offered by a Mahar. They could have a Mahar woman; but not food prepared by her.

All the liquor dealers in the Maharwada gave periodic bribes to the police. Fed them chicken. The policemen shared the bribe amongst themselves but not with the *police patil*, for our house belonged to him. He stayed in our house and I called him 'Uncle'.

\* \* \*

Masamai is my mother. She's the only daughter of Santamai. She was married to a poor man called Vithal Kamble. Starvation was a daily affair, yet she had to cut grass all day, lug it to the district town four miles away and sell it there. She carried piles of wood to Akkalkot to do business there, and brought back provisions for the house. It was a hand to mouth existence — daily toil for daily bread. Santamai and Dada sometimes walked for miles to Basalgaon to fetch Masamai, with loads on their heads. There were no motor cars those days.

Vithal Kamble was a labourer with a farmer. He earned a little over seven hundred rupees a year. It was his lot to work day and night. To toil, an animal among the other animals of the field. The labourer and the ruminant animals penned in the stables — they were one and the

same. Misery sat like an ox's hump on his shoulders. His gaunt ribs were like the whip marks on the bull's hide. His hollow stomach stuck to his spine with the tenacity of a gadfly. His future lay before him with all the cramped squalor of a cow-shed. How long would he have to chew the cud of hunger? He had to take his whole life in his grasp like a plough. In the waters of the irrigation canal is mingled a drop of the labourer's sweat.

The farmer that Vithal Kamble worked for was a Patil called Hanmanta Limbale, who helped him in times of need. But the Patil's needs were somewhat different, and so was his nature. It was because of him that a happy family broke up.

The *jat-panchayat* snatched Masai's baby from her breast. Another, a toddler, Chandrakant, was also taken away from her. She was divorced. Masamai had to leave behind her two young children. She was weeping. Lakshman, the baby, tried to reach out to her with his arms stretched, crying. Chandrakant threw a tantrum — he wanted to go with Mai. A husband-wife relationship can end, but how can a mother and her children break ties?

Masamai was a free bird now. She filled her belly by selling wood at the district town. But her heart was where her home was — with her husband and children. Now that was all over — she was a Sita looking for refuge in the forest of Dandakaranya.

Vithal Kamble remarried. A man can chew up and spit out as many wads of betel as he likes. If a woman does so, it only stains her honour. Once you've had her, she's spoilt fruit. How could Masamai remarry? She had nothing to eat. She was a woman discarded by her husband; the mantle of his protection no longer shielded her modesty.

Dadunya was a *gondhali* — a folk singer — of our village, who sang erotic songs and produced plays. In his spare time he went around selling utensils in nearby villages. He was the first to approach Masai. He needed a woman for the performance of *Kalagi-tura* — in the troupe of four, the woman sang, playing the tambourine, accompanied by a man on a one-string guitar. But Mai refused to sing. She wanted to lead an independent life.

However, Hanmanta Limbale managed to hook her. He kept her in a rented house in Akkalkot. Mai too sought refuge with Hanmanta. In any case she had been ruined because her name had been linked with his. Now she decided she might as well brazen it out. Hanmanta kept her like a pet pigeon. They lived happily together. Soon Masai got pregnant and delivered a baby boy. Who was the father?

Hanmanta wanted Masai — her body. But not a child. If it bore his name, it would be a blot on his family honour. Beside, the child would ask for his share of the property on growing up. Masai would in all likelihood have gone to court. Hanmanta wanted to avoid all this but how could he undo the birth of a baby?

My birth must have shaken to the foundation all the noble mansions of Patils and landlords. The very whiff of my first breath must have driven all virtue out of this world. The sound of my crying must have caused milk to spring unbidden from the breasts of all its unrelenting mothers.

Why did my mother agree to this defilement? Why did she bear this forbidden seed for nine months? Why did she yield this bitter fruit? Wasn't she tormented by the dirty looks condemning her as an adulteress? Did they celebrate my birth? Did anyone distribute sweets? Did anyone fuss over me? Or buy clothes for Mai? Who performed my naming ceremony? Whose heir was I? Who was it I could call my rightful father?

We had a neighbour called Gangubai, a quack, who was friendly with Mai. She would carry me on her back, selling needles, thread, marking nuts etc. from door to door. Displaying me, she would beg for old clothes. Women would feed her and give her clothes for me and oil for my head. Mai would be upset with Gangubai, and Gangubai would turn mournful: 'Your child helps me earn my bread. Am I killing your child?' Then the two would break into a quarrel. But as soon as Mai went out, Gangubai lifted me from the cradle and went begging.

When I was in the final year of school Gangubai came, hawking her wares, to our village. She visited us and Mai served her tea. Gangubai held me close and kissed me, stroking my back. She asked me if I would go to Akkalkot and said I should file a suit against my father. Gangubai was a mobile general provisions store. She exchanged needles, thread, marking nuts, beads, etc. for leftover food and old clothes. After Gangubai left I was discontented. I was growing up fatherless as Karna throughout the *Mahabharata*.

Hanmanta had begun to ill-treat us. There were quarrels every day. He would say the child was not his. That its eyes were like Kumbhar Dhondya's, a ruffian of the British times. Finally Masamai left him and took me to live with Santamai. Only a mother or else the earth are willing to welcome anything into their fold.

Beauty is a curse when it blesses one of the Dalits, who have a

saying: 'If she's beautiful, she's someone else's wife; mine's ugly'. A good looking woman is the target of all men's desire. Masamai's husband left her only because of her looks. Hanmata too deserted her after using her. That's why Mai was living like this with me as her only possession. How long could she go on without support?

Those who have been given power by religion on account of their high caste and money inherited from ancestors have deemed it their birth-right to abuse Dalit honour. Every village Patil and zamindar has slept with the wives of his land labourers. Used them like whores. As soon as she came of age, a girl from a poor family fell victim to their lust. You'll find the progeny of the Patil's promiscuity in some houses of the village. These households live solely at the mercy of the Patil. The whole village calls this the Patil's mistress's house and the children, the Patil's whore's brood. His benevolence, his visits, are all that matter for this household's happiness.

After me were born a string of babies — Nagi, Nirmi, Vani, Sumi, Pami, Tamma, Indira, Sidramma — in quick succession. From the same womb, fed on the same life-blood. The mother was one but the fathers were different.

Masamai got three children from Vithal Kamble. The first-born, Bhanudas, died. Chandrakant and Lakshman were born after him. These were snatched from her by her husband when he drove her out. I was born of Hanmanta. From Kaka, that is Police Patil Yashwantrao Sidramappa of Hannor, Masamai got Nagubai, Nirmala, Vanamala, Sunanda, Pramila, Shrikant, Indira and Sidram. On paper, Kaka has put down their caste as Hindu-Lingayat. But no Lingayat would touch us or accept us as one of them. We are a parallel Maharwada.

My father too was a Lingayat, and his grandfather and great-grandfather before him. That makes me a Lingayat. My mother was a Mahar. Her parents, her forefathers, were Mahars. So I am a Mahar. But I have been brought up by a Muslim — Mahmud Dastageer Jamadar — my grandfather. Shouldn't that make me a Muslim? Do claims of the heart have no religious sanction?

Am I a caste-Hindu? But my mother is an untouchable. Am I an untouchable? But my father is a caste-Hindu. I have been tossed apart like Jarasandha — half within society and half outside. Who am I? To whom does my umbilical cord join me?

Translated by Daya Agrawal  
An extract from Akkarmashi

DADASAHEB MORE

*The Stragglers*

The long-awaited 'tomorrow' dawned at last. It was a Tuesday. Many of us did not go round begging for alms. They would stay at home on the market day as if it were their weekly day off. We got busy heaping into one pile what had been saved from the grain we got by begging in the early morning. The grain, collected from different homesteads, wasn't one of a kind but a dozen. Rice, *jowar*, wheat, *chana*, *moong*, *bajra*, maize and other such varieties were all mixed up. But the money it fetched when we sold it, was just enough to pay for our necessities like oil and salt.

Besides this assortment of grain, some of us could manage to secure a few hens too. It wasn't as if they honestly earned the birds; truth to tell, they had been got by telling a pack of lies to people in trouble. Working miracles was the line: One was promised happiness, another prosperity, a third obedient children, a fourth an end to quarrels in the family. But for all problems, a hen was the sacrifice called for. Ignorant, superstitious people made over the hen as an offering. This society of ours doesn't have the sense to wonder why a man who can bring untold wealth to others should be unable to do so for himself, but go begging from door to door. Lured by the false hope of happiness, people hand over hens to members of our clan, who earn a few rupees by selling the birds.

A number of people had with them the fowls thus acquired, to sell in the market. We set out for the market in a body. There were almost fifty of us in the group. Some wore dhotis with rents reaching up to the knees, and with parti-coloured patches. The shirts some wore had a whole sleeve missing. As for buttons, there was never a trace of them. The 'turban' looked like a rag wound round the head, half of which lay exposed. The exposed top of the head with the turban going round it looked like a field enclosed by a hedge. The footwear was odd — a slipper on one foot and a leather chappal on the other. Most of our people wore no footwear at all.

The women too made a curious sight. The saris they wore sported

patches of different colours. The patches, roughly sewn on and in an assortment of colours, looked like a cobbler's patches on old chappals. To look at the choli they wore, one would be at a loss to tell the cloth from the rough patches. The latter presented a variety of colours. The women's hair seemed to have been allowed to grow only because cutting it is prohibited. It was wholly innocent of oil and all matted. The children, sparsely dressed or with no clothes on, dark, covered with mud and dirt, sniffing and crying, ran after the women. Such was the crowd that had set out for the market. Passers-by looked on as if this were a live film show, smiled and went their way. We reached the market.

Being apprehensive that we would steal things, everyone in the market steered clear of us. No one offered to buy the mixed grain or the hen or two that we had to sell. The birds might be stolen property, they thought. Everyone in the market regarded us as thieves. We had to sell the mixed grain as bird-feed at half the market price. Our hens too had to be sold at prices considerably lower than those of other sellers. Thus the articles we had to offer had practically no value. After all, we didn't count as members of society. We might as well have belonged to a different world altogether. Those of us who managed to sell their grain or hens, would buy a few necessities with the proceeds. Four or eight annas' worth of oil for the week. No curry was ever cooked. A few drops of oil were added to the chutney, that's all. Considering this, the quantity bought was in fact more than they would need over the week. A few other things like salt would be bought. The smaller children howled for the sweets on sale, but the noise they made was drowned in the general hubbub of the market-place. If a child were particularly obstinate, its father gave it a slap or two. The child would be quiet then because it knew that it would be thrashed if it cried any more. Anyone with a little extra money would drink half a rupee's worth of liquor and drown his sorrows and worries in the cup, walking unsteadily back to his tent.

We had come to the market, the two of us, my father and I. I wanted to buy a slate. Abas, my younger brother, yelling and without a stitch of clothing on him, had followed us. We had nothing to sell. I don't how know much money my father had. My father bought me a slate for twelve annas, and two pencils for five paise. Nearly eighty paise had been spent on me alone. My father was quite put out because, while the week's supplies for the whole family cost only a rupee, he had to spend eighty paise on me alone. Just then I noticed some berries

for sale. 'Buy me five paise worth of *ber*, Anna,' I said to my father. He was wild with rage. Without a moment's thought he slapped me hard, saying, 'I've spent such a lot on you already... God knows if you'll be a scholar or a rotter! To heel, like a dog!' Little Abas, my brother, was asking for sweets. But he too got nothing. We started walking back to our tent, our faces long. On the way back, my father bought ten paise worth of *ber* and four annas worth of guavas. It was clear that we would not get them until after we had reached home.

By six in the evening, everyone was back in the camp. Here and there was a man tipsy and groggy. Some bewailed the extra money they had spent. In our small world there were at least four or five who got drunk regularly every week. They were Nagoo Dorkar, Rama Shinde, Nivritti Shinde, Shivaji Dhangapure and Subhash Bhosale. These five Pandavas, each lying stretched out in his small home, would set up a racket with their roaring and cursing: 'Hey you... haven't you got dinner ready yet? Gimme my dinner right now or I'll slit your throat!' The other people looked on and enjoyed the show. Off and on, Rama Shinde would bellow, 'Damn! what's life for ... work, work, and more work.... A man's at it to his last breath and then he drops dead... What's wrong if a man enjoys himself...' Then Nivritti would take up the chorus and shout at his daughter, 'Hey Jyantay... Where the hell are you? ... Here I've been shouting for ages for you... Can't you even say yes father?... Go and tell your ma to cook some mutton quick...' A variety of such expressions could be heard. The wiser ones among the grown-ups kept cursing the drunkards. In general, the whole scene was quite amusing. My father to used to drink — not regularly, but at intervals of one or two market-days. When he came home drunk, he would get angry with us. Everyone in our family would keep quiet then. He would gabble a bit and then drop off to sleep. A little while later, all would be quiet in the tent for the night.

The next day I went to school. I sat in the courtyard in the open. The teacher was busy teaching. I listened attentively. Seven or eight days passed like this. I attended school regularly every day. I had managed to learn the letters of the alphabet. But how can the ill-starred ever enjoy a spell of good luck? The next week we were off again to another place. We struck our tents, tied them up into bundles; packed up our belongings. We loaded our ponies. Some of us slung their bundles across their shoulders. We were on the march again like pilgrims. Which town or village we should go to, was uncertain. We

would set up our camp where we could get something by way of alms, space for our camp, grass for our ponies to graze on and a source of water close by. It wasn't easy to find such a place. On some days we walked on and on from daybreak to sundown. The children, suffering from a raging thirst under the blazing sun, drooped. The hot ground scorched our feet. If one of our smaller animals strayed into a field, we had to submit to the owner's abuse and threats; sometimes the farmer would turn violent. Still, not a word could we say in return, because we were born in one of the lowest communities in society. So we had to suffer abuse and violence without a word.

We began our journey to another village. The heat was terrible. The earth was scorchingly hot. Our dogs panted with thirst. When they saw a tree some way ahead, they raced madly for it, and waited in the shade till our band caught up with them, and when it did, walked on with it. About eight or ten families had taken to the road. The rest had stayed on at Salgar. A day or two later, five or six families would proceed in a group in another direction. About fifteen ponies belonging to eight or ten families, carrying all the worldly possessions of a nomadic band, ambled along the road. The ponies were heavily loaded. Our bundles were firmly tied up with ropes to prevent them from slipping off. On top of a bundle you could see a hen or two which was made fast with a string to the bundle. The birds too would appear half-dead with the heat.

One member or the other from each group rode a pony. It might be a woman nursing her baby, or an elderly man, or little children. Pandurang Vayaphalkar, an elderly man of sixty to sixty-five years, was astride a white pony. On the offside, a hen, tied up, lay limp as if it were dead; on the rear side a pup had been tied up because it wasn't able to walk much. Pandurang Vayaphalkar had been ailing for a long time. The heat was too much for him that day and suddenly he was giddy. Even as he rode he showed signs of great agony. His daughter Sundra, walking alongside the pony, happened to look up; she saw her father's condition. She shouted, 'Help, help... run folks, run... my father's dying...' and began to sob and cry. Pandurang Vayaphalkar's pony was somewhere in the middle of the marching column. A few of us and their ponies were some distance ahead and others lagged behind. On hearing Sundra's shouts the latter spurred their mounts and the former turned back. Everyone screamed. The women wailed loudly. With all that noise Grandpa Pandurang lost his consciousness. The men-folk lifted him off his mount.

Frightened out of our wits, we children gaped at it all in silence. We could not understand what it all was about. All that we could understand was that people were crying and shouting.

Close by was a roadside *neem* tree. They carried Grandpa Pandurang into its shade. The ponies, loads on their back, cropped the grass bordering the road. The dogs had already taken shelter under the tree. What could they know of all this agony? The ponies groaned under the loads. Grandpa was set down in the shade. The womenfolk closed in all around him. Immediately, Maruti Vayaphalkar, his brother, shouted, 'Get back, get back... you... let him have some fresh air, or he'll die.' The crowd thinned out a bit. Some struck their foreheads, some beat their breasts. It was a great disaster for our family of wanderers. There was no village nearby. It was in an odd, out of the way place that the group was thus plunged into grief. Nivritti Shinde ran off and returned with a pitcherful of water that he had got from somewhere. They splashed the water on grandpa's face. Still he lay unconscious. The women began to wail shrilly.

By this time Gangu Mavashi was possessed by her familiar. She started moaning, gesticulating wildly and shrieking. Some knowledgeable ones among us began whispered exchanges: 'Do you know, Maruti Mama, it's Ambabai speaking through Gangu Mavashi.' Grandma Gangubai Dorkar was considered to be a good medium in our community. We all believed that whenever she was possessed, all diseases, no matter which, would be cured. Everyone was quiet now. Gangu Mavashi kept on groaning and shrieking. Grandpa Pandurang's daughter lay prostrate at Gangu Mavashi's feet. Between her sobs, Sundra said, 'Please, Mother Ambabai, ask for anything that you want from me but, please, make my father well again... We have no earning member in our family as you do know...' Immediately, Gangu Mavashi raised her voice a note higher, saying, 'Look, you, I'm the *zuting* of this place... You trespassed on my territory at mid-day under the sun... I've got you now, right at the hour allotted to me... I won't let him go.' Maruti Mama now prostrated himself before Gangu Mavashi and pleaded, 'Please, please, King Zuting, ask for anything you like, but please let my brother go unharmed...' At this, between shrieks, Gangu Mavashi shouted, 'If you want me to let him go... one hen... five *chappatis*, one coconut... rice and lemon... as soon as you camp this evening... in my name... wave them before your brother's face... put them down on the road... turn your face to this place... only then will I go in

peace.... Or I'll take him away with me...' After every member of the eight odd families had promised to make the offering, the spirit left Gangu Mavashi. Ambabai who had possessed Gangu Mavashi was making a slow departure.

Some women supported Gangu Mavashi and helped her to sit down. Some prostrated themselves before her while others praised her. Rama Shinde observed, 'Say what you will... but Gangu Mavashi is Devi Herself.' Others nodded in assent.

No one had noticed when, during all the hubbub, my father had gone off. Now he came back running. He had a fresh onion, green shoot and all, in his hand. He had pulled it out from someone's crop. Hastily the onion was split open. It was held against Grandpa Pandurang's nose. Just then a farmer, carrying a whip in his hand, ran up; no sooner was he close enough, than he lashed Subhash furiously. Subhash, writhing in pain, squealed, 'Oh! Oh! I'm dead...' All of us turned our heads and looked at the farmer. He was trembling with anger. 'Who was it that ran out of my farm?' he demanded threateningly; 'I saw someone with my own eyes.' My father stepped up to him saying, 'It was I who had come, master.... One of our elders was stricken and dying.... He was unconscious... so I took an onion... It's *my* mistake, master...' My father's meek, submissive tone went searing into my heart. But I could do nothing about it. Had I spoken a word, I would have received half-a-dozen lashes of the whip; and my own people would have beaten me up to boot.

By then some other members of the farmer's family ran up to us. I thought that they would beat my father. I started crying. My mother ran up to the farmer, caught hold of his feet, and placing her head on them, sobbed out, 'Please, master, have mercy on us.... Excuse him for once, I beg of you.' Still angry, the farmer asked, 'Why did you pluck the onion without my permission?' My father explained, 'I could see no one there, master; to go in search of someone would have taken time.. made me too late.... That's why, sir.' Lowering his tone, the farmer said, 'Don't do it again... or someone'll whip you till your bowels burst.' With this admonition, the farmer and the members of his family who had joined him, went away. Everyone of us heaved a sigh of relief. Otherwise, a second disaster would have been on us before we were out of the first.

While all this was taking place, the day had declined. Our ponies were still loaded. Who had the time to think of them? Grandpa Pandurang had regained consciousness; after a little while he felt much

better. 'Come on, let's get going,' said Nagoo Dorkar, 'or we will be late.' Everyone bestirred himself. First Grandpa Pandurang was hoisted on to the back of his pony. Some five or six women and two or three men walked alongside his pony. Others caught hold of their own ponies. The smaller children and women with their babies in their arms were seated astride the ponies. We resumed our march. The dogs which had been sitting in the shade stood up and shook themselves. They had had a long rest. What had taken place had been to their advantage.

Stumbling and tottering, we somehow reached Arag. To the east of Arag lay a heath. We turned our ponies' heads towards it. One by one, they reached the heath and halted. After all the ponies and all the people in our group had assembled there, my father's uncle, Nagoo More, said, 'Let's put up here.... There's space enough for tents... A brook's close by... grass for the ponies... fire-wood for us...' Everyone assented. Grandpa Pandurang was first helped to dismount. A rag, removed from the back of someone's pony, was spread on the ground for him to lie down on. Then everyone busied himself with unloading.

Hens, tied up and lying inert across saddles, were untied. Pots in which to boil water, earthen and metalware pitchers were untrussed. The womenfolk, a pitcher on head and a *degchi* under the arm, went off to look for wells. 'Dadasab, look after the baby while I fetch some water,' said my mother to me. I sat down with little Chhaya, about a year old, in my lap. My father started unloading the pony. First he got the harness off; then a large bag wrapped up in a blanket. Then he lifted off the saddle. Those who could not lift the bags by themselves asked for help. After the loads were lifted, the backs of the ponies glistened with sweat as if they had been washed. With the heavy loads off, the ponies were at ease. Their legs were then hobbled. My father started arranging our things. The ponies rolled in the dust. My father fished out pegs from the bags. He dug holes in the ground, one opposite the other and fixed upright posts in them. Others in our group were also busy setting up their tents. My father then tied the cross-piece firmly to the uprights. The tent-cloth — awning — made of gunny sacking, had been folded and placed on the pony's back. He spread it across the cross-piece. My small sister had kept up a steady howl all the while. It made my father cross. 'Dadasya, throw that girl away,' he shouted to me; 'Damn it, crying at all hours!' Poor thing; what could it know about the right hour to cry! I said nothing as the

work had tired father. He had been walking since morning, had been threatened and insulted by the farmer, and now he was busy setting up the tent. Presently, my father spoke again. 'Here, Dadasya, hold this end of the tent-cloth.' I set down Chhaya and caught hold of it. Pegs had to be driven into the ground on either side of the uprights. My father shouted, 'Stupid! can't you hold it right...? Such a big lump and can't even hold the cloth! How are you goin' to ask for alms tomorrow?' I pulled the awning cloth tight. My father fixed the pegs on one side of the tent and began fixing those on the other. A dog hurried under the awning and was about to sit down. My father cursed it roundly and snarled, 'Off with you.... Scoot... The devil take you...' The dog slunk out, moved off and sat down at a distance. Then at the back of the tent, my father fixed a small piece of awning. It stops the wind from blowing in from the rear.

At last, our home was ready. My father entered the tent and arranged the bag, the harness and other things neatly. Then he spread a tattered quilt on the floor and sat down on it. The little one was still crying. My younger brother had gone off with mother to fetch water. After a little while mother came back carrying a pitcher on her head. The pitcher was full of holes. They had been plugged with rags to stop the water from gushing out. On top of the pitcher was an aluminium pot to boil water in. On the outside the pot was jet black with smoke. Water from it splashed on my mother. She was drenched from head to foot. 'Dadasab... this pot... lift it off gently,' said my mother, and sat down. I couldn't have lifted the pot off otherwise. I put it on the floor. Mother set the pitcher down. Picking up the baby, mother started suckling it. The baby cried as it sucked and dropped off to sleep at the breast. By then Abas, my younger brother, came up, carrying a leaky pot. It was quite small, just enough to hold a quart or so of water. Half the contents had spilt themselves all over him on the way back. The streaks of water on his body made it look as if a dog had urinated on him. Water dripped from his hair. He was stark naked. His large crop of hair, uncut for a long time, made his neck look ridiculously thin. It looked artificial like a doll's neck. Abas set the pot down. Putting his arm round Abas, my father kissed him and lifted him on to his lap. The poor man loves his child as the shepherd loves his lamb, be it ever so dirty. 'Are there any *bhakris* left?' asked father. Mother poked about in the bag with her hand and extracted a small bundle from it. Only two or three *bhakris* had been saved from our breakfast. They were placed before us all. A few pieces were tossed

to the two dogs. The four of us ate all that remained of the *bhakris*. None had enough to make a full meal. So we ate just the chutney on top of the pile because there was not a piece of *bhakri* to go with it. What else could we do? We were so very hungry.

Turning to me, mother said, 'Dadasab, it's getting dark; come, let's collect some droppings; Abas will look after the baby.' I got up and picked up a winnowing fan; mother took a small basket. As she went out, she instructed Abas, 'Look you, Aba... Baby's asleep... Don't wake her up... Sit by her... Don't make noise... or she will wake up and cry...' Abas jumped up saying, 'Let me go with you, mother, to gather fuel...' 'Be quiet, will you?' hissed mother, 'so many roam all over the heath; it's getting dark. Fat chance of your finding fuel, smart chap that you are!' Abas sat down.

The two of us roamed about collecting droppings, dry cow-dung, and fire-wood. It was quite some time since the sun had gone down. Women and children from every one of the tents were about collecting fuel. Heedless of the dark, I'd make a dash as soon as I noticed a dry stick, because I didn't want anybody else to get it. After a while mother and I retraced our steps to the tents. We piled the fuel near our tent. Mother fetched three large stones. She arranged them into a *chulha*. One had to look about and mark the tent where a fire had been lit up, and go there for some embers to light one's own fire. Mother told me to get some from Savitri Mami's fireplace. I brought them in a rag. Mother lighted a fire. She put a *tawa* on top of the stones; she shoved some fire-wood underneath it so that it broke into flames. Mother kneaded some dough in an aluminium plate. She began to pat lumps of the dough into flat, round *bhakris*. Each family had lit up a fire. The dogs barked. Children cried. Now and then, someone would break into a song. He would sing a snatch or two. The women were busy cooking. Father called out to Grandpa Nagoo, 'O Nagootatya, will you step across?' Grandpa Nagoo walked to our tent. Father spread a rag for him to sit on, and anxiously asked, 'Look, now that we have come to this place, what about Dadasab's schooling?' Grandpa Nagoo thought for a while and then said, 'Listen Malhari, let him go on the rounds from tomorrow asking for alms. If he is not fated to be a scholar, then he wouldn't be able to support himself by asking for alms, nor would he have the benefit of good schooling... Think, we keep wandering like this. Our bellies ride our ponies. How then can we give him any education? He will starve. No one would employ a person from our community, even to clean the cow-shed.'

Father had a clear idea of all this, but he dearly wished to make a scholar out of his son. After considering the way we were situated, he changed his mind.

Father and Grandpa Nagoo finally decided that I should go about begging for alms from the next day. They went on chatting for some time. Then Ishwar Tatya, Grandpa Nagoo's son, called out, 'Hey, father... come along here... There's something to do...' Grandpa Nagoo took himself off. Mother could not bear the idea. She spoke to my father, 'Do you know that the child doesn't know how to ask for alms... How can you send him on the rounds?' 'Should he go around when he is a grey-beard then?' returned father angrily; 'Nothing doing; go on the rounds from tomorrow Dadasya...' As for me, I had no choice. I was like a dog which, at the word 'choo', pricks its ears. I couldn't make out how I was to go about it. 'Anna, tell me, please, what I have to call out when I ask for alms,' I said entreatingly to my father. 'What should I say first?' At this mother was moved and broke into tears. Father too was touched. But with an eye to my future, he said, 'Listen... when you stand before someone's door say, "May victory attend you... May Lakshmi smile on you... May your prosperity grow... May success wait on you.... Give a piece of *bhakri*, lady..." You have to sing this out. You're not to move on unless you're given a piece of *bhakri*... Keep on asking... and, watch out for dogs... If one attacks you, hold out your switch — you're not to hit it... You're not to run... You're to walk away slowly, step by step...remember.' I listened to it all. Mother served dinner. I was very hungry. I wolfed down the food. My father called out to Grandpa Nagoo, 'Come along Tatya, have dinner with us...' Similar invitations were issued from the other tents, 'O, Rama, come dine with us...' to which Rama replied, 'Carry on... I've had my dinner.' Invitations were thus exchanged. I didn't attend to anything of this. Gulping down the food was my only concern.

It was well on into the night by the time we finished dinner. Mother made the bed. It wasn't much of a bed. Just a couple of quilts. Mother said she had stitched them about the time I was born. Large holes had developed in them. When you covered yourself with one of the quilts, your head pushed itself out of one of the holes. As for small holes, there was no counting them. You could see everything about you through them. One was spread on the floor; but more than half of it was torn so that half the sleeper's body touched the earth; we used to lie, each in a tight bundle, knees touching the chest, between the

quilts. I tried to recall what Anna had told me I was to say: 'May victory attend you... May Lakshmi smile on you.. May your prosperity grow... May success wait on you... Give a piece of *bhakri*, lady'. For a long time I kept going over it. I didn't even know when the others in our house had dropped off to sleep; nor did I know when I myself did so; so lost was I in my thoughts.

The sound of my father bustling about woke me. Father dashed some water in his face. Probably he had been a little late in getting up. That's why he was in such a hurry. Just then we heard an early morning cock crowing somewhere. On hearing it father called out to Maruti Mama, "Mama, Mama... aa..yay..ay... Mamaa.a.... aren't you coming? The cock is calling already.' Maruti Mama too seemed to have got up hurriedly because he came out immediately saying, 'Yes, yes, I'll be ready in a minute.' Father put on a *kudmude* — a rattle shaped like an hour-glass — round his neck, put a bundle of almanacs into his bag. Dressed thus, father slung the bag onto his shoulder and picked up a stick. Maruti Mama too was similarly dressed; only, he carried a lantern too, to light him on his way. Thinking that everyone else was fast asleep, father went away with Maruti Mama.

Every Joshi is dressed this way; otherwise he wouldn't be identified as a Pingale Joshi. All grown-up menfolk ask for alms between cock-crow and sunrise. With sunrise they have to return to the tents because the *pingala*, a kind of owl, calls only at dawn, and people in general believe that our tribe understands the bird's language. The Joshi goes about a town, rattling his *bhamba*. He takes his stand at someone's doorway and goes on jabbering whatever comes to his mind. People believe that whatever he says is only a repetition of what the *pingala* has said. Why should the *pingala* worry over the sorrows of the world? It is also true that everyone in our tribe knows that the *pingala* doesn't speak to him, nor does he understand the bird's language. Many a beggar doesn't even catch sight of the bird. How can it be seen in the early hours of the morning? Still, our tribe uses the bird's name as a means to earn a livelihood and manages to keep body and soul together. We are able to get on only because we speak no evil; people of my tribe repeat, '... Lakshmi will visit your home...' But people don't understand all this. Moreover, who doesn't hope for something better? People give us something, however small the quantity, in the belief that some good will come their way. This goes on from early in the dawn to daybreak. As soon as the sun rises, our men stop asking for alms and return to their tents. No sooner do they

return, than their children, whatever their age, pick up aluminium plates, leaky pots, tins — each according to his strength — and rush off to the neighbouring town to beg for pieces of stale *bhakri*.

Translated by G.V. Bapat  
An extract from Gabal

P.E. SONKAMBLE

### ***This Too shall Pass***

I have two brothers-in-law, Dhondiba and Kishan. Dhondiba is married to the elder of my two sisters, Kishan to the younger. Dhondiba's village is Chera, Kishan's is Jagalpur. They are maternal cousins, and their mothers are my aunts — my father's sisters. Both my aunts are older than my father.

After my parents' death, I lived with Dhondiba. He was humble by nature. He looked after camels belonging to high-caste people. The investment was that of others; his was only the physical labour, and as wages he would get half the fares he earned — not enough to make ends meet.

My sister used to nag him constantly. On account of his laziness, she had to toil in the hope of earning something. My brother-in-law would simply roam about on his camel, unconcerned whether or not he got passengers. Work he would not do, but he was always present at home along with his children, to swallow greedily whatever was available. So my sister was perpetually annoyed with him and would even abuse him. At such times my brother-in-law would quietly leave the house.

But sometimes his mother (my aunt) would instigate a quarrel between him and his wife. She would say: 'O Dhondiba, the things your wife says about you! She curses you with total ruin. She says, "If you can't run a household, why did you have children, you swine?"' Listening to his mother, Dhondiba would get enraged. He would thrash my sister so hard, her head would bleed profusely. My sister would squat on the floor, screaming and cursing: 'O God, I'm dying!' But Dhondiba's mother would continue to provoke him, and he would belabour my sister even harder.

I would feel very bad. But what could I do? I would feel like beating my brother-in-law in return. But I was only a small boy. When my sister at Chera was beaten, I would run away to my sister at Jagalpur. But there too I would not go to her house right away. For her husband was of a slightly peculiar nature. He would look at me threateningly

and talk in a haughty manner. He would not be happy with my arrival there, and even if he was a little happy, I was of no consequence to him. If someone said to him, 'O Kishan, your brother-in-law has come,' he would say, 'Yes, yes, that boy has come, he simply comes for no reason at all.'

I was terribly scared of him. Hence, instead of going home, I would sit in a corner of Goddess Mariai's temple. I would feel like eating the coconuts and other offerings that had been made to the goddess, but I would not dare touch them for fear of what Mariai might do. So I would simply hide in the corner. If anybody entered the temple, I would grow timid, and hope that, seeing me, someone would inform my sister of my arrival. Then some children would actually notice me, and go and say to my sister: 'O Kaku, Parlhada Mama has come.' 'O Muktabai, your brother has come. He is sitting in Goddess Marimai's temple, but refuses to come home, even when we ask him.'

Thereafter my sister would come to pick me up, but with great fear in her heart. For she was extremely frightened of her husband, who was shrewd while she was simple. The poor woman was not allowed to go anywhere. She would feel greatly distressed about it. Brother-in-law only chanted *bharuds* wherever he went. He did not eat meat and he wore the sacred thread round his neck. The high-caste people were thus somewhat friendly with him. He was all puffed up with pride about it, and would rarely speak to poor people. He felt he had reached the sky. But he forgot where he had come from. My sister would come up to me and say, 'Come, brother.' I was a little afraid to go. For those intimidating eyes of my brother-in-law, directed towards me and my sister, terrified me. Still, I would sneak along behind her and sit in a corner of the house. The people there had a bad habit. The women would ask my sister, 'What has Parlhada brought for you, now that the festival is near?' They knew that I was an orphan boy who lived at the mercy of others. Their taunts would prick my sister, and I would feel guilty, for I was young and helpless, and I could do nothing for her. Brother-in-law would eat and go out. My sister and I would then quietly munch the leftover gruel and vegetables. I would go to sleep at the temple of Guru Maharaj, where people from the Mahar community gathered every night. People would see me and ask, 'Who's that, there in the dark? Who's there?' Someone would say, 'He's Kishan's brother-in-law.' And someone else would say, 'He's the little son of that Irmama. When his father was alive, they were well off. Many people would go to him, for he

was a magic doctor. But now bad days have fallen upon his child. And that Kishan too, does he care for him? Kishan is so well off at present, he should bring the boy up. But that's not likely, when he's so stingy.'

I would lie there all night, and in the morning I would leave for Chera, at times informing my sister, at times not. If I did not inform her, my sister would be anxious. Then somebody would tell her, 'O Muktabai, Parlhada has gone towards Chera.' And she would sit there, fretting and weeping. Sometimes I wouldn't go to my sister's house even when she came to fetch me from the temple, but return to Chera direct. Sometimes I would tell myself it was still daylight and set out elsewhere. But by the time I arrived at the farms of Bukka and Bembra, the sun would set. I would be scared and even if the leaves just rustled, I would imagine things leaping out at me. Near the Sutar farm my fears would increase, for it was rumoured that under the banyan tree, there was a terrifying ghost. I would walk at a rapid pace, and would start at the slightest sound. Sometimes an owl would hoot, and I would shudder at the bad omen. Sometimes my feet would be cut by the dry stalks on the ground, while the dead thorns would prick me. The thorns would break in half as I tried to pull them out of my feet. I would regret not having gone to my sister's house. I was being taught a lesson for spurning her affection, or so I'd feel.

I passed Standard Four. I wondered what I should do. Just then something strange happened. My sister from Chera brought my sister from Jagalpur home for her delivery, planning to pinch and scrape and make do somehow. My sister was lightened of her burden; she had a daughter. The house at Chera was merely a thatched hut. An oil lamp was kept lighted all night for the young mother. One night the lamp set the house on fire. The fire was uncontrollable. People tried hard to put it out by pouring buckets of water. But in vain. There was a strong wind. As the wind blew, the house turned to ashes. Everybody started gossiping about the fire. The entire Mahar community was saying, 'Don't know why Sakhu brought her sister along.' Some women would say, 'She wanted to show her love for her sister.' To this, other women would reply, 'Big deal! Will our houses need to burn down to cool her belly?' Still others would say, 'Don't talk like that, bad times come to everyone.'

My sister at Chera was very poor. But she had the habit of putting by some scraps in the hut for a rainy day. Besides, some seedless cotton was stored in the camel's saddle. All these things were now ashes. As it is they had no clothing, and even the rag quilt kept to provide

warmth during the cold and rainy seasons was now destroyed. My sister's children piddled on it a lot, but even so the patchwork quilt was good enough for warmth in winter. But now that was gone. 'The whole house burned down, but no one was harmed. God's grace is still with the poor!'

Everywhere, there was the same hue and cry. 'Fire! Fire! Sakhubai's house is on fire!' 'Why did the bitch bring her sister here? She should have left her where she was.' Some said, 'Their parents are dead. So she must have thought she should look after her.' Some would come to her and sympathetically say, 'O Sakhu, come to our house, we'll give you something.' Others would say, 'Sakhu, we'll give you clothes for your children.'

Thus the days passed. Some gave us old clothes and some gave us pulses, some gave us grains and some gave us rice. Sister did not throw away the charred *moong* and *urad dal* from the bundles that had been in the hut. But as it tasted awful, she would mix it with the *dals* given by others. Although it still tasted burnt, we had to eat it without protest. By and by we repaired the mud walls of our house, and thatched them crudely with a roof made of twigs, leaves and fodder. We started living in the house again. Summer was at its peak. The sun was scorching hot. In the afternoons we would sit under the tamarind tree belonging to the Brahmin.

Everybody would say, Sakhu's husband should now leave his camel and take up whatever work he gets. But brother-in-law was very stubborn. He would not leave his camel. If we requested him to do some work, he would retort, 'I'm busy with my camel, you mind your own business.' He was not ready to do any other work. Food or no food, he would loaf around on his camel. Freight or no freight, he couldn't care less. Only my poor sister would struggle, for she had children. She would either clear cowdung from, or carry wood or grass to, someone's house. I too would be with her. At times I felt like saying no. But afraid she would curse me, I had no choice but to stick with her, wherever she went. The rainy season was just beginning. Although it had not actually started pouring, the weather became cooler. Everyone began saying: 'O Sakhu, don't send your brother to school. Fix him up as a servant somewhere.' Sister would say, 'My brother is still young.' But the people would reply, 'Don't pamper him at home with love and affection. It doesn't pay. He is thirteen years old. What's wrong with the fellow?' Women would say to me: 'O Parlya, will you work as a servant in the house of Kishanrao Patil

or Appa More?’ I would keep mum. Sister would be a little happy. For if I worked, she would get some money to run the house. Besides, my daily bread would be taken care of.

Sister thus got me employed. Brother-in-law did not pay heed. I was nonplussed. Kishanrao Patil employed me at Rs. 2.50 per month. Everyone felt that my sister was now comfortable. For one thing, I ate outside the house. For another, she could pile up the money months on end, and buy something for the house. But I had never done this type of work before. For a while I felt good, for it was still summer and there wasn’t much work. Besides, my employers did not nag me. Also, I ate better here than at my sister’s — the same sort of *bhakri* and vegetables, but better spiced. At sister’s place it was different. At times I would get food, and at times I would not. At times I would get a small quantity of bread with plenty of *ambadyachi bhaji*. Would often have to fill our stomachs with these herbs dried and stored during the harvest. Or else, we would eat other vegetables with no proper seasoning. That explains why I used to like the food at Kishanrao Patil’s house. But then they began to make me eat close to the piles of dried dung cakes, or near where small children sat to relieve themselves. I was revolted, and thought it a hardship to work against my will, but I nevertheless ate. I felt like running away. But I was in a fix, and my nature was timid. Going to school was certainly better, even if I got no food for it. Here I did get food, but I had to eat where the children sat to shit! I felt miserable. One day I went to the Patil’s farm to collect fodder. There was a huge stack of it. How much fodder could I carry? Even if I did my level best, I could only carry one or two sheaves. And the wind was blowing fiercely. I tied up the bundle but it was not tight enough, and flopped around. With the strong wind in my face, I could not move forward. Some passersby said: ‘What, Parlya, become a labourer, have you?’ A few schoolboys asked me teasingly: ‘So you’ve left school, have you? Are you a servant at Kisan Patil’s?’ I had no answer. When many people questioned me thus, I would simply grunt in agreement, feeling awkward as I did so. But beggars can’t be choosers. I had no choice but to work. Sister too was unhappy about it. But she had no alternative; her house was in ashes. She would say to me: ‘O Parlya, please work well so we can keep home and hearth going.’

I would think, if I had parents, they would have brought my sister Mukta home for delivery, and my sister Sakhu’s home would have been spared. But heaven knows why my parents went to God so soon.

Were they afraid of us? And now the Patil’s family was overburdening me with work. I was a young boy. How could I carry on like this? Then the rains started. Brother-in-law was angry with my sister for making me work. He said to her: ‘We’ll face life as it is. Why are you making him slave?’ Then, turning to me, he said, ‘Go, Parlhada, go to school.’ I felt relieved and stayed at home that day. But the next day Kishanrao Patil came over and said in an angry voice, ‘O Parlya, what happened to you, you lout? You’ve got no gratitude. Why are you sitting idle at home?’ He asked my sister, ‘Where is your husband?’ Then brother-in-law came out and said, ‘Sir, only this boy and his sister have a hand in this. I know nothing.’ It was a good thing that I had not collected my salary so far. I felt that the work I had done equalled the food I had eaten, so the Patil and I were quits. I thus decided to leave the Patil’s service and stay at home. The Patil walked off in a huff, without giving me a second look. Everyone began accusing me: ‘O orphan boy, the house of your sister was burned because of you. Why did you leave your job?’ I would hear all this and sometimes lose my head. But they were elders. So my sister would hold me back. If I felt it too keenly, I would cry, sitting by the side of a neighbour’s house. Then I’d be off sulking to someone’s farm to do odd jobs and eat whatever stale food they offered me. Sometimes, if nothing else was available, they would say, ‘Eat, boy, bake these ears of grain and eat them.’ At times I would eat and at times I would simply stay without food. For often these people were just putting me to the test, and would say, ‘What! We’ve hardly said the word “eat” and you’re gobbling already. Hasn’t your school taught you any manners? When will you get some sense?’ So I would eat only if they insisted. I would wash the meal down with plenty of water. The baked grain would then swell up and make uncanny noises in my stomach, which would start to ache. And I would curse myself for having eaten the stuff.

As it happened, my sister at Chera was going through a bad phase. To make matters worse, there was no school in the village and everyone felt I was whiling away my time doing nothing at home. I too wasn’t enjoying myself. One day my brother-in-law at Jagalpur called me and said: ‘O Parlhada, will you stay here with us? We will open a shop for you. But you’ll have to stay here for ten years. Decide right now. People will say all kinds of things. But if you stay here for ten years, we shall get you married, and bear all the expenses.’

I was not keen on marriage. But I felt I would become worldly-

wise if I sat at a shop. So I accepted my brother-in-law's offer, and with a slate and notebook, left for Jagalpur. My sister and aunt wanted me to stay on in Chera. They said to me, 'That bugger Kishan is as shrewd as a crow. As if he's going to provide you with a shop!' But I did not listen. I went to Jagalpur hoping for a shop. Instead, my brother-in-law set me to work hoeing Appa Rao's land — by which I mean a field grabbed by Appa Rao. There was something illegal about the land, I wasn't sure what. But that wasn't my business. I was merely concerned with earning my bread. And the land was not even productive. Only useless weeds and stray crops would grow there.

I would go to the farm daily, carrying my hoe. In spite of all the difficulties, I applied my mind to the task and worked sincerely. Only a few *urad* plants had sprouted where they had space to grow, for the grass was so thick they had little room. It was as if nothing had been sown there. Herds of cattle would come there to graze. My brother-in-law had forbidden me to allow them on the farm. But I was only a stranger and an orphan, and nobody listened to me. Some girls from the Mahar community would bring their buffaloes there to graze. They would then settle them in a pond nearby. The water in the pond was muddy and full of fish-like creatures. I would think they were real fish, and when they leapt in the pond, I would try to grab them. The girls would abuse me for disturbing their animals. Some of them would remark sarcastically: 'Why is Mukta's brother Parlhad here? He's only good for disturbing buffaloes.' Others who did not know me would want to know who I was. Once, when the buffaloes came very close to the field, and I began driving them away, the girls started showering me with abuse. Not just that, but they made a funeral stretcher out of twigs and sticks, and laid on it a clay effigy representing me.

Gradually, I got to know everyone in the village. Some boys from there used to go to school at Hadolti. Sitting in Appa Rao's field, I would call out to them, 'Friends, is the Standard Five course very tough?' They wouldn't answer me. For all of them belonged to the higher castes, and were very snobbish about it. They didn't want to pollute themselves by speaking to me. I was crazy after learning. One of them was a Koli boy named Vithal. He was from Barahali, but he lived with a relative in Jagalpur and studied at Hadolti. He befriended me because the others kept away from him, as he belonged to a somewhat lower caste and was from a different village. Daily, as I weeded the grass and he passed by the farm on his way to school, I

would ask him whether English was a difficult language. He would say, 'Yes, it is rather difficult. But why are you asking when you don't come to school?' Then he would add: 'Maths and English are a little tough, and the Science teacher is very nasty.' I would think, Hadolti is not far off, and my brother-in-law, instead of asking me to sit in a shop, should send me to school. But how would he, when he was only interested in hoarding money? He had no concern for others. He had got above himself, and had no eyes to see those left below. I felt that though my sister and brother-in-law at Chera were much poorer, they were a thousand times better than him. I was bitterly sorry that I had come to Jagalpur. I wanted to run away. But how could I go back to Chera? I had come away though they had told me again and again not to. I was trapped. I didn't have the face to run away. Whatever I did would be wrong. It was either the frying pan or the fire. And I would say to myself, this too shall pass.

*Translated by R. Raj Rao*  
*An extract from Athavaninche Pakshi*

## Glossary

*aarati* the waving of a lamp  
*abhishek* the sprinkling of holy water on the deity  
*Ashvaghosha* a great Buddhist poet and philosopher  
*bania* grocer  
*barbaat* a crudely prepared Dalit dish with more gravy and less meat  
*bhakri* coarse, unleavened bread  
*bhamba* rattle  
*bharud* pithy religious discourse  
*bibba* a marking nut; the juice of this nut makes an indelible stain; it is used by washermen to put laundry marks on clothes.  
*bidi* crude leaf-cigarette  
*Chamar* an untouchable caste  
*chivda* spiced puffed rice  
*chulha* hearth  
*darshan* opportunity to see and be in the presence of a holy or venerated person or idol  
*Dhamma* the right path as shown by the Buddha  
*Ghats* a mountain-pass in western Maharashtra  
*gram sevak* village worker  
*Harijan* Mahatma Gandhi's name for untouchables  
*jal tarang* a musical instrument consisting of small bowls of water, struck to produce a note  
*jalebi* a kind of sweetmeat  
*Jarasandha* a mighty king, whose body, when torn in half, would join again. To kill him, Bheema tore him apart and threw the two halves of his body in opposite directions, so that they would not join again.  
*jat panchayat* caste council  
*johar* salutation from a Mahar to someone of a high caste  
*kacheri* office  
*kaku* aunt  
*kalagi-tura* a form of folk theatre

*Kaliyug* in Hindu mythology, the fourth age of the world, known for its degeneracy; the present age  
*Karna* a character in the Mahabharata; the elder, illegitimate brother of the five Pandavas, the heroes  
*kheema* mincemeat  
*Kunti* mother of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata. Also the unwed mother of Karna  
*ladoo* a kind of sweetmeat  
*Mahar* an 'untouchable' community  
*maidan* open grounds  
*malpua* a kind of sweet pancake  
*mama* maternal uncle  
*mamlatdar* district magistrate  
*neem* margosa  
*pallav* the end of the sari  
*panda* priest  
*pandal* cloth tent or marquee temporarily put up for functions  
*patil* the village chief  
*Ramoshis* a lower caste  
*rangoli* traditional decorative pattern made on floor with white, and often, coloured powders  
*sarpanch* head of village panchayat or 'council of five elders'  
*Satyakam Jabali* literally — 'desirer of the truth'; the son of a slave woman who, when asked his descent by the sage Jabal, answered truthfully — that he had no clan. The sage, impressed, gave him the name Satyakam and the use of his own name.  
*Shambhuka* a tribal youth slain by Rama for having learnt the Vedas  
*shastras* Hindu scriptures  
*shira* sweet made from semolina  
*Shuparnakha* sister of Ravana, the demon-king of Lanka  
*Sita* wife of the god-king Rama, abducted by the demon-king Ravana and later rescued. Rama disowned her as her purity was doubted by his subjects; she sought shelter in the Dandaka forest  
*talati* the village accountant  
*taluka* sub-division of a district  
*taava* griddle  
*thali* metal plate  
*tulsi vrindavan* small raised square earthen construction containing earth in which the basil plant is grown in the courtyards of Hindu homes. The plant is considered sacred and orthodox