

The Land

Bhoomi by Milind Bokil in Marathi
Translated by SHUBHADA DESHPANDE

Translator's Note

The original story in Marathi, *Bhoomi*, is by Milind Bokil, a renowned author in Marathi whose literary works are enriched by a unique realistic dimension that is a result of his active involvement in social work as an activist. The present story is thus an appealing account of how a Christian missionary from Germany, initially assigned the role of a teacher in a small village of Maharashtra devotes himself to a social cause and how the same determination to help the deprived section in the village leads to his expulsion thus making him realize the naked truth of being different from those whom he thought to be his own extended family across the national borders.

The translator has always found story an easy genre to be translated, possibly due to the prose narrative, as compared to poetry. However, untranslatability kept hovering around while translating *Bhoomi* from Marathi to English as the context is rich with culture-specific features such as dialectal expressions. Bassnett (1980) mentions that it is not possible to get a text exactly translated into another language as there are several factors involved like 'different cultures, societies and linguistic systems among others'.(Xavier: 1997) Though the translator belongs to the same linguistic background and can easily understand the dialectal version of the expressions in Marathi, she could understand the richness of such rustic expressions in a literary text but found it very difficult to transfer the genuine ethnic essence of the dialectal expressions. For example, the following Marathi extract from the original story

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"त्ये तर काई न्हाई. दुसऱ्या दिवशी फादरनी सोता कपडे काढून इहीर खणायला सुरवात केली. आपण अजून हथरूणातनं उठत बी न्हाई तवा हातभर माती खोदली होती. लई लाजवलं फादर तुमी आमाला "

Untranslatability thus couldn't be overcome successfully and the translator had to give in and translate the dialectal expressions in Marathi into the standard English version.

According to Abdullatief (2020), omission can play as a translation strategy to resolve a translation problem. He cites Dimitriu (2004, 165) who suggests omission as a helpful strategy for translators in order to adjust the translated text 'linguistically, pragmatically, culturally or ideologically' for the audiences/ readership targeted. He further discusses omission as a translation error but finally cites Baker (2000) to conclude that it performs the role of a strategy to 'deal with non-equivalence problems.'

As the present story is set in rural India, except the protagonist and two more characters, all other characters belong to rural background. Though some might be literate, they all are deprived of education due to their social status. Some of them, naturally, speak abusive language, though apologize for it.

"बघ ए हणमंत्या, बघ," बजाबा विजयाने ओरडला "आयघाल्या, तुला मी सांगत व्हतो ते पटत नव्हतं ना?"

Untranslatability of the abusive words made the translator simply use the expression 'abusive words' instead of translating the exact words. However, the author of the original story suggested some expressions in English as the translation of these words. Thawabteh (2014) looks at borrowing as a boost to 'rapid and ubiquitous intercultural exchange'. Using loan words from the SL is thus a commonly accepted strategy in translation.

In terms of the dialectical version of Marathi in the story, the translator, in spite of being aware of the beauty of the version, had no other option than translating the expressions into simple, more general words, as Baker (1992) mentions it as 'one of the commonly practised strategies' in translation.

“वाजंत्रीचा मोसम” was a term in rural and geographical dialect of Marathi. The translator had to use the word 'band season' to make the readers understand the concept. The underprivileged classes played the band as a part of marriage processions in order to earn additional income.

This is, as Owji (2013) mentions, the 'semantic void', inability to find semantically similar word in the TL. The dialectal version spoken by the villagers of Sawarde in the story is a specific feature of Marathi language thus making it difficult for the translator to transfer the exact layer of meaning and beauty. Venuti (1996) has mentioned language as a 'collective force, an assemblage of forms' constituting a 'semiotic regime' and discusses an interesting intertwining of the standard dialect that in fact dominates but at the same time is 'subject to constant variation from regional or group dialects..'

The word *Harijan* (meaning the sons of God referring to the underprivileged classes of society) was kept the same way in English as the word has been added to some English dictionaries. As regards the use of loan word here in the TL, the translator agrees with Coulthard (1992) who has opined that the translator has the image of an 'ideal reader' in mind who has 'knowledge of certain facts, experiences, opinions, preferences and linguistic competence'. Coulthard further states that it is on the basis of this image that the translator takes the decisions relating to 'content, expressions, sequencing and rhetorical devices.'

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Similarly, the story includes some expressions in English by the protagonist as well as other two educated characters, spelt in Devanagari script.

"आय एम टेकिंग द नाईट ट्रेन", "आय एम शुअर द सोसायटी हॅज प्लॅन्ड समथिंग फॉर यू"

The translator had nothing else to do than scripting the expressions in English.

The story is in third person narrative mentioning the protagonist as Father throughout the text. The translator has spelt the word with the initial in upper case throughout the story as she wanted to specify the difference between the words 'father' as a noun and 'Father' as a proper noun categorically referring to the priest. One can thus identify the limitations of the script, i.e., the original story being in Marathi which does not include similar noun; however, the same word signifies a noun too in the target language.

Khozan (1993), suggests that a translator is helped by the 'best approximations' to maintain the 'atmosphere' which in New Criticism refers to the emotional mood prevailed in the story. The present story includes formally reduced expressions like "In the inanimate, cold climate there." "In an unnatural quietness." as translated in English. The translator found it necessary to translate those reduced formal structures verbatim as it could transfer the exact mood of the context to the target language.

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Father had a final overview of the packed baggage. There was nothing much to be packed, in fact. Two big suitcases and a handbag. The government had given ample time to prepare. Ten days. Packing two bags within that period was not at all difficult. He had rather decided to leave behind many things. He had bought his own clothes when he came here. It would be the same while leaving.

The villagers from Sawarde had said they would be coming in the afternoon. To bid him farewell before his departure. Father had been to Sawarde some five-six days ago but all of them were not present so couldn't meet them. Those whom he could meet had yet to overcome the blow of Father's leaving the country. Then they said that they would all come and meet him in the school to say farewell.

Father stood near the window. Vacations were on. It was all quiet in the school premises. The two-storeyed, yellow school building formed a right angle with the place where he used to stay. There was an open ground in between. It had almost reached the road. Tamarind and mango trees surrounded the ground. The place that otherwise used to reverberate with

children's loud chatter was now occupied by a few squirrels scurrying around on the ground.

Father then began waiting for the people. In fact, he was against any such farewell. But Sonawanes were determined. Father wouldn't have paid heed to anyone else's requests. But he was not willing to displease the people from Sawarde. All those Harijans occupied a tender space in his mind.

Finding no one approaching his house, Father turned inside. Important documents were stacked on the table. The one at the top was from the Government of India. He kept staring at that thick, brown envelope for some moments. Then he sat in the chair and opened the letter. The content was clear. Written in a civil but firm language. Crystal clear. No ambiguity! Leave the country in ten days.

Father kept the letter inside the envelope again. He was alarmed when he had received it a week ago. In fact, he was cautioned by some of his acquaintances against some such happening. It was when he was to get his visa renewed. But he had not taken it seriously. He was hopeful to get the visa renewed as usual. But instead, he received this letter asking him to leave the country within ten days.

Father sighed keeping the letter aside. He was not at all willing to leave. He had not applied for citizenship but had never even imagined of being forced to leave this country some time. It was almost twenty years since he had arrived here from Germany. He had spent the initial fourteen years in the seminary. He used to teach the students learning the religion there. But he was weary of that dull routine. The seminary was situated in a big city. After some time, he developed a feeling of being inactive. All days used to be stereotyped. A strange stagnancy had made his life monotonous. A life- closed, lonely and ascetic. He then came to the school here. A district place that could neither be exactly called a city nor a village.

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In the beginning, he liked the work in school. He used to speak broken Marathi initially but improved it as he stayed there and started speaking it clearly. The school had a hostel connected to it. The Mission had its hospital at some distance. Taking stalk of the functioning of the school for around three to four years, he widened its scope. The number of children in the boarding increased too. He started realizing the true meaning of the term 'rural' as he got acquainted with those children. He used to advise the children to be regular in school and to scold those who were irregular. He used to ask for an explanation from the parents in case of those with poor academic progress. But when he started visiting the children's homes for this reason, he got to know that the main problems were different. Those were really the problems associated with poverty and misery. First of all, those issues needed to be addressed to make an improvement. Superficial solutions could be of no use.

He lost his attention in the school after he realized this. He started wandering around that whole region then. Sometimes on the bicycle or he even used to walk sometimes. Used to meet people. See their lands. See the crops. Used to observe their hordes migrating to faraway places for harvesting sugarcane every year. He realized that the whole region depended on the whims of monsoon. And the rains were unpredictable and sporadic. Always less than required. Most of the land was rainfed and therefore always drought affected. They used to sow the seeds whenever possible after the first monsoon and then kept waiting for the rains. They could harvest something only if it rained. Many times, it turned out to be only fodder. If it didn't rain, they would lock the houses and wander around in search of work. When Father realized the importance of water for farming, he started helping them in digging wells. Many a time, he used to arrange for the loans from the banks for them. Sometimes, from the funds of the

institute. Initially he used to help individual farmers and then groups. Then he began selecting the most deprived ones to help.

He was not able to understand exactly what was wrong with his work that made him suspect in the eyes of the government. He could understand that his way of work was hurting the interests of some other leaders and the big shots in the villages. The place like Sawarde had developed into an almost warlike situation. Anantrao from there was a big leader and was not happy with what Father was doing. People like him used to defame him so that he would leave the place. And they used their usual technique to defame him. But it was all false as one could judge. All crystal clear....and yet the government had taken this decision! Father was very disturbed and shocked to the core by all this.

He tried to get the decision cancelled. He requested some known influential people to work in his favour. He sent a telegram to the Archbishop too. But he was told that nothing could be done in such situations. There was very little time. He was very disappointed to know about it. Didn't even come out of his room for two days. He had been passionate about his work. Had made new plans. It all disappeared in just one moment.

He then started packing up all his belongings. Visited as many villages and met as many people as possible. He wrote letters to those whom he couldn't meet. The bus was scheduled for night. People from Sawarde had yet to come. It would all be over once they came and left.

He got up to see as he heard sound of people talking to each other in the premises. But it was the school gardener talking to some labourers. Talking amongst themselves, those people went away and again there was silence in the premises. Father looked at his watch. It was too early for Sonawane and people

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to come. Once they left, he would meet the bishop in the evening. Father had received a message that he was staying in the mission hospital.

Father had a look around the room. The things in the wooden shelf on the wall had yet to be taken care of. Most of those things would be left behind. Father opened the closed shelf. Many books were there which he had planned to donate to the school. An atlas, that too was to be donated. Pens, pencils and many such trivial things were there. There was a non-functioning watch. Bottles of medicine. Some files. Old albums of photographs and a pile of his personal letters below the album.

Father lightly picked up the pile of letters. All those were the letters from his brother- Hans. The last letter was dated six years back. He had been in a sanatorium for almost sixteen years after the war, suffering from asthma. No one else from Father's family had survived. Hans was the last. He had passed away in the same sanatorium six years ago. Since then, he had stopped getting letters. This pile of letters was pushed to the rear side somewhere.

Father dusted those letters and sat in the chair with those letters. Those were all from his brother Hans. All letters were in a specific type of envelope. The content inside was mostly the same. Hans' health used to have changes like the weather. The letters mostly talked about his health. Followed by trivial complaints. Stereotypical activities in the sanatorium. Anyone could tell the content without opening any of the letters. Father used to write letters to him regularly. Used to inform him about the happenings in India. He had tried to fill up the vacuum in his brother's lonely life. Used to wait for his letter. Six years ago, that link was broken.

Father removed one of the letters from the pile and started reading. After the description of his disease, Hans had revived

old memories. He could not join the war due to his ill health. He used to work in the post office far away from home. Father had joined the army. Everything was destroyed by the time war came to an end. His sister and father passed away in the last bomb attack. Mother was left behind all alone. She lost her mental balance when the enemy forces intruded. Father was held captive as a prisoner of war. Hans was absconding. She committed suicide by jumping off the third floor. Hans had recollected it all. Their childhood before the war, their village, school, sister, parents. Other friends and relatives and everything in their earlier life.

Though it all had happened a long ago, Father experienced a deep surge of emotions in the heart. Hans was tall with a smiling face. But the asthma had wiped off that smile. Father had visited him once but he was beyond recognition. With a grown beard. Ribs were moving. Younger to Father, he was looking many years older. He was panting. Not able to speak anything. When Father met him, he sat there holding Father's hand in his own for a long time.

But at least he was alive for many years. Daddy and Ana had died before anyone could gather wits. Father remembered; it was mandatory to join the army. One could smell the war in the air, He had joined when the war began. France, Austria, Russia. Initially, everywhere they were all frenzied by the victory and later ridiculed by the whole world. Disdain for being a prisoner. Coming home he could see nothing but heaps of debris and ashes.

Father remembered: He couldn't meet his parents and the sister but he could at least know what had happened to them. But he never came to know what happened to Norma. She was there when Father had returned home a couple of times during the war. She had taken up a nurse's job. But she could not be traced after he went to Russia. Since then, he could never see

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again the tall, slim figure with silky golden hair that she possessed. No one could tell him anything about it. He tried hard to search for her whenever possible but his efforts were in vain. He then consoled himself that she must have lost her life in war somewhere. But the qualm remained forever.

Father thought to himself..... had there been no war, perhaps the things would have happened differently. That doesn't mean I had not become a priest because that was decided long back. But the loneliness resulting from the loss of the whole family wouldn't have been my fate. There would be Hans, Ana, their children. Other friends would be there. Norma would be there too. Even far from the land, there would be a supportive feeling of having one's own people. There would be a weak string of Norma's love. But the war that took place, took the vitality and vigour out from life drying it to the extent of being desolate. The youth is all a waste, full of ugly features and scratches. Neither could I realize how the hands got hold of the gun nor am I aware of how I started using it. Went on killing everyone in front of me. I enjoyed riding tanks in their devastated villages as and when we won and was lashed by the same people when imprisoned. When I returned, the hands were full of blood and the mind was full of willingness to become a priest, realization of a new sin and a helplessness of having lost everything and everyone.

Father thought it was better that he came to India. Life was channelized into a new direction. There was so much to be done here. And it could give satisfaction too. After Hans passed away, there was no one left in the family. Life was devoted to the church. He was happy with the thought of continuing his work in India. Till the body lost its strength. But now that is also not possible.

With his eyes closed, he quietly leaned back in the chair.

Hearing the noise of people in the premises, he got up and came to the window. It was Sonawanes. With loud chats, they approached his house. Ten-twelve of them. Jagnya, Kundlik and Mukinda were also there. Father waved his hand from the window and indicated the way towards his room. He opened the door and stood there. All of them suddenly stopped talking as they were close to his house.

“Come, friends,” Father said, “Come in”.

Removing the footwear near the door, all of them came in. All were quiet as they entered. Jagnya, Kundlik and a couple of others were regular visitors. Others hesitated a little to sit and kept observing the pictures on the wall.

“Is the dog tied?” asked Jagnya. “It would be difficult for us otherwise.”

“Yes. He is tied throughout the day. So, nothing to worry during the day.”

“Is there a dog here?” one of them asked.

“Yes... a big dog it is,” said Jagnya.

“It was not letting us step inside the gate when we had first visited Father. We had to call him from outside.”

“Please sit down, friends. Why are you standing?” said Father.

“Yes, we will,” replied Bajaba, “we were looking at the pictures on the wall. Father, is it from your country?”

“Yes, from Germany.”

“Would you be going there, now?”

“Yes. To Germany,” replied Father, “Where else to go?”

“It must be very far, must be an air travel, if I am not wrong! How long does it take?”

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“ummmm.... takes one whole day,” Father replied thoughtfully, “till I reach home.”

“Oh.... really! Still better as you would take a flight. How long should it take by train if one plans to?” asked Bajaba.

“Long time. But there is no railway available.”

“It should be. Don’t you think? What if anyone wishes to travel by train?”

“Keep quiet. Don’t try to be over smart.” Someone among them interrupted him and said, “Be the Prime Minister and then bring whatever improvements you like. How childish to say there should be railways!”

All of them laughed. Father occupied his seat after they all sat. Initially, Jagnya and Kundlik were standing but as there was no space left anywhere, they sat on the bed beside Father. It was silence for some time. Some of them began gulping water from the jug kept on the stool.

“I remember the day when you first visited us,” said Kundlik. “Father from Kardile brought you here. He was saying we should dig a well to make provision for our drinking water. But you insisted on irrigating agriculture. That Father was not ready to accept your proposal. Do you remember? What a long discussion it was!”

Father smiled. He remembered. The parish priest had been unable to apprehend this subject. He was of the opinion that Sonawanes being Harijans, were prohibited to get water from the village well so a new well should be dug up. I was exasperated at the sight of what Sonawanes were facing. It was a colony on the outskirts of the village. Their houses were similar to those of the nomads. The roofs covered with wedges. No separate drainage system. Dogs resting therein. Half-clad children wandering bare feet. Many of them used to

work as labourers in others' farms. They used to toil hard day and night except for some hours of sleep. Accompanied by families. Their own lands were rainfed. Unable to grow any greens.

Father could recollect... while scouting a place for the well, he had realized that though dry, their lands were beside a brook. It could have good water levels below. He had dreamt of improving their farming with the help of a pump and pipeline thus irrigating their whole land. To make them independent and to save their hardships of running around in search of labour. Mere provision for drinking water, as he had rightly thought, was not going to be the solution to their problem.

"It was really helpful to get the land irrigated, wasn't it?" asked Father. "Water has changed your life."

"Yes, Father, you're absolutely correct," Sukdev, the oldest among them, replied, "We are grateful to you. I still remember our plight. Five years back, we used to toil hard and do all petty jobs begging for our daily bread in return. We used to be chased by dogs while asking for bread. Small children used to throw stones. What an inhuman life it was! As if we were living for the sake of living and there was no other motive at all!"

Everyone fell silent. They all fixed their vision to the ground. Avoiding each other's faces. Jagnya cleared his throat and said, "I still remember the time when you had scolded us." Everyone was curious to hear as he reset himself sitting comfortably on the bed and continued, "You initiated the work of digging the well but we did not contribute anything. Father, it made you angry."

"True," said Bajaba. "But it was band season. It is the time when we can earn something. It really helps, doesn't it?"

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“I remember it, too,” said Kundlik. “Father convened a meeting and told us that the well belonged to us. We would need to work laboriously. No one else could help us.”

“That was not enough. The next day Father took off his white clothes and started digging the well. We woke up to see that he had dug up almost a hand deep. Father, you made us feel ashamed of ourselves.”

Father smiled affectionately. But he remembered how he had lost his temper then. He was baffled to see their ignorance and carelessness. According to him, digging the well was in fact an issue at the heart of their life. But these people were happy with the petty, wrong jobs that could not give them any dignity either...in spite of being aware that it is socially not acceptable? How could they accept the job only for the sake of some drops of liquor? He had sounded very rude and stern then. He had called them ‘silly’ and ‘stupid’. They were trying to convince that those two months was the only period to earn something meaningful. But he had not heeded to their pleas. He had stayed there overnight and couldn’t sleep the whole night. He had then decided to start digging the well himself. And had started before anyone else had got up.

“I remember it too,” Hanmanta, the bearded man said, “I went to the plain in the morning and to my great surprise, Father was digging it all alone. Bare clothed. Body sweating profusely and dropping it on the ground.”

“Yes, yes,” Sukdev said, waving head, “Father, you have sweated for us. You left no stone unturned for us.”

“Now let us keep that topic aside. Did you get the chilly saplings?” Father interrupted him.

“Yes, Father,” said Jagnya. “We got it in the neighbouring village. We finished planting the saplings and came here.”

“Good we are on this topic now,” said Bajaba, “Father, could you please help me with my doubt? Are we supposed to spray half a dose of fertilizer on the chilly one month after planting it or not?”

“You are correct,” Father said. “First half before plantation and the remaining to be spread after a month.”

“Listen to what he says, Hanmantya,” Bajaba said loudly in a triumphant voice. “You swine! You didn’t agree when I told you the same.”

“Bajaba, behave your tongue,” Jagnya interrupted him, “Try to mind where you’re!”

“Pardon me, Father,” said Bajaba, slapping himself, “I know it’s a bad habit but this Hanmantya was acting smart.”

“But Father,” intervened Kundlik, “co-operative societies do not approve loan for vegetable farming. It would have really helped if they gave it. We need to spend from our own pocket to buy a bag of fertilizers.”

Father kept quiet. He thought Sonavanes had lied to him in this regard though he never expressed it to them. He remembered the day when the water lifting had started and the topic of fertilizers and seeds was discussed. He had offered the seed of groundnut and asked them to get the fertilizers from the credit society. They all had said, “Society belongs to all big shots. No one is going to entertain us there. So better you provide us with everything.” Father had trusted in what they said and had given them everything. Later he met the secretary of the society coincidentally who revealed that a loan was given to all of them. He offered to show the ledgers as proof and mentioned that it was time by then to collect the dues. Father didn’t try to verify it with them but was restless for some of the days after that incident. He was annoyed by this kind of ingratitude towards someone extending a helping hand. He was aware of

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the poverty and the deprivation causing helplessness. But it was very difficult for him to digest the fact that they lied to him.

Father remembered how disappointed he had been after that incident. As if he had lost faith in humankind. He had a strong feeling of not doing any favour to anyone. But time made him realize how it was exactly what people called experience and life. He understood the importance of being tolerant towards all such kinds of people. Initially, he had decided not to give them the seed of wheat but this realization made him considerate of them and he had changed his decision.

Mukinda was sitting quietly in a corner as others were talking. His head was down for a long time. He was busy removing the tassels from the mattress by one hand and with the other one on his cheek. Father happened to look at him.

“Hey, Mukinda, what happened? Why are you quiet?” he asked.

Mukinda felt ashamed as he laughed and looked down deeper. He was around forty years of age but his lean body structure made him look younger. He scratched the beard and started playing with the mattress again.

“Hope you don’t drink now, do you?” asked Father.

Mukinda shook head looking down. “I don’t drink now,” he said. “Kicked the habit.”

“How is Anyaba?”

“He was supposed to join us, Father,” said Bajaba before Mukinda could say anything, “but there was a death in his relation. So, he got stuck there.”

“Has he stopped drinking or not?” asked Father.

“He says he has stopped but not completely,” told Jagnya. “He gets a kick at times.”

“In fact, our Anyaba is very clever,” said Kundlik. “He has stayed in Mumbai. He thinks very smartly. But this habit of drinking has spoilt him. Additionally, the village is full of such hooligans. They make him dance on their tunes. A mere quarter of liquor can rob him of everything. Except this, he is an excellent man one could find on the earth.”

Father could visualize the short and fat figure of Anyaba. His face often looked growling. Eyes often reddened and a constant stink of liquor around his body. He wondered how men display a variety of dispositions. Had Anyaba utilized his wisdom for his clan, Sonawanes would have benefited a lot. But he lacked that understanding. There were two parties in the village and people from both the parties used Anyaba to fight against each other. A bottle of liquor could make him stand in front of anyone’s house and hurl abuses on him. At times, it could even lead him to fights. Mukinda was his associate.

Father remembered. Anyaba had started complaining when they decided to lift the water. The rest of the villagers were against the Harijans. They instigated Anyaba. Initially they said, “You will not get the land beside the brook.” So, Father managed to get permission from the higher authorities. Then they wanted to be a part of the scheme. But that too was strongly rejected by Father. So they provoked Anyaba and started troubling. Mukinda and Anyaba used to drink and attend and disrupt the meetings whatever way they wished. Once he had hit Jagnya in the head with a mattock.

Father recalled the whole long history. A history full of maddening quarrels and skirmishes. In spite of being poor and exploited by the landlords, Sonawanes were not organized and united. Even after consistent mediation, they used to fight and quarrel among themselves. This used to be at its peak

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especially at the time of distribution of water. Everyone used to break the bunds and channelize the water to their own land as soon as it overflowed. It was beyond their understanding that the water belonged to all of them and that an equal distribution was the only way to sustain the lift scheme. Father used to spend most of his time explaining to them this simple logic.

But this was not the only problem. Anantrao in the village was another trouble... He was the Chairman of the Zilla Parishad and his land was adjacent to their land. He owned the whole village. No one in the village disobeyed him. As Sonawanes got good water levels below the land beside the brook, he also started digging a well there. At a distance of merely fifteen feet and beside the brook. He deliberately signed a contract for this work with Anyaba and some of the Sonawanes started working there as labourers too.

Father's anger had known no bounds when he came to know about it. It was beyond his capacity to understand the ignorance and foolishness of Sonawanes. He was aware of Anantrao being a troubling hurdle but couldn't understand why Sonawanes were digging their own grave by digging that well. He approached the well shouting at the people. At the same time, coincidentally, Anyaba came there with some other labourers. Father called him close and asked, "What kind of drama is going on here?" He replied arrogantly, "Which drama? I am digging the well." Father had slapped him very hard for this.

"We were not in our senses at that time," said Hanmantya, scratching his head. "We used to behave madly."

"Why madness?" said Jagnya. "You didn't realize whom to treat dearly and who was your enemy. I was not there in the village at the time else would have told you better."

“But we were helpless!” said Bajaba. “Anantrao managed to get the ownership of brookside land. There was proof. Who can challenge the records?”

“Record was brought later,” said Jagnya. “Better you don’t mention the records. He did not own land there originally.”

“He might not. But my dear friend, he managed to get it done on paper. Didn’t he? Wasn’t his name written on the paper? Father, what do you feel?”

Father merely nodded head. He had openly started a mission against Anantrao with the help of Sonawanes. He sent letters to Tehsildar, Deputy Collector and also to the minister. He also got it published in the newspapers. But legally they were unable to restrict Anantrao from digging a well there. Additionally, he enjoyed a good social status. People used to get scared of his reputation. He arranged to get all the documents from the Tehsil office proving his ownership on the land.

Father remembered all those days. He was a lone warrior fighting there. But there was no chance of any authority taking note of it. Anantrao was so dominating that Sonawanes were scared to attend the meetings too. In addition to this, he started spreading a word against Father and continued digging the well.

“But collector sir was good, wasn’t he?” said Hanmantya. “He was quite understanding.”

“Certainly. He was a great man. He used to speak our language, though broken. The way he crossed Anantrao was really amazing.”

“But how could he alone do anything?” said Bajaba. “All other bastards were there to interrupt.”

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Someone shooed Bajaba again. Realizing his own mistake, he shut up. The collector was really a good person. Father remembered how finally he had approached the collector as no one else was responding to him. Initially, he had doubted Father's intention. But once listened to the whole story and said, "I am supposed to visit that area. I will personally go and enquire."

Unfortunately, Father had to leave for Retreat at the same time. He felt that it was his mistake. He should have postponed the dates and should have remained present when the collector had visited Sawarde. When he visited, he saw exactly the opposite of what father had told him. Anantrao was present. Sonawanes admitted in front of the collector that they had no trouble in Anantrao digging the well. They registered no objection. They gave a written statement. Waiving the statement before Father's face, the collector said, "See.....what you told was so different from what your people said."

Father remembered his own helplessness at that time. Hearing him, Father sat helplessly in the collector's office for some time. As he was unable to articulate any words. The collector broke the silence after some time as he suggested that people must have been scared and prompted to say so. They were scared of Anantrao. One could clearly infer the weakness of Sonawanes. Anantrao had taken an undue advantage of Father's absence there and had forced them all to write it.

Recalling that incident, Father said to the people, "You should not have given that written statement. It aggravated the issue further. A little more strength and resoluteness would have resolved the whole problem. Not only did you all let me down but also incurred a big loss for yourselves."

They all looked down again. There was complete silence for some time. Sukdev cleaned his throat, kept the turban on his lap and said in a little stretched voice, "How to tell you,

Father? It is not so easy to speak out everything. One day prior to the collector's visit, Anantrao and his men visited all our houses. Warning us. He told us that in case we had said anything against him, he would end our lives in a brutal way. Would parade our women naked on the streets... Would destroy everything. How were we supposed to face him in such a terror-stricken situation? Ours was a habitation of merely fifteen to twenty houses. You were not here, either. It was beyond our capacity."

Father was silent on this explanation. Suddenly, the room filled with a strange seriousness. Sukdev wore the turban again on his head. He wiped the eyelids with his dhoti.

"Father, we didn't lie happily." He continued. "But nothing is more valuable than one's life."

"Let's leave that topic aside," Father said. "There is no meaning in repeating what has happened earlier. Jagnya, please go in and ask to make some tea. Count the number of people." He asked them to leave the topic aside but it was difficult for him to drop it completely from mind. Hearing what the collector had told him, he had asked for the collector's suggestion, "What is the remedy to it, now?"

He had replied, "You can approach the court and get the work stayed. But that will be time consuming. Complaining to our department would not be worth either. Digging their own well deeper than Anantrao's may help Harijans in getting more water."

Father had not liked that reply but he later realized how this suggestion could prove a remedy for the problem. Then he started deepening Sonawanes' well. Initially he employed some workers. As a result, Anantrao started digging his well more forcefully. Father called an engineer friend. He said,

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“Boring would be better than digging. With three to four bores, you will certainly get water below.”

Father was about to recall that engineer when Kundlik said, “It was that engineer who taught Anantrao a true lesson, didn’t he?”

“Undoubtedly!” said Bajaba enthusiastically, “He was a Brahmin, wasn’t he? That engineer? Initially when he had visited our colony, he was holding a handkerchief on his nose. He had carried his own water bottle. But when Father showed him the problematic site of the well.... he got so charged! I have no words to explain.”

“Do you remember what he had said to Jagnya? He had said that he would bring the Ganga to our doors and that he was not at all less powerful than Anantrao. He proved his words by doing what he had said.”

“Oh.... yes.... It was like a war being fought. We were far scared. It was really beyond our understanding to predict anything.”

“Seriously!” Bajaba said, thumping on the lap, “Everywhere it was like the sound of gunshots. Anantrao dug one foot below and the engineer two feet. He simply defeated Anantrao.”

Father simply kept listening to them. Anantrao had also started the bore work on the same day. Two giant yellow trucks were standing in front of each other. The place was crowded by many people. People from other villages had come to watch the whole show. The engineer had asked Father when he broke the coconut as a holy sign to begin the work, “How many feet should it be down?”

He had said, “I don’t care even if it reaches the bottom of the Earth. I need water. That’s it.”

Realizing the gravity of his intention, the engineer had started working hard. Both the machines were drilling the land forcefully. People were shouting. The whole neighbourhood was full of black smoke. The babel there was making it impossible to know who was saying what. Men on both sides were abusing each other. Spitting consistently. The site resembled a warfront.

The war continued throughout the day and the afternoon sun heated people's temper even more. Father kept thinking of stopping it somewhere and being satisfied with whatever water they could get. Anyways, nobody owned the brook water. Their stoppage would have made Anantrao stop too. Else it would continue endlessly.

But in reality, he could not stop it. He visualized those days before forty years.....indiscriminate firing from the machine guns. The unbearable throbbing of the tanks. Yelling of children and women. Buildings collapsing like a pack of cards. Father kept on telling himself that the war was inevitable. One cannot run away from it. He didn't know the reason for which he had participated in the World War. But he was aware of the reason behind this war now. It was inevitable... He had warned himself, "You had run away that time. Don't repeat it this time!"

No one could understand what the engineer had done that time. But it was only Sonawanes' well that got jets of water shooting off. It became difficult to work there. Anantrao's well was dry. It was only powdered stones and sand coming up from the well. He continued digging the well furiously but couldn't get water below. Helplessly he stamped feet and left from there. Sonawanes danced happily. The engineer laughed out loudly and said, "See, I have brought the Ganga, haven't I? Tell the man with the cap that he is capable only of wrestling. He won't

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be able to know that we have bored horizontally, will he? Enjoy, here you have ample water, as much as you want!”

People kept recalling the old memories and Father was sitting among them with a gentle smile. The event had a wide publicity. All the newspapers in the district had published the news. People savoured the discussions regarding the struggle for water and Anantrao’s retreat. Everywhere people had Father’s name on their lips. But that publicity had an adverse impact. Anantrao got provoked very badly. He decided to drive out Father from there and started spreading bad rumours. He could use his influence at the higher level. He lodged complaints there.

“Father,” Bajaba brought him back from the world of memories asking, “Is it true that the government has asked you to leave the country?”

“Yes, it is true,” said Father with a smile on face. “Your government has asked me to leave the country. They had a fear that I might convert you.”

“Seriously feel like abusing the government,” said Bajaba angrily. “Why didn’t that government ask us? We would have rightly said that our Father has not done any such thing.”

“I am of the same opinion,” Jagnya volunteered, “Can’t we do anything? We will send a petition signed by all.”

“It is of no use now, Jagnya,” said Father with his hand on Jagnya’s back, “I have an evening flight the day after tomorrow.”

“Damn it!” said Jagnya. “You did so much for us. Shouldn’t we be able to do anything for you?”

“Seriously! It was all due to your noble efforts that we could get water. I really don’t understand how we are going to repay the kindness and benevolence you have shown to us.”

“Please don’t feel so.” Father interrupted them. “Run the scheme well. That will be a true reward for me. Distribute the water fairly. Don’t quarrel with each other. That way you will progress. Oh, that reminds me of something. I have got a spray pump for you as a gift. You can use it to spray pesticides. It is there in that corner. Please get it here.”

Father picked up that pump and showed it to all. He removed the pipe and showed them how to fill it with the pesticide. He also showed them the way it was to be filled with diesel. People were excited.

“This is fantastic, really.” said Kundlik. “Now there is no need to beg in front of anyone for this. We can get the pesticide, fill in this pump and spray.”

“Father,” said Jagnya, “We have got a gift for you too. As you are leaving. Can someone please get those things here?”

Jagnya made Father sit in the middle of the bed and garlanded him. Applied holy red powder on his forehead. He also draped his back with a purple shawl as a symbol of honour on behalf of all.

He said, “Kindly accept this shawl as a token of love from all of us in the colony. You protected us with a unique deed, what can we do for you? So, we have brought this shawl.” “Yes, please accept this small token from us.”

Father was deeply moved. He had a sudden lump in his throat. He was speechless for some time. With the shawl on his back, he got up and said in a voice full of emotions, “I am very thankful to you all, friends. Please don’t be under the impression that I have obliged you. Everything belongs to Him. Who am I to give? It was because you contributed efforts and broke the stones that you got the water. It all belonged to you. I just happened to be a contributor. I am thankful to you for the opportunity you all provided me to work with you and

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for the love you doted on me. Please forgive me for any mistakes or if at all I have said anything wrong during all these years. I would pray for your progress and happiness forever.”

There was complete silence then. Some snacks were served with a cup of tea. Everyone finished it and sat quietly. The world outside was silent. The gloom spread across all of them.

“Shall we take your leave, now?” asked Jagnya awkwardly. “Keep us in your memories. Don't forget us. The whole credit of our prosperity goes to you.”

“We would like to leave Father,” said Bajaba and he touched his feet.

Hanmantya and Kundlik bowed on his feet too. Sukdev bid goodbye with his shaky hands. One by one, all left the room.

Father came out and stood there on the veranda. Walking slowly on the ground, Sonawanes reached the gate. They were repeatedly looking back. Their hands were being waved frequently.

“See you, Father,” he could hear a low voice from a distance. Father waved a hand. Shortly, all turned on to the road and disappeared. Father stood looking at the road for a long time with his hand in the same position even after they disappeared.

The mission-hospital building was beside the road. The church stood behind it. High with a triangular roof. The church had a fresh green lawn maintained in front of it. The bishop was sitting in a chair below a tree. He stood up as Father went to him and greeted him. Holding Father's hand, he helped him sit in a chair near his own.

“I am taking the night train,” said Father after some time, “I have come to say goodbye to you.”

Bishop nodded his head gently and smiled. He was dark in complexion. His face had old marks of measles. He had a bald head. Wore glasses with a golden frame. Though aged, his skin had a glow. His physique was somewhat broad. He wore a white gown and the cross in his silver chain kept moving on his chest. His face would look rude and strict. Hearing Father, he gently said, "How would you be going?"

"From Delhi," said Father. "I have some formalities to complete. The flight is scheduled for the day after tomorrow."

Bishop smiled and nodded head. Both of his hands rested on his lap and the fingers intertwined each other.

"I am sure the Society has planned something for you," he said, "I mean, for the future."

"I hope so," replied Father. "As of now, I will go to Germany. Will know about it once I reach there."

"Yes, they may ask you to work in a seminary perhaps."

"Possible," said Father. "But I don't know anything."

He said this but he was aware that he would need to stay in a seminary somewhere in Germany. He had devoted his whole life to the church. He was in sound health. But it was not possible for him now to visit any new country. Now he was destined to stay in a seminary far away in the jungle. In an inanimate, cold climate there. In an unnatural quietness. Reading the same books again and again. Explaining its meaning to himself. Spending a lonely, empty life separated from the world. The rest of the world would keep enjoying its own pace of life. Running factories. Emitting vehicular smoke. Building high rises. Laughing sportively. No one would need him there. Certainly, they would not spare time for him. He would continue the boredom of preaching in front of some old folks. And leading the lonely life the remaining days. He was

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not willing to live such a life. He wanted fresh and open air like this. With people around everywhere. He would not mind a mountainous pile of problems. He wanted work. Plenty of work. The work that was necessary.

But he did not say anything. He knew that the bishop wouldn't understand even if he explained. He sat looking at the church behind.

"We feel sorry for the decision by the Government of India." Bishop said after some time. "We feel sorry to lose you. But you are not a citizen of this country. So, nothing can be done. We are bound to follow the rules laid down by the government."

"Yes. It would have helped to be a citizen of this country." said Father. "I feel the same. But at that time, I had an impression that it wouldn't make any difference. We are concerned with service."

"You are right." said Bishop. "We are concerned with service. Whether here or anywhere else. We want to serve humanity. The nation does not matter."

"But I used to like this country," said Father, looking around. "The earth, wind and water here. The people of this land. I had decided to spend my whole life here."

Bishop responded with a gentle smile to this. He removed his hands from the lap and folded them. "One should love mankind," he said. "The national boundaries carry no meaning. One should consider people at all places to be one's own people."

Father did not respond. A kite was moving slowly around the tower of the church at the back. It had attracted his attention for a long time. He continued staring there. It was flying against the clear blue sky. There was a crystalline statue of

Mary with a baby on the church tower. Beside it was a bright brass bell in a niche formed with bricks. The whole building of the church was covered with yellow twilight.

“I don’t understand why the government should do it.” he said to himself. “What exactly have I done that caused them to ask me to leave?”

Bishop simply kept listening to him. He did not reply.

“I worked for the poor here. What was wrong with it?”

“You should have run the school,” said Bishop.

“No, I don’t think so.” Father shook his head restlessly and said “The problems of this society are not going to be resolved merely by education. I told the inspection committee the same thing. It won’t help by making the children study and teaching them prayers. First of all, the poverty here should be eradicated. Else nothing is going to be possible. The committee didn’t accept it.”

“No. I don’t mean so.” said Bishop. “Our job is to serve. Our job is to wipe off the tears from the faces that are full of it. We are here to guide those who have lost their path.”

“What else did I do then?” Father said irritably. “I gave water to those who didn’t have it. Food to those who were hungry. Extended a helping hand to those who had fallen in the pit. How exactly was it different from what I did?”

“There were law and order problems,” Bishop said seriously.

“But it was wrong propaganda.” Father leaned ahead as he said restively, “By those who don’t like the betterment of the poor. This country is fated to experience it always. Those people will always oppose. The landlords with vested interests. Mere service delivery won’t work. Why don’t they understand this?”

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He went on expressing his mind and then realized that he was in front of the bishop and his voice was at a high pitch. He saw that Bishop was looking at him steadily.

“I am sorry,” said Father. “I spoke more than required. Forgive me please.”

Bishop raised his hand, “Steady,” he said, “Steady yourself!”

The sun was on its descent lengthening the shadows of trees. Father kept his hands on the chair and covered his face with palms. Bishop kept himself stunned for some time and then stood up minding his gown. He walked closer to Father and touched him on his back. “Come, I will pray for you,” he said. “Let us go to the Lord. The prayer will help you.”

Father got up with a heavy heart and entered the church slowly.

He reached the airport long before the scheduled time of the flight. But he checked in and sent the luggage in as it would be an unnecessary carriage for him. While he was before the counter, a tall and stout person with trimmed hair approached him. Father looked at him questioningly.

“Karhadkar,” he introduced himself. “I am from the Home Ministry.” Saying so, he produced his identity card.

Father smiled at him.

“It seems you are here to verify whether I am really leaving or not.” He said.

“No. Not exactly,” Karhadkar said politely, “But you need to sign some documents.”

“Hasn’t it been over yet? I spent my whole today in signing papers.”

“I am sorry, sir. But some documents need to be signed at the time of leaving. Let’s sit there, please.”

Father filled up the forms required by him. He had to sign some three-four papers. When he finished it, Karhadkar said, “Can we have a cup of coffee, if you don’t mind? You still have enough time before the departure.”

“Fine, let’s go,” said Father. “Let me enjoy the last bit of Indian hospitality.”

The restaurant was on the first floor. It had a glass wall on one side. Karhadkar selected chairs near those glasses. The widespread open tarmac of the airport was visible from there. The long spread of the runway narrowed down and disappeared at a faraway distance. The airport was otherwise a huge ground except the tarmac. Patches of red, dusty sand were visible. With some bushes grown here and there. It was fenced by a white concrete wall and beyond that was a similar ground full of green bushes. A thin white strand of buildings on the distant horizon. A plane had just taken off somewhere and was flying higher like an arrow.

Karhadkar did not say anything as they sat across the table. He ordered coffee. Father was looking outside. They faced each other as Father looked inside.

“Hope you won’t need any more signatures once I reach there.” He asked.

“No, certainly not.” said Karhadkar. “Please do not misunderstand us. But the immigration rules are quite troublesome these days. It is not that I came because something was missing. I belong to the same district where you worked. I was dealing with your case. I had heard a lot about you. That’s why I came...”

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“What did you hear?” asked Father. “If you have believed in hearsay, you would be wrong.”

“I didn’t mean so. Regarding your work. Ours is a drought-prone district. So, the work you did was certainly necessary. It was quite valuable.”

“If that is the case, why is your government asking me to leave the country?”

“Well, let me put it properly,” Karhadkar took some time to speak and said, rubbing a hand over another, “The State is a huge machinery. It doesn’t have a nose, ears, or eyes like a human being. It looks alive because it moves. But one part is not associated with another. We have a proverb in Marathi which means innocents have to bear the heat along with the culprits. The same is true with the government.”

“I didn’t get you.”

“I mean to say that the government has a general policy regarding the foreign missionaries. It is not implemented discriminately. People implementing the policy are different from those who make it. We work as per the rules. On the basis of whatever orders are issued from the higher authorities.”

“But I have not done anything which could scare the government.” said Father. “I haven’t uttered a single word relating to religion while working with people throughout my entire stay here. Forget others, not even in front of people belonging to my religion. I haven’t even been to church on many Sundays.”

“No. That is not the case.” Karhadkar placed the cup of coffee brought by the waiter before him and said, “Please, here’s the coffee.”

“The leaders who didn’t like my work spread such words against me. It was not true. I have been trying hard to advocate my case to everyone. The government should have verified the facts. A person like you could have been deputed on such a mission. In fact, the work done by me was the responsibility of the government. Isn’t it the responsibility of your government to help the Harijans? I actually eased the burden the government otherwise had to carry. And still the government asks me to leave the country? Strange!”

Karhadkar kept stirring the coffee with his head down. He didn’t say anything. Father stared at him for some time and then started looking outside again. Evening was casting its spell. The glass walls made the outside picturesque. A giant plane had just landed and rested on the runway spreading its wings.

Karhadkar finished his coffee. He wiped his lips with a handkerchief. He waited for Father to keep the cup down for some time and then said with a clear look at Father,

“I will answer your question. Actually, I am not supposed to disclose it to you, but you’re leaving this country now and you will carry this misunderstanding forever if I don’t tell you this. So, I will tell you.”

He was quiet for some time. As usual, he rubbed his hands against each other. Father was curious to hear him. Karhadkar continued,

“It is true that the government has a policy towards foreign missionaries which is not in favour of you. But we take the decisions only after verifying the facts. We were aware that the reports against you were submitted by the leaders who had their vested interests. We knew that. The government has not taken this decision merely on the basis of those reports. I think your work was examined by your own church. A sort of....”

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“Internal evaluation,” said Father.

“Correct. So, it was a committee. We had the report submitted by that committee. Before finalizing our decision, we asked for the committee’s opinion about you and.... they...”

“What about them?” asked Father.

“They gave an undertaking which said, ‘We do not encourage white missionaries to work within our country.’ It is their sentence. I am conveying to you as it was written. They did not wish the foreign missionaries to stay here. I think you got the point! What else could the government do then?”

Father was shocked for a while. Suddenly he could connect the link. He remembered that the incident at Sawarde had shaken the church. The establishment was rattled. There were some people there too who did not like his work. They appointed a committee. Consisting of four members. Father had almost a quarrel with them. He had tried his best to convince them but none of them would listen... Their dislike for this kind of work was clearly apparent. When Father had said to them, “This nation suffers from different problems.”, one of them reacted caustically, “We don’t need to hear this from foreigners.” He was under the impression then that it must have been due to their dislike for his work. But now he realized suddenly that the reality was different!

Karhadkar looked at his watch after some time and got up. He shook hands with Father as he got up.

“I should make a move now,” he said. “I met you very late but am happy that we met. One more thing. You can apply for a tourist visa any time. There won’t be any difficulty. That will allow you multiple visits to India. And please do come. You will understand many things which were not understood earlier. I wish you a pleasant and happy journey. Goodbye.”

He then left the restaurant tapping the heels of his shoes on to the floor.

Father kept staring at him for some time and then turned his eyes outside. The chain of events, like a motion film, passed swiftly before his eyes as he was looking outside. The colony in Sawarde. Those people with short built and dark complexions. Poor and sly. Suppressed and smiling. Loving and deceiving. The fiery sunlight on the plains there. The well. The clean, bright water of the canal flowing ahead in its own trance. That Anantrao with squinted eyes. The collector with gloomy eyes. That committee of four members holding bayonets. And the tall church tower in the blue sky.

He felt that all this was quite confusing and beyond his understanding. As rightly said by that officer. It rains from the sky, the grains spring from the earth and people live by the grains. But they have myriad ways of living. The life! Where does it come from? From the earth? Or from human beings? He never understood it. Perhaps he wouldn't be able to understand it in his lifetime.

His hand rested on the table. As he looked at it, he thought whether it was due to the difference in the colour. He covered his body with a white gown so as to hide the skin colour. Because white dissolves everything. But that is superficial. Like this gown. The colour inside never changes. It is never hidden even if covered. Or is it a punishment for his old sin? A punishment for the sin that was committed by him though unknowingly? He went on killing all those who were not like him. All those whose noses, colour, eyes were different from his own. Isn't it a penance for that action?

He was baffled completely. He thought it would have helped had the officer not told him this reality. Now he would never believe in the white colour. Henceforth he would examine the colour of the skin and eyes of a person wearing a white attire.

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He would first recognize the difference between himself and that man. He had sought refuge in this shelter so as not to be troubled by the differences in colour. But now that sanctuary was shattered. He did not own anything now that he could call his own - house, family or something that he would yearn for. The family that he had thought of being big was in fact very small. Like others, it also had the walls. He had wanted to live in this hot and earthly country. So that he could forget the old times, the history. He was hoping to find the light. But this land did not want him.

He kept looking outside, stunned and helpless. Evening was casting its spell. The surroundings so far clearly visible had started darkening. Like a picture distancing itself from the vision. A grey whitish darkness was forcing itself everywhere. A yellow light blinked far on the horizon and then gradually the lights came on one by one. Father kept on staring... Shortly, he heard the announcement for boarding.
