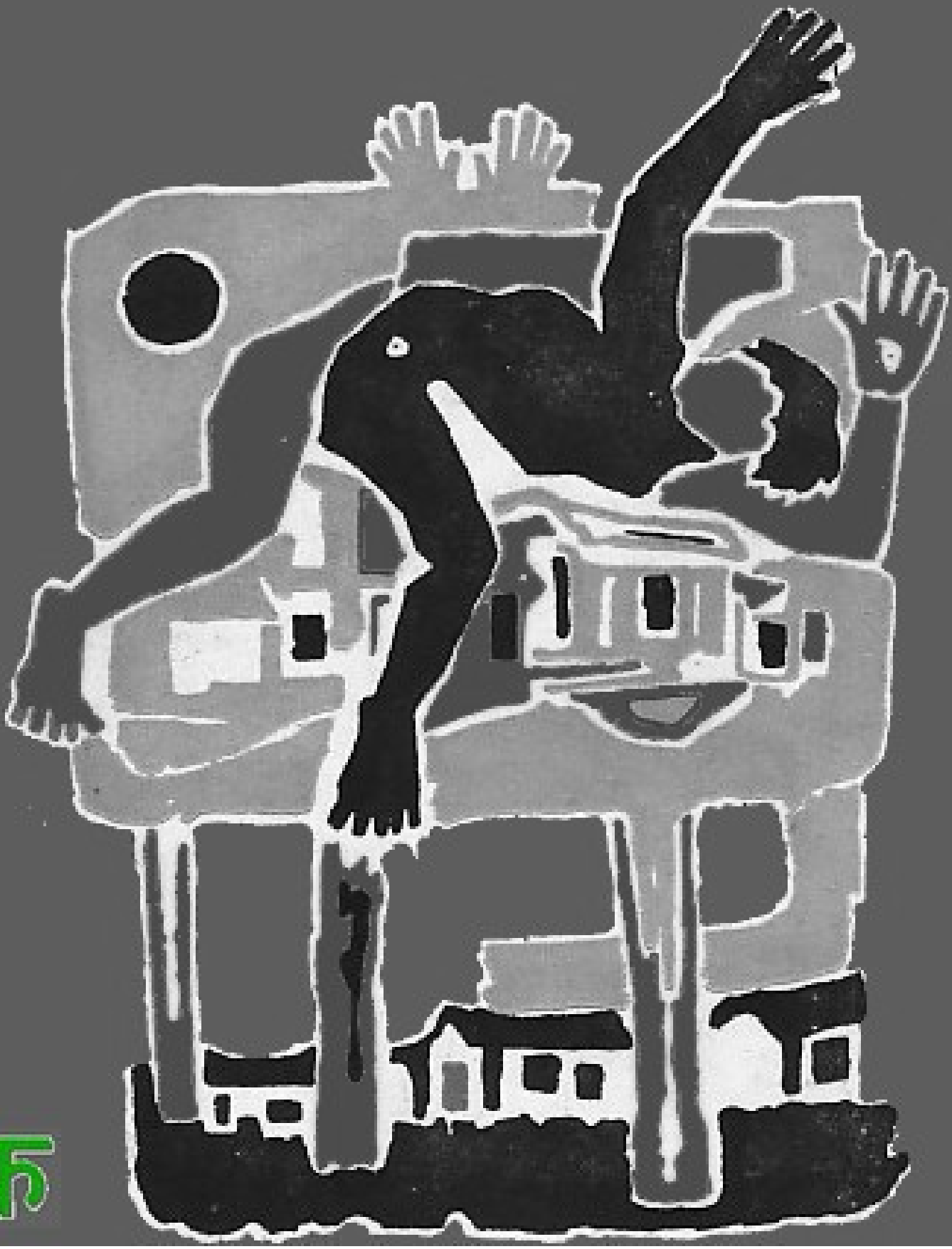
Lives Without Meaning

Om Prakash Deepak



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Kalpana Publications, Delhi, India

Lives Without Meaning
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I

He paused for a minute on coming close to Rajendra Nagar. For a moment he felt like going to Maqbool's to look for him. He was feeling very hungry. If only he could find Maqbool, food would be no problem. Nor would he have to sleep out in the cold. But there was no guarantee he would find Maqbool. And even if he did, Maqbool would probably have some others from his gang with him. He had no wish to meet anyone else. He didn't like any of them except for Maqbool. Maqbool was as big a crook as any but a good person at heart. At the time of his first arrest, a bond had formed between the two in jail and Maqbool had come to regard himself as his guardian. When he was broke, Maqbool fed him, offered him his room to sleep in, chided anyone who harassed him. So many years on, the bond remained the same. Had neither weakened nor grown stronger.

No matter what, he'd have to look for Maqbool tomorrow. But tonight he wanted to be alone, even though he was hungry and the long walk from the Tihar jail had exhausted him. He was also feeling cold. It had been summer when he was arrested and so he had come out in the cotton *kurta-pyjama* deposited in jail at the time of his arrest. However, the cold did not bother him too much. His bones had become accustomed to withstanding the harshness of weather. Although he was no longer as sturdy, he could brave at least one night. He was also not as bothered about his old coat lying in Maqbool's room as about the fact that he hadn't eaten and didn't have a single paisa in his pocket. He had had some change on him at the time of arrest but had been frisked at once on reaching the police station. Things deposited in jail are returned on release but anything taken out at the police station becomes the property of the police-station. He was aware that at the end of his term, a constable would forge his signature, that too in Urdu (whereas he had no knowledge of the language) and the money would be utilized for procuring a cup of tea. If he went now to the police-station to get the money back, he would be lucky if he escaped only with a lashing. He was more likely to end up in jail again.

That made it absolutely necessary that he look for Maqbool tomorrow. Jail releases are customarily made before the evening meal. He had just returned to the barrack at five after work at the factory when he was summoned. After handing in jail clothes, utensils and bedding, he had sat a long time in a queue of those to be released … before they had begun taking their thumb impressions in the register. When the jail window opened to let them out in a double file, it had already grown dark. He hadn't known any of the inmates released that evening. Nor was he in a mood to be social and had set off quietly. The old jail at Delhi Gate had been better in the sense that one didn't have to walk too long a distance. The area may have fallen on the outskirts of the city at some point but now it was in its centre. A hospital was coming up over there, a medical college. Whenever he passed that way his eyes

unconsciously looked for familiar spots, but nothing was recognizable. Just the walk from Tihar jail to city wore him out completely.

He felt a little thirsty (actually hungry). Folding the palms into a cup he drank from the tap on the roadside but couldn't take in more than three or four gulps. The water was icy cold and he began to shiver the moment the water went in. However, the exhaustion lifted from his body for some time and his steps quickened. He walked fast for a fair distance, began to feel tired again, yet the chill didn't leave him. It was perhaps past eight and the shops had closed quite some time back. The night was dark, the moon not yet out, the air chilly and now also turning a little damp. It was going to be foggy tonight. He turned left from the round crossing. This was his old familiar haunt. He hadn't really given it a thought, only his feet unknown to him, had carried him here.

This side of the ridge was still quite deserted. There was no traffic except for a taxi or scooter passing at intervals. This too would stop after sometime. A rock lay on the side of the road and beyond that rock, another rock - square and flat. If painted white, it would give the appearance of a cemented grave. And then it could be turned into the tomb of a Muslim saint to attract offerings. But he made such plans only in jest. The problem with him was that he could indulge in only occasional, small time fraud, could tell only an occasional lie. Couldn't lie on a regular basis, couldn't indulge in big time fraud on a regular basis.

The stone lay behind a big rock, only a corner of it visible. This was good to sleep on. It had a smooth surface and was longer and wider than the platform inside the barrack in the jail. He often came here to sleep when out in the summer. At times in winter also but then he had worn his coat and had something to cover himself with.

When he sat down on the stone, the stone felt very cold. At least the walk is over. He tried to comfort himself. He was very tired. Also breathless, from the long walk. Now it is a matter of spending one night, he thought. There was silence all over and it was nearly dark. The street lights too were spaced at long intervals. He stretched his legs out on the stone, then rested his back and then also the head. The stone was cold like a slab of ice. Its touch pierced through at once like a sharp instrument. Then the sting began to subside gradually.

And then, a slight breeze began to stir. The brush of the very first gust of wind made him shudder. Turning to a side and doubling up his legs, he brought his knees up to touch his chest. Tonight would be a difficult night. Only God could save him if the breeze didn't stop. There was no way he would be able to sleep.

A voice came wafting in from afar. At first he couldn't make out what it said but then suddenly with a chilling whiff of air, the words became clear – 'Brothers, who sleep on the footpath, you have been provided night shelters by the Municipal corporation. You can also get a rug and a blanket over there. Free of charge. Take advantage of the night shelters. You risk your lives by sleeping in the open.' – He had heard this earlier

also. In Maqbool's room. And once while he lay on this stone. Maqbool had been in jail those days. And there had actually been no urgency in him to go to the night shelter. He had had a coat on and had also got a thick cotton sheet. In any case the thought of going to the night shelter had never really occurred to him. To go like a beggar and ask some person – 'Sir, please give a rug and a blanket to me also.' – No, the idea had never appealed to him. Moreover he was so tired at the moment that there was no question of walking to Tibbia College. – Go that far and turn into a beggar? This stone will do very well.

A slight gust of wind blew every now and then and made him shiver. It was as if his face was being pricked by needles. His fingers had grown numb. To bring down the pain in his fingers he blew on his hands and began to rub his palms. This gave him some relief but the steam from his mouth settled on his fingers and with the next gust of wind the pain became sharper. The stone under him had become colder still.

The other day, Mustafa was telling him about the time he was caught stealing truck tyres. The police, in a bid to finding clues to other thefts, had forced him to lie on a slab of ice. 'That stupid cripple! He'd had one too many the previous night and just wouldn't get up. Only I know how I made him sit on the rickshaw. But once I did, I didn't stop pulling. And the bastard slept on the way also. Once there, his hands refused to move. Had the work been over by three I would have cleared off. But he took so much time taking the wheel off that it was time for the morning petrol. And then he slipped away from there. I loaded the wheels he had undone on to the rickshaw and was just making a turn when the patrol arrived.'

'And those rascals gave me a solid drubbing. Taking me on a month's remand from the court they thrashed me without missing a day to make me sing. And then one day they took off my clothes and made me lie on ice. As it was, my body was in a sorry state from the regular flogging. I almost died. They didn't allow me to bathe or wash my face. I had to clear my bowels inside the room and the stink was head splitting. They flogged me morning and evening and were asking the court for remand for fifteen more days. However, my earnest appeal to the Sahib, that they were beating me blue and black although I was not guilty and were only holding me on suspicion, beating me to extract a confession made some impact. Lucky that the judge was a gentleman. He took pity and sent me to jail.'

At times he wondered how Mustafa reacted when flogged or forced to lie on ice. Did he scream and shout? That Mustafa could scream and shout under any circumstance was beyond him. Mustafa may be short but was muscular and well-built. His face had hardened of late. It wasn't so earlier. But his eyes were still as innocent as a child's. Because he was good at heart. Mustafa feared none. He had never seen fear on Mustafa's face. He had narrated the incident about ice as though this trouble too, had come like the many other troubles in life and had now blown over.

He himself was easily scared. Just listening to this incident from Mustafa had scared him stiff. How must he have felt when forced to lie on ice! He recalled once in childhood, Bappa ... his father had asked him to bring ice – somebody had perhaps come visiting – and carrying the ice from the shop to his house had made his palms smart as if they were being pricked by so many pins. He had been thoroughly miserable, even though the ice had been wrapped in paper. Mustafa had said it wasn't the touch of ice that was painful because the skin, after a while, became numb. It pained when he was made to move because the movement kept the skin from going numb. Listening to all this, a deep fear had taken root in his heart, his fists clenched in, his body stiffened.

He felt scared even otherwise and often came to hear such tales in jail. The yellow turbaned *numbardaar*...the headman called Nathu often came to sit by and told stories. He had been the only one in the entire jail with a yellow turban. A crook of the first order, the headman used to play up to officers. The shrewd old timer could perhaps discern fear on his face and deliberately narrated to him his stories. What was peculiar was that despite his fear, he waited, in a way, for Nathu to come, who said that all the jail-officials were faint-hearted. Only the former Superintendent had been a real toughie (he had awarded the yellow turban to Nathu), an officer of superlative degree... he straightened out the most dreaded dacoits in no time.

And when Nathu went on to describe the methods adopted to 'straighten out in no time', he began to feel faint, as if all that was going to happen to him. He remained lost in thought for a long time even after Nathu had left, experiencing again all that he had heard and got very, very perturbed indeed. Tossing this way and that, he kept wishing for sleep but sleep eluded him despite the exhaustion.

There was one story Nathu specially enjoyed narrating. A political prisoner had gone on a hunger strike. Every morning and evening, eight men sat astride him, held his head back, pinned his arms and legs and milk was poured down a pipe that passed through his nose. Handcuffed and fettered, he was locked in a solitary cell. A man sitting outside pulled at the chain every now and then so he couldn't sleep. This went on for three days and three nights. On the fourth day, Nathu said, the hunger-striker fell down at the feet of superintendent.

The breeze had stopped. The shivering too, stopped gradually. But the stone had turned even colder. Sleeping in one position with folded arms and legs, his whole body became stiff and all his joints began to ache. But a fear had overtaken his mind. He didn't have the nerve to stretch out his legs for then the coldness of the stone would hit him all over again. There was another fear too. What if a police patrol came this way, threw torch light in his direction and he was seen? He shrank farther in.

In jail, he'd have been long asleep by now. Two blankets didn't take away the cold but over a hundred inmates slept in the barrack. When cold at night, they unconsciously huddled together and found themselves sleeping in groups of five or six in the morning. He would

get a blanket in the police lock up as well, but it was better to stay away from their clutches for as long as possible.

Whenever a policeman lay a hand on his arm, 'hey you …' he, paled with fear, his innards began contracting and he felt he would puke. All the time he stayed in the police lock-up, he was too terrified to speak. Very often he received extra blows for not answering properly at once. There was no one to give him food in the lock-up, but he felt like puking even when he smoked tobacco rolled in leaf - a beedi. (He didn't have with him even a god-damned beedi. It would have provided relief from the cold). He kept recalling all the stories about police-beatings. Did the police – suspect him of a serious crime? What if they framed him in something big and started beating him to force an admission?

When he was put on a van to be transported to jail, he used to heave a sigh of relief. But no sooner did one fear subside, another emerged. They would reach the jail now … now … now. How nice it would be if the van toppled over, he thought. If all the guards and the driver died or were injured. If the doors jerked open with the impact and everyone was freed. And then, who would know where they had disappeared? But there never was an accident. The van reached the jail safe and in one piece.

Despite having served so many terms, his blood still ran cold when the van stopped outside the jail. He was always the last to get down. As they stood outside in a line and the window opened with a loud clank he kept hoping for some kind of magic to happen that would take in the entire file along with the policemen and close the window leaving him out. And then he, eluding everyone's eyes, would make good his escape. When suddenly he received a smack on his neck, 'You, … will you move now or … rascal …'

The fog had thickened in the short span. The place suddenly seemed lit with a faint glow in which he could see the stone as well as a swirl of the fog. Turning his neck he saw the moon, rising from behind a cluster of trees. The moon wasn't visible, only the fog over there appeared pale.

He changed sides and straightened his legs. The touch of the stone felt like daggers and batons striking from all directions. A momentary shudder ran though his body but he began to stare without blinking at the spot where the fog appeared pale. His eyes smarted and watered and yet he continued to stare. He had travelled back in time. In fact, whenever he watched the moon rising from behind this cluster lying here at this stone, he travelled back. It seemed to him that sitting at his window, he was watching the municipality lamp standing near the margosa - the neem tree.

II

The city those days ended just a little beyond their compound. However, the compound had been quite old even then. The road was considered wide in those days – now, of course, it had become difficult to walk through it. A lane, looking like the many other lanes in the city, had branched out between two shops but didn't lead anywhere. Meandering here and there, it reached the same spot again. The space left out by the lane in its meanderings was taken up by toy-like houses built in rows of two. Roughly tiled or thatched roofs appeared like the spine of a sick mongrel ... floors of beaten earth ... the walls however, were plastered with cement in places.

And the winding lane was like a rope, binding in its fold an entire world. Not just the houses but also those who lived in them. And it was an entire world – a '*shivala*' - a Shiva temple, a water-well, a neem tree. A shop that sold everything – flour, pulses, rice, oil, candy, bottles of sweet and sour water (without ice) – everything of everyday need, that is. They were a family of two brothers but the shop was said to be owned by one of the two, perhaps the elder one, called Massur Maharaj, whose name may well have been Masmiadin. The entire compound had three poles in it put there by the municipality, over which burned lamps.

His house, which consisted of two rooms built one after the other, was close to the neem. Also close to the neem was one of the poles. A branch of the neem on that side dropped low. So low, that people, without climbing up or using a bamboo, plucked out neem twigs to be used as tooth brush just by pulling it down by hand. When the lamp was lit in the evening, he sat opening the window in the front room. The light, filtering down the neem leaves in the dark nights, spread out on the walls to form strange shapes. The slightest of breeze made these shapes dance, now making, now breaking them. But he never feared this sport of the dim lamp light. What he feared was the dark.

During summer, he generally slept before it was dark and even if he didn't bappa usually returned home by then. And he feared nothing when with bappa. However, darkness descended early in winter. And then he was both cold and scared. Mai - his mother - cooked rotis. Lighting the earthen stove in the back room, she covered the baby, if asleep, with a patched covering or held him in her lap if he was awake. He didn't really mind it but mai didn't pay him any attention when the baby was there. He had after all grown quite big. He didn't remember the number of siblings born after him. Perhaps one was born every year but no one survived except for him. What was really upsetting was that when a new baby was to be born, mai's tummy bloated up and she was not able to cope with the work and cooked the meals with great difficulty. Often she had fights with bappa at night. However, he did get a reprieve from taking his baths. In winter, if mai was keeping all right, she led him to the well every second or third day and scrubbing with a locally made soap, gave him his bath. He also received a blow or two if

he gave any trouble and often returned shivering with cold or whimpering from the blow.

And then when it was time for the child to be born, women from neighbourhood collected in the house and he was banished. At times mai could be heard groaning inside. He had heard neighbours say at times how very brave a woman Ghaseeta's mai was, other women just didn't stop screaming on such occasions.

Even he remembered Bisnath's wife. Bisnath, much older to him, had a light moustache and beard. He had gone all dressed to his in-laws' house for *gauna* - to bring his wife home after the prescribed post marriage interval - but the thick dark kohl on his dark face made him look more like a cat. His wife was very young, not over thirteen or fourteen. Dressed in red, she went about with a jingle of her jewellery. Soon, her belly too bloated up. Her outings stopped. She was seen only when she came out running and sat down to throw up. He found it disgusting and turning his face, moved away from there.

It was summer when one morning, Bisanth's wife began to scream. The children in the lane gathered in a group and the women too arrived at Bisnath's house. He realized when he saw the old *chamaarin* - the woman of leather workers' caste who acted as a midwife - that Bisnath's wife was going to deliver her baby. The same old woman had come to his house, each time mai was to have a baby. Once, Bisnath's wife came out screaming but Bisnath's mai caught hold of her and pulled her back in the house.

He was standing there, watching dumbly, when his mai appeared from behind him. He did not protest when his mai caught and took him home. Bappa had already left for work by then. Giving him his roti mai left, securing the door on the outside. He had felt bad and forced the roti down with difficulty. Later he kept turning everything in the house this way and that for a long time. Then he came and put his ear against the door but could hear nothing. He could have opened the window and jumped out but, for some reason, didn't feel like opening the window. In the end he took out his box filled with kernels and tamarind seeds, won by him in a game. Pouring them out over the floor he began to make piles of five – he could count only up to five.

When mai returned she had Massur Maharaj's wife and sister-in-law in tow. (He could never tell which of the two was the wife, which the sister-in-law). The three were sighing deeply and saying 'Oh God!' He didn't remember now what each said but certain portions of the conversation became fixed in his mind. 'Only God can help a woman on such a time. Poor thing. Even God turned away from her.' 'God's will. He gave her so much pain at such a tender age and also took her life.'

From this he knew Bisnath's wife had died. After sometime mai went to take her bath. And he sat there with his kernels and seeds spread out before him. Why had Bisnath's wife died, how had she died – he didn't understand for a very long time. Mai gave birth every year. It's a different thing that those days were extremely difficult. She lay confined

in the room for twelve days. He wasn't allowed in the room. Joining bricks in the front room and lighting it with fire, bappa used to cook a meal of roti and daal.

And each time he heard from the visiting women neighbours, 'this time too Ghaseeta's mother didn't get milk in her breasts..' Mai called sometimes an exorcist, sometimes a Muslim saint for a magic cure. She sent for goat milk at times and at times for milk of a special cow. Also baby tonics, but what happened each time was that the baby became enlarged, he whimpered for a few days and then one day, he died. Mai cried her heart out and bappa, wrapping the child in a cloth took one or two of the neighbours with him. On the day, he was fed by a neighbour and from the next day life returned to its old routine.

But even then, he did not sit inside with mai. The room filled with smoke when she lit the stove. In fact the entire lane became smoky in the evening when each house had a stove burning in it. Many of the people made grates out of tin canisters, lit them with coals and put them outside for the smoke to thin out. The smoke made the darkness in the lane darker still, out of which danced flames from the grates dotting the lane. This hour was specially scary to him.

He could hear mai cook inside in the light of a small tin lamp but that didn't take away his fear. Watching mai work at the stove in the smoke filled room or even sitting inside did not take away his fear. The light from the small lamp was very dim and just watching the smoke from the stove rustle up and spread in the room was frightening to him. When mai blew hard and the firewood went up in flames, it startled him. It seemed to him that the sooty tiles had caught fire. Later, when the flames came down slowly to give way to smoke, he felt stifled. He got up then and went to sit at the window.

Sitting at the window too, he felt very frightened till the time bappa came home or the municipality lamp was lit. But in winters, bappa generally returned home after the lamp was lit. Often the municipal worker was seen coming with a basket on the head and a ladder on shoulder as soon as it was dark or, at times, a little later. He could recognize the worker from a distance because of the ladder and the lamp burning in the basket. If he came late or didn't come at all (which was rare) he was totally overtaken by his fear. Despite the *bundee* – the lined vest - he wore and the patched covering called *kathari* that he pulled over himself, he sat there shivering with cold, benumbed with fear. He watched every man who entered the lane to see if it was his father, but when the man passed him by the fear in his heart increased further.

He recognized bappa only when he turned towards the house. And then he leaped up to undo the chain, his fear disappearing completely the moment he saw bappa. Bappa came in, took off his shoes, sat on the cot while he returned to sit at the window. In the dark he had barely a vague idea of where bappa was sitting but he could hear bappa breathe and felt no fear. When drowsy, he lay down on the sack under the window, or, at times cuddled up at the window to sleep. When roti was cooked, mai

came to wake him up. At times he didn't remember the next day whether he had eaten the previous night or not.

But usually the municipality-worker with the lamp arrived regularly and punctually. Resting his ladder against the pole, he put his basket down, climbed up, took the lamp off, filled it with oil from the box, cleaned the glass and the lamp with a duster and putting the lamp back on the pole, lit it. He was specially taken up by two of the worker's actions. One, when he rubbed the lamp clean, it shone in the light of the lamp burning in the basket. And then, when he took out the wick that had one end dipped in the box and brought it near the lamp in the basket it lit up at once. Lighting the lamp on the post, the worker dipped the wick in the box again and it puttered off. He liked both, the way the wick lit up and the way it puttered off. He always wondered why, when he put the burning wick back in the box, didn't the oil in the box burn up. He thought it had something to do with the worker's deftness and if he missed once the oil would surely go up in flames and if the box caught fire the whole basket would burn down. But it never happened.

In a while, the flame of the lamp found its measure and steadied down. The shadow of the lamp spread out in a strange shape under the post, lighting at the same time a large area of the lane. The light filtering down the neem leaves made a lattice on the ground that danced with the lightest of breeze. Sitting at the window he gazed at the flame of the lamp till his eyes began to smart and water but the fear in his heart was driven away. And when bappa returned he began to drowse, listening to his breathing.

In those days he thought he too would become a lamp lighter when he grew up. Going from lane to lane with a basket on his head and a ladder over his shoulder, he would rub each and every lamp clean and light it up. Otherwise too, he liked the lamp lighter. He had a moustache somewhat like bappa's, didn't speak to anyone on his daily rounds except for a greeting with '*Ram Ram'*. But the lamp lighting stopped before he could grow up. The lane was electrified.

As one entered the lane from the road, the first lamp post stood near the *Shivala*. It was the first to go when the electrification started. In its place came a tall pole filled with wires and a blazing bulb. Now the municipal worker had only two lamps to light. After some more days the other lamps too were replaced by electric bulbs, and the lamp lighter stopped coming. No one came to light the electric bulbs or to clean them. The bulbs lit up on their own when it was evening. At times it remained lit even during day time. It's light also, was very bright. If the doors and windows were left open the front room got lit up despite the 'neem' and everything in it became clearly visible. In fact, the back room did not get so well lit up with the small tin lamp.

The neem branch that dropped low came in the way and so, was felled. At first, people took away twigs. Soon they had a stock of tooth-brushes for months. The dry shoots were used as fire wood. The pandit, who performed religious rites at the *Shivala,* paid labourers and had the main branch, that lay severed, chopped and moved to his rooms. But it

was no longer easy to pluck twigs. People had either to use a pole or climb up.

But now the bulb gave out so much light, he did not feel afraid the way he had used to. Usually the bulb lit up with the dusk. He had also grown up a bit. However, there were times when the electricity supply failed and the entire lane was plunged into darkness. But the supply was quickly restored. When the bulb fused, it stayed fused for days. At times the bulb didn't work for weeks. And if it happened to be winter and the nights dark, he felt very scared. And then, he sat inside with mai till the time bappa returned, because now, there was no hope that the municipal worker would come and light the lamp. He didn't feel so scared now, sitting inside with mai. Even now, in the pitch dark outside, he felt something was smothering him from all four sides, and that he could not escape. In bappa's presence however, he was not afraid, no matter how dark it was. He was in mortal fear of bappa and never had the nerve to ask him questions. If bappa called him and sounded miffed he became speechless with fear. But when bappa was there he never feared anything and bappa was hardly ever miffed with him. He didn't recollect ever having been beaten by bappa in his childhood. Mai used to give him a smack or two every now and then. Once bappa had beaten him blue and black, but that was much later when he had grown quite big.

III

When the lane was electrified the circle of his life suddenly became wider. A little beyond the *Shivala* was the well, and a little beyond the well, the lane turned to the right. A little beyond the turn stood the neem tree. Till then, whenever he had gone to bathe at the well, it was only with mai. The occasion to go to *Shivala* came only rarely and then too only with mai. He usually played near and around the neem tree. Partly because a few homes near the *Shivala* belonged to *kahaars,* who were water-carriers, palanquin bearers and washed dishes, and *Rajgeers,* who were skilled masons, and a few grown up boys over there bullied and frightened the younger children, snatched their play things and even their money if they got a chance, robbed them of their share of eatables and to keep their commanding positions were constantly beating them. They were divided in groups and kept fighting amongst themselves and anyone not belonging to their groups was beaten jointly by all.

But when the pole near the *Shivala* was fitted with bulb, the children from the compound collected there. So did the grown-ups, but they went their separate ways after a short discussion on the advantages of electrification. The children, however, kept dancing for a long time. When something of the grown-ups' discussion came to their ears, they too began to wonder how, after all, did the bulb light up? Most of the children stood around Kisana because it was he, who had informed with full authority that electricity was a very dangerous thing. If touched with a naked wire even an elephant dies writhing in pain, then what chance would a man have? Things went a little awry when someone asked if the *rakshas* or the demons too were killed with electricity? When Kisana said they did, a debate ensued on whether or not Lord Ram had slain the demon king Ravana with an electric arrow? Rajee had witnessed the slaying of Ravana in the Ramlila, wherein the life of Lord Ram was enacted. She testified in Kisana's favour saying how Lord Ram's arrow had caused Ravana's body to go up in flames. But Ganesh had heard a story from a Pandit at his grandfather's house that Ravana died only when hit by an arrow in the navel. Ganesh was the same age as Kisana. He countered Kisana saying demons gobbled up electricity. Also threw out electricity. The debate halted at this point when Nanku threw a poser, 'but how does a bulb light up?' Kisana threw one glance at Ganesh to see if he would say something. But Ganesh had nothing to say. Then Kisana spoke with some pride that the English people knew of such a science that, whenever there was lightening in sky, enabled them to capture and trap it. That was the reason why the electric wires were covered with rubber – to stop electricity from escaping. Then the English carried it in the wire and lit up whichever place they wanted to.

There was silence at this for some time. The English people and their science was outside the purview of everyone. What everyone knew was that the English were absolutely white, didn't believe in their gods and

were the government. Kisana had once seen a black platoon going on road. There were road blocks and people had stood on side-walks. A few English sahibs too had passed at the time in their motor-cars. Kisana had only seen red faces at the window. But Rajee said when she had gone to watch the 'Ramlila', she had seen a 'sahib' in khaki uniform riding a horse.

Billo too, was there that day. Usually, she stayed inside the rooms, and was seen only at times, washing dishes. She was also the most stupid, always staring wide-eyed at everything. That day when children collected, she too, stood at one side. The children were making a din but she stood on a side, staring with her eyes wide open. And then the children began to play. Since there was not enough space to play 'hide and seek' or 'high and low', they formed a circle to play the game of '*korra jamal sai*'. Ganesh took off his shirt and twisted it in to *korra* – a whip, and so took the first turn. There were quite a few children and when they formed a circle, Billo too became a part of it. She too, sat in the circle, but the instant the *shivalewali* called – 'Basantia! Where the hell are you?' Billo got up without a word. Then came the sound of her loud howls but the children didn't stop playing. Billo cried loudly when she was beaten by her mother. It was only then that one heard her voice. But only for that long. She stopped crying the moment her mother's hands stopped.
All the boys in the lane called her Billo - the cat. Goodness knows how and when she came to be known by this name. It was perhaps because she was forever staring quietly with wide eyes. Sometimes, when she sat outside her room washing dishes, her eyes followed anyone, even children, who passed by till he or she went out of her vision. As if each was a wonder to her. But Billo's mother, the '*Shivalewali*' always called her 'Basanti' or 'Basantia' if she was angry. No other child in their lane was called by his or her proper name by their parents. One was Pillu, one was Hollar, another Mangu, Khacheru or Takaiya. Perhaps some of them had only these names, or had their names distorted. But if Takaiya was actually Tekchand, no one in the lane, except for his parents knew of it, perhaps not even he himself and definitely not the boys his own age. He himself was called Ghaseeta, his mother Ghaseeta's mai, his father Ghaseeta's bappa. But when caught the first time and asked his name in the police station, he gave his name as 'Dharamdas', son of Chhedilal, resident of *Hata Saith Ramdas* - For some reason both the names, his own and bappa's, which he had almost forgotten – surfaced at that time. But this happened much later.

In any case hardly anyone in the lane knew another's name. Even '*Shivalewali*' was called that because she lived in the small tenement next to the '*Shivala*'. What appeared a little strange to him at times was that nobody ever called her over, nor had he ever seen her visiting anyone. Even at his own place, when mai gave birth to a son (not if she had a daughter) and came out on the twelfth day of delivery, women of the neighbourhood collected at night to sing songs and the next day, mai sent sweet prepared with jaggery and sugar to everyone's house but not to *Shivalewali*. He had never seen *Shivalewali* go any other place except to the well and the latrines built by the municipality next to the trash bin, where a little beyond the neem tree, the lane turned back (it took

many more turns after that). When sometimes, Billo went to Masur Maharaj's shop to make a purchase (the shop was little to one side of the neem tree) she stopped at times on her way back if she saw boys playing under the neem tree. But did not speak. Standing at a little distance she only stared with wide eyes. If a boy said something, or even otherwise, she scampered away after a minute or two.

He had often overheard mai and neighbours call *Shivalewali* a tart, a whore, a hooker, while talking amongst themselves. And that she was a sinner even though she lived in a temple and the entire lane had to suffer the evil outcome of her sins. Once, when mai gave birth to a son and he died of a swollen stomach, somehow in the ensuing wailing and howling, someone mentioned *Shivalewali* and the women sitting there turned upon her saying that it was because of her sins that no child in the lane survived. There was no truth in this because Bhagirath's wife, just like mai, gave birth every year and even though all of them were scrawny, none had died. Five of Bhagirath's children were younger to him and all of them went about stark naked or clad in just a loin cloth, each bone on their body jutting out, drool and snot coating their mouths. Nevertheless, everyone was always angry with the Shivalewali.

Even though *Shivala* came much before the neem tree and the lane took a turn in between, the area was so closely confined that any sound spread and echoed within the compound. Especially at night, a sound made anywhere in the lane, a fight or a scuffle in any of the households could be heard all over. And howls and yells were heard almost every evening in at least one of the households. More often than not, there were simultaneous fights in many dwellings. But this had been an everyday occurrence and no one paid any heed to it.

However the noise at *Shivalewali*'s house was of a different kind. For one, it often came late at night when all others had gone to sleep and there was silence in the compound. And then, there were no fights at her house, only noise. When at times, the noise became too loud and woke up bappa he often let out a barrage of invectives directed at *Shivalewali*. Once or twice he went to the extent of saying, 'It's all because of that ruffian, Bachan Singh: he has given the hustler so much leeway, otherwise the bitch can't live here even for a day. He acts up only because he is the *Saith*'s darling.'

Bachan Singh was a goon of Saith Ramdas. He had never seen the Saith, had only heard that he was a big man and owned hundreds of houses. His grandfather had bought this plot of land enclosed by the lane and had got these tenements constructed. The compound was called Hata Ramdas after his name.

A devout man, he had the *Shivala* and the well constructed with his own money for the use of the residents of the compound. The government too held him in high regard. That's the reason the municipality had tin latrines put up in the compound.

The beginning of each month saw the Munim - the Saith's accountant - arrive at the compound to collect rent. He was accompanied by three or

four goons. Of all these, he remembered the face of only Bachan Singh because even while laughing, he appeared frightening. Goodness knows what he applied on his moustache that made them stand pointedly on either side like two large needles. His eyes were always blood-shot. When the Munim went round house to house collecting rent, the goons sat on the well and putting down their batons, played cards or got high on marijuana.

If ever, the Munim had a problem in collection of rent, Bachan Singh picking up his baton, went to that side and whichever side he went to had it coming. The moment the defaulter came out, Bachan Singh pulled his hair, knocked him down and sticking the end of his baton into his back gave a few jolts, shouted obscenities involving the man's mother and sisters and in the end left with the threat that in case he was compelled to return he'd do what not to his wife, sister and daughter! It was very rarely that Bachan Singh had to get up and go and he didn't remember him ever having to go a second time. None of the Saith's rent ever remained unpaid.

Those goons were always sprawled at the well during pay-up time but Bachan Singh visited often, even otherwise. If it was a little early in the evening, he sat down pulling up a cot outside the *Shivala*. Taking off his clothes, he wrapped a length of cloth, a tehmad - which he pulled out of his bag - round him and then, sitting at the well and putting his finger down his throat, he hawked up loudly and washed his hands and face. Shivalewali was not on talking terms with anyone in the lane, but for Bachan Singh, she took out a cot, served meals and he too talked to her laughing in a strange manner. He was frightened not only of Bachan Singh but the *Shivaliwali* too, scared him a little. He understood neither what bappa nor what mai said about her but somehow had to come to believe firmly that Bachan Singh was an evil man, that *Shivaliwali* was an evil woman. He had seen once or twice that when Bachan Singh talked to *Shivalewali*, sitting on the cot, Billo stood close by, staring with wide eyes and had wondered how come she was not scared of Bachan Singh.

The days were extremely cold when one night, wrapped in a *kathari*, he woke up due to the extreme cold ... or perhaps also due to some commotion. For there was still some noise when he woke up. He thought of getting up and going to bappa or mai but at the same time didn't feel like getting out of the covers. Suddenly the noise grew sharper and it sounded as if *Shivalewali* was screaming abuses in a shrill voice. In between, one could hear some other strange sounds as well. He was beginning to feel very scared when suddenly bappa had spoken from his bed, 'who knows what crooks the bitch calls over, it is difficult now for straight people to live here'. Bappa is awake. He had become a little reassured with the knowledge. Suddenly a scream rose piercing the noise and then, a little later came a thud – as if a rope pulling up a pitcher full of water had snapped and the pitcher had gone crashing down to the water in the well. He saw bappa rise and sit up. For some time now there had been sounds like an animal being butchered. And then, all at once, there was silence. But sounds from a while ago seemed to echo in his ears and suddenly he felt terrified.

Getting up quickly he went and cuddled against mai. He found that mai too was awake. She held him to her and slowly began to run her hand over his back.

Both bappa and mai were up and out by the time he woke up in the morning. He found himself alone. The earthen stove in the house had not been lit. When he went out, the lane too was deserted. A little further down he heard muffled voices coming from the direction of the well. The moment he reached the turn, he stopped in his tracks.

Eight to ten policemen stood near the well and the *Shivala*. The police had arrived quite some time back. Two or three men from the lane were trying to fish out the dead body of *Shivalewali* by dropping down a hook. All the men and women from the lane stood here and there in clusters. A havaldar - police sergeant -, baton in hand, stood near the *Shivala* and close to him stood the two money lenders, bappa, Bhagirath and a few other men from the lane. Near the door of Mahaadev's dwelling stood mai along with a few women. He too, went to stand behind the children who stood huddled close to a wall. Listening to snippets of people's talk from here and there he gradually came to piece together the whole incident.

Last night, some three or four goons of the *Saith* had visited *Shivalewali*. All completely sozzled. And one had suddenly happened to catch sight of Billo, asleep in a corner. Leaving *Shivalewali*, they had caught hold of the ten year old Billo. *Shivalewali* had fought hard, had even had a scuffle, but they had beaten her up and turned her out. She had kept screaming abuses and beating at the door with fists and when Billo had cried out, 'Oh mai', from inside, had jumped into the well.

Shivalewali's body, when it was fished out after some attempts, was put in a cart, covered with a cloth and taken to the police-station by the policemen. Billo had already been taken away by the police, whether to the hospital or the police-station, it wasn't known. People said she had been found lying unconscious and soaked in blood and chances of her survival were remote. The police had written down the details in front of witnesses, taken down the statements of the neighbours – the woman was of easy virtue. She was often visited by ruffians. She gave them shelter in her house. We have no idea of the incident last night. Neither do we know who was with her. We heard no sound of any kind.

For many days after the incident the lane lay submerged in a strange fear. There was less of noise, less of fights. Even the children were less quarrelsome. But no one said anything about *Shivalewali*. That night was talked about only as an 'incident'. During these talks he heard that the visitors that night hadn't included Bachan Singh (some said they had) but that other goons had brought over a relative of the *Saith*, some others said that it was this relative who had caught hold of Billo. (He wondered how they had come to know of this, but one of the goons might have mentioned something later.) No one talked of Billo either. He had heard vaguely that she hadn't died and that police had sent her to an orphanage.

Bachan Singh did not come to the lane again. When the Munim came to collect rent he had other goons with him. Bachan Singh always used to sit with others at the well and went anywhere only when the Munim asked him to, and then too, alone. But these goons went round with the Munim from house to house. None of the *Saith*'s rent remained unpaid even now.

IV

The room where *Shivalewali* had lived lay vacant for days. Although no one talked of her, the lock on the door drew everyone's attention. Therefore when his uncle, Dulaare chacha, went to live in that room, he found it very strange. When he had first arrived from their village, Dulaare chacha had stayed with them for many days. But when he found a job bappa approached the Munim to let that room out to Dulaare chacha. He had liked the fact of Dulaare chacha going away from their home. But the fact that he would live in *Shivalewali*'s room had initially appeared weird to him.

It was only when Dulaare chacha arrived that he came to know he had another home too, in village Murware of district Sultanpur. When he asked mai, she snapped at him. Bappa had gone to work at the time and Dulaare chacha too had been away. What mai had said in a slightly sharp tone meant – 'what home and what family? The relatives are the same as the contenders. No one has ever sent a grain from the land at home for them even to sniff.' But one evening, as he sat smoking a beedi with bappa, Dulaare chacha said – 'Ghaseeta won't have any memory of his home village!'

Dulaare chacha was forever smoking beedis and to tease him, often blew smoke at him. The smoke from beedis was so acrid that if he happened to inhale it, it sent him into a fit of coughing. When chacha smoked it became difficult to sit in the room. His teeth too, were a peculiar yellow and black and when he laughed, looked very ugly. His mouth smelt foul, and not just because of the beedis. Even bappa smoked tobacco but the smoke from his *hukka* - a water- tobacco pipe with a coconut husk to hold water - didn't smell so bad. He had also wondered a little at times why the water in the coconut husk didn't go through the pipe to bappa's mouth? Once when bappa had gone out, perhaps to attend to a visitor, he had picked up the *hukka* and put his mouth to its pipe. Nothing happened at first but when he dragged hard, the water and the smoke went straight to his lungs and then he had a very tough time indeed. His eyes began to water, his mouth began to drool from the constant coughing. By then, bappa too had come back. I have had it now, he had thought, with alarm. Bappa looked at him and asked somewhat angrily, "Why? Have you been smoking the *hukka*?" He hadn't answered. He couldn't have, had he wanted to because of the way he was coughing. However bappa had not hit him ... looking once at his plight, he had returned to his *hukka*. Never again did he try to pull at bappa's *hukka*.

Bappa had laughed a little when he heard Dulaare chacha. How would he remember ... he hadn't completed even three! Later, bappa and chacha kept talking about their native village and home and from their talk he began to form a hazy picture in his mind. They had a house in the village where bappa too had lived initially. Now bappa's chacha and his family were living there. He had many uncles and any number of cousins living there. They owned some land in the village which could

no longer sustain them. Dulaare chacha sounded a little unhappy. Bappa too disclosed at the time that he had come to Delhi because of the growing squabbles at home. And then, when he found work in a mill, he also called his brother. When war started and he found a better paid job at the depot, he left the mill. 'It is convenient here. Work regular hours, take back a regular salary.'

He had also come to know from their talk at the time that chachi - Dulaare chacha's wife - had passed away some three-four years back and that chacha had headed for Delhi after giving away his only daughter in marriage. He also held it against his elder brother that he hadn't made any attempts to get him married a second time. He sounded as if he still nursed a wish to marry, but who would have given his daughter to him?

And then somehow – perhaps from the talk of bappa's work – the topic of war came up and Dulaare chacha started again on his tale of woes – of how war was wreaking havoc in the village, nothing was available, the prices were soaring higher and higher each day. The house had come to ruins and could not be repaired. The family had expanded, not the income.
The war was a topic of discussion amongst the lane residents too, but how the war was connected to the repair of the house in the village was something he failed to understand. The women living in the lane too, said often that all the grain, vegetables and cloth went to the war, that everything was on fire and the prices were shooting up. One could only get six seers of wheat or eight seers of gram for a rupee! What was one going to eat? Often times, one heard of a *chore-bazaar,* and he wondered what this *chore-bazaar* was? Was it the market where '*chores*' – thieves sold their loot?

But war was discussed, also in another way. At first he used to hear that the English and the Germans were at war. The English were the government and the Germans wanted to remove the English from India. Hence the war. And now the Germans were on the verge of coming in. Once Mahaadev, while bathing at the well, was saying that the Germans wanted to take knowledge from our country, but the English didn't let them in. The Germans had secretly, unknown to the English, taken away the '*Vedas*' and learning from them, had made such weapons and arms that had existed in India during the times of 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata', but had disappeared in the *kalyug,* in this present age of vice. The English could not compete with them but there was a lot in the Vedas they couldn't understand. Only the scholarly *Pandits* of India knew their meaning and therefore the Germans thought if they removed the English from India they could make immense progress with the help of Vedas. The science contained in the *Vedas* was not found anywhere else. Therefore the Germans respected Indians a lot.

Then he heard that the Japanese too had joined the Germans and their armies had reached the borders of Bengal. It was then, he also heard the name of 'Babu Subhash Chandra Bose', and how the police had laid siege to his house and how he, by appeasing the Goddess, had

disappeared from there. He had reappeared in Japan and now his army was about to enter India.

He had heard the name of 'Gandhi Mahatma' earlier too – during the discussions at the well. But all that he had understood at the time was if Gandhi Mahatma had been arrested or released by the government. Why the government arrested or released Gandhi Mahatma, he didn't understand. The names of Gandhi Mahatma, Subhash Chandra Bose and Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru came to be heard more frequently after Bidesia died in the firing. During those days, there was much talk of how the government was holding Gandhi Mahatma and Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru in a secret place and subjecting them to endless torture. He had also heard once or twice that the government had deported Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru to a place farther away than kalapani ...the cellular jail at the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

Bidesia pulled a rickshaw, which he also owned. Although his house came much before the *Shivala*, he parked his rickshaw under the neem tree at night as there was no other space in the lane, returning quite late at night and taking the rickshaw out at the break of dawn. He came back for lunch and went out again after two-three hours. After he went home at noon parking the rickshaw under the neem, the children in the neighbourhood climbed up to play. Once when Rajee was sitting on the rickshaw, he began to swing holding its back. Suddenly Rajee turned and the rickshaw toppled over bringing down both of them. Both were hurt. When Bidesia returned and saw his overturned rickshaw, he screamed and shouted but Rajee did not let the secret out. She had cried out loudly on falling down but when Bidesia was letting off steam, she stayed in.

Although Bidesia had been pulling the rickshaw for quite long, he too had earlier worked with bappa at the mill. He was still working there when bappa left to work at the depot but quit after he got married and purchased this rickshaw. At the mill, one had to work the night shifts too. He remembered vaguely that bappa too, used to sometimes leave after dinner. On such nights he had slept clinging to mai. Otherwise too, he used to sleep either with bappa or with mai during those days. When Bidesia left his work and purchased a rickshaw it became not just a sport for the children but kindled the curiosity of the adults too - how much did the rickshaw cost? How much would he earn from it? Why had he left his job? And Bidesia had felt a little embarrassed saying he had reservations about leaving his bride alone at night and had therefore quit his job at the mill. The earning from the rickshaw was not fixed and kept fluctuating. But he would be master of his time and could work at will.

Hearing Bidesia, he had wondered if Bidesia's bride too was scared when alone? Many a time he keenly observed Bidesia's bride while passing that way. She was quite young – only fifteen or sixteen – but no child! Also, didn't give the impression she'd be scared at night. The people in the lane often jested with Bidesia with regard to his bride. Bidesia was nothing much to look at. He wasn't too dark but had sunken eyes, hollowed cheeks and a scrawny neck. He had grown his hair a little

after marriage which he kept oiled but which stood like spikes on his head. However, his bride was extremely winsome. Also, the cotton sari she wore was usually red which looked very becoming on her dusky complexion. Every morning and evening, when Bidesia was not home she went to chat up the women in the neighbouring houses. She must have cooked meals, otherwise what would the couple have eaten? At times, she also came to his place to sit with mai. But mai did not approve of Bidesia's bride. In her absence mai said that the way the lass was dawdling all over the lane, it didn't show good character. And when Dulaare chacha arrived, her visits to their house stopped all together. Once she just happened to come by but turned back when, on crossing the threshold, she saw Dulaare chacha. Didn't turn up again for the duration Dulaare chacha stayed with them.

If Bidesia's wife came over when bappa was home on a holiday, she stayed a little withdrawn and reserved, kept her head covered, laughed softly and less frequently. But didn't run away. However, once she had seen Dulaare chacha, she didn't head in that direction again. Even otherwise something had gone awry in the house with the arrival of Dulaare chacha. For one, mai had to sleep now in the inside room, and Dulaare chacha, along with bappa slept in the outer one. Then when it grew very hot, everyone began to sleep outside, under the neem. One day when mai asked bappa for money he started grumbling – 'It is not as we have a family treasure buried here. The man has been sitting idle for two months and eating without work or a job.' And for some reason he remembered what took place on a day. Nothing had really happened on that day either. Mai had been sitting inside cooking rotis when Dulaare chacha came asking for a cinder to light his beedi, and then sat by the door talking about one thing or another. Both Dulaare chacha and mai had begun to laugh over something when suddenly bappa returned from work. The moment he entered the house, Dulaare chacha stopped laughing and mai became a little flustered. Bappa didn't speak a word but Dulaare chacha got up and left. Nobody said anything for a long time, as if something had gone wrong. And after this, bappa kept quiet when in Dulaare chacha's presence, replying only in yes or no when Dulaare chacha said anything to him. He spoke rarely even with mai – and only as much as was required. His nature too had become irritable and he scolded and abused mai on every trivial matter.

The rains had started when one day, Dulaare chacha informed he had found work in a hotel on a monthly salary of rupees 8 and two meals a day. It was then that bappa said to him that *Shivalewali*'s rooms were lying vacant and that he should rent them. And so on the third or fourth day, Dulaare chacha went to live in *Shivalewali*'s room.

When it rained the entire lane turned muddy. Bidesia found it very difficult to bring in and take out his rickshaw. When the lane was dry, Bidesia stretched backwards in a peculiar manner as he pulled the rickshaw. Ringing the bell on the handle-bar of his rickshaw he took quick, small steps, as if trotting like a pony. But when it turned swampy he had to be careful with each step that he took and had to wriggle this way and that to pull his rickshaw out. He possessed one mackintosh, stitched perhaps by himself, which he put over his head when it rained.

It was raining during those days also and the lane had become a big swamp. The commotion must have started a day or two in advance but he wasn't aware of it. Although what happened that day and on many days to follow was beyond his comprehension, not only was he a witness to the impact it had but was himself affected by it. Words like 'government', 'police' and 'military' had become as dreadful to him as 'Ravana', or 'demons' or 'ghost'. 'Government' to him meant an English or a white man upon whom he hadn't till then set his eyes. But the 'police' or the 'military' meant men in khaki, who although like the others, were still different. They arrested people, sent them to jail, hit them with their batons or put a bullet through them, pouring kerosene over bodies, torched them. He had heard that even those, who were not yet dead, had been set aflame by the police.

It was noon. The time Bidesia usually came in to lunch. It hadn't rained for a day or two, so the lane had been dry in places. They were playing under the neem tree when Ganesh came running and stopped suddenly, 'Bidesia has died. He was shot with a bullet. They are bringing him over now. There is military in the city.' All the children stood stunned for some time, not understanding a thing. But Ganesh appeared completely stricken. As if he wanted to get rid of his fears by blurting everything out. He stood there for a minute then suddenly bolted, other children ran towards Bidesia's house without speaking a word.

It was as if a heavy load had fallen over its heart and the lane had ceased to breathe. Some other children too, were running towards Bidesia's house. Women had come out of their houses, but were quiet or talked in hushed voices. And suddenly Bidesia's wife came running out of Bhagirath's house – completely bewildered, dressed even then in a red cotton sari. Bhagirath's wife came out after her and stood at a little distance from her door. But Bidesia's wife didn't stop running till she reached her home. The door was latched from outside, the way she had left it. A few children stood at hand, and a few women here and there, in front of houses. He had seen people in their moments of grief but never again a face like that of Bidesia's wife, as it was at that moment. After the realization of the grave calamity that had befallen her... the wait for coming face to face with the calamity. She was not crying, but the words, 'Oh God', 'Oh mai', slipped uncontrollably out of her mouth as if a massive burden was crushing down her breath. Again and again she looked around with dilated eyes as if all the children and women that stood around held swords in their hands and would strike her neck any second.

He had no idea how long they had all stood there like statues. Perhaps a very short time and yet it felt like forever. As if a fear permeated the entire lane which everyone could see and touch. In fact when the men carrying Bidesia on the rickshaw entered the lane and Bidesia's wife, bursting like a dam, began to cry banging her head against the ground, it felt as if the tension had given way. People began to move about, women came forward to be close to Bidesia's wife. The children too changed positions and stood huddled against walls and doors.

At first one man, perhaps Mahaadev, entered the lane but stopped short after casting a glance inside the lane. And then everyone accompanying the rickshaw came in. They had propped Bidesia up in the seat like a passenger and had covered him with the mackintosh. Bidesia's wife darted ahead the moment she saw the rickshaw but tripped after two steps, either on her own or because her foot got caught in her sari. Then she began to moan and wail – 'Oh my dear, oh my mai, why didn't the cruel police drive a bullet into my heart.'

What followed was a jumble in his mind. People took down Bidesia, still wrapped in mackintosh and laid him on the ground before his house. His eyes went repeatedly to the rickshaw which had reddish brown stains on many spots. Somebody went in unlatching the door and brought a cloth or a sheet or a sari from inside and, removing the mackintosh, covered Bidesia with it. He couldn't see anything clearly from where he stood and yet suddenly began to feel sick, as if he was about to throw up the next minute. Standing against the Wall he controlled himself with some difficulty.

Things seemed strangely suspended for a long while after this. All the women in the lane had come to sit or stand there, surrounding Bidesia and his wife. Mai too had turned up. Men stood at a little distance. Many others, who didn't belong to the lane and had come with the rickshaw, went back. Soon, some others from outside started to trickle in just to stand there. Someone just passed through at times and crossed over. Men talked in whispers. Only the wails of Bidesia's wife echoed all over the lane, joined in by a few other women who mourned not just Bidesia but his wife's youth. Despite all this, everything appeared to be on hold.

Then slowly, voices began to rise from amongst the men. 'A curfew has been imposed for twenty four hours. No one can go out of the house. The town hall has been burnt down. There is military all over firing machine guns. Hundreds have died. How is one to go to work? Stay alert. If the police comes, everyone will be taken away.'

And a voice rose a bit higher – 'Hey Munna, go. Stand guard at the corner, give a shout if there is police.'

Someone said, 'How will the cremation be done? The city is under curfew.'

Followed by another, 'If the police comes to know he died by a bullet they'll take away even the body and then who knows how they'll cut him up or treat him.'

In a little while, Munna came running from the mouth of the lane shouting, police, police – and caused a commotion. Women, men, everyone made a dash for their house. Mai, when she saw him run, held him to her and together they rushed into Bhagirath's house. Bidesia's wife too got into a flurry and her wails stopped. Picking up Bidesia from both ends, some people carried him in. The lane became totally deserted.

But the police had probably gone straight ahead on the road, bypassing the lane. When nothing happened for a while, some of the people took courage and ventured out. Bhagirath's children, like so many sick puppies, stood in alarm for some time. Many others, dreading the police, had hastened into that house. Two or three of the children had then broken into a whimper. The wailing of Bidesia's wife could also be heard again from his room. But no one stayed out in the lane after this. People stood either by the doors, or inside Bidesia's room or went back to their house.

Mai returned home with him. There was still some daylight left, but perhaps not wanting to sit idle, she lit the earthen stove and began to cook.

V

Bappa returned a bit late that night. Mai was quite anxious and had started to worry from the time she finished her cooking. But there was no cause to worry. Dulaare chacha came by to enquire and mentioned that as bappa was a government servant he'd have received his curfew pass. But mai relaxed only after bappa was back. He had, on coming to know as he entered the lane, stopped by at Bidesia's house.

When curfew was lifted for two hours the next morning, some five or six people from the lane took Bidesia away. Bappa did not go with them for he had strict orders to be present on duty. He however, went to the police station before leaving to get a curfew pass so there would be no problem in case cremation got delayed. He told, after returning from police-station that he hadn't let on to the police that Bidesia had died of a bullet. He had said Bidesia had been ill since long. The police had drawn out a pass after looking at his depot-card which also had his photograph.

But no other person living in the lane could go for work that day. Curfew had continued for some two or three days. It was relaxed on the first day for two hours, then for four hours and then for the whole day. But not for many more nights to come. During the day, when the curfew was still on, people in the lane either stood or sat talking here and there. They were all either water bearers, porters, masons or cobblers and worked either in shops and hotels or with a contractor. Because of the curfew, all the bazaars were closed and everyone had to sit idle. Those working on a monthly salary did not lose out on anything but the daily wagers had no income. Massur Maharaj too did not suffer any loss because even though he didn't keep his shop fully open for fear of the police (though no policeman entered that lane) he kept the door open to carry on with the sale.

Ganesh was not seen that day after bringing the news to the lane, but the next day, as the men stood around talking, he came and stood under the neem. A few children were already playing there. He stood there quietly at first. Some of the children came to stand around him. Ganesh's face was still off-colour. Perhaps someone asked if he had seen Bidesia getting shot. And he began to tell. And as he began to tell, the colour of his face changed completely. "Arre, he fell right before me. The procession was taken out from the crossing at *Ghantaghar* - the Clock Tower. Such a huge procession too, there were thousands of men. Gandhi Mahatma has issued orders – turn the English out, bring in self-rule. The English have arrested Gandhi Mahatma. Therefore the procession. The English were so badly stoned, they had to run. All their rifles were of no use. The moment they came out of the police-station, the procession charged them pelting stones and bricks. Just when a Muslim *Havaldar* stepped out, I threw a stone with all my might. It hit him squarely on the chest. He ran back into the station. Processions were taken out all over the city. The town hall was burnt down. A

pitched battle with the police was on when suddenly four trucks full of military arrived. All the telephone wires had been cut down and yet, somehow, the police had managed to send a message. The military took position at some distance. It was a black platoon – balochis with three or four white officers. They ordered firing at once. Bullets began to boom. They fired one round and advanced ten steps. Fired another round and advanced ten more steps. Men began to die like flies. There was a stampede. Bidesia hadn't been part of the procession till then. He had stood at the side with his rickshaw. When people began to run, I too ran. And then, I saw Bidesia leave his rickshaw and come bang in the middle. With no fear for his life he ran forward, shouting *Inquilab zindabad* ... long live revolution. And then there was a bang and a bullet went through his chest and out the back. He died instantly. When he had run forward, the stampede too had halted. Then some men came out of the lane at the back and began pelting stones. Even the military was foxed for a minute. Mahaadev had recognised Bidesia – he too had been in the procession. Together with a few other men, he picked up and put Bidesia on the rickshaw. By then the military had taken position both in front and at the back. The bullets started flying again. People took to their heels. Quickly they took the rickshaw into a lane and out from the other end. I was running ahead of them."

As he spoke, Ganesh's face began to glow. As if he was a different boy. As if the Ganesh of two days ago had been transformed. Although nothing had happened and it only took a few days for things to return to their old ways. But at that instant, Ganesh grew in stature in the eyes of all those children. He had gone with the procession, had hit a Muslim *Havaldar* with all his might, had been there at the time of firing. Nobody doubted he had hit the *Havaldar*. He may have exaggerated a little but the boys would have believed anything Ganesh said with that glowing face and all the boys in the lane came to regard Ganesh as their leader. Kisana always tried to be one up on Ganesh but after this incident, even Kisana stood in awe of Ganesh.

And then when the curfew was lifted and the bazaars opened, everything went back to its old routine. Only the children had now found a new sport. Whenever Mahaadev saw the children, he said – Say 'Bharat mata ki jai', victory to Mother India'. And then, the children went round the lane in a procession shouting slogans – *Inquilab zindabaad, Mahatma Gandhi ki jai*. Everyone understood the meaning of '*zindabad*' and *'jai'*. During *Dushehera* too, when everyone celebrated the victory of Ram over Ravana, they shouted slogans like – *Raja Ramchandra ji ki jai* – Victory to Lord Ram. But no one knew what '*inquilab*' meant and at times they also had debates over it. And at other times over why someone did not kill the government.

In the beginning, Mahaadev talked everyday at the well about the war and about the movement. 'Subhash Babu's army is going to attack. He is coming to India soon. The English are unable to face the Japanese army. The movement is in full swing. The police and the military are wreaking havoc.' But gradually the talk at the well also cooled down. Mahaadev worked as an accountant with a cloth merchant and whatever he heard during the day in the bazaar, he repeated the next day at the

well. Whenever *mai* took him down there for a bath, the talk came to his ears too. But there was no change in the rest of the things.

The only other change occurred in Bidesia's wife. She was now clad usually in dirty, soiled clothes. Her hair dishevelled, in a tangle. She had always been thin but now became a bag of bones. Her face had withered, her skin had dried. Yes, her eyes almost sunken into hollows, still appeared large and if ever she looked with a fixed stare at someone even for a moment, it evoked a queer feeling. Her brother and his wife came to visit three or four days after Bidesia's death – with three or four children. Neither of her parents were alive. Her brother had arranged her marriage. Whether or not her brother and his wife asked her to come with them, she hadn't gone. A few days later, she began to go to some well-to-do households to do their dishes. And then her palms too, like her eyes, began to attract attention – for they now looked like the hands of a slender man. With a firm grip and yet strangely beautiful.

Everyone sympathized with Bidesia's wife in the beginning. Then just as other things had cooled down with time, their sympathy too began to cool down. Bidesia's rickshaw, parked under the neem, had kept reminding people of him every now and then. And then one day, a customer came from outside and Bidesia's wife disposed off the rickshaw. And one day it so happened that bappa bashed Munna up. It was a holiday. Bappa had gone to bazaar. On his way back, Munna probably made a crack at bappa. Bappa turned back to give him three or four smacks. Munna, perhaps because he was stunned or cowed down by bappa's anger, or for some other reason didn't raise his hand in retaliation. He kept quiet after receiving the whacks and bappa, grumbling and growling, returned home.

However, there was tension in the lane after that day. Mahaadev, Munna's father, was a mason and Munna, who must have been around twenty, was getting trained under him. Many households in the lane, all of them prosperous, belonged to the masons. Bappa wielded some sway because of his government service. He, however, was all alone. Even the boys came to know there was some hostility between the masons and Ghaseeta's bappa. But, despite the tension nothing happened. Except for the talk in the lane about how a single woman always spelt trouble, for her own self as well as for others.

And so, he was completely unprepared for the battle of Mahaabhaarat that suddenly took place at his house. All that he knew about why bappa had hit Munna was that Munna had made a crack at bappa. The fact that bappa had returned after hitting Munna and Munna hadn't had the gumption even to speak had only made him proud. Although he had stopped going to the *Shivala* for the fear of getting beaten up by the masons' boys. One day, when he was playing with other boys under the neem after lunch, somebody, he couldn't recall exactly who – perhaps Rajee, came to break the news that there was a fight going on between Ghaseeta's mai and Bidesia's wife. He went running and what he witnessed in front of Bidesia's house was completely new to him. Their clothes in a total disarray, blouses torn, they stood scratching and tearing at each other, letting out choicest abuses, not heard even from a

man's mouth. Quarrels and beatings were routine in the lane but never before had he seen such a fight between two women. That mai could fight like this! 'You man-eater, after eating up your own man, you'd now eat up another's too?' Had he not seen it with his own eyes, he could never have imagined it. Mai's build was not bad, but Bidesia's wife was still young. Soon, mai began to get breathless, and then other women intervened to pull them away from each other. These women too, perhaps sided in their hearts with mai because as they separated the two, mai scratched at the face of Bidesia's wife and tore down her *aanchal* - the open end of her sari. Something strange happened after the two were separated. Mai returned home still abusing but Bidesia's wife broke down suddenly. She went back crying to her room and could be heard even from there.

Bappa, when he returned home that evening, was already boiling, either because he had gone to meet Bidesia's wife or he had heard from other quarters. The moment he entered, he pounced upon mai – "You bitch! You are fond of wrestling? I'll cure you of your wrestling now. You have claims to virtues? I'll see how virtuous you are." Bappa didn't normally raise his hand against mai and mai too was generally subdued before him. But something was the matter that day. When bappa kicked her down, she got up at once and fell upon him – 'hit me, hit me, but if you go to that hussy, I'll kill you. I'll have your blood, hers too.' Just a push from bappa sent her sprawling down again – 'You want my blood? I'll give you my blood now.' Picking up a firewood, bappa began to hit her, but mai too was like one possessed. Again and again she rose and pounced – 'hit me, hit me, but you'll go to that hussy over my dead body.'

He was petrified to see bappa so angry. And when bappa picked up a firewood, he lost his voice. Standing in a corner of the room, he watched it all, as if his body no longer had the strength to move. Then suddenly, tears started to roll and his throat started to produce a strange muffled sound, as if it was he who was getting thrashed. When mai fell back exhausted and began to moan, bappa threw down the stick and stomped out. He did not return home that night.

Many women from the neighbourhood showed up shortly, criticised bappa profusely and abused Bidesia's wife to their hearts content. Mai said nothing. Only moaned. Mean while, somebody, perhaps Rajee's amma brought something, a paste of lime and turmeric or some such thing, to apply on mai's wounds. But no one paid any attention to him. He sat down on the spot where he had been standing and at some point fell asleep. When he woke up in the morning he found someone, perhaps mai, had covered him with a kathari.

Bapu returned home early in the morning but didn't speak a word. Mai was quite badly hurt. Still groaning, she had kindled the earthen stove - the *chulha*- and was engaged in cooking even before bapu was back. Quietly bapu ate his food and left for work. And from that day, a strange silence came to settle in the house. Bapu, quiet as he had been even earlier, now became completely silent. Mai too, became even more subdued. Her body ached for many days but she didn't stop her

household chores. He himself started to receive a little more of his parents' love. For many days in the beginning, whenever bappa wanted to convey something or even give money to mai, instead of doing it directly, did it through him. Mai too, when she had to call bappa to take his food, called out to him. But even in the silence and the softness, something seemed to have gone amiss.

Bidesia’s wife became almost invisible after that day. She kept always to her room after returning from work. And then one day she left her room also and went away. It was rumoured she had married another man but no one had any clue to the identity or the address or the business of the man.

VI

Before starting to train at a cycle shop, he also received some schooling for a few days. It wasn't much of a school. The pandit at the Shivala collected some children of the lane to teach them the alphabet. The pandit ran the school for some months but, for one, it was difficult to go about collecting the children every day and also, he didn't get regular payments. One day in his exasperation, the pandit drove the children away. 'Rogues ... low castes ... how would they know the advantages of education.' Thus the school came to an end. He had, meanwhile learned some numbers and tables. Also alphabets. But later, he remembered only the numbers. He could write his name but forgot the rest of the alphabets.

The cycle shop was to him the first, first-hand experience of the life's realities and the first few days proved quite tough. Hearing abuses and receiving slaps was nothing new to him, what he minded was that he now received these from new people. People he had had nothing to do with till now, and he got nothing in return from them. The four rupees at the end of the month went to bapu. The owner of the shop was Chhotelal, who himself kept sitting on a tin chair and lent a hand only when the work load was too heavy. All the work was done by Madan and Rahmat – a Muslim boy. Madan must have been seventeen or eighteen and Rahmat, fourteen or fifteen. When he joined, minor jobs like cleaning, pumping, oiling, locating the puncture by soaking the tube in a water-basin, unscrewing etc. came to his lot.

A few days later, Chhotelal fired Rahmat. Rahmat was a thief, but more than that he was a Muslim and Chhotelal had wanted to sack him on one pretext or the other. When Rahmat left, his position got worse. For one thing, there were now only two of them, instead of three, in the line of Chhotelal's fire and for the other, Madan too, apart from abusing him for every small thing also took to beating him because his own work had increased manifold. Rahmat could do almost all the work but he couldn't even put a tyre on to a wheel. Madan had to do more work and Chhotelal too, had to get up to lend a hand and they vented their anger at him. Madan was angry with him also because with Rahmat he'd had a pact. Apart from slipping away small spare parts or at times even tyres and tubes, they had also shared the major portion of money made from customers who came to the shop when Chhotelal was not present. But Chhotelal seldom left the shop now and Madan too, rarely dared to keep any money with him. He was perhaps scared he would squeal to Chhotelal.

He felt both anger and envy for Kisana. Anger, because it was he, who had told bappa that Chhotelal was looking for a boy for his shop. Kisana had been working at a nearby motor repair shop as a cleaner for the past two years. This was the cause of his envy. He watched at times how Kisana opened the bonnet of the truck to be repaired and cleaned it, or lying underneath, greased all its parts. He felt really envious when

Kisana emerged from under the truck with oil and grease on his hands and clothes.

And the way Kisana drew out petrol from the tank of the truck was nothing short of a miracle to him. Putting one end of the tube in the tank and the other in his mouth, Kisana sucked in air and hurriedly spitting out petrol, placed the tube in the basin. Petrol began to flow out and continued to flow till the time the tube was taken out of the tank. At first he thought there was a nozzle inside the tank, to which the tube was attached but in that case why did Kisana put the tube in his mouth? And if there was no nozzle, why did the petrol keep flowing? He asked Kisana once, and he laughed patronisingly – It's a trick. One day Chhotelal was not at the shop. There was also no work. So when Kisana brought a tube and a basin to take out petrol from the truck, he also stood at a side and watched. Putting the tube in the tank, Kisana handed him the other end. 'Sit down. I'll teach you the trick today.' When he drew in the air, he went through the same motions he had gone through when he had smoked bapu's hukka. Nothing happened at first. He only drew in air. Then the petrol rushed through the tube to fill his mouth, some also went to his stomach and when he took out the tube with a jerk, the petrol too, stopped after a trickle.

He felt sick the whole day. The petrol swallowed by him was not enough to make him throw up, but enough to make him dizzy and queasy the whole day. Kisana rubbed his back and head for quite some time but it didn't make much of a difference. Kisana also treated him to a glass of tea (tea wasn't as common those days as it was now) which gave him some relief, but he did not get back to normal for two or three days. The shop was close to the lane and he used to go back home for lunch around one or one-thirty. But he couldn't eat that day and started to feel sick after taking just one roti. Leaving the rest of the food he went to lie on his stomach and a little later, when he felt a little better, returned to the shop. Mai became quite worried and gave him a clod of rock salt to suck on. She was asking him to take some more rest, but he went back to the shop as he didn't want either Chhotelal or bappa to know.

He became friendly with Kisana after this and the friendship opened for him, the door to a new world. Kisana never confided fully in him but hinted that the petrol from the tank was often filched behind the owner's back and if someone chanced upon him, he was told the oil had trash and had to be cleaned. Otherwise too, if the tank had to be emptied they helped themselves to some of the petrol and sold it later. When they got a chance, they also swiped small spare parts.

Kisana was very fond of snacking on this spicy snack - *chaat* - and usually had money in his pocket. Now he sometimes treated him also to *chaat*. Once, giving Chhotelal some yarn, he also went to see a bi-scope with Kisana (nobody called it bi-scope now, but cinema). He felt a little scared that day. They took a tram ride to a spot near Jama Masjid. Never before had he ventured so far out to such a crowded place on his own. The fear that he might get separated from Kisana stayed with him till the end. There was a big crowd at the biscope but Kisana managed to go in and get tickets. Not only for themselves but also three extra

tickets. Later, he sold these tickets that had cost him five annas each, for eight annas each. Thus the biscope cost the two of them a total of one anna.

It was the first film he had watched. As far as he could remember, it was titled 'Bharat Milaap'. He liked it very much. And after that, he too became addicted. Whenever he found an opportunity, he too went with Kisana to see biscope. In the beginning he didn't have money and could go only when Kisana took him along and then too, he had to think of an excuse to give Chhotelal to get leave. Often Kisana went alone and told him later. At times he himself asked Kisana but Kisana used to excuse himself.

If Kisana took him along it was because he could talk to him without fear. Kisana talked of things of all manner... like one much experienced. One day Kisana asked him – 'Do you know how babies are born?' Even otherwise, he had observed how Kisana and Madan passed obscene comments directly on women, especially young women, who passed by. Even others uttered obscenities, but those obscenities concerned mothers, sisters and daughters and he was under the impression that these didn't actually mean anything. But Kisana and Madan directed the obscenities straight at women and somehow, perhaps by reading their faces, he came to understand these were not just obscene utterances but what they actually had on their minds. At such times their eyes acquired a strange glint, their lips tightened and all this made him feel a little uneasy.

He knew babies were born to women and before that their tummies bloated up. He also knew women suffered a lot when they had babies and yet the whole business was filled with mystery to him. Therefore when Kisana asked him this question he kept quiet. And then Kisana told him in detail the 'realities' of life and also that women had in them, eight times the heat men had, but the women's heat got released each month, while men's stayed stored inside them.

Listening to Kisana, he felt a big secret had suddenly been revealed to him, as if this new knowledge had suddenly ended his childhood and made him an adult. For many a day he had this strange feeling, as if this knowledge had been a secret of others and was now revealed to him because it wasn't yet a part of his experience. He also found it strange initially that Kisana, whenever he found an opportunity, either while going for lunch or returning in the evening, walked with him to his house and stopping him under the neem tree, talked of this thing and that while looking constantly at Rajee's door.

Rajee was the same age as he, but had somehow become more mature. She had now stopped playing with children in the lane, her mannerism too had become more like that of a grown-up. For some days in the beginning he thought Kisana accompanied him because they were friends. But one day, when Kisana was talking to him sitting under the neem, Rajee returned from outside, and throwing one glance at them went inside her house and shut the door. Kisana's face looked

unnaturally tense – 'The bitch … has a thing going with Ganesh … he has all the fun … and I am not allowed even to touch.'

The tension on Kisana's face and his words, not only baffled but also, to some extent, offended him. He failed to understand Kisana's anger because he had seen nothing that would indicate Rajee had a 'thing' going with Ganesh. Kisana had spoken out of desperation. But what was there to be desperate about?

Not many days had passed after this, when that whole tension and desperation made its way into him. He was standing, unscrewing a cycle turned upside down, when suddenly he heard Madan, who was working on another cycle, raise his head and let out a mouthful of obscenities. A pretty girl, thirteen or fourteen years of age, was passing by with a small boy. As she walked, she turned her gaze – her neck slanted a little, so did her gaze – her lips twisted as she spoke and a flame of fire ran through his body and then kept on running. His nerves tightened, his body stretched like an arrow mounted on a bow-string. The girl passed and went out of his sight, but his body still seemed to be on fire, his eyes were red. Where to go? What to do? Should he knock the wall down with his head, break the cycle with the pressure of his hands, jump into a well, what should he do?

Crack. His wrist received a jolt, he had turned the wrench gripped in his fist in the opposite direction, cutting the rings in the screw. The fire went out and he gave a start. Looking round him, he felt everyone around was watching him, watching the fire raging in his body, his taut nerves, the blood welling in his eyes. As if he had become naked and bare in mid-market. He felt everyone must have heard the sound of the ring cracking, which to him had sounded like the report of a gun. No one was watching him. No one had heard the crack, at least no one paid any attention to it. Madan was bent over his cycle, Chhotelal was dosing on his tin chair.

His friendship with Kisana deepened after this. The first few days were really trying. Everything was the same, only he had changed from within – and no one was aware of this change. There was no need to say anything to Kisana. Earlier, it was only Kisana who spoke about girls, his job was to listen. Now the two of them began to share their experiences. In this new round of friendship, he too felt the need to have money. Kisana had, even earlier, given some hints and now he too, when he had the chance, swiped, sometimes a small part, sometimes an old tyre or tube, sometimes glue. If he got a chance, he handed it to Kisana there itself, if not, he brought it home and hid it. Kisana knew a junk dealer to whom he sold all these things. The money they got was spent on eating *chaat* or watching biscope. Gradually a system evolved and whenever a new film was released, they tried to purchase the tickets in advance, and then sell the five *anna* tickets for eight *anna*. Thus, they generally watched the cinema for free and often earned some money too.

But this friendship didn't last long. In the beginning he liked it very much when Kisana walked with him to his house and sitting under the neem, talked to him, but began to dislike it equally a few days later.

Kisana was so obsessed with Rajee that the moment they left the shop, he began to abuse her and kept abusing her even as they sat under the tree, sometimes linking her with Ganesh, at other times cooking up stories of her imagined pursuits. At first he enjoyed listening to Kisana's talk but gradually came to find it offensive, mostly because Kisana, thinking him ignorant even now, gave went to his frustration before him. He also began to dislike the way Kisana talked about Rajee. And then, a few times, he got a feeling that Rajee was looking at him in a strange way – as if weighing him up.

And slowly his heart, on its own, attached many meanings to that look of Rajee's – Kisana was his rival, Rajee disliked Kisana. Kisana deliberately stayed constantly glued to him, if Kisana was not with him and he alone, met her, he could strike a friendship with her, Rajee could be persuaded to start a 'thing' with him.

He didn't have an open fight with Kisana but began, gradually to cut himself off from him. In the afternoon he tried to dodge Kisana's eye and came home alone. Even otherwise, he stopped hanging out with Kisana. Now, when Kisana asked him to come to the cinema, it was he who excused himself. When he started coming home by himself in the afternoon, once or twice, Rajee began to clean and pick something sitting out in front of her house. Once when he reached home, Rajee was sitting with mai who was stitching a patchwork spread and when she got up to serve him food, Rajee took her place and resumed the stitching. She sat there that day, till the time he went back to the shop. Rajee hadn't talked to him but he came to believe that Rajee could be made to come round.

And then, one day bappa caught his theft. He was sure Kisana had told on him. It was Sunday and bappa had a holiday. But he left for the shop in the morning like other days. When he returned home for lunch in the afternoon, a few cycle parts, which he had hidden under his spread, lay on the floor of the room, right in front of the door. Bappa was sitting with a neem stick in hand.

Bappa did not so much as ask him where the parts had come from or if he had stolen them. The instant his eyes fell upon the parts, he stopped in alarm, and at that instant received bappa's full handed slap. Staggering, he fell down. 'Rascal. Scoundrel. Thief. Doing his father proud! I'll teach such a lesson to this bastard, he won't think of stealing again.' Before he could pull himself together bappa had taken down his knickers, pulled off his shirt, dragged him out in the lane. He was struck dumb at first but when bappa, leaving his hand, began to hit him with stick, he began to cry, screaming out 'Oh mai!' He also thought of running away but when he realized he was standing stark naked, his feet stopped. Suddenly, bappa pounced on him and catching hold of his hair, gave him a push so he fell down again.

His screams brought many women out of the neighbouring houses, Rajee too came out, and stood in front of her house. The realization that he was naked and was getting thrashed before all these girls and women was, for a while, more humiliating and shameful than the pain of

beating. To hide his shame, he shrank on the ground and tried not to scream, but unable to endure the blows of the stick began to scream again.

The beating became unbearable after a while. The women began to plead with bappa to stop, saying he had beaten him enough. Mai, who had been giving him a tongue lashing from inside, saying he was a thief and would land up in jail, would bring dishonour to the family, now came out and chided bapu – 'kill him! Butcher! He has no love for his only son. He would rest only after he has killed him. Didn't even let him eat.' But bappa thundered - 'it is better the scoundrel dies than become a thief. But the rascal won't even die. And no wonder. He is a thief. And thieves are a sturdy lot.'

And everything within him shattered, turned to ashes. He forgot he was naked, he forgot he had grown up, forgot that women and girls stood watching, forgot the person beating him was his own father. All that remained in his mind was that he could no longer stand the lashings. He cried and grovelled –'I won't do it again bappa, I won't ever steal again.' After some time even the grovelling became meaningless to him, but his mind and tongue went on repeating, if only to retain his senses.

And then a few women neighbours also joined mai to intervene. Perhaps bappa too, had tired. Dropping the stick, he suddenly went in. By then his whole body had turned blue and he continued to lie still and sob even after that. He was only semi-conscious when mai, with others' support, brought him in and he realized afresh that he was naked. His heart sank in a flood of shame and pain.

Spreading out a *kathari*, mai helped him lie down and turning his face towards the wall, he closed his eyes. As bappa too was sitting at the other side of the room, he made an effort not to let out a groan. But couldn't stop himself. Unknown to him, his mouth began to issue forth a strange, muffled sound. He began to ache from lying for so long on one side but did not change sides till bappa was there. It was only when bappa went out after some time that he turned his face the other way.

VII

After that day he turned into a cowardly child again. However, his fear didn't disappear now, but increased when bappa happened to be near. After his anger had cooled down, bappa had taken him by rickshaw to the government dispensary and had his wounds dressed with tincture. On their way back, bappa had also treated him to those syrupy sweets - *jalebis* - but the thread between him and bappa had snapped finally.

The thread between him and the others in the lane too, had snapped. He was not on talking terms, not only with Kisana but with all the boys in the lane. He never came face to face with Rajee now. If she came to his house, he sneaked out at once without as much as a glance at her. He also avoided looking at other women neighbours. If a woman mentioned the day even to sympathise, or tried sweetly to preach against stealing he felt like strangling her, or even running off to a place where there was no witness to that day.

He felt most shamed and humiliated when he had to go back to work at Chhotelal's shop. The news of his beating had already reached him. Bappa had returned the cycle parts he had hidden. Chhotelal didn't say anything and only smiled. The smile held contempt and also a little pity and that was what he found most offensive. He went and sat quietly at a side when Madan pointed to a cycle – 'Take out the tube of the rear wheel and check for puncture.'

He was completely alone those days. After working silently through the day, he returned at night to lie down and for the entire time that he was free, was nagged by just one thought – that he should run off somewhere. But where? Do what? The only part of his life that belonged to him was when he, sitting or lying down, dreamt like *Shaikhchilli* – the proverbial fool, building castles in air – would that he met a man with magical powers who, taking pity on him, would reveal to him the secret of a hidden treasure, or give a magic salve for the eye that would make him disappear so he would be invisible to others but could see everyone, move at will through closed doors and walls (he had seen a film which had such an accomplished magician) or make him so powerful he could conquer the world and no one could stand up to him. He dreamt and he dreamt, funny dreams that would enable him to possess all the human, godly and demonic powers, enjoy all the pleasures and when forced out of these dreams, he remained listless, thinking constantly of how to run away, where to run away.

Some days later, there was also some talk of his marriage – something to the effect that he should be married off in the next *Jeth*, the third month of the Hindu lunar calender. They had received a proposal from somewhere, he never came to know from where. And then *gauna* after a year or two. But bappa left it at that, or he didn't know what exactly happened. The topic came up and it ended.

The month of *Jeth* came and passed. It was in that year that the country became independent and Pandit Jawarharlal Nehru became king – the Prime-Minister. A procession was taken out with him sitting in the same buggy as the English Viceroy. He unfurled the tricolour at the Red Fort. At night there were illuminations. He went neither to the Red Fort to hear the speech nor to see the procession. He went round the bazaar just once in the evening to see the lights. Bappa too, went out only in the evening, all alone, however, he gave him eight *annas* before leaving.

It was just after that, that Delhi was suddenly flooded with refugees. Two or three families ended up in their lane also. They appeared so strange! Some looked helpless and lost, others fierce and a little mad. They told hair-raising tales of atrocities Hindus and Sikhs were subjected to, in Pakistan. A family came to live in a house near the well – they were Sikhs. The man was seen only seldom, and when he was, he was always quiet. His eyes were very strange, so hard one was frightened to look into them. But his wife interacted with everyone. The women in the lane were also curious and three or four of them always had her surrounded. Narrating her tale, she went through strange motions. On the verge of tears one moment, she started screaming like one mad with rage the next, as if possessed by a spirit. He heard the Sikh had two young sisters. He owned a tailor's shop in a town. When the crowd surrounded his house, he himself beheaded his sisters with his *kirpan* - a dagger. He was about to kill his wife when the police arrived. The old police inspector was kind hearted, he had them escorted to the camp. They also had a boy of three or four years who always clung to his mother.

And one day, Delhi too caught this fire. He was sitting at the shop, checking a puncture. Madan was inside the shop, when suddenly a strange noise rose up from every direction and shops began to shut down quickly. There was panic all around. Hearing the noise, Madan came out and the two of them were watching in amazement, trying to figure things out when they saw a crowd of twenty to twenty five people rush in from one side. He took a little time to understand that they were chasing a middle aged man in a *tehmad*, running ahead of them. All of a sudden, either the man's *tehmad* got loose or his feet staggered with fear – a naked dagger flashed in the air. It rose- dripping with fresh human blood. Dropped. Rose again, dropped again.

And the next moment the crowd passed on. His eyes fell upon the road and his feet gave way completely, his head swam, a churning rose in his belly and he began to retch.

He didn't remember how he got up and went inside the shop. Leaving everything outside the way it was, he bolted the door from inside, dropped down on the floor, trembling for a long, long time. The day passed not in sleep but in a stupor. Chhotelal hadn't come to the shop the whole day. How could he have? Later, he came to know that curfew had been clamped. Madan had run away then and there or perhaps had joined the crowd.

It was getting dark when bappa came looking for him. It had taken just a few hours for plunder and loot to start. A little further, to the south of the bazaar was a settlement of Muslims – about ten or fifteen huts and a few old brick and cemented houses. Subsequently it became known that a crowd had surrounded the settlement. Only very few could manage to escape. Even before the police arrived, the only survivors in the settlement were the wounded who had been left in the blazing houses. Of them, some were rescued by the police. By the time the fire-brigade arrived, the huts were reduced to ashes and in most of the houses too, the only remains were half-burnt roofs and walls. Some women too were carried away by the men in the crowd. Much later, when he was working in a place in Karol Bagh and also lived there, a couple too lived in a small room nearby. The woman was very quarrelsome, very much so. When the man failed to stand up to her, he bemoaned – 'I brought you out, saved your life ...who knows what sorry end you'd have met otherwise! And this is what you give me in return?' But the strange thing was that no matter how bitterly they fought, it never came to blows.

This time too, bappa got a curfew pass from his depot. When he returned, mother was flitting about in worry – "Such plunder and killing in the city and the boy is missing". At first bappa found the shop closed, but on coming closer saw it was bolted not from outside but from inside. Bappa's knock at the door scared him at first and he neither moved nor made a sound. But when bappa called out, he felt much relieved. Bappa left alone the stuff that lay outside, none of it was very costly any way, but searching out a lock, locked the shop from outside.

When mai saw them coming she ran from a distance and holding him close showered him with kisses. She didn't stop crying and she didn't stop kissing him. "O my son, my prince, my moon'. At first he felt reassured, a sense of security but when mai's caresses didn't stop he felt a little vexed. Many of the neighbours, both men and women, were watching. Many came later to enquire if Ghaseeta had reached home or not. He concluded that mai must have been really perturbed and must have raised a big hue and cry.

Things with bappa could never be the way they had been earlier – bappa was murdered only a few days later. However, distance between the two reduced a great deal during those last few days. He had become even more of a coward but at least now his fear did not increase when he saw bappa. The city witnessed so much of plunder and killing that leave alone the lane, he was scared to step out of the house. There was a twenty four hour curfew and the military kept patrolling the streets. Then, when the fire cooled down a little there was peace for a few days, but again someone murdered someone in some area or there were isolated incidents of a crowd surrounding a house and putting it on fire before the military or the police could arrive. The occupants, if they received prior information, got away, otherwise they too perished.

Chhotelal's shop remained shut for a few days and when it opened, mai refused to let him go to work. But bappa started going immediately after the curfew was lifted. Mai was a little scared too, but bappa laughed out loud – "Can anyone dare to come before a military truck?" Those days, a

truck from the depot used to ply, taking people to work in the morning and dropping them near their homes in the evening. But bappa had to leave a little early now as the truck had to take a devious route in order to pick up people from different points. The train didn't take up so much time and the station at the *Subzi Mandi- the vegetable market* - was quite close to the house and the depot too was near a station.

Bappa was not feeling too well that day. At first, he said he wouldn't go for work. But then, on second thoughts he said, "Might as well go, what would I do sitting at home, this will only mean a cut in the wages." He lost some time before arriving at a decision and though delayed by only a minute or two, he missed the truck. Everyone at home thought bappa had gone by the truck. But when bappa saw none of his fellow passengers, he thought the truck had left but stood there for a few minutes, thinking perhaps no other person had come and the truck may still arrive. When it didn't he started for the station, intending to catch the train.

It wasn't yet noon when a policeman, with bappa's name written on a paper, came to make enquiries. Mai was inside the house. He was sitting at the door sill. The policeman stopped under the neem tree – "Is this Chhedilal's house?" The moment the policeman stopped and asked, his heart skipped a beat. He stood up, was unable to speak, but nodded his head – yes. "Chhedilal has been murdered, his body is lying at the Hindu Rao hospital." He heard, but didn't really understand what the policeman was saying. "Who is it?" - Mai asked from inside but he still couldn't speak or move. When mai came out the policeman repeated his question, then the message – "Is this Chhedilal's house? Chhedilal has been murdered, the body is lying at Hindu Rao hospital." Mai seemed paralyzed for a moment. Then hitting herself suddenly on the head, she almost crumbled down to the floor and started to cry loudly. Women from surrounding houses came out and circled mai. Four or five men also appeared. The two money lenders along with Bhagirath and two others who, perhaps hadn't gone to work or were perhaps unemployed. Tears dropped quickly down his eyes but he had still not regained his voice, as if an unknown force had clamped down his mouth.

And later, the unknown force also locked up the memory of the day in his mind. It was unlocked very rarely and when it was, he lingered very shortly on the days and the ensuing developments. For, whenever the lock opened, the face of bappa lying in the hospital verandah appeared before his eyes – open lips, as though he was still speaking when death arrived, eyes too, open and unmoving, as if they were not real but made of glass. Bappa had no wound on his head but on his chest (or perhaps the back) and on his stomach which had been stitched and bandaged at the hospital. No one knew if he died before or after he reached the hospital. Nor if he had been killed by Muslims or by Sikhs and Hindus, who mistook him for a Muslim.

The policeman who had come with the news also passed on that there had been a commotion at the mouth of a lane almost two furlongs this side of the station. Two policemen, patrolling the area had gone to check and found bappa lying all alone in a pool of blood. Later, he also heard

whispers that the masons – Munna and his friends - had taken their long standing revenge when they found the chance. During the days these rumours came to his ears, he was already thinking of leaving home. The rumours did not anger him, nor incited him to take revenge. On the contrary, the resentment in him went up and the wish to go away somewhere, where he wouldn't meet anyone from the lane, became stronger.

The policeman was still saying how the police patrol had sent for a vehicle from the police station and taken bappa to hospital, how his depot card, stating his name and address was found in his pocket, when suddenly, mai rose and began to run, still crying and screaming. He, and the others too, followed mai. Everyone understood without being told that mai was headed for the hospital. Mai was crying and running as if her early arrival at the hospital was going to make a difference. The city was quite peaceful at the time, the bazaar was open and there were quite a few people on the road who stopped when they saw mai running and crying like this. Many also asked the people from the lane who were following her what had happened. "Her husband has been murdered." "*Tch, tch, tch*"- making a sound expressing pity they moved on. Mai did not stop running on the incline before the hospital. She was breathless and her wails had turned to a strange, continuous sound which was filling up that deserted area.

They had placed bappa in a corridor on the outer fringe of the hospital, covered to the top with a hospital sheet. His was perhaps the only corpse in the hospital that day. Mai had gone crashing down on to bappa and accidentally or intentionally by mai, the sheet on the body became displaced, revealing bappa's face, which gave him a severe shock as if he had been hit forcefully on the chest by someone with a fist. Bappa's mouth was open with his feet showing, the fixed eyes seemed artificial, as if made of glass. Unable to watch he looked away but again and again his gaze returned. Then someone covered bappa's face and he felt some relief.

Some more people, with them Dulaare chacha and the pandit from the Shivala, arrived in a while. The pandit took charge of everything, to make arrangements for an early funeral, "If there is rioting we'd all get trapped here". Dulaare chacha went to get what was required. The bier was carried straight to the Jamuna river from the hospital. Three or four women from the lane had also arrived. They held mai and then took her home with them. It was perhaps the effect of the pandit's words that of the ten or twelve people who had come to the hospital, only six or seven went with the funeral.

When someone covered up bappa's face in the hospital, he was overtaken by a strange desolation and broke into sobs. Bappa's death had still not registered in his mind but the way his mouth remained open, his eyes looked glazed like glass, wrenched repeatedly at his heart. All the time bappa was being laid out on the funeral pyre and while lighting it up, he kept crying and sobbing, his heart turning in a curious way.

When he returned, he didn't have the heart to enter the house and sat there at the doorsill. Dulaare chacha went in at once. Mai was sitting against the wall, quiet now, after having cried herself to exhaustion, but seeing him she broke down again. He heard mai's sobs and lay there on his stomach on the floor. Dulaare chacha came out, paused when he saw him lying but didn't speak, just sat there quietly.

VIII

Dulaare chacha stayed the night, then stayed for good. It was natural and he also felt relief for some days. Mai cried often. At times, holding him close to her bosom she began to cry loudly. He could say nothing to mai and only began to cry himself. It was Dulaare chacha who consoled them. Often people turned up to express condolence but he still didn't feel like speaking. It was again Dulaare chacha who offered them seats and talked to them. At first he brought down his bedding, it was beginning to get cold. Then his clothes. Then gradually pots and pans, box – everything. When the month came to an end, he vacated his room.

They had to borrow from Massur Maharaj to feed Brahmins on the thirteenth day of bappa's death. No one asked him to do anything. Mai and Dulaare chacha made the negotiations and mai put her thumb impression on the paper. But then it occurred to him he would now have to work to earn. How else would they survive? Bappa had some money in the post office. Some also with the depot. But it wasn't possible to get out government money so quickly. Dulaare chacha was not such a burden. He took both his meals at the hotel. But only the house rent was two rupees, besides clothes and food for mother and son.

He went to Chhotelal on the third or the fourth day to ask for work. But despite much pleading Chhotelal didn't agree to pay more than nine or ten rupees (he had already increased it to rupees 6, after Rahmat left). Chhotelal's income too was not all that big but what was more important was that Chhotelal thought since he had trained him and he was still inexperienced, he should work for him for less. But could the two of them manage in ten rupees? He went round the bazaar making enquiries and found a job in a big shop near the mills, that paid fifteen rupees. They didn't do much of repair work, but mostly sold cycles and spare parts. Therefore he generally had to open up and assemble cycles.

Still, the money they had borrowed from Massur Maharaj was a burden, they had to pay interest on it so now they thought of withdrawing the money from post-office and the depot. They had to do a lot of running around and again it was Dulaare chacha who accompanied mai each time. For the first time, he felt a little piqued that mai hadn't thought it necessary to even ask him to go with her. Had it not been for Dulaare chacha, he'd have faced a lot of difficulty. His own job was a new one and the employer may not have given him leave. Still, he felt he should have gone with mai.

Only a few days had passed when suddenly he had a feeling that the people in the lane were giving him odd looks. When he went for work in the morning or returned home in the evening, people standing at their doors looked strangely at him, with pity and sympathy but also with contempt that tore at his heart. If there were more than one they began to talk in whispers as soon as they saw him. It didn't take him much

time to understand that the people were talking about mai and Dulaare chacha. Also, he didn't take long to realize that what they said was the truth. He hadn't talked much to Dulaare chacha even earlier, now there was almost no dialogue between the two. Mai used to look at him with concern for a few days but the resentment in his mind had turned to silence. As far as possible, he said nothing at all. Neither at home nor at the shop. Earlier, he had been alone only in mind. Now he was alone also in body.

The most trying time was when he went to bathe at the well. There were always some people or the other drawing water or bathing at the well. When he went, there were whispers or silence for as long as he was taking his bath. A municipality water tap had also been installed quite a few days ago in the lane but it was winter and the water in the tap those days was very cold. A bath in the fresh, warm well water always felt good. Also, it was an old habit. But now it became difficult for him to go to the well. Once while going for a bath he overheard from a little distance, the voice of the pandit from the Shivala, saying that those who killed Ghaseeta's bappa were not Muslims but the boys of the masons. They had been on the lookout for an opportunity for long. The pandit was a little short-sighted and didn't, perhaps, see him approach, and kept speaking till he was very close. When someone pointed him out, he clammed up at once. Suddenly there was silence and every one grouped near the well slipped quickly away. He had this odd feeling of having been rendered completely helpless and defenceless, completely vulnerable and pitiable. And the feeling brought him on the verge of tears. From that day on, he tried to go to the well at a time when it was deserted. It was winter and he would stay without a bath for two or three days. If it was getting late and there was someone at the well, especially one of the masons, he managed somehow to take his bath under the water tap.

The wish to leave home, leave the lane and go someplace else had become very strong but he couldn't think of a place to go away to. Many a time he had thought of leaving Delhi and going to Bombay or Calcutta but hadn't dared to. Also, he didn't have the money for the ticket. If he went without ticket and was caught he'd be done for. And if he left his house, where else would he stay in Delhi? Once, he took leave from his shop and went around Chandni Chowk to make enquiries at cycle-repair shops. But the ones he told he was working looked suspicious – why did he want to quit his old job? And those he told he didn't work looked even more suspicious – Was there anyone he knew who could vouch for him?

Disheartened, he was returning and must have come half way when suddenly a whisper began to spread in the air going from mouth to mouth. Mahatma Gandhi has been killed. Who killed him? And how? Was the killer a Muslim? No. A Hindu. He pumped a bullet into him. He is still breathing. No, he is dead. In no time, the shadow of death descended over the city. The doors of homes and shops shut down. *Hare Ram*! *Hai Ram*! What has happened? People, anxious and over-wrought, were heading only in one direction. A crowd stood at one point

in front of a radio. *Hare Ram, Hare Ram, Sabko sanmati de Bhagwan* – May God give good sense to every one!

For some reason his own heart choked with emotion. He had heard only the name of Mahatma Gandhi, had never seen him. The punjabi refugees, who had come to live in the lane often censured Gandhi ji, saying that Gandhi favoured Muslims, he arranged a grant of *crores* of rupees for Pakistan, got so many Hindus and Sikhs killed in Punjab, made us homeless, it was because of him that our mothers and sisters lost their honour. But he had been so disturbed those days that he hadn't paid any attention to this criticism. However, at the time the whisper spread and the shadow of death descended over the city, he himself started to feel very disturbed and tearful. As though a muted lamentation rising out of a choked up, massive throat was echoing all over the city, *Hare Raam, Raam*!

He kept following the people up to some distance without thinking. Then suddenly he wondered where, after all, was he going. He asked a few pedestrians, "Where is Mahatma Gandhi?" "At Birla Bhavan." "How far is it?" "Four or five miles." All of a sudden, he felt very exhausted. It was getting dark. He had been walking non-stop since afternoon and didn't feel up to walking another four or five miles. "What would I do there? I won't be able to see anything in so much of crowd and such darkness." He turned around.

Before he reached home, he met Mahaadev on the road, almost on the run with three-four other men. Seeing him, he had paused a little, people were standing in groups and talking in the lane at two or three places. At one spot, it appeared that someone was telling how Gandhi had been shot, he didn't remember whose voice it was. For a moment he thought of stopping to listen but then his eyes fell upon Munna and also some others of the masons standing with the group and he moved on.

All business came to a stand still for three days and he confined himself to his room. The next day, almost everyone from the lane went to the funeral, even Dulaare chacha, but not he. He stayed in his room thinking of what he should do. For some reason the restlessness in his mind had increased, as if his personal crisis had become more acute. He even thought to himself how it was going to make a difference to his life? But his sorrow and his exhaustion had increased. There was no sound and yet it felt a heart rending wail was echoing in the room.

The remaining two holidays passed in similar fashion. The people in the lane stood at several points talking in groups. Some one or the other sat under the neem all through the day. Dulaare chacha too sat along with them. Half-heartedly, he strained his ears to hear the conversation taking place outside but didn't feel like going out. It was some Maratha who had shot the Mahatma. He had been nabbed. People said he was killed by *Sanghis*. The funeral was attended by *lakhs* of people, eminent leaders, many had come from foreign countries. When he found the water-tap free during the day, he went and had his bath, took his food and flopped down again. Most of the time he stayed immersed in his dreams – If only an accomplished Guru would teach him the mystic

yoga, he would take on so many different forms, go to so many places, do so many things. What all would he do, if only he won a lottery of one *lakh* of rupees!

A few more days had passed and he had, in a way, given up. There had also been some talk of leaving the lane and shifting to another house – not too far away from his shop and Dulaare chacha's hotel. But they hadn't found one immediately. He had also thought that going away from the lane would bring him some relief. Meanwhile, the topic of his wedding too, had come up. Someone had told mai of a girl and mai had said to Dulaare chacha they'd get him married if the girl was good and the family decent, the bride could be brought home later. At times, he also thought of saving some money each month and going to Bombay. He had heard there were many people over there from their region. He would join a mill. But in a way, he too was getting used to things the way they were. The talk of marriage too had changed his mind. In a year or two he would grow up and try for a job in a mill or peon-ship in an office. Once he got married his parents in-law too would help.

But for some reason the matter of his marriage didn't make progress. It didn't end either but nothing reached his ears. Once on his way back from the shop, some people, sitting in dark at the well, were talking. He couldn't see who all were there but recognized the voice of the Pandit who was talking loudly, "… has no concern for her own son. Once there is a scandaal, who would give him his daughter." Walking quickly he went past, and though no name was mentioned in what the Pandit had said, he was sure the reference was to mai. His resentment swelled and kept growing.

He sulked but said nothing. He didn't even feel like saying anything in front of mai, who went about her household chores as a routine, spoke little and rarely went out. She had almost completely stopped going to neighbours and they too came only seldom and when they did, it was only to ask for something. Sometimes a sieve, sometimes a winnowing basket. Rajee used to come initially but then, perhaps, was forbidden by her mai. Whenever he was home, mai often turned to look at him after pottering about here and there, disturbed and full of concern. If he looked up, she moved away. Even otherwise, he felt mai looked a little sickly, downcast and subdued.

Holi too passed in like manner. They weren't going to celebrate anyway. He stayed sprawled in his room and mai too, was a little too restless that day. Once or twice he had a feeling she had cried quietly in her room. It was perhaps one month after *holi*. The days had become quite warm but the nights were still a little cool and they used to sleep inside. He with Dulaare chacha, in the outer room, mai in the inner one. For some reason he was finding it difficult to sleep that night. He was extremely perturbed over no particular thing and was lying with eyes closed. The foot fall told him that Dulaare chacha had gone in. Then, when muffled voices began to drift in, his ears cocked up unconsciously. Nothing was clear but he heard Dulaare chacha talk about calling the midwife the next day. Midwife? Why midwife? Suddenly, he received the shock of an electric current. Mai was expecting. He made calculations. *It was over*

six months since bappa died, but mai's belly is not that swollen. No, it's not that, it's recent. Dulaare chacha. And suddenly his head began to pound, like a sore tumour throbbing inside. He turned over to lie on his stomach.

He didn't know when he drifted into sleep that night but remembered Dulaare chacha had not returned till the time he was awake. He woke up with a heavy head but last night's incident had slipped from his mind. Without a thought he started to get ready for the shop. But after his bath, when he went into eat and sat before mai, it suddenly flashed in his mind. He couldn't eat. Somehow he forced down the roti. Mai looked at him with grave concern and apprehension. "What's the matter? Aren't you feeling well?" He looked up, mai appeared sad and disturbed and he thought she had started to look old in just a few days. "Nothing. I am just not hungry. Wrap up the roti in a paper. I will eat it during the day."

But as he was putting the roti in his bag, he felt he could endure no more, could live there no longer, and like someone under a spell, he put a set of clothes in the bag, also the money he had saved, around five-six rupees, in his pocket and slipping on chappals stepped out. He was not coming back. Ever.

IX

His feet moved, as a matter of habit, towards the shop for some distance. But then he wondered why he was going to the shop. Would he work there during the day and go some place, other than home, for the night? What was the use? If he wasn't going to work at the shop, why go there? He had also taken his salary some six or seven days back. He'd be losing ten days' salary. U*nh*! Let that be. If he asked for it now, his boss would only make trouble. He stopped. Then walked towards the station without any particular objective. He should look for work over here for a day or two.

Even after he reached the station, he couldn't think of what he should do. Actually his mind was not in it. His mind was full of mai and Dulaare chacha and also resentment. All through his way to the station, he had cursed them to his heart's content. He was extremely angry with Dulaare chacha and no less angry with mai. What did she see in Dulaare chacha? Couldn't she be patient for a little while? Again and again, he remembered the whispered words of last night and the memory made him simmer within. Such a shame! Bappa had been so highly respected. How was he show to his face to any one now?

The sun was high in the sky and the day had become hot. He went into the 'Company Garden', sat down under a tree and then lay prone. Over and over again, his heart boiled over and for some time he even contemplated going stealthily at night and hitting Dulaare chacha on the face with a huge rock. Even if he didn't die, his face would get so distorted that he'd become loathsome to look at – his nose would crack, his teeth break, eyes bulge. For a long time he kept thinking of how repulsive Dulaare chacha's face would look! Once he also thought of going with a sharp knife and cutting of mai's nose. And then he kept thinking of how he would go, how big a rock he would take and how he would hit it on Dulaare chacha's face, how he would hide in the melee and then going quietly round to the other side, make his escape.

When he felt hungry, he took out the roti from his bag, ate it and drinking water from the tap, lay down under a tree. Lay down and fell asleep. Even after coming awake he kept lying half asleep for a long time...thinking he would return to the lane some days later, after he had earned some money, tell the people of the lane with pride – 'I work in an office (or in a mill), get around fifty-sixty rupees. Also have a living quarter allotted to me.' Once he found a job, he'd also marry. Once he thought of getting married to Rajee. But no, he would keep no contact with the people of the lane. He would go there just once, talk with dignity and come away.

It was evening when he rose and washed his face at the tap. By the time he came out of the park, the road was bustling with crowd. Passengers were coming out from the station, perhaps a train had arrived. The thought of working as a coolie occurred to him. He went inside the

station and just roamed around, observing for some time. In a while, the crowd thinned out. At one spot he saw a few coolies sitting in a group smoking *beedis*. He passed by several times but was not bold enough to make enquiries. Even as they talked amongst themselves, they sounded coarse and harsh. Not only their bodies but their faces too were rough and tough. Especially the coolie with long moustaches had a peculiar ruthless glint in his eyes which he found frightening. As he passed by for the third or the fourth time, he saw the coolie with the moustache had moved away. An old coolie was sitting a little away from the group. He went to him and asked somewhat diffidently how one could obtain a coolie's licence. The old man didn't understand at first and when he repeated himself a little more loudly the old coolie, looked at him from top to bottom and laughed a little – 'Bribe the contractor, bribe the clerk, come morning and evening to pay respect, make hundreds of rounds, you may get a licence.' The old man was perhaps taking him lightly or wasn't particularly interested. Perhaps the old man was paying more attention to what the other coolies were saying. He came away but still hung around, thinking he'd talk to someone again if he got a chance. Another train arrived and the crowd of passengers began to filter out.
He noticed that a respectable looking man, a *Lala,* made the coolie put down his luggage – a box and a basket – at the stairs. Perhaps he had to go somewhere else, towards *Fatehpuri*. The *Lala* stood a long time but failed to strike a deal with a rickshaw puller! He watched for a while then taking courage approached him – Do you need a porter *Saith ji*? The Lala threw him a glance, 'Will you carry it? The place is only two furlongs from here. But these rickshaw pullers are so unreasonable. You'll get two annas. Come on, pick it up.'

Taking out his pyjamas from the bag and rolling it into a ring, he placed it over his head. The Lala helped him put the box over his head, he hung the basket on his shoulder, his own bag on the other arm. The box, not too heavy, wasn't too light either. He covered some distance quite easily but then felt a pressure on his nape. In the same breath, he felt the basket hanging down his shoulder grow heavy. His shoulder joint and the bone in his arm began to ache badly.

However, he didn't have to walk too far. Not more than half or three quarters of a mile, walking round the lanes. But after walking only a small distance he began to feel he would fall any moment, his arm would go down and the basket would fall. To keep his arm up, he held the box on both sides. It felt his neck would snap any minute. In the end he kept walking blindly behind the Lala as if being pulled. Finally the *Lala* stopped and hardly had he removed his hand from the box, when the basket came sliding down. Luckily it didn't turn over. Had the *Lala* not caught hold of the box from one side, he would have fallen down along with the box. The moment the load was off his head, everything before his eyes went dark for a minute. He had, during this time, become drenched in sweat. After sitting down for a while he felt a little better, his vision returned, his breath was restored. Meanwhile, the door too had opened in response to *Lala*'s knocking and a boy, around his age, came out. Picking up some courage he shifted the box in with the boy's help.

The two *annas* he received from the *Lala* appeared to him to be very costly. He had reached this sorry state carrying only one load – he kept thinking on his way back – how would he work as a coolie? But he revived a little by the time he reached the station. He was not used to it yet, he comforted himself, once he was, it won't be so painful. After all so many coolies carried loads day and night.

Exhausted, he went to sleep at around eleven at night in the waiting room only. It was still full of bustle and noise at the time but he was tired and fell asleep. After carrying *Lala*'s load he had become somewhat pluckier. A number of trains arrived after that. When the passengers came out and he saw one carrying a light load or hesitating in hiring transport he approached him and asked, 'Do you need a porter sir?' He had carried two more loads by ten o'clock and didn't have to labour all that hard. He carried the luggage of one gentleman to the bus terminus adjoining the station and the attaché case and bedding of a miyan ji - an elderly Muslim - a little farther ahead of Jama Masjid.

After eating at a dhaba - a small, common roadside eatery - for four *annas*, he was still left with three *annas* from the evening's earnings (Miyan ji had paid him three *annas*) and he felt quite happy. Lying in the waiting room with his bag under his head he thought it won't be so difficult to earn a rupee or two in a day. He would soon be able to save enough money and when he had the money, he would try to make contacts and obtain a licence. That way, he'd make more money.

When he had picked up Miyan ji's baggage it had grown dark and Miyan ji had perhaps hesitated to hire a transport out of fear. Perhaps he had failed to find a Muslim rickshaw or tonga puller. A few of the rickshaw but many of the tonga pullers were Punjabi refugees. Making him carry his luggage, Miyan ji hastened away quickening his steps. When he lagged behind, Miyan ji looked back and said to him – 'Come on, hurry up, brother.' A horde of refugee hawkers and vendors crowded the foot path on either side of the road, every now and then, Miyan ji would look up with a start. The bustle around the Jubilee cinema must have comforted him somewhat. 'Surely, there must be some Muslims among the cinema goers.' It was, any way, not time for a show. It must have been only interval. Miyan ji had slowed down over there and he was able to catch up with him. But his anxiety returned when they started moving again. Opposite the fountain, stood Gurudwara Sisganj.

Quickening his steps, Miyanji had almost started running, looking back at times to see if he was following but after some distance, was forced to slow down now and again, because the road wasn't too well lit and he wasn't able to match Miyan ji's pace. His face registered dismay at such moments. Delhi was calm those days. There had been no untoward incident but Miyan ji had probably returned after a long time and was still afraid.

When Jama Masjid approached near and Muslims began to appear in large numbers, Miyan ji heaved a sigh of relief and began to walk at leisure. He too found some relief. The load of the attaché case and the

bedding was not all that heavy but he had begun to pant from walking so fast. And then he awoke to the fact that he could see only beards all around him. He could see only Muslims over there. He, himself, became a little afraid now. As they turned into a narrow street he realized he was going into an entirely unknown area which he had never seen earlier. This was totally a Muslim domain. He began to wonder if Miyan ji had a dagger or a knife concealed in his clothes. If he stabbed him in a deserted, lonely spot no one would come to know. No one would hear if he shouted. Even the houses in the lane appeared dark. And then, even if someone did hear his shouts, why would they venture out? He became quite nervous and slowing down, kept following Miyan ji five to six paces behind him. Suddenly Miyan ji stopped. As he turned back to look, he had his heart in mouth. Now he is done for! Miyan ji looked at the door. Putting his hand in his pocket, he said, 'Put it here', however it was not a dagger that came out of his pocket, but money. He placed three annas on his palm.

He was feeling scared on his way back too. Also, he was afraid he'd lose his way. It was only when he reached the main road that he became confident he wouldn't get lost. But the fear persisted. In an illogical misgiving, he tied his pyjamas round his head, so that his choti – the tuft of hair atop his head, a telltale sign of being a Hindu – would no longer be visible. His heart kept pounding until he came out of the area of Jama Masjid, and untied his pyjama only when he reached the road at Chandni Chowk. Then finding a dhaba, he sat down to eat.

The night was almost over but it was still dark. He felt a slight chill and his sleep got disturbed again and again. Suddenly the sound of knocks made him open his eyes. A police constable, knocking the floor with his baton, was waking up people sleeping in the waiting room and asking – "Where are you coming from? Where do you have to go? Where is your ticket?" The new problem unnerved him. What would he say if asked these questions? The constable was still on the other side. As he went behind a pillar, he tiptoed out with his bag and taking cover behind the wall, went out of the station.

It was still dark but the night had turned from black to grey. From the station he crossed over to the other side and thought he'd go now to the town hall and lie down in the verandah. When it was daylight, he'd go and take his bath etc. in the waiting room. He was about to enter the 'Company Garden' when a voice thundered – 'Hey, you there, stop' and he completely lost his nerve. Two police constables from the morning patrol! Bolt, he thought to himself. The constables were still at some distance. He might succeed in escaping. But all his nerves seemed to have failed completely. His feet refused to move. Then he kept repeating to himself it won't be right to run, the constables were sure to catch him. If he ran, the constables would get suspicious. 'You there! Where are you off to?' One of the constables asked him but he didn't know what answer to give. 'What do you have in this bag?' The other constable asked and foregoing the first question he said 'Clothes!' The constable took the bag in his hand, felt it all over, took the clothes out and shook them. 'Where do you live?' asked the second constable. And suddenly he

found an escape route. 'District Sultanpur. In village Muswara. I've come in search of a job.'

'In Sultanpur? Or here in Delhi? *Saale*, which train comes at this hour?' Again he became a little nervous. 'I arrived by train last night. Slept in the waiting room.' 'So, where were you going now?' His nervousness showed on his face. Without thinking he blurted out a half truth, a half lie – 'The constable drove me out of the waiting room. I thought I'd go, lie down in the verandah of the town hall.' And a full handed whack landed on his face. 'Saale, you're taking us for a ride? You arrive from Sultanpur and know all about town hall and Chandni Chowk? Speak up, where are your accomplices?' The constable was a hefty one, his slap made his head reel and he began to cry. 'I swear Havaldar ji, there is no one with me. My father died and I have come looking for work. When I went to that *dhaba* over there at night to eat, someone pointed out the town hall.' His mind was working overtime after receiving the whack and he was cursing himself for not having said this earlier. One of the constables looked at him on hearing of his father's death but there was no effect on the other one. He received another slap on the other cheek, '*Saale*, your father will die when you get blows on your bottom. You are giving us a yarn! The likes of you are committing crimes every day. Stealing faucets and meters and selling them off at Motiakhan. Today we have managed to nab you. Speak up now, who is the leader of your gang?'

'I am no thief, Havaldar ji', he grovelled, 'I am telling the truth. I have no one living here.' 'He won't own up like this', unbuckling his belt, the constable suddenly began to whip him with it. Putting both his hands on his temples, he bent a little in defence. And his mind froze with fear. Trying to protect himself, he only cried loudly and continued to whine – 'I am not a thief Havaldar sahib. I have done nothing.'

Hitting him with his belt five or six times, the constable stopped. 'The rascal is a tough one, he won't admit to anything like this. 'Come you …. I'll straighten you up at the police station.'

When they reached the police station it was day light. As he entered the gate he felt he had become confined in a cage and would never be able to go out again. His cries had stopped on the way but he was still alarmed and was walking like a lifeless machine. 'Sit over there' the constable pointed to a corner and going to the constable standing guard, said something to him. But what frightened him most was that the constable had threatened to take him to task once they reached the police station and that he would now fulfil his threat. The very thought that he would now receive a beating made him go numb. He kept thinking whether he could escape the beating by admitting to stealing. But what would he say? Where did he steal from? Where is the loot? Who are his accomplices? The constable had asked these questions. What would he say if the questions were to be repeated here? He felt he could not escape the beating no matter what he said.

Meanwhile Jidda sat up, called a few foul names and then holding on to the bars called out to the constable on guard '... you there ... you haven't made anyone fill the pot with water.' He was a little surprised to see Jidda talk to the policemen in the tone of an officer. He was more surprised to see that no constable said anything in return. A constable brought water in a container. There was something like an earthen pot and also a shallow earthen basin – probably the bottom of a broken pitcher or pot – in a corner of the cell. Once the basin was filled, Jidda lifted his tehmad and sat down on the pot to defecate. The cell filled up with a foul smell but he was not concerned with the smell – even municipality latrines in the lane were always very filthy – as with Jidda's shamelessness. He sat quietly, keeping his head down, eyes averted. Jidda was also smoking a cigarette and making strange puffing sounds, like the panting of a buffalo bull. He too, smoked beedis at times but for some reason he was finding the smell of that smoke very offensive at that moment.

Jidda got up, opened the knot of his *tehmad* and then tied it tightly again. Looking at him while still in the act, Jidda said – If you want to shit or pee, do it now. Once the *Jamaadar* comes and cleans up, I will not let you do anything.' His whole body seemed to have become paralyzed but he picked up the basin out of Jidda's fear, and came to stand near the bars. Not seeing anyone outside, he stood there for a while. When he saw a constable pass by, he called out with some force, 'Havaldar ji!' Either the constable did not hear, or hearing him ignored him and went away without looking. He became a little crestfallen. From the corner of his eyes he saw Jidda had sat down leaning against the wall and had started smoking. But when a constable passed by again in a while, Jidda's voice rose from behind him even before he could speak – '*Oye*, Ramsingha, get this boy some water.' The constable only waved at the time, but he didn't have to wait for long. Ramsingh brought water shortly in a tin container.

As he was pouring the water, Jidda took out a five rupee note from the layers of the folded sleeve of his shirt and handing it to Ramsingh, said – 'Get two glasses of tea and a packet of Captain cigarettes. And send the barber.' Jidda was standing at the door and talking. He thought he'd take advantage and ease himself quickly. He sat a little sideways out of modesty and was finding it difficult to sit on the pot and was sweating with shame and nervousness. Jidda was not paying him any attention and yet when he moved from the door and turned back in, he relieved himself quickly and moved away.

He was feeling strangely upset. Whatever happened later appeared to him like a nightmare and he felt aloof and cut off from it all. In his fear, he kept sitting close to the wall. Outside, there was some movement now, and a few officers, besides the constables, could be seen moving around. The door to the cell opened when the *Jamaadar* arrived but a constable bolted the door and stood outside. Turning the pot over in the basin, the *Jamaadar* left. Then Ramsingh arrived with two glasses of tea, four biscuits wrapped in paper and cigarettes. He noticed that the constable returned only three rupees to Jidda and thought Jidda would now explode at the constable. Two glasses of tea, biscuits and cigarettes

for two rupees! But Jidda rolled the money up in his sleeve without a word. Ramsingh also gave Jidda a pencil and a paper on which he wrote a note and handing it to Ramsingh, said - 'Give this to the Havaldar of the guard when I go to jail, he will deliver it.'

Extending one glass of tea towards him, Jidda asked, 'Is this your first time?' He couldn't speak and only nodded. 'Were you committing mudda?' He didn't understand Jidda's question. 'Were you picking someone's pocket?' Jidda asked directly this time. No. Suddenly he wanted to cry. 'I didn't do anything, they just hauled me up from the street.' It occurred to him since Jidda held so much sway at the police station, they might release him if he asked them. But Jidda spoke a little angrily. 'So why do you cry? Now that you're here, son, show some steel. You can't imagine what they will do to you in jail, if you cry ... these policemen, the prisoners, the headmen, wardens will all ....'

He was struck dumb. The fear brought tears to his eyes. His tea still lay untouched and he was sitting like someone frozen. 'Drink it up', Jidda chided again, 'because in jail ...', tearing the paper packet from a side Jidda put two biscuits on it and extended towards him. 'Eat it. You won't get any food today. These corrupt policemen grow fat on the food money meant for those kept in the lock up.'

He was not hungry. The information that he won't be getting any food that day made no impact. Breaking a piece of biscuit he put it in his mouth and began to chew. It felt tasteless. As if he was chewing paper pulp. The tea also had no taste. He had still not finished his tea, when he saw the constable from the night before and was at once gripped with fear – now he has had it. He sat there, stunned. The glass of tea remained where it was. The constable went into a room. But in a short while, he heard someone inside – perhaps a senior officer – shout loudly in anger. Once again a new hope rose in his heart. From what he could hear, the officer appeared to be very angry with the constable.

When he heard the officer getting angry it gave him some hope – the officer might release him. Therefore when the constable opened the door, even as his heart was still pounding hard, he was not as scared now. However he was taken not before the officer, but to a Havaldar, who was writing something on a paper on the table and as soon as he went to stand there, asked in a sharp voice – 'What's your name?' The voice emerged without the lips appearing to move. 'What's your name?' He couldn't immediately connect himself to the question and stood quietly for a moment. The eyes looking down at the table looked up – 'You ..., I am asking you your name.' The moment he saw those eyes his blood froze. Even Jidda's eyes were fearsome but were also warm. These eyes were equally fearsome but stone-cold. He had never seen a butcher but when he look at the Havaldar's eyes, he felt he must be a butcher. His hands would never tremble while running a knife over an animal's neck or while skinning it. 'Dharamdas, sir', he said with much difficulty. The eyes looked down again. Father's name? Chhedilal. Residence? Hata Ramdas, beyond the vegetable market. He kept replying, as if, it was not he but someone else who was speaking. He had thought he would grovel before the officer saying his father had died and he had

come from Sultanpur in search of work. The officer may take pity. But the moment he saw those eyes his blood ran cold and he couldn't lie even about his place of residence. The havaldar asked no further question and continued to write on forms printed in Urdu. He looked around once, in fear, couldn't see the constable from the previous night. But the constable who had brought him from the lock up was coming out from another room with a handcuff.

That was the moment when he suddenly grew up. He was still scared and alarmed. Still feeling surrounded by unknown, fearsome dangers, however, he was no longer a frightened boy but a frightened man. When the constable began to handcuff him, he saw it was too big for him, big enough to fit the wrist of someone like Jidda. For a second he thought, if he tried, he could wriggle his hand out. But the constable too, had noticed his wrist was too thin and undoing it after handcuffing only one hand, he locked it after slipping the chain in. The handcuff was still loose but not loose enough to slip his hand out.

The constable attached the hook at the end of the chain to his belt and buckled it up. . As soon as he saw the constable attach the hook to his belt, he understood he had to go with him. The constable must have received money for his conveyance and food but he stepped out of the police station and set out on foot. The court those days was held at Kashmiri Gate and was not too far if one went through the *Kaurria* bridge. Coming on to the road handcuffed like this, he felt very odd. All the passersby on the road must be looking at him, he thought. And they'd think he must either be a thief or a pick-pocket. Head bent in shame, he began to walk beside the constable. But he felt even stranger after a while, to think hardly anyone on the road threw a second glance at him. Everyone was moving engrossed in one's own self.

Again and again he thought, if those people came to know he had been hauled up without any fault of his or branded a thief for no crime, won't they do anything to get him released? But how would anyone come to know? What if he came across someone he knew? If someone he knew saw him going down the road in handcuffs, he won't be able to show his face again. Passing over the *Kaurria* bridge he became extremely agitated. As he watched, a train emerged out of the station and began to pass under him. For a second he thought, he should jump, jump down, sit on the roof of the train, get down at the next station. No one would be able to catch him then. But he was in handcuffs and the hook of the chain was attached to the constable's belt.

His mind went completely numb at the court lock-up. The room was much larger than the police lock up but already it held twenty five to thirty men from the jail lock up who had their hearing that day. The stench of urine was revolting but others seemed not even aware of it: screaming, shouting and abusing, every one kept making a din the whole day. Most of the people crowded the spot near the bars of the door and looked at anyone who passed by to see if there was anyone they knew. Whenever anyone spotted someone familiar, he shouted to attract his attention and asked to deliver a message to someone. He went over to a corner at the back and sat down quietly.

Two or three of the men asked if he was there under one hundred and nine? He had no clue at the time what one hundred and nine meant. He shook his head – no, for stealing. But Mehmood looked sharply at him and asked, 'Where did you steal?' 'Nowhere.' He shook his head again. Then why was he caught? Was he a servant and there was theft at the master's house? No. Then?' 'The constable caught me at night.' 'Oh, he must have booked you under one hundred and nine then.' He said nothing, but Mehmood continued to look at him for some more time with his sharp eyes. Mehmood didn't have a scary face, yet one was a little frightened to look at him. The deep sockets of his eyes made his eyes – which were not large – appear large and he gave such a direct, fixed stare that he seemed to be staring without blinking. His face, wizened and covered with large pock-marks, had no beard but his hair was long, dry and tangled. His body, generally, was not fleshy and one leg was completely dried up and when he walked, it was with a limp. Watching him for some time with his fixed stare, Mehmood limped forward to the door.

One constable, sometimes two, came at short intervals, called out a name and the lock opened. Whoever was called, was handcuffed and taken away. And then was brought back after a while. Once, three men were taken away together. One was a young robust, handsome Ghurkha, another was a man with big eyes and pointed moustache, the third, a man, who had the look of an office clerk. No sooner had they left than someone said, 'This Ghurkha is a real brave-heart. The police beat him so hard it would have cracked the toughest but failed to crack him.' Then the others too joined the conversation – 'They broke into a jewellers', took away seven *lakhs* worth of loot but the shop owner reported a theft of only four lakhs because the goods were smuggled. Also he would have been caught for evasion of income tax had he reported the full amount. Loot worth three *lakhs* was recovered. But these fellows have swallowed up goods worth four *lakhs*. They could not touch Karam Singh. He, in any case, is a very powerful man. Also a man of great gusto. Can devour one full goat in one go. The Ghurkha they thought was only a boy and would spill out everything when beaten. But hats off to him, the police applied all its might and yet the boy did not let on.

He sat quietly and listened but by this time, he had reached a state when anything happening outside had no effect on him. Suddenly there were several shouts – 'Dharamdas, is there someone called Dharamdas?' He started and stood up in a huff. The constable had come for him, he called out twice, the prisoners too called out his name. Without a word he began to move nervously towards the door, suddenly Mehmood's face appeared – 'Is your name Dharamdas?' ' Yes'. 'So why don't you speak up boy, they have been calling for over fifteen minutes.' The door opened and as he handcuffed and lead him out, the constable kept cursing him.

During all this time he had become convinced in his mind of his guilt. To run away from home, carry luggage without licence or permit, think of hitting Dulaare chacha with a stone and cutting off mai's nose, sleep

in the waiting room – he was sure the moment he had stepped out of the boundary of his home, he had stepped into a world of crime. But he had not stolen anything. He kept thinking he would tell everything to whichever judge or officer he was presented before and ask for pardon – 'Please, let me go this time sir, I will never run away from home again, I am not a thief. I have not stolen anything.' Even as he repeated all this, he thought to himself – 'I did steal the cycle parts', but then he thought, no one knew about the cycle parts. Chhotelal had not reported to the police.

But when taken to the court, he didn't get a chance to say anything. The constable who had brought him from the police station was standing in a corner. When he arrived, a police officer, who had been standing there, asked – 'Is Dharamdas here?' Then picking up some papers and putting them in front of the judge, he said something in a low voice. 'What's your name?' 'Dharamdas, sir', he said, gulping down. The judge would now ask me more questions, he thought. What had you done? But bending down his head, the judge began to sign the papers.

The judge did not appear old and seemed a little bored and restless. Apart from whispers, the courtroom was filled with an anxious silence. The judge also checked his watch twice or thrice while signing the paper and was still bent over the table when the constable took him back to the lock up. All that he had in mind, stayed inside him. The judge asked him nothing. Not even what he had done, or if he had done anything or not. The constable said just one word – 'come'. He threw one glance around the court. Sitting on an elevated platform, the judge was still bent over the table, sitting below on either side, the clerks were turning over files, the police officer had come to his table and was taking out some more papers, two or three lawyers sat drowsing on the long table in the centre of the room, one or two other men were also standing and he no longer existed for any of them. Not only in the room but also not in this world, except for the constable who had the hook to the chain of the handcuff caught in his fingers and had to return him safely to the lock-up. On his way from the court room to the lock up, his mind remained strangely disturbed. What is going on? What is going to happen? What will they do to him? The building and also the compound outside was filled with so many people, both urban and rural, lawyers, officers, clerks - sitting or standing, walking fast and almost every one talking in a loud voice. Like so many animals, shut inside one enclosure, growling and grumbling. He remembered the pock-marked one saying, 'he must have been booked under one hundred and nine'. He thought, he'd ask him, what one hundred and nine was on reaching the lock up.

But Mehmood was not there in the lock-up. He had been taken away for hearing. The Ghurkha of the seven lakh theft and his two accomplices were back. Karan Singh, of the pointed moustache, and the other man were talking to others but the Ghurkha, surrounded by many, sat in silence. He felt the Ghurkha also, like him, was cut off from the others. Was the Ghurkha also a first timer? Perhaps. He too was young and also appeared different from others. Was he also frightened? People said the police had had beaten him badly but had failed to make him confess. He felt the Ghurkha's eyes appeared a little clouded. Then he remembered

he had stuff worth four lakhs. Each will have a share of one or one and quarter lakhs. One lakh rupees! He didn't have an exact idea of how much one lakh rupees were but knew the rich men having huge bungalows were called *lakhpatis*. Even if the Ghurkha is sentenced to serve a time of two to four years, he would be a lakhpati at the time of his release. But where is the loot? What if they refuse to give the Ghurkha his share? He had a good idea that if they betrayed, the Ghurkha would kill them. Again he looked carefully at him. Sitting silently, the Ghurkha appeared to him, to be a little sad.

He became conscious of how acutely hungry he was. But he was not going to get anything to eat. He had had only the two biscuits given him by Jidda at the police station. The tension of fear had perhaps diminished somewhat. Returning to the lock up after the silence in the courtroom and the meaningless din outside had given him some relief. As if he was safe there. This was perhaps the reason why he could feel hunger. The noon had come to an end, and the commotion inside the lock up was no longer as energetic. There was no crowd at the door, no eyes searching out familiar people. Two or three people stood looking out casually by the door. Most of the inmates had been to their trials and had been given new dates for hearing. A few were still in courts. Two young looking men, who had looked like brothers, had not returned. He learnt from the conversation there that they had indeed been brothers. Easterners. Hailing from some place in Bihar. (He didn't exactly know where Bihar was but since they were 'easterners', it must be in the east. He remembered his home and village – Sultanpur – was also in the east). The court had let them off. A boy around his age was sitting looking very distressed. He had been sentenced to two years' imprisonment – for stealing. He was in tears and telling the people sitting near him how he used to wash the taxis and other motor-cars parked at a stand near a cinema house in New Delhi, and got one or two anna in return from the owners of these taxis and cars. There was a burglary at a tailor's shop in the neighbourhood and he was forcibly caught and named in the theft by the police. He was let off by the court but the police arrested him again the moment he stepped out and adding two more witnesses in the initial case, framed him in yet another theft. This time, the judge sentenced him to two years.

His mind was busy thinking of the many possibilities. Would he be acquitted by the judge, like the two brothers from the east, or be framed in a theft by the police and get a two year sentence? He was hit repeatedly by hunger pangs once he became conscious of his appetite. The thought that he hadn't eaten anything since morning nagged him again and again. Not a day had passed since childhood when he hadn't eaten at least twice. The thought that Mehmood, with his crippled leg, hadn't returned yet also occurred to him once. Has he also been acquitted? But he returned in a while and informed that witnesses in his case had been deposing. And he also asked him – 'Why boy? What happened in your trial? Nothing? A new date has been fixed? What date? Don't know? Hey, are you man or a toad?' There was such contempt in Mehmood's sharp tone that he almost cried and controlled himself with much difficulty.

The cripple went hobbling over to the other side and could be seen saying something to the men over there, who turned to look. He could guess why they were laughing at him. Once again, he suddenly felt all alone in a completely alien world. He killed his instinct to break into a bawling, realizing, if he cried, these people would laugh even more at him.

X

The police van took hardly five to seven minutes from the lock up to the jail, which, during those days was situated at Delhi Gate and the area wasn't as crowded. When the van started, he began to think – 'the van is so crowded, what if the driver lost control and it overturned?' He thought how nice it would be if the impact made the door of the van come loose and the guards sitting at the back got wounded or fainted or were unable to get up, all the prisoners would escape and disappear in the crowd. Meanwhile many of the prisoners who sat looking out by the window, made a strange utterance sounding something like – *yo, yo* – which was nothing like a human or an animal sound, but somehow like the sound some 'men' sometimes made. And the prisoners made the sound all through the journey. He tried to see what it was that they saw before they made this sound and came to realize after the third or the fourth time that it was when they saw a young girl or a woman on the road that they made the sound.

The van reached the jail, stopped ten paces away and driving in reverse, the driver turned it round in a way that the van's rear came to face the jail gate. His heart began to pound loudly the moment the van stopped. But before he could think of anything or was in a position to feel anything except for an unknown fear, he found himself standing in a corridor between two huge, closed gates. The instant the van had stopped, a constable had opened the lock on the door and simultaneously a small window had opened in the outer gate. Getting down from the van, they had entered through the window in a double file. He could barely throw one glance at the arched gate and the stone walls. As soon as all the prisoners were in, the constable bolted the door quickly and put a padlock as heavy as three fists. A constable from the guard gave a paper to the warder and read out three names from another paper – 'Come this way'. The list included his name. The three of them kept standing, as the warder made others sit down in a row in pairs, counted them and opened the window in the inner gate. They went in, escorted by a headman and the window shut down.

Now there were the three of them in the corridor, as also the constables of the guard, two or three warders, two or three headmen, of which, one stood with them. They stood there like this for a fairly long time. The other two men were quite aged and it didn't seem like their first time in jail. He cast a frightened glance around him. At one side of the corridor was a concrete wall, at the other, a number of room like structures. He was a little surprised to see that walls were constructed by joining stones together with mortar and seemed ancient. The ceiling of the corridor where they stood was also very high and instead of being flat, was perched on four arches, like a dome. Later he heard that during the emperors rule the Delhi Gate had been the main entrance into the city and the fort, and outside the city wall was an inn. The British, by putting bars etcetera in the rooms of the inn, had converted it into a jail.

They stood there waiting when suddenly he was startled by a woman's screams coming from somewhere near the gate inside the jail. His heart missed a beat and he felt as if his stomach was getting drawn inwards, as if his chest was aching. How had this woman come to be inside the jail? Who was she? Why was she screaming? What surprised him was that not only the headman but also the other two in custody remained unaffected, as if this was nothing exceptional. After a short pause, one of them asked the headman, 'Is the mad woman still here?' Yes she is here. Where else would she go?' 'Is there no one in her family? Her father, or brother, or husband?' 'No idea. No one ever comes to see her.'

Even lunatics were shut inside jail? He had heard there were asylums where lunatics were kept. But one had to be confined if mad. She must be terribly insane. Perhaps violent. Probably hit people and had therefore been shut in jail. At that moment the Havaldar of the guard, who had perhaps been inside giving his name etcetera, stepped out and gave the paper in his hand to the headman. The window in the outer gate opened first and the guard went out and it was strange that with the exit of the policeman he felt even more lonesome and helpless as if the exit of the policeman had snapped his last link with the world outside, leaving him completely alone amid unknown, unfamiliar threats. The window clanked open and the three of them followed the headman. He was walking behind everyone and had hardly stopped when suddenly the scream of the mad woman echoed in his ears. He had heard the screams earlier too, but taken aback on hearing it from such close quarters, he crashed into the window frame, staggered and with much difficulty saved himself from a fall. Now he found himself standing in a compound surrounded by high walls. Adjacent to the right hand side of the gate, was a room. He could see no door, only the walls on two sides and two heavily barred ventilators high up near the roof. The door was perhaps on the third side. The mad screams were coming out of these ventilators.

Right opposite the gate on the other side of the compound was a small building. Its doors were open and a warder stood outside, along with two headmen. There were two or three headmen inside too. The compound, but for them, was vacant. There were many doors in the walls, all of them closed, their thick bars evoking a strange feeling. The building was surrounded on three sides with thickets of a variety not known to him. In the centre was a small pit, fenced on top, through which could be seen a small, withered, mango sapling. Whether or not it was meant for all the prisoners, but the headman, while pausing by that spot, spoke in a soft voice, 'Mahatma Gandhi planted this tree. He had come here after the last *Diwali*.' No one said anything. He himself couldn't make out what to think! For a moment he thought if Mahatma Gandhi had come here, had planted a tree, the jail must have become a somewhat better place. But then doubt crept in. Only sinners and criminals lived in jails.

There was a low table in the building and a headman sat nearby. Looking at the note brought by the headman accompanying him, he wrote something in the register lying on the table, then asked for their names and addresses. The other two men separated from him at this

point. Again he felt a little frightened. Why had he been separated? Where had they taken the other two? Where would they take him? But he couldn't speak or ask anyone anything. Shuddering within, he stood there waiting. However, he didn't have to wait long. The headman returned quickly. 'Come.' Going back to the right of the building, the headman stopped at a door against the bars. A warder appeared at the door. He saw there was another compound inside, a small one, and three long barracks. There were many boys in the compound, most appeared to be the same age as him. It was in fact a barrack for juveniles where boys from 14 to 21 years of age were lodged. The warder checked the note in the headman's hand and opened the door. He went in, as if, without thinking. The warder locked the door again and sat down on a stool near the wall without looking at him.

He walked four or five steps, then slowed down, then stopped. Where was he to go? He had to live here. In these barracks. In this compound. He kept standing there for a while, forlorn, feeling lost in an alien place. Then his eyes fell on Mehmood sitting at one side, eating. Three or four other boys too, were squatting there, having their food. When the cripple walked towards the water-tap with a basin in hand, he recognized him from his gait and also, watching those boys eat, his hunger over-powered his fear. Mehmood too had come on the van with him and had got his food. He too, might get it. However, he didn't have the nerve to ask the warder. Turning once, he looked back – the warder sat on the stool in the same posture. What was the point in asking the boys?

Then he saw Mehmood go by closely with three or four boys. Everyone looking at him and laughing in a strange manner. When he saw the cripple's eyes, all the nerves in his body tensed up in warning. The glint in the cripples eyes was similar to the glint he had often seen in Kisana's eyes, in fact, even more wicked. He felt a new fear emerge in him but with the fear, some anger too. He was not unaware of the threat the glint in the cripple's eyes had warned him against. He knew of the wicked goings on amongst the boys in the lane.

He was just standing there, mind alert, when the head warder came to close down the barrack. He called out as soon as he entered, 'Come, come, sit down everyone!' The boys began to sit down in pairs to form a double row. He couldn't understand which row to join. Thinking the warder would tell him, he kept standing in the centre. Then Maqbool rebuked him with an abuse. 'You! Why aren't you sitting?' Maqbool appeared two or three years his senior and had his feet in fetters. He wondered why a prisoner was asking him to sit, then thinking, the others too might be getting punished if one of them failed to sit, he asked – 'Which line should I sit in?' 'You, new here?' Maqbool asked. He too was an inmate only, but seeing his athletic body, the warder had made him a mate. Without being appointed a headman, Maqbool performed most of the duties of a headman. He was often in jail and was facing three-four trials even in those days.

Yes, he nodded. Maqbool turned towards the head warder, 'Which barrack would this new boy go to?' The head warder pointed one way,

almost without thinking. Maqbool turned towards him again, 'Go, sit in that row.' Turning, he walked in that direction and his blood ran cold when he saw Mehmood sitting there. He also noticed Mehmood begin to whisper to the boys sitting with him and they turned to look. At this point, the head warder shouted from behind him, 'Boy, what's your name?' He stopped and turned. What wrong had he done now? 'Dharamdas, sir', he said with respect. 'Take your basin and blanket'. Then his eyes fell on the headman who had brought him to the barracks. He was standing there with his things – a basin, a ragged rug and an old dirty blanket. It's not cold. What'll I do with the blanket? Then he thought he would spread it out to lie on. Clasping the rug and the blanket under his arm, and holding the basin, he sat down at the end of the row. The head warder made a count of the three lines, twice, then the boys at the front of his line began to get up to go into the barrack. The head warder stood at the door and shut the door immediately after him. The sound of the door clicking behind startled him and his head knocked lightly against the door bars. But he was not hurt. Standing there, he looked around him to see if there was a vacant space, away from where Mehmood was, where he could roll out his rug and blanket. Suddenly he heard a voice from a side – 'New lad. That cripple, the rascal will break a bottle today.' He looked opposite to where the voice had come from, there was some space on the floor. At a little distance from others were some things belonging to someone. He walked towards that space. Folding up the blanket, he spread out the rug on the top, put the basin near the head space and sat down. The moment he sat down he was struck again with hunger pangs. No one had said anything to him about food. The head warder was getting the other barracks closed for the night. He thought once of calling out to the warder to say he hadn't got any food, but he didn't get up. And then Mehmood came near him. 'Boy, who asked you to put your blanket here. Get up.' Mehmood's face and eyes were harder than usual but his mind had been ready for something like this. He did not get up. Mehmood stood a little sideways, putting all his weight on one leg. 'Can't you hear me, boy? Get up and spread your blanket over there.' Mehmood pointed with his hand. 'Why, does this place belong to you?' 'Will you get up or should I give you a few smacks?' A sound at the door made him look. The warder, after getting the barracks closed, was unlocking to shut Maqbool in. Mehmood too, saw from the corners of his eyes and withdrew one leg. He felt a little heartened. Mehmood won't dare to manhandle him as long as the warder was present. He also mustered some courage, if the cripple raised his hand, he too would hit. The cripple, with one leg and a half, couldn't be stronger than him. The warder went away after locking up. In the falling darkness he saw, there was just one headman left in the compound. Maqbool was standing near the door, perhaps to light up a cigarette.

The moment Mehmood saw that the warder had left, he stepped up again, 'You won't listen unless', and the cripple caught and pulled his shirt from the neck. The pull and the fear that his shirt might give way made him stand up. Meanwhile, perhaps Maqbool had seen them and clanking his fetters came in their direction. 'What is it? What has happened?' 'Nothing boss, this boy has spread out his blanket over here. When I am asking him to get up, he is acting tough.' Maqbool's face

hardened a little. 'It's because he is new here. All his toughness will drop in just one blow.' He felt trapped now. From Mehmood's firm hold he knew that the cripple was scrawny only in appearance, his bones still had it in them. And there was no scope of any misjudgement about Maqbool's brawny body. He thought he had escaped in the police-station, but won't be spared here. The fear in his heart probably showed on his face because the strong tension on Maqbool's face relaxed at once. 'Are you from Delhi? A first timer?' He nodded. The fear had robbed his limbs of their strength, his mouth of words. 'Sit', Maqbool said and he was so relieved, he controlled himself with some difficulty. In that moment of fear he had felt his belly pull inwards. When the tension relaxed his head almost reeled and he felt sick. Sitting down, he dug his head into his knees. Hunger, together with fear had so exhausted him that he broke into a sweat for a while. He continued to sit for some time with his head on his knees, then stretched out and closed his eyes when he felt a little better.

When Maqbool asked him to sit, Mehmood was taken aback and not knowing what to do next, looked at Maqbool's face, which no longer held any hardness. The cripple went hobbling over to the other side – 'Ok, *beta* ... dear sonny, you are sure to fall into my hands, someday.'

After he lay down and closed his eyes, Maqbool arranged his fetters and spreading out his legs on the blanket, sat down. Then asked, 'What's your name?' He opened his eyes but didn't get up. 'Dharamdas.' 'What have you been charged with?' At first he thought of saying 'with theft', but then remembering the cripple's words in the lock up, said – 'With one hundred and nine.' 'Don't you have parents?' He shook his head. 'No one who could bail you out?' He didn't exactly know what 'bail' meant but shook his head once again. There must be someone where he lived? He tried to think of an answer and began to consider everyone in the lane, turn by turn. Could he send for someone? But there was still a certain resentment in his mind. Informing someone in the lane would mean informing mai and Dulaare chacha. He was not angry with mai now but the idea of Dulaare chacha coming to his rescue was intolerable. He kept thinking and didn't speak.

Suddenly Maqbool asked, 'Haven't the policemen given you food?' And again he was on the verge of tears. That morning, saying that the policemen ate up the food meant for the prisoners, Jidda had given two biscuits to eat. And now, it was Maqbool asking him. No one had asked or offered him anything all through the day, as if, he had no need for food. He said nothing. Maqbool realized that he was hungry. Bending backwards, he picked up a tin box with a lid, opened the lock with a key tied to his waist with a string, took out two fists full of roasted gram and one onion and put it in his basin. 'Eat it.' Without speaking he sat up and began to eat. In his hunger he gobbled down all the gram quickly with the onion. He would have eaten all the gram with equal gusto had there been no onion. Even though it didn't fill up his belly, he was much comforted. Having eaten, he looked up and around him. Maqbool pointed with his finger at an earthen pitcher full of water. His heart hesitated once while going towards the water pot. Mehmood was sitting there leaning against the wall. The cripple saw him pass but said

nothing. On reaching the pot he thought of tilting it to pour water into his basin but there were boys sitting or lying down on their blankets on both the sides. There would be problem if the water spilled. The boys would find an excuse to fight. But someone may, if he dipped his basin in the pot, protest that he had polluted the water. He was still in this dilemma when a boy appeared, dipped his basin in the pitcher and went away with water. His heart faltered once again for a moment – who knows how many and what kind of people put their used basins in the pitcher? Who would know if someone was suffering from scabies or other infectious disease? Everyone – Hindus, Muslims, even chamaars - leather workers and mehtars - sweepers, scavengers - must be drinking from this pitcher. But there was no other option. He had to have water. The grams and the onion had made him even more thirsty. He put his basin inside the pitcher and standing there, gulped down two basins of water. Having had his fill, he felt his eyes had got back their vision. He felt revived.

When he returned to his blanket, Maqbool was lighting a beedi. An empty box of boot polish had a half-burnt cotton yarn in it. Maqbool rubbed a tiny iron chip over a stone. Rubbed again. A spark fell on the yarn and it began to burn. Maqbool closed down the box after lighting his beedi, looked at him and asked, 'Smoke?' 'Yes.' 'Here', and Maqbool held the beedi out to him. Later he came to know, one was allowed beedis and cigarettes in the jail but not matchbox. Now that he had got some respite from hunger, thirst and fear, he felt tired. After smoking the beedi, he stretched out.

XI

The court had acquitted him on that occasion, but only after a three month stay in jail. He had his first hearing ten or twelve days after his first day in jail, and when, on return from the hearing, he told Maqbool that the judge he had been first taken to had changed and his trial was now in Judge Sajnani's court, Maqbool had said – 'You're fortunate young fellow. Sajnani never sentences anyone under one hundred and nine. He stays somewhere close to Kashmiri Gate and goes for a walk at the break of dawn when it is still dark. Once he was taking a walk near *Kudasia Ghaat* at four in the morning. It had rained and he had rolled up the bottom of his trousers to save them from getting soiled. When the police patrol saw him, they booked him under one hundred and nine and locked him up. They made him sit for two hours at the police station. It was only when they asked his name that the truth came out. And what a dressing down he gave to all of them! Had them all placed under suspension. Since then he has vowed never to sentence anyone under one hundred and nine.'

During those three months, he felt at times he would start screaming wildly, go nuts. But somehow he survived. Partly, perhaps because he learned, to a large extent, to transfer his fear down to his fists. Whenever, he was afraid, his fists tightened, his heart pounded loudly, as the fear deepened his limbs too became numb but he never let his fear show on his face. What surprised him the most in the beginning was Maqbool. How the whole barrack was afraid of him! So much so, that even the warder and the headmen were cautious when talking to Maqbool, who was facing three trials for theft, one for rioting. He had been out on bail in the first three trials and had been gambling somewhere when a constable or havaldar arrived to demand his share. They exchanged heated words. When the constable, foul mouthed, called him a name, Maqbool caught him by his neck and hit his head against the floor, nose down. The nose broke. The police had then given him a sound thrashing. This time his bail application was rejected by the sessions court and he had been put in fetters immediately on arrival in jail.

And yet, there was a softness in Maqbool's eyes which was missing in the eyes of everyone else in jail. The eyes of all the others, whether they be prisoners, officers or warders, were hard and cold. One could tell by looking that they would show no mercy under any circumstances. If ever Maqbool looked at someone in anger, the person broke into a cold sweat, and yet, his eyes looked like that of a child. He seemed unafraid of everything. He was the mate at the barracks and this was only natural. Who else could be the mate as long as he was there? Who could dare to say anything to him? In the morning, when the barracks opened, he made everyone fall in line, made a count and then, had the food distributed. When the boys, who had a hearing that day, left, he sat down for a game of cards with the warder or the headman or a boy. Sometimes he drew something like a map on the floor and played a

game using shards as pieces. A game he couldn't learn despite Maqbool's attempts at teaching. Maqbool also took care of the furnace that was kindled once a week to wash their clothes and took out some coal for himself to keep. On days the vegetable was badly cooked, he kindled those coals to season it again. Occasionally, he obtained some potatoes from only he knew where and cooked them. The rest of the boys dried up the rotis left over from their meals. He was astonished to see those dried up rotis burn as readily as dried up twigs.

Thanks to Maqbool, not only did he escape the cripple's clutches that day, he also lived in a measure of comfort later too. Maqbool's treatment of him resembled that of a boy who finds and brings home a small puppy, miserable with cold and hunger, and feeds it, covers it with a blanket. Maqbool talked only seldom to him but whenever he cooked, always gave him his share. That first night, he had slept very little. Partly because his hunger had not been fully satiated and partly because the blanket had perhaps been infested with bugs and they had bitten him all through the night. But apart from all this a strange smell in the barracks, emanating from the bodies and the breath of the boys sleeping there, and mingling, when ever there was a gust of breeze, with the stink of the urinal built on one side, had kept disturbing him. Once he became accustomed, he himself mingled with the smell and found it strangely comforting, particularly in the winter. But it hadn't been cold that first night. Besides, the smell had been unfamiliar and he had found the barracks very stifling. Occasionally a boy had mumbled in his sleep, the calls of the watchman had kept echoing throughout the night. His sleep had got disturbed every now and then but his mind had been numb. He had been unable to think about what was going to happen next, nor what he would have to do, what he should do?

When he got up in the morning, his eyes were smarting. He had slipped into sleep just an hour or two back and when he awoke this time, most of the boys were already up. Maqbool was sitting, smoking a beedi, his legs stretched out. He couldn't draw his legs up because of the fetters. He was up and rubbing his eyes when the head warder arrived to open the barracks.

He was very pleased that day with the jail practice of an early meal. Food was served early in jail because the inmates were sent to work by nine in the morning. However, he was very hungry and when the food was served early, he felt happy. Because he was hungry, he could eat two rotis. There was 'daal', but he couldn't make out which 'daal' it was. Apart from the taste of salt, chillies and a little oil, he guessed from its dark colour and sticky consistency it was whole 'horse-bean'. The moment he put a piece of roti in his mouth, sand grated under his teeth. At first, he thought of spitting it out, but then forced it down somehow. Maqbool had given him an onion and he managed two rotis with it but when he finished the onion, he didn't have the courage to start on the third one. His hunger too was almost satisfied. He threw the remaining 'daal' in the drain and slipped the roti under the rug intending to ask Maqbool for an onion to eat it with, in case he felt hungry during the day. But he didn't feel hungry again.

Nearly all of the boys in the barrack were under trial. He heard that the boys, sentenced to more than one or two months, were sent to the 'Borstal' jail in Hissar. They weren't usually made to work as they were under-trials but occasionally the warder engaged them for watering plants or pulling out grass etcetera in the barrack compound itself, or at times in another barrack. The inmates were not provided with scrapers etcetera and the grass had to be scrapped out by hands. The boys kept at it slowly but watering plants required a little labour. Buckets had to be filled up at the tap and poured down plants and thickets.

This is how he ran into Jidda a second time. The warder had sent him along with ten or twelve other boys to pull out grass in the compound of '*Korateen*'[1]. He had heard that when a prisoner was punished by jail authorities, he was put in fetters and was shut in an isolated cell, and was made to grind twenty seers of wheat in one day, that was why the cells were called grinding mills. But Jidda was neither shut in nor grinding wheat. However, his feet did have fetters around them. He was sitting on a platform in front of a cell, playing cards and drinking a cup of tea which did surprise him but not much. Small fire pots burnt in all the barracks. And Jidda was a prisoner with some reckoning. He must have ordered milk by asking the Doctor or bribing the compounder.

He too sat down on the side where Jidda was sitting and began to pull out grass. He was also being a little greedy. Jidda may perhaps see him and offer tea. But Jidda was engrossed in the card game. Even if he saw him, he paid no attention. He had probably not seen him as, constrained by the fetters, he was sitting with his legs stretched out and could see him only if he turned around to look. Two of the other card players with him were prisoners, probably under-trial, as they were wearing their own clothes. One was a headman. Suddenly one cracked a joke with Jidda, 'Boss, I hear you too have been caught by the lure of the skirt. Did you marry?'

Jidda laughed out loud, then suddenly spat, 'What marriage? Am I made to fulfil the whims of a bitch all my life and then raise her litter? There is a girl with me these days. Such fun. She is an orphan, and used to go around begging. But she sure is delicious. I had brought her with me to enjoy for a few days. But I have no clue what's wrong with the bitch. Each night she brays out as if it is her first night. Otherwise, she is o.k. That's why I can't have my fill of her. It's been four months almost. She doesn't act difficult, just sits tamely. I hope she doesn't run away by the time I am out! But where would she run away to? She has no place. I had sent some money to my place so she won't starve, at least. But I can't be sure that a pal such as you won't walk off with her.' And again, Jidda laughed at his own joke, although not as loudly.

'Who can eye anything that belongs to Jidda?' The other prisoner with him tried to humour him. Jidda was perhaps in a very good mood. Twirling his moustache, he said, 'Many times I have asked, O, Basantia, why do you cry? Does it really hurt or do you pretend? But she says nothing and only looks at you like a cow.'

[1] perhaps a distortion of 'quarantine'

‘She must be putting on an act boss, women enjoy even more than men.’ Jidda took a sip of the tea and said a little mischievously, ‘Come over some day if the judge does not send you in for five years and I’ll make you take a dip. Then you can tell if she is pretending or not. Not that she is very chaste or virtuous. In fact she was walking the streets. Who knows how many have taken a dip.’

‘If she is shamming’, this time the headman spoke, ‘she won’t be waiting for you. She’ll take whatever things she can lay her hands on and run off.’ Jidda twirled his moustache again, ‘Where will she run off to? Where will she go with Jidda’s things? I’ll bring her back from where ever she’ll be and make twenty youths mount her one by one. Then I’ll see how the bitch acts.’

A strange silence fell at Jidda’s words. As he was listening, his hands had stopped on their own. Although Jidda was facing the other side, his face and his eyes now loomed in front of him. A strange tension appeared on the faces of the rest of the three, their eyes gleamed in a strange, frightening way and he knew, had Jidda’s eyes been facing him, they’d have appeared even more frightening. His limbs had grown slack and he sat without moving for a while. When the boy pulling grass at some distance came completely close, he gave a start and began to pull at the grass quick and fast so he could get away from there.

Jidda and his companions were still playing cards but now, perhaps, their heart was not in it. Suddenly the headman who had brought them there called out, ‘Boy, come and see here, there is so much grass, pull this out, all these rascals, they sit only at one spot.’ As if relieved, he got up quickly and went in that direction. Sitting down with his back to Jidda’s cell, he began to move his hands rapidly. And then, except for a side glance once or twice, he didn’t turn that way during the whole time that he was there. He was feeling queer inside and wanted that Jidda shouldn’t see him, shouldn’t recognize him. He tried again and again not to think of all that they had said but their words kept swirling in his mind even as he sat there.

Had he heard right? Had Jidda said ‘Basantia’, or some other name? Was it the same Basantia who had lived at the Shivala? He was struck with a strange revulsion when he remembered Jidda’s words. What kind of people were they? What kind of men? How could Jidda enjoy when the girl cried? Once his mind went to the extent of thinking of what would happen if he was with the girl and she started crying? He shuddered inside. How could a person enjoy when someone was crying with pain?

His mood had turned strangely sombre by the time he returned to his barrack. Maqbool had cooked potatoes with onions. When the food was served in the evening, Maqbool didn’t take his portion of the vegetable. When he began his meal, Maqbool asked with a little odd look, ‘Do you want some vegetable?’ His look was doubtful as if he expected him to say 'no'. He hesitated once, Maqbool’s look reminding him that he was a Hindu, Maqbool a Muslim. Also that he had accepted roasted gram and

onions from Maqbool but that Maqbool had cooked a vegetable for the first time after his arrival. He hesitated once, then said, 'Give me some.' He noticed, as he ate, that many of the boys looked at him again and again. It had become a little easier to eat the rotis with the vegetable and instead of the usual two, he ate two and a half. Although many more were piled under his blanket. After that day, he noticed that the hostility present in Mehmood's eyes for him was missing. Mehmood even laughed at times now when talking to him. But he also found that many of the Hindu boys began to grow distant from him. There was nothing on the surface, nobody said anything, but the barrack appeared to have become divided in three sections. A few Muslim boys, a few Hindu boys, and between the two, a number of boys – both Hindus and Muslims – who paid no attention to such things. If ever a word slipped out from some body's mouth, it was like a spark in the air. But nothing happened that would have started a fight.

There was more tension amongst the headmen and the warders, than amongst the boys. There was no Muslim warder or officer in the jail. They had all moved to Pakistan. A few of the headmen may have been Muslims, he didn't exactly get to know. Some of the headmen and the warders used certain expletives for the Muslim prisoners, but not usually in the presence of others. And one day, when they were watering the plants near the 'circle' inside the compound, he saw many people, donning black caps, go into the vestibule. (Meanwhile, he had come to know that the corridor and the offices, falling in between the two gates, were called the 'vestibule', and the building in the compound, where names etcetera were noted down, 'the circle'. However, he could never gather why that building was called the circle.) Who are those people, when a boy asked, the headman accompanying them answered they belonged to 'Raitery[2] Sangh' and opposed Pakistan. They were the ones who rescued Hindus from Pakistan but the Government had put them behind bars in order to appease Pakistan.

One of the prisoners, perhaps a boy named Sunder, didn't react to what the headman said but later spoke to the boy who had asked the question, 'They are associates of Gandhi's killer and have therefore been arrested by the Government. This rascal of a headman talks only rubbish. They had wanted to kill even Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru!' The matter went over the boys' heads and therefore didn't stretch any further.

Slowly, he got accustomed to the jail routine and when Maqbool narrated to him Judge Sajnani's story, he also began to hope he'd be released. His sleep didn't get disturbed now at night, when the headmen called out, 'Go on - all is well'. He had come to know that headmen were posted at short distances against the wall and a piece of wood or brass was circulated. One of the headmen walked up and handed the piece to the second one, then the second one walked up to the third. One of them said 'Go on', the other answered, 'All is well'. And this was how they kept watch all through the night.

[2] a distortion of *'Rashtriya'*

However, around ten days or so before his release, it was as if the earth shook suddenly and all routine was disturbed. A new boy arrived that day in the barrack. An old hand at picking pockets, he had been to jail twice earlier, each time for three months and had been caught again in a new case. He had an old enmity with some boys and was, unfortunately locked in along with them. When the boys went to sleep at night, those boys gagged him, using small pieces of shaving blades scratched his whole body, heating up a coin branded both his thighs. The rest of the boys, even if they saw anything, didn't intervene and no one in the other barracks came to know a thing during the night. When the barrack opened in the morning, the boy was in no condition to come out. He just lay there, groaning.

When the head warder found one missing, he shouted, 'Where has one gone?' Then some boys told him that the boy who had come yesterday was lying inside. The head warder went in cursing, but looking at the boy's condition, came out cursing twice as vehemently. The hospital was informed. The compounder came and applied tincture on the gashes, bandaged the thighs. It was only after two or three days that the boy could walk again, but despite repeated questioning, didn't name those who had done it. He was perhaps scared the boys would take revenge again if he told on them. But the rest of the boys in the barracks knew. Slowly the boys in the other barracks also came to know and then it reached the ears of the headmen and warders.

Whether deliberately or otherwise, the headman of the barrack was changed that very day. The new headman, earlier the orderly of the jailor, was shrewd, enjoyed the confidence of the officers and was serving life-sentence for murder. He was one of the three or four headmen in jail who wore a black turban. It was from conversations about the headman that he learned there were four categories of headmen – those with a belt, those with a white turban, those with a black turban and those with a yellow turban. He came to know that there was just one headman with a yellow turban and he was posted at the black mills where the most dreaded and fearsome prisoners, punished by the jail, were kept. That boy was shifted to another barrack. It was quite late at night when the screams and cries from the next barrack woke them up. All the boys stood beside the bars. No one could know at the time what the matter was. All that they could make out was that many of the headmen, warders and probably also a deputy, were inside and beating the boys with belts. The beating continued for almost one to one hour and a half. Even when it was over the boys were still terror-stricken all through the night. He couldn't sleep at all. They had come to know in the morning that the headman had gone and sat the previous night with the boys whose names had been mentioned and had kept lambasting them saying the rascals took the jail too lightly, thought themselves to be the big boss and were under impression they could beat whom they pleased, brand any one at will. Wouldn't the authorities come to know even if the lad didn't speak up? Each of them would be thrashed till they collapsed. He had kept on the harangue for some time when one of the boys, perhaps to divert him, had asked for a light for his beedi. Taking offence, the headman had shouted expletives involving his mother and sister and said he was not a servant of the ...'s father, light

up the ….'s beedi indeed. Suddenly enraged, the boy could think of nothing else and had spit on the headman's face. That did it. The headman had called other warders and headmen. Word reached the 'vestibule', a deputy too arrived. Unlocking the barrack, they gave the boys a thorough thrashing. Anyone who happened to fall before them received the brunt of their belts. But around eight or ten boys were selected exclusively and beaten badly. Their bodies were swollen in the morning. Some of them had perhaps got it on their faces as well, as their faces too were puffed up. Then they were presented before the superintendent and were put in '*danda-berree*'.

He had not seen '*danda-berree*' so far. The ends of their fetters were attached to an iron rod which made it impossible for them to stretch their legs. Not only was it difficult to walk, even sitting or lying down brought no relief. Then he noticed that Maqbool and the other prisoners in '*danda-berree*' had bandages of wool swathed round their legs to save them from getting cut up. But these boys had '*danda-berree*' on bare legs. Within two days, legs of most of the boys had gashes. Then, collecting rags from here and there, they had wrapped up their legs. The compounder came and applied medicine, yet the day he was released, most of them had festering wounds on their legs and the boys suffered agonies even in going to the toilet.

XII

Maqbool believed, without doubt, judge Sajnani would release him, and he too, came to believe it when he saw how severely the judge was scolding the policeman. It was in fact, to some extent due to his own foolishness that he had stayed three months in jail. When the judge had asked him if there was someone who knew him and could vouch for his conduct, he had said, yes. Otherwise, the judge would perhaps have released him earlier. The policemen, too, must have known about the judge and had kept postponing the case despite the judge's reprimand, hoping perhaps, that they'd find an excuse to transfer the case to another court. When the police did not file the challan at the first hearing, the judge lost his temper again. The challan was filed at the second hearing but without any evidence. When the judge asked the officer representing the police, point-blank, why he shouldn't dismiss the case, the officer said, "My lord! This boy is clearly a pick-pocket, two blades were recovered from him at the time of arrest. If the court won't pass a sentence in this case, it would amount to contempt of law and would encourage crime. The boy would go out and pick more pockets."

The judge first asked him if he had a lawyer. No, my lord. O.K. We'll deal with it later. The judge turned around the papers of the challan. Dharamdas s/o Chhedilal, r/o Hata Ramdas, Subzi Mandi. The judge looked up, what does your father do? No, my lord, my father used to work in a government depot, but both my parents passed away last year. You don't have a brother? No, sir, I am all alone. What do you do? I am learning work sir, at a cycle shop. Can your employer or someone from your neighbourhood vouch for your conduct? He paused for a moment thinking how to answer. The enquiring eyes of the judge rested on him. Yes, my lord, my employer is a big man, why would he come to court on my account? But someone from the neighbourhood would vouch for me.

The judge handed the papers to the clerk sitting alongside – ask him the name and address and issue summons. He got into a fix now, whose name should he give? Also, he didn't have much time to think. The clerk asked in a low but impatient voice, speak up, whom do you want to call? When he couldn't think of anyone else, he gave the name of the pundit at the Shivala, Pandit Balbhaddar Misir, Hata Ramdas. The next two hearings were wasted in confusion. The judge enquired and was told by the clerk – the summons has not returned sahib. The judge got some what peeved at the third hearing, not with him but with the police. He said a little angrily, I know all about your department! It has been a month and a half and you couldn't serve summons to one man? The officer said, 'I beg your pardon sir. I'll make a note of it and send it by hand this time.' 'No way. I am not giving any more time. This orphan child has been languishing in jail for three months for no reason.'

'But sir?,' said the police officer, 'If he is telling the truth, ask him what he was doing in the Company Garden at that hour?' When the judge turned to look at him, his face drained of all colour. What could he say

now? But the judge, instead of asking him, mimicked the police officer in a rude voice, 'But sir, if the boy is speaking the truth, who is responsible for keeping him forcibly in jail and turning him into a criminal? And even if he is guilty, aren't three months in jail, punishment enough? After all, you have arrested him only on suspicion, not picking a pocket.' Then turning towards him, 'Run off now. But never run away from home again. Go to your employer and go all out to convince him to engage you again. Don't run away even if he scolds or beats you. If you come before me again, I'll send you in for one year. Go, run along now.'

The constable undid his handcuffs. He folded his hands in front of the judge – Namaste sir, - but the judge was looking already at the papers of another case. Stepping out of the court room, he walked quickly for some distance in the verandah, afraid he would be arrested again, but then he saw the constable going towards the lock up to bring another prisoner without looking in his direction. He threw a glance around him. The two words – run along – spoken by the judge had made every one lose interest in him. Walking slowly he came on to the road outside.

At first, he kept thinking – the judge had realized that he had run away from home and therefore hadn't made too many queries. Had the judge asked questions he'd have been trapped. Then it occurred to him that his bag and the other set of clothes had been left in jail. Once, he thought of going back to the police lock-up and go with others to the jail and bring back his clothes from there. But the court had released him, so why would anyone take him there? Should he go to the jail himself and say his clothes were left inside? And then he suddenly realized he would never want to see the gate of the jail again. He hoped in his heart he would not see the day when the window of the jail-gate should close after taking him in.

Coming out on the road, he stood thinking for a while. What should he do now? While in jail he had almost made up his mind - he'd go back home. Go back home, fight with Dulaare chacha and drive him away. He had grown up now, after all, and if Dulaare chacha would create a problem, he would threaten him – I have stayed with hard core criminals in jail, if I set one of them after you, you'd disappear without a trace – bones and all. But he had thought he'd go home after it was dark.

Except for his clothes he had no other major concern. But then, he thought he was sure to get clothes at home. He had brought one set with him. He recalled there were shorts and vests also at home, also a set of kurta-dhoti, and perhaps a pyjama too. He also possessed a slightly torn shirt. There was no cause for worry. But what if Dulaare chacha had worn his clothes in the mean time? If he had, he would take him to task first on this count.

Maqbool had, as a precaution, given him two letters. There was no knowing at which hearing he'd be released. The letters were lying in his pocket, written in Urdu, which he couldn't read. But Maqbool had also explained everything to him : right opposite the mosque situated at the

starting point of the baarraa - the residential compex - is the paan shop owned by Aziz. This long letter is addressed to him. I have noted down some items in the letter. Tell him he is to bring all these when he comes to visit in a day or two. He is also to bring some money to deposit in my name. And explain to him clearly to bring cigarettes and slip in some notes between the silver foil and the cardboard of the packet. And to do so in many different packets separately. Tell him not to shove all of it down one packet so one can tell just by looking at it. I've written in the letter to give two rupees to you also. This other letter is for my brother Iqbal. He is the same age as you. Ask Aziz for his address. He has the key to my room. You can take the key and sleep in the room till the time you can make another arrangement.

Listening to Maqbool, he had nodded but had no mind to go to his place or to his room to sleep. The 'baarraa' was an out and out Muslim area. It was all right as far as passing the message to Aziz was concerned. He would also get money from him, there was not a single paisa in his pocket. But the idea of living in Muslim quarters scared him. He was also of the mind that even though Maqbool was a good sort, getting close to a Muslim was not the right thing to do. But perhaps Maqbool had asked Aziz in his letter to tell him his address, take the key from Iqbal and give it to him. Aziz didn't even ask his name. All kinds of people must have been frequenting his shop – perhaps that's why he didn't feel the need. After reading the letter he gave him two rupees. And then asking a boy to mind the shop he said – come along.

They reached Maqbool's place after taking many turns in the lane. An old single story house. The door covered with a curtain of sack cloth. Asking him to stand there Aziz called out – 'Iqbal' and went in. He stood there and kept thinking – Are there any women in Maqbool's household? Why is there a curtain on the door? Don't they observe purdah in front of Aziz? They must have gone inside when Aziz called out. Who would be there? Would Maqbool's wife be there? Had Maqbool married? His mother must be there, perhaps sisters too. Then suddenly, his mind became fraught with many apprehensions. Has he become trapped in a snare? Who knows what Maqbool had written in his letter? He looked around him. The lane was deserted. Only a few boys were playing in a corner. But it was day light still. What can they do in broad day light? What would he do if people surrounded him from both sides and asked him to either eat beef or be killed? There were only Muslim households in all the lanes. If they killed and buried him someplace, no one would ever know. There was in any case, no one to enquire about his whereabouts. He considered moving away instead of standing there, waiting. But it would be difficult to find his way out of these lanes and in case he met someone he would wonder what this Hindu was doing there. What would he say if someone asked something? That he had lost his way? But where was he going? To whose house?

He was still in a dilemma when Aziz came out with the key. The letter addressed to Iqbal stayed in his pocket. Perhaps Maqbool's family didn't approve of his conduct, the company he kept, and didn't want the younger brother to follow the same path. Was Maqbool's father still

alive? Did he have an elder brother? Aziz came out and said, come, I'll see you to your room. As they walked towards the road, the room was located within the lane, right at the backside of the road. Aziz opened the door. The room was quite dirty. At one side was a sagging cot with a dirty bedding on it and a few clothes on a clothesline at the other, an old frayed rug was spread out on the floor and in a corner lay some empty boxes, a small lantern.

Leaving him there, Aziz went away. Not wanting to sit on the cot he sat down on the rug. And thought, it was all very well, he could pass his time here. It was well past noon but still some time before dark. Leaving the room open he bought a beedi and matches from the roadside, lit up and lay down. He had thought once of locking the room before going out but then, thought there was nothing there that would be pinched in two minutes. The neighbours would know that it was Maqbool's room. If they saw him opening and locking up the room, they'd wonder unnecessarily who this person was.

He fell asleep and on waking up suddenly, found the evening drawing to its end. He was also feeling a little hungry. During the three months stay in jail, he had become used to early meals. He stepped out, locked up and thought he would go to a small dhaba for food then take a tram from the ice-factory. Now he also felt that he had taken the key needlessly. He should go and return it to Aziz, but what would Aziz think? If he was not going to stay there why had he taken the key? Then he thought he'd keep it with him for now, come another day and return it. He would have to return it. They may not have a duplicate. What if Maqbool came out of jail and found that both he and the key were missing.

By the time he had his meal, it had grown dark and by the time he reached Pul-Bangash, the roads were lit up. When he reached before the lane, he found it abuzz with people. He remembered people used to assemble and gossip at the well at this hour. For a long time he kept pacing up and down the road. Once, when he thought the lane had fallen silent he went in but on going a little further, saw three-four people standing under the light of the lamp post near the *Shivala*, he retraced his steps. If he passed by that point, someone was sure to recognise him. He did not want to meet any one from the lane before reaching his house. At first his mind had not been very clear and he had felt only a hitch, but walking about the road in wait of silence, he remembered all that the people in the lane had said and done and felt a rage build up in him. He would bide his time and deal with each of them. But first he has to deal with Dulaare chacha. He'd rent a house some other place once he'd driven Dulaare chacha away. But first he would shoo Dulaare chacha out and look for work, so everyone in the lane would know.
As he walked, he also passed by the shop where he had left his dues of eight or ten days. The lala was sitting on his seat and counting money. He'd come here tomorrow. He may get work again. Otherwise, he would ask for his dues. He also passed by Chhotelal's shop, who as always was dozing on his chair. There were two new boys in the shop but they were, at the time, smoking beedis. He did not see Kisana in the next shop. He

was still very angry with Kisana. He would, one day, give him a good talking to.

After a while he peeped again inside the lane. There was no one near the Shivala now. Quickly, he walked past the light. Anyone who saw him in the dark would not know him. But he did not meet anyone. When the lane turned he stopped. Beside the electric lamp post, was also a blazing petromax. People sat there eating in a row. He stopped outside the circle of light and stood in the dark against the wall. On a durrie spread out close to the row, sat a crowd. He recognized quite a few from the lane. Mahaadev, Massur Maharaj, and the pandit sat in a corner, chewing tobacco and talking to someone. A few members of a band stood at the back. The door to Rajee's house was open and people were going and coming, in and out. He guessed it must be Rajee's wedding, still when he saw a stranger pass by he asked, 'Why sir, is there a wedding taking place?' The man paused on hearing a voice come in from the dark, then probably thinking it was one of the low caste servants, he indicated by turning his face and said, 'The Chaudhury household is receiving a *baaraat* tonight.'

He continued to stand there for a while. The place would remain crowded till late at night. After all, they are entertaining a wedding party. Keeping to the opposite side and close to the wall, he proceeded to his house. He went and stood there going as close as he could without stepping out in the light. The door to his house was ajar and a lantern burned in the outer room. Suddenly a feminine voice drifted out speaking in Punjabi, and then a woman in salwar-kameez, a Punjabi dress of loose trousers and top, stepped out. Who is she? And this man? Looks like he is a Sikh. Yes he is a Sikh, there is a small kirpan – a dagger kept by Sikhs, dangling down his waist. The two went back in, the door closed.

How come these Sikhs are here? Where have mai and Dulaare chacha gone? Dulaare chacha had been thinking about it already, he must have left surely, taking mai with him. He was a fool to think, they'd still be here. It was all absolutely clear, there was no need to ask anyone. With heavy feet, he turned back. Someone perhaps saw him in the light near the Shivala and when he had passed ahead, a voice came from behind him, 'Is it Ghaseeta?' He couldn't tell whose voice it was. He didn't turn to see, nor stopped, instead, as if a little jolted (also somewhat disconcerted on hearing his nick name after so many months), he stepped up his pace and went out of the lane.

His mood had somehow turned sour. Where would they have gone! It occurred to him once that if he went to Dulaare chacha's hotel tomorrow, he'd probably see him. But the thought came and went away. He now wanted to see neither Dulaare chacha nor mai. He wanted to see no one. What would he do if he met mai? If she had gone with Dulaare chacha, it is well and good. For a while, he felt he was lost again in an alien place. The way he had in the jail when the barrack-gate closed behind him. Then he started thinking, he'd work out and build up his body, be a bully, become a rogue like Jidda, people would be terrified of his name, even the police and the jail staff would stand in

awe of him. Maqbool was a thief and a gambler. He too would gamble, also booze but won't steal. He would be a bully and people would pay him out of fear. And if someone would be defiant he would kill him with a knife, he would keep a pistol (he would first learn to shoot and become a crack shot), bang, and everything will be over.

Suddenly he realized he was heading back to the 'baarraa' without having thought about it. The lane with Maqbool's room was close. He gave a slight jerk to his head, entered the lane, unlocked the door, latched it from inside and lay down on the rug. It was very hot and the room had become a furnace. It was difficult to sleep. He remembered there was a lantern in a corner but had no idea if there was kerosene in it. Taking out a beedi from his pocket, he lit up. The acrid smoke of the beedi began to fill the room.

XIII

He suffered terribly in that furnace for months but there was no option. He did not have the courage to sleep outside, one didn't know what it would lead to. He saw many of the men sleep out on the cots in groups of four or six. But they were all Muslims, he couldn't muster the courage to sleep alone in the lane. Despite the scorching heat he slept inside with doors closed. The worst time was when the rains started and there was no breeze. It felt he would suffocate, the whole night was spent changing sides. Still he didn't have the guts to leave the doors open.

And more than the room it was his own body that was on fire. He became all wrought up – should he bang his head against the wall, leap in to a well, what should he do? In a matter of just a few days he came to a pass when, whenever he saw a young woman pass by on the road, he wanted to say 'yo-yo' in the manner of the prisoners. In his mind he killed many, forced himself on many but when he came out of his room he saw the world going its way and found himself at a complete loss. It was strange that while in jail, not just his mind but also his body had remained placid, perhaps due to fear.. but no sooner did he come out in the open, that a fire began to rage in him.

Actually, he had become absolutely lonely on coming out. At first he just didn't know what he should do. He had gone to the old shop and had a very brief talk with the owner. The owner had said there was no work but had paid him four rupees from the last eight days. He had not felt very confident but had gone there after preparing himself and when the owner had refused him work, he had asked him to pay him his dues. When the owner looked up he became a little hassled, thinking if the owner refused he'd have to quarrel. He was deliberately trying to put up a tough front. What money? You owe me eight days salary. The sharpness in his voice had perhaps cautioned the shop-owner, he had opened his box, given him four rupees, written a note – press your thumb on it. He was unable to read the note but could make out that the amount written was rupees four. Taking the money he had come out.

What should he do now? As he went through the bazaar he realized the city had changed. There had been changes earlier too but now it looked so different: Punjabis everywhere. Displaying goods on stalls, on carts, in shops. The number of shops had gone up. Punjabi girls and women in every place. He had heard stories that these Punjabi girls were easy to win over. He had specially heard that many women and girls walked the street, looking out for customers. Those who had no other income, earned and managed this way. He had also heard there were many refugees in Karoli Bagh. Taking the money from the shop-owner, he kept roaming around on the roads and in the lanes. He had never been to Karoli Bagh earlier. For one thing, a Muslim colony fell in between and secondly the area had been, for the most part, jungle and still deserted till last year, there had been only nominal habitation. But now when he went there, a whole new city seemed suddenly to have sprung

up. Endless crowds. Endless people. He kept loitering, even after it grew dark, he kept loitering but didn't see anything, nobody made any overtures, there was nothing that would have given him any hint.

There must be something. Surely, there has to be. But nobody thought, to look at him, that he could be a customer. He himself found all the women homely, even the girls he saw were homely. None of the women he saw appeared cheap. He thought, perhaps he was unable to identify. He had no experience. But he had grown very restless and had suddenly started to walk in the direction of Qutub road.

He had known about Qutub road since long. He had heard about it in his childhood, from the people in the lane, when he hadn't understood a thing. He had heard again on growing up. Kisana had once told him a strange reason why whores didn't have babies. But Kisana only said things he had heard here and there. Once, returning from a cinema, when their tram had come on to the railway bridge, Kisana had pointed with his hand and said that the lane directly opposite was a red light area.

He had sneaked in a look once or twice while passing by the Raamnagar road but it had been daytime and he had not seen anyone. That night too, he went straight ahead on the road without turning into the lane. The boys in jail often bragged about knowing all about the going rates of rupees five to rupees ten. But most of them were perhaps only bragging. They had not visited there. All through the way he kept thinking of the money he'd have to part with. If only he found someone needy, she might agree for a rupee or two. What if all four rupees were spent? He'd be left with nothing! The money Aziz had given was nearly spent. (He had, meanwhile, gone and asked for two more rupees which Aziz had given without asking any questions. Perhaps he had gone to visit Maqbool in jail and Maqbool had said something to him.) Unh, someone or the other was sure to agree for three-four rupees.

When he crossed the mouth of the lane, he thought, how stupid he was. Where was he going? After walking some distance, he returned and this time, taking courage, turned into the lane. And he was immediately taken over by a strange nervousness. Lifting his eyes once or twice he looked here and there and then dropping them, walked on. Later, only a few cinema like images stayed with him. A string of rooms, glittering bulbs, smoking lanterns, sack-cloth curtains hanging down a few of the doors. Saris of dark blue, green, red colours, glistening – apparently of silk. Rouge on cheeks, faces white with layers of powder, thick kohl laden eyes, dark hands – a few of them wheatish, ugly faces (one had looked a little better, she was perhaps from the hills), silver jewellery, a nose pendant hanging down a nose (he had no idea if it was brass or gold), all matured women. He didn't have the courage even to meet their eyes. A few men were also passing through the lane. One or two stood by the doors. There was bright light at just one spot to the right, at a paan and cigarette shop. Two or three men were standing there also.

He now came to a narrow lane. His feet slowed down. You ass, what is there to be embarrassed about? The whores stand here waiting for

someone to come and strike a deal. All of them looking like witches. Why would anyone pay them more than a rupee or two. That one, from the hills, had looked somewhat better. She must be charging a higher rate also. He should have struck a deal with her. She might have settled for four rupees. He turned back. This time walking a little slowly. And with some courage, keeping his eyes up, trying to look at faces. But a few eyes had perhaps spotted him earlier too. The row of rooms had hardly begun when he heard, 'Would you sleep babu?' He saw a thin, dark, middle aged woman, at least forty, with small eyes and large teeth, looking at him. No, no, not this one, and he broke into a run without a word, without a backward glance, without looking around him and breathed only after he had reached the road.

Damn, damn you, you're a eunuch, someone inside him said. However, he was drenched in sweat and was completely exhausted. The 'baarraa' was not too far from there but when he saw a tram approaching, he climbed aboard. On reaching the room he lay down. After quite a while, he remembered he hadn't eaten in evening either. The thought made him all the more hungry. But he didn't get up. At this time, all the eating joints must have closed down. This won't do, he thought. One day, when he had enough money in his pocket, he would drink, eat mutton (he had never eaten mutton, hadn't even thought about it, it was also more costly but somehow in his mind, he associated drinks and mutton with fun and high status) and then visit Qutub road. He had never had drinks and in some corner of his mind, also had a fear of drinks. Many of the masons and some others in the lane used to drink hooch and the impression in his mind was that after drinking, a man loses his senses, starts babbling, gets into scuffles and if he lands up in a tight spot, the police arrests him. But then he shook his head, he was no longer afraid of these things. The police arrested a person only if he made a nuisance of himself or got into street brawls. Otherwise, any number of people kept drinking. He would sit in a hotel to eat and drink. And then, he may not need to go to Qutub road (he had heard one could get girls along with drinks, in hotels). Only those who were no longer young, ended up at Qutub road. (All the women he had seen over there had been too old, mostly middle aged, not one of them had been young). This is right. Good quality girls must be available only in hotels. They must be costing more, at least fifteen to twenty rupees. If only he had twenty-twenty five rupees in his pocket, he could line up a good programme. All it boiled down to was money. He would get it one day.

But he never came to have money. It was his fault, mostly, but Maqbool also never encouraged him. The cripple had tried hard, tried his best to make friends but he could never form a bond with him. That night, when the cripple had turned up out of the blue, he could recognize him only by his limp. Otherwise, the cripple had been as well turned out as the college going son of a prosperous father. He had become a little edgy at first on hearing the knock. Who could it be at this hour? Meanwhile, there had been some unfamiliar visitors too, who said they thought Maqbool Miyan was back. It must be someone known to Maqbool again, he had thought. But when he opened the door, it was Mehmood who had come limping in. You idiot, what are you doing in the dark, did you go to sleep so early? Light up the lantern at least. He had become a little

confused. The man walked and talked like Mehmood but wore something like a jacket over trousers, boots on his feet. His hair, slicked neatly back, smelt good.

He lit up the lantern at that hour for the first time that day. Earlier, he had never felt the need. In the dim light he saw Mehmood wearing fine clothes - washed and ironed. When did you come out? Only yesterday. Hasn't Maqbool come out? (Such a stupid question). He was acquitted in one case, now he has appealed to the high court to release him on bail. If it is accepted, he'll come. What about you? Did the session court acquit you? Have you taken your food? Yes (he remembered he had eaten roasted gram with jaggery sticks in the evening which was not too satisfying). Never mind. Come, I'll treat you to kababs today.

He was in a fix throughout on the way. What if the cripple made him eat beef? But he didn't say anything. The cripple took him to a hotel close by. He knew that beef was called 'burra gosht'. If the cripple would order 'burra gosht', he'd know. There were benches on the side-walk and two tables, of rough wooden planks. Two plates of mutton curry for two annas each and roti. The man at the hotel didn't ask any thing and placed the food before them in enamel ware. Rotis, puffed up and white like bread, bigger than the rotis in the jail, but extremely tasty. However, no sooner did he put a curry-dipped morsel in his mouth that his mouth was on fire. Hell, is there chilli or poison in the curry! When the cripple saw his face, he burst out laughing. Too hot? He just couldn't stop laughing at first but then, said, 'All right, take some daal, or would you rather take yoghurt.' The cripple ordered two annas worth of yoghurt, also daal and said softly, they don't charge for daal here.

Even daal had chillies, only a little less than the mutton curry. Suddenly he had an idea, taking meat pieces from the bowl he placed them in the yoghurt. It was still hot but he was able to eat rotis. More? No more. I ate in the evening. He couldn't have eaten more than two even if he hadn't eaten the roasted grams. But Mehmood stopped only after he had eaten five rotis. Mehmood used to eat all three of his rotis even when in jail. (He himself could never manage more than two even after getting habituated, even when Maqbool cooked vegetables.) On his way back he kept thinking the mutton sure tasted good. He'd have enjoyed it even more, had it not been so full of chillies. Mehmood too had made sounds that said even he was finding the mutton hot but perhaps he liked it that way only. He must be used to having chillies.

He also felt he had passed muster in a test of life. The reason why Muslims were so aggressive was that they ate mutton. Punjabis too, consume mutton with abandon. They also consume milk and butter but milk and butter costs a lot. Men grow strong and become fighters on mutton. If one is to survive in the world, one has to be a fighter. He felt a little satisfaction. The cripple asked him just this much on the way – Did you like the food? Yes. The roti was good, the curry had too much chilli but the yoghurt set it right.

Mehmood slept there that night. Immediately after returning, he had taken off his clothes, hung them on the clothes line, searched out a shirt

and pyjamas from the pile of dirty clothes in the dim light of the lantern and then holding them in his hands, had made a face, unh! And had thrown them back on the pile. What difference does it make? I'll sleep in my underwear and see in the morning. Mehmood had rolled out the bedding lying on the cot (he had not touched the bedding till then. He had always been in the habit of sleeping on the ground. And the sagging cot would have been uncomfortable in any case) and sat on it with leg dangling down. He had looked so strange walking about in the dim light of the lantern. His whole body, though a little thin, was that of a normal being. But one of his legs, from waist down, was completely dried up. As if made, not of flesh and bone but of wood. As he hobbled about, his shadow, spread out over the wall, moved, as if it was not his shadow but had a life of its own. As he sat there, his longish, pock-marked face also looked a little too dry (perhaps smallpox had caused his leg to dry up too), smoking a beedi, he appeared lost in thought.

'This life is no good my friend,' Mehmood threw the beedi stub in a corner. 'It is all a game of money. You get nothing without money.' He said nothing in response, just lay there and kept looking. Suddenly Mehmood laughed, as if he had remembered something very amusing.' I had wanted to drink hooch today, wanted to go to Firoza but had no dough in my pocket. If you have no dough, you have nothing.' Behind the laughter rose a regret. He lay down on the bed.

He had been quite perturbed before Mehmood arrived. How would he cope? It was a good thing he had drawn a blank at Qutub road. Those four rupees had seen him through the week. He had gone and purchased a towel, a soap which he had used to wash his clothes and then to bathe at the roadside tap. He had cleaned up an empty box and had it filled with one anna of oil. The barber at the jail had once run his machine over his scalp and he still had a close crop. Earlier he had thought the growth on his face to be heavy and had considered paying one anna to a barber for a shave. But then it crossed his mind that it was better to have a beard when living in Muslim quarters. Those who saw him would take him to be a Muslim.

The real issue was that of money. He got daal for free at the dhaba. But one meal cost at least four annas, six when he was real hungry. As long as the money lasted he kept himself locked in the room and stayed sprawled the whole day. Either sleeping or fantasising about what all he would do if he had a lot of money. At times, trying to think of ways of earning money. Once he considered becoming a coolie at the station. There was no risk now, he would come here at night. But his mind said, no. No! Policemen kept hovering around over there night and day. And that policeman on patrol! If he saw him again he would lock him up again only to avenge himself. Should he ply a rickshaw? But he knew he couldn't rent a rickshaw without an introduction, or guarantee, or a witness. Who would stand his guarantee?

Once he also visited the wholesale grain and vegetable markets but he didn't have even a basket with him. Although he had also thought of earning money by carrying loads, with the idea of fending for himself by working, for the time being, as a labourer. At the vegetable market he

saw the work was heavy - hauling down sacks of potatoes from the truck. He might have got lighter loads if only he'd had a basket, but he hadn't got one. Most of the work at the grain market too was equally heavy, the labourers were lifting, carrying, putting down loaded sacks. But he got one load to carry after a long wait. Three or four bags belonging to a gentleman, weighing if not one mound, at least thirty to thirty five seers. But the gentleman tried at first to shrug him off with just six paise, saying the load weighed only twenty five seers and the rate was six paise per mound and paid him two annas after much haggling. After this he did not go to the grain market either.

He also made rounds of cycle shops. But all the shops in the neighbourhood belonged to Muslims. On hearing his name 'Dharamdas', they looked a little strangely at him and said, no, there is no work here. Once when he went to Shidipura and saw a cycle shop there, he thought of making enquiries. The sight of the Sikh sitting inside made him waver a little. He was a little wary of Sikhs. They didn't talk without abusing, got all boozed up and got into brawls on trivial issues. One can never be sure. They go about brandishing their kirpan, who knows when they'd lose their temper and stick one in to you. The thought of a bare kirpan brought back that scene before his eyes – the shining kirpan falling, rising again dripping with blood, falling again. But when the elderly Sikh saw him, he asked, 'what is it? What do you want?'

'Nothing. I want nothing. (The Sikh appeared sad, unhappy, a simple soul). Actually, I know cycle repair. Are you in need of help?' ' What work do you know?' ' I can repair punctures, tighten up the cycle, do all the other work. I am familiar with all cycle parts.' ' How much will you take?' ' The shop, where I worked earlier, paid fifteen rupees. Now, it is up to you.' 'Why did you leave that shop? (What should he say? That the shop owner had foul mouthed him. No Sikhs are forever using foul language). 'The shop owner had falsely accused me of stealing (he had thought up a new lie), so I left.' 'Falsely accused of stealing?' ' Yes, a new free wheel had rolled under his seat but he couldn't see it. It was found later and he also admitted his mistake but I said I won't work for him now.'

The Sikh kept thinking for some time, (It wasn't clear if he had swallowed the story) then said, 'I do need help. It's all fate. I had such a big shop in Gujranwala, with seven servants. But everything was left behind. I have just started work here. Ordinary repair work. There are no tools for bigger jobs. You can work here if you want and keep all the money you get for pumping in air. One anna for puncture, and one and a half if there is a burst. But no share in sales. I can't pay you a regular salary. We'll see about it later.'

He started working there but there was hardly any work. It was only seldom that someone turned up to get air pumped in tyres or get a puncture or burst repaired or the chain tightened. On days he earned up to twelve annas or a rupee, but then there were days when he earned hardly two or three annas. The Sikh opened his shop daily but seemed to get bored after two or three hours. He went for lunch in the afternoon

and returned after three or four hours. In the evening too, the Sikh closed the shop as soon as it grew dark. At times he cheated a little. If he repaired a puncture during this time, he kept the entire amount and didn't tell the Sikh but that didn't make much difference as there wasn't much of work. Also there was no scope for slipping out spare parts. There was simply no material in the shop. Work tools, a box of nuts and bolts and glue. The Sikh kept the spokes, free wheels etc. locked up in an almirah. Tyres and seats hung outside, all counted, and whenever the Sikh went out, leaving things outside, he made a count. But there were no sales. Only once he had found a chance and had sold a tyre priced at six rupees for seven and had kept the extra buck in his pocket.

As it was, he was always in difficulty, and to add to it he had also been a bit careless that time. He had more than one and a quarter rupee but got so restless one day he went to see a film and then suddenly he somehow got very little money continuously for four or five days. The day Mehmood arrived he had had all of three annas with him. He had purchased roasted grams for six paise, jaggery stick for one anna and had saved two paise.

'Are you married?' Mehmood asked as he lay on the cot. 'No.' (Strange how no one got personal when in jail, but once out, every one asked personal questions). 'Have you ever made out with a girl? But you are so dumb, how would you bring a girl round?' As he talked, Mehmood's mind seemed to change tracks. 'Firoza dotes on me. I too, love her a lot.' He found it strange. The cripple's voice was strained, but so soft, it surprised him.

He tried to turn to look at the cripple's face but could see nothing. 'Where does she stay?' 'She is a high class prostitute living at G. B. Road mate, not a cheap whore from Qutub road. Sings such fine *ghazals* too, it is beyond words. So easy on the eye, so enjoyable.' The cripple took the pillow from under his head and clasped it with both arms to his chest. 'But that mother of hers, ... an old shrew ... has sold off Firoza to a lala, a trader, for five hundred rupees a month. I could persuade her only after greasing her palms. Then too, because the trader had gone to Bombay. But Firoza fell for me completely. A woman wants only a man ... a man, do you get me lad? She serves only that man who conquers her in bed. These good for nothing traders ... they grow paunchy and impotent sitting on their seats ... their wives go to doormen to have their fill. But on the strength of their money they have their keeps, take potions and capsules before visiting. What I would like to do is drive a knife through him if I find him. She keeps on crying ... poor dear, but can't escape the clutches of her mother. These women ... have henchmen in their employ ... have their own people too, the police, officers, barristers, they keep everyone in their hold. That's the reason why no girl can escape. They would get any one, who rescued one, trapped and killed.'

'I had gone at first, once or twice, only to hear her sing and could make out from Firoza's look that she had fallen for me. And then, the other night, she surrendered completely and acknowledged my prowess. She must be waiting for me but I just couldn't arrange the damned money.'

Mehmood's voice held some regret again. Then he lay quietly for some time and suddenly began to hum ... I live only because I await you ... his voice was somewhat hoarse, still he was not too bad a singer.

XIV

Maqbool had come some days later. But the routine had changed with the arrival of Mehmood. He used to leave for work in the morning, when Mehmood was still having tea. In Mehmood's company, he too was getting in the habit of a morning cup. He didn't know what Mehmood did during the day but when he returned in the evening from the shop, there were usually two or three other men and a game of flush was on. And along with the game, drinks. He would come and lie quietly in a corner. But from the first or the second day itself, when no one felt inclined to get up, they would ask him to get *pakorras* -fritters or kababs or daal-moth. After drinks, they usually went out to eat. Mehmood came late at times. At times disappeared for the night and returned the next day. Once or twice he told him, brimming with happiness, he had spent the night with Firoza. His mouth moved slowly at the time, as if he was still savouring the taste of something. Whenever there was a gathering, he too received some money. Whoever won, gave him a rupee or eight annas. Gradually, he came to acquire a strange position, not that of a young boy, neither exactly that of a servant, but somewhere between the two.

No one asked him to join the game. And he never had the money, how could he himself have asked for a turn? Once he had asked Mehmood to explain and always watched them at the game and yet could never get the hang of it. At times he sat behind Mehmood and observed his moves but was unable to catch on. At times, Mehmood discarded very high cards, and at other times, kept on bidding on low cards. Once, on Mehmood's continuous prompting he also took a drink. It tasted foul but on becoming a little tipsy, he began to enjoy. He took a little more. And then, in a while, it seemed he had lost all control over his limbs. Everyone had a good laugh at him. He was in no shape to go out to eat. But Mehmood, perhaps took pity on him and before going out, brought him some *pakorras*, 'eat these, you'll feel better. Eat and go to sleep.'

He woke up the next day with a splitting head and aching limbs. After a bath his condition improved a little but remained off colour throughout the day. He had no idea when Mehmood had returned the previous night. Mehmood laughed in the morning. 'O boy! It took so little to knock you down. I was telling you to keep eating side by side. One must always have something to eat with drinks. Something salty and spicy. Salt and spice will kill the poison in the spirit. Otherwise the poison rises up from your gut.' And he had kept thinking that when he had money, he'd drink only moderately, (only the amount he had in his first glass) and he would first eat *daal moth*, the korma (he didn't know korma from Roghan Josh but he had appreciated korma) and then, if he got a girl in the hotel, fine, if not he would go to G. B. road. To Firoza's house? No, why invite the cripple's ire? There would be many others over there.

The cripple was always carrying a fair amount of money those days. He used to go out during the day for two or three hours. There was more opportunity for picking pockets in big crowds. He was purring with happiness one day, he had picked a pocket worth two hundred rupees the previous day (he hadn't returned that night and said he had been at Firoza's). Come, let me show you how to use a 'lakkad'. (He had learned that day that 'lakkad' meant a blade. Also that 'thaan' meant a thousand rupees, 'gaj' a hundred rupees and 'girah' meant ten). But he had failed to learn. The cripple gave up in just two or three days. 'No boy, you are not cut out for this. For one, your fingers are thick and they don't move nimbly because you are so scared. And if you are scared, you are gone. The slightest shake of fingers and you are in for a drubbing. First at the hands of the public, then the confounded policemen, and rest is taken care of by the jail staff.'

He wondered how the cripple had come to know his deepest secret in just two days... that he was damn scared. The reason why he couldn't learn to use the blade, could never have money, could neither eat korma with drinks sitting in a hotel nor ask a girl or go to G. B. Road. He sat at the cycle shop during the day, did whatever work was there, brought *pakorras* or kababs or daal-month when people gathered in the room and got a rupee or eight annas from whoever won in the game of flush.

This became the routine of his life and remained so even after Maqbool arrived. Maqbool slept at home but visited there at times during the day or in the evening. Played a game of flush at times but seldom drank. Mehmood told him that Maqbool went to Bundu Khalifa's *akharra* for workout and therefore did not drink. Maqbool also stayed more in the company of the people at the *akharra*. Seeing him there Maqbool had asked, 'you are still here?' And nothing more. Perhaps he had found out from Mehmood what he was doing. He had been surprised when Mehmood told him of Maqbool's acquittal in the case of rioting – he had bought off that policeman with five hundred rupees and the policeman had twisted his statement. He had been sentenced to six months in jail in a theft case but the sessions court had granted him bail.

Gradually he realized that it was Mehmood, who was the real leader of the gang (though they were all youths of around twenty years of age). Maqbool did not take his share from their daily earnings. However when a big theft was planned, it was Maqbool who led. First because he had an athletic, strong body. And second because he was unafraid and clever. There was a daily risk but no big money in picking pockets. Whereas it was normal to lay hands on loot to the tune of four to five thousand in a theft. The winters that year passed comfortably. When he had some money in hand, he went to the rag market and bought an old coat and two blankets. But a few days after the holi festival, when he went to the shop, he found it closed. He sat there and waited till noon and then came away. He had no idea where the Sikh gentleman lived. He went again in the evening, the shop was still closed. When he went the next day, there were workers making some renovations. He came to know that the shop had earlier belonged to a Muslim, who had fled to Pakistan. The Sikh man had taken possession during the riots. The shop was at a good spot and the Sikh man had given its possession for four

(or may be five) thousand to a bania - a grocer, who was going to open a grocery shop there.

When his job at the shop was cut short, he became totally dependent on Mehmood and his cronies and also began to feel the pinch of money. He got eight annas or a rupee only when there was a game of flush. Now that he had no work he stayed in the room only and Mehmood's attitude too, changed suddenly. Mehmood knew that now he depended completely on his money and began to treat him more or less like a servant, asking him to do chores like fetching tea, cigarettes, soda or returning the empty glasses and bottles. His mind too, was overtaken by a lethargy or rather, something akin to exhaustion. He felt no inclination to go anywhere, do anything. When Mehmood went out, he stayed sprawled in the room. But one day, when Mehmood threw his dirty underwear before him, along with one rupee, saying – Wash these, they've become too dirty – his mind revolted.

He was short of money, so he washed the clothes but after this, began to avoid Mehmood. He returned late at night, kept loitering here and there, and once even had an altercation with the cripple. One night, seeing a number of porters who carried loads of vegetables lying down near the vegetable market, he too joined them. A middle aged man asked where he hailed from. Perhaps from his face, he looked like an easterner. When he said that although he had lived in Delhi, he belonged to Sultanpur, the porters came to regard him as one of their own. He found they were all from that region. No one from Sultanpur exactly, but from Deoria, Gorakhpur, Banaras, Mirzapur.

The middle aged porter was from Mirzapur. He kept asking general questions. Talking to him, he kept hoping that the porter would talk about getting him work. But these porters were themselves homeless, carrying loads to earn a daily wage of a rupee or twelve annas or a rupee and a quarter or a half at most, spending some of it on food and saving the rest. But once he came to know them, he often went towards the market during the day. If he found someone, sitting idle, he talked to him. If there was a light load, he carried it. He was going less frequently to Maqbool's room now.

The porters slept in groups of ten or twelve. Perhaps that was the reason the police did not bother them much. The police patrol passed by, turning a blind eye or at times, sat with them to smoke a beedi. He was still scared of the police but realized there was nothing to fear. Still he didn't much enjoy the company of the porters either. For one thing, they were all grown up and had families. There was no one his age. They had left their homes, their families and a few, their lands behind in their villages hoping they'd return after making and saving money in Delhi. Almost all of them had tilled another's field, or had owned a small holding and were in debt, and hoped to earn and pay back. They were forever talking about their home and village.

It was partly because he still hungered for the *pakorras* and the *daal-moth*, and also because he got some money when there was a gathering that he still visited the room once in a while in the evening. The cripple

had become a little indifferent towards him now. He went there and if a game of cards was on, sat quietly. If someone wanted something, he threw the money at him, 'Hey Dharma, get a packet of cigarettes, get the scissors brand.' Now that he wasn't there permanently, they didn't think it necessary to give him money on winning. At times they paid, at times not. At times some money was left after making purchases, but only a few annas.

At times like these, he grew sad. He had discovered one or two isolated spots and used to go there to sleep. The spot was convenient and free from the fear of the police. From the vegetable market, one could also see 'Jeetgarh', built in the memory of the British killed in the mutiny. That too was a good spot but not completely hassle free. A little further down was a ruin, a relic of a building from the days of the emperor's rule. A staircase leading up to an open space and also a room with a roof. Ideal for both summer and rain. And the best part was there was no risk of the police. The police patrol never went that side and even if they did, couldn't see anyone lying on the terrace, not even in the torch light.

It was his greed that did him in. His clothes had become too grimy so he washed and put them out to dry in the room and went off to sleep. In the morning, Mehmood said, 'will you work?' 'What work?' 'Look, if you want the work, say yes. You won't have to carry loads, you only have to sit.' All of the open space on Faiz road from start to finish, had been taken up by Punjabis to put up stalls or to build small houses by joining bricks. At the end point, where a road from Panchkuian came up to the ridge, A new club had perhaps been opened where hooch was sold and people gambled all day long. A distillery was run by its side. Earlier he had thought liquor was sold openly in Delhi, so what was the need to sell on the sly. Gradually, he came to know one needed a licence to sell liquor. There was so much money in selling direct from distillery that one could become rich in just two or four months. Besides the club owner received one anna per rupee in gambling. There was no doubt a little risk but negligible if one greased the palms of the police. And one earned without putting in anything. If there was a game of sixteen hundred in a day, a hundred rupees would come to the owner! Just thinking about it made his head reel.

His job was to sit at the door. To let any person, who asked for Sardul, in and no one else. To knock at the door in a special manner if he sensed danger or saw a policeman patrolling the lane. There was a back exit, all the people and the staff went to adjoining house at the slightest hint of a risk and if the danger was more grave they could all slip away from another exit. The club too belonged to a Punjabi – Laddharam. There were two others besides him on his pay roll who sat inside supervising the sales and the game. The strange thing was that whereas all visitors to Maqbool's room, barring him, were Muslims, most of the visitors here were either Hindus or Sikhs. But if Mehmood visited, there must have been other Muslim visitors too, or perhaps, people didn't realize that Mehmood was Muslim. He didn't appear like one from his face. And he, in any case, couldn't tell a Muslim without the distinguishing moustache and beard.

Now, he often slept at the club. People kept going in and out till late at night. And thereafter, eating at a Sikh's dhaba close by, lay down at the club only.

One morning he went from there towards the jungle and while returning noticed a rock near a little lane, somewhat longer than the platforms in jail, but absolutely flat and smooth. Now whenever he longed to be alone, he made for that rock. Now he also had lots of money, had had a proper shave and went for one regularly after every two or three days and also got quite a few clothes stitched. Once, he also felt like getting a pair of pants, but wasn't sure it would suit him and that he'd be able to walk properly in it, with confidence, the way the others did. And had therefore got a kurta pyjama stitched by a Muslim tailor at the 'baarraa'. Also a woollen jacket.

He kept his stuff locked in a small tin box in Maqbool's room, although he now visited very rarely. He was saving money now and whatever savings he made, he locked in that box. He was having an easy time. Without putting in hard labour, he was making good money. He had noticed that many easterners had opened paan and cigarette shops at various points. And he had begun to calculate. If he continued to get money from the club even only for the next eight to ten months, he would have three to four hundred rupees. When he had that much money, he too would open a paan-cigarette shop somewhere. There were new settlements coming up, he'd get a place for a cheap rent and the shop too would pick up fast.

Now that the thought of saving money occurred to him, he started spending more thriftily and dropped the idea of a woollen coat. It wasn't that cold yet and he had brought a blanket over from Maqbool's for use at night. He had thought that he too would gamble on Diwali with five rupees.. if luck favoured the five might grow into five hundred. But he didn't get a chance to try his luck. The club was raided two days before Diwali – at ten at night. The police had formed a special squad to check gambling on and around Diwali. The Karoli Bagh police station was paid a monthly sum but perhaps the head of that squad nursed a grudge against the Karoli Bagh station house officer. He carried out a number of raids in Karoli Bagh in just two days. The club too got wind of it. They were on alert the whole day. Had it been some other occasion, the gambling party might have dispersed but even though some of the party left the game, others in the spirit of Diwali, remained sitting. When night fell and the police didn't show up, everyone relaxed.

Spreading out his blanket he had just lain down after dinner, when there was a knock at the door. He sat up startled, who was it? 'Open up,' two or three sharp voices rose at once and again, the knock. The people inside had also heard and there was instant panic. Had he been inside with the others, perhaps he too would have fled. But alone in that room, his feet seemed to have frozen. The voices outside, as also the knocks at the door became sharper and sharper. Those voices seemed to have him tied down. Instead of exiting from the rear, he began to advance towards the door. 'Who is there?' He asked again with extreme difficulty. 'Open

the door and we'll tell you.' His hands moved almost unconsciously towards the latch. Even as he was about to undo the latch a voice from within cautioned him ... let it remain closed. But at that instant there was a push at the door, his hand shook badly, the door opened and the policemen came barging in. One of them caught his hand, led him outside and made him sit in the police van parked there. The rest went in but could get hold of only two fat traders who perhaps had been unable to run due to either their bulk or nervousness. After getting out of the back door they had, begun to run in the lane instead of going in the next house. Both the traders had been newcomers, they had come because it was Diwali. They were not aware that the door of the next house opened out into another lane from where they could have cleared out. They thought if the police had surrounded them, there would be danger of their getting trapped in the house next door.

The squad leader (perhaps a senior officer) was standing outside with a small baton in hand. When a constable came to tell him there was no one else inside, he went in and made a round. The sight of the police had made the people in the neighbourhood come out and stand in a crowd. 'Whose house is it?' Coming out the officer asked, facing the gathering. 'Laddharam's,' answered many voices in unison. 'Is there no one else in his family?' 'No sahib, he is alone. That's his servant.' One of the men pointed at him in the van. 'Do you people know this is a gambling den?' 'No sahib, we know nothing.' 'And that it sells liquor?' 'No sahib, we go to work during the day, how would we know, but Laddharam is a good man to talk to.' 'What does he do?' 'He is a real estate agent, sahib.'

The officer came and sat down on the front seat and the van began to move. Had it been in his hands, the officer would perhaps have made further enquiries of him but his hands were tied and he delivered him to the staff manning the Karoli Bagh police station. When they asked him his name and address, he gave the same answer. Dharamdas. Son of Chhedilal, hata Ramdas. For some reason, he couldn't bring himself to give either Laddharam's address or that of Maqbool's room. The policemen too didn't show any interest and locked up all three of them. But within two hours the two traders were let off on bail. As the case was filed only for gambling, there was no problem of bail in the police-station itself, but who would have come to bail him out? He thought Laddharam might, but then realized, he would be angry. What option did he have other than to open the door? But then it came to him on its own that after everyone had gone out of the back door, they'd have put a lock on it. Then perhaps someone would have gone round to the front to tell the police there was no one in the house, Laddharam had gone somewhere and there was a lock at the back. Then perhaps Laddharam would have returned and opened the lock after a while pretending he had just arrived, and wasn't aware there was police outside. Possibly, the police, seeing that the birds had flown, would have left already.

However, he wasn't as afraid this time as earlier. Partly because he had now come to know quite a lot about courts and lock-ups. Besides he had also, in his heart, come to know what had to happen, would happen. The next day being a holiday, he didn't have to wait in the lockup at court.

There were two others, caught for gambling, who had not been bailed out by any one. One a paan shop owner from Pratapgarh and the other, a Punjabi dry fruit-seller. They were taken to the court in the police van, the havaldar went in and took in the signature of the magistrate on duty on remand papers while they were still sitting in the van, and then they were taken to the jail.

He had again felt very sick on reaching the jail. All the while that he stood in the vestibule, he had a sinking feeling. There was no knowing when he would get out of these walls again. The screams of the mad woman were heard again. But this time, it was he who told the two startled men with him, 'she is mad, has been locked up for a long time. She often keeps screaming.' And somehow after this he felt a little lighter. Perhaps by comparing himself with the other two. This time too, he was kept in the juvenile barracks and was therefore separated from the other two. As it was still day, he was also given the evening meal. There were just two or three of his old acquaintances in the barrack and they too had come a second time after release. The mate this time was a lean and thin boy named Devender who smoked pot and was an opium user. He had been caught peddling opium on the sly. Two seers of opium had been recovered from him. Trafficking in opium, the boy had become an addict himself. But he had loads of money and was treated with respect by all the warders. They took slips from him and brought back money. He never had to make do without anything. The headmen and the warders kept a regular supply of coal. He got milk from the hospital, also eggs and bread. He always had a stock of ghee, jaggery, onions - the lot. His meals were cooked every morning and evening. He took only rotis from the usual jail food and those too were kept separately in the bundle for him. His rotis came from the kitchen of the death-cells.

He had only this time come to know of this custom in jail, that the food for all the condemned prisoners counting their last days in the death cells was cooked separately. The same fare, but a little better cooked. Perhaps there was sand even in those rotis, but he felt the rotis meant for Devender were somewhat better cooked. He was a mate only in name. Except for making a count each morning and evening, he lolled in the barrack all through the day. Devender too sent for sweets on Diwali. Not enough for distribution among the boys but all the headmen and warders who visited that day were treated to sweets by him.

The boys received one sweet of 'laddoo' each on that day. He came to know that there was one baba – an ascetic, who visited on Holi and Diwali to distribute laddoos to everyone in jail. But it was on the second or the third day after Diwali, when the sun came up and yet the barrack was not opened. The headmen and the warders stood like statues near the outer gate of the barracks. The boys thought at first they were waiting for the head warder and would open in a while. When the sun began to rise up they began to make a din, gathering near the bars and screaming. All felt the need either to urinate or to defecate or both, the headman and the warder, just stood at the gate. When some of the boys could hold no longer, they took water from the pitchers and began to use the urinals in the barracks to defecate. When the stink started the

boys moved away from there. There was noise coming from the other barracks too. In a while, one of the headmen walked slowly in, what he said, he could not hear because he was at the back and the headman had spoken in a low voice but silence fell at once. Then a whisper made its way up. Jidda is dead. Jidda is dead! Jidda who? A notorious crook. Had many murders to his name. Built like a mountain he would have proved difficult to over-power for four men. How did he die? He was in the black mills, punished for abusing the deputy. When the warder went to give him sweets yesterday, he called him names again. Last night, around eight to ten headmen tied up his hands and feet, gagged his mouth and thrashed him up. The beating proved fatal. He was perhaps hit on a delicate spot. The deputy too was sure to have been there, the warders and the headmen alone wouldn't have dared. Besides, they had all been terrified of Jidda.

The headman went to the other two barracks also and within two minutes there was silence. Slowly the noise in the other barracks also stopped. There was no sound except for the boys' whispers in the barrack, it appeared as if there was no one in the jail. As if instead of being full of a thousand odd inmates, it was a deserted, desolate place. When the head warder came again after a while to open the barrack, someone whispered that he was also in charge of the 'black mills', and so he too must have been present. The boys looked repeatedly at his face but no one said anything. Making a quick count, he went away. The whispers had died for the duration that he had been there. The boys, sitting in rows, had sat in complete silence and had continued to sit even after he had completed the count. Once he went out shutting the outer gate, the whispers started again and gradually small groups of boys were formed.

The whole day, there was silence in jail. The boys talked only of Jidda. When the headman and the warder changed shifts in the morning, the boys made enquiries. The warder sent them away with a scolding but the headman told them a little. The cooks, when they arrived with the food, also talked only about this. But no one could say anything with certainty except that Jidda had died before the night was over. They had sent for the civil surgeon at the crack of dawn. Although he lived in the Irwin hospital next door, it had taken him more than half an hour to reach. The surgeon arrived, the body was taken to the vestibule, only then the barracks were opened. The civil surgeon had taken the body immediately with him for post-mortem. Besides this, many other stories were floating around. Someone said the deputy had been placed under suspension. But obviously the news was incorrect for he later saw the deputy on duty. Another said it was not their head warder but the one at the factory who had been present there. He had been beaten by Jidda once, some two or three years back when he had tried to boss over Jidda and had insisted that he should work. In his arrogance he had advanced, unbuckled his belt, and had been badly thrashed by Jidda. None of the headmen had come to his aid and he was left shouting. The head warder had come fresh from Punjab and was not familiar with Jidda. On his complaint Jidda was put in fetters but no inmate or headman agreed to give witness against him before the superintendent. He had been nursing this grudge when he got orders from the deputy to set Jidda

right, and had taken his life. Some others contradicted the story saying that the deputy had been present himself, there had been no intent to kill, it so happened that Jidda had suddenly suffered a blow that had proved fatal.

By afternoon, even the whispers died and the silence in the jail deepened. When, at times, the warder called out or shouted, or a boy spoke loudly, it sounded like a dog's bark, coming out of the dark. His heart had begun to pound hard in the morning itself, when the whispers had first started. His tongue seemed to have been paralyzed all through the day. In his restlessness, he had stood to listen in, at times near one group, at times near another, but hadn't spoken or asked anything. He remembered how Jidda had looked at him with his only red eye, how he had called him names - stupid, why cry? Now that you are here, show some steel. He remembered how Jidda had treated him to tea and biscuits. He had held such sway, everyone had been in awe of him. His heart didn't want to believe Jidda had died, and had died like this! In the black mill, with his hands and feet tied (or was he beaten wrapped in a blanket?), mouth gagged, unable to fight, unable to speak, unable to ask forgiveness, unable to grovel. Had his mouth been open, would he have said, forgive me sahib, let me go, I won't do it again? He couldn't come to a conclusion. For all you know, he may have asked for forgiveness at the time while silently vowing revenge. Or perhaps not. Such a powerful criminal. He had murdered so many. And even he couldn't live without fear, without peril, had to part with his life. He felt his limbs go limp, as if there was no strength in his bones, as if he stood not on ground but was hanging midair. The slightest of push from someone and he'd fall down and keep on rolling.

XV

The impact of Jidda's death on the jail lasted only two or three days. On the fourth day Babu started again to sing. He was a Maharashtrian, from some place near Indore. He had also become a little friendly. At home he had a widowed mother, a sister, also some land but no one to work on it. When they'd given it out on contract they hadn't had enough even to eat. Five or six years back (at the age of fourteen or fifteen) he went to Bombay to make a living. He couldn't manage any other work over there, what he did was join a gang of pick-pockets. He talked a lot about film actors, was not bad to look at, was a good singer and when ever free, sat down with a pitcher to sing. He wore an iron ring on his finger and played on the pitcher striking it with expertise. When Bombay police ordered his deportation, he made for Delhi. The moment he arrived he was booked under one hundred and nine. His conviction would mean one year in jail. He said he needed money for his sister's wedding. Ten or fifteen thousand. When he had that much, he would go back home. (Ten or fifteen thousand! It would take a life time).

He sang for hours, playing on his pitcher like a drum, even after lock up time. He remembered one particular song which Babu sang often, 'My heart knows no rest'. When he sang, some of the boys sat surrounding him. A few sang along. When laddoos were distributed on Diwali, Babu, instead of the pitcher, had turned the drum used for boiling water on washing days in to a playing instrument. There was singing for hours, the boys danced swaying and rocking and adding funny and foul words to the song. Then they played *kabaddi* in the evening. The warder too did not object, perhaps because it was Diwali. But when Jidda died, the boys appeared for two days, not only not to be the crooks they were, but also not to know the use of even one foul word. The head warder of the 'factory' had been placed under suspension, two or three of the headmen had been locked up in the mill, stripped of their belts (although only for fifteen days, there after the head warder reported back on duty and the headmen got their belts back). The boys said the deputy was being investigated but eventually it came to nothing. Babu too had been quiet for three days but began to sing on the fourth, after lock-up at night. Without accompaniment at first, but then brought the pitcher.

But the news of Jidda's death shocked him like the touch of electric wire and the shock left him completely drained and broken. His body too slackened in a strange way, as if, he had no strength left in him. And he could never be completely free of the impact of this shock, rather, he remained badly shaken within him. It was only after this incident that he began, once in two to four months, to have this pain in his chest. Not a very piercing pain but like a pressure of some kind inside him and it drenched him in sweat in no time.

The first time he had this pain was when the yellow turbaned headman came to sit beside him. He was a little old, or perhaps not as old as he

appeared to be. Around fifty, lean and thin and wizened. But it was frightening to look into his eyes. Not too small but sunken into hollows, looking like stone. Those eyes held neither compassion nor love, nor anger but were completely cold and dry. He had heard earlier that the headman had been deployed at the black mill but he had not been stripped of his belt. His gaunt body appeared quite capable of physical violence. But the old man was very shrewd indeed. Even after talking for so long he gave no hint if he was one of those who had beaten up Jidda?

The yellow turbaned one had come to the barrack in the evening itself and the whispers started immediately on his arrival. The old man had been on duty at the black mill. Rascal. Bastard of the first order. The favourite of officers, works as their spy. That's why he didn't come to harm. It was some time after the barrack was locked up and he sat smoking a beedi when the old timer came near the bars that side – boy, light up this beedi. Lighting up, he sat down, at first asking him questions. What's his name? What has he been booked for? Is he still under trial or has been convicted? And many more. And then he started, as if to give vent to his resentment - the times have gone bad, the British rule is gone, the whole management has gone to the dogs. There are no officers, no discipline. The superintendent before this one was so powerful, a mere stare of his made the hardest of criminal pee in their pants. The moment he stepped into the vestibule - dead silence. He could put a man against the wall, shoot him and say he was trying to escape. And now there are these puny officers, running helter and skelter, all because a prisoner has died.

As he listened to the old man, his heart began to sink. And when he began to tell him about the political prisoner who had gone on hunger strike – for three days and three nights, he was not allowed to relieve himself. Six headmen were put on duty to stand guard and not to let him sleep. One of the headmen sat at all times holding the chain and pulled twice or thrice the moment the prisoner relaxed or blinked and on the fourth day he fell down at the Sahib's feet – suddenly a pain shot up his chest, as if, someone was pressing down from inside. Unable to lie down he just sat, head on knees. Despite the cold he became all drenched in sweat within no time, the breeze made him shiver and, feeling cold, he lay down covering himself with the blanket. The old man, perhaps, kept speaking all this while but he heard nothing.

He changed places the next day, thinking if he lay on the same spot the old man would come again to narrate his stories. Sending Babu to sleep in his place, he slept in the corner of the barrack for two days. When it was night, the old man turned up again to sit there. He couldn't hear but there was an exchange of words between him and Babu. He felt a little afraid lest the old timer should report. But the old man left it at that. For two days he slept in the centre but then couldn't stop himself. On the third day he made a place to sleep near Babu, so now if there was a conversation, it was with Babu. He just lay there and listened.

The old man had a whole range of stories to tell, about dacoities, about the methods the dacoits adopted to make the traders tell where they kept their money, about how they chopped off their organs with a

hacker, burned a fire under their feet. How the police encountered the dacoits and how each was caught and killed. How the former sahib straightened out the toughest of dacoits. In two days time, the old man had perhaps realized that Babu was hot-tempered and didn't like listening to the tales describing the battering of prisoners. As if to settle scores, the old man first told the tales of dacoities and then of the dacoits of the gang he had seen getting caught and brought to jail. And of how they lived a straight life in jail or were straightened out. The old man remained on duty in the barrack till the time of his release, and came almost daily to sit beside them. He told his tales as if talking not of men but of tigers and wolves. It made him very ill at ease, his hands clenched into fists and his body stretched and became taut. Somehow keeping a hold on himself, he sat quietly. An even stranger thing was that when alone, he was often haunted by these stories and thinking about them he went through the same experience that he went through while listening to them. But when his thoughts arrived at certain horrific facts – such as burning of the fire under the feet, or caning of the prisoners after tying them to gallows in jail or rubbing of spices in fresh wounds or hanging them down the peg after handcuffing them – his mind refused to think any further and he was startled out of his thoughts.

The boys called the old man names behind his back but were terrified of him. The yellow turbaned one was close to officers. The boys felt pleased as punch one day when the old timer told them that although his term was over – his sentence had been reduced by four years and he had already served ten – his release order hadn't yet arrived. He couldn't tell whether something was wrong with the report of the police station or someone else was creating problems at the I. G. office. But since he was serving life-sentence, he couldn't be released without an order from the office of the inspector general. Good. May the rascal rot here, such a crook should never be released.

On the third or the fourth day after the old man first came to the barrack, his case was settled along with the two traders. A fine of rupees two hundred, six months simple imprisonment in case of non-payment. The traders deposited the fine immediately. And he served imprisonment for six months. Once it crossed his mind that there must be a hundred rupees in his box. If he intimated Maqbool, he might pool in the rest. But he left it at that. Who should he send with the message and the key? (He had hidden the key before he was searched, also the six, seven rupees he had in his pocket). If he gave it to a constable or a warder, he might pocket it himself. There was, after all, no one he knew personally.

Then too It had been very cold at the time of his release. However he hadn't faced any difficulty; for one thing he was wearing a coat and then, had also had some money saved up. The only money he spent was on beedis. He asked the boys going for a hearing to bring him a bundle. He walked the distance to Chandni Chowk on foot. And then, eating at a road side dhaba, caught the tram to the 'baarraa'. It was a little unnerving to see the room closed, however he found Maqbool at home. He told him he had turned the cripple out of the room. The cripple had

been trying to open the box when Maqbool had chanced upon him. He said all this so casually that he didn't know what to think. All he could do was to look at Maqbool's face again and again. He asked him, 'have you eaten?' 'Yes.' 'You've got money?' 'Yes.' Maqbool came to drop him at the room but for some reason, didn't stay. 'I'll come tomorrow.'

XVI

Lying in one position with his legs drawn up, his joints had begun to ache. However he couldn't summon the courage to turn to the other side. The cold would've hit him anew. His clothes had become wet with fog, the fabric piercing like hundreds and thousands of needles. Although the breeze had stopped slight gusts, blowing now and then around balls of fog stabbed through to the bones like arrows. His face too, absolutely wet, was numb with cold but he could still feel a sharp stinging. His folded hands had stiffened and his fingers, when he tried to move them, could barely do so with much difficulty. Slowly, he rubbed his palms, but both his palms had become like stones and completely cold. He couldn't even rub them with force. The pain in the knees was becoming sharper. When it became unendurable, he spread his legs half way and turned and was jolted at once. The wet, cold stone, where ever he touched it, felt like a stab of ice. The part of his arm, back and legs which had grown numb while resting against the stone, now felt the full brunt of the fog and the wind – like a gang cracking down upon him with rods and spears.

This is how Maqbool must have felt, when forced to lie on ice. But it had been summer then. Even on an ice slab, it wouldn't have been as painful as in winter. The Delhi weather too is so extreme, when it's hot, it's hot enough to singe your body and the two winter months so cold, it freezes the blood. It's possible to brave through the winter by staying indoors or putting on a coat and blanket but there is no respite from heat. Of course, the cinema houses in Delhi remain cool. If the gate is ajar, it gets a little cool outside too. The Regal cinema is the best. The cool air from inside drifts out to the portico. If one was free in the scorching heat, one could sit there, enjoying the cool air.

He hadn't had money that day to go to the cinema and had just been roaming around. Many new, English style hotels were coming up those days around the round-about at 'Barakhamba'. Their doors were always closed but whenever someone opened them to go in or come out, a whiff of cool air wafted out accompanied by sound of English orchestra. Once when he had been close to a hotel, a sahib and mem sahib opened the door to come out. The moment the door opened, the doorman jumped up like a spring snapping open. Once the sahib and memsahib stepped out, the doorman let go of the door and saluted. When the sahib handed him a coin, the doorman's moustache moved the way a dog's tail moves. The door swung close on its own and the whiff of cool air got shut off midway... as also the sound of the English band coming from inside. Seeing the door open, he had paused for a while, had thrown in a glance. Light had passed in through the open door up to a point and beyond that it was dark even in day time. Dim electric lights, milky white table cloths, flower vases on long tables, chairs in light green upholstery, glittering cutlery on the tables.

When the doorman turned his eyes towards him, he moved ahead. He could see just one man inside. Perhaps the others couldn't be seen because of the dark. At times he wondered what went on inside these English hotels. One thing he was sure about was that they served English wines. Many of the hotels had shops selling English wines next to them. Girls too must be available, but only high class stuff. The cripple used to make such tall claims. He bragged he had once had whisky sitting in the 'Standard'. 'No ordinary folks can go in there, my lad, you get white girls there, but you have to shell out big money. They are so shrewd, they can see through their clients in just a glance and unless you own a car you can't get to even touch their shadow. But the cripple was a braggart. He could see that those who came out of these hotels were mostly over forty, both the sahib and the memsahib.'

'Will you leave or should I call the police?' The sharp voice of the sahib coming from behind him made him look back. The sahib had parked his motor car a little to this side and as they crossed the verandah, the beggar woman standing behind the pillar had perhaps come after him. Despite the sahib's displeasure her lips were moving in a plea, 'may your children live long mai, may your glory grow sahib, may your son be a king, memsahib.' He was a little amused. How silly, how stupid this woman is! In one breath she calls the lady both mai and memsahib. Had the lady been a mai, she'd have taken offense on being called a memsahib. She clearly is a memsahib and must have flared up on being addressed as mai. After the sahib's scolding, the doorman too lost his temper, 'run off or I'll give you a kick. The likes of you don't understand unless kicked. Don't let me see you here again. I don't know where they appear from, like a bitch with puppies hanging on.'

The doorman's anger was perhaps more effective than the sahib's scolding, the beggar woman stepped back in alarm. The sahib opened the car door and when the memsahib was seated he went round to the other side and got in, all the while muttering without stopping, 'it is difficult to step out in the city, where ever you go they surround you like ants. Lepers or cripples or at places, boys whining like puppies or these damned women, they pester the most. Whose babies do these sluts deliver? Each has one or two hanging on to them. Their good for nothing men only give them babies but do not bring them up. When the motor engine revved up, his voice drowned in its sound.'

The woman was just like any other beggar woman. Standing a little to the back, at the point where the verandah projected outwards were three pillars. She stood there quite a distance from the hotel. Dry, matted hair, piled on head like twigs in a pigeon's nest, dusky complexion, parched skin, looking ready to tear like rotten cloth if pressed, or pinched ever so slightly. Her hair was black. She wouldn't be old but her parched up skin didn't tell her age. Wearing only a dhoti which was also wrapped over her bosom. What else was required in the heat? Dirty. Grimy.

He walked away. He had made up his mind that day to lift some stuff from shops at Queen's way, a trick he had learnt from Babu. School books sold easily, watches got good money but were risky. Swiping pens

was easy, even from people's pockets. Babu's trick was to stand where ever he saw a crowd in a shop, if the shop keeper noticed, to ask for something to look at and when possible to flick whatever he could, dodging others' eyes. Fairs and festivals were more convenient. A small pot or pan, socks, gloves, shoes, slippers – these were less risky. Even if he was caught the shopkeeper would let him go after a beating, for even the shopkeepers were wary of going to the police. Lodge a report, run to the court, give witness, spend money and in addition endure the high handedness of the police. If one was decently dressed and talked with confidence, the risk was cut down even further. The shopkeeper too was in two minds – the fellow looks decent enough, how to charge him with theft? What if it backfires?

He didn't work for many days on being released. He had money, and spent it slowly over days. Once when he was passing through the Karoli Bagh market in well laundered clothes and saw a crowd, it occurred to him to try Babu's trick and went and stood in a shop. The shop keeper was showing cigarette lighters to a customer, this is Hong Kong stuff sahib, you won't find it anywhere, very few are smuggled in. The sahib, perhaps didn't find anything to his liking, one by one he picked them up, turned them over, pressed to get a spark. And then two young girls arrived and the shopkeeper began to show them purses. There were seven or eight other men at the shop and just one servant. When the sahib left leaving the lighters, he stood there and like the sahib, continued to examine them by turning them over one by one. He stood there for a minute or two, looked again and again. Neither the shopkeeper nor the servant was paying him any attention. Both were busy dealing quickly with the customers. He took the lighter from Hong Kong in one hand. Turned the others around twice or thrice by the other hand and then seeing a woman exit, fell in step behind her, pretending he was with her.

He managed to come out but his heart was thumping loudly. His fear didn't leave even after he had mingled with the crowd. Turning into a lane, he emerged on another street, and then took the next turn to come onto a third and only then did he take a sigh of relief. But it was only after he got away from Karoli Bagh that he was convinced he was not being followed. The shopkeeper had told the customer the lighter was priced at rupees ten but he got only two rupees. This too had soured his mood. Put so much at risk for only two rupees. But he had lifted a lighter, and it would fetch the price it deserved. The real thing was that he lacked courage. It happened only seldom that the shopkeeper didn't look in a direction for a minute or two and he didn't have the guts to quickly flick something the moment the shopkeeper's back was turned. And besides, he didn't need the money and had therefore hardly lifted anything. Only twice or thrice, only in crowds, only when there had been no risk.

However, he started selling cinema tickets again. The trick had been learnt in his childhood with Kisana. When a new film was released, he purchased as many tickets as he could in advance and then sold them at rates they fetched but the business didn't always do well. When a film was a crowd puller, he made five to seven or even eight to ten rupees a

day for a week to ten days. Otherwise the business fell flat. The business also came to a standstill, when no hit film was released for a few weeks. Once or twice, he also suffered a loss. As he arrived to sell tickets, he saw a policeman loitering around. Quickly, he entered the hall to watch the film – now that there was to be no profit, he might as well get his money's worth.

This is what he was arrested for. The ticket window had closed and many were left without. He was standing with four tickets in hand, people were coming there on their own to enquire. He sold off all four tickets, which had cost him rupees two each, to a gentleman for two rupees and a half. As the exchange was taking place a policeman caught him by the shoulder from behind. He looked back startled and the moment he saw the khaki uniform, his head reeled. His stomach contracted, he felt he would stagger and fall. But the policeman had a strong hold.

He had eventually run out of money and many of the policemen had come to know him by face. And then, whenever identified, he was locked in under one hundred and nine. He had to stay in for at least three to four months, more at times. His business too had eventually become restricted to sale of cinema tickets. And he had also stopped fantasising about anything else. The only thought that occupied his mind was to somehow evade the police. Whenever the hand of a policeman fell on his arm – 'you there!' - he turned pale, his stomach began to draw in and he felt he would falter and fall. In the court too, his focus was on whether the police was asking for a remand. He was still rendered motionless with fear when he saw the jail gate. He had been kept in the juvenile barrack only the first two times. After that, first the lock up and then any barrack meant for prisoners. The bastards put him on spinning ropes with reed, which caused his hands, which in the beginning used to get all cut up, to crack.

The damned beggar woman too, had proved so unlucky. It was in the evening of that day that he had fallen into a police trap, hadn't got a chance to do a thing. He had been loitering around in Chandni Chowk the previous evening, with just ten or twelve annas in his pocket and thinking of going to Maqbool to get two or three rupees and use it to make some more. A new film was getting released in the Jubilee cinema hall after many weeks. He hadn't made any money during this while and had used up all the money that he had in his pocket. He thought instead of going at that hour, he'd go early the next morning and catch Maqbool at home. After looking at the posters of the new film at the Jubilee, he was going by the Fountain side when he passed a man standing on the side walk with a bag on shoulder and a bundle of incense-sticks in hands. Must be selling incense-sticks, he had thought. But as he went past the man, he heard him mutter, 'private, private.' He walked a few steps without giving it a thought and then it suddenly flashed in his mind, 'private,' meant a private woman. His feet stopped as if of their own accord. A flame of fire ran up his body. He had heard many a time there were private haunts all over the city, but apart from that one unproductive visit to Qutub road, he had never attempted to find out or go somewhere. Once, when he had adequate money, he had

visited G. B. road once or twice, but each time, not having the courage to climb up the stairs, he had taken only a round and returned. And for some reason, no pimp had approached him while he was there.

He turned back to look, the man was still standing there, moving his lips slowly. It occurred to him once to go and ask him, where would you take me? I am ready. But immediately he remembered, money? He didn't have the money. 'Private' haunts would be charging even more. The flame went down, so did his spirits. Within him rose an immense indignation – get money from somewhere, he has to get money from somewhere. But from where? He had never asked Maqbool for a large sum. And if he did get the money from him and spent it here, how would he run his business? He'd need money to invest, that too could be done only on Friday and Saturday and it was already Wednesday. Then he thought he'd lift something and sell it fast. This night was gone, but this man must be around every day. It appeared to be his haunt.

He kept going round Chandni Chowk for over an hour. Looking for a chance but didn't get any. Had he shown some alacrity he could have swiped something at two or three places (at one place, the shopkeeper put some wrist watches on the counter and began to open them for repair) but by the time he made ready to lift, the shopkeeper cast a glance back and many chances were missed in this indecision. He stayed on, even after the crowd had dispersed but now no chance came his way again. When shops began to down their shutters, he returned. The man too was not there at that hour, he must have found a customer.

That night he went down to the ruins beyond Jeetgarh to lie. It was so hot that even at night the air was hot. A fire raged within too and he was so restless the whole night that he went to sleep very late. Even as he lay he kept thinking he'd go on a search in the morning, pick up something definitely. Make some money by the evening and go to Chandni Chowk. If he made even ten rupees he would make a deal somehow. At most, the deal won't be for the whole night but he would get at least one turn for ten rupees.

But despite going round Karoli Bagh till noon, he didn't get anything. Suddenly he felt exhausted, drained. The heat and the restlessness he had felt yesterday had gone down. Intending to relax a little in the afternoon, he went to New Delhi after eating two rotis in the road-side eatery.

When the motor car went away, he walked on for a few steps, but the words spoken by the sahib kept ringing in his ears, 'Who knows, whose babies these sluts deliver!' Whose babies? That they get married is highly unlikely, they must be living in with one of their own kind, or hobnobbing here and there. And suddenly it flashed in his mind, why not talk this beggar woman into it? The face of the woman passed before his eyes. Pile of dry, tangled hair, dirty, grimy coarse cotton sari, parched skin looking like rotten cloth, a child hanging on to her waist, with only a black thread tied to his swollen belly. He felt a little hesitation. But she has a good body. She is not old and would agree for

only a few annas. Then he thought, such a woman could also be a friend, unless she was living with someone else. Even if she was, it would be with a beggar only. But the slut had this pup hanging on to her.

Without coming to any decision, he turned back, afraid she might have left. Looked around, he couldn't see her anywhere. Where had she gone in such a short time? He increased his pace. Just the fact that she couldn't be seen made him feel he had missed his chance. Had she been there, he'd have talked her into it. There were very few people around. Who would come out in this heat? Only a few motorcars were parked at the curb. She was not in the corridor. Where had she disappeared? She must have gone somewhere to beg. But so fast? He should be able to see her somewhere!

And suddenly he almost collided into her. There was a chick curtain between two pillars and beside the pillar, in the shade of the curtain sat the beggar woman with the child at her breast. Climbing up the verandah he turned by the pillar intending to get into the shade and all but collided with her. She appeared so suddenly that he couldn't even stop and, avoiding the collision, kept on walking. How could he have talked to her? He told himself. She had her back towards him and was feeding the child. How dirty she looked from close quarters! Her face was not bad, she must have been attractive in her days, but now her looks evoked revulsion. Not just revulsion but also a strange kind of fear. When he had suddenly come on to the verandah the beggar woman had turned to look, and to look at her eyes so closely, she seemed asleep. Startled perhaps for a while, she had continued to see with unseeing eyes, as if her mind was elsewhere. No, not deranged but like a scared, domestic animal. How she had stepped back in alarm when the doorman scolded her. What kind of woman was she! What was the fun in going to such a woman?

He walked till the end of the verandah, there was no shade in the field... it should be a little cooler under the tree in the round park. He went and lay down under that tree. Nothing can materialize here. It's better that I go to the old city after some rest. Something may come up in Chawadi Bazaar or Fatehpuri. But why do it at all? If caught, I'll be thrashed for nothing. It's better to go to Maqbool, bring some money and by some tickets in advance at Jubilee. They'll be running a new film from tomorrow.

Turning aside he closed his eyes and suddenly two lovely orbs appeared before him. When the beggar woman had turned to see, her bosom, covered only partially in the slipping sari, had become visible to him. The woman had been unmindful, as if, oblivious of his presence. At the time, he too, had been preoccupied but when he closed his eyes lying down under the tree, the orbs he had glimpsed once loomed before him now and this time the child clinging to one side was missing. He became extremely, extremely restless.

His body, though stiff with cold, had become a little feverish. Spreading out both his hands at once, he lay on his stomach and writhed just as

quickly. His fog-wet clothes touched the ice cold slab and it felt like someone scrapping his chest and stomach with a shaving blade. Oh bappa! He turned again to the other side and drawing up his legs brought his knees to his chest. The cold seemed to have enveloped him from all sides. He began to shiver badly and just didn't stop shivering. Folding his arms he put his elbows on his knees and closing both hands into a fist kept them near his mouth. Slowly, the shivering came down, the cold seemingly beginning to sink into him. The touch of breath on fingers touching his nose felt good. He brought his knees and elbows close to his chest.

XVII

Coming out of the water, she picked up her sheet but left the child's cloth lying on the sand. She was not cold but anyhow, wrapped the sheet around her shoulders. Her legs below her thighs had gone numb. As she walked she felt her feet were walking, not as she wished them to, but of their own accord. And her body was moving only because it was attached to her legs. Once she thought of stopping just to check if her feet would stop, but didn't. Her whole leg was numb but the cold sand was pricking her soles like pins. Without stopping she looked back and saw her foot prints visible up to some distance and beyond that only fog, and in it a vague impression of the river Yamuna stretched out like a black sheet.

She came to stand by the roadside. Standing all alone in the midst of fog, engulfed by it on all sides, she felt she had come to a completely alien place. The tree next to her appeared even more densely dark. On either side hung small balloons of pale light at short intervals, appearing after three or four – like so many earthen lamps arranged in a row. Though she knew them to be electric lamps, the light could only manage to form a pale balloon in the fog.

She turned her eyes from one side to the other and somehow had a feeling she had exited from the world. Beyond the road lay the world and the sound of 'ghrr' passing through it floated down to her (must be a truck, this is how trucks, passing at a distance sound), but she had come out of it isolated, alone. She was feeling the need to cry, to cry out loudly. But how to cry ? She felt completely drained, both in her mind and in her body. Though had she cried often (it had been some days now since she cried), in private and in public. She cried when in pain. But when she cried others enjoyed and laughed ... she cried like a pig getting slaughtered.

Her sari wet and clinging round her legs had begun to pierce through her skin. She lifted the border and squeezed out the water, it wasn't so bad now. Walking up to the tree she sat under it, leaning against the trunk. This was where she had been sitting since the evening. Wrapping half the sheet around her, she covered the child with the other half – 'Give a paisa mai, may your money grow, Saith. May you build your own empire, babu, may you get a promotion, may your children live, brother' – machine-like, she went on and on but in her heart, there was fear. Jitua had returned. When she will go back to the shanty, he won't spare her. He has returned after serving two months in the jail, he is going to torment her again. It would have been better, had he stayed in jail. She had lived comfortably during those two months. But the shanty belonged to Jitua. She had no other place to sleep. On other days, she'd have slept even by the roadside but how could she spend the night out in the open in this chilly winter? Perhaps she could, had she been alone. But the baby, who even otherwise keeps on whining, won't survive if they slept in the open.

And Jitua was a complete dog, grabbing her always the moment she lay down, bashing her if she resisted even mildly. The baby's continuous whimper made her cry. The bashings made her cry. The pain made her cry. Not that it made any difference to Jitua. He not only laughed himself but also described to the neighbours the next day how the slut cried like a pig getting slaughtered.

Even Jidda had not spared her, but had not beaten her, she had also had plenty to eat and wear those days. Now she has to beg for whatever she gets. Jitua gave her something only once in a while. Yet, all men are the same. They have always given her pain. Always, a scream rises from within ... oh ma ... and she can endure no more, can't prevent herself from screaming out. She tries hard but a stifled scream keeps rising inside her despite all effort to block it. All the women in other shanties laughed, also the men, they wondered also, and often the women said she pretended. This was beyond her. Why would she pretend to be in pain and agony? She also couldn't get into her head that men gave pleasure. What pleasure? To her, men had always given pain.

When the child was born, she had almost died. But everyone had always said that childbirth was painful. Such killing pain, yet all women give birth. Like her, they too must be doing it unwillingly, as something not in their control. But then, the women in the neighbouring shanties had said, being with a man would no longer be painful. But no! Men have always given her pain and only pain.

The evening drew to a close , the lights came on. On any other day, she'd have left by now. But she feared going back to Jitua in the shanty. When he had been put behind bars for two months for peddling opium, her days were spent peacefully. Now, she sat there, even when the traffic on the road almost stopped. When someone appeared, she began, 'your money will grow saith, one paisa, may your empire grow, babu.' Even when the man went past, she kept repeating mechanically for some time, then felt silent. She didn't know when she dozed off. Suddenly a gust of cold wind woke her up with a shudder. The fog was thickening. The road was completely deserted.

She cradled her child, wrapped as he was in the sheet, on her waist. Carefully picking up the money, she came under the electric lamp meaning to count and knot it up in her sari. Her hand, while counting the money, relaxed and the child swung down at once. As she gathered him up, she felt he had gone completely cold. As she started to wrap him up in the sheet, he appeared stiff and did not even cry. She moved and swayed him, touched him all over. Nothing. Holding the money in one hand and the child in the other, she returned to the tree and sat under it. Sat for a long time. Then getting up, went down the side of the road, the water of the Yamuna river stretched like a black sheet in the fog at some distance.

As she drew closer, she could hear in the silence the low gurgle of the flow of water. She stood still for some time even after reaching the river bank. The cold was freezing and she began to shiver, but took off her

sheet and placed it on the sand lest it got wet. She also took off the loose garment she had dressed her child in. Her hand fell upon the black thread tied around child's belly by a woman neighbour as protection against the evil eye. She thought of snapping it but didn't. Lifting her sari with one hand, she stepped into the water, biting cold water, its current rapid, it was as if someone was sawing off that part of her foot. Carefully she brought the other foot in, stretching her arm, placed the child on the water and drew back. Silently, the child went down but after a while there was a small sound, like a bubble breaking, she thought the child's head had surfaced and instinctively her foot moved forward. The water there was a little deeper, up to her thighs, her sari dropped from her hands and spread over water. The current there was even more rapid, she felt the sand below her feet shift. She tried to peer through the dark but could see nothing. She turned and walked out. For some reason she was not cold now. Picking up the sheet she wrapped it round her shoulders.

No she wouldn't go to Jitua's shanty now. Resting her head against the tree trunk she lay down. Her legs were freezing now, drawing up her knees she folded her legs but couldn't stand the wet sari. Stretching her legs, she wrapped the sheet round her back and chest, if she'd draw up her legs, the wet sari would wet the sheet as well.

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Daily
Delhi, December 1957: The cold wave sweeping the capital these days took two more lives last night, of which one was a woman.

About the author

Om Prakash Deepak was foremost a political writer and activist, being closely related to the socialist party of India and its founder Dr Ram Manohar Lohia. After the death of Dr Lohia in 1965, he became the editor of Jan, the Hindi magazine of the Socialist Party.

During 1970s, he became closely associated with Loknayak Jay Prakash Narayan and his call for *Sampoorn Kranti* (Total revolution). During these years, Om Prakash Deepak wrote political and social articles for a number of publications, especially Dinman, a weekly magazine in Hindi, and for Everyman's, a weekly magazine in English. For example, during 1971-72, he travelled and wrote extensively about the war and the founding of Bangladesh.

Om Prakash Deepak wrote limited fiction, mainly short stories, during 1950s and 1960s. His fiction work includes two novellas – Manavi (1962) and Kuch Zindagiyan Bematlab (1968, translated in English as Lives without meaning in 2016).

In 1975, when Om Prakash Deepak died, he was 47 years old and was writing a biography of Dr Ram Manohar Lohia.

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About the translator

Ranjana Srivastava nee Sinha is a Delhi based English - Hindi translator who at times also translates from Hindi to English.
After initial schooling in Meerut and then a Government School in Delhi she went on to do graduation in English and master's degree in Hindi from Miranda House, Delhi University.
After a few years as a translator in a Government organisation she began freelancing for translation agencies, literary magazines 'Hans' and 'Kathadesh' and did Hindi to English translations for Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University. Her translations of Lydia Avilov's 'Chekhov In My Life' and Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth' were published by Rajkamal Prakashan and Random House India respectively as 'Meri Zindagi mein Chekhov' and 'Unabhyast Dharti'.
In between she also taught translation classes in Miranada House.

About the translation of "Lives Without Meaning" from Hindi, she says: "As the wish to translate a book comes from my desire to share its experience with those who cannot read it in its original language, my attempt is to bring the reader of the translation as close to the original work as I can. So yes, I have followed the Author, almost step by step. In both the sense and the linguistic style of the book. The process of translation is always a struggle for me, a tight rope walk because as a translator I have to be honest to both - the author and the reader. I have therefore tried to restrict my presence to the minimum, just enough to take the reader along on a journey that I went on earlier."