



SEETA'S elder sister, Pyari. Sumitra's older daughter, Pyari. Pyari, a loader in the Ranchi collieries. She is very dark - a tribal. In the village her family are blacksmiths; when they do not get this work, they bring wood from the forest and make beds. Blacksmiths' work included making utensils, agricultural implements, hooks. Ever since trucks have started running, their broken parts can be bought cheaply, and the villagers have even started making swords and shields out of these. But Pyari has come to the mines with her father. They have given up their ancestral occupation. Yet they have all the implements for this work at home. The Ranchi camp can fulfil its own needs and those of its neighbours.

So Pyari and her husband Sheetal both work as labourers. But Sheetal has become addicted to liquor. Queen Mahua has cast her eye on him, and refuses to leave him. He works at the colliery and also trades in liquor brewed at home. Whatever is left over after sales, he drinks himself. He is now so addicted that at dawn, instead of washing out his mouth, he gargles with liquor, and sets out, swaying, to the mines. Pyari completes his quota of work but does not let her man be rebuked.

When he drinks too much and falls down, the other labourers bring him to her and say: "Here, look after your drunkard or he may go down in the pond. Keep an eye on him." With great care, Pyari brings him home and puts him to sleep on the bed. She herself lies down on the ground. After all, how much room

Pyari

by

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is there in the hut? Barely enough for one bed. Pots of *mahua* too are crammed into this space. Pyari cooks, and puts the plate before him, saying: "Here, eat. Your body is melting away. If you do not eat, the liquor will cut into your stomach. Take some care of yourself. I don't ask you to work. I'll do the work. But you might take some care of your body." If Sheetal is in his senses, he even holds his ears and does sit-ups before Pyari.

But as soon as Pyari goes out on some chore, Sheetal's eyes go to the pot of liquor. However much he may reproach himself, his mind cannot shake off the enchantment. It begins to spin round the pot like a top, and enters the pot like a bee. And once again, he begins to drink.

So Pyari nourishes her husband like a child. She cooks and feeds him. She even fills water for him to bathe. For some reason, as soon as she sets eyes on Sheetal's face, she is overcome by his innocence. Sheetal too cannot live without Pyari. He roams around drunk, but always stays near her. "Just like a calf following its mother."

A union has been formed in the colliery. Pyari too is a member. The mine has been taken away from the Raja Saheb by the Bihar government's receiver. There were plenty of contractors even before. Now there is a regular crowd of them. New shafts are being opened. The wages are very low. The whole family works 12 hours a day yet can barely manage to survive and to send some money home.

Sometimes, a contractor runs away without paying the wages. He sells four to five trucks of coal in a week and then takes off. The labourers are left at a loose

end. They are forced to borrow a week's ration on credit from another contractor and work for him, while the loan mounts. At dawn, Pyari eats some stale rice and, taking some in a utensil, sets out to work with her drunkard Sheetal. Sheetal drinks liquor instead of water before setting out.

Sheetal has also begun to gamble. He wants to buy a red bordered *sari* for Pyari, but is unable to get the money together. So he started off playing cards. One day he will make such a big win that he will buy not one but two *saris* for his Pyari.

Pyari's sisters Seeta and Sarsatia are leaders in the union, but Pyari is afraid lest their boldness should result in the contractor throwing her out of the job. When their first son was born, Sheetal stood the whole camp to liquor. The boy resembles him. Pyari thought that once a child was born Sheetal would reform. But he did not change at all.

Sheetal's distant relative, Phagu, has also arrived to work along with them. Phagu is in Pyari's work team. Pyari's father is the head of the team. He collects everyone's wages, and distributes them at night. When the contractor comes to hand over the wages, he sits on a string bed in Pyari's father's camp. As the head's daughter, Pyari is respected. But she has begun to realise that the wages are not distributed according to law, that the attendance is not recorded. She has no evidence of her employment.

She goes to union meetings and when she puts her son to sleep at night, she murmurs slogans as she pats him: "Write down my name. Write down my identification. Write down my salary. Write down who I am." She walks ahead

in processions and shouts slogans. Sheetal too does not forget to shout slogans, even though swaying with intoxication.

Ever since Phagu has arrived, Sheetal spends his time with him. Sheetal has made him his brother. The two have completed the rituals of brotherhood and have sworn mutual loyalty in the presence of the community. A brother is above the relation of son to parent or husband to wife. The two of them have gone and offered water to the goddess Chhinmasta. They have fallen at one another's feet and on one another's necks.

Phagu addresses Pyari as his sister-in-law. They joke with one another too. But Pyari is now relieved of one responsibility. Phagu now takes care of Sheetal, both in the house and outside. All Pyari has to do is feed him and put him to sleep. To toil of course is her work. The mines are now government owned. Pyari's name is on record. She has got a card. Phagu too has a card but Sheetal did not get a card. He is now totally dependent on liquor, and on gambling.

Pyari's younger sister, Sarsatia the

leader, too did not get a job. Her fight continues. Pyari too is fighting. Pyari says to the manager: "We will not go down deeper than 500 feet. If you insist, we will dump the coals or mud and stones wherever 500 feet end. If you stand there, sir, we will dump them on your head."

"Your tongue has really started wagging, Pyari. You never used to open your mouth before, where have you learnt all this?"

"The stomach teaches, *babu*. Our Gupta mother has said that we are not to lift coals for more than 50 feet and mud or stones for more than 100 feet without a lead lift. And we won't carry it up an incline of more than 10 feet. Look, we climb slopes of 40 feet, we walk distances of 500 feet with loads. That is why we earn such low wages. Under the contractor, the rates were low but the work was less heavy. Since the mines have been taken over by government, the rates have increased but the accounting is wrong. All of your reading and writing leads to our being cheated. You say 'The labourers are cheats, and don't work properly.' But that's not true, *babu*."

Pyari wonders what kind of labourer would not want to work. Surely they haven't come so far from home in order to hang around idling. She's having a hard time at home. Liquor is now being brewed in every second house. Sheetal's trade is not doing well. The labourers who have not got cards work on construction sites or brew liquor from *mahua* in the season, or mix spirit to make liquor.

At first, Amir Khan and Guptaji of the union used to go out to stop the brewing. The labourers would drop the cards and liquor and run when they saw them coming. But they say necessity is the mother of invention. People began to go into the forest to brew liquor and to gamble. After nationalisation, a liquor shop has opened in Kedla. Liquor reigns all around. There are now several unions instead of one. The wages too are higher. On wage day there is plenty of drinking and gambling. The police have begun to occasionally make a raid in order to claim their share.

Today, Sheetal did not earn anything because the police raided the market and confiscated his brewing materials. They





gave him a couple of blows with a stick too. Fortunately, Phagu helped him run away. Otherwise, they would have had to go all the way to Ramgarh to free him from the excise department, and would have had to pay Rs 500 as a bribe.

That night, Sheetal began to gamble with Phagu. He refused to stop. He even lost his hut by staking it. When he lost his trunk, Phagu got up. But Sheetal caught him by the hand and made him sit down. What should he stake now? He had nothing left. All the neighbours gathered to watch the game. The women were busy cooking.

Without hesitation, Sheetal staked Pyari. Phagu tried to stop him, but other men incited him. Some turned away and sniggered. When Phagu hesitated, Sheetal said: "My words have weight, brother. You will see what your brother is made of. He will lose everything but will not lose his word." Sheetal lost Pyari too. The onlookers slunk away. Phagu got up and went away without claiming his rights.

Sheetal got up quietly. Pyari was sitting outside, talking. "Get up Pyari, I'm leaving, from today you are Phagu's wife. I have lost you, you can keep the child too. I'll find a place for myself." Pyari thought he was drunk and joking. She

said: "Am I your land or property that you should stake me? Or am I a vegetable to be sold? Just because you say so, will I make Phagu my husband? This cannot be."

Phagu who had followed, anticipating trouble, said: "Forget it, Sheetal, such things keep happening. How can I keep your wife? It was just a game. Treat it as a joke. And go get some sleep."

Sheetal grew angry. "It is a question of my word, brother. Pyari, you will have to go with him."

"I won't go", she screamed.

The whole camp, including women and children, gathered and began to curse Sheetal. Pyari's father brought a scythe. "I'll kill the wretch here and now, daring to stake my daughter." Pyari quieted her father, and took Sheetal indoors.

Sheetal used to like Pyari's nose very much. When he felt affectionate, he would pinch her nose and she would squeal and jerk it away. Sheetal thought: "It is this nose of which she is proud. She dares disobey me." He touched Pyari's nose as if he were catching hold of a hen's head. Pyari cast him a loving glance and shut the door.

At midnight, a scream rose from Pyari's hut. People came running. Someone slunk silently out of the hut. Pyari was

screaming, covering her face with her hand. A hand soaked in blood. "O god, what wretch has attacked my daughter?" screamed Pyari's mother, Sumitra, "He has cut off her nose, my daughter's parrotlike nose."

Everyone realised that this was Sheetal's doing. He had quietly left the camp. Everyone advised reporting to the police. But Pyari refused. She said: "That which was in my fate has taken place." People were eager to pursue Sheetal. She knew he would be caught. With great difficulty, she stopped her father. Phagu, considering himself guilty, was standing by, dumbstruck. Slowly, he came forward. "Don't despair, sister-in-law. Let's go to Ranchi hospital. I'll get you a second nose. I will suffer the punishment, in place of my brother." Before falling unconscious from pain, Pyari looked at him with doubt-filled eyes, as if she no longer trusted men. Phagu took her to Ranchi.

Pyari has returned home. Phagu had taken her to Bombay and got her a second nose. Sheetal never returned. Nor did he go to his village. Now Pyari lives with Phagu. Both of them work in the colliery. The oldest son has grown up. Phagu too has a son and a daughter now, but a hatred of men has taken root in Pyari's mind. She now spends most of her time on union work.

After all, Sheetal had thought her merely a piece of goods. She earns, and works as hard, in fact harder, than men do. Who was Sheetal then to stake her? She often argues with herself thus. She lives with Phagu because he served her with devotion in her days of distress, even performing the most menial tasks. But he too is a man. He can change anytime. So now she does not give all her earnings to the man. She keeps the money herself and gives him pocket money. She has become a union leader. The labourers respect her. She is not willing to surrender herself fully on the basis of trust. She has learnt to weigh and judge.

(translated from Hindi by *Manushi*)