

## Early Sorrow

Reminiscences By Ajeet Cour

LIFE'S earliest sorrow is a blacksmith's forge in which body and soul, thoughts and dreams, all of life—not only the life one has lived but all of life that is to come—boils and melts like iron, and then is forged with hammer blows into a harmless serving spoon or a dangerous knife, a respectable frying pan or a sharp toothed scythe, or perhaps a pair of tongs which

continues, to infinity, to weigh the burning coals and clean the ashes off them, so that life's chill bleakness may be somewhat diminished and a glowing island be preserved amidst the horizonless flood of darkness.

When I look back, I find it hard to understand where the first sorrow of my life originated. It was not born of any one, extraordinary, exceptional, stormy

event, so one cannot look back through the entangled years and lay one's finger on it.

I was a sad, solitary child. The first memory that rises from the mists of time is that of the birth of my younger brother, Jasbir. An un-rest in the house, a turmoil, a lady doctor clad in white, and Shyama, the midwife, fair, in a muslin sari, who kept running between the kitchen and

my mother's room, and sometimes giving me a kind word or caress. She was the only one in the house who ever paid me any attention.

I sat by myself, shrinking in fear, in a corner of the house, in the room where big trunks and bedrolls were stored. On the first floor of this house was an open terrace round which I used to cycle all day long. But, these days, the cycle too stood, forlorn, in a corner.

And when Shyama the midwife showed me the plump, pink and white baby, saying : "Look, here's your brother", I remained silent and withdrawn.

At the time of her delivery, my mother suffered some complication which made it hard for her to walk. For years after, she used a walking stick, and I used to support her when she went to the bathroom or the courtyard. I was barely four years old at that time.

If ever I started to play, both father and mother would rebuke me : "What business have girls to keep playing all the time ? Soon, you will go to another house. Learn to be sensible. At least, learn how to serve your mother. After all, you will soon have to serve your mother-in-law."

And, with Jasbir's birth, my playing days came to an end.



I had only one friend, Rohini. She lived next door. In those days, a wide slope led up to each house, and under the slope ran the water-pipes. After the slope came four or five steps, then the footpath and then the road. One just had to walk along the slope of our house to reach Rohini's house. Yet my playing with Rohini was rationed—once in five or six days.

I was barely five years old, when Rohini's grandfather and my father issued orders that our days of playing on the slopes were over.

The season of play was over. The season of sorrows had begun.



On looking back, as far as I can, into childhood, I cannot remember a single

day when my mother took me in her lap or caressed me. The only opportunity I got to sit close to her was when, once a day, she combed my hair and plaited it, and I always feared that moment, because my hair was a regular jungle, long and thick. It hurt a great deal when my mother combed my hair. I would sit in front of her, crying silently, while she would continue her combing, remarking exasperately on my hair. Then, she would plait it so tightly that my neck would begin to ache.

From constantly seeing my brother Jasbir in her lap, I had developed the firm conviction that Jasbir was her only real child. I must have been picked up from some wayside or other.

And then my thoughts, instead of dwelling on fairy tales, would begin to weave the sad threads of life into a story. My mother was someone else, who perhaps had died, and her people had said. "She's gone and died and left for us this dark, fat nuisance of a girl. We can't bring her up. Let us throw her by the wayside, where either someone will pick her up or some black cat or eagle will get hold of her."



My mother could not get up from bed and my grandmother had no great liking for housework. Since my grandmother and the servant had to run the house, they were always on the look out for ways to minimise work. In the morning, she used to make *paran-thas* with eggs, butter and milk for my father and grandfather. But she used to give the two of us stale *rolls* left over from the previous night, with some butter and sugar. We were quite content with these.

My grandmother used to say : "Girls don't eat butter. Nor do they drink milk. If they do, they grow up too fast." But my father used to rebuke his mother for saying this.

In those childhood days, one felt so hungry that one was not particular about what one got to eat. Jasbir was so fond of sugar that at lunch, and dinner too, he would eat curds with sugar, and some potatoes. For years, he did not eat either

lentils or vegetables. He did not like them.

I was about five years old at that time. I was playing with Rohini on the slope outside my father's clinic. On one side was Rohini's house and on the other a hardware shop. There were only a couple of shops on Chamberlain Road that were not doctors' clinics. One was the hardware shop, another the office of an Urdu newspaper from which one could hear the clanking of machines all day, and at the corner of the road was Dilli-wali Halwai where one could buy *purls* and potatoes, served on banana leaves, which one supposed to have come straight from Delhi, that place as distant as a foreign country, and to be so tasty for precisely that reason.

The fat owner of the hardware shop patted both of us on the head and said : "Would you like a sweet,, little ones ?" We said : "No, thank you, we've just eaten at home." These were the instructions given to us at home—we were never to accept food from an out-sider but were to say that we had eaten at home.

Smiling, he asked: "What did you eat, little ones ?" I do not remember what Rohini said, but I said : "I ate stale *rotis* with butter and sugar." The fat man laughed heartily, and remarked to someone else : "The daughter of such a big doctor eats stale *rotis* with butter." And a report reached my father.

That day, my father slapped me for the first time—the first time that I remember. And instructed me : "You are not to talk to any man outside the house. Girls do not talk to strange men."

The slap hurt as much as if someone had branded on my cheek with a hot iron the words : "You are a girl and girls do not talk to anyone"—as negro slaves used to be branded with a sign of slavery on their backs.

The smell of the scorched flesh of my cheek filled my mind with darkness for many days. For many days, I did not eat stale *roti* with I butter in the morning nor did I go to play with Rohini.



It was from this time that I began to

feel somewhat distant from my father. It was at this time that I began to feel afraid of him and his dictatorship at home. When his footsteps were heard on the stairway from his clinic to the house, a strange fear would seize me, and I would begin to look for a corner to hide, either in the store-room or on the roof.||

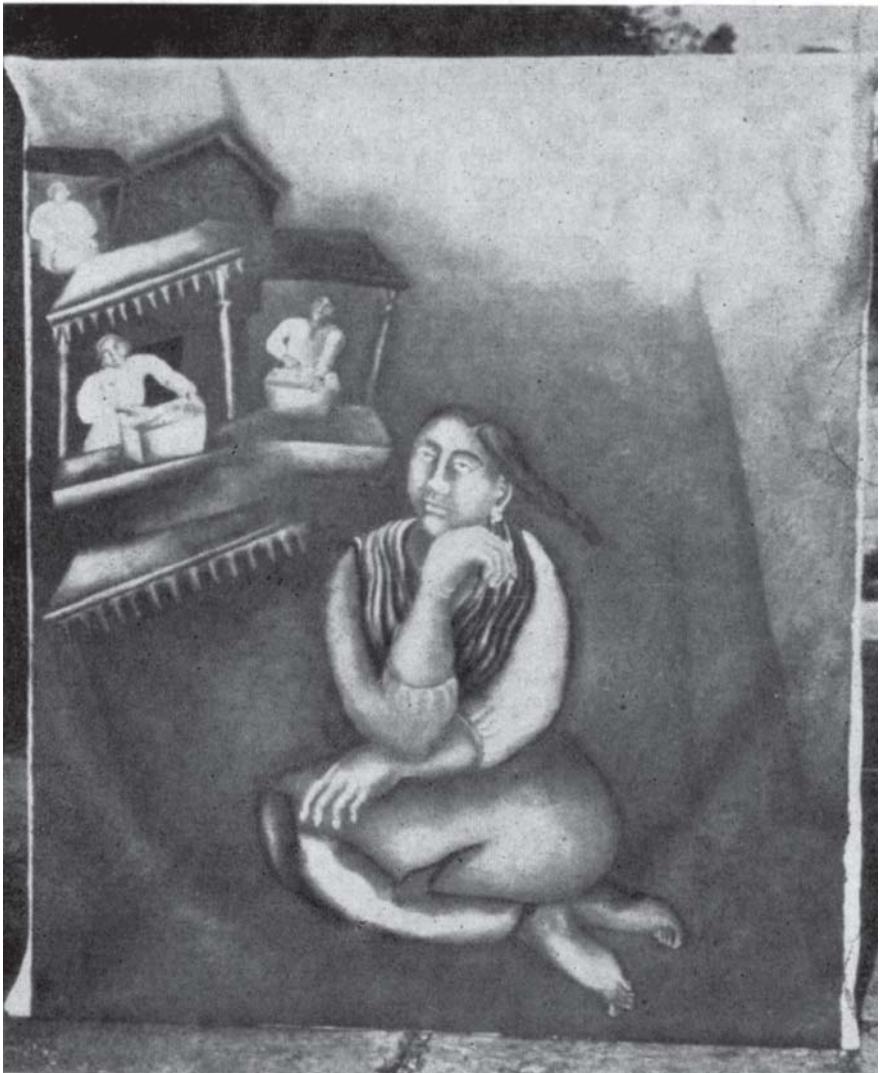
It was at this<sup>^</sup> time that the feeling emerged clearly at some level of my consciousness that since I was a girl, a great portion of life was forbidden to me. Jasbir was a boy so he could do as he pleased.

When Jasbir grew a bit older, he spent the whole day playing with his friends. He went to school like a prince, and when he got home, would drink milk, eat a *parantha* and go out to play. But, in the evening, far from going out, I was forbidden even to lift the blinds and look out of the window at the street below.

In the evening my sole support was the old string bed that lay on the roof. I would lie on it and watch the setting sun and the crows winging their way homeward, and I always felt that I too had to go somewhere in search of my true home, but I could not fly because I was in a cage.

My grandfather was a man of strange habits. He had long ago given up working, closed down his shop in the village, and come to stay with his big doctor son in Lahore. But, though he had no work to do, he was always going out, in his white kurta pajama and loose turban. He found it impossible to sit at home. This annoyed my father greatly. My father was very conscious of the value of time. To listen to the news on the radio was to make good use of time but to listen to songs a waste of time. To read the newspaper was necessary, but to read magazines useless. And to read books was not only useless but a sure road to destruction.

Finally, to render respectable at least a couple of hours' wandering in the evening, my grandfather proposed that he would take the children to Lawrence



Garden or the zoo or to Simla Hill every evening. My father was not particularly pleased with the idea because spending two or three hours on a walk seemed like a waste of time but finally, thinking it might be good for the children's health—being a doctor, he was highly health conscious—he agreed.

These long walks in the evening filled life with an indescribable beauty. The grey roads, gradually eclipsed by the shades of evening, took one by the finger and led one to mysterious places. For the first time, I realised that to be able to walk is a miracle. One springing step after another, and the distance is traversed. From where had this spring

come to my legs, this elasticity to my feet? This was a wonder, a miracle.

I had a great friendship with the animals at the zio. The otter with his rippling, gleaming, brown skin, bathing in the small lake. The giraffe, swaying with pleasure. The monkeys, chimpanzee and apes, munching roasted corn. The lioness and leopardess, lying in a drowsy languor, with their cubs around them. The sweet face of the deer. The pairots, the peacock, the birds.

I even dreamt of these animals. Of caressing the lion cubs, of swinging from the giraffe's neck. Of the ape sitting on my shoulders and passing its fingers through my hair while I doubled up with laughter, saying : "Have a good look. There aren't any lice in my hair." And of

the big crane carrying me in its beak, far, far away, where no one would say to me : "You are a girl, don't go out. You are a girl, don't jump and play around. You are a girl, don't look out of the window. You are a girl, don't talk to anyone."

Today, looking back, it seems to me that merely because a child was a girl, her childhood was snatched from her, her youth was pour-ed into an iron mould so that she could not grow or spread beyond predefined bounds. Just as the feet of Chinese girls were confined in iron shoes to prevent them from growing. Just as people sow the acacia and the fuchsia in small pots, and those trees which would have spread themselves towards the sky, embracing the rising and the setting sun and moon in their branches, sending down roots into the earth, become dwarfed and shrink in the space of pots, so as to become the ornaments of some drawing room.

My mind still wanders in Law-rence garden. Even today, I feel like running barefoot on those velvet lawns.

The footpaths of Simla Hill led straight to some magical land. And, on the way, one met red ladybirds sleeping on each grass blade, bugle shaped flowers which one could pluck and suck honey from, and bushes covered with tiny purple berries and with thorns. But in those days one was not deterred by thorns.

When the walks began, I felt as if I had attained paradise. I had always longed to play with Jasbir but I had felt that he was the prince of the house and I a dirty, unwanted slavegirl, so it was not possible for us to play together. Now, Jasbir and I together examined the wings of butterflies, and swung from the boughs of trees. And, as dusk fell, the glowworms we both had collected would begin to sparkle in the pocket of my frock like so many stars.

In all my life, this was the only time, the evenings of this one year, when I was very close to Jasbir. Before that time, he was an object of envy to me and, after that time, shivering with shame, I hardly

dared look at him.

That was the time when the evening walks were stopped.

That was the first storm in the long season of sadness. So it could be called the first sorrow.

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One day, when we set out from home, I felt that a nail in my shoe was poking me, right under the sole. But I did not say anything, because I knew grandfather would say : "All right, then you stay at home today."

I walked along quietly, enduring a sharp pain with each step. When we reached the end of Nisbet Road, where the statue of Queen Victoria stood, T told grandfather about the nail. He had met an acquaintance on the way and the two of them were walking ahead of us, chatting together. He did not like my inter-rupting their talk and said crossly : "Keep walking quietly. I'll see later on."

At the crossroads, there was a large building, the office of Lakshmi Insurance Company, and at its gate sat a cobbler. I hesitantly said : "Grandfather, ask him to knock the nail into place." But when I received another sharp rebuke, I began to cross the road.

As we neared Simla Hill, I began to feel as if the nail was travelling through my foot and up my leg towards my knee, cutting through the bone. The pain was so sharp that I began to cry. Quietly, at first, then with loud sobs.

But grandfather, oblivious of my tears, continued to stride ahead, talking to his friend, and Jasbir, abandoning me as a crybaby, was running even further ahead, while I dragged myself along behind them.

It never occurred to me that the shoe could be taken off and carried in my hand. Perhaps this was the curse of having been born and bred in the city.

By the time we reached the top of Simla Hill, I was weeping copious-ly, but not aloud, still silently. There was only one person on the peak, taking a stroll. "What's the matter, daughter ?" he asked me. "Why are you crying ?"

"The nail", I said.

"Nail ? What nail ?"

"In my shoe." Still standing, I gestured towards my foot. He took my finger and sat me down on a nearby bench. He opened the laces of my shoe and took it off.

Seeing the wound on my sole, he exclaimed : "Oh my god." Then he picked up a stone lying nearby and began to hammer the nail in.

Grandfather had left off talking to his friend and was now standing about four paces away from me, arms folded behind his back, eye-brows raised, regarding me with displeasure. Jasbir was busy chas-ing a butterfly.

That person hammered in the nail, wrapped my foot with his handkerchief, and then forced my foot back into the shoe. Patting me on the shoulder, he strolled off down the path.

He was such a good soul, quietly compassionate, that I still have a faint memory of his face.

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It was dark by the time we reached home. I was very hungry so I went to the kitchen to get my dinner from grandmother.

Grandmother had just handed me the plate of food when father came storming into the kitchen. With him was grandfather who stood at the door with eyes glowing like a cat's.

Father slapped me violently on the cheek. The plate fell down and smashed to pieces and a sharp edge cut into my leg or knee, I forgot which. All I remem-ber is that while that edge cut into me and a pool of blood spread under my leg, soaking my frock, father continued to shower blows and slaps on my head, my back, my cheeks.

And all the members of the family collected at the door to watch the drama—silent and solemn, as though they were participating in some auspicious religious ritual.

At first, I could not understand what was going on. Then I heard father's roar : "Why did you talk to a strange man ? You just don't behave like a girl at all. I've told you a hundred times not to talk

to any strange man. From tomorrow, you are not to go for walks. You are not to step out of the house."

And that night, I really wished that some miracle might occur, that I might die. In the morning, every-one would look at me and say : "She's dead. Well, that's another problem dealt with. She was only a girl. And she didn't even know how to behave like a girl. Good riddance."

It was after that night that a blind, deaf, black sorrow engulfed my mind. After that, I never walked freely, laughed freely or talked freely to anyone. All the boughs of my spirit were trimmed and the naked stem planted in a pot full of stony soil, ashes and salt where, from a high spreading tree I became a bonsai.

Bonsai—the unique handiwork of parents who give birth to girls.

And the bonsai has no relation

to high, spreading trees. Because it belongs to a different species.

The sorrow of the earth and the restlessness of the skies filled my breast. A strange unease.

And, once again, I took to lying on the loose string bed on the roof and watching the crows flying home-wards at dusk. And my mind kept crying : "Where is my home ?"

(translated from Punjabi by Manushi)

## Report From Ahmedabad

THE national dailies reported the recent riots in Ahmedabad as having originated in stonethrowing at the *rathyatra* on June 9, the implication being that Muslims provoked the violence. However, in all subsequent reporting, they described the riots as a battle between two communities, and did not mention to which community those killed belonged.

Mirai Chatterjee of Self Employed Women's Association (see their report in **Manushi** No. 33 on last year's violence in Ahmedabad) visit-ad **Manushi** office on July 23, and talked about the atmosphere in the city.

She said that there are conflicting reports about who began to throw stones at whom. Eyewitnesses told her that the processionists were fully prepared for a battle, since trucks filled with stones and bricks were part of the *rathyatra* right from the start. Slogans raised by the processionists from the beginning and while passing through Muslim areas included "Victory to Jagan-nath, Kill the Muslims", "Victory to Jagannath, Muslims are thieves."

After passing Dariapur, a predominantly Muslim area, the procession reached a predominantly Hindu area where the violence erupted, and, on subsequent days, spread like wildfire, reaching its climax on July 12, during the *bandh* called by the Hindu Suraksha Samiti. She estimates that

about 95 percent of the victims were Muslims. Muslims were able to offer very little resistance, because the attack was so sudden and vicious that they were unprepared.

The violence assumed new, more barbaric forms—in addition to stabbings, people were burnt to death. The rioters seem to have got this idea from the November 1984 anti Sikh riots. At Meghaninagar, a family of Muslims, most of them women, were burnt to death in their house. At the Civil Hospital, two Muslims, visiting a patient, were hurled from the second floor and then set on fire.

In many middle class areas, Muslim establishments were looted and burnt. At Ashram Road, a posh area, a Muslim hotel was ran-sacked and set alight, right opposite Ellisbridge police station, in broad daylight. Although government had anticipated that violence would erupt at the *rathyatra*, and claimed to have made elaborate security arrangements, the police everywhere played the role of bystanders and made little use of their arms.

Mirai estimates that there are about 10,000 refugees in the five Muslim camps. In the one Hindu refugee camp, there are about 350 people. Many of the Muslim refugees from Asarwa, Meghaninagar, Chamanpura, all Hindu majority areas, have refused to return to their homes. Those who had fled from Bapunagar

when they were threatened and stoned by their upper caste Hindu neighbours from the adjoining Anand flats, said they would return but wanted army protection.

The camps were temporary structures and it was raining. One man asked that the government build permanent structures for the camps since the Muslims were likely to be coming there again and again. An unfortunate development is that middle class and labour colonies in Ahmedabad, and Gujarat towns like Bhuj, which have never before been affected by riots, this time suffered serious violence.

Many refugees reported that their own neighbours had been involved, in the killing and arson. A wave of antiminority feeling of a vicious kind seems to be sweeping the urban areas. The only hopeful sign is that so far no violence has occurred in rural Gujarat, where Hindus and Muslims live in amity. □

As the magazine is being printed, a wave of antiminority violence has hit Delhi, supposedly in reaction against terrorist killings in Punjab. What is most disturbing is that attacks on Sikhs and Muslims in Delhi have, for the first time, occurred simultaneously. Many parts of the city are under curfew. We hope to carry reports in the next issue.