

Memoirs/Asian Studies/Sociology/Politics

The Whole Truth and Nothing But the Truth: A Dalit's Life

B. Kesharshivam

Translated from Gujarati by **Gita Chaudhuri**

From 'On the Occasion of the Book Being translated into English'

For a dalit, simple things like an entry into a temple or a bus or a hotel also requires an intense struggle.

Recently, the proposal by the government to introduce reservations in the private sector has elicited a strong reaction.

Even now a dalit woman is stripped and paraded naked in a village. A marriage between a dalit and a non-dalit is not always possible, and if it does take place, then often the dalit has to pay with his life.

I have been an officer of high rank; I have received higher education from a university; I am also a writer. Yet a tenant living in my house still had the audacity to call me a dhhed [particularly degrading abuse, banned by law]; he said, 'You are a dhhed. A dhhed will always remain a dhhed! Now go to the court and file a case of atrocity against me. [pp x-xi]

From 6 'Quenching of Thirst

One afternoon, Magan and I were wandering in the field when he said, 'Look Bhikha, look at the quarter moon!'

I looked at the sky and was completely baffled. Moon at mid-day and that too a quarter moon! When Magan saw my bewilderment he said, 'Alya, not in the sky. Look there, at the well.' I turned around and saw a girl drawing water from the well. We burst out laughing. [p 30]

From 'In High School'

Once our class went to a picnic at a Shiva Temple at Pavathi. We went inside the temple and paid obeisance to the idol of Lord Shiva. I, too, watching others, placed my hands on Nandi the bull, and then touched my eyes . . . Nobody had stopped me from going inside because I had gone in a group. Had I entered alone then somebody would have asked my

caste and then I would have had to leave the temple right at its steps. Perhaps I would have had to listen to some curses as well.

I had a great time playing the singing game of antakshari, cards and play ring and yet somewhere deep down I had this constant fear of being recognized. It hurt me deeply. . . Some boys told jokes. On everybody's insistence I too narrated a few jokes and made them laugh. After so many years, especially after doing some reading in psychology, I now understand. It was the only device I had to forget the hurt inside me!

The food had been very good, and so all had eaten their fill...Once the meal was over I heaved a sigh of relief... We had to throw the plates in a pit next to the road. A group of beggars stood by and ate the leftover food from the plates. When I threw my plate in the pit, one of the beggar women rushed to collect it. Suddenly she looked at me and recognized me. She threw my plate as if it were a live wire or filled with poison and cried out, 'Hai, hai, he is a dhed...' I just stared at her. Even at that time I had wondered how I could be lower than this illiterate beggar woman... She was illiterate and yet from which school did she acquire this knowledge? [pp 112-113]

Extracts:

From 27 'Dholka'

The biggest challenge was to find accommodation. In the beginning I stayed at the government rest house but how long could I remain there? The news of my dalit status had spread in the town, and so, in spite of having a powerful post, I could not get a house. I would approve of a house but the minute the house owner came to know about my caste, he refused to rent it to me. I met the local leaders and the MLAs but it yielded no result. The news of my inability to find an accommodation reached the district headquarters. It became a topic of conversation in the city, and for me it was a shameful event. To whom could I have confided my pain? Finally, out of desperation, I rented a house that belonged to a Muslim. It was situated at the outskirts of the city . . .Bharti [his wife] was lonely in this house and I too wanted a house in a better and more populated locality of the city . . There was a Government Resolution (GR), which stated, 'If a dalit employee cannot be given a government residence then a house could be requisitioned and given to him.' But I had not heard of any instance where this had been implemented. [pp 141-142]

From 44 'Gandhinagar'

Around this time [the Reservation riots]: I also visited my own moholla in Kallol, which was also affected by the riots. Stone pelting during the day and rumours of fire during the night was the fate of the residents. Watching my beloved home, where I had blossomed, experiencing such tension was absolutely heartrending. I was deeply agitated. A crowd of 40,000 people surrounded the mohalla. We kept vigil at night. We patrolled the moholla

with sheets tied around our heads to avoid being hurt by stones. There was a Muslim colony next to my moholla. When the crowd saw our strange headgear, they thought that we had called the Muslims to patrol our moholla. Immediately the stone throwing stopped and nobody dared to think of setting fire to the moholla. The thought of the Muslims' presence was enough to make them shake in fear. The next day many enquired outside the moholla, 'Did the Muslims come to your moholla at night?' The moholla people laughed at the thought that their headgear had scared the higher caste people who had assumed the presence of Muslims. They also realized what weaklings these higher caste people were. That is why Dr. Ambedkar said, 'Those who consider themselves strong and capable find only a goat to sacrifice. Why don't they dare to sacrifice a lion?' [p 231]