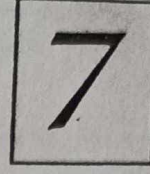




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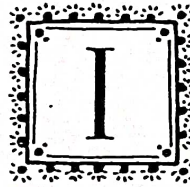
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Sanjay Khati

Pinti's Sabun

Translated from Hindi
by Ashutosh Roy



It was a first for our village.

Sure, some of us had heard of sabun but you wouldn't find more than a handful who had actually seen it. In fact, we knew what it was only because of the Faujis. And also because some of the women had once seen it with Deputy Sahab's daughter, Pinti. People say that the floral fragrance of her soap spread around her for almost a mile. Fifteen years later, Pinti was still remembered for her sabun – and sabun was talked about in

the same breath as attar, phulel and other perfumes.

Pinti, of course, was a being from another world. But no one from our village had ever been seen with a sabun. In fact, I was the first to get one. It happened suddenly, and rather unexpectedly.

It was the fifteenth of August, I think. It must have been a special day because school was closed. Kaka and I had walked milēs to the kasba to sell potatoes. Kaka was only five-seven years older than me and we were almost like friends. He did try to assert his seniority once in while, but never succeeded.

Captivated by the hustle and bustle of the kasba, we were wandering about, sucking lemonchoos, when we found ourselves in a noisy, crowded field. It seemed to be a mela of some kind. There were whistles blowing all around us and a man was shouting over a loudspeaker. We had drifted into the thick of the crowd, when suddenly, I felt myself being pulled. Someone had caught me by the arm and dragged me into a line-up of some kind. A man was getting several boys of my age to stand along a white line. On

either side of me, the boys were shouting and screaming, crouching forward on one foot as if they were all set to sprint, as if a race was on.

My first reaction was to panic. Kaka was nowhere to be seen. He had probably been pushed away, along with the rest of the crowd, by those lathi-wielding men. A count had begun over the loudspeaker. One. two — And three!

The boys around me ran like a pack of hungry animals let loose. And I ran with them. At first I could not make out what was happening. But when I noticed the fellow next to me pull ahead of me, kicking away on his spindly legs, I ran with all my might. Before I knew it I was sprawled on the ground, hopelessly entangled in the finish tape at the other end of the field. And I had scraped my knees. As I pulled myself up, I was handed a sparkling box to the sound of applause.

Kaka surfaced from somewhere in the crowd, laughing. And then we were both laughing. I wanted to run more, to keep running. So I ran. Kaka followed, panting. I made straight for the village. I could hear Kaka calling out to me. When I finally stopped running, he caught up with me.

"What is it, re?" he wanted to know. Oh, I was still clutching the shiny red box. Kaka snatched it from my hand and began to examine it. He was the first to realize that it was a sabun. His face lit up with excitement as he smelt it several times. He would not give it back. "I am not going to eat it," he snapped when I put my hand out for it. But his intentions did not seem honourable to me.

So I reacted. It was mine, after all. I tried to take it away from him, or to make him drop it. But there was no way I could get the better of the tall brute. Soon he had even removed the wrapper and uncovered the precious, rose-coloured bar. As a last resort I flung myself on the river bank and bawled. "I'll tell Ija ..."

It worked, as always. Kaka glared at me for a while. "Go die," he said, as he threw the sabun at me. I caught it. "What about the wrapper?" He threw that too. I covered the bar with great care. Smelling it all the way, I walked home, very pleased with myself.

That was the beginning of the first real hostility between Kaka and me. Of course I did not realize it then. So enchanted was I by the delicate fragrance of the sabun,

that I paid no attention to him. The enmity would, over time, become permanent.

Anyway, that evening, Kaka followed me, kicking the stones at his feet. On reaching home, he announced, his lips twisting, "Hariya thinks he is too good for us. Just because he has got a sabun."

Ija was gathering cowdung. She stood up. "Sabun! Where did you get it? What is it like? Show me."

"It's mine," I shot back.

She cleaned her hands carefully and came up to me. "Let me also see it. What kind of sabun is it?"

By then I was suspicious of everyone. After much fuss, I reluctantly loosened my grip on the sabun. Ija took it to the lamp and looked at it intently. She smelled it twice or thrice. "I'm going to bathe with it," she declared.

I swooped on the sabun like a hawk. Stuffing it into my pocket, I ran and stood at a safe distance. Ija was shocked. "May your sabun burn," she cursed. Then, glaring at me, she walked away.

And so my mother became my second enemy.

It took me a long while to understand the power of the sabun. Perhaps I was not

old enough to. However I soon began to feel that I was surrounded by enemies.

I knew Kaka had been rummaging through my things. He had looked into every box and container in the house, and even under the hay stacked in the cowshed. But only I knew where the sabun was hidden. Finally he gave up and tried to get into my good books instead. But I had become wise to his tricks.

As for Bapu, he was not fated to even get a glimpse of the sabun. The incessant discussions about the sabun had irritated him so much, that he resorted to the stick right away.

By then I was certain that no one could be trusted once they had seen the sabun. So I did not budge from my decision not to show it to anyone. Finally Bapu gave me two kicks on my back, saying, "So attar and phulel are his new interests. Send him to graze the cattle. That will cure him."

I bore the insult, and did not cry. But I did wonder if I was his son after all.

Kunti, my sister, got to see the sabun, even to touch and smell it – under my watchful eyes, of course. Once she had touched it, she followed me all the time,

her eyes full of hope. The only way to get rid of her was to slap her.

It was becoming very difficult for me to even look at the sabun in the midst of all this hostility. The days dragged by. Finally, one Sunday, I resolved to do it. I took out the sabun and sat down to have a hot water bath.

This was to be my first bath with the sabun. With great care I removed the wrapper and placed it neatly in the sun. Holding the sabun gently in my right hand, I ran it lightly over my wet hair.

The rose-coloured sabun was embossed with English letters. I could not read them, but whatever they were, they made the sabun even more beautiful. I had to make sure they did not wear off.

Kaka was supposed to be studying. I could hear him reading aloud, but every now and then, his head kept appearing at one of the windows. Ija, on her way to the fields, saw me and stopped in the courtyard. She stood transfixed for several moments, then walked off in a huff. But Kunti remained there, a few steps away from me, mesmerized by the sight of the

sabun sliding through my hair, its rich white lather, and the many-coloured bubbles shimmering in the sunlight. I shooed her off. "Go! Go away."

Kunti began to beg, "Dada, let me also use it."

I knew Kunti only too well. She had the cunning of a cat. It was best to chase her away. I threw some water at her. When that failed, I slapped her with my wet hand. Kunti's screams brought Kaka rushing down the stairs. "How dare you hit her? Now you've had it," he shouted. But he did not move beyond the threshold. He just stood there and glared at me. Laughing, working up a lather, I was lost in my own world while Kaka continued his tirade.

After a long while, with great reluctance, I washed the sabun off my body. The sabun still looked almost new, I thought, as I dried it and wrapped it up carefully. Kaka caught a whiff of the scent as I strutted past him.

What a fragrance! I felt so fresh. And my hair was so soft. I quickly put on my clothes. I was afraid that the scent might evaporate.

Sometimes I would jump off from the

parapet on the terrace and fly away. Higher and higher, gliding over mountains and jungles like a pigeon. Beyond countless lands and villages. I would feel a thrill run through my body. I would look at my house below – a little toy house, and Ija, Bapu, Kaka, Kunti. They were like tiny ants. Only I soared above the whole world, soared above them all. No one could reach me.

These were dreams. People say that growing children often dream of flying. But dreams *can* come true. The day I first bathed with the sabun I felt that now I would be able to fly.

It was a school day. After scrubbing myself thoroughly with the sabun, I was glowing. I wore my best clothes over my fragrant skin, and combed my hair with an extra flick. On the way to school I kept smelling my arm to check if the scent had worn off. It stayed for hours. If it were not for the heat and sweat and dust and wind, it would probably never go away.

Pandemonium broke out as soon as I entered the classroom. Within moments, everyone was sniffing around desperately. I enjoyed the spectacle for some time, a

little smile playing on my lips. Then I turned to the boy next to me and stuck my arm in his face.

"Oh baba, what have you put on?" he almost jumped out of his skin. What followed was literally a stampede. Tauba! Kids scrambled to get as close to the source of the scent as possible. They leapt over each other to stick their noses wherever they could get a whiff. Those who were privileged enough to get it were dying to know more. "What is it? Tell us, tell us, please," they begged.

By the time I finished recounting the story, the whole class was buzzing with excitement. Really? What is it like? It even has a wrapper! It will finish some day, then? He can go win another race! Show it to us yaar, show na, just once ...

The commotion died only when Massab stepped in. But no one was interested in the lesson. The boys watched me from the corner of their eyes. I was on top of the world. If I had wanted I could have declared myself the class monitor and all of them would have said – Fine! Everyone had heard so much from their fathers and grandfathers about Pinti and her sabun. Becoming a part of what had always been

a dream was almost driving them out of their wits.

The half-time bell rang. As usual the boys started to rush out. Suddenly they froze – I was still sitting in my seat. "Come re, let's go," they called. Everyone wanted to be close to me, even those who had frequently bullied me, taking advantage of my slight frame. No one had ever waited for me before.

"You are on our side," some said. "No, on ours." A big fight started over which team I should be in.

All I could think about was being mauled in kabaddi, covered in mud from head to toe. "I don't feel like playing," I told them.

"Why? Why is that?" they asked in a chorus. Then they understood. "Fine, you can be the referee. You can sit and watch." One by one they pushed off, somewhat disappointed.

The news had spread through the village like wildfire. Everyone was anxious to see the sabun. I would be stopped by all kinds of people. Others would visit me on some pretext. They would ask to see the sabun. When I refused they would get angry. Some would even shout at me. At

any rate they would always smell me. My stubborn refusal to show the sabun became a source of embarrassment for my family. As a result they were abusing me all the time. Whenever Kaka saw me, he made menacing gestures at me. He even tried to strangle me. Kunti sulked. If I got into a fight with her, Babu would not hesitate to rain blows on me with his two-and-a-half kilo hand. And Ija was always irritated with me.

They were all like vultures waiting to snatch away my little piece of happiness. I noticed that at first people treated me with respect, but when I did not show them the sabun they immediately turned against me. Almost all of them became my enemies.

People began to call me Pinti. It was not just a joke. It was a way of expressing their hostility towards me. "Pinti, Pinti," the kids would jeer. Although I was offended by this name, I could not help thinking about Pinti quite often. I would wonder where and how she was. I had sketched a mental image of her and I would spend idle hours adding colour to it. I imagined she was like the goddess Lakshmi on our calendar. Fairness draped in radiant

clothes, she filled the night with her light. There wasn't a speck of dust on her.

I had stopped going to play. A few kids stayed with me but soon even they were drawn away by the majority. While the kids were up to their mischief, I would be sitting, perched on the wall, idly swinging my legs. They would maul each other at kabaddi, slip into the wet fields in search of kakri, steal lemons, swim naked in the river, fall into the slush, get their clothes torn and end up dirty and bruised. I would just sit there, cracking my knuckles and watching them.

The truth is that several times I felt like jumping into their midst. But each time something held me back. I wished someone would just drag me into the kabaddi field, but that did not happen. They had stopped asking me. They assumed that Pinti was only supposed to sit and watch. In their minds I had ceased to exist.

A few days later, Kaka was setting off for the kasba. He was collecting the bags to carry back things. "I will go with you," I said, unable to check myself.

"No. You will not," said Kaka, viciously.

"I will."

"Bhabhi," Kaka shouted, "tell him to get whatever you want. I am not going."

Ija pounced on me like a tigress. Holding me by the ear she threw me to the ground.

"I am going to teach you a lesson. Getting too bold as you grow ..." she said, with two kicks on my back. Kaka was ecstatic.

"Make sure you beat him properly," he said.

Ija dragged me out of the house as if I were a dead mouse and shoved me into the bichoo bushes. "No, Ija, nooo ..."

The last strand of affection snapped then.

The thorns of the bichoo bush still pricked me and tears welled up in my eyes as I sat on the wall at half-time – seeing blurred images of children playing. My elbows were grazed, my hair was full of mud. I had bathed that day, but there was no fragrance about me.

I felt like crying loudly. I wanted to get up and go. Leave the place for good. Go where Pinti lived. Where people were different. Where there was no hatred, no senseless oppression.

I made up my mind that to seize the first opportunity to run off to the kasba. I would

catch a bus from there for some distant place. And never return. Never.

The idea took root over time. I picked out the clothes I would carry with me, and a bag for them. I stashed away some walnuts and found out where to get the money. All I needed was an opportunity.

Then it happened. I was taking a bath. I always bathed, even if it was freezing. I did not realize that Kaka was waiting in ambush. As soon as I put the sabun away he pounced on me like a cat. I was trapped. Kaka's hand went out to grab the sabun. He would have picked it up but it slipped and fell. I swung the heavy bronze lota at him with all my might.

A muted cry escaped from Kaka's lips as he slowly sank to the ground, his hands clutching his head. By then I had retrieved the sabun and was ready with my lota. But Kaka did not move. My legs started to tremble. "Kaka, Kaka," I shouted as I tried to shake him.

Kaka groaned and raised his head. Blood streamed down his forehead. "You hit me, saale," he muttered. Covering his forehead with his hands, he stumbled out. He stopped a little distance away, then

turned. He was crying, his face was white and his cheeks were streaked with blood and tears. "Saale, one day your sabun will finish," he blurted, in between sobs.

I was stunned. Slowly, I opened my fingers. There was the beautiful rose-coloured sabun. But it was so thin now. And it was not fragrant any more.

My heart sank.

There was no time to cry. I put on my clothes and rushed upstairs. I pulled out the bag and threw in some clothes. There was no time for walnuts. School bag? No need. Money?

Then I heard Kaka telling Ija that he had slipped on some cowdung and hit his head against the door of the cowshed.

I felt drained. I fell into my cot. Some time later I recovered enough to go and hide the sabun in its usual place. Then I came back, curled into a dark corner and went to sleep. I slept all evening – told everyone that I had a stomach ache.

When I got up the next morning, a strange white light seemed to envelop everything. It had snowed at night. I was terrified.

Barefoot, I ran across the snow. Snow,

four fingers deep, covered the haystack. The hiding place was somewhere under it. I dug into the snow. The sabun wasn't there. Here? Or there? My hand was covered with mud.

And then my fingers touched a slimy object. A lump of rose-coloured mud. Fragrant. I fell into the snow shivering uncontrollably, the lump in my hand "Hariya."

It was Ija. She had come to milk the cows. I looked up at her. The lump slipped out of my hand. Softly, sadly, "Hariya," she whispered.

I started to tremble. Breaking down like never before, I clutched her with my muddy hands and cried. And cried. Ija sat down next to me, held me in her arms. Just like the old days. I sobbed in the warmth of her embrace.

And then I felt as if a mountain of snow had started to melt. My heart felt light, light as cotton. If a breeze had come along just then, I would have floated away.

SANJAY KHATI says, The background for this story is the Kumaon Hills of western UP which is my birth place. Some of my own childhood memories form the fabric of the story. It depicts the simple life of the hill people, which is in turmoil after coming in contact with modern consumerism. It may seem that this story is of a bygone age, but the clash of two cultures is still going on.

Sanjay Khati is a journalist and lives in New Delhi.

"Pinti's Sabun" was first published in Hindi as *Pinti Ka Sabun* in *Hans*, April 1990, New Delhi.

The translator, ASHUTOSH ROY, is an engineer in computer science.



Manju Kak

The Boy



His lower lip quivered, tremulous, as if it had a will of its own. His face remained impassive as a boy's should when saying goodbye to his mother. How could she be leaving when she had just come! The long days when he had waited for her had dragged by, while hers with him had been a cipher.

His father came up once a term, exactly in the middle of it. Told him that he had to make good, he had to become a chartered accountant, a nuclear physicist, an

engineer. Said he had to excel, go to Harvard, MIT, IIT, NID ... where they, his parents, had hoped he would reach if they worked hard enough to give him golden opportunities. He had to make good, like his brother before him. Get ahead. Reach out for more, for the stars. Remember Browning – A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for – Dad quoted. He closed his mind to shut out Dad's voice. Why did Dad go on so? He knew this. Wasn't it in his mind all the time?

But how could he do anything when all he thought about, all he wanted was to be with his mother. At home, not here. The way she stood just now saying all those things about his socks, his medicines, his tuck, about brushing teeth at night. He wasn't really listening to her. Just to the tone of her voice and wondering would she still be there when he came home for his holidays? Would he see her again? Would he see her looking at him the way she did now, bringing to him the warmth of a slept-on pillow?

It was growing dark. A long drive through purple-green hills before they hit

the plains. She had to be in office the next morning. She waved. He waved too. She walked down the slope. He couldn't keep standing there watching her leave. What would the other boys in the dorm say? Goey Goey Chipmunks, they would tease. They didn't know yet. He didn't want them to know. Ever. It would be worse then. They would try and hide that they knew and he would see it in their eyes.

He had a test, two of them – Bio and Math. But how could he study, how could he go on with this business of living when she was saying goodbye?

Chandu, Chandu!

He turned, raced back. She was calling. But she didn't see him. She had already turned the corner. He kicked a pebble, trying to swallow the lump in his throat. The pebble flew a yard. He kicked it again but it stuck in the bajri.

Should he go see the play in the school auditorium? Stick to Bio and Math? Damn! This whole business of study. Highly overrated. He should call it quits. Give up. It had nothing to do with real living. He couldn't. Look to the future, Dad had said.

Mum. He remembered the way she

Remember your first day at school, she asked. This was in Lucknow where they had lived then. He didn't remember. But he liked her to tell the story ...

An hour after I had left you, you took your new satchel and walked out of class. Straight out of the gates of Silver Bells Nursery. And no one knew. A whole block down the road you walked, and you only four. I was morose that day, having seen you off. Stayed back from office, and what do I see but you walking in. Immediately I'd gone to the principal to fire her roundly. But I found her tearing her hair in despair. Pandemonium there was. They were all crying. The whole nursery. About fifty, sixty kids.

"You told me I mustn't cry, Mama, so I came home," you lisped. Yes I'm glad I didn't go to office that day. Really glad. I was able to have you with me all day ...

He kept thinking of this as he opened the Bio book and flicked through its pages, crisp and full of intricate diagrams. But through their whiteness, all he could see was the edge of her lace-trimmed dupatta when she took off her spectacles, and used

it to wipe the corner of her eye.

It's April and the hot winds have started, she explained. It will be hotter still when you come down in June, but there will be litchees ... melons ... mangoes, Chandan ...

And you Mum, what of you?



MANJU KAK says, It was the sight of fruits on a wayside cart that inspired this story. The fruits were fresh and it occurred to me that the essence of life is this. But we muddle our lives with so many other things.

Manju Kak is a freelance journalist and writer. She has taught for several years and has been a broadcaster. She also designs and paints.

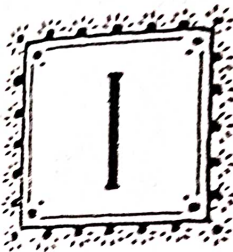
A collection of her short stories, *First Light At Colonelpura* has recently been published by Penguin. She lives in New Delhi.

"The Boy" was first published in Sahitya Akademi's bimonthly literary journal, *Indian Literature* (Volume 150).

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Dhunketa

Miriam's Letter

Translated from Gujarati
by the Author



In the grey sky of early dawn stars still glowed. An old man was walking through the town, drawing his tattered cloak closer to shield his body from the cold, biting wind. Except for the occasional bark of a dog or the screech of a bird disturbed before its time, the whole town was wrapped in deathly silence. Most of its inhabitants were still asleep. The old man shivered but plodded on till he came out of the town-gate on to a straight road. On one side of the road was a row of trees,

and on the other, the town's public garden. At the end of the garden stood a handsome new building. Light gleamed through the crevices of its closed doors and windows.

As soon as he saw the wooden arch of this building, the old man was filled with hope and joy. On the arch hung an old board with the newly painted letters, POST OFFICE. The old man went in quietly and sat on the verandah. Two or three voices of people busy at their work could be faintly heard.

"Police Superintendent," a voice inside called sharply. The old man started at the sound, but composed himself quickly to wait.

Name after name rang out from within as the clerk read out the English addresses on the letters and flung them to the waiting postmen. From long practice, he had acquired great speed in reading out the titles - Commissioner, Superintendent, Librarian, Diwan Sahib - and in throwing the letters.

In the midst of this procedure a joking voice called, "Shikari Ali!"

The old man got up, raised his eyes towards heaven in gratitude and stepped forward.

"Godul Bhai! You called out Ali's name, didn't you? Here I am. I have come for my letter."

"Who's that?" asked the new postmaster.

"Old shikari Ali, sir. He waits here every day for letters that never come," the clerk told him.

The old man went back slowly to the bench on which he had been accustomed to sit these five long years.

Ali had been a clever shikari once. As his skill increased so did his love for the hunt. Soon it became an obsession. Not a day passed without Ali setting out with his gun. People said that when Ali sighted the earth-brown partridge, which was almost invisible to other eyes, the poor bird was as good as in his bag. His sharp eyes spotted the hare, crouching in the yellow-brown scrub even if the dogs failed to see it. And in a moment it was dead. Ali loved to go fishing too.

However, when the evening of his life was drawing near, Ali's life suddenly took a new turn. His only child, Miriam, had grown up into a young woman. And before Ali realized it, she married a soldier and went off to live with him and his regiment

in the Punjab. For the last five years Ali had had no news of his daughter.

Ali became very lonely. The hunter's instinct was still there, but the thrill felt by a sportsman was no longer there. Nor could he laugh at the bewildered terror of the young partridges bereft of their parents. He gave up hunting and spent all his time reflecting upon life and admiring the beauty of the lush green fields. He began to understand the meaning of love and separation.

Ali had never received a letter in his life. But now, he would rise at four o'clock every morning and walk to the post office. With a serenity born of hope and faith, he waited. For a letter from Miriam.

The post office, one of the most impersonal buildings in the world, became a place of pilgrimage for him. He always occupied a particular corner of the building, and when people got to know his habit, they laughed at him. The postmen began to make a game of him. Even though there was no letter for him they would call out his name just to see him jump up and come to the door. But with boundless faith and infinite patience Ali came there every

day, and went away empty-handed.

As Ali waited, he would see the peons come to collect their letters – smart young men in spotless turbans and creaking new shoes. With great enthusiasm, they would exchange news from their various offices. Every now and then, the door would be thrown open and the postmaster, a man with a face as sad and inexpressive as a pumpkin, would be seen sitting on his chair inside.

One day Ali was there as usual, but he did not move from his seat when the door was opened.

"Police Commissioner!" the clerk called out, and a young fellow stepped forward briskly for the letters.

"Superintendent!" Another peon came up to the clerk. And he, like a devout Vishnu bhakta, repeated the customary thousand names.

At last they had all gone. Ali too got up. Saluting the post office as if it housed some precious relic, he walked away slowly, a pitiable figure, a century behind his time.

"That fellow," said the postmaster, "is he mad?"

"Who, sir? Oh, yes," answered the clerk.

"He has been coming here every day for the last five years. But he doesn't get any letters."

"Who does he think will have the time to write a letter every day?"

"He is a bit mad, sir. In the old days he committed many sins. Maybe he had shed blood within some sacred precincts and is paying for it now," a postman added.

"Madmen are strange people," the postmaster remarked.

"Yes. I saw a madman in Ahmedabad once who did nothing but make little heaps of dust. Another one went every day to the riverbed in order to pour water on a certain stone!"

"Oh, that's nothing," chimed in another, "I knew a madman, who recited poetry all day ..."

Everyone in the post office began to talk of lunacy. After a while, the postmaster said in a quiet voice, "To them perhaps we appear mad."

For several days after that Ali did not come to the post office. Everyone wondered why, but no one cared enough to find out the reason.

Then one morning, he was there as usual. His face looked tired. It was a struggle for him to breathe. That day he could not control himself.

"Master sahib," he begged the postmaster, "do you have a letter from my Miriam?"

"What a nuisance you are, bhai!" the postmaster exclaimed impatiently.

"My name is Ali," Ali responded absent-mindedly.

"I know! I know! Do you think we've got your Miriam's name registered?"

"Then please note it down, sahib. It will be useful if a letter comes when I am not here." How would poor Ali, who had spent three-quarters of his life hunting, know that Miriam's name was not worth a pice to anyone but her father?

The postmaster lost his temper. "Have you no sense?" he cried. "Go away! Do you think we're going to eat your letter when it comes?"

Ali walked out very slowly, turning after every few steps to gaze at the post office. His eyes filled with tears of helplessness.

Suddenly, Ali heard someone coming up behind him. He turned around. It was one of the clerks.

"Bhai!" he said.

"What?" the clerk asked, surprised.

"Here, look at this!" Ali produced an old tin box and emptied five gold guineas into the surprised clerk's hands. "Do not look so startled," he continued. "Take them. They will be more useful to you. But will you do one thing for me?"

"What?"

"What do you see up there?" asked Ali, pointing to the sky.

"Heaven."

"Allah is there, and in His presence I am giving you this money. When my Miriam's letter comes, you must forward it to me."

"But where? Where should I send it?" asked the utterly bewildered clerk.

"To my grave."

"What?"

"Yes." There were tears in Ali's eyes. The clerk slowly walked away, the five gold guineas in his pocket.

Ali was never seen again. No one cared to inquire after him.

One day, the postmaster was sitting in the post office, waiting anxiously for news of his daughter. She was very ill in another town, and the postmaster was worried.

The letters were brought in and piled on the table. Seeing an envelope of the colour and shape that he was expecting, the postmaster snatched it.

It was addressed to Shikari Ali. The postmaster stared at it for a moment. This was the letter the old man had been waiting for – the letter from his daughter Miriam.

"Lakshmi Das!" he called the clerk to whom Ali had given his money.

"Yes, sir?"

"This is for old Ali. Where is he now?"

"I will find out, sir."

The postmaster did not receive a letter that day. All night he worried. He could not sleep so he got up at three in the morning and went to wait in the post office. When Ali comes at four o'clock I will give him the letter myself, he mused.

After spending one night anxiously waiting for news of his daughter, the postmaster understood Ali's pain. And he felt a great sympathy for the old man.

At the stroke of four the postmaster heard a soft knock. That must be Ali, he thought. He rose quickly from his chair and flung open the door.

→ ❖ Miriam's Letter ❖ →

"Come in, Ali bhai," he cried and held out the letter to the old man standing outside, leaning on a stick. The old man lifted his eyes and in them was a light so unearthly that the postmaster shrank back.

Hearing the postmaster's words, Lakshmi Das came out. "Who was that, sir?" he asked. The postmaster did not answer. He just stood there, staring at the door from which Ali had disappeared. At last he turned to Lakshmi Das. "I was speaking to Ali," he said.

"But shikari Ali is dead, sir."

"What! When? Are you sure, Lakshmi Das?"

"Yes, sir, I'm sure," said a postman who had just arrived. "Ali died three months ago."

Miriam's letter was still lying near the door.

The daily routine began. The clerk read out the addresses – Police Commissioner, Superintendent, Librarian – and deftly threw the letters at the waiting peons.

→ ❖ Dhumketu ❖ →

DHUMKETU is the pen name of Gaurishankar Govardhanram Joshi. He completed his graduation in 1920, after a chequered career interspersed with stray employment. He worked as a private tutor with two aristocratic families and devoted all his free time to writing. One of the pillars of Gujarati literature, his works include fiction for children and neo-literates. He has also adapted and translated Confucius, Kahlil Gibran and Rabindranath Tagore into Gujarati.

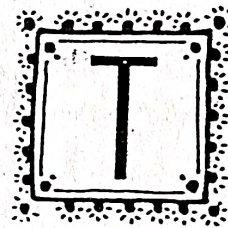
This translation was first published in *Contemporary Indian Short Stories Series I* by Sahitya Akademi in 1959.



Cho Dharman

Fireworks

Translated from Tamil
by N S Jagannathan



They were all gathered on the cement platform, some distance from the cluster of buildings. The low, squarish platform was crowded with children. Next to each child were stacked bundles of metal ring moulds that they had packed with chemicals and threaded with fuses the previous day. That day's task was to

Ch "Fireworks" won for its writer and its translator the 1993 Katha Award for Creative Fiction and for Translation respectively.

remove the moulds and put the fire crackers out in the sun to dry.

Foreman Shankaran Pillai was on his rounds. "You there!" he boomed, "don't bang the moulds against the floor! The chemicals at the bottom will spill. Squeeze them out. Ai, you Pirakkan, do you hear me, you rascal?"

Pirakkan looked all around him. Then he said, "Did you hear that, Veluchami? Foreman Annaachi wants us to squeeze it out at the crack of dawn!"

Everyone started laughing. Shankaran Pillai was livid. "Rascals! If you don't get down to work and put the crackers out to dry, you will not get any rings to work on for the rest of the day. You will just have to pick up your kanji vessels and go home."

No one even listened to Shankaran Pillai's threats.

Foreman Colamban, whose job it was to fill empty tubes with explosives, strolled in. His dark body shimmered with the aluminium dust that stuck to it.

"Look who's come here! The white boss himself! What boss, are the tubes ready for the fuses?" one of the boys asked.

In the western corner, tipping, the work of preparing the fuses, was progressing

briskly. Long threads were being dipped into buckets containing a black chemical paste. The threads were then stretched along horizontal poles to dry. They would get tauter as they dried and become fuse material. These threads would then be wrapped in thin sheets of white paper, measured and cut to size, tipped with chemical and inserted into the cracker mould. The boys engaged in this work, their faces streaked with the black chemical, looked like circus clowns.

This was a tricky job and the children had to be careful. If there was too much wastage, there would be a cut in their daily wages. If the fuses were not taut enough, there would be further cuts.

"Hurry up, you bastards! Have all the moulds been squeezed out? Mikhelu, pick up all the empty rings and pile them up there."

Mikhel grumbled under her breath. "What an expert at getting free work!" she muttered as she bent to collect the rings. Stringing them on her arms right up to her shoulders, she jangled them ... jhal ... jhal ... jhal ... and danced to the music.

"Just look at her, Shanmuganne," one of the boys cried. "Ever since she started

wearing a dhaavani, she is ravishing. Gets me all excited."

Mikhel made a face at him and threw an empty ring in mock anger. He laughed and dodged it.

"Annaachi, everything has been put out to dry, all the empty moulds have been stacked ..."

In a moment they were off. Rings that had to be inserted with fuses lay in heaps. The foreman's orders ricocheted off the distant buildings.

"Ai you, come back! Six thousand Saints, four thousand Bijlis, four thousand Goas, eight thousand Thukkada plus a thousand Sada have to be counted and stacked now!"

One by one they came back. Each person picked up a hundred, two hundred pieces and arranged them. The rings had to be smeared with a mud and red ochre mixture. When they were dry, each one would be pierced with a steel needle. Some of the same ochre-mud mixture would be pushed in through the holes and the fuses inserted. The children sat in a circle, making holes, their fingers moving like tops. They looked like hens pecking at scattered grain.

"Ai you, shove it in nicely. The mixture must go right down. Twist the needle when you pull it otherwise the mud within will spill out."

"Annaachi, he is a new boy. He doesn't know how to do it."

"You there, Thangamadathi, show him. Sammugavadivu. you too lend a hand."

Everyone sniggered. The children put the finished rings out to dry and came back to work on more. Red ochre rings spread out on the platform like so many plates of aarati.

Once one lot was over, they ran out to collect the fuses. They fought among themselves for the stiffer fuse threads. Now and then, they changed their positions to ease their sore backs.

Sammugaiah, whose job it was to prepare the fuses, walked up to Saroja and secretly passed a few of the best ones to her. Saroja accepted them, smiling, smeared his face with a little black paste and then disappeared. Sammugaiah was in seventh heaven.

Some of the workers got busy sorting out the various crackers. The Saint was a big red noisy explosive. The Sada was a

smaller version of the Saint, the Bijli was a multi-coloured, striped cracker.

They knew that once they sat down to insert the fuses they wouldn't want to get up. So they headed for a wash and the midday meal of kanji before they got down to serious work. The old woman who sold vadais on credit was there, with her large box. The gardener was chasing away those who had gone to his well for a wash.

"Ai you harlot's brats! Run away or I'll break your bloody legs. Come here to wash off a ton and a half of poison from your filthy bodies, uhn? Even a buffalo will not come near the water you touch. Go away, you devils!" he shouted and threw a sod at them.

"One of these days I swear I am going to teach this old son-of-a-bitch a lesson. I will really pollute his well with chemicals," muttered Pirakkan as they walked away.

They sat in a tight circle under the dense-leaved neem. No one bothered about the alumimum-mixed black powder that sparkled on their noses, faces and hands as they chatted among themselves.

"Why didn't you show up at the cinema yesterday?"

"Was the picture good?"

"Yes. There was a huge crowd. But I felt bad, standing in the queue dripping with sweat. Everyone was staring at me. I was so ashamed I could have dropped dead."

"What can we do? If we give up this job, where can we go?"

"This damned stink! We are so used to it that we don't smell it. I hate to meet anyone's eye. I know they are probably grimacing with disgust."

"Ai, you there!" a voice interrupted them. "Push the fuse in and pack the mix inside properly. *He* is sure to come and check it out. If it's loose, he'll deduct four rings in your account." Shankaran Pillai's loud admonitions would soon become never-ending, they knew.

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The cramped rooms in which they worked had doors on all four sides. Near these entrances there were water tubs. All the workers, young and old, were packed tightly into each room, like matchsticks in a match box.

"Why does a small room like this need four doors?" the new boy asked.

"Wait for the day the inspector comes and you will find out."

The room resounded with laughter. The poor sap hung his head in shame. Then he looked up at Pirakkan.

"Had he known the answer to this, would he have failed in class seven or come here to sit with us and swallow this black poison daily?" said a brat in green trousers.

"Shut up, you silly pup. *You* are a know-all, aren't you? Why didn't *you* continue *your* studies and make a great success of your life? Why the hell have you ended up here?" Pirakkan's outburst had effectively silenced the brat.

Pirakkan turned to the new boy and explained, "According to the rules, only four people can work in this room at one time. And even these four should not sit together. Each must sit near the exit and work. The moment a fuse is fixed in a ring, the ring should be taken out to the platform. There should never be a ring with a fuse inside it in the room. Every time you go out, to the platform to give in a fitted ring, or just go out for a piss, you should step into the tub outside and wash your feet. Only then can you come in. That is the rule."

"If I don't?"

"If you don't, the sand stuck to the soles

of your feet will rub against the cement floor, spark briefly, and ignite the black chemical on the floor. All the rings stacked here will blow up and you will be charred to death, like that poor Changili."

In this room only one door was kept slightly ajar. The others were locked. The water tub had only garbage. The board on the wall which announced – Only 4 Persons – had a zero scrawled after the four with the same black chemical!

Ring moulds fitted with fuses covered the cement platform. From a distance they looked like tender sprouts spearing their way out of black soil.

"How does Saroja alone manage to get the best fuses," wondered Veluchami.

"You are a fool, Veluchami. Hers are no ordinary fuses. Each one is an auspicious one."

"Auspicious? Oh I see. No wonder Saroja inserts them so fast."

Saroja bit her lip to stop the laughter that bubbled within her. The little devils! There wasn't a thing they didn't know. They just loved to tease her, hoping to hear a few choice expletives from her.

Just then a little boy came up to the door

and handed Saroja a small packet.

"Who sent this?" she asked.

"Sammugannaachi asked me to give it to you."

"Which Sammugam? The one who prepares the fuse threads?"

The lad nodded and ran away.

"Veluchami, now do you understand why Saroja gets the best fuses?"

Saroja blushed as she hid the packet of vadais in the folds of her sari.

"Sarojakka! It seems that Mikhel and Colamban are not on talking terms?"

"Their romance is over."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Does everything have to be spelt out to you? Remember Mikhel's younger sister, that fair little thing?"

"Yes?"

"She's five months pregnant."

"Really! Who does she say did it?"

"Govaalu, the packer."

"My God! He's still a baby!"

"What has he to say?"

"He swears it wasn't him. Hasn't shown up for work for ten days now."

"Just because her younger sister is like that, it's not necessary for the elder to be that way too."

"Why don't you tell Colamban this?"

"It's not my business."

"Then shut up."

They heard Shankaran Pillai scream, "You bastards! As soon as you've inserted the mix, the cracker should immediately go to the platform. If I see more than a single fuse in the room I shall cut your wages. Then don't blame me." The children quickly took the rings to the platform.

"Are you saying that with five months gone the mother didn't know? What kind of a woman is she? Even a barren woman can recognise morning sickness."

"What can the wretched mother do? She is not at home the whole day to see her daughter vomiting. But once she realized something was wrong, she took the girl to the hospital. The doctor just asked her if her daughter worked in a factory. The mother concluded that the swollen belly was due to the poisonous fumes her daughter had inhaled. So she didn't bother too much. When she found out what was wrong, it was too late."

Thangaraj, who worked in the next room, came up to Saroja, his face creased in an ingratiating grin. "Ai Akka, I have

two rings left but no fuses. If I go to the foreman, he will yell. Can I have two fuses from you?" he asked.

"Help me insert the fuses into my rings first, then you can have what you want."

"Please, Akka, please!"

"Go bring your rings first. I'll give you the fuses."

"If the foreman sees me doing it, he will chew me alive, Akka."

"To hell with the foreman. Come on. Be a man."

Thangaraj came and sat down opposite Saroja. He had given up studies when he was in the ninth class and had joined his younger brother at work here.

"Some people came asking for your elder sister's hand, I heard. What happened?"

"Don't ask me about that farce. Last month a boy came from Uralakudi. He was the only son of a large farming family. They asked if the girl would work in the fields. My sister just shook her head."

"Can't say I blame her. If you go into a family like that, you cannot avoid working in the field. You have to work under the blazing sun. Those who have tasted the comfort of this fireworks factory wouldn't like to stand in the hot sun. Take me.

Would I? Never. My flesh will just melt."

Saroja went on, "The day before yesterday, another bridegroom had come."

"From which place?"

"Varadampatti. The boy is a distant relative on my mother's side. He has a job in a government office. Wearing a suit and all."

"When is the wedding?"

"What wedding? He liked my sister but they wanted to know how much schooling she has. When they heard she had not been to school at all, they just got up and left without even taking a sip of water.

"All the chaps who come fall for her. She looks like a lady teacher! Educated bridegrooms ask if she has been to school. A farmer from a large family wants to know if she will work in the field. We are neither here nor there ..."

Saroja was tired.

"If you can get somebody here, you can work without getting scorched in the sun. Both can swallow this poisonous chemical till they die."

All those who had finished their quota, arranged the rings, then ran to stand in a queue to collect their pieces of washing

soap. This was a daily routine. You got a measly bit of soap to try to wash off the aluminium dust, sulphur and the black chemical grime clinging to your body. You had to fight for your place in the queue. Then you carried a bucket in one hand and your clothes in another and ran towards the Kurunchankulam lake.

Last year, Chelliah, a smart fellow with a sharp tongue was standing in one such queue. When his turn came, he said, "Can't you give us a bigger piece of soap? We can hardly wash our hands with this. The aluminium dust just doesn't go. The body sparkles in the morning sun. ..."

Before he could finish speaking, the senior accountant slapped him so hard, his fingers left their mark on Chelliah's cheek.

"Mind your business, you dirty dog! Full piece, half piece! Get out. Don't come to work from tomorrow."

"All right. Settle my account and give me my dues. If not this dump, some other dump."

"Come tomorrow with your father and collect your money."

"I worked here, not my father."

Poor Chelliah is now counting the bars in Thattaparai juvenile jail - for having

stolen and sold chlorate bags belonging to the company. His sister is trying to get a job in another company. Everyone now calls her chlorate-thief Chelliah's sister.

The bus that took the children home had arrived and was parked at the gate. Boys and girls, washed and half-washed, were fighting for a seat in the bus. There was a tremendous clamour, like that of birds returning home to their nests in the banyan tree.

It was getting late but there were still no signs of Saroja and Sammugaiah. In the garden on the other side of the lake, there were two buckets, sparkling in the setting sun. The strong scent of the pichi flowers was intoxicating.

The sound of the horn was harsh on the ear. The bus was about to leave when Shankaran Pillai came running towards it, desperately waving his hands.

"Ai you! Junior boss just phoned from the godown. He said ten thousand packets are urgently needed. Have to be loaded tomorrow morning. Come, finish them. Payment in cash," said Shankaran Pillai.

Cash payment meant that you did not have to wait till the end of the week to

settle your account. It was money in hand. Besides the bus fare to go home, you also got free tea, bun, pakkoda and sev.

Some of the workers got off the bus. Soon after, it left.

When they were all assembled in a circle in the packing room, petromax lamps, kept hidden so far, were brought in. All the workers sat around the heaps of crackers and started packing them.

"Annaachi, why don't you tell the boss to fix a tubelight? We will be able to see better."

"Shut your filthy mouth, you brat! There is no electricity even in the manager's room. The inspector says that after four in the evening, there should be nobody here except the watchman."

"Ai, Mikhel, Thangamadathi, move further inside. We have to keep the door closed. If the light is seen outside, some rascal will phone and the jeep-men will come to lock the room and seal it. The crackers must go to the godown the very same day they are ready. That is the rule. But to avoid paying the lorry fare, these crackers, made over the last ten days, are still stacked here."

The crackers were being carefully put

into bags. Shankaran Pillai stapled the bags, counted them and put them in cases. His heart was brimming with joy.

"Annaachi, we need a fresh packet of staples," someone said.

"Just count the packets and keep them aside. I'll go get some."

He returned in no time. But in his hands, there were four or five candles.

"There are no staples in stock," he said. "Here, use these candles. Be careful. Fold the packets tight and apply the flame lightly. The plastic bag will melt and seal itself. We need only a thousand packets. Shake the packets properly so that the crackers are fully inside. If even a little bit of the fuse hangs out, we are finished!"

First, there was one explosion. Then a series of them.

Caught in the dense cloud of smoke, they could not see the locked doors. They could not open them. Screams were drowned in the din of bursting crackers.

By daybreak, along with all the fire crackers, eight child crackers, six adult crackers and three elderly crackers had exploded into cinders. The five female crackers were charred beyond recognition.

CHO DHARMAN says, I strongly feel that the most cruel aspect of this modern industrial society is child labour. Having been a child labourer myself, I know of the dreams and longings of working children. In my story, I have described an incident from my experience and tried to create an empathy with the working children in the reader.

Cho Dharman works in a textile mill. He has published over thirty short stories in Tamil literary magazines.

This story was first published in Tamil as *Nasukkam* in *Subhamangala* (Madras, June 1992). It won the Ilaikkiya Chintanai Award in the same year.

The translator, N S JAGANNATHAN, was a teacher and a civil servant before becoming a full-time journalist. He has worked with several major newspapers and was Editor-in-Chief of the *Financial Express* and the *Indian Express*. Currently the editor of *The Indian Review of Books*, he frequently translates from Tamil into English and from Bangla into Tamil.



ABOUT KATHA

KATHA is a registered nonprofit organization devoted to creative communication. Katha's basic objective is to spread the love of books and the joy of reading among children and adults.

KALPAVRIKSHAM, Katha's Centre for Sustainable Learning, develops and publishes quality material for neo-literate children and adults, and works with teachers to help them make their teaching and presentation more creative. Amongst our publications are *Tamasha!* a fun and activity magazine on development issues for children, in Hindi and English. And *Hulgul ka Pitara*, a teaching and learning kit. *Stree Katha*, is an illustrated, interactive book on women's issues, in Hindi, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu and Urdu.

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