

ISMAT CHUGHTAI

Of Fists and Rubs^{*}

THERE WAS QUITE A CRUSH OF PEOPLE at the polling station, as if it was the premier of some movie. A long line stretched out to infinity. Five years ago, too, we'd formed such endless lines, as if we'd come to buy cheap grain, not cast a vote. Wisps of hope flitted across our faces: regardless of how long the lines, our turn was bound to come sometime. And then you just watch, we'll be raking in piles and piles of money. He's our trusted man; the reins of good fortune will be in the hands of one of our own. All our miseries will vanish.

"Bai, O Bai! How are you?" The woman wrapped in a dirty-looking *kashta* bared her filthy, yellow teeth and grabbed my hand.

"Oh, it's you, Ganga Bai ..."

"No, Ratti Bai. Ganga Bai was the other one. She died, poor woman."

"What a pity! Poor woman ..." And my mind zoomed back five years. "Rubs or fists?" I asked.

"Rubs," Ratti Bai winked. "I kept telling her not to, but why would she listen, the blasted woman. Who are you voting for, Bai?"

"And you, who for?" we asked each other casually.

"Our caste-wallah, of course. He comes from our area."

"Five years ago, too, you voted for a man of your own caste, didn't you?"

"Yes, Bai. But he turned out to be a real scrap. He did nothing for us," she said, making a long face.

"And this one, he's also from your caste."

"But he's really first-class. Yes, Bai. You'll see, he'll get us our farmland."

"And then you'll go back to your village and thrash rice."

"Yes, Bai," her eyes flashed.

^{*}"Muṭṭhī Mālīsh," from the author's collection, *Dōzakhī* (Lahore: Nayā Idāra, 1967), 47–61.

Five years ago, when I was in the hospital giving birth to my Munni, Ratti Bai said that she was on her way to the polling station to vote for her caste-man. He'd made a solemn promise before a crowd of tens of thousands gathered at Chaupati that the second he came into power he would change everything. Milk would flow in rivers, life would become as sweet as honey. Today, five years later, Ratti Bai's sari was even shabbier, her hair even more gray and her eyes twice as dazed. Hobbling on the crutches of promises made again today at Chaupati, she'd come to cast her vote.

"Bai, why do you talk to that slut so much," Ratti Bai opened her bundle of exhortations and advice as she pushed the bedpan under my cot.

"Why? What's the harm?" I asked, acting as though I didn't know.

"Haven't I told you? She's a very bad woman? Downright wicked, a slut."

Before Ratti Bai came on her rounds, Ganga Bai had used exactly the same words to let me know her opinion of the former: "Ratti Bai's a first-rate tramp." The two hospital workers were always at loggerheads. Now and then they didn't even hesitate before coming to blows. I heartily enjoyed talking to them.

"That bum Shankar, he's not her brother." Ganga Bai told me. "He's her lover. Why, she sleeps with him!"

Ratti Bai's husband lived in a village near Sholahpur. He had a small piece of land and was stuck to it. The entire yield was sucked up by debt and interest payments. Just a little bit was left; before long it too would be paid up. Then she would go and live with her children, happily ever after thrashing rice to separate it from the husk. Both women dreamed with such longing of living happily pounding rice in their homes, the way a person dreams of Paris.

"But Ratti Bai, why did you come to Bombay to earn money? It would have made more sense to have your husband come instead."

"Oh Bai, how could he? He works in the field. I couldn't have managed farming."

"And who looks after the children?"

"Oh, there's a slut," she said calling her every bad name in the book.

"He hasn't married another woman, has he?"

"The bastard, he hasn't got the guts. No, she's a keep."

"What if she becomes the mistress of the house in your absence?"

"How could she? Wouldn't I beat her hollow and stuff her with hay? Once we've repaid the debt, I'll go back."

It turned out that Ratti Bai had herself chosen the poor helpless woman left to care for her husband and children. Once the field became theirs,

she would return home as a proper housewife and thrash rice. And what would become of the keep? Oh, she would find another man whose wife has gone to Bombay to earn money and who had no one to look after the kids.

“Doesn’t she have a husband?” I asked.

“Why of course.”

“So why doesn’t she live with him?”

“The little land he had owned was eaten up. He works as a farm laborer, but for eight months of the year he steals and pilfers, or wanders into big cities and supports himself panhandling all day long.”

“Does she have children?”

“Of course she does. Four, at least she used to. One was lost right here in Bombay. Nobody ever found out what became of him. The two girls ran away and the youngest boy lives with him.”

“How much money do you send back to the village?”

“The full forty-one.”

“How do you get by?”

“My brother supports me.” The same brother Ganga Bai had said was her lover.

“Doesn’t your brother have a family of his own?”

“Of course he does.”

“Where do they live? In the village?”

“Yes. It’s a place near Puna. His elder brother takes care of the farming.”

“You mean *your* elder brother,” I said just to tease her.

“Come on now. Stop it! Why would he be *my* brother? Oh Bai, do you really take me for that kind of woman? I’m not like Ganga Bai. Do you know, hardly four days go by in a month that she doesn’t receive a beating. Bai, if you’ve got any old, worn-out clothes, don’t give them to that vile woman. Give them to me instead. Okay?”

“Ratti Bai.”

“Yes, Bai.”

“Does your ‘brother’ whack you?”

“That tart Ganga Bai, she must have told you that. No, Bai, not very much. Just sometimes, when he’s had too much to drink. But then he also shows affection.”

“He shows affection too?”

“Why wouldn’t he?”

“But Ratti Bai, why do you call that scoundrel a brother?”

She started to laugh. “Bai, that’s just how we talk.”

“But Ratti Bai, when you earn forty rupees, why whore around?”

“How else would I manage? Three rupees for renting the *kboli*, the

rat-hole where I live, and then I have to pay five to Lala.”

“To Lala, whatever for?”

“All the *chawli* (tenement) women have to, otherwise he would throw us out.”

“Because you carry on this business?”

“Yes, Bai,” she seemed somewhat embarrassed.

“And your ‘brother,’ what does he do?”

“Bai, really I shouldn’t say, but selling drugs is a nasty business. If someone doesn’t bribe the police, they chase him out.”

“You mean throw him out of Bombay?”

“Yes, Bai.”

Meanwhile a nurse barged in and scolded her, “What are you doing here jabbering away. Go, the bedpan needs to be removed in No. 10.” Ratti Bai promptly left the room, grinning with her yellowed teeth.

“What’s with you, you spend hours talking to these loose women. You need rest, otherwise you’ll start bleeding all over again.” The nurse picked up my baby girl from the hammock and left the room.

Ganga Bai was on duty in the evening. She walked into my room without bothering to ring the bell first.

“Bai, I’ve come for the bedpan.”

“Oh no, Ganga Bai. Sit.”

“The sister will start hollering. The slut. What was she telling you?”

“Sister? Oh, she was telling me to rest.”

“No, not the sister. I mean that Ratti Bai.”

“Just that Popat Lal beats Ganga Bai black and blue,” I teased her.

“That son of a bitch, forget it. He wouldn’t dare.” Ganga Bai started pounding slowly on my legs with her fists.

“Bai, you promised to give me your old chappals.”

“Okay, take them. But tell me whether you got a letter from your husband.”

“Of course.” Ganga Bai promptly pounced on the chappals. “If that whore of a sister saw it, she would kick up a ruckus. She makes too much fuss.”

“Ganga Bai.”

“Yes, Bai.”

“When will you return to your village?”

Ganga’s shining black eyes drifted off to the lush green haze of fields far away. She took a deep breath and said softly, “May Ram give us an abundant crop this time. And then, Bai, I will go back. Last year the flood

ruined all our rice paddy.”

“Ganga Bai, does your husband know about your ‘friends?’” I probed.

“What are you saying, Bai.” She became deathly quiet. I sensed she was feeling somewhat embarrassed. She immediately tried to change the subject, “Bai, you had two girls in a row. The seth will be mighty angry, won’t he?”

“Seth—who?” I asked, confused.

“Your husband. What if he got himself another wife?”

“If he did, I would also find myself another husband.”

“Your people do that? Bai, I thought you come from a high caste.” I couldn’t help feeling that she was making fun of high-caste people. I tried my best to make her understand, but she firmly believed that by giving birth to a second girl I really would be thrashed. If my seth didn’t beat me black and blue, then he must be an absolutely third-class seth.

Staying in a hospital is nothing less than solitary confinement. Friends and acquaintances visited me for two hours in the evening, the rest of the time I spent chatting and gossiping with Ganga Bai and Ratti Bai. Had it not been for them, I would probably have died long before then from boredom. A little bribe was all it took to get them to spill all kinds of things about each other, whether true or false. One day I asked Ratti Bai, “You used to work in a mill, so why did you give that up?”

“Oh Bai, the blasted mill was a racket.”

“Racket?”

“Oh Bai, for one thing, it was awfully hard work. Still that would’ve been bearable, but the bastards kicked you out after a couple of months.”

“How so?”

“They would hire other Bai *log*.”

“Why would they do that?”

“Why? Because if a person stayed for six full months, the Factory Law kicked in.”

“Oh, now I get it.”

In other words, the entire staff changed every few months. If any worker stayed longer in her job, she would be entitled to sick leave, maternity leave, the works, to comply with the Factory Law. So they kept switching workers every couple of months. That way a worker was employed for hardly four months a year. In between, women often returned to their villages. Those who couldn’t afford to would run around to other factories looking for work. Some would roost along the sidewalks selling piles of rotten old vegetables. Swearing matches and fights broke out over turf. And since they carried on without a license, they had to cough up some dough to “feed” the policeman at the corner. Still, when an unfamiliar

officer wandered that way now and then, there would be a veritable stampede. Some would quickly bag their merchandise and slither into a side street; some would get caught and start crying and wailing. But the police kept dragging them to the station. When the situation cleared up, they would swarm back, spread their tattered pieces of cloth and put their things on display. The clever ones threw a few limes and ears of corn into a shoulder bag and walked along pretending to be shoppers themselves. When someone passed by, they would utter softly, "Hey brother, buy some corn. Just one anna each." Buying vegetables from one of them was to practically invite cholera.

The totally wretched ones resorted to begging, and if the opportunity presented itself they weren't averse to a quickie on the run. Perfectly primed, at least in their opinion, with a wad of paan stuffed in their mouths, they strolled up and down in the dimly lit area by the railway station. A customer walked in, glances were exchanged, and the deal was struck. The customers were mostly milkmen from Uttar Pradesh, or homeless laborers with wives back in villages, or eternal bachelors who only had these squalid streets and sidewalks to call home.

One morning a brawl broke out between the two Bais on the verandah. Ratti Bai plucked out Ganga Bai's topknot. In return, Ganga Bai broke Ratti Bai's *mangal sutra*—her marriage necklace of black glass beads—an assurance that her husband was still alive. The poor woman started sobbing inconsolably as if she'd been widowed. The cause of the fight was the cotton pads that were used for cleaning wounds or for pregnant women and then discarded. According to the city ordinance, they had to be carefully burned, but it turned out that the two Bais would remove the soiled cotton from the containers, wash it clean, roll it into a bundle and take it home. Since their relationship had become quite tense lately, Ganga Bai snitched about it to the supervisor. Ratti Bai started swearing at her, which quickly turned into fisticuffs. Both of them would have been fired but they whined and pleaded so much that the supervisor kept the matter under a lid.

Ratti Bai was a bit flabby and older. Ganga had really let her have it. When she came in to return the bedpan with a swollen nose, I asked, "What do you do with the dirty cotton, Ratti Bai?"

"Wash it and dry it. It's perfectly clean."

"And then?"

"Then we sell it to the cotton merchant."

"Who would buy such germ-filled cotton from him?"

"The mattress man—the one who makes cushions for rich people's furniture."

“Oh my God!” I bristled with revulsion. I remembered that when I had the cotton removed from a wicker sofa so that it could be re-fluffed, it had turned out to be completely dark. Oh no, was it the same cotton that was used for cleaning and dressing wounds! Is my daughter’s mattress made from that too? My daughter, as delicate and fair as a flower, and this pile of germs! God curse you Ganga Bai! God take you away Ratti Bai!

Because they had gone after each other with their shoes today, Ratti Bai was writhing inside. And since Ganga was relatively younger, Ratti Bai considered her a greater sinner than herself. To add more fuel to the fire, a few days ago she’d managed to snatch Ratti Bai’s standing customer. All those abortions Ganga Bai had had over time, and the live baby she had dumped in the gutter that still kept breathing even after she stuffed the umbilical cord in its mouth! A whole crowd had gathered near it. If Ratti Bai had wanted to, she could easily have spilled the beans and gotten her caught, but she buried the secret in her chest. And look at the cheek of that vile woman, the way she sits on the sidewalk selling piles of unripe jujube and guava, as though nothing had happened.

“Friendship is one thing, but what if something went wrong, Ratti Bai. Isn’t it better to go to the hospital?”

“Why should we? We’ve got plenty of Bais among us who are as good as any doctor. Absolutely first-class.”

“Do they give you medicine to get rid of the fetus?”

“Of course they do. What did you think? Then there is this fists method, but rubs work best.”

“What is this ‘fists,’ ‘rubs?’”

“Bai, you won’t understand.” Ratti Bai blushed a little and started to laugh. She had been eyeing my powder case for some days now. Whenever she dusted me with it, she would put a pinch on her palm and rub it on her own cheeks. I thought the box would be enough to get her to talk. When I offered it to her, she took fright.

“No Bai, the sister would kill me.”

“No, she won’t. I’ll tell her I didn’t like the smell of the powder.”

“Why it smells fine, very fine. Oh Bai, you’re crazy in the head.”

After a good deal of prodding she described the details of “rubs” and “fists”:

“Rubs” work perfectly during early pregnancy—like a doctor, absolutely first-class. The Bai makes the woman lie down flat on the floor, then holding herself with a rope suspended from the ceiling or to a club, she stands on the woman’s stomach and works it with her feet real well, until the “operation” is performed. Or she makes the woman stand against the wall and after combing her own hair she ties it tightly into a topknot.

Then, after dousing it with a fistful of mustard oil, she bangs it against the woman's legs like a ram. Certain young women used to hard labor don't respond to this. Then it's time for "fists." After dipping her unscrubbed hands with their grimy nails in oil, she just pulls the throbbing life from the womb.

Most of the time the operation goes off without a hitch on the very first assault. If the performing Bai happens to be a novice, sometimes one of the hands is broken off, or the neck comes out dangling, or even a part of the woman's own body that needed to stay inside spills out.

Not too many die from the "rubs," but the woman generally falls prey to all kinds of disease. Different parts of her body swell up. Permanent wounds form and never heal, and if her time's up, she dies. "Fists" are used sparingly, only when everything else fails. Those who survive aren't able to walk. Some drag on for a few years and then croak.

I threw up. Ratti Bai, who was describing all this with relish, panicked and ran off. I felt overwhelmed in the dreary silence of the hospital. Oh God, such a dreadful punishment for bringing life into this world—I thought, drifting off into a haze.

My throat was stinging from pure horror. My imagination began coloring in the pictures Ratti Bai had drawn for me and then breathed life into them. The shadow of the window curtain was trembling on the wall. Soon it began to flail like a blood-soaked corpse on which Ganga Bai had applied her "rubs." A horrific iron clamp in the shape of a fist with filthy nails sank its teeth deep into my brain. Tiny fingers, a drooping neck, in a sea of blood—the prize of the first assault. My heart sank, my mind felt dazed! I tried to scream, to call someone, anyone, but my throat jammed. I tried to reach for the bell, but my hand wouldn't move. Silent cries were stifled inside my breast.

It was as if the screams of someone murdered suddenly shot up in the impenetrable silence of the hospital. They rose from my own room, but I was unable to hear them, unable to hear anything that was spilling from my own mouth unconsciously.

"You must have had a dreadful nightmare," said the nurse as she stabbed me with the syringe of morphine. I tried to tell her, "Sister, please, don't. Look, there, the dead body covered with blood from Ganga Bai's rubs is writhing on the cross. Its cries are piercing my heart like a poker. The feeble sobs of the child dying in some gutter far away are pounding in my brain like a hammer. Don't give me morphine to dull my senses. Ratti Bai has to go to the polling booth. The newly elected minister is her

caste-man. Her debt will be paid up with interest now. Ganga Bai will happily thrash rice. Please lift this mantle of sleep from my mind. Let me be awake. The spots left by Ganga Bai's blood are swelling on the white sheet. Let me be awake."

I woke up when the man sitting behind the desk looking like a clerk stamped one of the fingers of my left hand with blue ink.

"Vote for *our* caste-man, okay," Ratti Bai admonished me.

The ballot box of Ratti Bai's caste-man rose like a massive fist and came down with all its awesome power on my heart and mind. I didn't drop my vote into that box. □

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*