

ISMAT CHUGHTAI : A LADY WITH A DIFFERENCE

M. Asaduddin

ISMAT CHUGHTAI, Urdu's most courageous and controversial writer, had become a legend in her own lifetime as much for her unconventional writings as for her mercurial personality. Born at a time when the Indian society, particularly the Muslim part of it, was largely orthodox and tradition-bound, and women spent their whole life behind the purdah, Chughtai challenged the mores and values of her time and fiercely advocated selfhood and self-definition for women. With brutal frankness and devastating honesty she pointed her accusing finger at the superstitions, follies and foibles prevalent in the society, especially the injustices meted out to women. She had a special place among her illustrious contemporaries in the field of Urdu fiction - Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hasan Manto and Krishan Chander - and brought into its ambit the whole terrain of feminine sensibility with a sharp focus on female sexuality which was hitherto regarded as a taboo. Her writings have transformed the complexion of Urdu fiction in significant ways by bringing about a change in the attitudes and terms of reference in assessing literary merits of works in Urdu. Her contribution to the language - pert, racy, colloquial, idiomatic with a liberal sprinkling of expressions special to women with its raw and rough edges intact, as it was spoken by women of Agra, Aligarh, Rai Bareli and some parts of Rajasthan - is no less remarkable.



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Ismat Chughtai was born in the western Uttar Pradesh at a place called Badayun, associated with the memory of Gautama Buddha, on August 21, 1911. She was the ninth child of Mirza Qasim Baig Chughtai and

Nusrat Khannam. Her family name was Ismat Khanam Chughtai and she was called by her nickname, Chunni. Qasim Baig Chughtai was a Judicial Magistrate who served in different capacities at Agra, Bahraich, Jaunpur, Kanpur, Lucknow and later at different places in the princely state of Mewar like Sojat, Sambhar, Balotra, Jawra, and particularly, Jodhpur. He retired as Deputy Collector in 1924 and returned to his family home at Agra. He soon got fed up with the dirt and filth of Gali Panjshahi at Agra and moved to Aligarh. However, the Maharaja of Jodhpur called him back with honour to Jodhpur where he served again as the Judicial Magistrate. He died in 1937.

Being the ninth child of her parents and that, too, a girl, her birth into the world was not greeted with enthusiasm by her parents or other members of the family. Even her mother never let her feel wanted or cared for. Describing the occasion of her birth, she says: "My mother was dressing up to attend the marriage of her friend's daughter in the neighbourhood. The cleaning woman was sweeping the floor when I chose to arrive into the world, unannounced. When my brothers and sisters were born, the mem (the white nurse/midwife) used to come. But my delivery was managed by the sweepress. That is why my brothers and sisters teased me by calling me 'a sweepress's offspring'. Rather than suffering from any inferiority complex I also started to believe that I was not my parents' child but the sweepress's who fed me with milk." Burdened with so many children and other responsibilities, her mother had no time for her. Not to speak of cuddling, cajoling and pampering which every child is used to in an Indian household, even the necessary motherly duties were performed by the ayah when she was an infant and later, when she grew up, by her elder sister, Farhat Khanam alias Manju. In fact, Ismat Chughtai had begun to look upon Manju not as her elder sister but as her mother and gave her all respect and affection as long as she lived. As far as her mother was concerned, Ismat Chughtai's feelings about her were very complex. So ingrained was her sense of childhood deprivation that she later on commented – "Amma used to hate me,

perhaps." This cryptic sentence says a lot about her innermost feelings. A psychoanalyst would certainly trace the seeds of rebellion in Ismat Chughtai to her neglect and deprivation as a child.

Ismat Chughtai spent her childhood days playing football and *gilli danda*, (tipcat), riding bicycles, plucking guavas and hogging them, wandering about the neighbourhood and generally looking for some mischief or the other. When she saw her brothers riding horses, she insisted on doing the same and despite her mother's strong opposition, had her way. Day in and day out she was made aware of the difference between men and women and boys and girls. But she was not ready to accept her subjugated status as a woman lying down. She reminisces, with a chuckle – "realised that being a girl had its advantages. Abba's standing instruction was that girls should not be pulled by their locks or nose. If girls beat anyone, the person should lodge a complaint with the *sarkar* (her father). Well, there was just one girl – and that's me – against whom complaint was lodged every other day. However, my brothers' reputation in this regard was so low that I was hardly ever punished. On the contrary, they would be reprimanded."

When she was four years old, Ismat Chughtai was introduced to the *Baghadadi Qaeda* (Arabic First Reader to teach alphabet). Tutors would come home to teach children. In her short story, "Bachpan", she gives a graphic description of the way elementary education was imparted to her. Her early school education began at Agra where she used to go to the Municipal school along with other children in a palanquin, carried by two kahars (palanquin-bearers). From Agra the family moved to Bahraich and later when Ismat Chughtai was about nine years old, to Aligarh. Somehow she completed reading the Quran at the age of twelve. Rather than complimenting her on her achievement, the members of her family derided her for having accomplished something which Naiyer, her sister's daughter, had acquired much earlier in addition to other accomplishments that were considered necessary for competent house-keeping. Ismat Chughtai never showed any inclination towards these so-called accomplishments that were considered necessary for a woman to

make her life happy, particularly after marriage. When she was twelve, her mother one day gave her an old *gharara* (skirt) to practise sewing. She did not show the slightest interest. The same happened when she was asked to learn how to cook. Ismat flatly refused to learn culinary skills. The mother was horrified and began to have nightmares about what would happen to such a wayward girl after marriage. The matter was brought to the notice of Ismat's father. When he wanted to know why she did not want to learn 'womanly' skills and asked her what she would feel with her husband after marriage if she did not know how to cook, her answer was – "If he is poor, we'll make do with *khichdi*; if he is rich, we'll keep a cook. Her father was rendered speechless by this splendid display of common sense. It seems she was already on the way to acquire the essential traits of her character – fierce individuality and clear-mindedness about what she wanted and what she did not want.

When Ismat Chughtai was in the ninth class, marriage proposals began to arrive. During those days it was very common to get girls married at the age of fourteen or fifteen. Her parents approved the proposal from a boy who was a deputy collector. Preparations for the marriage began in right earnest. One day she noticed some unusual activities at home. After making discreet enquiries she came to know that the preparations related to her marriage. She wrote to her elder brother Azim Baig Chughtai requesting him to stop this marriage. He wrote back saying that the proposal, in fact, was sent by him, that the boy was suitable from all counts and that she could continue her study after marriage. Then she told her parents that she was not going to marry, at least not just yet. When all persuasions failed, she thought out a plan which was sure to succeed. She wrote to her cousin Jugnu (Athar Hussain, son of her elder maternal uncle, Zafar) a letter in which she made an impassioned plea to him to rescue her from the impending catastrophe. She asked him to write a letter to his father conveying his wish to marry her. Jugnu went along with her plan and conveyed 'his' wish to his father who pleaded with his sister (Ismat's mother) to break off the other engagement. Nusrat Khanam, who was deeply attached to

her brothers and was very fond of Jugnu, was only too happy to do that. By this extraordinary sleight of hand Ismat was successful in warding off an early marriage which, in all probability, would have effectively closed the doors for further development and literary creativity in her.'

Ismat Chughtai had studied Islam, Christianity and Hinduism at some depth, but she found what she termed as *mazhab-e-insaaniyat* (religion of humanity) to be the best. Hinduism attracted her; particularly, she was fascinated by the Hindu mythology and the image of Krishna, the dark god. Though she sometimes attended religious rituals of both the Sunni and Shia schools of Islam, they were more of social rather than religious occasions for her. She accepted the validity of all religions in the conduct of human life and man's social behaviour, but she did not seem to believe in their transcendental nature. Neither did she seem to believe in a life after death. A streak of agnosticism runs through her stray comments about religion. All this becomes clear in her answer to the question on the presence of religion in her works:

J.P. – There isn't too much of Islam in your stories...Are you a believer?

I.C. – Now don't get me into trouble. I can recite the Kalima beautifully – when necessary, for example, when I visit Pakistan!

I believe there is some power, but I'm not afraid of it. If I jump from my window with Allah's name on my lips, I know He won't save me. I don't pray, but I don't do anything bad either. I've never cheated anybody.

There's no harm in following any religion. I became a Hindu too. I fell in love with a Hindu boy; he took me to the temple, made me drink cow's piss. It was quite fragrant. ...I've been to temples – I love their *prasad*, their *pooris*.

In some sense she always remained a child – curious and precocious. Her love of mischief and child-like wonder never left her.



She was always game for novel experiences, meeting new people and seeing new places. She travelled to China, Soviet Russia, France, England, Finland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Pakistan and her excitement is evident in the travelogues that she wrote after her travels.

In her twilight days she had lost her memory and had become quite frail. However, neither age nor the vicissitudes of life could blunt her rapier-sharp wit or subdue her aggressiveness. Despite her failing health her confidence in herself and her innate stubbornness did not leave her. She could never accept that she was wrong or bring herself to accept defeat. Whenever she committed a faux pas and contradicted her own statements because of her failing memory and people pointed them out to her, she would shout them down and coolly disown her own earlier statements. Similarly, she used to shout at doctors who said that she had lost her memory. Eventually, the end came on October 24, 1991 when she was found dead in her bed in the morning. She was not buried in accordance with the Muslim funeral rites but quietly cremated, as she is said to have wished, in the electric crematorium.

EXERCISES

A. Let's Answer

1. How did Ismat describe the occasion of her birth?
2. How did Ismat Chughtai spend her childhood days?
3. How was elementary education imparted to her?
4. Which religion did she find the best?
5. 'In some sense she always remained a child.' Do you agree?
6. What light does the story throw on human behaviour?

B. Let's Discuss

Discuss the following in groups or pairs.

- a. Gender bias must be discouraged.

C. Let's Do

- a. Do a project work on the woman who left her imprint despite adverse social circumstance.

THE ACCIDENTAL TOURIST

Bill Bryson

Of all the things I am not very good at, living in the real world is perhaps the most outstanding. I am constantly filled with wonder at the number of things that other people do without any evident difficulty that are pretty much beyond me. I cannot tell you the number of times that I have gone looking for the lavatory in a cinema, for instance, and ended up standing in an alley on the wrong side of a self-locking door. My particular specialty now is returning to hotel desks two or three times a day and asking what my room number is. I am, in short, easily confused.

I was thinking about this the last time we went *en famille* on a big trip. It was at Easter, and we were flying to England for a week. When we arrived at Logan Airport in Boston and were checking in, I suddenly remembered that I had recently joined British Airways frequent flyer programme. I also remembered that I had put the card in the carry-on bag that was hanging around my neck. And here's where the trouble started.

The zip on the bag was jammed. So I pulled on it and yanked at it. With grunts and frowns and increasing consternation. I kept this up for some minutes but it wouldn't budge, so I pulled harder and harder, with more grunts. Well, you can guess what happened. Abruptly the zip gave way. The side of the bag flew open and everything within – newspaper cuttings and other loose papers, a 14 ounce tin of pipe tobacco, magazines, passport, English money, film – was extravagantly ejected over an area about the size of a tennis court.

I watched dumbstruck as a hundred carefully sorted documents came raining down in a fluttery cascade, coins bounced to a variety of



noisy oblivions and the now-lidless tin of tobacco rolled crazily across the concourse disgorging its contents as it went.

“My tobacco!” I cried in horror, thinking what I would have to pay for that much tobacco in England now that another Budget had come and gone, and then changed the cry to “My finger! My finger!” as I discovered that I had gashed my finger on the zip and was shedding blood in a lavish manner. (I am not very good around flowing blood generally, but when it’s my own – well, I think hysterics are fully justified.) Confused and unable to help, my hair went into panic mode.

It was at this point that my wife looked at me with an expression of wonder – not anger or exasperation, but just simple wonder – and said, “I can’t believe you do this for a living.”

But I’m afraid it’s so. I always have catastrophes when I travel. Once on an aeroplane, I leaned over to tie a shoelace just at the moment someone in the seat ahead of me threw his seat back into full recline, and found myself pinned helplessly in the crash position. It was only by clawing the leg of the man sitting next to me that I managed to get myself freed.

On another occasion, I knocked a soft drink onto the lap of a sweet little lady sitting beside me. The flight attendant came and cleaned her up, and brought me a replacement drink, and instantly I knocked it onto the woman again. To this day, I don’t know how I did it. I just remember reaching out for the new drink and watching helplessly as my arm, like some cheap prop in one of those 1950s horror movies with a name like *The Undead Limb*, violently swept the drink from its perch and onto her lap.

The lady looked at me with the stupefied expression you would expect to receive from someone whom you have repeatedly drenched, and uttered an oath that started with “Oh”, finished with “sake” and in between had some words that I have never heard uttered in public before, certainly not by a nun.

This, however, was not my worst experience on a plane flight. My worst experience was when I was writing important thoughts in a notebook ('buy socks', 'clutch drinks carefully', etc.) sucking thoughtfully on the end of my pen as you do, and fell into conversation with an attractive young lady in the next seat. I amused her for perhaps 20 minutes with a scattering of urbane *bons mots*, then retired to the lavatory where I discovered that the pen had leaked and that my mouth, chin, tongue, teeth and gums were now a striking, scrub-resistant navy blue, and would remain so for several days.

So you will understand, I trust, when I tell you how much I ache to be suave. I would love, just once in my life, to rise from a dinner table without looking as if I have just experienced an extremely localized seismic event, get in a car and close the door without leaving 14 inches of coat outside, wear light-coloured trousers without discovering at the end of the day that I have at various times sat on chewing gum, ice cream, cough syrup and motor oil. But it is not to be.

Now on planes when the food is delivered, my wife says: "Take the lids off the food for Daddy" or "put your hoods up, children. Daddy's about to cut his meat". Of course, this is only when I am flying with my family. When I am on my own, I don't eat, drink or lean over to tie my shoelaces and never put a pen anywhere near my mouth. I just sit very, very quietly, sometimes on my hands to keep them from flying out unexpectedly and causing liquid mischief. It's not much fun, but it does at least cut down on the laundry bills.

I never did get my frequent flyer miles, by the way. I never do. I couldn't find the card in time. This had become a real frustration for me. Everyone I know – everyone – is forever flying off to Bali first class with their air miles. I never get to collect any thing. I must fly 100,000 miles a year, yet I have accumulated only about 212 air miles divided between twenty-three airlines.

This is because either I forget to ask the air miles when I check in, or I remember to ask for them but the airline then manages not to record



them, or the check-in clerk informs me that I am not entitled to them. In January, on a flight to Australia – a flight for which I was going to get about a zillion air miles – the clerk shook her head when I presented my card and told me I was not entitled to any.

“Why?”

“The ticket is in the name of B. Bryson and the card is in the name of W. Bryson.”

I explained to her the close and venerable relationship between Bill and William, but she wouldn't have it.

So I didn't get my air miles, and I won't be flying to Bali first class just yet. Perhaps just as well, really. I could never go that long without eating.

EXERCISES

A. Let's Answer

1. Have you ever travelled by a train or a plane? Do you remember any interesting incident that occurred during your journey?
2. Why does the writer say that he is easily confused? Give evidences in support of your answer.
3. Describe the incident that exasperated the narrator at the Logan Airport in Boston.

B. Let's Discuss

- a. Travel light is a golden rule to make your journeys pleasurable.

C. Let's Do

- a. Do a project work on the modes of transportation.

SAINT RAVIDAS

Guru Ravidas is hailed as the liberator of the common people, representing the voice of revolt of the suppressed and non-privileged humanity. He was a cobbler, one among the untouchables. The family occupation was making leather items like bridles for the horses of the rich and the aristocrats. He was born in the village Mandoor- Garh, on the outskirts of Kashi (Banaras), the citadel of orthodoxy and obscurantism sometime between 1376 and 1377 AD. He was born on a Sunday (Ravivar) and hence his name Ravidas. He is also called Raidas. At that time, untouchability was practised with full rigour. When Ravidas began to worship God (Shaligram), the Pandits of Kashi rose in opposition. However, in the face of adverse circumstances, Ravidas, by dint of piety, virtue, spiritual attainments, exemplary conduct and character and force of personality, rose not only to be a great religious guru of the people, but also came to have among his disciples poetess Mirabai and other notable men and women. Rani Jhali took, 'deeksha' from him. To this day, a temple and a monument for Ravidas stand in the courtyard of Prayag Kumbh Mandir in the palace of Chittoor.

SAINT RAVIDAS

Caparisoned elephants, uniformed soldiers, members of the royal family, expensive presents and variety of fruits - all went in an impressive procession to Banaras from Chittoor. They were sent by Queen Jhali of Chittoor. They were to meet not a King or an emperor; nor a potentate or a prince, but a pauper who was the saint of saints, the very embodiment of virtue and piety. The procession wended its way to a small hut and stopped at its door. They went there to honour and revere the saint there. This small hut was the sacred abode of the godly Ravidas, the saint who preached and practised for over hundred years to reform society, to eradicate caste distinctions, ignorance and prejudices. This

was in the later half of the fourteenth and the early part of the fifteenth centuries in north India.

This was a period of darkness, foreign oppression, humiliation and devastation for India. There was a succession of invaders, the Ghaznis, Ghoris, Slave dynasty and the Khiljis. Local culture, religion and practices were sought to be destroyed. The native citizens had no sense of security and their morale was very low. During this period of gloom, there appeared on the national scene Swami Ramanand and his disciples like Ravidas and Kabir, Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus. They revived and revamped the spirits of the people, by their teachings, exhortations and struggles.

Ravidas's central teaching was that he who worships God becomes a man of God. High and low castes are meaningless and absurd. He brought self-respect and prestige to the humblest, lowliest and the lost - the untouchables and the weak. All are equal and there is only universal man enjoying the fruits of equality, fraternity and spiritual attainments.

He waged a relentless war on caste and casteism. He suffered but did not give up. Till his last days, Ravidas spread the message of equality of men and women and castigated the evils of untouchability. He strove for the uplift of the depressed classes and the backward sections of society through his sermons and preachings.

Ravidas's greatness lies in the fact that he was found worthy enough to have forty of his verses, included in **Guru Granth Sahib**, the sacred book of the Sikhs.

Even today, after a lapse of about 600 years, saint Ravidas is revered and worshipped, not only by his followers but also by people at large and occupies a prominent place in the religious hierarchy.

Guru Ravidas, his ideology and teachings have greater relevance today than ever before. Saint Ravidas's war on caste should be our inspiration. Ravidas was a great unifier. He stood for universal brotherhood.

Today money-power and muscle-power have the upper hand. Ravidas showed utter disregard for money. It is said that Ravidas knew the alchemy given to him by a devotee of his which could change any

metal into gold. Ravidas said that his alchemy was, 'Ram Nam' and the goodness of man high or low. He never touched it and it was returned to the devotee.

Whatever his disciples and devotees contributed, he spent on sadhus and temples, for the poor and the starving. He lived and died for mankind and it was his mission and it was his mission to make society free from casteism, orthodoxy and ignorance through godliness and passive assertions and preachings.

No wonder even today, Ravidas shines and is adored and worshiped by millions in the country even after over six centuries.

EXERCISES

A. Let's Answer

1. Describe in your words the procession to Banaras from Chitoor.
2. Why did the pandits of Kashi oppose Ravidas?
3. How did Ravidas become a great religious Guru? Who were his disciples?
4. What was the teaching of saint Ravidas about untouchables? Was he satisfied by their condition?
5. Mention the incident from the text which proves that Ravidas did not prefer money?
6. Describe the contributions of Saint Ravidas to the society.

B. Let's Discuss

- a. Sincerity and commitment have their own rewards.
- b. Untouchability is a social curse.

C. Let's Do

- a. Do a project work on the social condition in the medieval age.



BHARATHIPURA

U. R. Anantha Murthy

Prof. U R Anantha Murthy has been acclaimed as one of the most prolific writers and thinkers of the Indian subcontinent. His contribution has been historical in the field of creative writing, particularly novels and stories. His original works have been in Kannada but have been translated into English, Russian, French, Hungarian, Hindi, Bangala, and several other languages. The films Sanskar and Diksha have been based on two of his works Sanskar and Ghotasraj respectively. He has been visiting professor to Iowa University and Tufts University of America respectively in 1975 and 1978. He was vice- chancellor of Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam and the Chairman of the Sahitya Akademi. He has been conferred India's most prestigious award in the field of literature, the Jnanpith Award.

The extract here is taken from U. R. Anantha Murthy's novel Bharathipura. Jagannath, the protagonist, returns from England to his ancestral village home in Bharathipura. It is a temple-centred village and the reigning deity is Lord Manjunatha. He wields power through a demon-spirit called Bhutharaya, or so many of the inhabitants believe. This belief has been systematically exploited by the ruling class in the village to maintain their feudal power over the village people. Jagannath returns to this place with the hope of bringing about a new awakening among the people. He realises that to awaken them is to destroy the myth of Lord Manjunatha. Therefore he should take the untouchables into the temple. But before that he should destroy the myth of his own family-god Lord Narasimha. He asks the pariahs to touch the image of this God. The following extract describes this highly tense situation.

BHARATHIPURA

From the portico he stepped down to the courtyard and stood there. He suppressed a desire to look back. An uneasy feeling came to him of being watched from behind, by his aunt, the priest, the cook, and the cook's children. He felt his aunt's look whipping his back. He could have got rid of this suffering by looking her in the face, simply shattering her entreaty. He was frightened. To defy her thus would be a violence too much for him. The hand which gripped the casket was damp. Perhaps this

saligram of Lord Narasimha had never crossed the threshold of the house before. It must have stunned his aunt's whole being to see this happening now. With all the force of life in her eyes she must be drawing him back in her prayer. He did not know why he had come to a standstill. He looked up and saw before him the pariahs, dressed in white long clothes, standing like orphans at the far end of the courtyard. Their vacant eyes just looked on. They did not know of the impending blast. They did not want to know.

Slowly he began to move towards them. The red mass of the sun was sitting on the shoulder of a distant hill. The weak yellow light of retreating evening fell on the haystack. The last bus from Shimoga appeared on the curved road under the hill, raising dust. The cattle were returning to their sheds, bells jingling on their necks. At this time of the day Aunt should have been waiting for them near the shed. Kaveri crossed the courtyard, carrying a headload of firewood, her steps brisk under the weight, and her sari tucked up. These pariah folk, dressed in white shirts and clothes, must have looked funny to her. She tittered.

Jagannath thought what an absurd situation this was. For his part this *saligram* was just a pebble. Still, what an intense drama around it! He was turning the whole courtyard into a magnetic field with the pariahs in front of him and Aunt behind. How removed was his person that had concluded, by pure logical thinking, that there never was a God!

The absurdity of his action flashed in his mind. It was he who had made a *saligram* of this stone by taking it out to the pariahs to touch it. He stopped. With great effort he looked round. Aunt and the entire household were standing there. At one corner of the veranda he saw the servants. All were watching him. Aunt's tongue must have dried up or she would have certainly called him back. She was standing there like a mother staring at the dead body of her son being taken away for cremation. None had ever dared to take this thousand-year-old *saligram* out of the house. Whatever she could be thinking of it had become part of

Jagannath's own mind. He felt the presence of her eyes within him and the black stone held tightly in his hand burned like cinder.

Was he doing this for the sake of the pariahs or for his own sake? Was it to discard Brahminism? Discarding everything, was he now going to tread what Adiga would call the path of an *avadhoot*? It bewildered him to realise how at this very moment all his Marx and Russell were going up from him in vapours.

He tried to clear up his thoughts. The pariahs, who had never hoped for anything, are standing before me like impersonal ghosts. I cannot stop here for ever in a state of palpitation. The moment my resolve weakens I will be swept over and put down by Aunt's eyes. But I am going forward with the *saligram* in my hand and at the same time backing out with misgivings. Why did this action get into my head at all? The pariahs should touch the family god before they touch the village god Manjunatha. Otherwise this resolve of mine will not be solid and real, the pariahs will not give up their past and accept a new life. If I am prepared for the violence necessary for this action, I will have learnt the first lesson of the violence of change. I should therefore go ahead, believing in my own thoughts. Otherwise Aunt will triumph. It was bitter but once again he looked round. There was a ghastly desolation about the house. It had rejected him, he felt, and had reduced him to a dry useless thing flung into the courtyard.

This moment of fear and anxiety must have perplexed the pariahs who had already been feeling guilty in their new clothes. If he did not go to them and offer them the stone in his hand they would be gone. He realised that he was in a situation where something had to be done urgently. He walked quickly towards them.

The important question is, he thought, why God has invaded me like this. What I wanted to show as stone has now become a *saligram*. Why is it so? Why are the bells ringing in me? At every step I have turned this stone into a *saligram*. Like the priest of some unique ritual act. All the time trying to shout out that this is not a *saligram* but a piece of hard

stone. The eyes of the pariahs are on me; and are vacant like the eyes of cattle grazing in the field. They are not aware of a past or of any future. But those eyes at my back are compassionate and they tug at me. Shall I dodge now or shall I turn over and come to fulfillment in the minds of the pariahs?

He went and stood near them. Seeing him so close they stepped back. Jagannath opened the lid of the casket. The entire action was nonsense. If a conch blew now and a pair of cymbals clanged, it would be a fair comment on it all. But the spell of giving to the pariahs the black naked stone in his palm overwhelmed him without his knowing it. The veins of his throat swelled. He said in a deep trembling note: 'Touch This.'

He looked around. The sun was setting. Aunt and the priest were at the door, terror-stricken. Janardhana Shetty could be seen in a corner of the courtyard. The Okkaliga workers, with their sickles at their side, had huddled together in another corner. Kaveri was leaning against the parapet, wiping her face. In front of him the pariahs stood gaping like idiots. His body shook and his hair stood on end. He said again, coaxing them: 'Touch this.'

Words stuck in his throat. This stone is nothing, but I have set my heart on it and I am reaching it for you: touch it; touch the vulnerable point of my mind; this is the time of evening prayer; touch; the *nandadeepa* is burning still. Those standing behind me are pulling me back by the many bonds of obligation. What are you waiting for? What have I brought? Perhaps it is like this: This has become a *saligram* because I have offered it as stone. If you touch it, then it would be a stone for them. Thus my importunity becomes a *saligram*. Because I have given it, because you have touched it, and because they have all witnessed this event, let this stone change into a *saligram*, in this darkening nightfall. And let this *saligram* change into a stone. You, Pilla, you are not afraid of a wild boar or a tiger; so, touch it. One step further and you are already inside the temple. Centuries will alter. Touch it now. Let you learn. Touch! How easy! Touch!



His hands were sweating profusely. The pariahs moved back. All had turned him down – these pariahs and those people behind him. The evening had turned him down. He knew that the pariahs were afraid. They had seen how they caught thieves at the temple, by taking round a charmed coconut and asking the suspects to touch it. Crimson *mantrakshata* on a salver and a peeled coconut on it with its tuft turned to the front, sprinkled with *kumkum*. The coconut would have the appearance of a human face. Everyone would have to touch it. But there would always be some person who gasped for breath when the salver came near him, his veins standing out. And he would fall unconscious. The pariahs had undergone all this. The oracle of Bhutharaya must have appeared to them now in this contingency, with a bunch of areca flowers in his hands, with *kumkum* on his body, quivering all over, and pronouncing their individual punishments.

Jagannath tried to soothe them. He said in his everyday tone of a teacher: 'This is mere stone. Touch it and you will see. If you don't, you will remain foolish forever.'

He did not know what had happened to them, but found the entire group recoiling suddenly. They winced under their wry faces, afraid to stand and afraid to run away. He had desired and languished for this auspicious moment – this moment of the pariahs touching the image of God. He spoke in a voice choking with great rage: 'Yes, touch it!'

He advanced towards them. They shrank back. Some monstrous cruelty overtook the man in him. The pariahs looked like disgusting creatures crawling upon their bellies.

He bit his underlip and said in a firm low voice: 'Pilla, touch it! Yes, touch it!!'

Pilla stood blinking. Jagannath felt spent and lost. Whatever he had been teaching them all these days had gone to waste. He rattled dreadfully: 'Touch, touch, you TOUCH IT!' It was like the sound of some infuriated animal and it came tearing through him. He was sheer violence itself; he was conscious of nothing else. The pariahs found him

more menacing than Bhutharaya. The air was rent with his screams: 'Touch! Touch! Touch!' The strain was too much for the pariahs. Mechanically they came forward, just touched what Jagannath was holding out to them, and immediately withdrew.

Exhausted by violence and distress Jagannath pitched aside the *saligram*. A heaving anguish had come to a grotesque end. Aunt could be human even when she treated the pariahs as untouchables. He had lost his humanity for a moment. The pariahs had seemed to be meaningless things to him. He hung his head. He did not know when the pariahs had gone. Darkness had fallen when he came to know that he was all by himself. Disgusted with his own person he began to walk about. He asked himself: when they touched it, we lost our humanity – they and me; didn't we? And we died. Where is the flaw of it all, in me or in society? There was no answer. After a long walk he came home, feeling dazed.

(Translated from the Kannada by K. V. Tirumalesh)

EXERCISES

A. Let's Answer

1. Who was the reigning deity of village Bharathipura?
2. Why did Jagannath want to take the untouchables into the temple of Bharathipura village?
3. Why were the pariahs afraid of touching the *saligram*?
4. Why was touching the stone so important?
5. What did Jagannath say to the pariahs to encourage them to touch the stone?
6. How did Jagannath encourage the pariahs to touch the stone?

B. Let's Discuss

- a. Discrimination on the basis of caste and creed should be discouraged.
- b. Age old practices do not go easily.

C. Let's Do

- a. Do a project work on any three eminent social/ religious reformers of India .

