

# To Survive and Prevail

Mishkaben

HE first noticed her at the Ramera worksite. Ramera is at the junction of the Shamlaji highway where the village roads from Kalanpur and Naya Savera meet the bypass. The *zilla parishad* had sanctioned road-building for three kilometers here, and Vepari found out that he could clean out a neat Rs three lakh profit in under two months. So he got Kalabhai, his *mukadam*, to arrange for labour from the neighbouring villages — *adivasi*, all of them — and within two weeks they had a workforce of about a hundred, mostly women, tearing at the soft red earth and piling it high by the roadside. Vepari liked *adivasi* women. They worked hard during the day, and they were sexually available at night. He was well contented.

“Who is that one, Kalabhai?” Vepari asked the *mukadam* nonchalantly. “Which one, *saab*?” The *mukadam* spat a big blob of *paan* and followed the pointing finger. “Oh, she? She’s new, *saab*. Shall I find out?”

“Yeah, you tell me later.” Vepari walked away, but the image of the *adivasi* woman bending and raising her *tagara*, her arms glistening with sweat, her feet and face red with dust, stayed indelibly in his mind. Her eyes were dull and opaque. He noticed that, especially. “She doesn’t give anything away,” he thought.

Ramanlal had brought two steam-rollers instead of the three they needed. When he saw Vepari he winked and said, “*Kem*, Arvindbhai, we are becoming late or what?” He laughed a little. “Come on, *yaar*. I am having chicken and damn good *mowra*. You having?” Vepari walked towards the tent where they usually had their midday meal. Salu, Ramanlal’s bearer, salaamed him and got a couple of glasses ready. There was much to discuss. So Vepari

forgot all about the women of Ramera until he went to bed that night. Kalabhai was solicitous about his needs. Vepari had a young girl all the three nights he was on site. That night, as he paid her off, and she was about to leave, he asked suddenly, “Who was that woman from Ramera today? The new one. She was wearing a green *ghagro*.”

The girl giggled. The money had made her very happy. Easy to satisfy, these *Dungri Garasiya* wenchies.

“It must be Kamliben, *Sethji* is meaning.”

“Kamliben?”

“Kamliben from Phulera originally, now only she is living in Ramera. No husband she is having.”

“Ah-ha.”

The girl left, and he turned on his side and swiftly fell asleep.

The next morning Vepari sent for Kalabhai. “That woman, what have you found out?” he asked.

Kalabhai smirked. “Her name is Kamliben Ajit Bhagora,” he said conspiratorially, “but her husband Ajit is dying long time. He was mission church helper many many years. But now is dying with four-five children all in Kamliben’s hands only.”

Vepari was curious, “She doesn’t have a man?” It seemed unlikely that a woman in full bloom like Kamli would stay that way for long.

“Sometimes Salaji mukhi is coming. Sometimes Amrut, Ramanlal *saab*’s *mukadam*. Mostly Amrut, I am

thinking.” He leaned forward and whispered, “*Saab* fancy, no problem. Tonight I am doing *bandobast*.”

That night, however, Vepari was not at the Ramera junction. He had two other work gangs further down the highway closer to Himmatnagar. So Ramanlal and he took the jeep and were away for almost the whole day. That night they spent at Himmatnagar, and the next morning Ramanlal took the bus to Mehsana. Vepari drove back to Shamlaji with the money in his strong-box for the *rozgari*. But there were two more stops on the way, so it was about five in the evening when he finally reached Ramera.

The sun was still high in the sky, and everything around was hot and dusty and sweaty. The women had almost finished the day’s work, and were sitting in a line waiting for the *mukadam* to bring his book and hand out the daily wage. Kalabhai and two others, one was the clerk, took the strong box from the jeep, while Vepari went to the tent for some water and hot *cha*.

The heat was overpowering. In another half hour the sun would be down behind the distant hills, and it would be cooler but right now he wanted to jump naked into the shallow *talao* behind. Instead, he slurped the tea and was lost in his thoughts. Then he heard the loud voices.

“... you must give fourteen. Why are we signing for fourteen and you only giving eleven?”

“*Bas*, woman! You keep your

mouth shut! Are you taking what I am giving or no?" Vepari recognised Kalabhai's voice.

"No! No! All we women are wanting fourteen rupees for daily wage!"

More shouting was heard. More hubbub. A woman's scream. A man's curses. More women were shouting and screaming.

Vepari put the tea down and stepped out of the tent. The word went around swiftly, "Patel *saab*. Kalabhai *chor chhe!*"

The men and the women were talking all at once. Vepari saw that Kalabhai and his two assistants were overwhelmed at the small table they were sitting at. He also noticed that in the forefront of the shouting was the woman he had been asking about earlier. Kamli.

"Kalabhai, what's the problem?" Vepari barked.

"*Saab*," Kamli and two other women opened up immediately, "this *mukadam* is giving only eleven rupees only when we are always getting fourteen rupees only *rozgari*. You say, *Saab*."

Damn. This had never happened before. These bloody women did not know how to count, and the three rupee difference always went into his pocket. Besides, Vepari had made it a practice that only the men collected the money which the women earned, and, of course, the men would always keep quiet. Like that they were sure of getting their cut each time the relief work project came around. There was always more labour than one could contract for, and keeping your mouth shut was one way to make

sure that your village was always given preference the next time Kalabhai came around recruiting.

Vepari tried to wangle his way through. "What Kalabhai is giving is correct is fourteen," he began. He glossed over the eleven rupees that Kalabhai was actually handing out.

"No, *saab!* said the foremost woman. "That is eleven rupees, not fourteen".

The woman called Kamli turned



those dull eyes at him and said, "*Saab*, we are knowing how to count. Why you are cheating us?"

At this one of the men raised his hand to strike her. "Why are you calling *saab* a cheat?!" he exclaimed, but before his hand could fall, Kamli had deftly turned her body away, and then raised her fist and glowered at the man. "Manya, bastard! Touch me and see!" Manya glowered back but said nothing.

Vepari bent down and whispered

to Kala, "Give them the full amount today. Then we'll see later". Aloud he said, "Patel *Saab* is not a thief or a cheat. We are paying proper *rozgari* for proper work. You count what Kalabhai is giving now..."

Vepari walked back to the tent muttering angrily under his breath. Damn that woman! I'll fix her, he swore. I'll ban her from the worksite, she and her gang. How many were they? Five? Five ringleaders, eh? "*Saab*, we are knowing how to count. Why you are cheating us?" We'll see about cheating, you bitch. Know how to count, do you! When Kalabhai returned to the tent, Vepari asked him, "How did that happen?"

"What to say, *Saab?* This Kamli only is telling all the others that Ramanlal *Saab* is paying fourteen rupees, and near Sunokh, also other *thekedars* are paying fourteen rupees so why Veparisaab is giving less, eh?"

"Damn woman", Vepari spluttered, "Fix her!"

Kalabhai drew a long breath. "Not so easy, boss. Many women are liking her and Amrutbhai is keeping her like this," he made an obscene gesture, " - so it is not that simple, *saab*."

"Get her off the worksite, she and her gang. That'll show her."

Kalabhai whistled, and Manya came to the door of the tent. "*Su saab?*"

"*Saab* not wanting Kamli and Shakri and Phuli and Bitu to work here anymore, got it?"

Manya nodded, eager to please. "I don't want to see them around. Get rid of them!" Vepari added fiercely.

Manya nodded, and withdrew.

Kalabhai pulled out a bottle of new *mowra*, and produced two glasses. "What to say, *Saab*. *Naseeb naseeb*". He poured out two liberal draughts, and downed his without pause. Vepari drank slowly and asked, "Tell me more about this Kamliben".

Kalabhai began, "I not knowing her so well as her husband, Ajit Bhagora who was *kamgar* at mission church at Kalanpur. Ajitbhai is having many things in hand, like permission for big-big money for building wall, well and what-not. Kamliben also is helping here-there, and she too is getting small-small money here-there."

"Who says so"?

Kalabhai smiled, "What for you be asking, *saab*. These things everyone is knowing. You want *pukka* wall around field and you want Ajitbhai to give money, so you get Kamliben on your side, and you give small-small, heh-heh, but sometimes not so small-small, eh!"

He poured himself another glass of *mowra*, and continued. "This Ajit is doing well as mission *kamgar*, but he is having seven children, two of first wife and five of Kamli, so there is need of much money, eh, what you say? So Kamli is also getting money in her pocket and *rotlo* in her mouth, eh! And more, she is also getting women together and with much talking and working and sitting, and like this only women are becoming more bolder and more loudly talking even in front of men, what you say, eh *Saab!*"

So Kamli was a rabble rouser too.

Kala carried on. "So this Kamli is become big one in Ramera-Kalanpur-Savera. She is getting all

adivasi women, both Chrissan and Hindu, on her side only, and they are forming *Stri Sanghatan* and even getting milk cooperative in their own village, what you say, eh *saab*? Us men are only looking-looking, and these women are doing-doing!"

Vepari poured himself another drink. Some character, this Kamli. "Then Ajit, her husband, died, two years, no, three years back. No, No... must be at least six years at least. And Kamli is only working-working because *rotlo* is not so easy to make, and there is big-big *jhagda* over their field,



and the children are growing big-big and going here-there, and these days where is anyone to say 'Don't do this!' or 'Don't go there!' so Kamli is thinking how I am to keep my power and control in family and in village with women, and how I am to get *rotlo* in the belly for me and my childrens? And this is why she is taking up with Amrutbhai".

"You mean Ramanlalsaab's *mukadam*?"

"Same one, *Saab*. He is from Nana Samera, *Saab*, and it was on the

road here only that they are meeting, and taking liking one for the other. And she is bringing *mowra* for him and cooking a chicken, and they are sleeping together in her own house, and she is going with him on his cycle in front of all in the village, I'm telling you".

"She is his *hok*, you are saying -"

"Not so, *Saab*, because Amrutbhai is not so rich that he can keep *hok*, nor because his first wife Saviben already given him two sons, so what for he wants *hok*, all his family against. But this Kamli has got hook in Amrutbhai's heart, and he is spending money for her, and she is giving him damn good fucking of this I am sure —"

"How are you so sure, Kalabhai?"

"Because, *Saab*", he grinned self-consciously, and as he was in his fourth glass, the words tumbled out without shyness, "Last month when Amrutbhai is gone to Imatnagar with Ramanlalsaab I too am tasting Kamliben quick-quick like, and such damn good fucks I am getting no stopping that woman, eh, what you say! But she is also asking good money, eh *Saab*, good money".

So this was Kamli's story, according to Kalabhai. This was the woman he had seen two days ago on the worksite, and whom Kala had promised to get for him. He had noticed her eyes that day, and yesterday he realised that the defiance of the women centred around her.

I'll fuck her and break her, he resolved.

It was already getting on towards night. The drinking had made him sleepy. He dismissed Kalabhai and turned in, and fell asleep almost immediately; and though he awoke once briefly around midnight and felt

a woman's body close on the mattress, he was too drunk to take her, and snored on and on until the late morning.

When Vepari awoke the sunlight was streaming in through the tent, and the distant sound of voices merged with the faint tic-tic-tic of pick-axes which could be heard from afar. The work had begun early. Because of the heat the tribals preferred to start early and take a long break during the hot afternoon, and then resume again in the early evening. The events of the last night came tumbling through his memory. He looked at his watch. A quarter past nine in the morning.

Time to get started, he thought. There were things he wanted to get done today.

But life is what happens while we make other plans. That day Kalabhai was killed when the steamroller accidentally crushed him on the roadside. There was a police investigation, but no one was blamed because it had clearly been an accident. Nevertheless Vepari had to leave the Ramera project and attend to many other business details, and so the thought of Kamli and of the *adivasi* women was completely driven from his mind. It would have remained that way until months later, except for a chance visit to Idar, where Ramanlal was engaged in some building construction. As Vepari had come to the worksite, Ramanlal described how difficult it was to get labour and that he had to import *adivasis* from Sabarkantha, and even from Rajasthan. A lot depended on the *mukadam*, Ramanlal complained, and Vepari agreed. He told him how he had lost a good *mukadam* in Kalabhai five months back in a stupid accident close to Himatnagar. Yes, he remembered Kalabhai, Ramanlal did. He was glad that his own man Amrut was still

around, and was in fact here itself at Idar. The name Amrut rang a bell, and Vepari asked for him.

A dark man with a pock-marked face came up. He recognised Vepari and broke into a smile, "*Salaam, Saab,*" he said.

"*Kem, Amrutbhai,*" he replied.

"*Saru, saru,*" he replied, "*Saab* not coming this side any more".

"I am working near Himmatnagar," Vepari replied. "I only came here by chance".

Ramanlal had ordered *cha*, and the *baharwalla* came up from the nearby restaurant with three glasses of tea.

"Tell me, Amrut," Vepari began, "your woman is still with you?"

"Saviben?" he asked.

"No, Kamli. Who was with you in Ramera."

The man smiled. "Of course, *Saab*, she is here. You wanting to..."

"Send her here to me. Now." Vepari said.

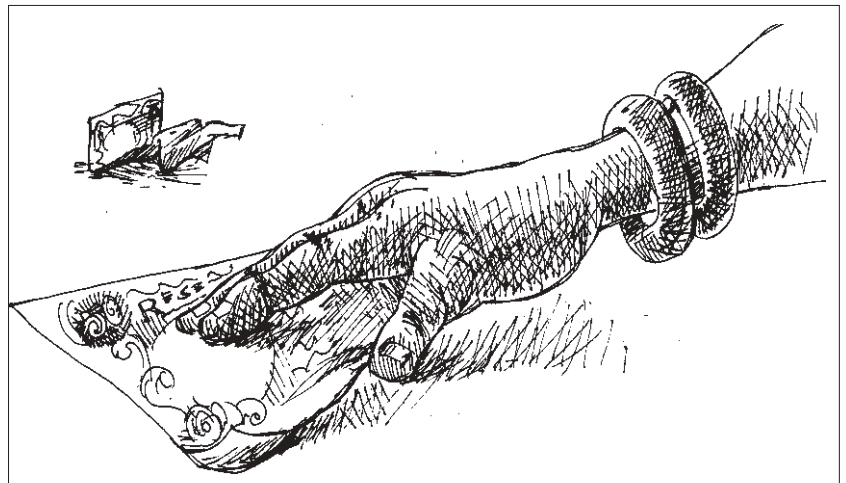
"Now?"

"Yes, I am at this side hotel. You send her for five minutes."

Ramanlal caught his eye and smirked, "A quick one, eh?" but he said nothing. About ten minutes later

Kamli was sent to Vepari's room at the hotel.

She stood there in front of him. and for the first time since Vepari had noticed her six months ago, she had his undivided attention. She was of medium height, as are most *adivasi* women, and was wearing a cheap nylon sari with a blue pattern. Her complexion was light, though there were sunburn stains on her forearms and her face, and her feet were dusty with the mud and cement of the construction site. Her body was full and firm, and sweat had formed little circles under her armpits and below her breasts. As he gazed at her the wild desire to subdue her leapt in Vepari's mind. Perhaps it was the loss of his foreman, whom this woman had contested and challenged the day before he died; perhaps it was just that he felt all tribal women were sluts and one could do with them as one pleased; perhaps it was the primal desire to teach her to submit. Vepari grabbed her by her arm and drew her to himself. The woman did not flinch. Vepari tugged at her sari, and she, with a practised gesture, slid onto the floor, and hiked her skirt upwards, while the man fell clumsily upon her. In five minutes it was over. Vepari struggled to his feet and rearranged his clothes. The woman pleated her sari carefully, and adjusted



her hair, and wiped her mouth against her arm. There was an uneasy silence between them. Vepari fished into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled ten rupee note. He tossed it on the floor.

“Take that,” he muttered. The woman Kamli opened her mouth for the first time, “Ramanlal Saab, he giving always fifty,” she said. She did not stoop to touch the money.

“Fuck off,” Vepari spat, “take what I give and get out.” “I giving good service, you be giving good money.” Kamli said, staring quietly at him without moving. Her eyes were the same. They intrigued and angered him. Again he thought – she doesn’t give anything away. Her gaze was dull and opaque, like windows screened from view. Before that blank stare Vepari suddenly felt unnerved. His desire spent, he suddenly felt unsure of himself. “I said, take that...”

“Saab always giving fifty rupees rozgari. Why you cheating?”

The words had a defiant ring, and Vepari knew he had no alternative. He pulled out another note, fifty rupees this time, and threw it in front of the woman. She bent down and picked it up, still not touching the ten rupees,



smoothened it, and folded it, and then tucked it into her *choli*. Then she looked at the contractor again and said slowly, “You men all alike. You paying to have my body, and you cheating to have my body. You be thinking you have my body and you having everything. You having nothing, and I spit on your money, although I also take it because I need it. But me you will never have — not you, not Ramanlal Saab, not Amrutbhai, no one. No one.” She paused and drew her breath. “When I was young, I trusted you. I trusted even my father. And because I trusted, I almost die. Now I will not die be-

cause I know how to survive. I will survive — me, my children. Because you can do what you want, but you will never touch me!” Kamli turned towards the door, and glanced at Vepari again. Then, before he could say anything, she opened the door and walked into the bright sun. Vepari wished he had said something. But what? He had never spoken to women, only shouted at them. Even in bed, he had nothing to say to women. He only wanted to fuck them. He wondered at this woman who had just spoken to him. What deep and sudden tragedy had blighted her life and drawn those curtains across her eyes? Had she been betrayed? And by whom? When one is a tribal, anything is possible.

He turned fretfully and looked at himself in the mirror over the washbasin. It doesn’t matter now, he consoled himself. It doesn’t matter anymore. After all, she’s just an *adivasi*, and who cares what *adivasi* women feel. He was glad he had shown her. And yet, he wasn’t sure what.

An hour later, he drove back to Himmatnagar. □

(Illustrations by Kaushal Shrivastava)

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