

THEY happened to meet at the Manikarnika Ghat.

Vishwas was thoroughly disgusted. To begin with, he did not believe in rituals. Then the fact that he had had to leave his wife behind added to his irritation. During the journey, he had been subjected to the ordeal of eating all kinds of food. He had thought that things would be better here. But he was wrong. It had been decided that they would have their meals at the house of the family priest. Vishwas did not relish the idea at all.

Looking disdainfully at the devoted mass of humanity surging around, Vishwas pressed his handkerchief to his eyes which smarted with the smoke rising from the funeral pyres. He thought it was shameful that anyone should bathe in dirty water and in the presence of so many people. Momentarily, he tried to forget that Janak Rai and Mangala were his parents.

“What blind faith, what ignorance!” he thought. The scorching heat of the sun and his having been without food since morning only added to the nausea he felt at the incessant clamour of people that grew louder every minute.

“*Yajman Raja ki jai ho!*” A priest came forward to put a mark of sandal paste on his forehead. Vishwas had an impulse to slap the brahman’s face. Somehow, he managed to restrain his hand and looked sternly at the priest. Unperturbed by the look, the brahman asked: “Babuji, where will you stay?”

“In hell”, Vishwas hissed and turned away. His mother, Mangala, was still nowhere to be seen. For quite some time, Vishwas stood there, turning a deaf ear to the continuous chatter of the brahman. But he could stand it no longer.

Janak Rai had gone back to the rest house after instructing Vishwas to escort Mangala back. For all one knew, he might have settled down to have his meal. Vishwas was hungry and that very thought annoyed him.

What was the world coming to? Here he was, letting his work suffer in order to accompany his parents on this pilgrimage. But neither of them showed the slightest gratitude. Any other mother would surely have cooked a hot meal for her son even if they had been camping

SHORT STORY

DHIRUBEN PATEL

The Revelation

somewhere for a couple of days. But his mother did not seem to have time for anyone except her gods and goddesses!

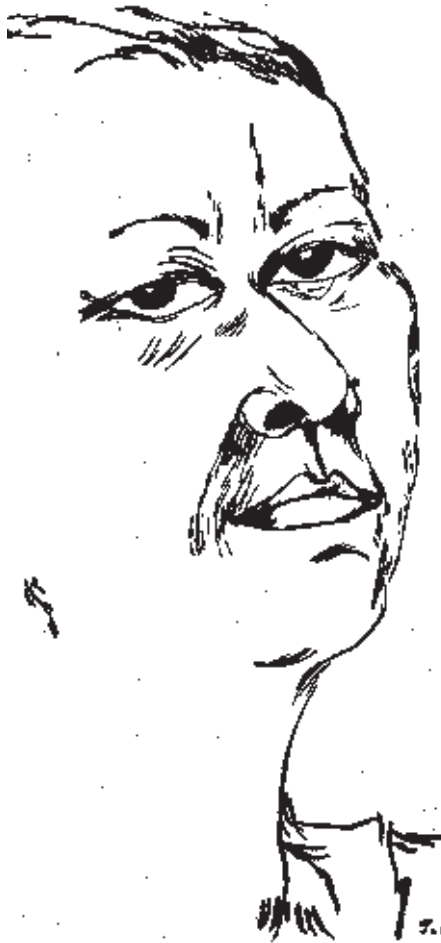
His father was no better. Why could not he order Mangala to cook for them at least once if not twice a day? As a

matter of fact, his mother should wash his clothes. How could he go about in such dirty and crumpled clothes?

Time stood still. Only the heat kept increasing, Vishwas almost fainted with hunger and thirst. He was even tired of thinking what he would say to his mother should she appear that very moment. Many of the pilgrims had already bathed and left the Ghat. The brahmans too were preparing to leave after picking up their *chaddars* and sandal paste bowls. Still there was no sign of his mother.

Suddenly, a thought struck Vishwas. After all, this was a place of pilgrimage. Suppose she had lost her way? This sea of humanity — and it was the first time she had left the security of her home and stepped out. Vishwas felt a pang of fear. He burst into sweat. In sheer panic, he cut through the crowd and started looking for his mother. She could not talk in Hindi or give anyone her full name and address. She did not know who the priest was, to whose house she had to go! As these thoughts came to his mind, Vishwas panicked all the more.

The moment Vishwas spotted a woman in a grey sari, he turned in that direction. But either the lady would be too fat or too thin or would be talking in too loud a voice. No one had ever heard his mother talk loudly. At home she stayed engrossed in her household duties—cooking food, hunting for somebody’s lost things and quietly



listening with bowed head to anyone who chose to talk to her in a raised voice. First, it had been her in-laws, later her husband and now her son and daughter-in-law.

Vishwas could not recollect any occasion when she had done anything to satisfy her own wish or had contradicted anyone. Whenever she spoke, which she rarely did, her eyes would be lowered and her face would register no emotion. After Vishwas grew up, he had convinced himself that his mother had no personality of her own. She would always remain the way she had been. What would have happened to her without someone to guide her? Pride welled up within him when, in comparison, he thought of his wife, and he felt happy.

He had never found it improper that since his childhood, he had dominated his mother. Even today, as he searched for her amidst these unfamiliar surroundings in an alien city, the thought uppermost in his mind was that of giving her a good scolding the moment he found her.

Honestly, she did not have any sense of time. After all, how long could it take to finish her holy bath and climb those few steps? Probably she was sitting with brahmins performing some *puja*. But how long could that take? Such a long time was enough to wash away the sins of 17 generations. And—there she was!

Right beside a brahmin's colourful umbrella, two women were standing, each with a hand on the other's shoulder, engaged in what seemed to be a very interesting conversation. For a split second, Vishwas hesitated.

Surely that woman in a grey sari could not be his mother. But there was no doubt she was his mother.

Vishwas was enraged. He rushed in that direction. As he walked, he did not bother who dashed against him, who tumbled or who cursed.

When he was close enough to her, he called out: "Mother!" But neither of the women looked at him. Both of them were deeply engrossed in their chat. They were in a *samadhi*, as it were. They were not bothered by the scorched earth or the heat of the sun above. The milling crowds did not irritate them. They were



oblivious to the grim atmosphere of the Manikarnika Ghat, which proclaimed the transient nature of human experience.

The other woman clapped her hands and said: "Do you remember, Mani, that time when you acted the role of a king in a drama and our Yasoda forgot all her lines?"

"*Namdar...Jahanpanah... Namdar ...*" Mangala repeated as if imitating someone. Bent double with laughter, as she recollected her childhood incidents—was that his mother, Mangala? Vishwas stared at her in amazement.

"And Shanti, you were bursting crackers at Diwali and..."

"Oh yes, I remember it very well. Had you not pulled me away in time I would surely have burnt to death."

There seemed to be no end to their chatting. It was as if two adolescent girls who were reliving their loving friendship had blossomed to life after a lapse of several years. Tender joys and infinite wonders of those bygone years were reflected once again on the faces of those middle aged women. Vishwas was flabbergasted as he stood there, listening to them.

After what seemed an eternity, Mangala noticed Vishwas. Almost at once her face froze. She asked nervously: "How long have you been standing here, son?"

"Oh, not very long", Vishwas replied gently.

"It's just that—I met Shanti on the

way. Where has your father gone?"

"He has gone back to the rest house. Shall we go now?"

"Yes, let's go." Guiltily, Mangala began to collect her bundle of clothes.

"Give those clothes to me, mother", Vishwas said. Taking the bundle from her, he turned with a smile to the other woman. He said: "Let me carry your bundle as well."

"Take it, my son. God bless you. How can I expect you to recognise me? Your mother and I played as children."

Played...Did his mother ever play with her friends? Was she ever a little girl? Hundreds of unanswered questions sprang up in Vishwas's mind. Unfamiliar feelings surged in his heart like the colours of a rainbow. In his excitement, he turned to say something to his mother. Both of them were lost in their conversation once again.

"Is this your son, Mani? What's his name?"

"Vishwas."

"It's a nice name. Seems to be a good boy too." They walked a few steps together.

Suddenly, Shanti remarked: "He doesn't resemble Vinayak at all."

Shocked, Vishwas looked at his mother. A dark shadow came over her face. She could barely mumble in a quivering voice: "But, Shanti, don't you know the engagement with him was cancelled and I was married elsewhere?"

An uneasy silence gripped all of them. As if with one stroke the beautiful house of cards had come tumbling down before them. The soap bubble with all its radiant colours had suddenly burst. The steps of the Ghat seemed endless. And the heat of the sun overhead became unbearable.

As they reached the top, Mangala composed herself and said: "Son, please give this *Masi* your father's name and address."

Names and addresses were exchanged. The housewives took leave of each other. But that was only a formality. The real meeting had ended right there on the lowermost step of the Ghat.

(translated from the Gujarati by Bina Bhafcta, in Gujarati Short Stories, edited Sarala Jag Mohan)