

When I was first introduced to the village of corpses I was a mere child. Perhaps that is why the impression it made on my mind was as firm as a footprint on wet cement and I remember every detail so vividly.

My father was then the Home Minister to the Maharaja of Orchcha and looked after the state jail. He had introduced several improvements in the condition of the lives of criminals and it was on his initiative that those accused of murder were freed of wearing a ball and chain on their feet. One such prisoner used to come every day to our house to work in the garden. For eighteen years he had carried the iron ball in his hands as he moved, one step at a time, so even after he was freed of that burden, his feet moved slowly. Two deep gashes ran round his ankles and had become bleeding sores. 'What was your crime, *bandi*?' I asked him one day. He looked at me, his fearsome moustache bristling, and replied matter-of-factly, 'I cut off my sahib's neck, *binnoo!*'

'Why?' I went on and he was silent. Perhaps he was trying to figure out how he could summarize his crime to suit a child's understanding. Bansi had killed his *firangi* boss and yet managed to escape the death penalty. Perhaps the judge felt that in a curious way, he was a victim of his circumstances. After all, his boss was guilty of a terrible crime against Bansi. He had snatched his *khansama*'s wife from him and made her his mistress. Had his wife not managed to escape Bansi's fury, her head would have rolled on the ground as well. Whatever the reason, Bansi's death sentence had been converted into life imprisonment.

Bansi was the headman of 'the village of corpses' a euphemism for the inmates of the jail. Once he

*Female criminal

**Brothers, this is a village of the dead!

Part Three

Apradhini*

Saadho, E Murdan Ka Gaon**

○ Shivani

Translated from Hindi by Ira Pande

took a truck full of 'villagers' to the temple at Kundeswar. My father had been responsible for granting him permission to do that. The joy on their faces at seeing the glorious sky overhead, that was clearly visible from our terrace next door to the temple is a sight I can never forget. My father had a huge vessel of *jalebis* sent over for them and their shouts of joy and the full-throated hurrahs for my father rent the sky.

Years later, I was in the vicinity again and went once again to visit 'the village of corpses'. This time, my brother was the Private Secretary to the Maharaja of Orchcha. The old warden of the jail was still around and I persuaded my brother to let me accompany him to the jail one day. At first he was horrified at my request:

'How can you even think of such an absurd thing?' he asked. 'Girls from good families don't go near a jail!' However, when his new bride, my sister-in-law, added her shy voice to mine, he had to give in. We reached the outer precincts and were a little intimidated by the sheer size of the thick walls that seemed to tower over the area. Just two intimidating syllables saying 'Jail' in bold letters were painted over the arch that led in. How different those jails were from the ones you see now!

The state jailor had a personality to suit his job: he wore tight *khakhi* Jodhpuris, carried a whip in his hand and had well-waxed moustaches. Those moustaches alone carried more authority than a posse of policemen. Like the flowers round the necks of the gods that are said never to wither, I am sure that the moustache of a jailor remains black, bushy and frightening even after he retires. One roar from him had people trembling and not one prisoner had the temerity to lift his eyes when he strode into a cell. He took us on a guided tour of the jail and then to the smithy where the prisoners themselves fashioned the balls and chains they were forced to wear. He proudly displayed handcuffs they had made asking us to weigh a pair in our hands. I realized that this was a ploy to distract us from asking him to take us to meet the prisoners, among them a notorious dacoit of Madhya Pradesh, Deshpat. His Robin



Suparana

Hood-like exploits had become legends and lore by then: how he looted a village or burgled the house of a famous Seth in Lalitpur within minutes, then donated the loot to the family of a poor girl so that they could marry her off....

‘Come, I’ll take you all to meet Deshpat,’ the jailor said finally and both of us began to tremble at the prospect of meeting the legendary *daku*. I could not believe that we would finally meet the Deshpat who had inspired ballads in the neighbouring villages of Bundelkhand. When he was brought in, he stood there with folded hands: a lithe body, salt and pepper hair and a face full of deep lines. His eyes were as calm and deep as the surface of a quiet lake. He bent low over our feet and stood up. My eyes filled up: it was like seeing a proud bird caught in a cage. How it must hurt this proud man to bend before two young girls, I thought. We sat in awkward silence, then he turned politely to the jailor and asked, ‘Can I go now, *sarkar*? It is almost time for the prisoners’ lunch.’

‘Deshpat oversees the prison meals,’ the jailor explained to us. ‘So, what have you made today, Deshpat?’

He laughed and his two missing front teeth lent his face a curious youthfulness as he threw back his head. ‘What else but the same old *chane ki daal* and *roti, sarkar*,’ he laughed.

‘Go, fetch some on a clean plate for these girls,’ the jailor ordered him. ‘Let’s see what you think of their food,’ he said to us. A short while later, Deshpat arrived holding a plate with our food. Two fat chapatis and a small bowl of *chane ki daal* rested neatly and next to them was the special tomato chutney he had made just for us by roasting tomatoes on a griddle and squashing the pulp with some chillies and salt. It tasted delicious and in no time, we had gobbled up the lot. The taste of that meal still sits on my

tongue as a tantalizing memory. After meeting Deshpat, I thought I could go another step, so I placed my next request before the jailor. ‘Please take us to the death row,’ I begged him.

‘No, no,’ he almost threw up his hands in horror. ‘I can’t take you there. Those men are wild, they speak the kind of vile language that ears such as yours should never have to hear. And if your mother hears I took you there, she’ll kill me,’ he added. He began to herd us out but I dug my heels in. Finally, he agreed to take us. We crossed the huge courtyard and went to the far end of the jail. The low roofs and tiny cells shocked me: how could a grown man live here? There were just two prisoners there and one day, at an appropriate signal from the jailor, they would be led to their death. The state hangman had a practised wrist—he knew exactly how to grease a noose so that it slid over their heads and killed them with one flick. Heavy beards covered the faces of the two men who stood clutching the iron bars of their cells. They yelled some obscene words at us but before they could say more, the jailor quickly led us away. Nearby was the lone woman prisoner of the death row. A *maalin*, she was due to be hanged in a month’s time. She had a veil drawn over her face and had vowed to never lift it, we were told. She wanted no one to see her face and had declared that she would not even unveil her face at the time of her hanging. ‘How can I face girls from good families, *sarkar*?’ she told him when we asked to see her face.

How times have changed since then! Now, when after all these years, I went to interview some prisoners in the women’s jail in Lucknow, they had no such qualms. Like blasé strippers, they narrated their stories to me without any visible hesitation, hardly faltering even when they came to the goriest details. My pen froze occasionally, but not their tongues. Their exposure to the relentless

interrogation by the police, the press and the court had made them clinical about themselves and their crimes. They were like actors who read their parts mechanically before an audience. Each had a story that was fit for dramatization and each provided my pen with new material.

I was presented with a fresh drama each time I went there. This time, it was a dark, tall woman who refused to meet my eyes. I felt I had seen her somewhere but could not place her face. Then, it dawned on me that she was like one of the dark women of the artist B Prabha’s works—the same sadness and the same fleshy lips that are the hallmark of her portraits. Yet when she came and sat down next to me and I studied her face closely, I realized that the innocence of B Prabha’s models was missing here—this one was like a fruit that has been artificially ripened and so her face had none of the natural sweetness of Prabha’s village belles.

I had been told that she was the moll of a famous dacoit, whose name spelt terror. Then one day, he was caught and his gang rounded up. Now, he was languishing in a jail in Delhi and his wife was here, many miles away in Lucknow. There were just two months left of her sentence and I wondered what she would do after she was free. Apparently, she had stashed away 120 *tolas* of gold in a bank in Kanpur, which she claimed was her dowry, not looted goods. Each time the gang came back after a looting spree, they would give her gold and jewellery. She would then melt it down and stash it away to be made into some other piece later. Her husband, occasionally oppressed with the loneliness of the life he had chosen, would whisk her away to some town to savour the bright life. A car would wait for them in a dark alley and she would accompany her husband, dressed in her fine jewels, to go on a spree to Bareilly, Lucknow or Kanpur.

‘Did you never feel guilt about accepting the stolen goods your husband placed at your feet?’ I asked.

‘No,’ she replied glibly. ‘How was I to know that he got them after looting or killing someone?’ She looked up at my face and something in it must have made her pause, for suddenly the mask slipped. There had been no stopping Janaki once she started to tell me her story but this one was like a vicious snake: she emerged from her basket to hiss at me when provoked, then slipped into her basket once more.

‘So why are you here?’ I nudged her again.

‘For aiding and abetting crime: my husband is accused of seven dacoities and murder,’ she answered in a low voice, avoiding my eyes. We played this cat-and-mouse game until I managed to get the story out of her. Her husband returned one day from one of his secret ventures to find her upset and depressed. A lonely life in a forest was hardly conducive to make a person happy, and then the unending flights to new hiding places, the eternal wait for a husband who may never return. She could trust no one, nor confide in a friend. Who knew when a member of the gang may decide to sell his mates for a few pieces of silver to the police? That day when he returned, he threw a bundle at her feet. Wrapped in dirty rags, it was a king’s ransom in precious stones and jewellery such as she had never seen. She took one necklace from the lot and with trembling hands, placed it round her neck and for a moment she tried to forget the neck that was probably hacked off to snatch this treasure. ‘Wear it today,’ her husband told her. ‘But I know they will come after me for this: tomorrow we will have to melt it down.’



Suparana

‘Never,’ she replied. ‘Melt this exquisite thing? I’ll hide it in my clothes, no one will know.’

However, the vanity of a woman makes her reckless: until she can hear someone exclaim over a piece of jewellery and sigh in envy, what is a necklace worth? ‘We were returning from Bareilly after a late-night movie,’ she recalled in a sad voice and my antenna started tingling at the tone of her voice. I could almost picture the scene—a stolen car, she and her husband wearing shiny new clothes, cheap scent, a new purse on her lap; her husband’s mouth savouring a *paan* and the sleepy aftermath of a late-night show. The driver was speeding when he felt they were being followed.

‘Looks like the police are behind us,’ the driver said over his shoulder. His hands were trembling by now and the car zig-zagged dangerously as he tried to speed away. ‘Didn’t I tell you not to wear that wretched necklace?’ her husband snarled in anger. ‘If we are caught with that thing round your neck, we’re done for.’

She quickly took off the stolen goods and hid some in her purse and some inside her clothes, but to no avail. The police took little time to unearth them and the owner identified them as stolen goods. That is how

she had landed here, she said. Today, there were two letters for her from her husband and the postcards, kept on a nearby table, were easy to read. I blushed as I read the few sentences that I managed to see.

The interview over, she stood with folded hands and prepared to leave.

As she turned, I couldn’t help asking, ‘You will be free soon: what do you plan to do after you return?’

She stared at me for a few minutes as if I was a policeman interrogating her before parole, and then said, ‘Work as a teacher somewhere, I’ve passed the eighth class here and will try and get a job.’

I wonder, though, how far that will work out. Having got accustomed to the free life of the forest, the power of the moll is not easy to give up or forget. Where will she find gold to cook, I wonder, or savour the delicious curry made from a fresh kill? The stealthy outings made in a stolen car, the money-filled purse on her lap and a king’s ransom worth of jewellery that she was used to wear?

My reverie was broken when the doctor entered and asked, ‘Shall I send the next one in?’ I nodded, unable to speak to a normal person so soon after an exposure to someone’s abnormal life. I had been told the next person was the clown of the jail—and my heart lifted a little at the prospect of meeting this one. It was like yearning for a spoon of sugar after swallowing a bitter dose of castor oil. So far the ones I had met were like the practiced trapeze artistes of a circus. They flirted with death as they swung dangerously from high tension ropes, trusting their life to another person’s machinations. The clown was led in: a blank, foolish face, large expressionless eyes and a meaningless grin on her face.

‘Here she is,’ the doctor smiled as she brought her to where I sat. ‘She goes home tomorrow. Listen, Muggi, I just got a letter from your husband: he is looking forward to your return but is terrified of one thing...’

‘What is that, *memsahib*?’ she looked disturbed for a moment.

Naturally he would be worried, I privately thought. Who would not be if he was faced with prospect of welcoming a wife who had been locked away for fourteen years? The doctor smiled. ‘He says,’ she twinkled at Muggi, ‘that he is worried you will not leave a single brick standing in his house.’

‘No, no, *sarkar*,’ Muggi’s grin was back immediately on her foolish face and she touched her earlobes in horror, ‘I won’t eat them.’

I must have looked stunned at this exchange, so the doctor turned to me as she explained, ‘This is a true child of the earth, Shivani,’ she said. ‘She has a thing about mud: give her a *sakora*, or *kulhar*, a flower pot – anything made of mud—and she eats it up.’ Muggi blushed and looked down at her toes.

No wonder she looked like a flower pot herself, I thought. A dark swarthy face, a *sari* tied inches above her ankles and a *kurti* she seemed to be bursting out of. If she sneezed, the buttons would fly, I thought. She had no trace of womanly softness in her at all: her eyes, her walk, her face were singularly lacking in any grace. She sat in front of me, shaking her knees in a way that no decent woman would. And yet, she was capable of loving a man deeply: she blushed at his mention and her face registered the glow of a woman in love each time his name cropped up.

What a strange tale hers was! She was just fifteen years old when her sister’s husband introduced her to a life that landed her here. At fifteen, Muggi exuded an animal sexuality that was unmistakable and her swarthy



skin fairly glowed with her life juices. She was initiated into the craft of charming gullible men and soon she became adept at the trade. Her body filled out and her fleshy lips and large eyes acquired the sly animal cunning that a vixen has. Her brother-in-law would find some grieving widower, eager to find a second wife to look after him and his children and offer Muggi as a candidate. A quick wedding was organized and the two sisters would put up the drama of weeping and wailing when it was time for Muggi to leave for her new home. The poor groom was totally taken in as he tenderly led his bride away.

Muggi would then work on his family, quickly ingratiating herself to the mother-in-law and soon she knew where the family stashed its wealth. Then one day, when the time was ripe, she decamped with everything and neither she nor her brother-in-law could ever be traced. They would flee to another town, and start their business under a new name, a new address. In twenty years, Muggi had conned fourteen husbands.

And then, Muggi fell in love. I was reminded of Somerset Maugham’s unforgettable short story ‘Round Dozen’. The only difference was that in Maugham’s story the con-master was a man, in my tale it was a woman. Muggi’s fifteenth husband was a blacksmith and Muggi was totally seduced by his vigorous lovemaking. She loved his glistening body to distraction. Often she toyed with the idea of confessing everything to him: she would tell him, she thought, how she was innocently seduced by her own brother-in-law and sister into this life and now she wanted to reform herself. But suppose, she thought immediately, that he turned away from her in disgust? And she would keep silent. Most men cannot tolerate even one other man in their wife’s life: here she was with a cast of fourteen husbands behind her! Even Draupadi in the Mahabharata could not equal her record. And then, there was another problem. Her husband’s mother was a *devi*—she loved Muggi like a daughter and Muggi, motherless herself, was overwhelmed by the love

she found in this house. Muggi gave back to her husband's mother all the love she got from her: she worked tirelessly in the kitchen, oiled the old woman's hair religiously and combed it lovingly, rubbed her feet to ease her corns and even picked the lice from the old woman's hair.

Muggi's penchant for eating mud was a joke between them and whenever she saw Muggi looking pensive, the old woman would break a terracotta *sakora* in two and give it to her daughter-in-law, saying kindly: 'Here, *bahu*, go on and eat it.' And she would tell the neighbours, 'Look at her! Any other *bahu* would crave sweets and savouries: all this one wants is a bit of earth!'

This earthen idyll was soon to be shattered: her brother-in-law and sister began to get restive. It had never taken their student so long to accomplish her mission. What if their golden goose had been kidnapped by another player? And he decided to go and see matters for himself. He arrived at Muggi's house ostensibly to ask after her welfare and complain

that even after six months, she had not visited her sister once. But the blacksmith was no fool and Muggi's brother-in-law was found out. Then a sensational case started that went on and on and fresh skeletons tumbled out of Muggi's past. Both she and her brother-in-law were convicted for charges of cheating and sent to jail. Muggi was given a lighter sentence and the day I met her was her last in the jail. She looked thrilled at the prospect of returning to her blacksmith and his mother.

'But will they accept her as willingly?' I asked the doctor. 'After all, they must know all about her past.'

'Her mother-in-law can't wait to welcome her daughter-in-law back,' I was told. 'Isn't that true, Muggi?' the doctor turned to Muggi as she said this to me. Perhaps her simple, uncomplicated nature had something in it after all, for Muggi blushed and looked down bashfully.

'Why don't you say something?' the doctor goaded her. But Muggi's face ducked even deeper into her

chest. 'Do you know,' the doctor turned to me again, 'her mother-in-law visited her regularly in jail and never once forgot to bring her *diyas* and *sakor*s to eat.'

Muggi stuffed her *pallu* into her mouth as she giggled, 'I promise I will not eat another one all my life,' she said. The happiness on her face, suffused with the joy of returning to her husband and home, was infectious and both the doctor and I burst out laughing. As I got up to leave the cursed prison, I wanted to whisper in Muggi's ears, 'Go ahead and eat all the mud you want, Muggi!' Any woman who can retain her sense of humour and her innocence after a prison sentence deserved all the happiness she gets. I silently blessed her as I left, 'May your mother-in-law keep feeding you bits of terracotta; may your blacksmith love you with all his heart and may you find the happiness in your fifteenth marriage that was lacking in all the previous fourteen, Muggi. Amen!' □

Tell us a Story



Each of the regional languages of India has a vast and rich repertoire of grandmother's tales, folk stories, poems, sayings, jokes, witticism, etc. Unfortunately, these are inaccessible to those of us unfamiliar with languages other than our own mother tongue.

We invite MANUSHI readers to share with us what has struck you as significant from this repertoire in your mother tongue, that has not previously appeared in English. Please send us the original with a fresh English translation, identifying its oral or written source.