

Daag Diya Sach (The Funeral of Truth)

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Daag Diya Sach (The Funeral of Truth¹)

Ramnika Gupta

“Mahaveer...Mahaveerrrrrrr...ssss...sss! “Maalti...Maal...tiii!...ssss...Once again the sound of that flute pierced through the heart. Again the blaring sound of Tasha² — and the noise of the drum and again — Maalti...sss... Mahaveer...sss...!”

I was heading towards Hendengada after a gap of two years but was suddenly stopped on the way itself by those voices. I made the car stop. After getting down from the car, the torchlight showed me a thin, weary old man approaching stumblingly and meanwhile playing steadily on the flute. Seeing me, he came closer to my car and said, “Memsahib, you came on time. See, Mahaveer and Maalti are playing hide and seek in the forest - look, they’re calling each other. Memsahib this is my Mahaveer’s flute. See, how this drum is lamenting and calling Mahaveer! He again said while beating the drum: “Mahaveer would beat this drum to call Maalti and signal his arrival. Look at this Tasha. My Mahaveer’s Tasha party won the first prize in Hazaribag! My Mahaveer is lost somewhere here. Memsahib please find him! Even Maalti too is lost somewhere!”—Uttering this he remained silent for a while. Then suddenly, imitating Mahaveer and Maalti’s voices, interchangeably, he started enacting their roles with a heavy heart: “Mahaveerrr...Maaltiii...”

I recognized him; he was Dhokar Ravidas, Mahaveer’s father, who had

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1. I am thankful to Maya Pandit, Rose Sebastian and Anupama Rai for reading the earlier drafts of this translation and pointing out the missed nuances in English, and to Nilekha Salunke and the participants of Women in the ‘Vernacular’ course for their meticulous engagement with the story when it was first discussed at Banaras Hindu University.
 2. Term collectively used for the band party. However, *Tasha* is one of the musical instruments.

perhaps lost his senses. I interrupted him in the middle. “Don’t you have to go to work today, Dhokar? Why are you roaming around? He fumed: “Why should I do that bloody work? No Memsahib, we all shall die. See Memsahib,” and then he leaned towards a specific side as if to escape from something. He shouted: “Oh...oh...oh..., see this entire mountain is falling on me. Memsahib, watch out! Save yourself! The sky is pelting stones!” Memsahib, see this stone is already lying on my chest and underneath it...is laying my Mahaveer. See, see, these stones have turned themselves into a mountain of grief! Oh...Oh...my...my God, please save, someone please save my Mahaveer from these devils.” Then he started speaking with folded hands. “NO! My Mahaveer did not commit any mistake, he only married Maalti. Memsahib, there was love between Mahaveer and Maalti. I will sacrifice everything for my *bahu*³. House — and everything! Please leave my Mahaveer. For God’s sake, I beg you — please leave, him.”

I was looking at him bewildered. I dragged him to sit in my car and told him— “Dhokar, let us go to your house, there I will talk and listen to you.” He sat quietly with me. Meanwhile, I noticed that his facial expressions depicted the interplay between hope and fear, flattery and request and finally the whole thing was overshadowed with a ray of hope that had love at its core.

As the car passed by *Panchayat*⁴ building, he shouted, “Memsahib look over there—they have tied Mahaveer.” I heard him but still kept quiet. He kept on shouting. We were now about to reach his house. While getting out of the car I said: “No, there is nothing like that Dhokar, I can’t see anything of that sort. Look, Mahaveer and Maalti will never come back. You go home now.” He started crying, “Memsahib, if even you can’t see the cruelty, then who else will save us from their torture? Why Mahaveer and Maalti will not come? You just remove this heavy stone aside. Mahaveer will rise up in a second. He is under this stone. Memsahib can you hear, Maalti is crying. Oh my God! Tragedy has befallen us. Look, they are disrobing my *bahu*! O saint *Raidas*⁵! Please save her! They are pulling her *saree*⁶. Memsahib, Arjunva is smouldering her with burning flame. Memsahib, please save my daughter, please save her.”

Then he started talking to someone who wasn’t visible, “O Buddhan, you at least save your daughter. Isn’t she your daughter? All these *Panchs*⁷ are

3. Daughter-in-law.

4. A village assembly or council; body of arbitrators for settling disputes.

5. Saint Ravidas, the 15th century bhakti saint poet, also called Raidas in rural India. The dalits of India claims him to be their Guru.

6. Women’s cloth.

7. Members of the panchayat.

no less than Duryodhana. See, they are stripping your daughter. Why don't you speak?" Then, crying "No, no!" he pounced on some invisible entity as if to snatch away something from those hands. But suddenly he fell flat on the ground as if pushed by someone. I helped him to stand on his feet. By now his family members too came out.

Seeing me, his wife started to cry bitterly and said: "Memsahib, he repeats the incident of that night every day. I lost my son and now my husband has lost his mental balance because of this. Hearing his wife speak, Dhokar too spoke suddenly—"O *Sarpanchji*⁸, leave my Mahaveer! I beg at your feet. If you want to beat him, beat me instead! Sarpanchji please stop Sohana Mahto! Then he laid himself down on the other side of the floor, in a posture of begging at someone's feet.

O *Mukhiya*⁹, our entire family has served you all their lives. Get my son released from these butchers. Please, all of you take your daughter back but release my son. I am the culprit. You have beaten him enough. Please don't raise your stick again. We have only ten houses in the village. How dare we invite your enmity?"

Then, in a mixed tone of argument and self-justification, he started to talk to himself: "How do our ten houses count in a locality of your four hundred? Whatever you order, we will obey. We will leave the village if you so desire. Don't kill my Mahaveer!"

He was lying unconscious for a while. His wife sprinkled water on his mouth. After regaining a bit of consciousness, he looked around with his eyes bulging. It seemed as if his eyes would come out.

He shouted: "Arey, stop, stop. Drop the stone. Don't hit him, Arjun. Hey, Nakul, please save him. Mahaveer is your friend!" He started banging his head on the floor and weeping bitterly.

"We are ruined now. Not only did they take eight thousand rupees from us but also a quintal of rice and pulses. They ate our porridge and in front of us stoned our son to death." Beating his breasts he spoke again: "Memsahib, I am the one who is responsible for this. I not only paid money for the petrol and the vehicle but also sent Laxman along with them to bring Mahaveer here to be killed ultimately. I only said it in the Panchayat. I am the culprit. Mahaveer has offended and insulted all of you. Punish us in whatever way you deem fit. But Memsahib, I did not know that they would kill Mahaveer."

His lamentation was unending. Every now and then he was oscillating between the present and the past and in the process repeating the events of

8. Chairperson of the panchayat.

9. Translated literally as—my leader.

that night which materialized in front of his eyes.... Two years ago, a group of 400 people, intoxicated by the madness of caste stoned his son to death and took Dhokar's thumb impression on a plain paper affirming that he is the one who had killed his own son. His family members now took him inside the house while the rest of them sat with me to discuss the progress of the Mahaveer murder case. They were curious to know its progress. I reached home late at night.

Along the entire way, I was thinking. When will the madness around caste end? When will patriarchy be eradicated? When will millions of these people live without fear? When can the likes of Mahaveer and Maalti roam around freely without any one interfering? When will Mahaveer's flute be played without fear? I was engrossed in these thoughts as I suddenly felt as if Mahaveer and Maalti were around me. I could hear screaming in the middle of their love talk. I travelled back to the past which made its way through the dark forests, through the uneven ways and finally led me to villages with brick and mud houses.

This was a time when the love between Mahaveer and Maalti was at its zenith—the story of their love has now travelled from fields to the lanes of the village and finally culminating in their own houses where they would meet after their respective fathers have gone for work! A slight whispering has also started among the members of Mahaveer's Tasha party. The members of the family, in spite of an awareness of this whispering, preferred to remain silent, thereby giving a hint that the parents of both the families had no problem with this relationship.

But one day, a village strongman saw them. It was enough to raise a tremendous storm in the village.

"This bloody son of a C***ar¹⁰ is wooing our K**mi¹¹ girl. How dare that daughter fucker to do that? This was the response of the young K**mis of the village. These same people were Mahaveer's companions in the Tasha party. They were clerks along with him in the coal depot and also his friends. But what is friendship in front of caste solidarity? "K**mis are descendants of Shivaji. The K**mi Shivaji, the warrior, the king, and even Sardar Patel was a K**mi. In such a scenario, how could a lower caste fellow love a K**mi girl?" The whole village was burning with anger. This village and more specifically the K**mis used to earn a lot of money from the coal depot. A host of them

10. Cobbler, low caste, dalits. In the caste Hindu hierarchy this community was earlier classified as 'untouchables.' In modern India, the community is one among the many Scheduled Castes.

11. Hindu agricultural caste mainly residing in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh.

were clerks. The rest were the leaders of the workers. K**mis used to get four days' work in a week. And they also used to steal the working days of the *Manjis*¹² and *Ravidasis*,¹³ at times by the use of brutal force and on occasion by sheer use of cunningness. A few of them bought tractors. They earned good income from them as hire charges. There was no problem of money. On the top of it, this time the M.L.A. was also from the K**mi caste and that too by defeating the red flag. What was the issue then? Commit crime, extortion. Who is going to ask? The inspector at the police station was also K**mi. What else did they want?

"How do these bastards dare to imagine such a thing? What is the status of these ten houses as compared to our four hundred? Ever since he got a job in the coal depot, ever since he made a brick house, the success has gone to his head. What if he got good marks in matriculation? Does that mean that he is the repository of all the wisdom! As if all of us are fools! What if he has a Tasha party? We also play the instruments with him. We will surely teach him a lesson for becoming a lover." The young K**mi males started to spread the word everywhere.

The news reached the elders of the village. They rebuked Maalti's father Buddhan Mahto and told him in clear terms. "What do you wish? Do you want your daughter to be married to a C***ar? Do you want to live in the community or not? Within ten days, find a boy and marry off your girl, otherwise, none would be worse than us. You are sullyng the honour of the community. He is your friend and he must remain a friend; he shouldn't dare to become your relative. Confine Maalti in your house if you must. We will bury them alive, in case they are again seen together."

Buddhan started pleading: "How could one get a match so easily! Moreover, Dhokar's son is also suitable. In today's world, who is bothered about caste? We don't even have money. Those of our caste who got jobs in the coal depot are asking for motorcycle and T.V. as dowry. From where shall we bring so much money? Further, none of you wish to establish a marital alliance with my family. I don't have even thatching on my house. How could this all be managed at such a short notice?"

"We don't want to know anything about this! Borrow money, sell the land...but marry your girl to a person of your caste at any cost. If you don't get a bachelor, marry her to a married man or a widower. The rate of boys on the jungle-fringes is less; marry off your daughter there!"

"No, no, how could I marry such a beautiful daughter of mine to the

12. The followers of saint Ravidas — the dalits. In the present narrative — the chamars.

13. Followers of saint Ravidas, usually those who are at the lowest rung of society.

jungle-fringe or to someone unmatchable? Further, my daughter is educated. She will not tolerate such an injustice.” Buddhan started to cry. But there was no chance of a trial. Accompanying his son, Buddhan took off to find a match for the girl. Maalti was sixteen-seventeen years. The match they found was of ten years. He was affected by chronic illness too.

Maalti’s mobility was strictly restricted. Mahaveer and Maalti’s homes were in front of each other. They could no longer meet now.

The family of the groom was supposed to come in the evening to seal the marital deal. Maalti was restless. She knew that her father and brother loved Mahaveer but dared not accept it due to the extensive pressure of the community. What should Maalti do? Her father was scared. He had not been to work for the last four days. Four days had already passed from the given ten stipulated days. The family of the boy would come in the evening. *Khassi* (mutton) will be cooked. The deal will be sealed. Then? Then what will happen to her? Marriage with a child? Because of this thought, Maalti started to cry. Her mother was also crying inside! What could she have done?

“The elders would have accepted our relationship and, at most, they would have excluded us from the community! But these youngsters? They think themselves superior even to the *Rajputs*¹⁴ and the *Brahmins*¹⁵. They are imitating them. They are asking for dowry. Who gives currency to caste in today’s world? What kind of educated youngsters are these? Caste should break after education. But here it has strengthened. The headmistress of the school says: ‘All castes are equal.’ Even we are considered lower castes by the *Rajputs* of Nimadih. Can any K**mi dare to marry their daughter? These people will not fight with them. They will always dominate who are lower than them.” Maalti, while arguing with her own self, had decided: She would not wait until the arrival of the groom party. If at all she was to be married, it has to be only with Mahaveer.

The mutton was cooked in the night and served with liquor. Everyone was drunk. At the same time, Maalti sneaked into Mahaveer’s room. Mahaveer requested her with folded hands: “Maalti go from here, this marriage is not possible. I am a lower caste. You will kill yourself; I too will not be spared. Please don’t stay here.”

Maalti replied in a tone of protest: “You are scared so easily. Whatever

14. Forward caste in India’s social hierarchy. It comes under the umbrella term of *Kshatriyas* in the four *Varna* (understood also as the social division) and placed at second position — after the *Brahmins* and before the *Vaishyas*.

15. The priestly and scholarly class that is located at the top of the table in the four-tier *Varna* division.

you swore in the *Durga*¹⁶ temple, it seems you have forgotten that. At that time you had said, 'I will die but I will not leave you.' Was that all a lie? See, in spite of me being a woman, I have come to you leaving behind my home, family, everything. Let's us elope. I cannot marry that child. And if you will not do that, I will hang myself."

When Maalti could not be convinced after repeated arguments, Mahaveer finally decided to leave the coward within him behind and spoke like a warrior who was ready to do and die. "All right Maalti, you come out of your house tomorrow at ten on some pretext. I will be there at the turn of the road. From there we will move to Rajappa, my bua's (aunt) house and will get married there. My friends will also be with me."

Next day Maalti came out of her house on the excuse of meeting one of her friends and both of them did not return.

When Maalti did not return till the evening, there was a whispering in the house. A search was initiated. Has anyone seen her with Mahaveer? They asked the people. When even Mahaveer did not return, the villagers' suspicion was consolidated that they have eloped together. Panchayat was summoned. The youth started arguing with the elders: "You people just sit and watch. Now we will take the decision. You people have become old. You do not understand the issue of honour and morality." The youth started to gather together with their sticks. In a community of four hundred Kurmis, there were only ten Ravidasis and twenty-five *Turi*¹⁷ households.

Dhokar's entire family was tied up and presented before the Panchayat. Even their eight-year-old girl was tied to the nail of the hut. Buddhan Mahto's family was summoned too. In the stillness of the night, people came and sat around lanterns and oil-lamps. A bonfire was built at the centre. The red flame of the fire reflected in the red eyes of the four hundred K**mis who were burning in anger. The Ravidasis were horribly scared. Their eyes turned white with fear. "Kill these bastards! Take away Dhokar's daughter and fuck her, all of you. Then only this bastard will realize what is the honour of someone's daughter."

"Babu I don't know a single thing. Buddhan and I have come together from work." Dhokar was pleading.

"Bloody fellow! You are telling a lie. You have only planned and sent

16. A popular Hindu Goddess identified with ferocity and violence for liberating the world from evil.

17. Mainly classified as Scheduled Tribes, the Turis are traditionally engaged in Bamboo work. Often landless, they are also engaged in the business of vegetable growing and other small agricultural works.

them away. Present both of them here otherwise, you will be buried alive.” A number of voices nodded in affirmation.

“Look! Both of you put here an amount of five thousand each and also arrange a quintal of rice and pulse. *Khichdi*¹⁸ will be cooked. We will stay here day and night. We will hire a vehicle. Our people will accompany you to search Mahaveer and Maalti, and until that time your family will be kept tied here. Dhokar, you only go along. And see, none should know about this. Bring them here without a noise. If you complain to the police or some leader, your whole family will be finished and something will happen to this girl which you will remember for seven lives,” said Arjun Mahto, signalling lewdly towards the little girl.

Dhokar ‘Ravidas’ was intimidated. There wasn’t a way out. He borrowed five thousand rupees from the moneylender, after surrendering his cow and pigs. Buddhan was also punished in the same way. How could Buddhan or Dhokar offend the entire community? The watchman of the police station, Miya Rasool, used to live in the same village. He was also tied up along with Dhokar’s family, so that he could not move out and inform the police. This way, the police too would remain unaware of the incident. After all, this was the majority of four hundred houses. How could a group of ten houses defy this majority?

Buddhan too was instructed: “All of you sit here only. Or else, be ready for dire consequences.” The elders and respected people of the village were witnessing the injustice, like the great *Bhishm-Pitamah*.¹⁹ How could they speak? Their children provided bread to them. Even for the *sarpanch*, words were hard to come by. The caste leader was silent too. “Why should I be bothered, so long as my headship remains,” His was an approach of that sort. That night itself, a group of 13-14 people went to search Mahaveer and Maalti and returned by next evening empty-handed. They couldn’t be traced.

The congregation again assembled the following night. “Hey, bastard! Where were you roaming all day? You know the place of their hiding. Tell us otherwise all of us will f*ck this daughter of yours...”

In fact, Dhokar was unaware of their hiding. The younger son of Dhokar, who was also tied there, knew about their whereabouts and also could predict where they could have gone. He was silent till then with the thought that the people would not leave them alive once caught. But once he

18. An eatable dish usually made of rice and lentils.

19. A powerful warrior figure from the epic *Mahabharata*. In spite of being an unparalleled warrior, his silence along with that of Drona in the ‘Game of Dice’ is often debated.

noted that the whole family would be destroyed if they were not produced, he spoke up: "I will go and search them out wherever they are and produce them before you. Please leave my sister and mother alone. Don't beat my father."

"See, the bastard is vomiting everything now. They know everything. These people have only helped them to run away. All right, deposit the rice and pulses again—a quintal each, submit a sum of five thousand rupees per head and all the expenses that are required for the vehicle etc. Move bastards, if you fail this time, remember that none of you will be alive."

"From where will I get such a sum, *babu*²⁰? Whatever I had is already mortgaged."

"You are making us fools. You earn so much in the coal depot, where does it go?" This time, Dhokar surrendered all the ornaments of the house and gathered three thousand rupees. The share of rice and pulse was given by the village trader with an assurance that he would recover the money easily since the borrower has no option to run away. Buddhan Mahto also managed to pay the money somehow.

On this occasion, the youth took charge. Mahaveer's brother accompanied them. He straightaway took them to the house of Rajappa *Mausti*²¹. There they came to know that Mahaveer and Maalti had already married and had left for Gola. Everyone reached Gola. Mahaveer and Maalti were not ready to come. Upon this, Mahaveer's brother Laxman said: "Mahaveer let's go home! Otherwise, they will ruin your sister. They will also kill father and mother. We too will not escape."

"So you people wish to take us away only to be killed?" asked Mahaveer in a tone heavily loaded with frustration and sarcasm.

At the same time, a few of those youths started talking sweetly with Mahaveer. Some of those were clerks along with him in the coal depot and also his companions in the Tasha party.

Nakul Mahto said: "Mahaveer, buddy at least believe me. We are your friends. We take the responsibility that nothing will happen to you! Let's go only for the satisfaction of the Panchayat. At most, they will penalize you by excommunicating you from the community. The Panchayat has always been like this. Trust all of us. We are not your enemies." When Mahaveer started to sway unaware of their trap, Maalti said—"No, I will not go to get killed. I know how the boys and girls are beaten in a K**mi Panchayat. Especially in the cases of the couples leaving each other. And we, we have eloped. All of them are brutal, I will not go."

20. The word has a variety of connotations. Here, 'young boy.'

21. Generally referred to one's maternal aunt.

And then she addressed the K**mi youth: "You all used to say that I have cut your nose by selecting none of you and befriending a C**ar? Now all of you have come to take revenge on us?"

Mahaveer was in a fix. Everyone was pressing through subtle love. The only silent person was Laxman, Mahaveer's brother. He knew that he was handing over his brother to the butchers. But he could not have said anything. He was speaking what he was taught: "Come nothing will happen to you. Otherwise, none of us will be spared." With the gestures of his eyes, he wanted to alert his brother not to come along but was scared of being caught in the act. He admired Maalti's defiance and resistance.

Mahaveer was pretending to be ignorant though he knew the truth. He decided to go along with them. Maalti too went and sat in the vehicle. They reached Hendengada in the evening. The Panchayat was in session. Khichdi was being cooked. The bonfire was on.

The arrival of Mahaveer and Maalti brought stunned silence to the crowd. But after a while, abuses started to be hurled at them. The women of the village too started to congregate once they came to know about Maalti's arrival. 'Whore, promiscuous' and what not, the abuses went on. The young males had a grudge: Why Maalti did not select any K**mi boy from such a big community? Because of this, they were adamant about taking extra revenge. They were heroes too in the Tasha party. Some of them were even clerks in the coal depot. They had land, money too. How could she be entrapped by a C**ar boy, and that too she being a K**mi's girl?

Meanwhile, the Panchayat started to question her. "Maalti, Mahaveer compelled you to elope with him, isn't it?" Said Tejan Mahto in a rebuking tone so as to get her answer in affirmation.

"No, I only forced him to take me away. It was my choice to go away. I will not marry a child."

"See, how this girl is chirping? Don't you know that Mahaveer is a C**ar, a low caste? We were all here, why didn't you not choose any one of us?"

"Is there a meaning of caste and sub-caste today? You too kept a woman who belongs to a lower caste. Mohana even eloped with a married woman. I liked Mahaveer and that's why I married him. Love is not possible forcefully—then how could I choose any one of you." Maalti answered spontaneously. She could not be scared down.

"Education has turned the girl into a leader. Such a girl should be buried alive."

None could be at ease with the truth uttered by Maalti. The entire Panchayat was unable to digest Maalti's truth. The girl who belonged to four

hundred houses was speaking the truth of ten houses. How could that be possible? Four hundred houses...Ten houses...! She should have spoken the truth of the four hundred houses but she was speaking the opposite.

On the other side, Kishun started to question Mahaveer. Mahaveer was saying — “We have married — now leave us and let us free. Whatever has happened has happened. If you all so desire, I will leave the village but not Maalti.”

“This much courage! How dare he show the courage of the four hundred houses, regardless of belonging to ten houses? How’s that possible? Bloody bastard, C***ar.”

Meanwhile, Arjun came up with a burning piece of wood in his hand, pulled off Maalti’s *saree* and stripped her. He thrust the firewood into her naked thighs. “Take this! This is Mahaveer’s pe**s! This burning will teach you a lesson.” And then he thrust the burning firewood into Maalti’s womb...the truth of Maalti’s existence... the truth of a woman’s existence!

A loud scream rose from her: “Father, Mother please save me!” And then she was kicked from all corners. Her father and mother fell on her, to save her. “Please leave her! Don’t kill our daughter. She has now returned home, will you still kill her?” Maalti fainted.

A group of young males shouted from the other side—“Kill this bloody C***ar. Give him such a punishment that the people of other castes never dare to look at a K**mi girl again!”

Mahaveer’s hands and legs were tied to different pegs. Holding a big stone in his hands, Nakul Mahto ran towards him.

“Nakul, you said that you are my friend! You assured me that nothing will happen if I come with you to the village. I came on your assurance, Nakul! And now even you are deceiving me!” Mahaveer asked straight into the wild eyes of Nakul. For a moment, Nakul’s hands stopped.

“Hun! What friendship! That was only a ploy to bring you here!”

Meanwhile, Arjun came from behind and crashed a big stone on Mahaveer’s head. Mahaveer could not even cry.

Then he was crushed to death with stones. His hands and legs were shivering till they had life in them. The story of ‘You too, to Brutus?’ is now played out in Hendengada. The only difference was of places—Rome and Hendengada. Was there a difference between the ruler and the ruled? A humanity inclined towards cheating and fraud, deceit and cruelty — irrespective of one being the king or the commoner — ultimately turns into ‘Brutus’. Today it turned out to be Nakul. Mahaveer never read that play and perhaps had never heard about it. He only knew some rules of friendship but today, ‘Brutus’ had happened to him and that too through Nakul.

Dhokar was wailing: "Leave him babu, don't kill him!" Mahaveer's face transformed beyond recognition. His lips that used to play sweetly on the flute, were crushed. His eyes, which used to roll around the Tasha and dance along the drum, were now hidden somewhere in the lump of flesh. Only the tied hands and legs had some life! Hands—which were used to play on the flute! The shoulders, where the drum used to be tie up, were hanging as a chunk of flesh! Why did nobody speak? Why nobody resisted?

In reality, Mahaveer's body wasn't more than a heap of flesh by now; he was crumpled.

The watchman did not say a single word; after all, life was precious to him!

Dhokar did not utter anything; ultimately he had to live in the same village!

Buddhan did not speak; he still had to marry off his daughter! Who would have married her now beyond the community?

Only the killers were speaking! The wolves were crying!

Mahaveer's corpse was lying in the open the whole night. Everybody celebrated. Khichdi, snacks and liquor were served throughout the entire night! That day, the man who crushed Mahaveer with stones was the hero of the whole community. The great warrior who killed a helpless, tied man. Their honour was saved, the honour of their community, the honour of their women! The honour of women—which was given to them by men and in return the women were supposed to be the slaves of men for their entire life. The lover of the K**mi girl was hacked to death. All women were happy. The community was happy. Who could break the rule of the community? Can the cattle break the fencing of its byre? Was it anything less that the community has given them all the security?

Maalti's mother was quite scared inside; she could not cry. Only Mahaveer's mother was crying; loudly. She lost everything now. Why she would not cry? Dhokar accepted his lot. An acceptance, which he got as a legacy from his ancestors, who in turn learned that through centuries—!

"Babu let me take my son's corpse home," He was pleading throughout the night. He was scolded and silenced.

In the morning, the order came. "Go and bury Mahaveer"

"Babu, let me bring the shroud."

"Yes, the shroud is necessary! He is a Hindu. We have to follow the ritual"—said the sarpanch.

"You have killed him now, but allow him the ritual of death Babu! Dhokar said in a pleading tone and burst into tears. Tears, which broke the dam of horror, built through the previous night.

One more session of the Panchayat was summoned. What's to be done! Meanwhile, Manku Turee of the Turee clan told Dhokar quietly. "Dhokar, inform the police, otherwise we will also affirm that you have killed Mahaveer."

What should Dhokar do now? If he listened to the K**mis, there would be death! Listening to the Turees would also invite death!

"Then it's done! Death would be satisfying if it helps to catch the murderers of your son." Dhokar's heart started to counsel him. The panchayat allowed him to bring the shroud for his son. A group of five people decided to help Dhokar and they all headed towards Jarba. They started to run as soon as they crossed the boundary of the village. In the hot summer, the sun was at its peak. They reached the police station through jungle. Dhokar fainted midway but his friends had no time to even look after him.

The police inspector was a *Harijan*²². He came along with them immediately. He did not waste time in registering the F.I.R. Mahaveer's corpse was laying there only, in the Panchayat house. Everyone sat around it. In the morning only Maalti was sent to a different village along with her parents and brother. Everyone was now in and around the corpse—Dhokar Ravidas's others sons, Mahaveer's mother and the little girl who was Mahaveer's sister.

"Police! Police!" People surrounded the police from all corners. The women also grabbed at the police inspector's revolver. After all, these were the women of four hundred houses. But even then the inspector did not fire the rounds. He knew that if he fired, Mahaveer's murder will be overlooked and instead, he, the Harijan inspector, would be charged for firing on the villagers. Thus Mahaveer's murderers would never be caught. Some of them attacked the inspector with a sword, but he swerved aside and escaped. The sword made a four-inch deep cut on the wooden bench. Nonetheless, the inspector did not allow the funeral rites of the corpse to happen. On wireless, he informed the Hazaribag S.P regarding the incident and asked for help. Because of their fear, the five associates of Dhokar, who went to inform the police did not come with the inspector. They came now with the shroud pretending to be unaware of everything. After all, they were to live in the same village after the incident! Every time the police would not come. Anyway, the inspector informed the S.P. The outside world came to know about Mahaveer's death after four days of the incident: "Dalit youth hacked to death for love marriage with a K**mi girl."

In fact, I was one of those first outsiders who reached Hendengada that day along with the press reporters. In front of us, the dalit youth, Mahaveer's

22. Used as a synonym for dalits in contemporary India.

brother and uncle had given their testimonies. Till that day neither was Dhokar traced nor any of the culprits arrested.

The arrogance of caste has strangled the humanity! Dhokar did not return home that day. When people went to search him he slipped into the jungle. He was brought home. Mahaveer's last rites were performed by then. Dhokar was searching for Mahaveer. He was searching for Maalti. The entire village was abuzz with the news that Mahaveer's ghost is on Dhokar.

From that moment, Dhokar stopped going for his work. Now, every day he leaves his house at eight o'clock, roams around the Panchayat house, and repeats whatever happened that night. The whole night people hear the cries of Mahaveer...Maalti...Mahaveer...They also listen to the tune of flute and the noise of the drum.

The K**mi women were abusing Dhokar, the police, the government and naturally Maalti and Mahaveer. K**mi men in turn abused red flag bearers and especially me—since I was the one who brought the incident to light and got 45 people arrested.

The Ravidasi women of the village cry too. While some of the Turee, Ganju and adivasi youth feel disgusted with the cowardice of the Ravidasis, the others would say: "What they would have done? They were ten families! How would they have fought with four hundred families? Meanwhile, some will also say, "We have to unite and fight against this injustice," and they would imagine the success of their unity in their hearts. The elders would say: "Let bygones be bygones; after all, we have to live among them. We are low caste and we have to always transact with them." The dalits of other castes will quarrel among themselves "What is the need that we should fight for the other caste?" Then immediately some young person would say: "Is it to prevent them from dishonouring your sisters and daughters? When it will befall you, will you help? We shouldn't be thinking this way. All dalits should have a common Panchayat." Such a suggestion would have a melting effect on the elders.

Every now and then a variety of such planning would be done; a host of strategies would be discussed. Some of them had success while the rest faltered within the mind itself.

Today again I became restless after listening to Mahaveer and Maalti's story from Dhokar. Dhokar has not only seen it, but also lived it. Every single stone that was hurled at Mahaveer, it seemed, had hit Dhokar's face. I too lost myself in the incidents of that night, but suddenly the voice of the flute echoed in my ears! When the sound of the flute was getting low, someone said, "Maalti..." and the answer came, "Mahaveer..."

The people of the village say that Dhokar is carrying Mahaveer's ghost. Yes, Mahaveer's ghost is there on Dhokar because Dhokar is a human. The ghost will be there on any human being who witnesses such an incident — the ghost of that incident, the ghost of the murderers, the ghost of the dead will automatically come — if the person has empathy! And Dhokar is a human — was a human and will always remain a human.

"But what is the identity of those four hundred men-women?" The voices of Mahaveer and Maalti voices are asking!

"Were they human or caste? Were they human or K**mis?" Dhokar's struggling voice is asking.

YES! They were not humans, they were castes.

Caste, which was manufactured by *Manu*²³! Caste that dissolves only after death.

"They were Hindus—not humans!" The jingling of the Tasha!

"They were K**mis—not humans!" The beatings of the drum!

"They were not even animals since animals do not have caste." All the musical instruments of the Tasha party were striking in the chorus. The flute was at its highest note.

Translated from Hindi by Umesh Kumar



23. A word that carries various meanings in Hinduism. It refers to the first man and his children in Hinduism. The word is also used as a prefix to the famous Hindu text *Manusmriti* and perhaps refers to a series of Manus who may have contributed in the production of the text. In some interpretations, it also refers to the first Manu — Svayambhuva, the spiritual son of Brahma — the architect of the universe.