

Self Critical Honesty

The Writing of Urmilla Pawar

○ Eleanor Zelliot

Chauthi Bhint (*The Fourth Wall*) is one of Urmilla Pawar's best known stories and Urmilla herself is probably the best-known Dalit woman writer. One might well ask, what is Dalit about this story? Other than that it subtly concerns caste and ends not so subtly with Ambedkar's picture on the fourth wall of a room with pictures of gods on the other three walls. What is feminine or womanly about it, other than the appearance of a strong village woman at the very end? I think there is a certain definable quality to Dalit writing and a difference between the writing of women and men. This is my reading:

The Dalit approach to literature concerns not only listing the grievances suffered by lower castes but an ability to look at society as a whole-high and low caste, old and young -but with sympathy for the low. It is, however, perhaps at times too honest about the practices of its own society. Daya Pawar and Lakshman Mane have been criticized for "revealing" the problems within the worlds of their castes in their autobiographies. Here, Urmilla Pawar combines the common theme of honouring Ambedkar and glorifying social work with the equally common theme of the shallowness of the commitment of some to Ambedkar and to social work. She does not hesitate to expose the cruelty of a family.

The distinct quality of Dalit women writers, is their ability to criticize both caste Hindu society and Dalit society, especially the patriarchy. As Urmilla told the interviewer for the Sparrow series that men's callous treatment of women within the Dalit community should be recognized: "You (male Dalit writers) set out to write the truth about your own life. So to write about only one aspect of your life is not very fair. Life should be written about from every angle. You should write about your mistakes also."

Urmilla writes about the unkindness of those who are devoted to the Ambedkar movement when their own well-being is threatened. The strongest idealist in her story is a woman from the village who has been ignored by all, but who turns out to be the solver of problems in a somewhat ambiguous ending. Her stories are quiet, concerned with problems that anyone might have. But the ones I have read have been written explosively, centering on a personal or family crisis. Here Nana, a nobody, has the courage to leave his unkind sons and to announce who he is to his high caste room-mates at an old peoples' home, but he does it without cinematic overtones. In contrast to some of her other stories, the men (the sons) in this story are not overbearingly patriarchal; they and their wives are equally adamant about the loss of a "righteous" inheritance. In many of Urmilla's stories, the women characters are treated with great compassion.

I don't believe this story is about Urmilla's own life, as many Dalit writings are, but simply reflects a human situation. However, the stout aunt may be modelled after an aunt of her mother's who loved her deeply. Urmilla comes from the Konkan, from a family where the father died all too soon, and the mother raised her children by making baskets which the children sold door-to-door.

The father's rule that the children should be educated was continued by Urmilla's mother after his death. But Urmilla did not continue her education in college until after marriage and three children, and then she studied up to M.A. in Mumbai. She began writing in 1975, and short stories became her forte. Some of her stories are read in college classes. One, "Kavach" (Armour), was much criticized for its earthy tone, although it is completely honest about the vicious teasing given low caste women.

It became clear in the 1980's that Urmilla Pawar was a major Marathi writer, and she has been invited to represent Marathi letters as a short story writer. Later, she and Meenakshi Moon, editor of "Maitri" (woman friend) travelled all over Maharashtra to find material for their book on the participation of women in the Ambedkar movement. It is titled "Amhihi Itihas Ghadawala" (We Made History Too) and is now in its second edition (Sugawa Press, Pune, 2000).

Urmilla plans to write her autobiography. This is a valuable addition to Dalit literature since, so far, the only Dalit autobiographies are by minimally educated women. It will undoubtedly contain strong views on the entrenched patriarchy both outside and inside the Dalit community. It may deal with the personal tragedy of the death of her son in a railway accident. It will certainly reflect the strength and creativity that can be found in Dalit women.

Pandurang Medhekar (Nana) briskly left the Samadhan Building. There was a bag in his hand. He wore a house lengha-shirt. As he walked his neck was shaking. He was murmuring something and he kept losing his balance. Even so, he strode forward with determination.

His neighbour, Manohar Ranapise, who was preparing to go to the office saw him and ran outside. "Nana," "Hey, Nana!" he shouted. Nana kept on going. Ranapise hurried down the stairs. By that time Nana was in the street hailing a taxi. Ranapise ran out and blocked his way. "Nana, where are you going?"

"To the cremation ground," Nana said angrily.

"Nana, what is this? Now come home and let's see..."

"Home? It's not a home, it's a jail! Animals live there. Humans don't live there. Animals. Animals. Blood suckers!" Nana's body shook with anger as he spoke.

"Quiet now! Take it easy!" said Manohar with concern. He took Nana's bag and led him to the side of the road saying anxiously, "Nana, I am not in your family. But I know the whole situation. All this happened because of the gift you gave to our centre, didn't it? Your sons and your daughters-in-law were furious, weren't they? Nana, I'll do this. I'll tell them to give it all back to you."

"Don't talk like a fool. Give me the bag and let me go!"

"Nana, where will you go?"

"To an old folks' home."

"An old folks' home? Where is it?"

"I know."

"Have any of us ever gone there?"

"I am going. I have to go."

"All right, but what'll it be like? Let's find out about it first."

"No. Whatever happens to old people there will happen to me. And

SHORT STORY

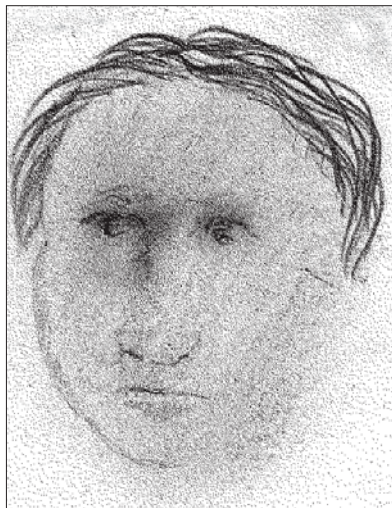
*Chauthi Bhint** (The Fourth Wall)

○ Urmilla Pawar

Translated by Gail Omvedt

anyway, how much longer do I have? I'll be happy to spend my days with a few other, sad, old people."

Manohar tried to reason with Nana, but once he realized he was determined to carry on, he stopped a



taxi and said, "Let's go. I'll see that you get there."

The taxi started off. Without saying anything more, Nana rested his head on the back of the seat. His son's words were stinging his heart like a scorpion's sting. "You make a show of doing social service, but you can't do it only with money. Your wood has gone to the cremation ground."

When Pandurang Medhekar retired from the postal service, his sons planned a celebration. He said, "No, no. What is there to celebrate?"

"What is there? It's the custom. You brought us up, you educated us," his sons said with pride. "Besides, we

have two more reasons. We and our friends have started a Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Cultural Centre. We want to let people know about it. We'll invite well-known people as President and speakers to that meeting. And also, Tatyasaheb Chitale has been elected M.P. from here and we'll felicitate him too. All of these people will be very useful."

Nana didn't understand anything about what his sons said but he knew that he had worn himself out for his children and he was content with this.

He put on a brand new shirt, especially made for the occasion. He parted his hair neatly. He put a gold ring on his finger and took his place on the stage. Then, rubbing his ring he closely inspected the audience. He threw a glance at the pictures of Phule and Ambedkar placed on the side of the platform. The speeches startled him.

Nana's personality really was quite ordinary. He was light-skinned with a stick-like body, with hair gone white over many seasons, and a helpless expression that could not be erased from his face. Even so, every speaker praised him extravagantly. To tell the truth, Nana had never looked beyond his household and his family. Words such as "social responsibility" or "debt to society" were way beyond him. He had wandered in a closed circle of letters, postcards, packets and savings certificates. Still, such high-flown labels as "servant of society," "great benefactor," "lover of knowledge" were now being applied to him.

Nana glowed to hear these words, words that he had never before heard about himself. Instead of glancing around here and there, he began to concentrate. "What great things people are saying about me! Such trust they have in me!... It's all right for the great people sitting beside me! Their work is great! Their work is recognised by all people! But what about me? What have I done for society? Have I ever run to help people in difficulty? Given a loving word? Given support?" Then he began to examine his life and he felt ashamed. "No, no. I am not worthy of all this." He did not dare look at the portraits of Phule and Ambedkar at the side. He couldn't meet anybody's eyes.

The speeches soared. Every speaker talked enthusiastically about the importance of social service. "The service of society is truly the service of God." "Whoever goes on that path will have a golden future." Agarkar, Savarkar, Phule, Ambedkar ...such great names were dancing on each speaker's lips. The plans for the new cultural centre were cited again and again. Kindergarten for children, sewing classes for women, literacy classes for the uneducated, advice for the needy, support for the helpless – all these ideas were thrown in the air... the speakers talked on. They talked about gifts to the Centre. One hundred and one... Five hundred and one... One thousand and one... They proclaimed the figures like auctioneers. The audience clapped. However, the activists were not happy. They called for still bigger donations.

In this tumult, Nana's mind kept admonishing him. "Up till now you've done a lot for yourself and your children. Your sons are well-educated. They've got high-class employment. Do something for the society. Now is the time! Get up! Speak!" His feelings overwhelmed him.



Nana stood up to respond to the felicitations. Somehow gathering some words together, he said, "Friends! I feel I should do something for the society. I would like to announce publicly, I will donate my retirement fund of fifty thousand rupees to the cultural centre."

On hearing these words, the audience clapped thunderously. The assembly hall resounded for five minutes. People's faces bloomed. The eyes of the activists gleamed. The honourable speakers on the stage looked at Nana with great respect. The journalists scribbled furiously. Nana looked for his sons and daughters-in-law, but they were not to be seen.

When the programme finished, Nana returned home feeling gratified, enjoying the never-before-felt satisfaction of giving. Without going to his room, he sat on the sofa in the hall. Waiting for his sons, he stroked the garlands he had been given in the ceremony. He was happy from inside out....

"Today my aunt should have been here to see this ceremony." As he sat there, memories of his aunt in the village kept coming to him. When Nana sold his fields, his shed, his plot of land and finally his house for the education of his children, for their weddings, and to buy a house in the city, she tried to stop him. She opposed him and said with anger,

"You are a frog out of water. You may not think about your community, your caste, but remember, you'll get old, and you'll be dependent on your sons."

Nana was angry too, "Look, my sons are well-educated. They won't put me aside. When you come helplessly to the door, they'll take care of you too."

While remembering his aunt, his eyes began to close. The loud ringing of the door bell awakened him. He became anxious. None of his daughter's-in-law came to answer the bell. The door did not open. He stood up and opened the door. His sons were standing at the doorstep looking at him as if they would pierce him with their eyes.

"You are so late! Where have you been all this time?" Nana asked naturally. Casting aside his hand, his younger son said, "We were going over the idea of your great generosity...."

Nana didn't catch on and looked towards his older son. Slipping inside, his son said, "Who told you to do such a thing?"

"But what's happened?"

"You throw away such a great amount and then you ask what has happened?" Puzzled, he replied, "Throw away? What are you saying? Didn't I give the money to your centre?"

"Oh yes, but, whatever modest help we get for the centre we collect through donations. And we had a big campaign. We invited big donors. Why? Because isn't theirs the real responsibility to bring up people from the bottom? Shouldn't you at least see what those big people have to give?"

"Hey, instead of worrying about whose responsibility it is, and who has given what, I did what I thought I should do. And how have you lost by that? I've already done for you what should be done."

“Oh, I should think so. That was your duty. Are we not doing everything for our children? People should first see to their families and then to the community. If our own house is burning, how can we put out the fire in the community?” Nana’s own words were thrown back at him.

It was getting very late. Voices were rising; words were being hurled. Both daughters-in-law had come out and were standing with their hands on their hips looking for a chance to say something. Since he didn’t want any more drama, Nana ended the conversation, and went into his room to sleep.

Seven or eight days later, the affair of the donation became widely known. People kept talking about it. The daughters-in-law began insulting him in small ways. His meal times fell under a cloud. His sons began to ignore him. Even the grandchildren were not allowed to talk to him freely. He was beginning to feel cut off, but Nana remained quiet. He knew that in the stages from infancy through youth, adulthood and old age, the fourth stage was the one in which there is endless.... Still, our children give us support. He was living in that trust even though he was suffering insults. But one day that trust was broken.

Before going to the office, both sons came and stood before Nana, and holding out an ST ticket said, “Go to your village and take a break for a few days.”

“Go to my village? What are you saying? For what reason should I go? What is left there of mine?”

“What? Isn’t there a joint family house there? At least you haven’t sold that.”

Hearing this shameless talk from his sons, Nana got upset. The anger that he had kept suppressed in his heart for so many days burst out and he shouted, “Why are you making a

show of this? Why don’t you say openly that my use to the family is finished?”

“Yes, yes, you are of no use to us, after your great show of social service,” the youngest yelled angrily.

“What? I made a show?”

“Then what? What kind of social service comes only from money? Social service requires sweat,” the older said, clenching his teeth. “Your wood has gone to the burning grounds. You’re old and of no use. What do you know about social service?”

Nana felt the whip of words. The scorn in these words was like lava pouring over him and he writhed in mental agony. Having taken revenge with this verbal assault, both sons walked out while the two daughters-in-law kept filling the lunch boxes and talking to each other. Nana rose in a daze, put on his clothes, filled his bag and walked out unseeingly.

Leaving behind all of the roads and squares of the city, the taxi drove in the direction of a distant hill, smashing over the tarred road, across ups and downs and curves, stopping finally at the foot of a small hill, in front of which was a closed gate. Behind the gate, in a cluster of trees, was a long building like a school with a long wide veranda. Doors opened onto the veranda... Dangling from a column was a three by four blackboard, with the sign, “Evening shadows.” Under the poetic name, the words, “Home for the Aged” made the meaning brutally clear.

Getting out of the taxi, the two went to the gate. Lifting the chain and pushing open the gate, they grumbled loudly. From a room beyond the veranda, old men with necks trembling like tortoises came outside and fading gazes brightened with enthusiasm. “Who are these people? Have they come to meet someone or be admitted? Or only to make enquires?” Questions dangled in the

air. The guard came forward. “What do you want?”, he asked.

“I want admittance.”

“Come after four,” the guard growled.

“Oh Listen, it’s only one now. Where will we go...” Manohar protested loudly and started an argument. Finally, giving him five rupees, he took Nana inside.

Sitting Nana down, he went in to make enquiries. Explaining Nana’s overall situation to the manager, he filled in a form and paid the fees. Signatures were taken and after the room number and a copy of the regulations were given by the manager, the two left.

Having got admission Nana felt a sense of release and strolled along with Manohar. Just as they approached the room, “Come in, come in, you boycotted one,” came the chorus from within, startling them both.

On three cots in the room sat three old men, laughing softly, and welcoming Nana. “Come in. Why are you startled? We are like you, our families don’t want us, society has discarded us”, one explained and all three sat chortling.

Nana and Manohar did not laugh. They came in silently. Inside, against the wall, the fourth cot was Nana’s. He sat on that fourth cot. Manohar shoved his bag underneath the cot and Nana said, “Manohar, now you can leave.”

“Nana, if you need any money...”

“No, I have some.”

“Look, Nana, take care of your health. Enjoy yourself, I’ll come from time to time.”

“Manohar, what will you come here for? Go, live happily and look, don’t tell any of this to my sons. I don’t want to see their faces. From today, they are dead for me...!!” As he spoke, Nana couldn’t help sobbing. His eyes filled with tears.

Manohar's footsteps faltered. The men came over to Nana and said, "Oh, why are you crying like a small child? Don't behave this way. Keep your mind firm. Whatever has happened, it is finished and should be forgotten. Look first open up your bag," said one pointing to the bag under the cot. "And take out the pictures of the gods and put them on the wall."

"Oho, what are you looking at? Look, we three have three walls. On each wall, see how we've set up our gods? And now, the fourth wall is yours. See how nice it looks. You'll soon feel at home."

"Just then, lunch came for Nana. "Come on, please eat and then get on with your work."

Nana sat looking at all the pictures of gods and buwas. Fresh garlands flowers and incense was offered to them. In the corners of the photos incense sticks were set and below then the words of saints had been written. Only the fourth wall was empty. It was blank, ready to be filled with life.

"Nana, first eat a couple of bites. You haven't eaten anything since morning." Manohar persuaded him to eat, but in vain.....

"I don't want any lunch. I'm not at all hungry. Come on, let's see the ashram." Nana got up and Manohar followed. All the rooms were of the same size and shape. Each had four cots and four walls. A table exactly in the middle with four chairs around it. It was covered with books, writing paper, pens, erasers, etc.

Behind the rooms was an empty passage. There was a kitchen at one end, and at the other end a bathroom adjoined the passage, followed by a big hall. In half the hall dining tables and chairs were set, while the rest of the room was used as a prayer hall with a big shrine in the corner. Large and small images of the gods were set in the shrine along with all the things needed for worship. In a

second corner reposed a table, cymbals, and tabor. Small rugs were placed here and there, and two or three old men wearing silk garments sat counting their rosaries.... Two other men with ash smeared on their bodies were lost in contemplation.

Seeing all this, Manohar said with some apprehension, "Nana, you will probably be troubled by some things here, because these men belong to an older generation, who hold fast to old ways of thinking. So, be cautious about what you do."

"Look, friend, what kind of caution do you mean? As long as I have a place to lay my head peacefully, I'm all right."

"I'm just saying it like that. Look, I'll bring two or three photos of gods and you put them on the wall, and if possible, don't say anything about caste. At least at your age, you don't want that fight."

Manohar talked while Nana sat listening. Nana realised that home for the aged meant a common life for those of the same age, and the same



sad situation. Each would be considerate of the other and with a free, liberated mind they would go fearlessly towards the final end.

Remembering something, Manohar pulled the regulations out of his pocket and putting his finger on the rule, said, "Nana, fifty rupees per month is compulsory for pujas and religious rituals; we didn't pay this money. They will take it from you afterwards."

Taking the regulations in his hand, Nana said, "OK, Manohar, you can go. You'll be late getting home."

"But the photos..."

"I will see to them, you go."

Waving goodbye to Manohar, Nana went to the veranda. Members of an adivasi band were standing there making loud jangling sounds. Among them were small children, women and men older than Nana. In their hands were honey cakes, pieces of sealing wax and medicine made from forest leaves and roots. People were haggling over the prices. Some people, talking loudly, pointed at two or three boys about twelve years old. On their black emaciated bodies, red boils had erupted from bee bites and the boys were in agony. This group was talking about the misfortunes of collecting forest produce and were repeatedly beseeching the manager so they could get something for their labour.

These were Kalekabhinn Katkaris... Seeing their nearly naked, emaciated bodies, faces wrinkled as if ploughed, and frozen eyes, Nana became almost feverish and remained standing there for a long time.

"Oh, friend, ...cheee, why are you looking at them? Come quickly, hurry you'll get cold." One of Nana's companions was calling him. When Nana returned to his room the three were witting on Nana's cot and one of them said, "Oh, that's the raw material for our handicraft; tomorrow

you'll see what goes on here."

"In the meantime, take a look at the regulations. See, from nine to twelve in the morning there is the packaging of honey and making of raw candles, grinding medicine, work in the garden and so on." A third gentleman gave the information.

"Oh, forget that. Now, are you going to tell us something about yourself?" "What is your name, village, occupation, relations, your reason for coming here and so on. Come on, tell us...."

"Look, saying you're not in the mood will do you no good," said the three in turn, taking sips of tea, and creating an atmosphere of play.

Their easy talk made Nana feel good. Laughing, he said, "You are senior to me, fellows, so first tell me something about yourselves."

Each began to tell his story, until one gentleman said, "Oh, what is there to say that's new? Look, I am Joshi, this is Savant, this is Rasal and you... Medhekar. Yes. Your name may be different; your occupation, family situation may be different, but our identity is one, and that is 'old men.' Our misfortune is the same and that is: people don't want us."

"The reason they don't want us is also the same, that is, money." Removing his glasses, Savant said, "Once I distributed all my earnings among the children, they didn't want anything to do with me in my old age."

Rasal described his problems. "I have only one daughter and my wife stays with her and so we can save a few rupees. But I don't live there. In one way or another the question of money comes in, doesn't it?" Joshi said, looking at Nana.

Nana, for some reason, kept quiet. He wondered whether they would agree about his giving so much money to the community? Or would they think that in bringing forward the question of money he was making up

a story?

"Well, Medhekar, what about you?"

"Yes, yes, I'm also here because of strained relations over money."

"See, our conditions have brought us to the same level, that is, our circumstances are the same. We should keep our minds strong. What has happened is over and we should live without worries.

"It is just like going back to our childhood home," someone said, and they all laughed from their hearts.

Then the three stood up. "Medhekar, we are going for a walk and will be back soon. Until then, make yourself at home," Joshi said, looking at the blank wall.

Nana opened his bag and began taking out his crumpled clothes. On seeing two or three Adivasi boys leaning against the door, he said, "Come in, come in. What are your names? Where have you come from?"

The boys were startled by the unexpected questions and began to back away. One got up his courage and came forward. Falteringly pointing his finger he said, "That is Hongar...Behind him is Thya...I'm Dindya." And then not knowing what else to say the boys just stood there smiling.

"Here, take a little money for snacks," said Nana putting half a rupee into their hands. Just as he was patting them on the back, someone yelled, "Hey! what are you doing here? Go and play over there." The boys jumped and ran off like rabbits. Nana remembered his grandchildren and sat on the cot feeling depressed.

When his companions returned from their walk, their glance went to the wall. And then looking at Nana on the cot, Joshi said, "Medhekar, aren't you feeling well? He seems to be sleeping."

Savant came forward and shook him. Medhekar, get up, it's time for

prayers."

"You go. I'll just lie down for a bit." Nana said, and remained where he was. The three went out glancing at each other and whispering, "If he doesn't come to prayers, what does that mean?"

"We'll soon find out. Where can he go?"

When they came back they found Nana still sleeping. The three came forward and put their hands on him. He really was feverish.

Making him drink a herbal concoction which one of them had learnt from the manager, they settled Nana comfortably on the cot.

There was no evening meal in the ashram. In a little while, milk arrived. The three forced Nana to drink some milk, saying, "Look, since morning, you haven't had a morsel." Seeing their concerned faces, Nana felt better.

When Nana woke up the next morning his companions were brushing their teeth. "Well, Medhekar, how are you feeling now? Is there a fever?" Nana smiled and said no and went out to wash his face.

Outside in the back many people were taking their baths. Some old men had put on silk garments and were chanting, while others were moving here and there keeping time to the rhythm.

Afraid to turn in that direction, Nana came back and sat on the cot. Joshi who had gone after him to wash his face began to dig for information. "Medhekar, are you named after your village Medha? Are people from every caste and religion from there named Medhekar or only you...?"

"No, everyone from Medha has the surname Medhekar." Even though Joshi's face fell a bit at Nana's answer, he gave a meaningful glance to his companions. Savant, who was shaving, looked at Medhekar in the mirror and said, "But what castes and religions are in Medha? That is how

many of your people?"

"I left the village when I was very little, so I really can't say." Savant's fuse was struck by this answer of Nana. Then Rasal moved closer and said, "Medhekar, you still haven't put anything on the wall. If you don't have anything, should I give you one or two of my photos?"

"Oh, it's his wall. Why are you encroaching on his wall?" Joshi asked this keeping an eye on Nana's reaction.

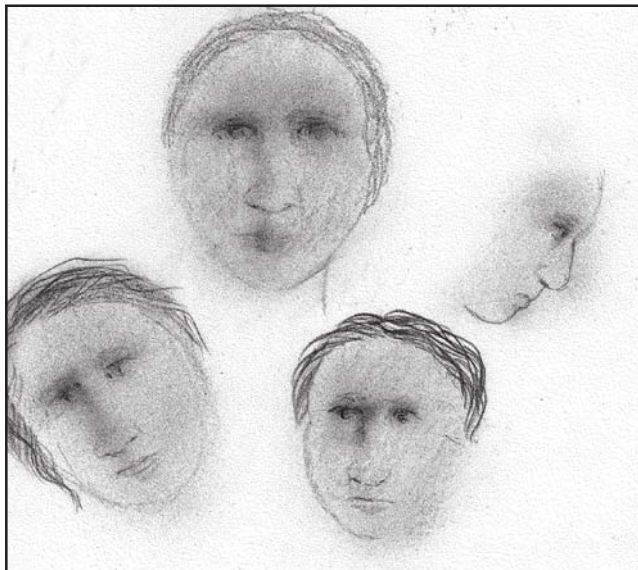
Saying that he would take his bath and come, Nana left and went outside. The others looked at each other as if he were evading the issue.

The bathroom was no more so crowded. Nana took his bath, washed his clothes, and wrung them out and left them to dry. When he came back the three were talking to each other. Seeing Nana they stopped talking and said, "Had your bath? Come on, we'll be back. Medhekar, just leave your clothes in the bathroom, someone comes to wash them."

When the three came back from their baths, Savant and Rasal had on silk clothes and Joshi, waving his sacred thread, was muttering chants. The three, looking towards their walls, finished their puja rituals. And then, changing his clothes, Joshi said, "Ever since I came here, I've been able to do one thing the way I wanted and that's the puja. What about you, Medhekar? For peace of mind and so on...? What are you reading?"

The three peeped at Nana's book. Closing the book, Nana said, "Come on, it's time for our handicraft."

"But the book..." The three exclaimed in their enthusiasm. Nana held the book out to them. "Your



Guide to Health. You should read it." Quickly they cleaned up and went out to the veranda.

The packing of the honey that had come the day before was going on. The old people worked with tremulous hands measuring the honey, filling the bottles, sticking labels, stamping them and so on.

Nana liked such work and came forward with his companions. "He's the one who came yesterday, isn't he?" , said the others smiling and welcoming him. One gentleman from the school, who was making a list, looked at him through his heavy spectacles and said, "Who are you?"

"I'm Medhekar."

"Medhekar means who?"

Nana kept quiet and the questioner looked towards his companions. They shrugged and muttered to each other, "Probably...He seems to be an untouchable..."

"Oh, how are those labels being stuck?" someone shouted in protest.

In the afternoon again everyone came together in the hall. There were many men, and only two or three women. A few old people were very worn out, bent, and seemed to walk only with other's help.

While eating Savant said to Nana, "Medhekar, I'll tell you a story of one of my friends who was an 'atheist'. I told him, Baba, this atheism is no good. You'll have to pay for it. People should first experience life and then decide what they think about it. I told him to put some god's photo in front of him and sit in meditation for a little while, and see what kind of experience he has after a few days. Even if nothing happens you'll get some support for your old age."

"Then what happened?" Rasal asked enthusiastically.

"Well, he did just that and now he's become a firm devotee."

"Oh, but why are you telling this to Medhekar? Joshi said.

"If nothing else, he should try it and see."

"But since when is Medhekar an atheist? Well, Medhekar?"

"Look, friends, I don't know if I'm a believer or an atheist. I only know that I'm an old man left hanging before death's door by a situation I can't control...without support...without resources..." Saying this he suddenly began to feel tormented and got up and went to his room. He knew that everyone was eager to find out what his caste was. From time to time questions were asked, and he knew what the reactions would be, on finding out who he was. He was ill at ease all the time, feeling the unusual tension of the situation.

After a long time his companions came in and one of them asked, "Medhekar, someone is going into the city, do you want anything? That is, photos or whatever...?"

Nana lay looking at his wall and shook his head. The three raised their eyebrows. The manager came in with

some papers and said, "Medhekar, you have not given the fifty rupees for the puja, can you give it now?" Nana sat up and said quietly, "I thought this contribution was voluntary."

"Oh, this amount is compulsory according to the regulations."

"It may be, but shouldn't rules be made taking everyone into account?"

"Medhekar, it seems you haven't carefully read the regulations, whatever is left over from this amount is to be given to temples and maths, how can you oppose such a gift?"

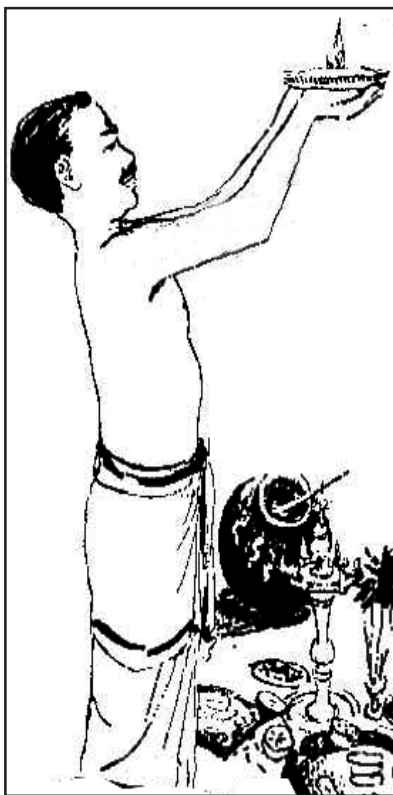
"I'm saying the entire rule should be voluntary."

"Okay, I'll have to tell the trustees and everyone will have to take into account other rules also." With this, the manager left in a huff. After a little while, tea came and then Nana's room-mates changed their clothes and went out.

This silence of his companions made Nana uneasy. He too didn't feel like lying alone in his room. So he changed his clothes and went out. When he came to the veranda he saw his companions coming out of the office. Even though the three were aware of Nana, they ignored him and walked on.

Nana went out through the gate. As the open air outside came over him he felt better. On the open bank the old people of the ashram were sitting gossiping. On the other side of the hill some Adivasi boys were running here and there after cattle. Nana kept walking down, away from the ashram.

When he came back the murmur of prayer could be heard from the hall. Washing his hands and feet he came inside and, sitting on his cot he kept looking at the three walls with the photos of the gods on them. He remembered the conversion ceremony, and the twenty-three vows he had taken at the time, as he looked at his blank wall.



After the prayers, the three came back, and went to their cots. Nana looked from one to the other as if they would smile or say something, but they kept chanting quietly. After that, milk came and they sat lost in contemplation. And Nana picked up his book.

When he woke up in the morning, two of the men had had their bath. Rasal was shaving. As Nana was leaving for a bath with his towel and clothes, Joshi said, going out hurriedly, "Medhekar, wait a minute, I left my puja clothes in the bathroom. Let me get them and come."

Going out after him, Rasal said, "I'll take my bath first, then you go."

Not wanting anyone else to stop him, Nana deliberately took his bath after everyone and at that point someone said, "Medhekar, don't keep wet clothes in the bathroom." Nana began to laugh. After taking a bath, he went to the veranda. Only one or two people nodded on seeing him.

For the afternoon meal, Nana went to the hall. He saw his companions sitting inside. Seeing Nana, they seemed to smile, and then suddenly ignoring him they kept talking among themselves. When Nana went to pick-up his meal from a table near the door, he over-heard a discussion behind him. "Yes, yes, that's right, that's how we should act. He should be shown his place. And if at each place there's a stop-sign, so what? Really, we are the ones who are insulted."

"But I say, if it's true then how did the manager admit him?"

"Because this ashram is open to everyone, that's how."

"Oh...o... he's listening."

"Let him listen, we can say what we want."

"Look, everywhere we suffer their coming up."

"Let it be, he's here, so why the debate?" This was someone else's understanding voice from behind.

"If he's suffered from pollution his whole life then why is he here?" This was another old man's complaint.

"Oh, where does it finish, there's pollution in dying itself," was the response of a second.

Nana couldn't help but think that while on the outside his family was boycotting him, here, too, it would be difficult to live. Some way out had to be found. He would have to leave here. But where was he to go? This was the problem that confronted him. He was filled with anxiety.

Four or five days went by a this repressed, isolated state, and one day in the middle of the afternoon, the gate's iron door could be heard opening and a resolute voice saying, "Oh, Pandurang, where is Pandurang Medhekar? Which room is he in?" Heads stuck out from every room. One eighty-year-old man and one sturdily-built old peasant woman, straight as a cane, were standing on

the veranda. A sari with a scarlet border worn covering her head, a shawl over her shoulders, packet under her arm and a stick in her hand. Wiping her spreading sweat with the end of her sari, she was looking here and there with an enquiring glance.

Nana heard this voice and was shocked as realization dawned upon him that it was his aunt's voice. How had she come here? Hurriedly, he went outside.

Seeing Pandunana, the old woman's affection burst out. "Old, my child..." she exclaimed.

Running her hand over Nana's back and crying, the old woman was speaking loudly, "Oh, that Manohar came and told me that your sons threw you out. When I heard that I was so worried, child." And then with sudden anger she said, "And didn't you think of me when you left? Did you or didn't you sell a piece of your land? Your brother is in the village, your sister-in-law is there and am I not your aunt?... Then why didn't you come home? Why? Tell me!"

The old woman was speaking crossly and argued out of emotion. Nana stopped her and led her into the room. "Oh, Pandurang, I've heard that you donated fifty thousand rupees to the community and became a great social worker. Oh, what kind of social work are you doing, Baba? Listen to me, come to the village and do whatever you want for society." As she spoke she took out a small packet and pulled out a blue leaflet and gave it to Nana, saying, "Look at this, a balwadi is starting in out village. It will be a big programme. We will put your name as president, look."

Nana took the leaflet in his hand. On the left side of the invitation for the inauguration of the balwadi was a photo of Mahatma Phule, with Babasaheb Ambedkar on the right and in the middle, Lord Gautam

Buddha. Below that was the information. "Why are you looking at it like that? Look, don't give even one rupee. Only give the kids a little of your wisdom. Teach them. Give them knowledge." Saying this she grabbed Nana's bag from under the cot.

At the dramatic entrance of this old woman, her high voice, her free boisterous behaviour, everyone from the ashram stood dumbstruck. Nana, seeing the great heart of an uneducated ignorant woman, had choked up. His thoughts raced ahead. I haven't asked one word about her in my whole life, I've never given her even two rupees. I speak arrogantly to her even while she is thinking about



my own good. And she's the one, though penniless herself, who has come to see me. "Aunt, really you are good," Nana burst out, and leaning on her he said, "Aunt, I never understood your worth. Forgive me. I was mistaken. I was confused, but today I have seen the way, I have seen my path. I am going on that path. But aunt, forgive me. Our house... I can't come to the village because I lost that right a longtime ago."

Then turning to everyone who had gathered around with folded hands, Nana said, "Friends, I am a homeless

old man, I came here for support, but on coming here I understood that I had mistaken my way. Friends, excuse me, for being inconvenienced because of me."

Turning towards his three companions he said, "Friends, do you remember that you told me to do one experiment? Keep a god's photo in front of me and meditate. I did that experiment, and should I tell you what I became conscious of? I became conscious that this was my body. This, my sight that is fixed on the photo is still good. I was conscious that my memory is still very good and I can hear quite well, and the blood running through me gave me the consciousness that I am whole and active."

"Folks, I am very grateful to you. I learned from you that my body is not worn out. It can still do much work and so I have decided from today that I should use my body for others until I die. Enough."

Pausing for just a moment Nana looked towards his wall and then said, "Friends, since coming here you have, from time to time, told me one important thing to do, and this extremely important thing I will do today. The one who inspired me to do social service is my ideal, and I am going to put this on my fourth wall." Saying this, he took the blue leaflet with the image of Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar in his hand and stuck it on the blank wall. Then taking his aunt's bag in his hand he briskly walked out with her. □

*"Chauthi Bhint", pp36-55 in Gaokusabheril Katha, edited by Sharankumar Limbale. In Memory of Daya Pawar. Pune: Madhuraj Publications, 1997

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