

DIDI, get up fast — Babuji’s calling you on the balcony!” Neetu’s younger sister Chinki shook her arm hard, in a panic. It took a lot of effort to penetrate the deep slumber that had overtaken her. Truly sound sleep — born out of the reassurance she had felt on reaching home unscathed, coupled with her sense of achievement at being able to battle successfully to save herself from harm. Waking in a state of confusion, she sat up on her bed and struggled to open her eyes. The ghastly scene resurrected itself, and each part of her body recoiled from a rancid sense of defilement. As if that weren’t enough, her brain re-mained sluggish and stubbornly out of control. She was about to flop back onto her pillow when her mother’s harsh voice lashed her slack form back to life.

“Neetu, your Babuji is calling you! Out there on the balcony. You can sleep later.”

It had been so hard to fall asleep... “Do I have to go right now?”

she barely murmured. But Amma snapped back, “Do you want me to call an astrologer to suggest an auspicious moment?”

Amma’s behavior seemed very strange, not like her at all. No doubt she had a sharp tongue, but at a time like this, to lose her temper... Just last night, when she had returned home, this very Amma had clutched her in a tight embrace and had broken into a long, agonized wail, like a forlorn cow reunited with her lost calf. She must have thanked God a million times for her safe return. Having lost all hope of getting her back, the whole family had been dumb with grief.

Finding her standing there

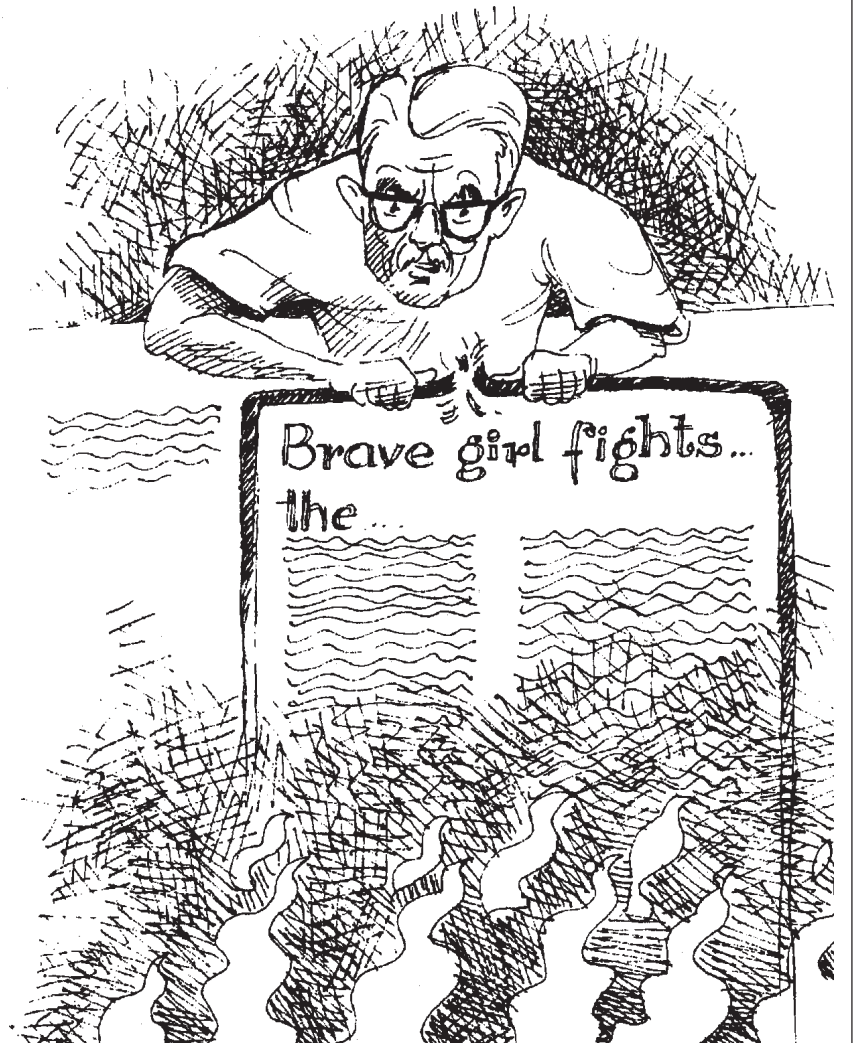
**Pret Yoni - Ghost form which is assumed by the spirit of a young person who dies an unnatural/un-timely death, before there is time to fulfill any of life’s aspirations.*

Prét Yoni

○Chitra Mudgal

suddenly, very much alive, had been such an incredible relief, that in those joyous moments of reunion, no one in the family had remembered to offer even a glass of water to the *Havaldar* and the woman constable who had escorted her back. Dada (elder brother),

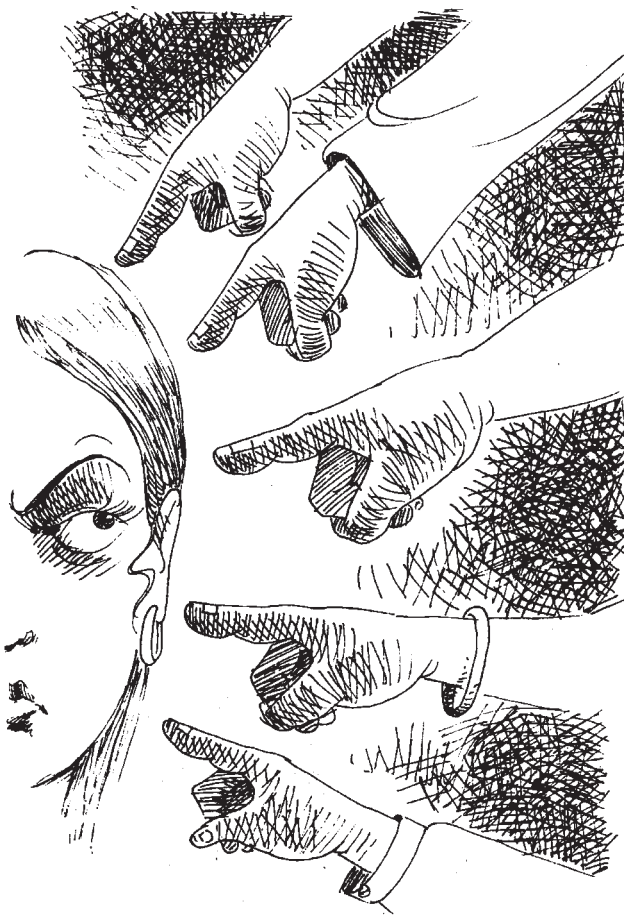
Binnoo (middle brother), Chinki (younger sister), Babuji — virtually all of them had gone crazy with joy. Their jubilation had shaken Neetu to the core. She had felt absolutely enthralled and gratified at this display of affection.



“Wait, I am coming.” Neetu got down from the bed slowly, massaging her injured knee. Her attempt to straighten the leg brought unbearable pain, to her surprise. Last night, when she had fled, frantic, neither of her hurt knees had troubled her with even the slightest hint of pain. Not now though!

Like Amma, Chinki, who stood at the door, also seemed different. She stood aside, witnessing her agony — a mute spectator. Neetu wanted to go to the basin to freshen her eyes with a jet of water, but Amma’s shrill command, like a halter tightening around her neck, pulled her straight to the balcony. It had been turned into an improvised bedroom for Babuji, by enclosing it with long windows. When he was at home, he would relax here, read, or have his afternoon nap.

Right now he was seated on the divan, resting his back against the wall, with the newspaper spread before him. All the other members of the family, except for Chinki and herself, sat around him. Seeing them gathered there like that, their busy morning routine abandoned, made Neetu’s senses prickly. Something had gone wrong somewhere, something which directly or indirectly affected this family. She had already had a foretaste of Chinki’s and Amma’s odd behavior and now Babuji’s taut forehead and Dada’s frown confirmed her fears. The moment he saw her, Babuji pounced on her, growling, “So you’re here at last? Here, take a look at the paper,” he said, folding the newspaper at a particular page, and passing it to her. “Right on top, that box item on the right!”



Taking the newspaper from him, she gazed at the headline and glanced at Babuji inquiringly. “The Exploits of a Brave Girl” — “Yes, that’s it.” Babuji let out a deep sigh. Her sharp-ened eyes speeding over the news item.

“31 August - Mathura. Yesterday afternoon, a severe collision took place, near Gwalior, between the Punjab Mail coming from Bombay and a goods train. It resulted in hundreds of casualties. A B.A.(Hons) final year student of Delhi University, Anita Gupta, who had boarded the train from Bhopal was returning to Delhi in a taxi with some other passengers after receiving first aid. She became the victim of a sexual assault by the taxi driver at an isolated place beyond Mathura, after the other passengers had disembarked. Showing exemplary

courage, Anita fought with him and succeeded in escaping this monster. Mauled and dishevelled, she managed to reach the nearest police post, where she lodged an FIR against the delinquent taxi-driver. The police are making a concerted effort to trace the culprit. Anita returned safely home to her parents in Delhi under police protection. The SHO, Shri R.C. Goyal, was full of praise for this courageous Delhi University student and has exhorted other girls to emulate her example.”

She was impressed by the alacrity of the reporter. And her heart was immediately filled with feelings of joy and increased confidence. The SHO had, indeed, showered praises on her. He had said, “You really are a brave girl! If you could fight that monster all alone, the whole lot of us should at least be able to track

him down. We’ll see to it that he pays for this crime!”

She wanted to ask, “Babuji, why is the whole family so upset instead of being proud?” but before she could open her mouth, the phone started ringing in the drawing room. “Must be Mukta from Bhopal,” Amma muttered to herself, rushing to pick it up. Amma had barely left when something seemed to strike Babuji. He rushed after her and snatched the receiver from her hand* before she could even say “Hello.” Amma looked stunned at this unexpected assault and her face tightened with suppressed anger. However, Babuji’s detached “Hello” reassured her that neither their daughter, Mukta, nor their son-in-law, Ravi, was on the line. “Who is there?... Oh, Dr. Sahib!... What news, Dr.

Sahib?... Oh, that box item? Yes, yes... Like you, I, too, am surprised... The fact is, our Neetu is still at Bhopal with Mukta, our elder daughter. They are celebrating Anshu's birthday on the fourth of September, and they are not allowing her to return without attending it... No, no, this Anita is not our Anita... must be scores of Anita Guptas in the university ... Yes, times are really very bad. education, whatever education you give... Yes, yes, you are right... The girl indeed was very brave... And I agree with you. Official figures themselves speak of 150... at least double the number must be dead... No, I leave the house at about 11:00... Right, Dr. Sahib... Thanks for the good wishes."

His face grew even more tense as he put the receiver back. It seemed as if, swamped by a flood of troublesome thought, he was struggling to reach the shore.

"Listen." He meant to address Amma, but finding everybody standing around, his anxious tone seemed to warn all of them.

"Heard that? Your daughter's bravery is doing the rounds, all over town... That was only Dr. Kanta Babu's call . . . Wait and see, the phone will keep ringing the whole day, minute after minute. People will keep repeating our daughter's wonderful feat to us and rub salt on our wounds while feigning sympathy ... We have no face left to show anyone — especially to our dear relatives...!"

Dada, who was standing there, leaning against the dining table, threw a troubled glance at Babuji, "Those Aligarh people will surely come to hear of it and . . ."

Babuji seemed to find some substance in Dada's apprehensions. "And if they want they can break off

the engagement... Aren't newspapers sold at Aligarh, too?"

Shaking her head, Amma cursed her community as if she weren't one of them: "As if Banias weren't suspicious minded enough already!"

"Stop cursing your caste and listen carefully." Babuji gazed at their faces, his glance alert and penetrating. "Now, from this very moment on... no one is to disclose any knowledge of this news item. . . Whether it's relatives or well



wishers phoning or coming here to the house to sympathise, pretend you don't know anything about it . . . they can make their own assumptions if they like!"

Her head turned dizzy: Was this man her Babuji? A religious, God fearing man, the Babuji she knew was

the kind of person who had shunned false-hood all his life. Where had this coward been hiding, who was shame-lessly concocting tale after tale just to keep safe, to stay within the narrow boundaries of conventional honour and prestige. This man, her Babuji, used to be proud of his daughters, saying they would be the prop in his old age. Now he himself was determined to undermine this support, by turning them weak and helpless. How, then, could they provide him support when he became old? This was the same man who always fought with Amma and said that education is the only dowry I'll give to my daughters. Education alone will make them self-reliant. They'll learn to fight their own battles. After all we will not always be there to protect them and shield them from from harm

Hadn't she fought her battle with all her might? And where had she acquired the confidence to do so, the strength that permeated each pore of her being? Wasn't it from Babuji? And could the truth be concealed like this? Why didn't he cast off this despicable mask, be brave enough to free his real self and face the truth — that the Anita Gupta flashed across the newspaper headlines was none other than his own daughter, Neetu. If Babuji couldn't muster up the courage to face the truth, it would not be his daughter Neetu alone who would lose her confidence, but all other daughters and...

"Munna!" Babuji turned to her older brother, Dada, and like a practised hunter turning his sights on his prey, said in a forceful voice: "Book a demand call for Bhopal right

away. Instruct Ravi or Mukta, whosoever comes on the line ... no one should get the slightest inkling that Neetu is not with them."

Dada called his boss first, to inform him that he would be late for office, because his father had had an attack of bronchial asthma and he would come after taking him to a doctor. "Around twelve, sir. I will definitely reach before lunchtime." Dada was able to act the worried son well enough to convince his boss, who expressed concern. Then he began to dial the Bhopal demand number urgently.

The pain in her injured knee was now unbearable. She felt as if all that was happening, this feverish activity, was like a serpent tightening its coils around her, numbing her limbs with its venom. Rebellion churned within her but she could not give it voice.

When Didi picked up the phone, Babuji explained to her briefly the misfortune that loomed over them which threatened the family honour, and he stressed the do's and don'ts that should be observed to save it. Amma pulled Chinki, who was just at the threshold of adolescence, to a corner of the room and whispered something into her ear, involving her in God knows what conspiracy. But Chinki's childish face looked perplexed, as if she could not fathom the cunning being prematurely forced on her.

Dada caught hold of her middle brother, Binnoo, who stood there confused. "You're not going to play cricket in the neighborhood, understand?" Dada admonished him. "And come straight home from school." Amma assailed Dada's naivete: "School... If Binnoo doesn't go to school for a few days, he's not going to forfeit a collector's post, is he?" She felt like going back to bed again. She needed to sleep desperately but she had barely taken a step when Babuji turned to her and said, "Neetu, you

must act as if you still have not returned to this house — there's no need for you to come out of your room — not even to answer the call bell or the phone. Make the best use of your time, concentrate on your studies, but remain inside your room."

"Correct," Amma agreed, "This has been her complaint all along — that she can't study in peace with all the noise in this house."

"Babuji! I've been absent from school for two days. I'll need a medical certificate now."

"Don't worry; we will get you a medical certificate for a week. You stay put in the house. Someone will have to answer the call bell and attend to the visitors when your Amma has to go to the market."

Her face shrivelled with contempt. All that Chinki ought not to know was being implanted into Chinki's mind, and she was just a helpless onlooker. Neetu could read the emotions flitting on Chinki's face. Chinki's playful innocence was being replaced by a cunning, wolfish alertness. She was basking in the privilege of exercising authority... even if it was on the pretext of keeping a watch on her Didi's movements. Until just the other day, she was being bossed about by Didi, told when she should play, eat, sleep, read, with whom she should play, how and how much she should eat... She had to put up with Didi's dictates all the time. But things have suddenly changed. The dice have turned in her favour now. Authority has slipped into her hands — from Didi's. Maddened, Anita rushed to her room and flung herself on the bed. Burying her throbbing head in the pillow, she burst into tears.

Last night, pressing Neetu deep into her bosom, caressing her face and sobbing, Amma had said, "My little bird! We had almost lost all hope..."

She had gone on and on: "After they saw you off, Mukta called from Bhopal informing us that your bogie number was S-9, Seat No. 32. Your Babuji, impatient as ever, got to the station one hour in advance. The first announcement informed him that the train would arrive an hour late. A second announcement followed saying that there would be another hour's delay. In the absence of definite information, people who had come to the station to receive their relatives became restless and impatient. All sorts of rumours were going around. Some said that a bomb had exploded in the train. Others spoke of an engine breakdown. After nearly an hour and a half, the railway authorities regretfully announced that the train had met with a serious accident and had collided with a goods train near Gwalior. They expressed the fear that there had been hundreds of deaths and cases of serious injury. People started running helter-skelter and your Babuji got into a panic. He just didn't know what to do, how to allay his anxiety. There was no way to reach Gwalior, get to the accident scene and find out what had happened to you. He called Dada up from a shop outside the station. He advised Babuji to come back home since it was no use hanging around there. So he left your description, our address and tele-phone number with the station super-intendent and came home. Fearing the worst, we were in such a state that none of us could swallow a bite of food or even a drop of water. The very thought that our beloved Neetu might have been snatched away in her youth by a cruel destiny wrung our hearts. And why in such a painful manner? This untimely end would surely condemn my flower like child to wander as a ghost in the afterlife..." The tears rolling off Amma's chin onto her dusty, tangled hair had soothed Neetu's bruised psyche.

Later, the police came and told Babuji about the whole episode: how his daughter had stood up to the unexpected assault by the taxi driver and had courageously fought him off. Not only had she managed to escape from him but had been able to get to the police station to file an FIR. "Your daughter is a real Durga." The woman constable's words had filled Babuji with a feeling of great pride.

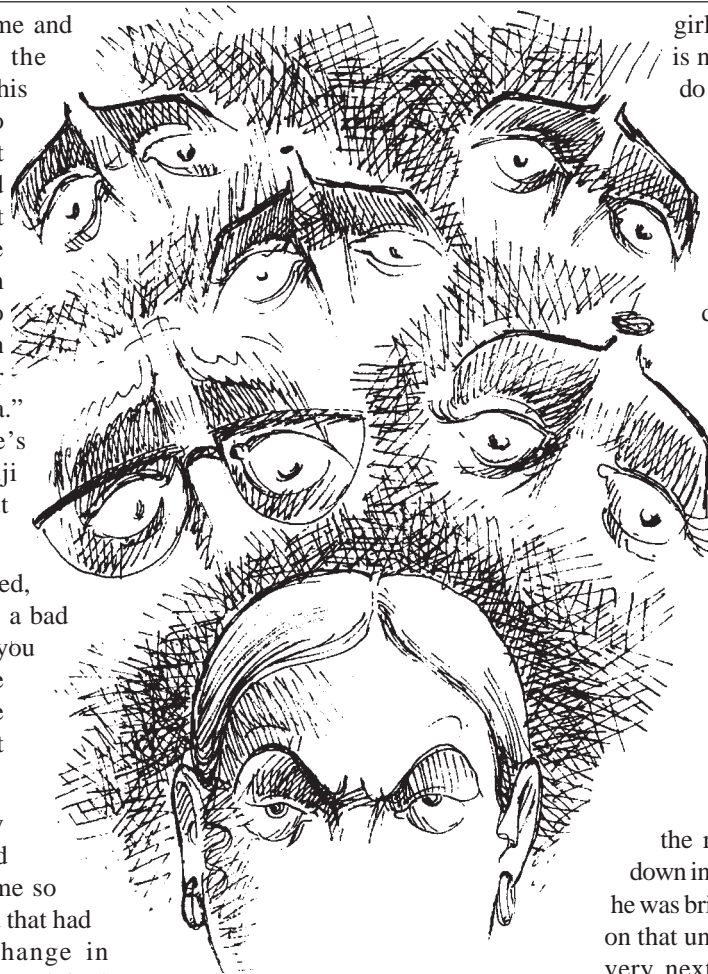
"Forget what happened, child. Just think of it as a bad dream. It's enough that you are alive — safe before our eyes. You've vanquished not one but two *Yamarajas*"

This was the very same Babuji! How could he have suddenly become so insensitive? What was it that had brought about this change in attitude— just reading about it in the paper? Fortitude, grit, determination, courage — all these words became meaning-less. Was it just the fear of public disgrace? She could remember the time when Babuji had stoutly supported the idea of allowing Mukta Didi to take up a job and live alone in Bombay in spite of their relatives' critical comments..

"...Mukta says," Babuji was telling Amma, "Confining her to the house for a week is hardly enough to stop all the talk. She should complete her studies as a private candidate."

"Mukta is really foresighted.

Suppose she discloses the truth to a friend in a confidential mood? Who'll accept her in their house then?"



For some reason their conversation was suddenly disrupted. She could hear Babuji arguing on the phone. Perhaps it was a press reporter who wanted to find out about the whole episode, speak to her. She wanted to lift her head from her pillow, cry out and tell Babuji that she wanted to attend to the call, but she was unable to do so. Suddenly she felt as if her own inner self was about to crack and that she was left with no desire to resist. Poisonous fumes surrounded her; the stench of a gathering conspiracy was beginning to overpower her senses.

She could hear Babuji say angrily, "The student who has given you our telephone number seems to have something against our daughter — the

girl assaulted by the taxi driver is not my daughter Anita. How do I know who that girl is? Sure, why can't you find out? You must! You need something spicy — something sensational — otherwise how will your newspaper sell? My daughter is at Bhopal with her sister. No, she is not here. How can I call her to talk to you? No, she doesn't have a phone. What is there to hide? Once it has appeared in the papers, can anything remain hidden? Look, don't talk to me about progressivism and an enlightened outlook. I am a fully enlightened father.. That's all, I have nothing more to say!"

Babuji didn't simply place the receiver back, he banged it down in a rage. As if it were a hammer he was bringing down with all his force on that unknown reporter's head. The very next moment he shouted out, enraged, "Chinki, remove the plug and put the phone away.... Can't you hear?"

Intimidated by Babuji's angry tone, Chinki ran to disconnect the phone. However, Amma intervened: "Let it be... Your Babuji is not in his right mind." Then she turned to Babuji and tried to reassure him in a gentle, composed tone, "Do you think you can tackle this mountain of trouble with a small pick axe? Since when have you become so childish? Suppose there's an important call for us?"

"Can't you see how many important calls we're getting?" Babuji growled in response to Amma's advice. "While registering the FIR, why couldn't your daughter tell the police:

'This is a matter concerning a girl's honour, her safety, her future. Please keep it a secret' ...and it would have saved us all this worry... this dis-grace.'

"Even the wisest lose their heads in a crisis. It may not have occurred to her..."

"If so many other possibilities could have occurred to her — why didn't our Jhansi ki Rani think of this?"

"Why cry over spilt milk? And do speak a little softly Neetu is not yet asleep. She must be overhearing every-thing in her room."

"You mean I must be afraid of her, muzzle my mouth?" Instead of calming down, Babuji became more furious.

"The tumeric-lime paste is ready," Chinki announced from the kitchen, "The bowl is too hot! Where shall I place it?"

"Carry it on a plate to Didi's room and put it on the table. I'll be there in a moment."

"Why this paste?" Babuji looked curiously at her.

"It's for Neetu's swollen knee. It's badly injured and has gone blue. The slightest touch causes pain."

"If it's a fracture, we will need to consult an orthopedist." Amma seemed worried.

"We'll do that." Babuji didn't show much interest. "If it were a fracture she wouldn't be able to move her leg."

Despite knowing that he was

hemmed in by so many worries, Amma found this indifference distasteful. She was about to turn away without replying when she heard him call out, "Listen," and stopped.

"Listen, I was saying, have you instructed everyone properly? Chinki, Vinnoo, Munna and... Neetu?"

Piqued by the reiteration of what had already been said and done, Amma snapped back, "You have already done that. Is there anything that remains for me to do now?"

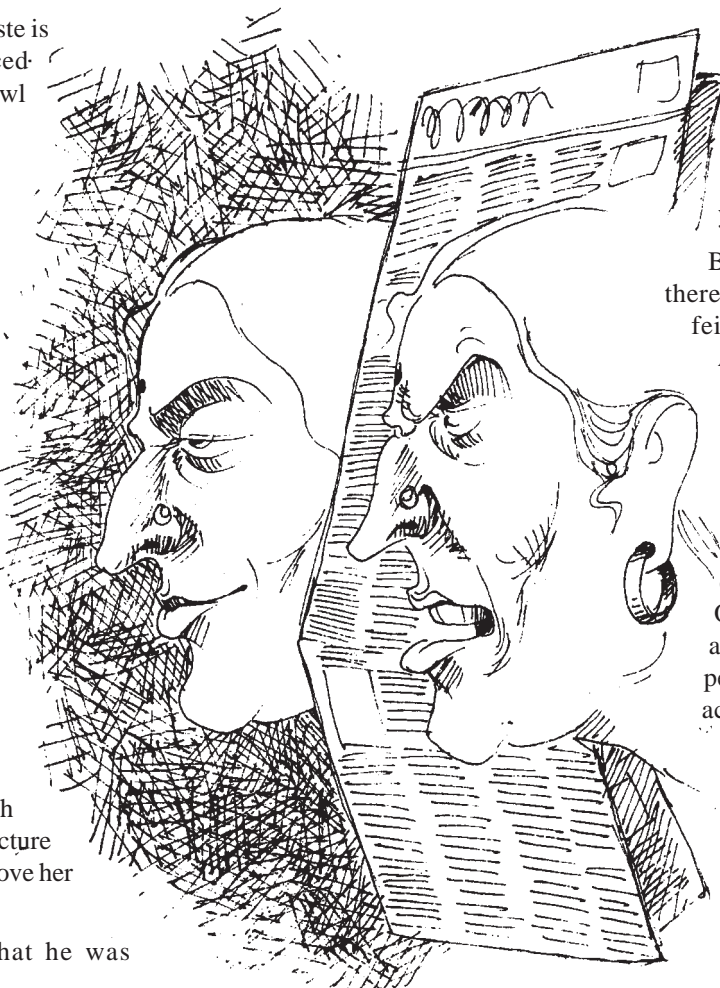
The tumeric-lime paste must have gone cold by now, she thought, hurry-ing out of the room to avoid another "Listen." Standing near him, even for another moment, would have

meant having to listen to all his homilies and saying, "Yes" to every-thing. Could one get rid of worries by going over them again and again?

She put her finger in the bowl to check if the paste was still hot, but it had gone cold. It needed to be hot enough to be just barely tolerable, in order to dissolve the clotted blood. So she took the bowl back to the kitchen and asked Chinki to heat it on the *tawa* once again, and then returned to Anita's room where she sat down quietly at the head of her bed. For a while she ran her fingers through Anita's dishevelled, dust-laden hair as if overcome by feel-ings of motherly affection. When Chinki brought the paste bowl back and put on the bedside table Amma bent low and whispered, "Neetu, can you lie straight on your back? I want to rub this paste on your knee."

But Neetu continued to lie there as if she hadn't heard, feigning sleep. She loved Amma when she was like this. Her affection was like the shade of a spreading banyan tree. When she was with Babuji this wonderful shade seemed to dwindle and wither away. Or was this show of affection an act — a performance by an expert actress?

When Amma repeated her words she turned around to lie straight on her back. But when she tried to straighten her leg, it refused to budge and a spasm of



unbearable pain made her break into a cold sweat. She just barely managed to stop herself from shrieking.

The *salwar* was too tightly-fitted at the ankle to be pulled up over the knee to enable Amma to rub the paste. Amma bent down again and whispered coaxingly, "Pull off your *salwar*, darling. I'll bring my petticoat, you can wear it below your *kurta*" And she got up and brought a clean, freshly laundered petticoat from her cupboard.

Neetu had knotted her *salwar* around her waist like a *lungi*. Then, stung by the worst of apprehensions, Amma asked, "What happened to the string?" Her suspicious eyes gleamed questioningly.

"...It broke."

"Broke...how?"

"While...I was running..."

"Running? Was it knotted...?"

"No..."

"Then...?"

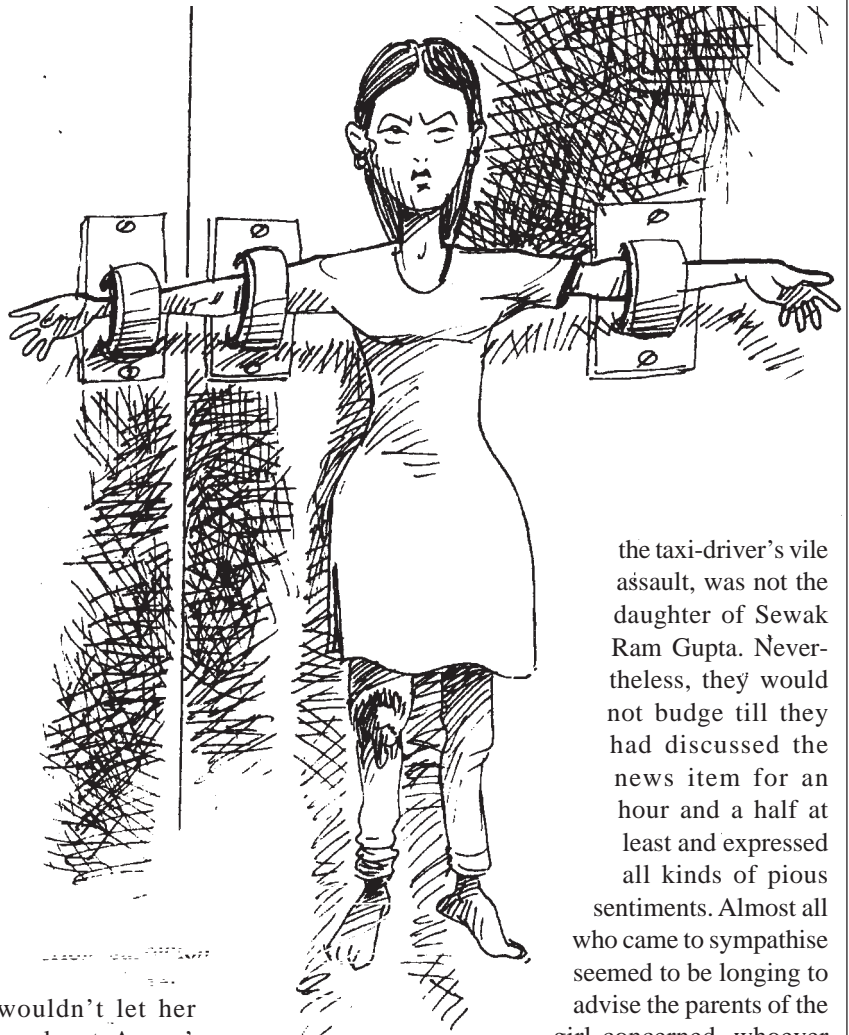
Her dry lips quivered but she couldn't speak.

"Get up," Amma dragged her up roughly. Putting the petticoat around her neck, she pulled it down in the manner of a baby's frock.

She had begun to plaster the paste on her knee when her hand suddenly came to a stop..." When is your period due ...?" she asked.

The wonderful reassurance Amma's affectionate touch had imbued her with, just a few minutes ago, vanished, scattered like a string of pearls broken by a sudden harsh tug...

She wanted to ask Amma what horrible suspicion had prompted her to ask such a question... The monster, despite all his efforts, hadn't succeeded in fulfilling his evil intent...'! fought with all my might' she wanted to say... But the pain in her knee



wouldn't let her speak out. Amma's fingers, rubbing the paste on her joints, had suddenly pressed down too hard.

Three days passed, but she was not permitted to leave her room. Even the drawing room was forbidden to her; she was not permitted to breathe freely even behind barred windows. The reason given was that she should not be seen by the people coming to the house. What Babuji anticipated came true: A stream of well-wishers continued to pour in, some having read about it in the papers, some having heard of it from others. They all came to display their sympathy and provide support. Perhaps it dampened their spirits when they learned that Anita, the victim of

the taxi-driver's vile assault, was not the daughter of Sewak Ram Gupta. Nevertheless, they would not budge till they had discussed the news item for an hour and a half at least and expressed all kinds of pious sentiments. Almost all who came to sympathise seemed to be longing to advise the parents of the girl concerned, whoever

she was, that they should not allow the matter to be hushed up even if the police had been bribed and tried to suppress it. If need be, they should fight the case right up to the Supreme Court and not rest until that monstrous taxi driver was hanged.

She was amazed by Babuji and Amma's skilled performance. With what ease they laughed and joked with the visitors, invited them to sit, to visit again. A couple of times, Amma's deftness really astonished her. When Patel Aunty and Penkar Aunty came to visit, Amma had peeped into her room, on the pretext of fetching water, to warn her of their feline cunning and

had advised her to bolt the door from inside. They were sneaky enough to try and enter her room, using some excuse, and find out what had really happened. However, Amma knew how to handle such unscrupulous women. If questioned, she would say, "My eldest niece has come from Agra for an interview for a job. She is preparing for it and has shut the door to avoid being disturbed."

Perhaps Sushila Auntie had come now. It sounded like her voice. Auntie was talking about some news item concerning her. She quickly unfastened the latch, opened the door slightly and stood there to overhear what was being discussed. She heard Auntie saying: "There is a box item in the afternoon edition of today's *Sandhya Times* about the Delhi University student, Anita Gupta, who was the victim of sexual assault by a criminal minded taxi driver on the night of August 30. Delhi University students, both boys and girls, have decided to stage a demonstration before police headquarters tomorrow at 10 a.m. at ITO, against the failure of the police to apprehend the culprit."

"They're doing the right thing! Absolutely the right thing! One girl by herself, even if she turns into the goddess Durga incarnate, cannot be expected to protect her honour. The whole community should stand by her." This was how Amma reacted to Auntie's information. Neetu could not believe what she was hearing. Such an open display of deceit!

She could feel the silence that had afflicted the whole family after hearing the *Sandhya Times* news.

Maddened, Babuji paced from drawing room to balcony, balcony to drawing room. Noticing his agitation, Amma began to worry about Babuji's

hypertension. "Why don't you go to the market and get some fruit and vegetables?" she urged him. "You need diversion, if you go out you'll feel better." She called out to Binnoo to fetch the khaki bag hanging on the kitchen door.

Babuji stopped suddenly and threw her an unwilling glance.

"And yes, if you happen to come across a roadside newspaper vendor with the *Sandhya Times* don't forget to get a copy..." She said the last words almost in a whisper. "I could ask Binnoo to run and get the paper from Sushila's house. But it might make her suspicious...She might wonder why we are so interested in this piece of news... And then, it takes time to persuade a child!"

Neetu was also wishing that Babuji would go to the vegetable market and bring a copy of the *Sandhya Times*. If Amma had not coaxed Babuji to go, she would definitely have cast off all hesitation and asked him to bring her a copy. She would like to read about the demonstration herself, word for word. She wanted to know who these people were, who also felt injured and humiliated by an act which so dishonoured her womanhood and had chosen not to remain silent, passive onlookers like the members of her own family.

Babuji took the bag from Binnoo and hung it on the back of the chair beside the dining table. Neetu felt that Babuji did not want to go out of the house. Many battles must be raging within him, but she felt he had evaded all of them. Amma was busy in the kitchen, perhaps putting on the milk to heat. Should she ask Babuji to go out? Just like she used to ask before...

Should she herself force the bag into his hand and push him out? It was

quite possible that like before, he might turn and grab both her hands, squeeze them, and with a mischievous smile, he might say, "Oh, you *churail*, why are you pushing me out?... I'm going, I'm going. But now I'm going to take you along, too. Come on, hold the bag."

She tiptoed out of her room towards the drawing room where Babuji was still pacing restlessly. Hearing her footsteps, he started out of his train of thought and turned towards her. The moment he saw her he screamed in a rage, "Why have you come out of your room? Go back to your room!"

She was hardly prepared for this sudden outburst. Stunned, she stood there speechless.

"Haven't you heard me?"

For the first time she mustered the courage to open her mouth, "Babuji! I need today's *Sandhya Times*. Please!"

"So... it means this smoke is not without a fire. It seems you have somehow managed to instigate your fellow students to stage a show to vindicate your self respect and parade our honour in the streets?" Enraged, Babuji lost control and caught hold of her by her arm and dragged her back into the room, without showing the slightest concern about her injured knee. "You seem to be bent on ruining whatever we have managed to retrieve. Not only have you drowned yourself in disgrace but are bent on dragging us along too."

Hearing Babuji's shouts, Amma turned the gas and came rushing into the room in a panic. Instead of asking Babuji to stop, she began to curse Neetu, instead. "What is this drama all about? Neetu! Do you want us to become the laughing stock of the neighborhood?"

The three days of training had probably made Chinki smart enough to catch the message in Amma's sharp glance. She at once rushed to the one or two windows which had inadvertently been left open and shut them to prevent the noise in the house from going beyond the four walls. Anita knew that Chinki wouldn't stop there. She would now pick up Dada's transistor and play it at full volume.

She wanted to weep, but she pressed her face into the pillow with all her strength to choke down her sobs. She felt as if she would die of suffocation. But she did not relent. Happen what may, she wouldn't lift her head from the pillow. It would be better to die than to suffer this humiliation... better to end her life her-self than to die a lingering death like this at their hands.

She caught hold of the pillow from both its ends and squeezed it with all her strength...

The sound of many voices speaking together forced her awake. Darkness had plastered the walls with a suffocating fog. The light emanating from the tubelight in the court yard was trying to creep into the room from behind the swinging curtain, dancing on the floor restlessly like the ropes of a swing.

There was some Doordarshan serial showing on television — perhaps some comedy show. Chinki and Vinnoo's natural, unaffected laughter mingled with the chorus of unreal, recorded laughter on the television. She guessed that everyone in the house was sitting glued to the tele-vision. The light in the kitchen had already been turned off. There was a pin drop silence all around. This could continue for another 10 to 15 minutes. Outside, the court yard had a

sideboard placed along the wall, and Babuji's cordless telephone was lying there. Last winter her brother-in-law, Mukta Didi's husband, had brought it from Singapore for Babuji's use. Babuji had the habit of remaining in the toilet for hours on end; he would even read his morning newspaper there. This cordless phone had been a great convenience. He was now able to attend to the phone calls in the toilet itself.



She wanted to speak to her friend and classmate Namrata. She knew that Namrata had made a number of phone calls but had been fobbed off with the usual lies. Namrata knew very well that she was to return from Bhopal on the 3 Oth of August. She had already written to her about it. She wanted to talk to Namrata and to tell her every-thing, especially her suffocation and confinement within the precincts of her own home. And also that Anita Gupta, victim of that taxi-driver, was none other than her own best friend, Neetu.

Stealthily, she walked up to the show case and picked up the cordless phone and started to dial Namrata's

number. The bell started ringing at the other end. Perhaps it was Namrata's Aunty who picked up the phone. Just as she was about to speak and ask her to call Namrata, someone came from behind and snatched the phone from her hands. Confused and frightened she saw Dada standing behind her. He glared at her like a watchful jailer and asked, "Whom were you trying to phone?"

"Don't I have the liberty to phone anyone?" she revolted inwardly. "Do I now need your permission to breath and move?" Her body shook in dumb rebellion but the words stopped short at her lips, which merely quivered pitifully. What had gone wrngng with her? What was happening to her? Why couldn't she speak?

Dada told Binnoo to take the phone away and keep it in his room. Then he turned to Babuji and scolded him for his negligence in leaving the phone on the sideboard.

Meanwhile, in a bid to boost her morale, Amma asked her coaxingly, "Come and sit with the others in the drawing room and watch the T.V. news. Chinki will lay dinner on the table in the meantime." When Babuji cast aquestioning glance at Amma, she said, "If anyone turns up by chance at this late hour, I'll send her to my room at once."

Anita jerked Amma's hand off her shoulder, resting there in an expression of false sympathy and walked into the darkness of her room.

Her thwarted rebellion caused endless tears to flow from her eyes.

As usual, Amma followed her to her bed and caressed her hair, strok-ing and patting her head.

"Be brave, *beta*. One can only survive hard times with courage.

Everything we are doing is for your own good."

She could hear Dada in the court-yard, commenting on her mental state in English. "She has almost lost her balance, it seems!"

She wanted to pull Amma's fingers out of her hair, and break them just as she would break the tip of a sharpened pencil. Amma's touch had revealed a falseness — it could not communicate with her body any more — nor any longer convey those silent feelings which meant so much. She couldn't believe there would be a time when Amma would touch her and she would lie there, wooden, unable to hide her face in her lap.

"Dinner is ready, Amma! Dada and Babuji are already at the table," Chinki announced, peering into the room.

"Tell them to start — and listen," suddenly Amma's tone became

mysterious, I have kept that *kada* down there in the steel bowl, right beside the cooking range. Pour it in the tumbler and bring it quickly here for Didi. It is to be given to her before her meals."

"I'm bringing it now." Chinki hurried to the kitchen to fetch the tumbler, telling Babuji, Dada and Vinnoo to go ahead with their meal.

"Neetu! Listen! You have to take this *kada* before your meals." Amma put her hand behind her head to make her get up.

"*Kada!* What kind of *kada*!"

Pangs of hunger churned in her stomach.

"You go, Chinki." Amma took the tumbler from Chinki's hand and muttered: "This *kada* will make you get your period, whatever happens...Now drink it quietly."

She glanced at Amma. The yellow light in the room seemed to touch her shrivelled face, add a reddish tinge.

"What are you thinking? I'm not giving you poison to drink." Amma's mask of composure began to slip.

"Why don't you give me poison straight off and end all this...!"

"Neetu!"

"Did you even care to ask me what actually happened?"

"Do you think a man will ever spare a woman already in his clutches?"

"If I had been in his clutches! Have I ever lied to you?"

"Whether you have or not — what's the harm in drinking this? It's just boiled herbs."

"It means that you don't trust me.."

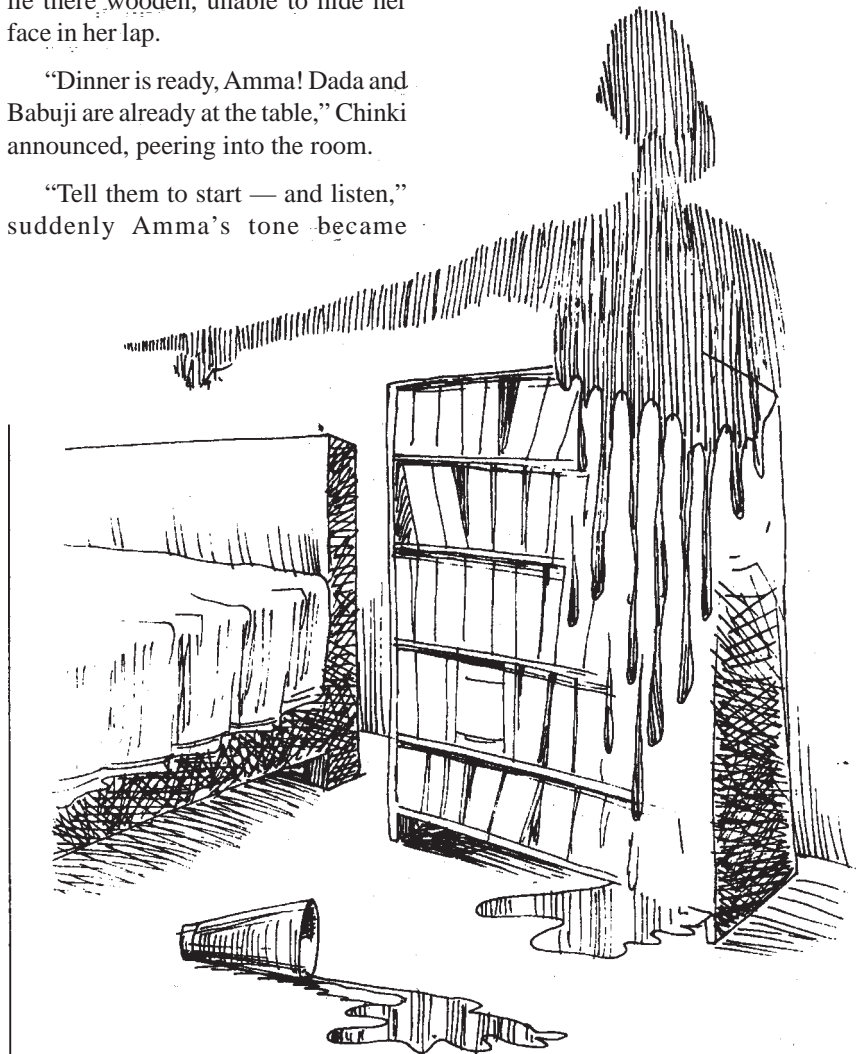
"All right, I don't. Drink it quietly."

"No!" she turned stubborn now.

"You will have to!" In a fit of rage Amma grabbed her hair ruthlessly in her fist and tried to force the contents of the tumbler down her throat with the other hand.

In retaliation she pushed Amma aside with all her strength. The tumbler slipped out of her hand and hit the book shelf at the foot of the bed. Its brownish-green liquid left bizarre, grotesque figures on the wall and started dripping on the floor from the bookshelf.

Infuriated, Amma lost all self control. She pounced on Anita like a



wild cat and caught hold of her hair again and began to slap her on the face. Anita struggled to free herself from this unexpected assault. She tried to stop Amma from hitting her by catching hold of her hands, but Amma seemed to be out of her mind. The fact that she had tried to stop her added fuel to the fire. Clutching her by the hair, Amma dragged her off the bed and began to kick her with all her might. She might have kicked and beaten her unconscious if Dada and Binnoo had not intervened.

“It would have been better if you had been among those 150 passengers who died.” Seething with rage Amma left the room, cursing her.

She had been able to escape a rapist’s attack without suffering any harm. But how would she escape the five rapists present in her own home, intent on violating her mind? How could she battle these double-faced monsters who were now revealing their true colours? If the home which was her strength, her support and her refuge was turning on her, destroying her — using the norms of society as an excuse — how could she bear to live?

Love, affection, good wishes ~ these were all false words. Just a means to express one’s own self-centered obsessions. What they called living, the life they wanted her to lead meant allowing herself to be constrained at every step subject to their conditions and demands tightening around her like a noose. It was not just a week’s imprisonment she faced. It was a whole life mortgaged to them — to be spent shut up in a dark, narrow tunnel. Would she be able to live like that?

With what cunning had Amma and Babuji been able to implant their destructive, thoughtless beliefs in Binnoo’s and Chinki’s malleable minds.



It didn’t take much to turn them against her. When they look at her now — it’s like an accusing finger pointing at a criminal.

She suddenly recalled a scene she had witnessed at her aunt’s village, Birbhum at the Chamra Tol — the leather worker’s colony. It battered at her with mocking insistence. Six or seven men with spears in their hands had surrounded a hog they themselves had nurtured, preparing to slaughter it. The hog squealed pitifully and then ran for its life, ran...and ran...

No...self destruction was far better than surrendering her self to them...

The whole house lay sound asleep. She rose, cautiously bolted the door and picked up one of Amma’s nylon saris which lay folded up on top of a box. Skillfully she prepared a strong noose. She placed a *moorah* on the bed, tied one end of the sari to the ceiling fan, then pulled at it again and again to test its strength...This was the only path that remained...todeliverance. She would not leave a note giving reasons. Dada’s hand-writing was just like hers. They would be free to choose reasons for her suicide — anything they wished to say, to save face.

She climbed on to the *moorah*. She was about to place the noose around her neck when suddenly that box item in the *Sandhya Times* flashed before her eyes, the news item she had not seen. That tomorrow morning at ten, students from Delhi University were planning a demonstration in front of the Police Commissioner’s office, a peaceful protest against the delay in apprehending the taxi driver who molested Anita Gupta, a fellow student.

Tomorrow...the very same students would read about her suicide in the paper. They would feel insulted and betrayed, feel that they had been fighting for a lost cause. They would see her as a girl so weak and cowardly that she had accepted defeat, even before the battle began.

She continued to stand on the *moorah* as moments passed — reading and re-reading that unseen news item...And a decision began to sprout, to grow in that womb of uncertainty— her mind. She could fight with one— why not five? She was not alone any more!

She removed the noose from her neck and jumped up again and again to open the knot she had tied on the fan, as if engaged in playing some kind of game. She removed Amma’s sari, put everything back in its place. Freed from her burden, relaxed and confident now, she went and lay in bed. Sleep pressed on her lids with a strange, intoxicating insistence.

She’d be there tomorrow morning at the Police Headquarters at the I.T.O. for the demonstration — united with others of her generation. □

**Translated from the Hindi by
Shardena Sharma and
Deepa Agarwal**

(Illustrations by Kaushal Srivastava)