

Enlightenment

By **SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE**

Translated from Marathi by **PRIYA ADARKAR**

My professor Khanolkar had given me an appointment for four o'clock. My collection of verse, *Surya*, had been published last month and I wanted to present Khanolkar Sir with a copy.

I pressed his doorbell and heard it resound through the house. After some time I heard footsteps. The door opened. This must be Sir's wife.

"I am Amar Bansode. Is Sir at home?"

"Yes, he's here. Come in."

I entered Sir's sitting room.

Sir's bungalow was spacious and the atmosphere was luxurious. The library was abundantly stocked. An unrealistic oil painting of Jnaneshwar hung on the wall. A handsome wall clock. Vases of flowers all around. Lush green velvet curtains hung heavily at the windows. On the left, a TV; by it, a phone. Beyond, a tall image of Nataraja. Neatly ar-



ranged cushions and seats.

When Sir arrived, I rose and greeted him with a namaste.

Sir seated himself grandly like a prince.

When I gave Sir a copy of my book he smiled.

"Very well produced. I will read it and write about it. And Amar; you must read and write a great deal. Don't get carried away by fame. You people have endured so much. You must speak out fiercely against inequality. But your literature must not contain hate and vengeance. What will we achieve by bloodshed? The first Marathi Dalit writer was Jnaneshwar. The bitterly orthodox harassed him greatly."

I murmured agreement.

Just then Sir's daughter Aparna arrived. Sir introduced me to her: "This is Amar Bansode. He is a Dalit poet. At present he is working as a clerk in a Pune bank. He was at our college four years ago. This is my daughter Aparna. She is in the second year of her MBBS."

Aparna looked as beautiful as an exquisite book. Her hair swayed like the plumes of rice plants. She went indoors but her momentary presence lingered like a perfume. I took leave of Sir.

Once, at a function, I met Khanolkar Sir with his wife and Aparna. All the guests were his friends. Sir was a colossus in Marathi literature. When I went up to him, he welcomed me with a smile. There was a subdued smile on Aparna's face, too. Sir introduced me to the guests. "This is Amar Bansode. He is a Dalit poet." After the programme we all drank tea.

When I went home, on the table was the book I had given Sir. How had that happened? I leafed through it. Lines in many places; asterisks marked obscene words.

"Who brought this book, Mother?"

"Bhosale Guruji's son."

I went to Bhosale Guruji's house where he sat reading the Bhagavad Gita. I waited to meet his son who was not at home.

After a while Bhosale Guruji's son arrived. I

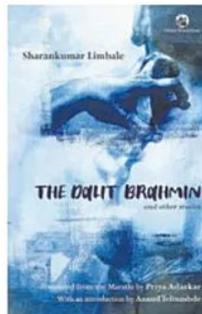


asked him about my book. He said he had received a copy from a friend, Sadaphule, who had looked through the book on a journey. Sadaphule had sent it to me through Bhosale Guruji's son. On reading my book he learned of my caste. His young son had read some obscene words in the book, and asked him the meanings. There had even been a quarrel at home about it. "How did you let this book fall into the boy's hands?" he had scolded his wife.

SADAPHULE AND I had become friends on a journey and we had exchanged addresses. It was on account of his interest in reading that I had made friends with him. He had read *Upara*, *Balute*, and *Taral Antaral*. I set out for his house.

I reached Sadaphule's house where a Sanyanarayana puja was under way. I, too, put an offering of twenty-five paise before the shrine, had a darshan of the deity and took some prasad. I raised the subject of my book with Sadaphule. He said he had found it at a waste-paper depot.

I was utterly confused and mystified. How had the book I had given Khanolkar Sir as a gift reached Shahid Waste-paper Depot? I went to the waste-paper seller who had given my brand new book to Sadaphule free of charge.



I was utterly confused and mystified. How had the book I had given Khanolkar Sir as a gift reached Shahid Waste-paper Depot?

In return, Sadaphule had treated him to tea.

I sat down beside the waste-paper seller. I bought him tea. I told him I was Sadaphule's friend. We chatted a little. The Bhagavad Gita and works of Tukaram, Kusumagraj, and Mardhekar were lying among the waste paper. Diwali issues, magazines, study guides and thick books in English sat side by side. Shakespeare was being sold here by weight. My book weighed only ninety grams. It could be posted anywhere in India with a fifteen-paise stamp.

The owner of Shahid Waste-paper Depot gave me the name of Vinod Shah. Vinod Shah was a new poet of the Satyakatha stream. His poetry collection had received an award that year. He was to be found at the Sahitya Sangh at this time and also wrote book reviews in dailies from time to time. It was at Khanolkar Sir's house that I had got to know him.

Vinod Shah had been extremely pleased with my poems. He would even quote lines from my poetry. He would discuss every word. He would ask me the meanings of words that he had not understood. I found those romantic comments of his about my poems quite unforgettable. Vinod Shah was like brown sugar, a real *gard*. His ornamental expressions, his attractive gestures, his brimming eyes, the rings of smoke that rose from time to time from his cigarette, his habit of breaking off momentarily while speaking... because of all this I had forgotten my irritation.

Vinod Shah had liked my poems. Why then would he throw my poetry in the rubbish?

"Give me an extra copy if you have one. I don't have a copy of your book. I'll write about it. I'll pay for it. Your poems are a wrestler's training ground for enlightenment," he said. "If you do not have an extra copy, give it later. In fact, I have already read it." Interrupting him as he was speaking, I took the book out of my shoulder bag and gave it to Vinod Shah.

"I found this at the waste-paper depot."

Vinod Shah turned as white as a winding sheet.

"There are some obscene words in it and the speech is very rough. Everyone at home reads. If they come across this book, they will be needlessly angry." Vinod Shah was embarrassed.

"There is a conspiracy to curb new ideas by calling Dalit literature obscene. Licentiousness

is on the rampage in Marathi literature. That is tolerated. You read it with relish. Why don't you say outright that what you don't like is the subversiveness in Dalit writing?"

Vinod Shah said much to try and mollify me. He apologised to me.

I SET OUT for Professor Madhusudhan Joshi's house; he was the one who had given my collection of poems to Shah.

Saraswati Colony. Anandavan Bungalow. Khanolkar Sir's bungalow is at the end of this very row. I rang the doorbell. As no one opened the door I rapped on it. Disconnecting the doorbell, everyone in the household had sat down in front of the TV. Professor Joshi was doing his PhD under Professor Khanolkar's guidance. Professor Joshi opened the door with an irritated air. His wife and children were engrossed in watching TV. I had disturbed his mood.

"What work have you cooked up for me?" he asked.

"Just this: where did you get this book which you then gave to Vinod Shah?"

"There is a conspiracy to curb new ideas by calling Dalit literature obscene. Why don't you say outright that what you don't like is the subversiveness in Dalit writing?"

"From Khanolkar Sir. He doesn't read poetry, you know. So he told me to take it away."

"I ask because I am the poet who wrote these poems."

"Oh, ho! Yes, I met you once at Sir's house. Sorry, I forgot! Come in, come in. Have some tea before you go."

"No, I don't have time. Some other time." And I turned away sharply from his door.

I rang the doorbell. The music of the chimes fell on my body like a crumbling cliff.

Aparna opened the door.

I went in. Khanolkar Sir was watching TV. He got up and came towards me. Sir's imposing drawing room. His impressive personality. His high forehead. His thinning hair. The grim expression on his face. His eyes like the scorching heat of the afternoon sky in summer.

He sat down.

"What brings you here?"

"I'm leaving tomorrow. I thought I'd say goodbye."

"When do you return?"

"I haven't yet decided."

"All right."

"Sir, have you read my book?"

"I'll read it this week. I have a lot of work these days. I do want to read your book."

"But I found the book in a waste-paper shop."

"How is that possible?"

I took the book out of my shoulder bag and placed it before him. Sir could not comprehend any of it. He grew visibly uneasy. I, however, was noting every gesture and expression of his like a book of records. White patches had begun to throng Sir's face.

Just then Sir's wife came in. She saw my book, and grew furious. She hadn't yet seen me.

"Who has brought this book here again? Suppose it falls into Aparna's hands? What stars has Ravi caused to shoot by reading it? How filthily these people write! Who is going to read books like this?"

I was beginning to be enlightened! ■

Selected by Mini Krishnan

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