



LACHHMA

Mahadevi Varma is one of the major living writers of Hindi literature. Though she is best known as one of the leading exponents of the Chhayavadi trend in twentieth century Hindi poetry, her life and work as an educationist and socially concerned thinker have been as remarkable as her contribution to literature. She is an accomplished prose writer and essayist, who excels in the genre of the pen and ink sketch (rekhachitra). Her sketches poignantly evoke the strength of simple, poor and despised people. This sketch has been translated from Hindi by Manushi.

WITH her old black skirt discoloured by repeated washings, tucked up in a strange manner, her torn and dust stained veil wrapped tightly around her waist, and a large sickle in her hand, Lachhma leapt down onto a heap of grass and leaves that lay below, and burst out laughing. In a mixture of Pahari and Hindi, she said: "Why do you worry about me? Am I a human being like you? I'm an animal! Look at my hands and feet! Look at the work I do!"

I do not know why I am so fond of this young hill woman who overflows with spontaneous laughter. Her suntanned face looks like an unripe apple that has been roasted in the fire. Her liquid eyes beneath their dried lids look as if they are swimming in fathomless depths of unshed tears but are dried on the surface by the sunshine of laughter.

Her teeth are white and even but her lips have turned blue through continual exposure to cold. Her feet are hardened by climbing over rocks day and night, her hands by cutting grass and breaking sticks. Damp mud and cowdung are the only softening agents they know.

Like a pimple on the chest of the mountain, Lachhma's small grass hut stands perched on a rock. Her father's eyes are weak, her mother's hand is broken, while her niece and nephew have

lost their mother to death and their father to asceticism. So Lachhma is the only one strong enough to support these helpless beings. In this wilderness, what work can Lachhma do to keep so many people alive? That is the perennial problem. They have one buffalo, a memorial of better days. Lachhma gathers grass and leaves for it. She does the milking, sets curds and churns whey. In summer, she sows a few potatoes around the hut. But this does not compensate for the lack of grain nor does it solve the problem of clothing.

Saturated with tears, Lachhma's lifestory has now become so heavy that not the most tireless story teller nor the most patient listener is ready to sustain its weight.

Lachhma was married into a village that lies 60 miles distant from the abodes of civilisation. Her in-laws were thriving cultivators with plenty of land and many cows, buffaloes, oxen. Yet amid this abundance, cruel fate displayed its irony. Her husband could not be called mad but his mental development was no greater than that of a child. Parents-in-law may grow fond of a retarded son's intelligent and hard working wife, but to her brothers-in-law she can only seem a nuisance. Her presence necessitates giving the brother a share in the property

and they also have to restrain themselves from laying hands on her.

When all the tortures inflicted on her failed to make Lachhma relinquish her rights, she was beaten so severely that she fell unconscious. Thinking she was dead, they threw her into a pit. It would be hard to describe how she came to consciousness and, though suffering unbearable pain, managed to drag herself across the valley to the next village. Not a word escaped her lips regarding the maltreatment she had suffered because, she thought, talking of it would mean a loss of family honour. Also, how could Lachhma, self respecting as she is, say that she had been beaten up! Her invented story, of having been hurt by a sudden fall from a high rock, bore testimony to a courage that would have been difficult to trace in the brutally true story of having been beaten up.

On the way, for three days, she got nothing to eat. Laughing, Lachhma says: "When I felt very hungry, I would make a ball of yellow mud, put it in my mouth, close my eyes and tell myself: I have eaten a *laddu*, I have eaten a *laddu*." Then I would drink lots of water, and everything would be all right." When her family saw Lachhma thus returned from the mouth of death, they wanted to teach her in-laws a lesson, but she

opposed the idea, and thus managed to avert a Mahabharat.

Sorrow seems to have taken up permanent residence in the shadow of this unfortunate woman. As soon as she reached home, her brother's wife died, leaving behind a little girl and a month old baby boy to be cared for by Lachhma. Her body may be broken with toil, her fate severe, yet Lachhma has a whole and healthy heart, on the strength of which she took up this bittersweet duty. But what did she know of childcare! There was no nursing mother to be found in the vicinity and the baby was not able to drink milk from a vessel. Lachhma had an idea. She managed to beg an empty oil bottle from somebody, and loosely tied a cloth round its mouth, somewhat like the wick of a lamp. With this, she fed the baby watered down buffalo milk. Every bone in Lachhma's body has been enfeebled by the tortures she suffered at her in-laws' place. If she sits still for a while, her spine begins to ache unbearably, and if she remains standing, her knees begin to hurt. Yet, waking by night and toiling by day, she, unaided, fulfilled her sister-in-law's trust. Today, that baby is old enough to follow his aunt around like a pet animal, mutely imitating her every action.

When I first met Lachhma, I thought of taking her to Prayag and educating her there. When I made the proposal, Lachhma merely looked towards her fragile hut, and then bowed her head. In whose care could she leave those beings? At that time, there was a hope that her brother, who had been severely shaken up by his wife's death, might yet return and do his duty but even when that hope proved vain, Lachhma's radiant laughter remained unshadowed by despair. With an unforced smile, she says that in the forest, reading and writing are of no use. Here, one must know how to climb trees, how to pluck leaves and chop wood. When her old parents are no more and the children grow up, why should god keep her in this world any longer? Her next birth will definitely be such as will permit her to stay with me and to study,

without neglecting her duty.

To educate her, I must wait at least until the next birth—if this strange statement did not speak of such dedication to duty and such simple faith in life, how could one help but laugh at Lachhma's peculiar madness?

If friendship is defined as the free exchange of joy and sorrow on a level of equality, then I lack friends. I express my joy not only in art but also in the company of birds and animals, trees and plants. Sharing my gladness with them is fully satisfying to me. As for the expression of sorrow—I do not like to burden another with even a fragment of my sorrow. When someone is happy, I feel a kind of freedom from anxiety with regard to the person so I stay at a distance, and my relationship to the grief

stricken is one of tenderness.

But my primary feeling for Lachhma, with her bramble torn hands, her stone bruised feet and her radiant laughter, is one of respectful friendship. She is not so unstable in her distress nor so light as to think that she requires my support. On many occasions, I have found her far wiser and greater than I am.

Lachhma too, unlike other hill-women, behaves as my equal. She fills the gap between us with her simple sense of equality so I do not have to make any effort to reach her.

She knows that I can eat choice dishes yet she goes out of her way to bring me foodstuffs that are found in the forest. One day, she came running, with some fresh honey in a waxy piece of honeycomb, and insisted that I eat it



at once. I am not fond of sweet things, and the sight of honey always calls up a vision of bees that takes away my appetite, but for Lachhma's satisfaction I had to taste it.

Many people there keep bees and trade in honey, but Lachhma cannot buy a wooden hive for bees nor are the walls of her house so built as to accommodate bees. When I asked, she told me that one wall of the hut had split open. Lachhma wanted to rear bees in the crack. But why should bees consider it worth their while to come there? Tired of waiting for them, Lachma began to catch bees and transport them to the crack. Several times, they stung her and her hands swelled up; several times they rejected the narrow crack as a dwelling and flew away. Finally, some generous bees obliged Lachhma by settling there. It was the first honey from their hive that she had brought me.

Similarly, one day, when I was leaving, she wandered far and wide to get a bunch of black grapes as a parting gift for me. When the buffalo yields milk, Lachhma comes running with milk in a wooden cup, curd in a leaf cup or butter on a leaf, and, making muddy pictures on the dry floor with her wet feet, she reaches my kitchen and insists that I eat a little. Throughout my student days, I lived in a hostel. When I went home for vacations, my mother used to feed me with special care, but her care always seemed an exception to the rule, so I am not used to such care.

As soon as I completed my studies, I accepted the duty of caring for a number of students so I have not had anyone to insist that I eat. Lachhma's insistence does away with my alleged and imagined adulthood, and carries me back to the easy and natural state of childhood.

She is simple in her motherly love. Irritated by constant interruptions in my work, I one day said to Lachhma: "Next time I come here, I will make a hut on that lonely mountain top and live there, where nobody will be able to disturb me."

Through constantly having to worry about feeding everyone, she has come

to realise that the problem of food is not easily solved and without solving it, no work can be done in this world. Fearing lest I too be beset by this problem in the wilderness, she put forward a proposal that was truly characteristic of her. Lachhma suggests that I go and live on the high mountain top when her two year old buffalo calf turns four and starts giving milk. Then the milk of one buffalo will suffice for the old people and the children, and the milk of the other for me. She will come every day and bring me a seer of milk, a seer of curd, a couple of potatoes, some wood and water. She will not speak a word, she will not even look at me. She will just leave the things at the door and come away. Then, when I have finished writing my fat book and when I get bored with staying alone, I will just have to call out: "Lachhma" and she will immediately come up, and will carry all the stuff down, even the thatched roof of the hut. Having made this weighty proposal, when Lachhma looked at me with a kind of pleading gravity, I was too taken aback to say a word. Solitude and quiet can easily be obtained nor is it difficult to write fat books, but one will look far to find a helper so inexplicably loving and caring as is Lachhma.

Lachhma is not far from the truth when she says that she lacks good fortune, not good understanding.

One day, as she watched me painting a picture of the Himalayas, she suddenly said: "If I had the materials, I would paint the snow exactly as it appears." Jokingly, I asked : "What materials would you want?" With a strange combination of gestures and words, she explained that she wanted a big blue paper and some white and green colours. Then she would climb a very high mountain, spread her blue paper on a flat rock, and sit there all day, drawing the Himalayas, some of them upright as a wall, some spread out like a thatch, and some domed like a temple. The blue paper would be the sky, the white colour for snow and the green for deodar trees. I was amazed at this vast proof of little Lachhma's intelligence. The sight of my struggles to paint a blue

sky on a white paper must have led her to think of a blue paper.

On enquiring, I came to know that Lachhma, though she had never been taught the art, was so fond of drawing flowers and leaves, plants and creepers, that she had covered the walls not only of her own but also of her neighbours' houses with *geru* and rice colours. Her pictures may not hold much meaning but the unskilled labour of the artist's fingers and the lack of means are clearly visible.

In the same way, by watching others, she has learnt some knitting but since she did not have wool and needles, she could not fulfill her desire to knit a sweater for her old father. When others informed me of this reason for her despondency, I got her the materials but I am convinced that she would have run away, leaving them behind, had the question of protecting her father from cold not been involved. She has a great deal of affection for me but she would never think of making affection the means of fulfilling even the smallest of selfish desires.

In general, the numberless discomforts and varied dears of hill life make selfishness very grossly visible, but I found Lachhma's life exceptional in this regard. I have to look for the tears hidden beneath her natural laughter, and then find out the causes hidden beneath those tears. And finally, Lachhma never fails to render my efforts vain by saying : "Oh, I am just a jungly, what do I need ?"

Lachhma, who is so pure in heart, is forced to remain unclean in outward appearance. Sometimes, she gets annoyed at her own uncleanness and says: "How dirty I am! Don't let me come inside the house. Stop me at the door. See, how the whole house gets spoilt when I come in." These outbursts are addressed to herself, because she immediately starts exonerating herself to me: "I scrubbed my feet and washed them this morning, but when I was half way here, I had to turn back to give grass to the buffalo. I beat my skirt on a stone and washed it yesterday, but the children

wiped their muddy hands on it. Day before yesterday, I washed my veil in the stream and dried it, but I had to tie it round the bundle of grass because the string suddenly snapped."

In some distant past, Lachhma possessed a wooden comb. Ever since it got lost, she does her hair by washing it in the stream and then pulling out the more matted parts. The gift of an old black comb was a great event in her life. Having tucked it in her waistband along with her knife, she used to perform her toilet in the forest, with the aid of mountain rivulets. Her strange happiness in being able to do her hair could not but bring tears to one's eyes.

What name should one give to the misfortune of a woman for whom such a petty object is a rarity, even in the twentieth century with its countless unprecedented beauty aids ?

Once, the other women told me that Lachhma was in the habit of burning incense and wishing ill on their children. When I asked her, she said that she wished ill not on children but on the eyes of certain people. There is an old motheaten picture of Durga in her house. Morning and evening, she puts some lighted coals and some perfumed dry leaves before it, and prays that the eyes of those who look on her with evil intention may be burnt to ashes.

I did not find it easy to explain to her the truth that purity cannot be protected by wishing ill on anyone's eyes, because the test of true purity is that the most impure vision is cleansed by contact with it, but Lachhma had no difficulty in understanding the subtlety of what I was trying to say. Ever since, she prays only for well being—her own as well as that of others.

This daughter of the mountains is as determined as she is fearless. Just as she finds her way through the darkest night with the help of her sickle, so also she stands resolute and unmoved in the face of the fiercest opposition.

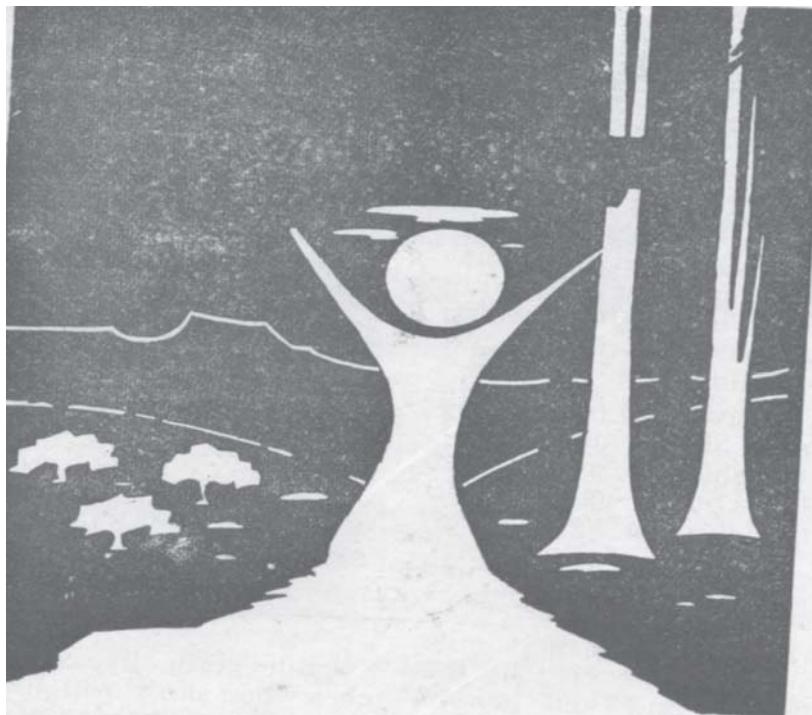
Some years ago, some of her in-laws' relatives got the news that she was alive, so they brought her unknowing

husband along, and asked Lachhma to go back with them. She requested her child like husband to hand over everything to his brothers and to stay with her. She would sleep in the buffalo's shelter but she would provide a clean hut for him. Even if she had to lie on dirty, ill smelling grass, she would procure a string bed from the villagers for him. Even if she went hungry, she would labour night and day to provide food for him. She told him that since she was married to him, she was willing to stay with him, all her life long. But she was not willing to go to his house because his people would kill her, and her parents, nephew and niece would, in any case,

rise up to take revenge on the women concerned, but even after seeing clear evidence of cruel injustice done to a woman, all women are ready to add to her unjustified punishment.

Thus a woman who does not solicit male help at every step, is put in a strange position. As she moves beyond their reach, men get increasingly exasperated, and their exasperation usually expresses itself in false accusations. This is natural, because we find satisfaction in proving our possession of that which we cannot possess, whereas we feel no need to declare our hold over that which we have.

Is it surprising if they who are



die of hunger.

Her husband's relatives refused to leave him there, because they did not have confidence in the good faith of this magical woman who had risen from the grave. A wave of discontent with Lachhma's behaviour swept through the surrounding areas, and she became the target of all kinds of gossip. The psychology of society is the same in the hills as it is in the plains.

If they so much as imagine that injustice is being done to a man, all men

standing upright but keep hearing proclamations of their having fallen down, begin to consider the effort of standing up futile ? Until a woman becomes strong enough to stay unperturbed by false accusations, her situation remains insecure.

I saw in Lachhma the strength to stay unperturbed and also the generosity to forgive her accusers. Neither does she demean herself by criticising others nor does she diminish her self confidence by justifying herself.

Her mind, like a mirror, is evidence of its own purity. Once, while a certain gentleman was sitting in my house and enumerating to me her various imaginary faults, she was standing outside the door and making faces at him, like a small child.

Even when the wickedest men in the village are spoken of, she only says in her simple way : "Apne aap rakega" (He himself will be). In the vocabulary she has framed, this means — let be, he will reap as he sows.

When respectable people pass Lachhma by on the road as if they see no difference between her and the buffalo she is grazing, this does not anger her. She justifies their behaviour, saying : "I am not like a human being. They are very good. How can they talk to me ? You talk to me— that is not very good. But you talk nicely to me, that is why I don't leave you alone." (*ham lumko gherte hain*) It is not easy to grasp all the implications of Lachhma's broken sentences, but one can understand that she has no place for ill feeling towards any one in her heart which has shrunk into itself at the thought of her own smallness.

The day I leave is a painful day for Lachhma. She comes running to see me after she has milked the buffalo. She comes again after filling water and once again after feeding the children. As my packing proceeds, each joint in her body seems to shrink and shrivel.

She always walks the first mile with me. When we reach the second milestone and I tell her to go back, she stands, looking lost, wiping her eyes, and watches me go on.

Hill paths are not broad and straight like our roads. They turn and twist; sometimes a tree blocks the way, sometimes a rock. Long after she has disappeared from view, I hear her tearful voice calling after me: "Go carefully, come back soon, all right."

These days, Lachhma does not have to face the prospect of starvation. The apple orchards are heavy with fruit. The unripe and sour apples lying

beneath the trees wither or rot there, so no one is forbidden to gather them. These days, Lachhma sits down under any tree and eats half or three quarter seer of sour, inedible apples. Then she works two days without eating anything.

she were literate she could write me letters, Lachhma, with strange gestures, says in her broken language: "I write in my own way. I sit on a rock and think I have written this, I have written that, that should not have been written. When I think that the letter



But gradually, winter approaches when snow will lie three feet deep like a burden of sorrow on earth's heart, when people will sit around the fire at home, telling old stories after a new fashion, when the rich and the poor will live on their stored up grain and will mock at nature's cruel game; when some animals will be sent to the warmer villages below while others will be secured in their shelters and fed dry grass. What then will Lachhma do with the disabled old people, the small children and the unsheltered animals?

It is true and yet not true that I get no news of her. When I tell her that if

has been sent, then I get up happily and cut grass or chop wood. All that I write — does it not reach you?"

Who can help laughing at the idea of a letter written without paper, ink, pen or alphabet and sent without the help of a post office?

But when, suddenly, in winter, I am seized by the desire to leave my warm room and go to those mountains lying buried in snow, when, in summer, I disregard all the fashionable, beautiful hill resorts in my eagerness to reach that silent, anguished corner of the mountains, who can say that I do not receive illiterate Lachhma's letters? □