

LET'S EAT

The seasonal rains have failed continuously for the last three years. With no other source of irrigation, the land has grown rocky and brittle leaving acres of farmland staring at sky hankering for relief. Except for the cacti, *erukkalai* and *piinari*, no vegetation has survived. The water in the wells has receded to deeper and deeper levels - from two hundred feet to four-hundred, then five-hundred, and finally seven-hundred - like the violent fluctuations in the bullion market. If this trend were to continue, one could expect to exit on the other side of the earth through the forests in the Americas.

The droughty bamboo shrank into dwarfish stalks that stuck out of the ground like wobbly shoots; a single match could set them all in a bonfire. The sweltering heat squeezed whatever moisture remained in humans and animals, their skins bleached and looking ghastly.

Bereft of water and fodder the livestock barely survived with their skins looking like dried grapes; their pallid bodies and rickety bones, fit only for human consumption, they were quickly dispatched to slaughter houses in open wagons. For humans, corn seeds became the main source of sustenance. Shop keepers stored stale corn and wheat on their shelves; onions and green chilies simply disappeared and were unavailable to the poor as supplement to their paltry meals. The shopkeepers offered no credit, so the womenfolk had to pledge their jewelry for provisions; eventually their *mangala sutra* chains too had to be surrendered. Over the days and weeks, all their household paraphernalia - pots, pans, woks, plates, tumblers, utensils big and small - were exchanged for cash and returned home as wheat flour.

The merchants wasted no time in cashing on anything that came in their way: bicycles, clothes with *zari* border, ploughs, spades, including Amba Bai's wardrobe dabbed with saffron powder . . . It was rumored the old village prostitute could entice a customer for just two rupees; did she survive or die?

The wheat flour, when mixed with water, gave off a horrible odor. Does any produce - say, rice or wheat - ever grow with a natural, disgusting odor? The bureaucrats bought provisions at subsidized prices, let them rot and decay in the warehouses before shipping them - as a generous gesture - to the stores for public consumption. Not even the pigs in the cities of Europe or the United States would have touched them.

The school children were served corn-flour pudding as a midday meal. Their hunger was so extreme they never bothered with taste. The specter of hunger hung in the air. In every house, the young and the old competed with the children for food; stray dogs foraged garbage for food.

Do not think for a moment what you have just read describes the famine conditions in some far off African country. This news comes from the present-day life in Central India - of "the citizens riding the luxury buses toward a golden age."

Ganapat Sakharam Nath Re is patiently waiting for the day when his body will be reduced to a link between the cosmos and barren earth. He is hoping his last remains would be consigned to flames in the *Paingam Vadi* cremation ground. The Gulf of Khambat in the west and the Bay of Bengal in the East lay more than five hundred miles away, so there was hardly any hope of his ashes being immersed in sea. Nath Re is already eighty-three; how could he expect anyone to offer him the Governor's post in any state?

So, he is simply doing the next best thing - uprooting the cotton and dry-chili weeds, feeding corn to the cows, peeling off the papery layers of the onions, corralling the stray calves from the fallow lands, helping with the disposal of the sterile plants, tearing down unserviceable ploughs and other implements, and seeding ground-nut and sorghum plants.

It has been close to eighteen months since his wife Gangabai died of dysentery soon after the couple got their only son married off; Nath Re had no other worries - he lived with the little change his son offered him every week. The two grand-daughters were to be married off in a couple of years. For lunch and dinner, Nath Re had a couple of *Bakri* and onion - that was a real feast! He adopted austere practices on Mondays and Tuesdays. He skipped lunch on Thursday - the day of worship of *Goddess Santoshima*. That night his daughter-in-law would serve him marinated rice flakes with boiled potato, supplemented with fried onions and green chilies. When he was free and there was nothing else to do, he would recite *Abhang* and *Dynashwari*.

Now, for everyone, the famine remained a deep hole, a major hurdle to cross. But what had made his son Bagoji Ganapat Nath Re rub out his own life, his wife's and the two children's?

It was said of a foolish king who, considering himself a great warrior, went on murdering others - his own people and those he thought his enemies - at last found himself defeated on a battle field and stood with a sword in one hand, his feet firmly planted on the ground, and shouted, "A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!" Maybe Bagoji had noticed his young daughter sobbing, "A bread! A bread!" Was he frustrated that he could find nothing worthwhile

in the house to pledge for a loan? Did he remember his father had not smoked in the last four weeks?

Or might he have agonized over his close friend and relative - his brother-in-law - who was desperately fighting for his life in the Gondia Public Hospital . . .

Rumor has it that in a certain village - when the rainy season failed - the natives would appease the goddess *Kali* by smearing hot chili-powder on her face, thinking the burning sensation would be so severe and unbearable that the goddess would immediately cause a downpour. But now things are quite different - the son might have felt that the goddess would not budge even if a bucketful of strong chemicals is poured over her head

Still, where did his son get money to buy the bug poison? Was there some stuff left out of the insecticide used for the cotton weeds, stashed away somewhere in the attic? And, where did he get the wok and corn flour?

It was the season of *Ber* - the juju fruit. You get plenty of them - you can even eat them raw - if you just walk into the grove next to the village. Say you happened to seek shelter in rain under a tree, you will find the fruit within your grasp.

Otherwise, why didn't he travel - without a rail ticket - to Nagpur, Raipur or Jabalpur where it is easy to survive as a *coolie* - carrying a load of bricks, gravel or sand? Or he could have lived as a beggar reciting *Abhang* . . . It should not be a problem to earn at least five *roti*'s a day . . .

What was Bagoji afraid of?

Was he scared his young daughters would fall prey to some sexual predators?

Why did he think of sparing only his father's life?

The old man could barely contain his emotions . . .

He was too timid to end his own life . . .

There was nothing in the house worth saving. For whom? Why lock it up? No poet would be singing its glory, anyway.

"It makes no difference to me where I die," the old man whined to himself. "I don't even have ten paise with me, no other clothes to wear and no idea where my next meal comes from. Where is my next shelter? I can only begin my journey with no hope, no aim . . ."

Is this not a land where spirits roam all the time?

The stomach is a well that never gets dry; it is a smoldering flame that never dies, a wound that never heals, and an animal that feeds on itself. Hunger has no form, it is always lurking somewhere in the body.

Where could Nath Re possibly go and cast off his shadow? How could he fling his fondest memories of Bagoji, his dutiful son, his daughter-in-law, a fine hostess, and the two grand-daughters who nursed sweet dreams that someday they would sport bridal makeup and walk in a colorful procession?

Why not renounce everything and become a *sadhu*? How about living on the riverbank of *Hinganghat* forest with only a loincloth around his waist and wearing the same clothes washed and dried - day in and day out? Nath Re neither wished to die, nor hoped to live. He would wait for the appointed time living in the world with the hope of eternal bliss . . .

One who sees no way to turn to is free to take any path and claim it as his own . . .

Adilabad Junction could make no claim to being a busy intersection in the main railway line. It was situated in the western corner of the eponymous district of Andhra Pradesh touching the State of Maharashtra, just twenty kilometers away. The State of Karnataka was eighty kilometers from it. The borders of Chhattisgarh were one hundred and twenty kilometers from it. Drought, poverty and neglect have battered the region. Outlaws and criminals from the neighboring states ruled the roost there. The People's Liberation Movement sponsored by Communists, had already secured a foothold in the region.

None of this concerned Baburao, a sales representative. His profession demanded in his business travels that he pay no attention to his personal preferences regarding proper food and transport, convenience in accommodation, and the hot weather even if it was a hundred and twenty degrees. He was just a rocket ready to be launched on demand. He worked at the pleasure of his bosses and his own predilections counted for little. Predictably, there were only two outcomes in his work: the rocket should hit the target and destroy it or miss the target and be seen never again. Baburao felt some comfort in imagining he was a spear hurled at a mad elephant rather an arrow shooting a little rabbit.

That morning his breakfast consisted of *usal pav* and *chai*. For lunch he liked to have *naans* and *dal*; otherwise he would have *potato vada* and *chai*. For dinner, he would always seek out and find a good restaurant. Those were the days when liquor shops were non-existent. For entertainment, he visited Marathi movies.

Around that time Baburao's itinerary included visits to Parbhani, Padnera and Latur and his target was the cooperative society of the producers of the cotton mills in that region. He spent daytime in doing leg work, something that proved very strenuous and exasperating, the early part of the night traveling by rail and late nights sleeping. The next morning began with travel and the afternoon was again devoted to leg work. His briefcase carried everything a single person on the road would need. In spite of his demanding schedule, Baburao snatched happy moments.

That day, early in the morning, he vacated his hotel room in Yavatmal. He could have done so the previous night, but the last Yavatmal-Adilabad bus had already left around four-thirty. He reached

Adilabad at eight. The mill was four kilometers from the bus terminal. He rented a bicycle at the bus stand. Since his passenger train was scheduled to leave Adilabad for Parbhani at 2 P.M, he decided to rent a room in Parbhani that evening. His work in the mill delayed him till 1 P.M. There was not much time to have a leisurely lunch and go to the railway station; if he tried he would miss the train.

Baburao was ravenously hungry. For breakfast he had eaten only a couple of *potato vada* and *chai* - how long will that last? He was not sure what he would get to eat at the railway station. He returned the rented bicycle at the bus stand and took a rickshaw to the railway station. On the way the rickshaw driver stopped at a shop where Baburao ordered four *rotis* and potato *sabji* in a parcel. The food included as freebies an onion split into four and a piece of lemon. After buying the train ticket, he sought out and found a compartment that was sparsely occupied and slid comfortably into a seat when the train began to move. That train had been in continuous service for the last ten years and, now, one could detect a sense of lethargy in its movement from its whistle. In the scorching heat the floating dust particles mingled with his sweat. It would take at least four or five hours before the train reached Parbhani. Baburao decided to rent a cheap room in Parbhani and have a shower. Right now he felt hungry. He took out the water bottle and opened the food parcel.

Two dry palm leaves stitched together with tiny twigs carried sorghum bread pieces along with a generous measure of *sabji* - a coriander sprig mixed with fried onions and morsels of boiled potato in the middle of which lay a deep-fried green chili. Conventional wisdom holds that 'food tastes great when if it is red and hot,' but Baburao has no such quirks. He craved no taste in food just as he needed no mat for sleeping.

He enjoyed watching the fun outside through the window while making sure the dust particles in the air would not soil the bread pieces. He was leisurely biting the hot, green chili hard while simultaneously tearing the bread piece with his right hand.

A fragment of bread and some *sabji* still remained. His fingers held a mouthful of bread and, as they brought it near his mouth, Baburao felt his raised hand suddenly grasped by the sallow, emaciated hand of Nath Re.

Stunned, Baburao raised his head as he heard a rattling voice, the old man's hand still shivering . . .

"Hami Kaanaar. . . "

He was not saying, "Give me food." Neither was he saying, "I want to eat." Baburao felt the old man was reminding him of a time-honored Tamil clarion call, "Let's Eat."

The old man's eyes were moist. The hand shuddered while he repeated the words in a strained voice:

"Hami Kaanaar. . . "

The utterance of hunger jolted Baburao. The echo was not a plea for alms. It was a frantic call against the infliction of hunger on humanity.

Baburao still had some food left, but what good could a gob of bread do? He wished the old man had shown up earlier.

Short of snatching the food from Baburao, Nath Re took it, sat in the opposite seat and started chewing the bread piece. He struggled with pain and his mouth twisted a little to one side because his saliva glands needed some time to harmonize with his swallowing. When, with his eyes closed, Nath Re, took a hard bite of the hot, green chili, he seemed to exemplify the scourge of hunger, the bane of humanity.

Baburao offered Nath Re his water bottle. He didn't know when the train would stop at the next station. He made up his mind to buy some green bananas and offer them to the old man. The words *Let's Eat* continued to ring in his ears - like the *mantra* the *Lord Subrahmanya*, the *Father of God* - whispered into the ears of his father, *Lord Siva*.

(Original Tamil title: **Yam uNbom**)