

S. R. Harnot's
Cats Talk

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Edited by

Khem Raj Sharma and Meenakshi F. Paul

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Dedicated to Elizabeth Paul

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INTRODUCTION

S. R. Harnot is an eminent Indian writer occupying a coveted place in contemporary Hindi short story writing. His stories derive life from the majestic mountains, cascading rivers, and simple folk of the Himalayan region. Written in dialectal Hindi, his stories bring to life the pulse of the people in their everyday reality. With his keen and evocative powers of description and his dispassionate gaze at the deeply rooted social, cultural and religious milieu, he creates a world where the timeless encounters the exigent. In this regard, his stories have often been placed in the storytelling tradition of Premchand.

Harnot dextrously contextualizes the complex overtones and subtle rhythms of society, and succinctly captures the flow of life in a way that is authentic and aesthetic. His short stories present the little joys and unceasing ironies in the life of Pahari people. His narratives explore the absurdities and incongruities arising from political shenanigans and religious hypocrisies, class and caste discriminations, corruption and unbridled development, and self-centeredness in human relationships. While the mountains, forests, water, land, flora and fauna of the Himalayas are present as melodic resonances in them, his stories bring focus to issues of women, caste, class, nature, ecology, democracy and development as central concerns. Within the framework of Pahari culture, Harnot weaves the changing truths of contemporary times. On the one side, he is agitated by the abrasion of spatial significance in his culture; on the other, he creates characters who strive to realize their full humanity. Thus, even though his stories are embedded in the subsoil of Pahari life, they are not limited to the local but are universal in nature.

Many of Harnot's stories are about social changes that have brought loneliness and sorrow to the hill villages. "Cats Talk", "The Twenty-Foot Bapu Ji", "Ma Reads" and "m.com" narrate the experiences of aging individuals, who live by themselves in homes where their children seldom or never return. Akin to the mountains among which they dwell, they watch the exodus of their children in search of higher education and better livelihoods. For these parents, life alone in the hills is as difficult and tiring as age itself. Yet, all of them are self-respecting and socially aware, resourceful and self-reliant, hardworking and stoic.

Harnot joins the dalit discourse obliquely through the stories, “The Saddle”, “Savarna Devata, Dalit Devata”, “m.com”, “Slur”, and “In the Name of Gods”. These stories deal with characters who are marginalized, deprived, and othered on the basis of caste. He deconstructs the insidious methods through which caste is perpetuated and concurrently delineates the resistance of those who face it. The stories speak for the dignity of all human beings. In them, Harnot strikes a progressive chord and imbues the characterisation of his protagonists with clear strokes of reason and purpose.

This collection includes two stories, “Aabhi” and “The River Has Vanished” which are sensitive explorations of environmental degradation on account of human actions. Harnot is deeply concerned with distorted human sympathies towards the natural world that contribute to ecological imbalance. The very rivers, mountains and forests that gave rise to human civilizations are threatened by them today. Harnot’s stories compel us to think where we have come. Where we are going. Where we will reach. And for how long this can continue. Through a bird, a monkey, a dog, a cow, a river, Harnot minutely explores the retreat of nature in the name of development. In “Aabhi”, the tireless strivings of a bird to keep a temple lake clean come to naught in the face of careless littering by tourists and the ruthless exploitation of the forest by the mafia. “The River Has Vanished” captures the intense tension between the need for development and the age-old ways of life in the mountains. These stories give voice to the idea of preserving ecological spaces of the mountainous region and its people. Location itself becomes a discursive character in these stories.

Harnot often juxtaposes rhythms of nature and the people who live close to them against the disruptive encroachment of modernity, even as he acknowledges the inevitability, and sometimes the desirability, of change in the social and cultural praxes in society. The crux in his worldview is that of keeping balance rather than the negation of one or the other. Harnot’s writings present this aspect of Himachal’s milieu and its culture through the precise apposition of incongruities and the resultant ironies. This narrative strategy heightens the impact of his satire on superstitious, casteist, gender-biased, ageist and fundamentalist tendencies in society. Interestingly, his protagonists, more often than not, succeed in transcending their personal and social problems through determined endeavour and clarity of purpose.

Harnot’s flair for photography equips him with an eye for detail and mounting a scene with deft touches of contrast, interest points and perspective. His description of action and events is almost cinematic and he draws nature’s vignettes with the painter’s palette. He writes in a

deceptively simple and lucid language that allows for an in-depth unfolding of human nature and relationships. Localisms imbue his language with authenticity and a unique charm in the manner of Chinua Achebe. His mastery is on display, particularly, in his characterisation. His protagonists resonate in our sympathies long after we are done reading their stories. Their idiosyncrasies and existential dilemmas almost become part of the reader.

The rich layers of meaning conveyed through a straightforward narrative technique in Harnot pose a delightful challenge for the translators. Local words and syntactical patterns apart, the anachronistic but lived culture of his world together with the deep ingress of the present times into it, test the translators' agility. An adequate translation of many of his stories cannot be wrought without the translators immersing themselves in the complex cultural matrix of his society. Thus, while his characters are universally human, the field of their humanity is particularly specific. This is clearly reflected in the many translations of his texts, which range from close translations, adaptations and transcreations to inter-semiotic migrations.

The various translators in this collection have naturally interpreted the stories severally and translated them according to their own diverse translating practice and belief. Hence, there are varying spellings of Hindi and Pahari words in different stories, for instance, 'devatas/devtas', 'gur/goor' and 'biri/bidi'. Also, there are varied interpretations and descriptions of cultural ideas and concepts, for example, 'chariot/palanquin' for the 'rath' (open palanquin with a canopy) of the devata and priest/oracle/vehicle for the devata's 'gur'. In our view, these variations add to the richness of the narratives and to the reader's holistic reading experience by adding different strokes of nuance and texture.

While striving for the desired balance between the two languages, the translators have almost always given primacy to the original. For example, relational names have been mostly retained, 'Amma' (mother), 'Baba/Bapu/Pita' (father, grandfather, respectful term for an old man), 'Chachu/Kaka' (father's younger brother, respectful term for an older man), 'Chhote Pita' (father's younger brother), 'Badi Ma' (wife of father's older brother). Even so, they have not shied from accepting precedents set by earlier translators which aid fluency, such as following the English rule for making plurals. In Hindi and Pahari, plurals may be synonymous with the singular, e.g. 'neta' (leader or politician) – 'Ek (one) neta', 'Kayi (many) neta'. Or they may be different, e.g. 'bachcha' (child), 'bachche' (children). Plurals also change with the case, e.g. 'sapna' (dream), 'sapne' (dreams), 'sapon ka' (of dreams). In these translations, this complexity

has generally been avoided by accepting the addition of 's', to make plurals, for instance, 'devatas' and 'raths'. The possessive noun has been used in both ways, with an apostrophe 's', 'panch's' and also in consonance with the first language, e.g. Pahari ('of /belonging to' the 'Pahar' i.e., mountains).

For this collection, the earlier versions of the translated stories: "Cats Talk", "The Reddening Tree", "Daarosh", "Saddle", "Savarna Devta, Dalit Devta", "Slur", and "In the Name of Gods", have been reworked by the editors with the consent of the translators. In doing so, the guiding principles have been those of lucidity and accuracy, especially of cultural concepts specific to Himachal.

"Cats Talk" was published in Hindi as "Billiyan Batiyati Hain" in the collection, *Daarosh Tatha Anya Kahaniyan* and has been translated into English by R. K. Shukla and Manjari Tiwari. The story first appeared in the Hindi magazine *Pahal* in 1995; its English translation was published in the Journal, *Indian Literature* in 2013. The story depicts the harsh reality of the outmigration of people from villages to urban areas and reflects on the varied aspects of motherhood. It is the story of an old alienated and long-suffering mother whose world is now peopled by her affectionate domestic animals and her devoted pet cats. The story is a memorable piece for its rare delicacy and profound simplicity.

The Twenty-Foot Bapu Ji, "Bees Foot Ke Bapu Ji", is also part of *Daarosh Tatha Anya Kahaniyan*, and has been translated into English by Meenakshi F. Paul and Khem Raj Sharma. The story talks about the changing father-son relationship. Harnot skilfully juxtaposes the statue of Mahatma Gandhi with the life of old Chachu to portray the abandoning of old values by the younger generation and the compulsions of economy and social prestige that ensnare it. This abandonment is paralleled by the retreat of Chachu from his son's life, which in turn is mirrored by the elevation of Bapu Gandhi's statue from six feet to twenty feet in order to keep it safe from vandalism. This story is a telling and ironical reflection of our society that glorifies its ancient culture but neglects the teachings and negates the bonds.

The Reddening Tree was first published as "Lal Hota Darakht" in the anthology *Akashbel* in 1988. Harnot modified the story and included it in *Daarosh Tatha Anya Kahaniyan* (2001). The story has been translated into English by Meenakshi F. Paul. It is a powerful and moving story, narrated in almost lyrical terms, about a poor farmer family, torn between their dharma and their means. The unprecedented conclusion of the narrative leaves the reader breathless and wonder struck at the denouement, which is both impossible and inevitable. The story was included in Paul's

anthology of translation, *Short Stories of Himachal Pradesh* (2007). The translation of “Lal Hota Darakht” has been reworked by her for the present collection.

“**Daarosh**” is a fine and subtle delineation of an atypical custom of a tribal area in Himachal Pradesh. It first appeared with the same title in the Hindi magazine *Hans* in 1997 and was then published in *Daarosh Tatha Anya Kahaniyan*. The story has been translated into English by Khem Raj Sharma. Daarosh means ‘by force’. A dying custom of that particular area is called “Daarosh dublub” which means marriage by force. The story is about an assertive resistance by an educated village girl against the disempowering patriarchal setup of her society. It captures the eruption of tensions in an ancient society when the light of new knowledge penetrates its strong walls. An upholder of preserving the rich culture of his inheritance, Harnot is also known for going all out in doing away with social evils in the garb of customs and traditions. “Daarosh” posits a counter discourse to these hegemonic forces.

“**The Saddle**” was originally published in Hindi as “Jinkathi” in the literary magazine, *Kathadesh* in 2005 and was again selected for publication in the special issue of *Kathadesh* on “Ten Years One Choice” in 2007. It was included in Harnot’s collection of short stories *Jinkathi Aur Anya Kahaniyan* in 2008. The story was translated into English by R. K. Shukla as “The Saddle” and published in the *Journal of Literature and Aesthetics* in 2008. The story brings out the subtle textures and complexities of ‘Bhunda’, an ancient and terrifying Himachali festival involving human sacrifice. The insidiousness of caste prejudice is represented in this festival. The central role of the scapegoat is assigned in it to a male from a dalit community of the hills, called beda. It is worth mentioning here that the word ‘dalit’ is used in this introduction to convey the limited sense of referring to persons belonging to the diverse range of communities traditionally considered as low caste or untouchable. The chosen dalit man is deviously consecrated as a brahmin only for the purpose of the potentially fatal ritual in which a long rope is tied from the top of a hillock to a point below and the beda has to slide down it. While the ritual may have been a way of propitiating the gods for the high castes, but for the beda it spelled likely death. In the story, Harnot employs ‘Bhunda’, as a narrative device to express his angst engendered by the inscribed hegemony and hypocrisy in the ritual. Saddle becomes the ironic metaphor in the story to convey how, saddled with the risky job of the Bhunda, the dalit protagonist uses it to gain advantage and some form of redressal.

The story, “**m.com**” was published as “Em Dot Com” in *Kathan* (2001) and included in *Jinkathi Aur Anya Kahaniyan*. It has been translated into English by Meenakshi F. Paul. The story is a powerful story about the ironies etched into the transformations wrought by economic development and modern technology in traditional societies. On the one hand, these changes bring about ease and prosperity, on the other, they loosen the ties that keep the community together. Young people are able to find dignified alternatives to traditional caste professions but they also become uncaring of the values of consideration and cooperation. Ma is able to travel on modern transportation but feels helpless and inadequate to deal with the internet-based process of registering cattle. The story strikes a deep nostalgic note for community feeling and innocent bygone times but also accepts the injustices and inequities of those very days. The present is a mixed bag, as indeed are all times.

“**Ma Reads**” was first published as “Ma Padhti Hai” in the leading Hindi magazine *Hans*. It has been translated into English by Ira Raja, and appeared in the literary magazine *Atenea*, in 2004. It was later included in her book, *Grey Areas: An Anthology of Indian Fiction on Ageing* (OUP 2010). It is the story of a writer and his hardworking independent mother. Her son wins accolades in the city but does not share his literary success with his illiterate mother back in the village. Till one fine day, he realises with a pang that he has gifted his books to many people but has never shown even one to his mother. He carries a bundle of his books home only to realise that all along she has quietly been ordering his successive books and carrying them around fondly as she did her innumerable chores. The dramatic turn accentuates his shame which is overwhelmingly and bitterly felt.

“**Savarna Devta, Dalit Devta**” was published in Hindi with the same title in the collection of short stories *Jinkathi Aur Anya Kahaniyan* and has been translated into English by R. K. Shukla and Manjari Tiwari. It records the pain and anguish of a dalit boy, who could not reconcile himself to being subjugated and mistreated on the basis of caste. The inhumanity of the practice of caste pollution perturbs him greatly. He questions the religious traditions that lead to the othering of people lower down the caste hierarchy and concludes that these are part of a conspiracy to keep them in perpetual bondage. He decides to honour the lesser deities standing outside the gate of the temple rather than worship the main devata and his attendant deities inside, who he comes to believe are captives of caste. An act that is simultaneously defiant and inadequate, but which nevertheless augurs the beginning of change towards social equity and dignity.

“Slur” was published as “Kaalikh” in the monthly journal *Himprasth* (2002). It was later included in *Jinkathi Aur Anya Kahaniyan* and has been translated into English by Khem Raj Sharma and Meenakshi F. Paul. It is the story of a bold young dalit widow, Shyama, who has a son born a couple of years after the death of her husband. Her husband had died of insanity caused by his dabbling in witchcraft and thereafter Shyama has managed on her own. In a conspiracy to deny her and her son their rightful share of her husband’s property and to prevent her son from being educated, she is sought to be castigated by the very men who had exploited her physically and financially. Instead, she exposes their hypocrisy and shames them before the whole village council. Her agency shakes the hegemony of the social, political, and cultural setup of her society. Her son cannot lay claim to his father’s name but in the end, there is no cause for him to do so as the name of his mother is sufficient. The epilogue-like ending accentuates the hollow assertion of male supremacy in an already surrendered bastion.

“In the Name of Gods” was first published in *Pahal* in 2006 by the title “Devataon Ke Bahane”. It is also part of *Jinkathi Aur Anya Kahaniyan* and has been translated into English by R. K. Shukla and Manjari Tiwari. It is the story of Som, an educated dalit boy, who wants to rid his area of backwardness and underdevelopment. He devises and executes an intelligent political strategy around the egos and influence of the powers that be to ensure that development finally comes to the area. In the end, Som emerges as the leader of the village and is acknowledged by everyone, irrespective of caste or status. Harnot debunks the casteist notions that dub people of the scheduled castes as incapable and unworthy of high office. Harnot presents education and political voice as effective levellers of the field which enable the disadvantaged to shine and contribute meaningfully to society.

“The River Has Vanished”, “Nadi Ghayab Hai”, was published in the short story collection *Mitti Ke Log*. It has been translated into English by Ravi Nandan Sinha and is part of his anthology of translations, *Great Hindi Short Stories*. A book on Harnot’s environment-based stories has also been edited in Hindi by Usha Rani Rao with the Hindi title (2018). In this story, Harnot exhibits his engagement with environmental issues and promotes the idea of development with conservation. In Himachal, as in all of India, rivers are worshipped and have mythological legends attached to them. In the story, the village boy Teekam senses the conspiracy of the rich and the powerful to tame the river for their benefit, which would deprive the villagers of their livelihoods and lay barren the whole area. He

intelligently uses the faith of the people in the village devata to thwart the construction of a dam on the river.

“**Aabhi**” is taken from Harnot’s latest short story collection *Lytton Block Gir Raha Hai* (2014) and has been translated by Meenakshi F. Paul. It is the story of a bird, locally called Aabhi. Legend has it that the bird keeps a lake by the name of Serolsar in Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh scrupulously clean, not allowing even a twig to remain on the clear waters. In this age of environmental degradation and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, the bird becomes a living symbol of interconnected ecological coexistence. Aabhi and the Mother Snake Goddess, who lives in the temple close by, embody the essentially pantheistic aspects of Pahari culture while also depicting people’s increasing disregard for nature and the divine. Masterful in its description and personification, “Aabhi” is one of the most loved stories of Harnot. Together, these twelve stories provide a representative canvas of Harnot’s oeuvre that we hope will both delight and engage the readers.

Khem Raj Sharma
Meenakshi F. Paul
April, 2018

CATS TALK

BILLIYAN BATIYATI HAIN

Amma's tiffs have begun—with herself, with the match-box, with the earthen lamp, the pieces of cow-dung fuel smouldering in the hearth, and with the cats racing in and out of the house. That's how her day begins. She wakes up at about four in the morning and with her also wake up the cattle in the shed. Birds take their cue from all this and start twittering and chirping in the courtyard. Not to be left behind are the cats who start their racing bouts the moment Amma rises from her bed. Who can say who wakes up first, Amma or the cats!

Many a time Amma quarrels with the dark, her hands measuring its multiple layers. Her hands explore the bed, the pillow but the match-box is nowhere to be found. Sometimes Amma lights her bidi in the night and the match-box drops from her hand and slips under the bed. Half asleep, she takes a few puffs but forgets to pick up the match-box before falling asleep again. When she wakes up in the morning and needs it again, she cannot find it and starts cursing it. After all, she needs it to light the earthen lamp but it takes her a good deal of time to refresh her memory about the match-box lying under the cot. She bends from the bed and moves her fingers over the floor to retrieve it. She manages to find it finally but not before getting fully worked up. Then she straightens up, takes out one matchstick, and tries to light it but to no effect. This works her up even more and she starts cursing the matchstick again.

The dark confuses her and she rubs the wrong end of the matchstick. The matchstick breaks; she takes out another one, strikes it but this one also breaks. She succeeds in her third attempt and lights the half-smoked bidi from last night. She also lights the earthen lamp and the room is flooded with light, thus one matchstick serves two purposes at the same time.

While trying to rise from the bed, she discovers that the cats have stuck their nails in her salwar or kurta. Irritated, she picks up the cats and flings them to the ground. Even when she flings them with considerable force, the cats touch the ground on their feet. Amma believes that God has

blessed the cats that way. They never fall on their backs ... a couple of more curses and that's all,

"Witches, dare again to touch my bed! I'll drain the life out of you two, I will! Rats and rodents play all the night in the room, you two just keep snoring in the soft, warm bed! Now you see what I do to you two!"

And the cats quietly hide themselves in the darkness.

The two cats are mother and daughter, one white and the other black. No one, not even Amma can ever tell as to which of the two is younger. One is called Kali and the other Nikki. They know their names because when called so, they respond immediately.

Many a times Amma pushes them on to the loft above the veranda and shuts the trapdoor, where they remain for long, mewling and growling ceaselessly. But Amma remains unmoved and doesn't open the door. The loft also serves as Amma's granary where she stores the harvested corn-ears and grains. Amma thinks this has two advantages—they dry up easily and secondly there is no fear of the corn-ears rotting. Amma could have left them to dry in the courtyard but then who knows when the gates of heaven would open and the rain-gods send water pouring down? And then there is always the fear of the dust-storms. Alone, how would she gather the corn-ears and bring them in? When she needed grains for grinding, she would take out a few corn-ears, put them in a bag and lash the bag with a thick stick until the grains were completely separated from the cobs. Further ahead in the loft, Amma stores the healthier corn-ears to be used for sowing the new crop.

Amma would never go to the loft in the dark. She is afraid. Even though the movements and smell of the cats keep away reptiles and other harmful insects but who could allay Amma's misapprehensions? Once bitten twice shy. Even today Amma remembers that a black snake had sneaked into the loft through the mud-tiles of the roof. The moment Amma stepped on to the loft it raised its hood and hissed. Amma was back on the veranda in a flash and could hardly breathe for a while. The snake was driven away with great difficulty.

Apart from the corn-ears, Amma keeps many things up there—at the back she has old wool, some bundles, two or three broken lanterns, a few broken umbrellas, empty bottles, old plastic and rubber shoes. On the other side there are eight or ten coils of beul tree fibre and a dowel for twisting it into twine. Neck ropes, halters and muzzles for the cattle are also kept here. She also keeps the bare dried shoots of the beul on the loft. Amma never lights the hearth without these during the winters and monsoons. That is why in the summer itself she ties the green shoots and after they have dried she immerses them in water. When they are ready, with the

help of a few women she beats them till the fibre separates from the shoot. This serves two purposes; she gets the shoots for kindling and the fibre for rope.

The cow mooes as soon as Amma begins to mutter. Even though the cowshed is at some distance from where Amma sleeps, the closeness between the two can be known from their conversations. Amma knows what the cow says or wants from her and reasons with her while lying in bed. Sometimes she also scolds her, 'Don't make so much noise, Chambi. Let me get up at least, I'll attend to you before doing anything else'.

The cow has just calved and knows that Amma would milk her first thing in the morning. Early in the morning, Amma goes into the kitchen to prepare wheat bran for the cow. If bran is not available at the grocer's, Amma has to make do with whatever is left after sieving the flour. Sometimes left-over food from the night before is given to the cow blended with buttermilk and a sprinkling of salt. Amma also carries a leftover roti or two for other animals. She knows that once one of them has started eating, the others would not have the patience to wait.

In Amma's cattle-shed there are other animals also—a pair of bullocks, one baby cow, and two lambs. The cow is tethered to the right side of the door and the baby cow close to its mother. The lambs have their pegs slightly to the other side of the door and some distance away are tethered the bullocks. The bamboo-ladder stands by the wall. Amma uses this ladder to climb to the hayloft. She stores quite a few bundles of dry grass there so that when she falls ill or when the weather turns bad, the cattle do not have to go hungry. She also keeps big conical and round bamboo baskets there.

After milking the cow, Amma comes straight to the kitchen and it's here that Amma's first tiff with the cats begins. Crouching at the door the two cats wait while Amma is milking the cow. The moment Amma steps out into the courtyard with the milk-bucket, the two cats start following her, often getting between her legs and thereby causing her enormous irritation. Amma curses them but the cats simply ignore her words and become even more impatient. They know that they will be the first to taste the milk. Their continuous mewling fills the house. Once in the kitchen, the first thing Amma does is to pour milk in the cats' saucers.

Now Amma lights the fire. When the weather is fine during the summer, Amma makes the fire with a handful of dry grass but during winters or rains she puts the dry beul shoots or cow-dung upley in the

earthen fire-pot and covers them with ash to preserve it from going out. If the upley are insufficient or she feels the fire would not last till the morning, then she presses a few more in the heap of ash. Hardly, if ever, has it happened that Amma's hearth has gone cold. Amma says that in a household the fire should always be alive or it bodes ill for the family.

Amma stokes the fire with the tongs and adds grass or wood to kindle it. She doesn't like to blow into it because it makes her cough. The result is that the whole house is filled with smoke which blackens the walls. Apart from the thick layers of smoke, cobwebs are everywhere on the walls. There's hardly any difference between the blackened and cobweb-filled walls and Amma's face. Amma has also become like the smoke. If one peers long at her face, one would have a feeling that this smoke is not that of the fire-wood or upley but has its source in something smouldering inside her.

Amma knows how to tell time without a clock. There's neither a clock nor a cock around to tell her whether it is evening or morning but it seems that she can hear the changing footsteps of time. She understands fully well when the moon or the stars knock at the doors of the sky. It's child's play for her to tell the time of the day or night. It has become a habit with her to rise at the exact same time in the morning. Sometimes the birds are puzzled as to whether it is they who rise first in the morning or Amma. Birds are chums with Amma and their morning sun descends only in Amma's courtyard. After finishing her morning chores in the cattle-shed and the kitchen, she does not forget to scatter a handful of grains in the courtyard. She keeps a separate store of millets and coarse rice meal from her own share of rations. On the low branches of the trees on both sides of the gate, birds have made their nests and Amma always keeps water-filled pots under these trees for them. This she does especially during the hot weather so that the birds have their full supply of water and do not go thirsty. For this purpose, Amma gets fresh earthen pots every year.

The whole village can hear Amma calling the birds any time of the day. Even when the birds are hovering over her head, she shouts for them to pick up their food once she has thrown the grains in the courtyard: 'Come birdies, come, your food is waiting for you!'

To keep the birds safe from the cats needs special care. Sitting at the door and puffing at her bidi, Amma watches over the birds while they peck at the grains and sees to it that the cats do not scare or pounce on them. Sometimes, to keep the cats busy elsewhere, she goes inside the house and pours milk in the saucers for them.

Strange is Amma's lonely world. She is always busy with someone somewhere. She has invented quite a few things to while away her free, lonely time. Hardly is there any child in the village who has not eaten a piece of jaggery or butter-smeared roti from her hands. Hardly is there a woman who while going to fetch water or collect fire-wood has not stopped in Amma's courtyard for a puff of her bidi. There's not a dog in the village that has not tasted a few crumbs of roti with its quota of swearwords while passing by Amma's door or any bird that has not pecked the grains in her courtyard. Even stray animals would not forget to have a casual peep into her courtyard while passing by her house.

If Amma ever falls ill, then a woman or a girl from the village takes charge of her household chores, fetches water for her, feeds her pets. Even cows and cats do not bother her when she is unwell. The birds take care not to make any noise and let her take full rest. This is also a period of complete cease-fire between Amma and those with whom she has regular tiffs. Quite often Amma catches a cold which causes headaches. Then it's the cow that comes to her help by softly licking her hair and forehead. As for the cats, they either quietly crouch around her or just lick her feet, legs or hands. As for the bird-party, it keeps flying around her as soon as the early morning sun-rays touch the earth. They chirp and sing around her as usual for they also wish to be near her when she is sick or unwell. Only the fear of the cats keeps them from drawing too close to her. Perhaps, it is the collective good wishes of her pets that Amma soon gets well.

It has been four years since her children's father died. Like everyone else, Amma also called him Pita. They had a daughter whom they married off when she was quite young. The son was provided with a good education. Pita insisted that their son must become an officer, or there was no fun in having an only son. So, no effort was spared to have him highly educated. Debts accumulated, a few acres of family land were mortgaged. As soon he completed his college education, he got a job. But the old couple had not foreseen that once their son was exposed to the glamour of city life, he would become a stranger to them. His contact with his soil gradually began to diminish. The gap between the parents and the son kept on widening and one day the couple got the news that he had married a city girl. Now they could not face the people of their village.

After many days the son visited the village with his bride and after spending a few days with them he left. The daughter-in-law did not know the ways and customs of the village and while she was there she felt as if she was in prison. She could not stand the smell of raw earth or the stench of cow-dung. The couple had dreamt that when their daughter-in-law would come, she would take charge of the household and Amma would be

relieved of her daily grind. Crops would grow aplenty, the number of cattle would increase, their prestige in the village would rise, the daughter-in-law would look after the old couple, Amma would spend her time playing with her grandchildren, and the whole house would be abuzz with activity and reverberate with children's laughter. In fact, while the son was in college, his father had contacted many people of his community who had eligible daughters. He had very grand plans for his son's wedding. Wasn't he the only son, he would ask himself. The ceremony would be on such a grand scale that relatives would talk about it for weeks. And did people talk about it for weeks!

Amma recovers very quickly. And with that begins the old routine: the household chores keep her busy as always. Often it happens that people from the village warn her:

"Devru kaki, why do you strain yourself so much? Your son sends five hundred rupees every month and that should be sufficient for you. Now you should take rest."

And Amma readily replies, "Have you ever heard anyone dying of household work? So long as one breathes, one has to move about. And then so much land, so many animals, so many cows and bullocks, how can I leave them to themselves?"

Sometimes the village pradhan or thakur says to her, tauntingly, "Devru, why don't you sell the land? Give away your cows and bullocks because your son and daughter-in-law are not going to come here. What will you achieve by holding on to them? Now you have grown weak and can't even move about easily."

Amma understands their intentions. They have their eyes on her land and house. She replies sharply, "Pradhan ji, I can manage not only these cows and bullocks but even twice as many. The job is a temporary affair. My son has to come back here. And moreover, this is my problem, why should you lose sleep over it? You tend to your own work"

Amma knows fully well that once she is gone, all her property would be grabbed by these greedy people of the village. They would quarrel over it like vultures. Her son is oblivious of these things but the village is, after all, my village, my very own. A job doesn't last forever. One's prestige or social status depends on what one has in one's ancestral village.

When the postman comes to deliver her son's money order, he often sits with her and tells her stories about city life. After Pita's death, the son regularly sends five hundred rupees every month to Amma but she alone knows how useless that amount is in mitigating her loneliness. She doesn't want any monetary help from anybody but accepts it only to keep up her

son's honour among the village people. The land and the cows are enough to meet her requirements.

Amma often recalls incidents from the postman's anecdotes about city life that make her worry about her son and daughter-in-law. How restless city life has become! Everyday something nasty takes place there. Riots break out followed by police baton charge and bullets. How must her son and daughter-in-law be managing their lives under these conditions? And then, there's the little one going to school! This is why Amma loves her village where peace prevails all the year round, no riots, no baton charge or police firing here. But the peace of the village cannot allay Amma's perpetual fear and restlessness that weigh so oppressively on her heart. It's a mother's heart after all. Even if the son has become a complete city man and the daughter-in-law hates to visit her, how can she forget them and their wellbeing!

Amma is nearing sixty. During all these years she had never paid any attention to her body. She would not discard old, torn clothes until they were total rags. Her hair, unwashed, uncombed, would always be tied with a torn dupatta. She often thinks of washing and drying her hair but can never find time for it. When her daughter visits, she washes Amma's hair or occasionally a woman of the village washes it for her. Then Amma remains relaxed for days.

Harvest is Amma's busiest time. Amma's agricultural work is taken care of by the village custom of farmers helping out in each other's fields by turn. The whole village comes readily to help Amma. The people of the village know that she spares no efforts in feeding or looking after those who help her in these times. Sometimes the youngsters of the village tell her, teasingly of course, that they would help her in tilling or sowing only if she offered them a few pouches of country liquor.

Amma then picks up her broom and pointing it at them she scolds them, "You rogues, you should be ashamed to say such things to your grandmother. Your mouths still smell of mother's milk and you have the cheek to ask for liquor! No, you will not get any."

Everybody knows that ghee has become very scarce these days, but Amma is very generous with it and keeps up the tradition of feeding those who help her with plenty of ghee and raw sugar.

Amma knows that a new round of tilling is needed when maize saplings start to grow. When Pita was alive, he would do the entire tilling himself with some help from his grownup son. Her married daughter also

came home those days. But it needed quite a few helpers to complete the tilling on time, so there would be about thirty to forty neighbours in addition to the family members. Amma saw to it that the tilling began in style with drums and shehnai playing soulful music. Pita was an accomplished shehnai artist and he led the other musicians. Marriages, jatars—religious fairs and processions, and tilling always began with his shehnai recitals. Amma was always by his side at these times. She was specially invited on such occasions. She was an accomplished jhuri singer and no one could match her in singing these love songs.

And when it was the people's turn to work in her own fields, her joy knew no bounds. Pita played on his shehnai, his partner beat the drum, and Amma's jhuries and julfies filled the air with joy.

Amma's lilting voice would waft through the maize-fields and resound across the entire valley, making the young maize plants dance and wave with ecstasy. The rain-filled clouds would frisk and frolic through the sky as if intoxicated with Amma's voice. The whole atmosphere would seem to be charged with joy and people would be filled with hope and enthusiasm. The moment Amma's voice came to a silky stop, Pita would cry out in appreciation 'Bravo! Sha..ba..shayyy!'

Even now sometimes the village women cajole Amma to sing a song or two on ceremonial occasions and Amma obliges but it is obvious that the old fervour is now a thing of the past. The strain becomes too much as she says to the women, 'Now look, even breathing has become difficult for me and you ask me to sing'.

How could Amma breathe easy? She alone knows how silently but relentlessly something has been nibbling at her soul over the years. But she does not want to disappoint her companions. She starts to sing but her voice chokes and the words that do manage to come out seem to be those of a novice and not that of an accomplished singer as Amma is known to be. Her voice breaks down and she starts to cough, her eyes become red, and it appears as if Amma is fighting for breath. Old wounds, so long asleep, seem to wake up and become fresh. In between the bouts of coughing, old memories well up in her mind and float in her eyes. She turns her eyes to the blankness as if someone is calling her. She could see Pita from far away point his shehnai towards her and say, "Wife, let's hear one more jhuri!"

But where is he now...? Four years have gone by since he left this world but it appears as if it happened only yesterday. Amma simply cannot believe that Pita is no longer around. She is often overpowered by his memories and sobs and cries for hours. He was her only support and now he was gone.

During the nights Amma often imagines that he is lying on the cot next to hers. Amma sleeps in the same room which she shared with Pita and his cot is still there because Amma did not allow it to be moved away. To her the cot was an assurance of his presence in the room and this mitigates her loneliness. When he was alive, Amma would get up many times in the night to fill his hookah. The hookah still stands by the cot. Every two or three days, Amma scours it with ash and changes its water. When any village elder comes to visit her, she prepares the hookah as she did before. Its bell metal shines like a piece of silver on the sand.

Sometimes, Amma suddenly wakes up in the night and is overtaken by an illusion. Pita would often fling aside his quilt while sleeping. Amma still hears his deep breaths in the night and notices some movement on the cot. She sits up in the dark and gropes the bed but discovers the cats sleeping there. Amma does not disturb them and quietly slips back into her own bed. Cats do this often, when they do not lie in her bed, they jump on to Pita's bed to sleep.

Amma is firm in her belief that Pita died prematurely. He had stopped breathing all of a sudden. He often comes to her in her dreams and says, "Wife, perform the post death rituals for me in Haridwar-Pehowa; my spirit has not been liberated till now."

But what can Amma do to have the rites performed? So far away from home, Haridwar is another country for her. Sometimes she thinks that if the manes are angry and are not immediately propitiated, there would be neither peace nor prosperity. And this thought keeps nibbling at her heart, driving away the peace of her mind. The son would be held guilty of not discharging his obligations to his ancestors. Once Amma had met a shaman, who told her that he was capable of calling back the departed souls of seven generations.

When requested by Amma to call back Pita's spirit, the man obliged and Amma still exclaims with wonder, "The same voice, the same way of talking, only this time he spoke through the shaman beneath a black sheet of cloth. He told her 'Wife, I have no complaints against you but my heart longs for my son, send him here the next time!'"

But how could she send her son? He has become a city man and no longer cares what happens to her. He will face the consequences one day when things will have gone too far.

The bullocks tethered in the courtyard often pull out the stakes. One day when this happened, Amma was sleeping in the sun and heard the

lambs bleating furiously. The lambs are Amma's informers. Their bleating tells her that something unusual is happening in the shed, like one of the cattle drawing out the peg and roaming about in the open.

Amma's two bullocks are very gentle but over the last few days they have taken to fighting. They have become jealous of each other. When she heard the bleating, Amma rose and glanced at the lamb. It was circling round its peg. In the process, the rope tightened around its neck and it collapsed on the ground just as Amma reached it. Now she did not know whether to first rescue the lamb or to manage the rogue bullock. When she shouted at the bullock it advanced towards her furiously. If Amma had not found a thick stick it would have flung her into the field. The bullock's behaviour was unexpected and ominous. It means, Amma thought, somebody has cast an evil eye, otherwise it is unthinkable that her cattle would ever disobey her or become disorderly in her presence. She somehow managed to push the bullock back into the shed. Amma then cut off the lamb's rope with her sickle. It was only when she poured some water over it that the lamb opened its eyes, to Amma's relief.

Stakes have always been Amma's worry. She cannot fix them hard into the ground. She has to sit at the edge of the yard of the cowshed to wait for a man or boy passing by to ask for help in fixing the uprooted stake firmly into the ground. This time, she saw the temple priest coming her way. Amma called out loudly to him and when he came close, she bowed to his feet in obeisance and enquired about the wellbeing of his family. When he sat down Amma offered him a bidi but before he could light it and have a few puffs, she went inside the house and brought out the hammer to fix the stakes.

"Pandit ji, first please fix the stakes quite deep into the ground. The bullock almost killed me today."

The pandit removed his big woollen shawl from his shoulders and began to fix the stakes. When he finished, Amma was relieved. The pandit checked the other pegs and assured Amma that those were all right.

Now Amma thought this was an appropriate time to broach the subject that was weighing on her mind. "Panditji, such a thing has never happened," she said, "Tell me what has gone amiss with me or my family." Saying this Amma went inside the house and quickly came back with some wheat grains in a bell metal plate which she handed to the pandit. The pandit sat cross-legged on the wooden seat and upturned the plate on the ground. He placed the grains in a little heap on one side of the plate and then picked up a few grains in his hand. He asked Amma to blow on them. Amma did as asked. The pandit held the grains in his hand for some time; took his hand to his mouth and recited some mantras. He

recited the names of devi-devtas and then dropped the grains on the back of the plate. He counted the grains one by one. Amma squatted before him and watched his actions intently. She also recited the name of the devta silently.

Meanwhile, the pandit's face was reddening as if the devta was descending on him. He picked up some grains in his hand once again and handed them to Amma in three instalments, careful that each time the number of grains was only five and not six because while five is an auspicious number, six is ominous. Handing the grains to Amma, the pandit said, "Look, Devru, something is the matter, no doubt. Tomorrow is the first day of the New Year. You must come to the temple tomorrow and the devta will help you. Today, after washing your hands and feet offer some incense dhoop to your family deity and sprinkle gaunch-cow urine, and holy Ganga water. Then throw some grains round your house and feed the remaining with wheat dough to the recalcitrant bullock." After giving these instructions, the pandit left and went home.

Amma did as the pandit had directed her. Now she had to wait for the next day. She was convinced that some evil spirit was playing mischief with her. She would go to the temple and hold a special puja. She would ask the deity about the welfare of her son and daughter-in-law and also ask who had made them turn their backs on her. Only the deity could tell her which enemy had let loose an evil spirit into her house.

Next day Amma finished the household chores quickly to go to the temple. The temple is hardly a furlong away. It is situated right in front of her house and every time she steps out her eyes fall on the devta. This is why Amma never leaves any left-over food in her courtyard and sprinkles it with gaumutra or Gangajal in the morning. If the house is clean your mind is also at peace, she believes. But Amma and peace, they have hardly, if ever, been together!

At about three in the morning, Amma reached the temple with dhoop and thick sweet rotis, called roat, for the devta. She took off her sandals near the wall of the temple and sat down quietly in the outer place meant for women. First, she bowed to the deity and then handed the basket of roat and dhoop to one of the kardars, the temple keepers. He took the offerings and emptied them near Bhairava's small temple. He then took out a few pieces and offered them to the deity on Amma's behalf by flinging them in all four directions. He then sprinkled a few drops of

gaunch. He put a few grains of rice and a flower in the basket and returned it to Amma as the deity's prasad. Amma accepted it with folded hands.

As she sat there quietly Amma's eyes were on the temple compound where the temple kardars had begun to assemble and the devta's musical instruments had been brought out. The musicians had picked up their instruments: The drummers had the dhol, nagara, and chambi; the horn players had the narsinga, and karnal. Only the shehnai was missing because there was no one who could play it. The absence of the shehnai player struck Amma deeply because the absent shehnai player was none other than her own long dead husband. She was assailed terribly by his memory. He was the one from his family who performed every ritual of the devta as his kardar. He was also the devta's shehnai player. He was present on every important occasion, be it sakranti—the first day of the month, a jatar, or any other work. Amma imagined that he would appear suddenly from nowhere, bow to the deity before taking his position among the musicians, and then take out his shehnai from his bag, set it carefully before breathing into it to produce that soul-touching raga which only he could produce. In the beginning, the sound would be a little scratchy but soon it would change into its usual accomplished tune.

Now that her husband is no more, the devta would be deprived of that musical homage. This thought touched her so deeply that her eyes filled with tears.

The time had now arrived for the panchi, the ritual worship of the devtas. Amma moved a little forward from where she was sitting. When the priest came out from the temple he looked around before taking his seat in the compound. Amma bowed to him from afar. The priest sat on the eastern side of the temple. To his right and left sat the kardars as the panchs. In front there sat the oracles and kardars of three different devtas. On a plate nearby, the panchs had kept dhoop, pieces of jaggery, rice, and vermilion sindur to be used during the worship.

The musical invocation started and various musical instruments began to make a rousing sound. Amma knows that these musical sounds denote the descent of the gods on their human devotees. When the music rose to a crescendo, a strange excitement seemed to charge the air. Every once in a while, a kardar flung pinches of flour and sprinkled gaumutra in the four directions.

The priest had been chosen by the devta as his chief vehicle and he started to lapse into a state of convulsion as a result of the devta entering into him. The music rose to a higher pitch and the effect of it was a greater frenzy among the assembly of devotees. The god had finally arrived. The devotees folded their hands and bowed their heads.

When the devta entered into the priest, he began to thump the ground violently and shout in a frenzied voice, "Protect us".

The assembly repeated the same. A panch poured a handful of rice or grain into the priest's hands and he threw it in the air to suggest that protection had been granted. Now the panchi had begun, Amma was in a state of terror and excitement, her hands jerked involuntarily. The Devta himself called out to her and she stood up startled, "Come forward Devru".

One kardar quickly helped Amma to come forward. The devta moved vigorously; he screamed and beat himself with the heavy link-chains in his hands. Amma remained motionless but a huge storm raged within her. Today she will reveal everything in the presence of the devta, she will seek answers to all her questions that have been building up within her. She can no longer carry the weight of those questions and then there can be no secrets from the divine presence. If she had only one question, she would have asked it quickly but there is a whole crowd of questions, a whole bunch of sorrows welling up within her and she did not know what to ask and how she should go about it. What she did not know, however, was that all those questions and all those sorrows were floating in her eyes. The devta must have seen them all. Isn't it true that he knows everything that goes on in our minds? What can she hide from him?

"Are your bullocks alright?"

"Yes, by your grace, Deva."

"Take these grains of rice as protection. Throw them in your courtyard. From today onwards, no harm will come to you, no sorrow will cross your path".

Amma bowed her head in reverence and gratitude but said nothing. The thousands of questions floating in her eyes had fallen down as two tear drops. ... She thought the devta had taken care of those questions. The priest through whom the devta had spoken those reassuring words looked at her. She appeared to him a picture of infinite grace and composure, a goddess almost. Dumb cattle and gods her only support. When she came out of the temple premises, she saw some women sitting near the boundary wall. One of them stopped her and said, "Devru, Maal, the cattle festival is near and you must come to join the singing every day."

Amma didn't answer and went home quietly.

When she reached home she remembered what the woman had said. She also remembered how in the past she celebrated this festival with enthusiasm and gaiety.

But now she doesn't like to sing or celebrate; whereas in the past such occasions had drawn Amma to themselves as if by force and the womenfolk of the village would anxiously wait for her. The cattle festival

was something very special for which the singing would start weeks in advance. The women would assemble at the temple and for hours the place would reverberate with song and dance. The bright moonlight would add to the beauty of the occasion and the valley nearby seemed to respond to the mood of gaiety and joy. Amma was always cajoled to be the lead singer and her songs would waft across the valley and fill it with melody. The village women would joke and laugh with gay abandon. On the eighth day Amma would deck her cattle with colourful ribbons and bells and be the first to take them to water. She would carry a bagful of puffed corn and walnuts and distribute them to all those she happened to come across.

And now the Maal is on the next day and Amma's festival will be as it has always been for the last so many years, all by herself, without her son or daughter-in-law. Only the cats, a lone cow, the two bullocks and the two lambs would be there. These dumb animals will be her fellow revellers. She knows full well that now when she sings, her voice hardly crosses the threshold of her own thoughts. It would hit its head against the boundary-wall of the house and come back to her.

But it's an auspicious festival involving the wellbeing of her life's companions and therefore it has to be celebrated with care and piety. Had it been some other festival, she would have ignored it but this festival of the cattle comes only once in a year and how could she ignore a festival dedicated to her companions in her lonely life? Amma had forgotten to pick the white bungadi and golden sartwaj flowers for making garlands. Sartwajs grow abundantly around the house but for bungadis she would have to go far to the pastures. But they are a must for decking the cattle.

Amma rose early to go to collect the flowers even though it was still very dark. No doubt she had to go a long distance but picking the flowers doesn't take much time and therefore she returned soon. She took out a skein of beul strings from the loft and strung the flowers into four or five garlands in the dim light of the earthen lamp.

It was the day of the Maal but Amma's morning routine today was the same as any other day. She got up and finished the household chores as usual. Then she untied the young heifer and fed it with plenty of green grass. She plastered the courtyard with cow-dung and drew a small sacred diagram in the middle of it with turmeric paste and wheat flour. She placed flowers on this mandap and brought the holy durva grass. She had prepared the pinni balls of wheat dough for the animals quite early in the morning. She now took out live embers in a ladle and poured ghee and dhoop over them. She stood the heifer near the mandap, washed its horns with clean water and performed rituals before it as part of the puja.