

## SHORT STORY

## The Solution

DILIP KUMAR (translated by V. Surya)

To tell you this story, I am afraid I must drag you out of this compartment of Nilgiri Express from Coimbatore, which is arriving in Madras so irritatingly late. Making our way between porters who are obviously disgusted that I don't give them my only box to carry, past the eagerly waiting rickshawallahs, disappointing them as well, we hurriedly cross Walltax Road, slip into a narrow lane and reach Mint Street.

This is a North Indian, specifically Gujarati, neighbourhood, and is therefore distinguished by a certain blend of ostentation and filth. I mean by ostentation the kind of clothes that people wear. As for filth, I refer to the garbage that they spew out of their houses. These Gujaratis believe in keeping their houses clean and their thresholds dirty. In accustoming their minds and noses to living in a squalid environment, these people are second to none.

It is 8.45 a.m. Shops and offices are being opened; schoolchildren are hurrying along; people look spick and span. Gandhi-capped *sethjis* and their smartly turned out stupid sons have begun to fill the lane. Foreign cars, motorcycles and scooters are lining up along the curb.

The famous Ekambareswarar Temple is in this very same Mint Street. It is a big temple with a tank and an enormous courtyard, very impressive, with statues and sculpted pillars. Like the city's other famous temples, this one too appears quite ordinary to its habitués, and magnificent to infrequent visitors. At its gates, to the left, is a *sethji's* snack shop. To the right are a *chettiar* selling coconuts and the usual row of beggars displaying their inexhaustible wares of disease and wretchedness. Lord Ekambareswarar Himself sits placidly inside, allowing all these people to make profitable use of His address.

The three narrow streets which run around the sides of the temple is where both my uncle's house and the locale of my story are to be found. I reached my uncle's house, which is a narrow building covering miserably two larger ones. On one side is the dirty, red-and-white striped wall of the temple, and on the other, houses, mostly without porches. One of these is a primary school and another a high school. Just then, children of all sizes were spilling into the street, and milling around the ice-cream man's ubiquitous pushcart.

At the gate was a group of young Gujarati women struggling with a tap that apparently had refused to yield to their manipulations, and mocked them, dry-mouthed. They greeted me with a solemn silence. I looked at all of them, but not one was really worth a second glance. Thirty families in this building, and not one beauty among them! Except perhaps Urmila who lives on the top floor...but that's another story. To understand this one, I must first acquaint you with the topography of this building.

In the center is a large, open courtyard, cutting the sky above into a large square. This aperture is not only to admit *Varuna* and *Surya* into the building, but also to serve as a receptacle for chewed-up Calcutta paans deposited in it from the upper floors.

Six flats confront each other across this square. Two smaller courtyards lie beyond these flats, one on each side, the one on the left leading to two lavatories, and the one on the right, which has a well within it. Around each courtyard are ten flats, making a total of thirty in this one building. Thirty flats with thirty Gujarati households in them, and connected to one another by filthy staircases stained with *paan* spittle. Usually at this time of the day, women are to be found sitting within the open doorways of these flats, busily engaged in some household task or the other. One might be scrubbing dirty utensils, another washing clothes, a third cleaning rice or wheat. Though most of these women have the kind of bodies that bloat after a few years of marriage, they are a hardworking lot. Ignorant, stubborn and quarrelsome, they have quelled their world and reduced it to Hindi films, sugar-sweet *filmi geet*, recipes and finery. Apart from these, they have another interest: the alarmingly thoughtless reproduction of the species. Each of the housewives in these thirty households has at least five offspring. (My uncle, too, has five). The rate of population growth in this area has the inexorability of a natural law. Mind you, they're not submissive—these women. It's their men who are meek, obedient and self-effacing. Grieving over the crushing mediocrity of their existence, and imagining that they have inflicted some terrible cruelty on their wives, they slink guiltily along the corridors.

As soon as I entered the building, a surprise awaited me. The

main courtyard was deserted. An extraordinary silence filled the place. I crossed the courtyard towards the staircase and caught sight of one of the inner courtyards, the one with the well in its center. Around it was a crowd of men, women and children. My uncle was standing in the middle of this crowd, staring intently into the well. Everyone looked silently at me as I approached. After a second's surprise, Uncle pulled himself together, and told me in Gujarati, 'Go upstairs. I'll soon be with you.'

Suppressing my curiosity, I hurried towards the staircase. Gopal Bhai was coming down, and I asked him what the matter was. 'What to say, Dilip Bhai! The water problem has become acute. Not a drop of water to drink in this entire building! And in this fine state of affairs, a rat has fallen into the well. Poor Babu Bhai! From eight this morning he's been trying to get it out, and can't!' said Gopal Bhai sorrowfully. On the top floor, as I entered Uncle's house, I was met by Chandra, his daughter, who smiled joyously and called me in. My aunt bustled about to make some tea for me.

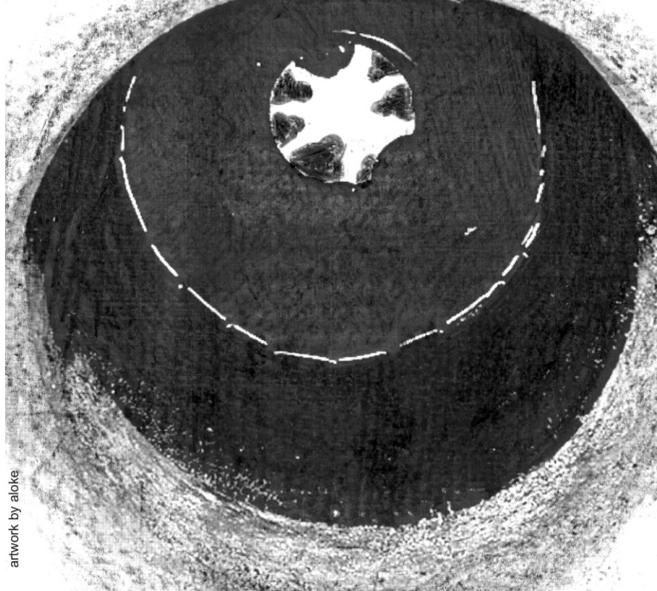
My uncle's house was small, with a largish hall at the end of which were two rooms. The room on the left was the kitchen and the one on the right was a bedroom-cum-bathroom-cum-storeroom, all in one. The boys must have gone out to play. Uncle had two daughters (Poorna was in the kitchen), and three boys—Kamini, Vrajesh and Deepak. Grandmother had gone out to the temple. She left in the morning at five and would not be returning till 10:30 or 11:00. Extremely orthodox, Grandmother believed firmly in ritual observances of pollution and purity. Every time I came to visit, the first thing she did was push her ritually washed pure clothing to the two ends of the washing line, where it would not come in contact with the top of my head (I am somewhat tall), carefully using a bamboo pole expressly meant for handling such vestments.

I looked in the direction of the lavatories. Wonder of wonders! They were empty and waiting to be used. Something was up, certainly, normally, 9:15 in the morning is peak lavatory time for the sixty persons who live on this floor, on which there are just two conveniences. In accordance with the culture of my uncle's household, renowned for its orthodoxy and its scrupulous observance of ritual purity, the use of the lavatories was subject to certain strict regulations. In fact, a trip to the lavatory was a disciplined exercise.

Firstly, one was required to fill a small plastic pitcher with water from a broken cement cistern and to place this filled pitcher on the narrow parapet beside a waterless tap. Nearby on a low wall stood an empty Dalda tin, placed upside down. One picked up this tin with the left hand, set it down at the entrance to the little passage at the end of which were the lavatories, picked up a small plastic bucket with the right hand, dipped it into the aforementioned broken cement cistern and filled the Dalda tin. Carrying the full Dalda tin in the left hand, and gracefully stepping around and across the many little pools of urine produced by the children on this floor, avoiding the first lavatory, the sight of which is guaranteed to produce nausea, one reaches the second, exerts oneself to the utmost to avoid slipping on the slime and then immerses oneself in meditation on the philosophy of J. Krishnamurti or the poetry of T.S. Eliot. Emerging later, one puts back the Dalda tin in exactly the same position. One then picks up the half-dissolved 501, Rexona or Lifebuoy soap lying next to it, raises the plastic pitcher full of water using both wrists only, gently pours water on one's hands and scrubs them with soap, and washes them. Then one takes up the pitcher in the usual way, fills it and washes one's feet.

The crowd around the well had thinned. The women had left, and so that the men, except for a few youths and some children. The men all wore long-cloth vests with pockets and white pyjamas, except for Uncle. He had on a frayed sleeveless sweater and a dhoti, held up with a cheap belt. Uncle had worked in the LIC for almost twenty years and was among the foremost of the educated occupants of the building. This was his realm, and he commanded such prestige, derived from his old-time school-leaving certificate, as to lord it over everyone else. Just now he was involved in the matter of the well. A tin sheet had been placed above the well to prevent birds' droppings from falling into it. This blocked off the light, leaving only a small gap. Into this gap, a youth was now beaming a flashlight.

Deep down in the darkness bobbed a black shape. The general guess was that it was the rat. No one was willing to lend his bucket to haul up the dead rat. Uncle particularly was very definite that no bucket belonging to his household was to be thus defiled. And so an



artwork by aboke

empty old fruit basket had been tied to a rope and lowered into the well. The rat had now floated to the well's side and had been in the same spot for over half an hour. When the crowd told me this, Uncle imagined it to be a comment on his competence and became quite angry. Yet with lowered brows he doggedly went on with the work of getting the rat out. For him it had become a challenge of the highest order.

From time to time, his neighbours, Kantial and Chandrakant, kept pestering him with questions in Gujarati on the progress of his efforts. Frowning and drawing his eyebrows together with fierce concentration, Uncle actually enjoyed all this distracting attention. Finally, losing patience, he resorted to some desperate strategies—lifting and lowering the basket in jerky movements, as though he were pounding chilies, or grinding batter or pulverizing grain with a variety of pestles.

These tactics worked. The rat floated to the middle of the well. Enthusiasm bubbled up. Everyone felt that it would be easy to bring it out from this position. Like a ship's captain, Uncle now issued authoritative directions to the youth with the flashlight, and ordered everyone else to stand aside. Then he lowered the rope and with great deliberation and dexterity brought it close to the floating rat. The next moment with dazzling speed he hauled up the rope. Everyone peeped eagerly into the well and was disappointed. The basket was empty.

For the next forty-five minutes, the wretched creature defied him most impudently, bobbing adroitly out of reach of the basket and making him look more ridiculous than ever.

It was 10:15 before the rat was somehow brought out. Shuddering at the sight of the corpse, both adults and children shrank away. Deeming this an excellent opportunity to demonstrate his virility, a hitherto unnoticed youth bore off the basket containing the rat to dispose of its mortal remains.

Uncle basked in the triumphant pride of a Mahmud of Ghazni, a Caesar or a Napoleon. Then, for fifteen minutes, with a demagogue's eloquence and strategist's penchant for detail, he held forth to half a dozen fawning Gujarati youths on the methods by which he had forced the rat to vacate the well. When Uncle's lecture was over, Jayantial and some others who were waiting nearby asked a reasonable but troubling question: Could the water in the well now be considered potable?

Not having given thought to this matter until that very moment,

Uncle was slightly taken aback. Pulling himself together, he declared hurriedly, 'No, no, of course the water can't be used as it is. Someone must go to the Health Office; they'll sprinkle some medicine or the other into it. Or we'll pour a little chlorine in it ourselves.'

He began to move off. Although heads bobbed in agreement, faces registered not just worry, but sheer terror at the prospect of having to drink not only rat-polluted, but also chemically-contaminated water. The Tanjorian Gujarati Chandrakant said to Uncle in a pleading tone, 'Will you inform the Health Office? We know nothing about such matters, Babu Bhai!' Uncle replied politely that though he was quite willing to go to the Health Office, the fact of the matter was that he didn't exactly know where the Health Office was. Anyway, he said, he was already very late for work, and wriggled away.

Meanwhile, rich, TV-owning, old Govindji Seth strongly advised that fifteen or twenty pitchers should be lightly skimmed from the water's surface and poured off to make the rest of the water fit to use. Standing authoritatively by, he saw to this operation at once. When it was over, everyone stood around the well, panting with the effort, and stared disconsolately into it, unconvinced of the efficacy of this method of purification.

Just then Grandmother could be seen at the building's entrance, leaning on her cane. Wearing a white sari closely printed over with small black flowers, with a tulsi mala around her neck, she was the very picture of clarity and

orderliness. Yet no one noticed her at first in the confusion. She came up to the harried group around the well and asked what was troubling them. The problem was immediately referred to her for solution.

Grandmother thought for a moment. Then she announced, 'Come, I'll show you a way out,' and led them all upstairs.

In the hall, Kanu and Vrajesh were playing at wrestling. As she went in, Grandmother reprimanded Kanu with a light but painful rap on his buttock with her cane. Then she went up to the teak almirah near the kitchen and seated herself before it. Slowly she began to open the doors. Inside the almirah were several small idols dressed up in gold, lace-bordered garments and reclining on tiny mattresses.

In one corner was a little bundle tied up in saffron cloth. Grandmother took it out and placidly untied it with fat, but amazingly deft fingers. Within it was a very small mud pot with a clean white cloth tied around its mouth. Grandmother called to Poorna to fetch a bowl. Untying the cloth, she poured a little water from the pot into the bowl. Utter silence accompanied her movements. Although every one was impatiently watching her, Grandmother closed the almirah properly without the least hurry, before she turned to face them.

Among those who crowded near the door and outside it was Praanjeeval. Grandmother now beckoned to him. As she had been sitting with her head lowered for some time, her glasses had slipped down her nose. She pushed the bowl of water a little forward raised her eyes so that they could look through the glasses, and announced, 'Here you are. There's Ganga-water here. Say the name of God, pour it into the well, and use the water.'

Praanjeeval nodded humbly and received the bowl. Everyone followed him as he went out towards the well. In a little while pots brimmed with water in every house. The abnormal silence of the building gave way to the sound of households functioning once more.

Grandmother serenely immersed herself in *Jan Kalyan*, a monthly religious journal.

Dilip Kumar and V. Surya are a well-known writing, editing and translation team in Tamil.

## What the Children Learn: A Review of Primary Textbooks of Bangladesh

AHMED AHSANUZZAMAN, (Adapted from a paper presented at Jadavpur University, Kolkata last December. All translations are those of the author.)

In October 1994, National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) of Bangladesh came up with the first imprint of *Paribesh Parichiti -- Samaj* (Introduction to Environment--Society), which has remained the prescribed textbook for Class Four across the country since 1995. However, a 'revised' edition of the book became a 'necessity', leading to the birth of 1996 version. While one may wonder about the possible reasons for the overhauling of the book in such a short period of time, it comes as no surprise to anybody knowledgeable about textbook publication in Bangladesh. This is because at the time of the first imprint there was a particular party in power, which subsequently lost the 1996 election battle to their political adversaries, who wanted their version of 'truth' in the textbooks. With the October 2001 general elections, the former party came back to power, which meant that by January 2002 reprints of the first edition were ready to be distributed. Significantly, barring Chapter 14 of the latest edition (the 1996 version contained 13 chapters in total) which is presumably a new inclusion, there is just a single chapter (Chapter 10)—the apple of discord—that underwent surgical intervention in the wake of change in government. The other chapters remain virtually unaffected as their contents do not posit any threats to the historical revisionism of the concerned parties.

Indeed, the business of textbook production is far from being an innocent one, not only in Bangladesh but in other countries, as it is deemed a potent means for disseminating and propagating the thoughts, ideas and dogmas of the group in control of the levers of power.



The 'politicization' of textbooks in Texas, USA, could be a case in point. In a response to an editorial piece entitled '*Textbook Politics: Liberals are shocked that some education critics have an agenda*' (28 March 2002), the Wall Street Journal said:

'The federal government has grabbed authority over local schools and parents in brazen violation if the US constitution (Amendment 10 of the Bill of Rights). They have done this in the name of "improving" education. The constitution was established to protect citizens from the overarching power of centralized and consolidated federal powers. We have ignored those constitutional protective mandates at our peril.'

As the French Marxist thinker Louis Althusser (1918--1990) observed, there are the 'societal mechanisms for creating pliant, obedient citizens who practice dominant values, "ideological state apparatuses" (ISAs), and he traces "the rising influence of schools as the dominant ISA in modern society." Schools instill in students "the habits that will make them productive workers in modern capitalist societies so

that they... [assent] without question'. The role of textbooks is, therefore, of vital importance to the policymakers, manifesting the will and desire of the government so as to affect the growth of the learners of those materials. As will be seen in the comparative analysis of different discourses (of the apparently identical book published under different regimes), the common tendency of the policymakers in Bangladesh is to, by means of subtle amendments in chapters, have these read, believed and justified without letting the readers have much of an option. The whole stance is so crudely juxtaposed that facts for this year are reversed/altered the next year. And the poor NCTB Chairman -- the seeming man-in-the-circle --condemned to blow the government's trumpet in succeeding Prefaces claiming that the latest version was made following 'proper scrutiny' and 'correction'!

To take up Chapter 10 of 'Introduction to Environment -- Society'. The 2002 version entitled 'Heroes of Bangladesh Liberation' contains brief life-sketches of great national

leaders like Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Huq, Husain Shaheed Surawardi, Maulana Bhasani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman. Yet, one who has perused this version as well as that of 1996 (Chapter 10 of this edition was titled 'Two Great Bengalis') will be drowned in a sea of confusion not only because of the '96 version's omission of sketches of some of the prominent figures but also because of the descriptions of Sheikh Mujib and Zia that stand in sharp contrast to the 2002 version. For instance, the 1996 publication has more than three pages to discuss the life and contribution of Mujib. Significantly, it is provided that before his arrest on March 25 night, Mujib declared the Independence of Bangladesh and with the victory on December 16, 1971, the dream of 'the Bengalis' was realized under his leadership. The closing paragraph of the chapter records the killing of Sheikh Mujib along with most of his family members on August 15, 1975, by 'some power hungry conspirators'. The paragraph, therefore, logically deduces August 15 as 'National Mourning Day' when people pay 'homage' to his 'accomplishments' (1996: 94).

The 2002 version has a little over one-page description on Mujib's life. Crucially, it entirely omits Mujib's declaration of Independence episode. On the contrary, it provides the information that as an administrator, Mujib was a failure and the condition of the country turned 'suffocating', and 'as a result of which' there occurred an 'uprising' that saw the assassination of all of Mujib's family members excluding his two daughters -- Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana (2002: 94).

The three-page entry on Shaheed Ziaur Rahman has it that taking a historical decision Zia, on 26th March, declared the Independence of Bangladesh from the temporary radio-station

at Kalurghat, Chittagong. Now, there is no mention of Zia's declaration of Independence in the 1996 version of the book while in 2002 issue, there is no reference to Mujib's declaration of Independence before his arrest on the fateful night of March 25. Now, Banglapedia--the national Encyclopedia of Bangladesh--does not contain any reference to Mujib's declaration of Independence before his arrest by the Pakistani military though it mentions that Zia, on radio, announced Bangladesh's Independence on behalf of Sheikh Mujib (Vol. X, 348). In both cases, history has been made a scapegoat. Yet, the young learners of Bangladesh, and no doubt their parents, are under the impression that the textbooks, being unaffected by party concerns, speak the truth.

*Amar Boi* ('My Book')--Bangla course-book for Class Three--originally published in 1993, was revised and amended in February 2001. However, in December of the same year a reprint of the original followed because the party under whose regime the February version appeared was no more there at the helm of power and within a couple of months of getting back to power the ruling party felt it necessary to re-introduce the original version published during their previous tenure. A look into the contents of both books will reveal that there are twenty-six items with their titles remaining similar. Why then was the December 2001 version produced?

Item 21 of the February version -- '*Birsrestha Mohiuddin Jahangir*' ('Hero of Excellence: Mohiuddin Jahangir') -- begins with a reference to 'Bangabandhu' (Sheikh Mujib)'s historical March 7 speech generating the idea that the people of Bangladesh 'fought the liberation war in compliance with Mujib's clarion call'. The December 2001 version of the item is entitled '*Birsrestha*

*Jahangir*' (this is the only change one encounters in the content lists of the books), which replaces the entire reference to Mujib's speech with a two-paragraph description on the hero's picturesque village and his childhood dream of becoming a soldier. Besides, the February version of the piece, might appear to one, rather an 'unguarded' denouncement of the then Pakistani rulers busy looting the wealth of Bangladesh. In contrast, the equivalent piece of the December issue, one might read, is 'guarded' in its equivocation of the oppression of the Pakistani rulers. The slight yet curious alteration in the anecdote could be seen as yet another indication of how an event of history is vulnerable to partisan concerns. It is just likely that an elder brother has read the February version whereas the younger one would be reading the December version of the apparently same piece. A

problem is bound to occur: who is learning the truth, the elder or the younger? And what is worse, the learner who might have read a version of history in one of his previous classes is, with the passage of time, likely to come across an altered version of the same episode in another class of study, thereby shifting the inter-person conflict to intra-person chaos. This may have, at least, a two-fold significance. First, the learner might go through stages of uprooting in that he does not have a solid history to rely on, that either he is an outsider to his soil or a stranger to himself. Secondly, it could be that the frequent changes and alterations in history serve only the ends of the state organ. Exposed to different orientations of history the nation is stuck in perpetual limbo that keeps her ideologically divided forever. The hangover of divide and rule from the colonial period is perhaps here at work that makes

administration 'rather easy' for the party in power.

Here it is important to stress that there has hardly been any debate over the issue between the opposed political quarters. This is probably because they both deem it will serve their own purpose of maintaining status quo when they form the government in their turn. In this, both the parties are similar in objectives and modus operandi. Thus one can see that the production of children textbook in Bangladesh is anything but an innocent activity. Being controlled, regulated and monitored by government agencies, the textbook affair closely follows a 'design' that, unfortunately, remains largely undetected and unaddressed.

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## July on Food Street

NUZHAT AMIN MANNAN

On summer evenings

They are out in droves

Mothers, uncles, aunts, nephews, *ayis*, in-laws,

With girlfriends, mistresses, chums, neighbours,

Chess-partners, colleagues, children, pets

Eating outdoors under umbrellas, sitting on

Middleclass patio chairs with their *Qingdao* beer bottles

Ruddy, happy faces inhaling their

karma, the warm July city air

the barbecue vendors' goodies,

aroma of mutton sizzling over cumin, propane,

Cigarette smoke...

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