

MAHASWETA DEVI

Rudali

In Tahad village, ganjus and dushads were in the majority. Sanichari was a ganju by caste. Like the other villagers, her life was lived in desperate poverty. Her mother-in-law used to say it was because Sanichari was suffering. At that time, Sanichari was a young daughter-in-law; she wasn't free to speak up. Her mother-in-law died when Sanichari was still young. She was never able to answer back. Sometimes the old woman's words came back to Sanichari. To herself she would say, 'Huh! Because I was born on and named after a Saturday, that made me an unlucky daughter-in-law! You were born on a Monday – was your life any happier? Somri, Budhua, Moongri, Bishri – do any of them have happier lives?'

When her mother-in-law died Sanichari didn't cry. At the time, her husband and his brother, both the old woman's sons, were in jail because of malik-mahajan Ramavatar Singh. Enraged at the loss of some wheat, he had had all the young dushad and ganju males of the village locked up. Her mother-in-law died in great pain, of dropsy, lying in her own excrement, crying out, over and over, 'Food, give me food!' It was pouring that night. Sanichari and her sister-in-law together lowered the old woman into the ground. If the rites weren't carried out before the night was over, they would have to bear the cost of the repentance rites for keeping the corpse in the house overnight. And there wasn't even a cupful of grain in the house!

So Sanichari was forced to go from neighbour to neighbour in the pouring rain. Dragging the neighbours home with her, and handling all the arrangements for the cremation, she was so busy that there was no time to cry. So what if there wasn't? The old woman had given her so much trouble that even if Sanichari had tried to cry she wouldn't have been able to wring out any tears.

The old woman couldn't stand being alone while she was alive. She couldn't stand being alone after her death either. Within three years the brother-in-law and his wife were dead too. At that time Ramavatar Singh had started a hue and cry about throwing the dushads and ganjus out of the village. Terrified of being driven out, Sanichari was on tenterhooks. There was no crying over those deaths either. Was one to weep or to worry about how to burn the corpses and feed the neighbours cheaply at the shradh? In this village, everyone was unhappy. They understood suffering. So they were content with being fed just sour curd, sugar and coarse, parched rice. Everyone understood the fact that Sanichari and her husband didn't shed any tears – how is it possible to weep when you've borne three deaths in as many years? Their grief must have hardened into stone within them! To herself, Sanichari had sighed with relief. Was it possible to feed so many mouths on the meagre scrapings they brought home after labouring on the malik's field? Two dead, just as well. At least their own stomachs would be full.

She had never thought, however, that she wouldn't cry at her husband's death. And yet, such was her destiny, that this was just what happened. At the time her only son, Budhua, was six. Leaving the little child at home, Sanichari laboured hard for the sake of a little security in her household. She would go off to the malik's house where she would split wood, gather fodder for the cows and, in harvest season, work alongside her husband in the fields. A piece of land had been left to her husband's brother by her father-in-law; together the couple had built a little hut on it. She had painted designs and pictures on the walls. Budhua's father wanted to fence in their angan, and grow chillies and vegetables. She had plans to raise a calf she would get from the malik's wife. It was all fixed. Her husband said, 'Come, let's visit the Baisakhi mela at Thori. We can offer worship to Shiva as well. After all, we've managed to save up seven rupees.'

The mela was a grand affair. The Shiva idol was being bathed in pots and pots of milk donated by the rich. This milk had been collecting in large tanks over the past few days. It gave off a sour stink and was thick with buzzing flies. People were paying the pandas money to drink glasses of this milk and promptly falling sick with cholera. Many died. Including Budhua's father. It was during British rule. Government officials were dragging the victims off to the hospital tents. There were only five tents. There were sixty to seventy patients. The tents were cordoned off with barbed wire. Sanichari and her son sat and waited beyond the barbed wire. They learnt that Budhua's father had died. The government officers didn't give her any time to shed tears. They burned the corpses quickly. They dragged Sanichari and Budhua off for a vaccination against the disease. The pain of the injections made them yowl. Still crying, she washed off the sindoor from her head in the shallow Kuruda River, broke her bangles, and returned to the village. They were new shellac bangles. She had just bought them at the fair. The panda of the Shiva temple at Tohri demanded that she make ritual offerings there before returning to her village, since her husband had died there ...

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Bikhni was a childhood playmate. Everyone called her Kalikambli Bikhni because she always wore a ghagra made out of a black quilt. Carrying a bundle on her shoulder, she was striding along hastily. Not noticing Sanichari, she bumped into her.

'What the hell? Are you blind?'

'It's your father who is blind.'

'What did you say?'

'You heard me all right.'

A fine fight was brewing. Sanichari was all set to enjoy herself. A good set-to cleared the brain, got rid of a lot of undergrowth. That's why Dhatua's mother literally quarrelled with the crows – quarrelling kept both mind and body in fine fettle, the blood coursing through your veins like

bullets from a gun. But as they glared at each other, Bikhni asked: 'Hey, aren't you Sanichari?'

'Who're you?'

'Bikhni, Kalikambli Bikhni.'

'Bikhni?'

'Yes!'

'But you were married off in Lohardaga.'

'I've been living in Jujubhatu for many years.'

'Jujubhatu? And I've been in Tahad, just half a day's walk from you! How come we never met?'

'Come, let's sit down somewhere.'

They settled down in the shade of a peepul tree. They eyed each other closely, before each relaxed in the realization that the other was no better off than herself. Like Sanichari, Bikhni's wrists, throat and forehead sported no jewellery other than blue tattoo marks; both wore pieces of cork in their ears instead of earrings, and their hair was rough and ungroomed. Sanichari handed Bikhni a bidi.

'Did you come to the market?'

'No, I came to look for my grandson.'

Sanichari told her about Haroa, about herself, about everything. Bikhni listened, then said, 'Is there no caring left in this world? Or is it our fate, yours and mine?'

Sanichari laughed bitterly: 'No husband, no son: wherever my grandson is, may he be safe.'

Bikhni said, 'I had a son after three daughters. Their father died long ago, I was the one who brought him up. I began to take in calves for rearing, and gradually I managed four cows, and two she-goats of my own. I got my son married, and I fed the whole village on dahi-chivda-gur after taking a loan from the mahajan.'

'Then?'

'Now the mahajan is about to claim my house by way of repayment, and my son is moving in with his in-laws.'

Bikhni spat while saying this. She said, 'His father-in-law has no sons. My son will live there along with his brother-in-law as his servant. I told him, let's sell the cows and repay the debt to the mahajan but my son took the cows and calves away to his in-laws. But I am Bikhni, after all. I've just

sold my two goats in this marketplace. My son doesn't know. Bas, I've got twenty rupees in the tank, and I'm off.'

'Where will you go now?'

'Who knows? Your son's no more, mine's as good as dead. Perhaps I'll go to Daltonganj, or Bokharo or Gomo. Beg at some station.'

Sanichari heaved a sigh. She said, 'Come with me. My two-roomed hut is empty. Each room has a platform to sleep on. Budhua built them. The vegetable patch still yields okra, eggplant, chillies.'

'And when my money runs out?'

'We'll face that when it happens. Your money is yours. Sanichari can still earn enough to subsist on.'

'Then let's go. Tell me, is there a water problem in your village?'

'There's the river. And the panchayati well, though that water's bitter.'

'Just a minute.'

Bikhni went to the market and returned after a short while. She said, 'I've bought some medicine for lice. We'll mix it with kerosene and massage it in, then wash our hair. Lice can worry you more than the most worrying thoughts.'

Walking along, Bikhni said, 'My granddaughter will probably cry for me. She's used to sleeping beside me.'

Sanichari said, 'Only for a few days. Then she'll forget.'

Bikhni was delighted with Sanichari's house. Right then and there she sprinkled the place with water and washed it down. She went off to the river and fetched a pot of water. She said, 'There's no need to light the stove tonight. I have some roti and achar with me.'

Bikhni loved housework. Within a couple of days, she had put a fresh coat of mud and dung on the floor of the house and compound, washed Sanichari's and her own clothes thoroughly, and aired all the mats and quilts. At home, she had withdrawn more and more from the housework as her daughter-in-law took the reins into her own hands. This was out of hurt pride, but her daughter-in-law thought she was lazy. Managing a household is addictive. It can set even someone as unhappy as Bikhni to dreaming unrealistic dreams. There was no knowing how long she'd be there – this was Sanichari's house. One day Bikhni began to dig and tend the vegetable patch. She said, 'With a little effort we will get lots of vegetables.'

The lice medicine killed the creatures in Sanichari's hair. After sleeping comfortably she realized that her sleepless nights had been caused by the lice, not by mental anguish. No matter how griefstricken one is, a work-worn body is bound to sleep well.

For some days the two of them ate off Bikhni's money. When that ran out, Sanichari felt as if the sky had fallen on her head ...

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... Then she told Bikhni, 'Come, let's go to see Dulan. He's a crafty old rogue, but he has a sharp mind. He's sure to show us a way.'

After hearing them out, Dulan said, 'As long as there's a way of earning, why should anyone die of starvation?'

'What kind of earning?'

'Budhua's mother! Do ready-made ways of earning exist? They may exist for malik-mahajans, but do they exist for dushads and ganjus? We have to make our own opportunities. How much money did your friend bring with her?'

'Twenty rupees.'

'Tw-en-ty whole rupees!'

'Yes, but we've spent eighteen rupees on food.'

'If it was me, I'd have seen Mahabirji in my dreams long before the money ran out.'

'What on earth are you talking about, Latua's father?'

'Why? Can't you follow me?'

'No, what do you mean?'

'Before my money ran out, I would pick up a nice stone from the banks of the Kuruda River. I'd anoint it with oil and sindoor and proclaim that Mahabirji had come to me in my dreams.'

'But I don't even dream!'

'Arre, once you find Mahabirji, you'll have no shortage of dreams.'

'Hai baba!'

'Everyone knows you. It won't work if you try it. But your friend is new here, we'd all believe her. Then you could present yourself and Mahabirji at

the Tohri market-place. Collect offerings from the devout.'

'Hanky-panky with a god? As it is, Mahabirji's monkey followers don't leave any fruit on my trees!'

'It's trickery if you consider it trickery. Not otherwise. You have a sinner's mind, so you think it's trickery.'

'How's that? Eh, Latua's father?'

'Because ... let me explain.'

'Go ahead.'

'Lachman's mother has rheumatism, doesn't she?'

'Yes, she does.'

'Well, she gave me ten rupees to bring her some holy oil from Chas. I didn't even go to Chas, just took her some oil from home after a few days. And it wasn't trickery because I didn't consider it to be. She massaged herself with the oil yesterday, and today she walked on her own two feet to the fields to shit. You know what they say – if your mind is pure, the Ganga flows even through wood. Look here, Budhua's ma, there's no bigger god than one's belly. For the belly's sake, everything is permissible. Ramji Maharaj said so.'

Dulan's wife spoke up: 'Even when the old man lifts a pumpkin from the malik's field, he claims it's on Ramji Maharaj's advice!'

Bikhni said, 'We're in trouble. How can you help? Give us old women some advice.'

'Bhairab Singh of Barohi village has just died.'

'Yes, his son killed him.'

'So what? In rich families the son kills the mother, the mother the son. Forget about who killed him. Amongst us, when someone dies, we all mourn. Amongst the rich, family members are too busy trying to find the keys to the safe. They forget all about tears. Our malik has ordered a fancy funeral. The funeral procession will be tomorrow afternoon. They need rudalis to wail over the corpse. They've got hold of two whores. In the households of the masters, whores weep for the dead. These two were probably Bhairab Singh's whores at one time, now they're wizened crows. They'll be no good. The two of you go, wail, cry, accompany the corpse. You'll get money, rice. On the day of the kirya ceremony you'll get clothes and food.'

Sanichari felt an earthquake within. She exploded. ‘Cry? Me? Don’t you know I can’t shed tears? These two eyes of mine are scorched!’

Dulan spoke in a cold, expressionless tone. ‘Budhua’s ma, I’m not asking you to shed the tears you couldn’t shed for Budhua. These tears are your livelihood – you’ll see, just as you cut wheat and plough land, you’ll be able to shed these tears.’

‘But will they take us?’

‘What am I here for? If they don’t get good rudalis, Bhairab’s honour will suffer. The malik-mahajan demands honour even when he’s a corpse. Bhairab’s father and his generation kept whores too, but they looked after them. When they died, the whores mourned for them out of genuine affection and gratitude. But the Bhairab, Daitari, Makhan, Lachman Singhs of this world treat their labourers and whores alike – they tread them into the mud. So the randis don’t make convincing rudalis. What vicious bastards that lot are! The worst is Gambhir Singh. He kept a whore, had a daughter by her. As long as the whore was alive, he kept the child in comfort. When the mother died, he told the girl: “A whore’s daughter is a whore – practise your profession and support yourself.”’

‘Chhi, chhi!’

‘That girl is now rotting in Tohri, in the randi bazaar. From a five-rupee whore, she’s down to a five-paise whore. Budhua’s wife is there too. She’s in the same state.’

‘Who wants to hear about her?’

Dulan said, ‘Wear black clothing.’

‘That’s what we wear in any case.’

Dulan took them along. On the way, Bikhni said, ‘If this kind of work comes along from time to time, and if we find jobs working the malik’s fields or breaking stones, we’ll be able to get along.’

Sanichari said, ‘Won’t there be talk in the village?’

‘So let them talk!’

Bhairab Singh’s accounts-keeper Bachhanlal knew Dulan. Lachman had put him in charge of the funeral arrangements, and it was no easy job. At the moment, he was preoccupied with how he could pass off two shovels, a clothes rack and some brass utensils he needed for his own home as part of the funeral requirements. As soon as he saw the two women he said, ‘You’ll get three rupees each.’

Dulan said, 'Such an important person is dead, and the rate for mourning him is only three rupees? At least five per head, huzoor.'

'Why?'

'They'll do such a good job, you'll want to give them a tip. Lachman Singh has ordered that ten, twenty are spent, whatever it takes, he wants some good rudalis. Two hundred rupees have been budgeted for this.'

Bachhanlal sighed, wondering how Dulan knew so much.

'Okay, five rupees each. Go sit outside.'

'And they're to get rice as well.'

'They'll get wheat.'

'Give them rice, huzoor.'

'Okay.'

'And feed them well – they can't mourn convincingly on an empty stomach.'

'Dulan! How many bastards died to give birth to you? Go, wait outside. They'll get fed.'

Bhairab Singh's second wife ordered that the rudalis should be served generously with a snack of chivda and gur. Prasad's father hadn't left them lacking in anything.

As she filled her stomach on the chivda and gur, Sanichari thought that perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them.

At first the randis paid no attention to the two old village women. But Sanichari and Bikhni wailed so loudly, and sang such well-chosen phrases in praise of Bhairab Singh, that the marketplace randis had to admit defeat. Sanichari and Bikhni wailed all the way to the cremation ground and all the way back. Each of them earned five rupees and two and a half sers of rice. Bachhan told them, 'You must come back for the kirya ceremony.'

'We'll definitely come, huzoor.'

At the kirya, they got clothes and feasted on puri, kachauri and besan laddus. They packed their portions to take home. Sanichari shared some with Dulan's wife. Dulan listened to all their news. He cursed. 'That bastard Bachhan was allotted two hundred rupees for this job, and he got away with spending only twenty.'

'That kind of thing is bound to happen, Latua's father.'

‘Tell your friend to keep her ears open on her trips to the market. All the shops belong to the landlords and moneylenders. Tell her to find out who’s ill, who’s dying ... otherwise we won’t get information in time. And she should tell them that she can arrange for more rudalis.’

‘How?’

‘Go to Tohri. The randi bazaar.’

‘My God!’

‘Will your friend go?’

Bikhni said, ‘Yes, I’ll go.’

Dulan said, ‘Do you think we always had so many whores? It’s these Rajput malik-mahajans who have created so many randis.’

His wife said, ‘The whores have always been there.’

‘No, they haven’t. Not here. All the evil things have been brought in by *them*.’

‘They’ve also been here forever.’

‘No. Earlier, when the area was under the Raja of Chhotanagpur, it was mostly jungle and hilly land and adivasis lived there. This was a long, long time ago. The Kols in the district town talk about it.’

The tale Dulan told them was very significant: it explained clearly how the ruthless Rajputs infiltrated this remote area of tribals, and from zamindars, gradually built themselves up to the status of jotedars and moneylenders and established themselves as the masters of the area. The Rajputs were warriors in the army of the Raja of Chhotanagpur. About two hundred years ago, in protest against the cruel oppression practised against them, the Kol tribals revolted. The Raja immediately sent his army to put down the uprising. Even after the rebellion was suppressed, the Rajput warriors’ aggression was not sated. They went on a rampage, killing innocent tribals and burning down villages. So Harda and Donka Munda started sharpening their arrows, and a fresh tribal uprising was imminent. Then the Raja sent his Rajput sardars into the sparsely populated Tahad region. He told them, ‘Take as much land as is covered by throwing your swords in the air. Start at sunrise, and carry on till sundown. There are seven of you, claim as much land as you can in this way, then live off it.’

That’s how the Rajputs settled in Tahad, and how they come to be masters of this region. From century to century their holdings and power increased. Even now they take possession of land, not by throwing swords

in the air, but by shooting bullets at people and flinging flaming torches at settlements. Once they were all related, and though the blood ties have thinned, they all claim the same status and honour.

The lower castes live in settlements of decrepit mud huts roofed with battered earthen tiles. The tribal settlements look equally poor. In the midst of these are the towering mansions of the maliks, but they have certain things in common. Except for salt, kerosene and postcards, they don't need to buy anything. They have elephants, horses, livestock, illegitimate children, kept women, venereal disease and a philosophy that he who owns the gun owns the land. They all worship household deities, who repay them amply – after all, in the name of the deities, they hold acres which are exempt from taxes and reforms. Of course, there are differences between them – Aaitari Singh has six toes, Banwari Singh's wife carries the blood of a low caste gwala in her veins, Nathuni Singh has a stuffed tiger in his house.

After reminding them of all this he told them – 'These people need rudalis to prop up their honour. Now I've shown you the way, fight on.'

Sanichari and Bikhni nodded. For them nothing had ever come easy. Just the daily struggle for a little maize gruel and salt was exhausting. Through motherhood and widowhood they were tied to the moneylender, while those people spent huge sums of money on death ceremonies, just to gain prestige. Let some of that money come into Sanichari's home!

So Sanichari and Bikhni fought on. Everything in this life is a battle. Bikhni was not a woman of this village, but she became part of its life surprisingly easily. At sowing and harvest times, she laboured in Lachman's fields, at other times she visited the market and the shops near the bus stop and brought home news – who was on his deathbed, who gasping his last in which malik's house. Then they would wash their lengths of black cloth. Put them on. Knot some churan into their anchals.

Munching on a churan, they'd hurry along to the big house. Sanichari negotiated with the malik's gomastha. Their negotiation followed a fixed pattern.

'The way we'll weep and wail, huzoor, we'll drown out even the chant of Ram's name! For five rupees and rice. On the day of the kirya ceremony we'll take cloth and food. Nothing more, nothing less. And if you need more rudalis, we'll arrange it.'

The gomastha would agree to everything. What option did he have? Everyone wanted them after seeing their performance at Bhairab Singh's funeral. They were professional. The world belongs to the professional now, not to the amateur. The gomastha himself is professional at manipulating the fieldhands' accounts and increasing the interest owed by peasant debtors. So professional is he, in fact, that on a pittance of a salary, a mere ten rupees a month, he manages to acquire his own fields, cattle and even, if he so desires, several wives. Professional mourning for the unmourned dead is a regular business. In the big cities, prosperous prostitutes competed for such jobs. In this region, it is Sanichari who has taken up this business. After all, this is not the big city. There are no prosperous prostitutes thronging Tohri. So far, he has to agree to Sanichari's demands.

'Just for wailing, one kind of rate.'

'Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees, one sikka.'

'Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one's head, five rupees, two sikkas.'

'Wailing and beating one's breast, accompanying the corpse to the cremation ground, rolling around on the ground there – for that the charge is six rupees.'

'At the kirya ceremony, we want cloth, preferably a length of plain black cloth.'

'This is the rate. Over and above this, you people are like kings, can't you spare some dal, salt and oil with the rice? You've got the goddess Lakshmi captive in your home, you won't miss it! And Sanichari will sing your praises everywhere she goes.'

Business prospered. There was such a demand for the pair who wailed at Bhairab Singh's funeral, that it was almost like a war of prestige. Soon, not just the landlords and moneylenders but lalas and sahus began to ask for Sanichari. In fact, when Gokul lala's father died, he said, 'Come every day till the kirya ceremony, Sanichari.'

Gokul gave them sattu and gur every day, saying, 'We acquire virtue by feeding you.'

He also gave them good quality cloth, unlike the malik-mahajans who palmed off the cheapest cloth. Sanichari and Bikhni sold it in the market.

When he heard about the treatment they received at Gokul's house, Dulan said, 'Good. From now on, you must keep visiting your clients'

homes every day right till the kirya ceremony. They're bound to give something to rudalis. At such times no one really keeps a strict eye on expenditure.'

'Yes, they'll surely give something.'

Sanichari exhaled tobacco smoke in sharp contempt. She said, 'These people can't summon up tears even at the death of their own brothers and fathers, won't they count their kirya costs? Do you know that Gangadhar Singh, a rich man like him, was stingy enough to use dalda instead of pure ghee on the funeral pyre of his uncle?'

'If they could cry for their own, where would you be?'

'They could shed a tear, at least.'

'Anyway, let's talk of something useful.'

'Go ahead.'

'Rich people's goings-on. Nathuni Singh's mother is on her deathbed. His house is quite far away. He's said that he wants to hire you.'

'She's dying, not dead yet.'

'Arre, if you hear Nathuni's story you'll realize what sinners these people are. Nathuni Singh's land and wealth are all from his mother. Do you know who she is?'

'No. No one keeps track of everyone's affairs the way you do.'

'She was the only child of Parakram Singh. The kind of oppression that man practised! When I was a child, I remember how he pushed out one of his tenants, Hathiram Mahato. He tied the old man to a horse and set the horse galloping.'

'Yes, I heard about that.'

'Parakram's daughter inherited all his wealth. Nathuni owes everything to her. For some time she's been suffering from wasting fever and coughing up fresh blood. Apparently this disease is highly contagious.'

'No, no. Budhua had the same thing.'

'Budhua was a good man. Nathuni's ma is definitely evil.'

'Whatever. What were you saying?'

'Nathuni is such a worthy son that he's isolated her in a single room at the far end of the compound. Aside from tying a goat to her bed, he hasn't bothered with any treatment. No hakim, no kabiraj, no doctor. No herbal remedies, no medicines, no injections. She's still alive. Meanwhile, he's stocking up on sandalwood and sal wood for a sensational funeral pyre.'

Bales of cloth are arriving, for distribution at the kirya ceremony. He's preparing to feed Brahmins and purchasing loads of ghee, sugar, dal, flour. He's buying utensils as well, to give the Brahmins.'

'My God! And his mother's not even dead yet!'

'His mother's left to lie in her own excrement all day. Once every evening Moti the dushad woman cleans her up – no one's concerned about loss of caste or defilement any longer, it seems. They've kept a maid to sleep beside her at night. He's not willing to spend a paisa on trying to cure her, but plans to spend thirty thousand on her funeral!'

'You don't say!'

'He's shouting it from the rooftops. That's why I say their whole attitude is topsy-turvy. They don't care about the living, but once they're dead, they hold grand funerals and try to raise their prestige. In this cold weather, he's taken away her warm quilt and given her a thin covering instead. He wants her to die quickly. You must visit their house every day till the kirya ceremony.'

'And what if they don't give us anything?'

'Don't worry, they will. Nathuni won't want to be outdone by Gokul lala. It'll be a loss of face before his community.'

There's a saying that even the tiger shivers in the bitterly cold month of Magh. The cold soon kills off the old lady. Sanichari presents herself every day till the kirya. Nathuni has three wives. The eldest reluctantly doles out atta and gur, grumbling. After all, she died of old age. Why spend so much on her kirya?

Nathuni's middle wife is the daughter of an extremely rich jotedar. Nathuni himself was rich because his father married the only daughter of a rich man – he wanted to do the same. It's bad luck that neither the eldest nor the youngest but only the middle wife is treated as the beloved. She looks down on her marital home as poor compared with her father's and resents her co-wives because they are mothers of sons, whereas her child is a daughter, which lowers her status in the eyes of others. Overhearing, the eldest wife sneers. 'What's thirty thousand rupees for a kirya ceremony? – less than nothing. May my father live long – but when he dies, then I'll show everyone how a kirya should be held!'

The eldest co-wife replies sharply, 'Of course you will! After all, you have to cover up the fact that your father's sister has the blood of a lowly

barber in her veins.'

'Don't make me laugh! My aunt and barber's blood! Everyone knows my aunt's husband in Gaya. But what about your widowed sister who lives with her dead husband's brother? How come you don't mention her?'

This causes a major fight. But the middle wife must be truly virtuous. Her words were heard by the gods, and soon after her father was stricken by smallpox. She sent for Sanichari. She said, 'It must be true that those who die on an inauspicious Tuesday tug at the living. Otherwise why would my father get smallpox so soon after my mother-in-law's death? Here, Sanichari, here's a rupee tip.'

'Smallpox?'

'Yes.'

Sanichari puts on an innocent air and asks – 'But I heard that the upper castes never get smallpox? That it is a disease of the poor and lower castes? That's why we take the government vaccination to appease the gods.'

'The government vaccine is like cow's blood.'

Saying this, Nathuni's middle wife changed the topic. She said, 'You were there, weren't you, when the eldest wife and I quarrelled? With my father gone, I have no one. Here I'm surrounded by enemies. The others are given respect because they have sons. I'm the mother of a mere girl.'

'They respect you as well.'

'That respect is not for me, it's for my father Mohar Singh's wealth. My father didn't want to send me far away, that's why he arranged my marriage in a household where there are co-wives. Otherwise, as Chauhan Rajputs, would we ever have married into such a family?'

'It's all a question of fate.'

'That's true. Listen, I'm off to my father's place. You and Bikhni will be required, plus another twenty randis. They'll get one hundred rupees plus rice. You two will get fifty rupees plus rice. You'll stay there till the kirya ceremony, you'll get your meals, and return after you've got the cloth from the kirya ceremony.'

'Huzooran, your father's not dead yet.'

'The rot has set in. He has such a fit physique, fed on milk and ghee, the soul is reluctant to leave his body. When my mother-in-law died, you were given coarse rice and khesari dal.'

'And oil, salt, chillies.'

‘Don’t I know what they gave you? I know exactly how generous my eldest co-wife is! I’ll give you rice, dal, oil, salt, potatoes and gur.’

‘Huzooran is a great benefactor of the poor!’

‘And listen, you must really do a good job of the wailing.’

‘Certainly – and shall we roll on the ground as well?’

‘Yes, roll on the ground.’

‘We’ll roll on the ground, and shall we beat our heads too?’

‘Yes, beat your heads.’

‘Our foreheads will split.’

‘Five rupees each extra for the two of you? Money’s no problem, Sanichari. My father’s cremation and kirya will be the stuff legends are made of. Everyone will talk about it. I want my husband and co-wives to burn with jealousy. I’m my father’s only child. The lavishness should match what my father is bequeathing me. He drank his milk from a silver glass everyday, had whores when he was a young man, kept them till he grew old, wouldn’t touch anything but foreign liquor. He refused to remarry in case his second wife didn’t treat me well.’

‘Please give me some money, I’ll have to pay the marketplace randis in advance. They’re regular rascals.’

‘Here, take.’

The whole situation was quite complex. When someone died in a malik-mahajan household, the amount of money spent on the death ceremonies immediately raised the prestige of the family. The status of the rudalis also rose. The price for this was paid by the dushads, dhobis, ganjus and kols, from the hides of whom the overlords extracted the sums they had overspent. Mohar Singh’s lavish death ceremonies became much talked about, with the lion’s share of the profits going to the Brahmins. Nathuni’s middle wife never returned to her husband, and to prevent him laying his hands on her father’s wealth, she began to spend lavishly on preparations for her daughter’s wedding – this, however, took place after some years.

Sanichari reported her good fortune to Dulan. He smiled slyly and said, ‘The coalminers have a union. Why don’t you form a union of rudalis and randis? You can be the pishiden.’

‘Hai Ram!’

‘Will you look for market-place randis now?’

Bikhni spoke up – ‘I’ll get them. It’s the women who are ruined by the malik-mahajans who turn into whores.’

‘Nonsense, they’re a separate caste.’

‘No, no, you know nothing about it.’

‘Hordes of them gather at the Tohri marketplace.’

Suddenly, Dulan asked, ‘Arre, Sanichari, remember Nawagarh’s Gambhir Singh?’

‘Baba! Don’t I just! The one who used to roam about the Diwali mela on his elephant. He had a huge nose and a big goitre on his neck.’

‘He’s done something terrible.’

‘What now?’

‘Motiya was his kept woman. He maintained her like a wife. As for Motiya’s daughter Gulbadan – he dressed her in silver anklets and let her play on his lap. He had vowed to marry her off respectably after Motiya died. Today I saw Gulbadan walking towards Tohri, her eyes red with tears. She was saying, “They know how to produce children but not how to look after their offspring. He’s thrown me out.” I asked, “Why?” She said, “I merely complained to him that his nephew was pestering me, and he glared at me and said, ‘Your mother’s been dead three months and you’re still hanging around here! Listen to my nephew’s offer, or get out. You’re the daughter of a whore, after all.’ ” ’

‘What a swine he is!’

Dulan cleared his throat. He said, ‘I felt terrible. Gulbadan said, “How could he tell his own daughter to sleep with his nephew? And when I have a child by him? One day, they’ll kick that child out in the same way. I’ll have to work in the marketplace.”’

Sanichari heaved a sigh. ‘With that face, she’ll get snapped up by some rich merchant.’

Bikhni said shrewdly, ‘She’s learned from her mother’s fate, she won’t let herself be tied to one man.’

Bikhni went to Tohri and returned, saying, ‘My goodness! At the chance of earning money, a whole crowd of women gathered around!’

‘Got a good look at them?’

‘That I did.’

‘What’re they like?’

‘Cheap whores, selling themselves for a few annas, all old now. It’s a hard life. They still have to stand around, eyes lined with kohl and lamps in their hands. They’ll come as soon as they get to know that the old man’s dead. One good thing!’

‘What?’

‘I saw your Budhua’s wife, your son’s wife.’

‘In Tohri?’

‘Yes. She looks older than you.’

‘Don’t talk about her.’

‘She herself came up to me. She’s been there ten years. Asked about her son.’

‘What did you say?’

‘What should I say? Why should I say anything? I didn’t talk to her.’

‘Good.’

As she ate her vegetables and rice, Sanichari thought of her daughter-in-law – of her huge appetite. When did she leave? It was the year the elephants overturned that railway engine. The year Budhua died. The mango tree was just a sapling then, now it bears fruit. Ten years at Tohri. Good thing Haroa ran away. At least he didn’t find out about his mother.

After eating, the two of them took tobacco. Sanichari said; ‘It was her fate. I wouldn’t have turned her out after Budhua’s death.’

‘No, no, of course you wouldn’t have.’

‘Did she look very poor?’

‘Very.’

Sanichari fell silent.

Then Mohar Singh died.

The kirya was held with much pomp and splendour. Afterwards, when the old whores took leave, they addressed Sanichari and Bikhni respectfully: ‘Huzoorain, if you need us again, just send word, we’ll come.’

Sanichari and Bikhni got a brass bowl and a bamboo umbrella as well as cloth. Bikhni sold them in the marketplace and with the money bought a sackful of worm-eaten corn. She said, ‘We can grind it into wheat or make porridge.’

As time goes by, they settle into a rhythm. When someone dies, they work as rudalis. The rest of the time they survive on half-empty stomachs. And when there’s nothing available? No problem. There aren’t more than a

couple of deaths a year. For the rest, like everyone else, they labour in the fields or work for the malik, clearing land, or gather roots in the forest to feed themselves.

Bikhni surprised everyone. She didn't go to visit her son even once. She grew chillies in Sanichari's courtyard and sold them, then said: 'We should try growing garlic. Garlic sells well.'

Gradually, their reputation grew. Everyone wanted them as rudalis – sure, they weren't cheap, but they really did provide their money's worth, really did weep and wail and hit their heads in the dust. The praises these two sang in honour of the deceased made even their relatives think of them not as the dyed-in-the-wool devil's henchmen they were, but as divine beings born on Earth to beguile them.

Things were going very well. In between two years were bad – Nathuni's eldest wife's brother was on his deathbed, but recovered after a stint in hospital. Lachman Singh's stepmother was virtually declared dead until a dangerous vaid, a natural healer, came along and cured her.

Sanichari heaved a sigh of relief and said, 'Fate.'

The village barber, Parashnath, was unhappy as well. He said, 'All this goes against dharma.'

'Why?'

'Look here, Budhua's ma. Earlier people fell sick, and in the natural course of things, they died. Along with births, there should be deaths as well. Otherwise how will the world carry on? When the old become sick, they should die. All this business of old people being saved by doctors, vairs, hakims – I ask you, is it correct?'

Sanichari sighed. 'Well, you're still better off than me. After all, you're in demand for births and marriages as well as deaths. No sooner is a wedding discussed than you're summoned! What will become of me?'

Bikhni was not despairing. She said, 'Their time had not come, so they didn't die. No one lives beyond their fated time.'

Dulan said, 'There's nothing to worry about. You're eating better than before, so you're worried about things going wrong. Don't you see the malik-mahajan's attitude? Lachman Singh's stepmother would weep at the sight of a good harvest because the money earned this year might not be repeated next year!'

Sanichari said, 'Go on with you! Think you can turn everything into a joke?'

After that, Sanichari's luck improved. Bikhni returned one day, laughing. 'Great news!'

'What?'

'I'll have to sit down comfortably before I can tell you.'

'What's the news?'

'Getting irritated?'

'Get on with the news!'

'Gambhir Singh is dying.'

'Who told you?'

Bikhni told her everything. She'd got the details straight from the barber, a reliable source. Does Sanichari remember that Nathuni's mother had the wasting fever and cough?

'Yes, yes, of course I remember. Go on, Bikhni.'

The way Nathuni treated his mother is now the norm in their community. This disease is considered beyond Shiva's skill. Any treatment or medication is seen as a grave insult to the god. Gambhir Singh has no close kin. His nephew is his heir. The nephew has isolated him in a shack in the yard, left him there with a black goat. At the sight of the goat, Gambhir Singh said, 'This means I'm going to die.' He gave instructions to arrange such a kirya for himself that it would leave everyone stunned. Everyone would realize a great man had died.

'Then? Go on, Bikhni!'

'Gambhir Singh is a really strange man! He's refusing medication, just does pujas and yagnas and havens all day long. His wife insisted on calling a doctor. Even the doctor holds out no hope.'

'He isn't dead yet, is he?'

'He's bound to die! The nephew can't do a thing. The old man summoned his lawyer and ordered that at least a lakh be spent on his kirya.'

'Why?'

'He's saying he's going to use up all his money. His nephew can take the proceeds from the land. He has no children, and he refuses to leave any money for his nephew.'

'So then?'

'Today or tomorrow, he's sure to die.'

‘Meanwhile?’

‘Meanwhile, I’ll make a quick trip.’

‘Where do you want to go?’

‘Ranchi.’

‘Ranchi? Why?’

‘I met my nephew-in-law at the marketplace. He asked me to come, his daughter’s getting married.’

‘Daughter’s getting married?’

Bikhni let out a sigh. ‘He says that wretch, my son, will probably be there. You’re bound to ask why, if I want to see him, I don’t just visit him at his in-laws. But that I can’t do. However, if I do come across him on a visit to my nephew, no one can say anything. Even he won’t realize that it’s him I’ve gone to see.’

Sanichari said, ‘Well, since you put it like that, I won’t say anything. You say you want to see your son. But will you come back soon? Or will you stay on there?’

‘How can I? That day I had walked out of my home and I met you by chance. If you hadn’t been there that day, what would I have done?’

‘Don’t forget about Gambhir Singh.’

‘Oh, I’ll be back within four days.’

It was a three-mile walk to the bus stop. Sanichari accompanied Bikhni, saw her onto the bus, advised her – ‘It’s eight rupees for a seat, squat in the aisle, you’ll have to pay only two rupees.’

Walking back, she mused on the exciting events taking place – to think of her friend, who knew nothing but footpaths, actually riding in a bus, and going all the way to Ranchi. All that way to attend a relative’s wedding! One’s relatives live around one – not in far-off big cities like Ranchi!

Sanichari strolled home chatting to people on the way. Everyone said, ‘She’s led such a hard, sad life. But finding Bikhni has been a blessing. What a hardworking old woman! The whole look of Sanichari’s home has changed! This is what they call the game of chance – people who come from far away, strangers, can become as close as one’s own kin. Like the bark of one tree grafted onto another.’

At home, Sanichari felt restless. Out of habit she went into the forest to collect firewood, and returned with a bundle of dried twigs. Bikhni would never return empty-handed. She’d bring back something or other – either a

couple of withered twigs or a length of rope she found on the path, or a pat of cow dung. Her most recent scheme was to rear a calf. Sanichari can't understand how, even at this age, she's so interested in domestic and household matters.

A few days passed. In this manner, Gambhir Singh's condition worsened as expected. Sanichari went there one day and discussed everything with the gomastha. In the process she learned that although it was being said that he had tuberculosis, actually he was dying of another disease. The excesses he had committed with untold women had given him venereal disease, which was rotting his flesh. That was why he was holding so many pujas and prayers, refusing medicine, courting death.

The accounts-keeper said, 'He's decided to die during the period of the waxing moon.'

Sanichari asked, 'Why?' She thinks, 'Can the all-powerful malik-mahajans, who can do whatever they want, die when they want as well?'

'Who knows?' replied the accounts-keeper with philosophic detachment. 'If you die during the period of the waxing moon, your soul goes straight to heaven; otherwise, like Yudhistira, you have to visit hell first.'

Sanichari is not too familiar with puranic characters, but has no doubt of their greatness. Through calendar art the images of the epic and divine characters merge with the film actors who play their roles in movies. Trilok Kapoor and Yudhistira, Abhi Bhattacharya and Sri Krishna and so on, and so forth. Astounded, she asks, 'What? Is the malik-mahajan Yudhistira?'

The accountant explains patiently to this illiterate woman: 'Whatever the malik-mahajan says, happens. Right or wrong is a question of one's point of view. Now, wicked people might say that the malik committed dacoity when his father was alive, in the time of the British, that he stole Lachman Singh's father's horse, that he burned down many dushad settlements with his own hands, that he ruined hundreds of young girls, that he's a big sinner. But the malik doesn't see it that way. So he's gathered astrologers and pandits to determine what sin it could be that had caused him to be inflicted with this terrible disease.'

'Have they found out?'

'Found out what?'

'What the sin was.'

‘Of course. When he was a boy he hit a pregnant cow with a stick and killed it. This is his only sin.’

Still she asks, ‘Will he really die in the period of the waxing moon as he wants to?’

‘Most definitely. Haven’t you seen, till now, that whatever he wants he gets? And I’ll say this, he’s done the right thing – if the money gets into his nephew’s hands, it won’t last.’

‘Why?’

‘All the malik’s women have been Hindu, even the untouchables. But the nephew’s randi is a musalmaan.’

‘Hai Ram!’

‘Be prepared. I’ve worked here for so long. But after the kirya I won’t stick on here. When the kirya is over, I’ll leave. Malik has instructed that his kirya should be so grand that everyone forgets about Mohar Singh’s funeral. We’ll go all out, huzoor.’

Sanichari came away.

She returned home worried. Six days had passed. What’s the matter with Bikhni? They live in an isolated village, not much communication with the outside, no one takes the bus anywhere. Who can possibly carry news of Bikhni from Ranchi? She sighed, and put some quilts out to sun. Ground a little corn. Then she went to do her obligatory share of repair work on the panchayat meeting place. If not seen to regularly, these mud huts got eaten away by termites. She returned home carrying a load of twigs on her head, straightened, and saw the stranger.

Unfamiliar man. Shaven head. Bare feet.

‘Is Bikhni dead?’

In a trice she understood everything. She asked, ‘Are you her nephew-in-law?’

‘Yes.’

She felt a landslide within. But many deaths, deceptions, injustices, had hardened her endurance and self-control. She asked the stranger to sit down. She herself sat down, sat quietly for a while, then asked, ‘How many days ago?’

‘Four days.’

Sanichari counted backwards and said, ‘The day I went to Gambhir Singh’s. What happened?’

Asthma, complicated by a chest cold.’

‘Something that started here or there?’

‘She drank a glass of sherbet on the way.’

‘Then?’

She recalled how Bikhni could never resist colourful sherbets, digestive tablets and candied fruit.

‘Then the wheezing became worse. My brother-in-law works in a hospital, he called a doctor, we started medicines and injections.’

‘I never did that.’

She would catch a few cockroaches, boil them and give Bikhni the water to drink. The wheezing would improve immediately.

‘Did she get to meet her son?’

‘He didn’t come. I’ll be going to his place next, to give him the news. Did my aunt leave any belongings here?’

‘No, nothing. You call her aunt, and she died in your house but all these days we didn’t even know she had family of her own, she was roaming the countryside alone, homeless ...’

‘I didn’t know or I’d have fetched her before.’

‘You’d better be off. You have a bus to catch, it’s a long way from here.’

He left. Sanichari sat by herself and tried to comprehend the situation. What did she feel? Grief? No, not grief, fear. Her husband had died, her son had died, her grandson had left, her daughter-in-law had run away – there had always been grief in her life. But she never felt this devouring fear before. Bikhni’s death affected her livelihood, her profession, that’s why she’s experiencing this fear. And why, after all? Because she’s old. Amongst them, one works, if one can, till one’s last breath. Ageing means growing old. Growing old means not being able to work. And that means death. Sanichari’s aunt had lived to such an old age that they carried her in and out of the house like a bundle. In winter, they left her outside while they all went off to work, and came home to find her as stiff as wood, dead.

Sanichari didn’t want to die like that. And why should she die? Her husband died, her son died, she didn’t die of grief. No one does. After the worst disasters people gradually bathe, eat, chase away the goat nibbling the chillies in the yard. People can do anything – but if they can’t eat, they die. If Sanichari has survived so much grief, she’ll survive the loss of Bikhni. She’s devastated but she won’t cry.

Money, rice, new clothes – without getting these in return tears are a useless luxury.

Sanichari went to see Dulan.

He grasped the gravity of the situation at once, said, ‘Look, Budhua’s ma, it’s wrong to give up one’s land, and your profession of funeral wailing is like your land, you mustn’t give it up. Can’t you see how amusing it all is? One by one they’re dying, you’re going to wail, they’re taking the pomp and splendour of the mourning so seriously, making it a matter of honour, they’re fighting over it. Take Gambhir Singh, for example, he could easily call in a doctor and get cured, but he’s not interested. He’s more attracted by all the hoo-haa of a fancy funeral.’

‘It’s their business, what they fight over, what brings them honour.’

‘It’s your business too.’

‘How will it help me to know all this stuff?’

‘When Budhua’s father died, didn’t you take over his work in the malik’s field?’

‘Of course I did.’

‘In the same way you have to take over from Bikhni.’

‘How so?’

‘You have to go yourself.’ Dulan spoke forcefully, angrily, ‘It’s a question of survival. You must go yourself.’

‘To Tohri?’

‘Yes, to Tohri. You’ll go there, you’ll find the whores, fix them up. Otherwise between Gambhir Singh’s nephew and the gomastha, they’ll keep all the money.’

‘I’ll go.’

‘You must.’

‘But what if ...?’

‘Your daughter-in-law’s there, is that it?’

‘You know?’

‘Of course. But so what? Isn’t she also a ruined whore like the others? Get her as well.’

‘Her?’

‘Definitely. She needs to eat and earn like everyone else. This business of getting whores to mourn is really amusing. The wealth of these malik-mahajans is unclean money. There’s no limit to it. Let a few whores from

the bazaar come to their funerals. It's the malik-mahajans who've turned them into whores, ruined them, then kicked them out, isn't that so?

'Yes.'

She's not too clear about how they've become whores. She recalls how hunger drove her daughter-in-law to leave home, how Gulbadan looked upon her father's nephew as her brother, though both her father and the nephew considered her nothing but a whore. It all seems very confusing to Sanichari, who ponders the matter but can't fix on any direction to her thoughts. What does Dulan have to say?

'Don't weigh right and wrong so much, leave that kind of thing to the rich. They understand it better. We understand hunger.'

'That's true.'

'So then, go on.'

'Won't the village speak ill of me?'

Dulan laughed bitterly. 'What one is forced to do to feed oneself is never considered wrong.'

Sanichari understood what he was trying to say.

Gambhir Singh died on the seventeenth day. When he was breathing his last, the gomastha sent Sanichari a message. She sent word that she was on her way with some more rudalis.

She got into her black clothes and went to Tohri. She felt no embarrassment about asking directions to the red light area. Considerations of the stomach are more important than anything else. She walked in calling, 'Rupa, Budhu, Shomri, Gangu, where are you? Come along, there's rudali work for you.'

The known whores gathered one by one. Soon there was a crowd, from the five-rupee whores to the one sikka ones.

'Huzoorain, you?'

'Bikhni's dead.' Sanichari smiled. Seeing a familiar face in the crowd, she asked, 'Budhua's wife? You come too, bahu. Gulbadan, you come along as well. Gambhir Singh has died; by wailing for him and taking their money you'll be rubbing salt in their wounds. Don't hold back. Take whatever you can. Come, come. Five rupees a head. Everyone will get rice and cloth at the kirya ceremony.'

There was an eager bustle among the whores. The young ones asked, 'And us?'

‘All of you come. When you grow old you’ll have to do this anyway, so while I’m around let me initiate you.’

Everyone was enjoying themselves hugely. Gangu brought Sanichari a mora to sit on. Rupa brought her a cup of tea, a bidi. There was an air of excitement. Then they all set off for Nawagarh.

Gambhir Singh’s nephew, his gomastha, everyone was astonished at the sight. The gomastha hissed – ‘Have you brought the entire red light district with you? At least a hundred whores!’

Sanichari said, ‘Why not? Malik said make a great noise, a big fuss, something people will talk about. Is that possible with a mere ten whores? Move, move, let us get on with our work. The malik belongs to us now.’

Gambhir’s corpse stank of rotting flesh. The randi rudalis surrounded his swollen corpse and started wailing, hitting their heads on the ground. The gomastha began to weep tears of sorrow. Nothing will be left! Cunning Sanichari! Hitting their heads meant they had to be paid double! He and the nephew were reduced to helpless onlookers. While hitting her head on the ground and wailing loudly, Gulbadan turned her dry eyes in the direction of the nephew, cast him a leering wink and grinned. Then, listening to Sanichari’s cry, she rejoined the chorus.

Translated from Bengali by Anjum Katyal