

THE LIGHT FROM HEAVEN

(A NOVEL)

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Mr Sreenivasan is an authority on management and has written several books on the subject besides being the author of four well-received novels-one in Tamil and three in English. His other works include a translation of the *Tirukkural* and an autobiography, *Climbing the Coconut Tree*.

Now settled in Coimbatore, he hopes to devote more time to literary pursuits.

Dedicated to

S. Sethuram

and

C.R. Ramachandran

In Remembrance of New York

Misled by fancy's meteor ray,

By passion driven;

But yet the light that led astray,

Was light from heaven

Robert Burns

ONE

I

The river dominated the town; and the temple on its bank - with its seven-tiered gopuram-dominated the river. The temple was a thousand years old; no one knew how old the river was. The temple was built by a grateful as well as fearful people to propitiate the river, and the chief goddess of the temple was named after the river.

In the summer months, she was a slender stream of water, meandering leisurely amidst vast sands on either side, a small rivulet that flowed by the stone steps of the temple, where the devotees could have their obligatory bath and perform their ceremonies. Then, she shone like a diamond chain on the neck of a beautiful woman, shimmering in the morning light. But when the rains came, she swelled and became an angry goddess, the swirling brown waters breaking the banks and entering the town. Even the sacred precincts of the temple were not spared. She moved majestically, spreading, ravaging, destroying everything in her path, moving towards the eternal ocean, symbolizing the blending of the Individual with the Universal spirit. The people of the town understood her moods and adjusted their lives to them, praying that she might shower her blessings with generosity and manifest her anger with discrimination.

Holy river, virgin goddess of the dark and silent hills, she burst forth into the hot and dusty plains to bring life, prosperity, happiness, and occasionally, misery and destruction. She brought agriculture to the parched lands and along with it, culture, civilization, learning and philosophy. She gave men and women their faiths and their superstitions, regulated the seasons of hard work and indolence. She cleansed their bodies, and purified their souls; she was their eternal protector, but also the blind arbiter of their destiny.

Balan, alias S. Balasubramaniam, was the son of Seshadri Iyer, head clerk at the collector's office in Kamalapur. He was twenty-two, a graduate in History of the A.B.M. College, and unemployed. His sister Lakshmi was twenty-eight and still unmarried because her father could not afford the dowry for a suitable bridegroom. She had a slight limp, which meant a bigger dowry. She worked as a typist in a local shop. There was nothing unusual in all this, since thousands of families were placed in similar situations and had to manage as best they could.

Balan could not sleep. He tossed and turned and got up once to put on the light, much to his father's annoyance. His thoughts and anxieties kept him awake. The attempt to find solutions to his problems through spiritual means was not an easy task. Nor could he talk about them to anyone, for no one would understand, least of all his parents. At about five o'clock, he gave up trying to sleep and walked out of the house. The creaking of the door woke Seshadri Iyer. 'Where are you going at this time?' he shouted.

'I am going down to the river'. In their parlance, it meant he was going to the river for his ablutions. The river which made them pure and holy was also their scavenger.

'Is it morning already?' the father asked, rubbing his eyes.

'It is beginning to get light in the east,' said Balan as he hurried off. It was a moment of decision for him.

He knew no one would be about yet and he wanted to get it over with quickly. He walked briskly. On reaching the river bank, he took off his shirt and put it under a banyan tree with a stone on top to prevent it from being blown away in the wind. His bare body shivered in the cool morning breeze. He walked down the steps and plunged into the shallow waters. Strangely, the water was not cold; it still retained the warmth of the previous day's sun. He stood waist-deep in the water and faced the east, to watch the glory of the rising sun; then raising his hands in solemn prayer he chanted the Gayatri mantra.

We contemplate the effulgence of the eternal Sun whose light is ardently sought after and who inspires our *intellectual processes*.

It had been chanted day after day his ancestors, by more than a hundred generations of Brahmins for over three thousand years. He was now repeating it for the last time. Then, he made up a prayer of his own, for there was nothing in the Vedas for what he was about to do.

Gods of our ancestors: Agni, Vayu, the Sun and the Moon! Please bear witness to this act of mine. In your presence, and I hope with your blessings, I hereby renounce my status as a Brahmin, for I and my community have lost the virtues and ideals of Brahminhood. We are not the true descendants of the ancient rishis with a thirst for knowledge, but mere inheritors of a fossilized wisdom. As a sign of that renunciation, I consign this thread that was invested on me, to the holy waters of this river so that it may flow into the ocean and be one with the Ultimate Reality. Maybe one day I might deserve that thread. Till then, let it be in the safekeeping of the Gods. Forgive me for this act of mine.

He removed the thread that lay across his chest, ceremoniously cast it into the holy waters and watched intently as it was carried away by the current. He got out of the river and, squeezing out the water from his dhoti, dried himself, put on his shirt and walked home.

It was a symbolic act; an act of defiance against ceremony, against privilege, against casteism. His life this far had been dominated by rituals, symbols devoid of any meaning, mere pretences - drawing water from the well and calling it Ganga water, pouring ghee on

to the fire and referring to it as Ambrosia, giving a cow to a Brahmin and hoping one's ancestors in heaven would have adequate milk. Such purification ceremonies and rituals had been present all his life and he had always criticized them as meaningless. Yet, when he wanted to throw away his holy thread, he had to perform a ceremony! He realized how deeply it was ingrained in him. The thread was like an umbilical cord that bound him to a tradition, a community, to an attitude of the mind. There was no escape unless he could sever it totally.

They lived in the agraharam, the Brahmin part of the town, near the temple. It was also the oldest part. Though the town had expanded in recent times and become the headquarters of the district of Kamalapur, the agraharam still asserted itself as far as the temple and its surroundings were concerned. Life in the agraharam was regulated by festivals and days of fasting, by the goddess being taken out in procession in various costumes and on different chariots, by the puja times in the temple, and by the crowds of visitors who came on important occasions. Seshadri Iyer had no official duties at the temple and earned his living working in a government office, but his wife Savitri's uncle had been a trustee of the temple many years ago and that imposed an obligation on her to strictly observe what could be called the temple culture.

Their house had an open front yard, a verandah in the front, a bedroom and a living-room in the middle and a kitchen and store-room at the back. The bedroom was where the beds were stored and the members of the family slept in various parts of the house, depending on which way the wind was blowing, the weather being generally hot. The bedroom also served as a puja room and no one was allowed in until after a bath. The living-room made some concessions to modernity in the form of coat-hooks for hanging up shirts, a wooden table and four cane chairs, even a table fan – which was rarely used because of the high cost of electricity. This uneasy combination of tradition and modernity reflected the lives of the various members of the family. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the house was a coconut tree that pierced the roof of the front verandah and rose majestically skyward. It was considered an ill-omen to cut down a coconut tree that was still yielding, so Seshadri Iyer had had to respect tradition and build the verandah around the tree.

Savitri was short and fat with a frog-like face. She tied her sari in the orthodox manner, exposing her rounded calf muscles. Her large and pendulous breasts, unable to contain themselves within the loose-fitting blouse, tended to swing to and fro as she walked. The large red pottu on her forehead, without which she was never seen, asserted her proud orthodoxy. Of a pleasant temperament, except when crossed, she was unbending where religion was concerned, making no compromises to the changing times. Her life revolved around the happenings at the temple and she observed very strict dietary habits—no onions on auspicious days and no mushrooms, ever. She called the latter the diet of monsters. The only concession she made to modernism was coffee, of which she was inordinately fond. Her father had died early, and she was brought up by an uncle who married her off young to

Seshadri Iyer because he was willing to accept a small dowry. Savitri was very proud and fond of her uncle.

The days of her childhood—a time when godlessness was uniformly frowned upon—were when her uncle was a trustee of the temple. People came to her house for theological discussions, for instructions and orders. Questions such as whether the mark on the male deity's forehead should be decorated with a 'U' or a 'Y' shaped mark were debated in all seriousness. At her uncle's initiative, a golden crown was made for the goddess and Savitri felt nearly as happy about it as if it had been made for her! Time and imagination had both mellowed and exaggerated these impressions and she never tired of talking about them.

On the other hand, her uncle was not untouched by modernity. He was appointed a district judge and Savitri used to say proudly, 'Even the English Collector used to visit our house. He always said he liked our coffee best of all. He even sent his cook to our house so that my aunt could teach him. But of course, she would not let him come into the kitchen and made coffee in the outhouse, where he could watch without touching any of our utensils. Even for the Collector we had a separate tumbler which we did not use ourselves. After all, white people are supposed to have descended from the rakshasas aren't they? That was how orthodox my uncle's family was!'

When Balan returned from the river, his mother asked him, 'Are you going to have a bath?'

'No, I had a dip in the river, 'he replied and escaped detection for the time being.

But the next day, he had a bath in the house, in the lean-to behind the kitchen which served as a place for heating water. His mother brought him a towel and saw his bare chest. 'Where is your holy thread?' she cried.

'I have thrown it away,' replied Balan.

'Oh, my god!' she wailed. 'Is it not enough that I should stay in this house and listen to all the blasphemies that you utter every day! Now you go and commit the worst of all sins! A true-born Brahmin without his thread! That a son born of my womb should behave like a sinner! And here I am with an unmarried girl in the house. Who will set foot in our house now? And what will my old uncle say when he gets to hear about it?'

She called on all gods to bear witness to this most recent tragedy in her life and went to complain to her husband who was performing his puja.

Seshadri Iyer was a meek and mild-mannered man, cautious in everything he did. His father had been a post-master in a small town all his life and had never aspired to anything better. The son had inherited some of his father's characteristics—honesty, loyalty to his superiors and a desire never to get into trouble. He made an ideal junior civil servant, meticulous in carrying out orders and in following rules and regulations. There was a precedent for everything he did, both in his official as well as his domestic life, and he

quoted those precedents from the civil service manual and from the Vedas and Agamas alike. Others who had started their careers at the same time had moved on to become deputy collectors and one or two had even been absorbed into the Administrative Service, but Seshadri Iyer remained where he was. His superiors praised him, but did not recommend him for promotion because they knew they would never get another subordinate like him. So, he had remained a head clerk in the Collector's Office for the past fifteen years. Now he came out of the puja room, more worried and anxious than usual at this new problem that threatened.

Balan came into the house from his bath. For a long time now, he had given up putting ashes on his forehead in the traditional way or going into the puja room for worship every morning. That had been accepted by his family, though with reluctance. After all, many Brahmins did not observe such customs any more. Going to office with a conspicuous spot or ashes on one's forehead often led to one being the butt of jokes. Seshadri Iyer himself wore only a small, discreet spot that was invisible to any but the most discerning. But to throw away the holy thread! Even the mild-mannered Seshadri Iyer could not accept it without protest. After all, there was a limit to such things even in these modern days! But he knew he was powerless to enforce any discipline on his wayward son.

'What have you done Bala?' Seshadri Iyer asked his son at the first opportunity.

'Nothing father; I have merely removed a symbol that is no longer appropriate.'

'Have you no respect for tradition and sentiment, even if you do not have faith in your religion?' Seshadri Iyer asked. 'No consideration for the feelings of your parents, and for your sister who waits for a bridegroom?'

Savitri could not keep out of the discussion. 'Which decent Brahmin will come forward to marry your sister now?' she shouted. 'And which Brahmin girl will marry you?'

'We have waited for ten years for a Prince Charming to come and claim my sister,' Balan shouted back. 'But they seem to be more interested in the money we can offer than in my sister's virtues. The presence or absence of my thread won't make any difference.'

'If you could get a decent dowry, we could use it to get your sister married, the mother cried. 'Or we could have an exchange wedding with a family who has a daughter and a son. But a threadless Brahmin who flaunts his godlessness is worse than an untouchable. No Brahmin will ever come to our house now.'

'Don't you see, mother, that is exactly my point,' Balan tried to explain. 'I am no better than an untouchable; none of us really is. In some respects, perhaps, we are worse, for if I had been fortunate enough to have been born an untouchable, I would have been a qualified doctor by now.'

Seshadri Iyer realized how deeply the disappointment of not getting admission into the medical college affected Balan even after five years. Asking his wife to shut up, he said to his son, 'Look Bala, you have studied the Vedas and the Agamas. You know that by merely removing the thread, you cannot cease to be a Brahmin. It is not a title given by the government or a degree awarded by a university that you can renounce. If you transgress the laws of your religion, you do not cease to be a Brahmin. Even if you marry an untouchable girl, you are still a Brahmin and your children will be Brahmins. Take the case of Ravana. His mother was a Rakshasi, but because his father was a Brahmin, he was entitled to all the privileges of being a Brahmin and could learn the Vedas.....'

'You know father that is not a bad idea.'

'What?'

'That I should marry an untouchable girl. It will be a small atonement for all the past arrogance of Brahmins towards other communities.'

Seshadri Iyer lost his temper at this point. 'You are talking like those godless heathens who go around scribbling anti-Brahmin slogans on the walls of the town!'

'No, father; please do not equate me with them. They are motivated by hatred of a particular community while I am deeply hurt by an overwhelming sense of guilt.'

Seshadri Iyer was somewhat mollified. He spoke in a calmer tone. 'Bala, don't you realize that it is not in your power to give up your inheritance? Once a Brahmin, always a Brahmin. You are the descendant of Rishi Agasthaya; you are a Brahmin according to god. Even the government records show that you are a Brahmin. If you remove your holy thread, if you commit other transgressions, you are merely an erring Brahmin. There is no way out of your situation. To be a Brahmin is an eternal privilege as well as bounden duty'.

'No! It is a curse!'

'If you think it is a curse,' Seshadri Iyer spoke very quietly and there were tears in his eyes, 'if it is a curse, there is no escape from it; not in this life anyway.'

'Yes, I realize I am trapped; Balan muttered almost to himself.

The father pressed home his advantage. 'After all, a piece of thread round your chest, what does it matter? One of the great advantages of our faith has been that a person is free to believe what he likes. We have had saints who were atheists. Belief is one thing, but social conformity is another. It means that a Brahmin should behave and act like a Brahmin. No one is going to enquire whether you have a thread under your shirt or not. And if you tell people you have removed it, they are only going to laugh at you. I suggested that in the interests of the family and in your own interest, you put it back on. We can have a small ceremony tomorrow...'

'No! No!' shouted Balan. 'Can't you see, this is what I object to, the hypocrisy of it all! You are more worried about what people will say than what is right!'

'Yes, I cannot afford the luxury of intellectual hair-splitting because I have the responsibility of feeding my family, including you. I want to lead a decent and respectable life so that I can hold my head up among my people!'

Following his father's outburst, Balan put on his shirt and walked out of the house. Savitri now became the anxious mother. 'Poor boy! He left without his breakfast. Why did you shout at him? You know he's very sensitive, and not having a job and having to live off us hurts him so!'

'It was you who started the whole thing!' shouted Seshadri.

As Balan walked onto the verandah, his sister Lakshmi intercepted him.

'Bala!' she said, holding him by his sleeve. There were tears in her eyes. 'Why are you doing this to us?' she pleaded. 'Haven't we enough problems without your adding to them! I am a burden to the family. In spite of all her sympathy, mother has an accusing look whenever she talks to me, because I am not married yet, and father is worried about his retirement. We will then have to live on his pension. Can't you do something--- anything—to help us all out instead of pursuing your foolish ideas?'

'Yes, even you bring in a little money with your typing; I realize I am the only parasite,' Balan said.

'If only you knew how much it costs me to earn that money!'

'What do you mean?'

Lakshmi looked into the room before whispering to her brother. 'That fat, middle-aged boss of mine is always hinting at things, making lewd and indecent suggestions. I put up with it only because of the situation here'.

'Has he misbehaved with you in any way?' Balan said angrily.

'It is not so much what he says. Every time he looks at me, I feel as if he is mentally undressing me. When I give him letters to sign, his hand always manages to touch mine.'

'I will tackle the fellow!' Balan growled.

'Please, don't, his sister said. 'If you do anything and I lose that job, we will be worse off.'

'Then why are you telling me all this?'

‘So that you know what we are all suffering. Try to get a job as soon as possible. Then I can give up mine.’

‘Get a job!’ Balan gave a bitter laugh. ‘When do you think that will be?’ And he walked out.

II

At the age of twelve, Balan underwent the ceremony of the holy thread that confirmed him as a Brahmin. Those were days of hope, for Seshadri Iyer was expecting a promotion, and a bright future for his brilliant son. There was a smile on Savitri’s face as she watched her son undergoing the ceremony. First his hair was shaved. ‘With this kind of knife, the deity Pusha did the shaving to Brihaspathi, Agni and Indra. May you also have a long life and reputation like them,’ the priest intoned. Then, after an ablutionary bath, three strands of cotton thread—twisted in the time-honoured manner—were put across his narrow chest and he was seated in front of the holy fire. Palasa sticks were added to the fire which was being fed with ghee from a silver bowl—the only silver article Savitri possessed and which she exhibited on every public occasion.

O, God Agni, you who bestow life, have shining limbs and grow by the ablutions of ghee! May you accept the praise we offer you and drink the ghee as Ambrosia, and like a father towards his son, lead this young boy to a ripe old age.

Balan was made to stand on a black stone:

Boy! May you be as strong and as hard as the stone on which you stand, and may you withstand and vanquish your enemies in a like manner!

The deity Revathi plucked the fibres from the cotton seed, Kritikas spun it into thread and Dhee wove them into cloth. A thousand deities supplied the threads for the cloth you wear; it is the same garment bestowed on the Sun. You are now a protector of your friends and relatives. So, you will have a shining personality, increased wealth and a life of one hundred years....

Balan, having an enquiring mind, wanted to ask a hundred questions, but he had been told to obey the priests and the solemnity of the occasion somewhat overwhelmed him. Then, he was asked to repeat the following:

Let the guru and sishya come together; let us peruse the good path...
The drops of water come from the spray of the ocean. From these
drops of water, from the rays of the Sun, let me attain immortality.

I have surrendered you to the protection of all the Gods. May all your descendants be good.

The occasion was solemn, but the general mood festive. The ceremony was held in a small pandal, green with mango arches and banana leaves, its floors smoothed with cowdung, erected in the front yard of Seshadri Iyer's house. Music blared from a loudspeaker. The holy fire and the burning incense made the already close atmosphere even more stuffy. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, except the host who was harassed as he rushed around trying to look after the guests as well as supervise the ceremonies that confirmed his son in Brahminhood.

There was noise and confusion everywhere: children running around and yelling, the priest's assistant shouting for various things required for the ceremony, the men chatting in one half of the pandal, the women in the other half exchanging gossip about various other ceremonies they had attended, having a word with the hostess and whispering secrets to each other. Savitri—dressed in the best sari she possessed—ran here and there, greeting the women guests, ensuring that the lunch would be ready as soon as the ceremony was over, giving instructions to her daughter and keeping an eye on the ceremony at the same time.

'Pity, they couldn't find a bridegroom for Lakshmi at the same time,' one of the women whispered to her neighbour. 'After all, she is getting on eighteen and if they had celebrated the two together, it would have been cheaper.'

'Bridegrooms don't grow on trees,' said the other woman. 'Where is that poor man going to get the dowry they demand nowadays? Even a clerk or a typist—if he has a permanent job—expects ten to twenty thousand rupees. And if you are looking for a qualified engineer or doctor, the figure is astronomical. And of course, we can't even think of IAS officers!'

'It isn't as if she's good-looking or clever; and her limp will add at least another ten thousand to the dowry.'

'Yes, she will find it very hard to get a husband.'

These were women who were experts in the art of bridal negotiations. Having successfully married off their own daughters and acquired daughters-in-law, they were equipped to weight the situation to the last thousand rupees. Lakshmi could not help but overhear some of this conversation and could hardly hold back her tears.

The gossip among the men was of a slightly different kind. 'I wonder where Seshadri found the money for this celebration. It must have cost him a good five thousand.'

'I don't know why he was in such a hurry; after all, the boy is only twelve. When there is a girl waiting to be married, that's more important.'

'I asked him the same question. But you know what he is, a stickler for tradition. "A boy's upanayanam must be performed not later than twelve years of age, according to the sastras," he says.'

'That was all right in the old days when the boys went on to learn the Vedas from the guru. But when he is going to the Mission High School to learn Mathematics and English, he could easily have postponed it until he had found a bridegroom for his daughter. It would have been cheaper in the long run.'

'Everyone has a very good opinion of him in the office, but I doubt very much if he'll get far,' commented one of his colleagues from the Collector's Office. 'You see, he doesn't show any initiative, doesn't go out of his way to help others. You know what it's like in offices these days. Progress and promotion is a matter of mutual help and assistance, if you know what I mean,' he said with a wink.

'Nor does he make anything out of it,' said another. 'As head clerk in the Collector's Office, he has so many different avenues for advancement. But he won't accept a rupee, even if it is voluntarily offered to him.'

'Every one of his notes in the office begins with the words, "As a measure of abundant caution..."'

'Not like his brother,' added another gentleman. 'He is known as a "prescription" doctor. Thanks to prohibition, he makes a good living out of giving prescriptions for brandy. He was saying in the club the other day, "I will give a medical certificate recommending alcohol for your dog if you pay me three hundred rupees." That is the kind of attitude that makes a man progress in life these days.'

'Seshadri helped him financially to become a doctor. But he won't lift a finger to help his elder brother now. It's every man for himself these days.'

Suddenly, there was a disturbance at the entrance to the pandal. A young man came up to Seshadri Iyer and whispered something to him. Seshadri Iyer immediately excused himself to go and receive his wife's uncle, the retired district judge. Savitri was extremely proud of the fact that her father's brother had been a judge and brought him into her conversation at the slightest opportunity. Whenever her status in the local society was under threat she would say proudly, 'My uncle sent twenty people to the gallows during his term of office, and every one of his sentences was upheld by the high court! He would have been elevated to the bench if only he had been a few years younger.'

The old man came in with a walking stick and many people rose to greet him. A chair was brought for him and placed close to the platform where the ceremonies were being held. Just then, Seshadri Iyer's boss, the Collector himself, arrived and the host hurried once again to the entrance to receive him. He was seated next to the judge. The ceremonies, which had been interrupted by the arrival of these distinguished guests, commenced once again.

Father and son, the preceptor and pupil, the guru and sishya, intoned alternately:

Oh, Sun God, may this bachelor attain the End which the God Agni,
Vayu, the Sun and the Moon have attained.

May you, the loved one of all the ways see that I attain the excellent
virtues of bachelorhood.

Let him learn the Vedas with the power of remembrance, with the
mind to absorb and the wisdom to act.

And so it went on. The father—Seshadri Iyer—sat with his son for he was supposed to initiate his son into the mysteries of becoming a Brahmin. But since he was only a harassed clerk in the local Collector's Office and his knowledge of the mantras was a little rusty, the priest did the honours and the father merely acted his part.

After invoking the gods of Rain, Wind and Fire to confer upon him mental strength and intellectual capacity, the pupil asked the preceptor to 'instruct' him. And the preceptor, after due ceremony, instructed the pupil in the Gayatri mantra.

We contemplate the effulgence of the Sun whose eternal light is
ardently sought after and who inspires our intellectual processes.

What could be more appropriate for a boy going to his guru to learn the Vedas or for a pupil going to Mission High School to pursue his studies?

The guests were fed; the priests were paid; the guests departed after having congratulated their host on a successful function.

The ceremony had been performed for countless Brahmin boys for more than three thousand years on the banks of the Ganga and the Indus, without variation, without modification. The same gods had been invoked, the same deities propitiated. It had been performed in forest huts, in the palaces of kings and in the homes of sages. The ceremony had been initiated by one of the rishis—Agasthya—who migrated to the south, bringing the Vedas and the ceremonials with him. The pint-sized sage is said to have drunk the seven oceans dry, but people said later—in a more materialistic age—that it referred to the oceans of knowledge which he imparted to his descendants, of whom Balan was one. The 'rational' explanations given by subsequent ages to ancient superstitions were accepted by

the 'neo-moderns' as a sign of the wisdom of the ancients. And when successive Islamic invasions nearly destroyed Brahminism in the north, it was preserved in the south with greater zeal and purity. The burden of tradition lay very heavily on Balan.

What was special about Balan was that he seemed to have inherited the wisdom as well as the spirit of enquiry of his mythical ancestor. In another age, in a different civilization, he too might have become a sage, a philosopher, perhaps another Buddha. His desire for knowledge extended beyond the confines of a ceremonial faith. Instinctively he sought to get to the bottom of things—the Ultimate Reality the ancient sages had sought. But all this was still in the future. At the time of his initiation his express wish was to pursue the study of Sanskrit—a motive worthy of a true Brahmin. Everyone applauded his desire, except his father, who demurred. It would be very expensive. Besides, it wouldn't prepare his son for a lucrative career.

'It will interfere with your studies,' said Seshadri Iyer, attempting to conceal the financial aspect.

'No point in learning all that unless you want to be a priest. And who wants a priest in these godless days?' Savitri said, in support of her husband.

'The purohit uncle has promised to teach me Sanskrit for an hour every day. He says he won't charge anything,' Balan said. He was aware of the financial status of his family. 'And it won't interfere with my school. They say all modern science is to be found in Sanskrit. That is what I want to learn. 'Balan learned Sanskrit fast. He had a near insatiable curiosity and an almost compulsive power of logical reasoning. It was the philosophical rather than the ceremonial aspect of the Vedas that absorbed his interest. He questioned everything he doubted:

'According to the texts, a learned man is a Brahmin. Then, how is it that so many learned men are non-Brahmins and so many Brahmins are ignorant?'

'Why are different kinds of punishments prescribed for different communities for the same crime in the Manu Sasthra?'

'Why do you tell me that eclipses are caused by the snake swallowing the moon or the sun, when we know that it is because of the shadow of the earth crossing the path of these bodies?'

'If all the gods are different manifestations of the Ultimate Reality, why do the different sects quarrel?'

The teacher threw up his hands in despair and shouted, 'Look Bala, the first duty of a sishya is to accept the preceptor's words without question. Besides, these are not my words. They have been handed down by the gods.'

'But, sir!'

'I am only teaching you Sanskrit; I am not an interpreter of the scriptures. If you go on asking questions like this, you will end up an atheist.'

After that, Balan did not ask any questions, but concentrated on learning the language. Soon he reached a stage when he could read books without the aid of his teacher and he read many Sanskrit works without his teacher's knowledge or consent. They only helped to foster his growing scepticism.

One day he came across the following passage in one of the Upanishads and his heart was elated

Lead me from the unreal to the Real,
From darkness to light,
From Death to Immortality.

And then, the following passage in an obscure text:

The faith to believe, as well as the right to question, the desire for knowledge, as well as the freedom to remain ignorant, the ability to practise austerities, as well as the courage to do without them, no contempt for the low and no flattery for the mighty—these are the characteristics of a true devotee.

Now he knew he had the right to question. As he grew up, he began to understand that knowledge that was static tended to either become fossilized or be reduced to superstition. He started to realise that the right to question with a healthy scepticism was necessary to reach the Ultimate Reality. With the enthusiasm of youth, he discussed these ideas with his father.

Most of these ideas were beyond the understanding of Seshadri Iyer. But he wanted to encourage his son in his studies and merely commented, 'If you have faith in God, you won't be far wrong.' The family was happy that the boy was so intelligent and his doubts and questionings were attributed to his youth.

'He is going to be like my uncle, the judge,' Savitri proudly told everyone. 'He will become a four-sleeved lawyer,' she would say referring to the distinctive gowns barristers wore when she was a child, 'and then end up as a high court judge.'

'I don't want to send people to the gallows like he did,' protested Balan. 'I would rather be a doctor and save lives.'

'I wish you would find some way for your mother to reduce her weight when you become a doctor,' his father joked. 'She is the only investment I have made that has been growing consistently every year.'

'What investment did you make?' protested Savitri. 'I was the one to bring in the dowry that enabled you to buy this house.'

III

There was no doubt that Balan was brilliant. But the age of fifteen, apart from his Sanskrit studies, he knew about the theory of relativity and about electronics and computers and sundry other things. His thirst for knowledge was great and he showed initiative in acquiring it. He read whatever he could lay his hands on, incessantly asked questions of knowledgeable people and stored it all away in his mind. What was more important was that even at that age, he was able to draw conclusions from what he learnt. His teachers liked him, were patient with him, and said he would go far, but in which direction, they did not specify. He passed his high school examination with distinction and was ranked in the first ten among a hundred thousand boys. The family had to make sacrifices in order to pay for his education. They could not afford to educate both their children, so Lakshmi gave up her studies before taking a degree and learnt to type in the hope of supplementing the family income. Their hopes were all pinned on Balan and his brilliance.

He went on to study for the pre-university examination. Admission was no problem because of his high marks. Unfortunately, he contracted typhoid a fortnight before the examination was due and could hardly walk to the examination hall. The doctor advised rest. Balan himself was not keen to take the exam but Seshadri Iyer was firm that he should.

'People will think you failed if you skip the examination', he said.

'But I have the medical certificate, father!' Balan protested.

'Who will believe a medical certificate these days?' asked Seshadri Iyer. 'For fifty rupees, there are doctors willing to certify that you are suffering from heart failure!'

So he took the examination and in spite of his lack of preparation, passed with very high marks.

It was then that the next difficulty presented itself. It was one thing to be brilliant, but for a poor Brahmin boy to get admission into medical college was another matter. 'I will do well in the interview', Balan told himself and his parents. But Seshadri Iyer knew better.

In the viva-voce examination, Balan answered all the questions correctly, politely, even humorously. The examiners were in a fix. Suddenly, one of them asked, 'What does "this year, next year, sometimes, never," mean?'

Balan thought for a minute. He knew then he was not going to get into the medical college, however well he answered the question. He replied, 'It means you don't want me to enter the medical college.'

The examiners were embarrassed, but pleased to see him go. There were charges of corruption against the authorities in the newspapers, against the methods of selection, and so on. Writ petitions were filed in the high court by some aggrieved candidates, the list of new admissions was not released and there was a glimmer of hope that Balan's application might be reconsidered. But the final outcome was that he did not manage to secure a seat. With great difficulty, Seshadri Iyer was able to get him admitted in the local Arts College with History as his main subject. Even Science, which Balan would have preferred, was beyond his reach.

Not being able to enter the medical college was not only a great disappointment to Balan, but also a turning point in the fortunes of the family. Seshadri Iyer and Savitri realized that all the economizing and saving, the sacrificing of Lakshmi's education in the hope of making Balan a doctor, were in vain. Their hopes and expectations gave way to bitterness, disappointment and frustration. Seshadri Iyer, characteristically, did not say very much; he suffered in silence. But his wife, more open and expressive, blamed Balan when she discovered how he had answered the last question. 'Why did you have to go and annoy the examiners? If you didn't know the answer why didn't you say so, politely? You and your arrogance!' she shouted.

'But mother, don't you see, they were determined to fail me. That question had nothing to do with my ability to be a doctor. Even if I had answered it correctly, I would still not have got in unless I had at least a lakh of rupees to pay for a seat!' Saying this Balan burst into tears—something he had not done for many years.

Immediately Savitri was transformed into the tender mother. 'My poor boy! You worked so hard and were so confident. I suppose it was written in the book of fate!'

'Maybe if I had written to my uncle, the judge, he could have pulled strings, perhaps' she continued, wiping her eyes with the end of her sari.

For the first time, Seshadri Iyer spoke. He was tired of his wife's allusions to her uncle. 'Your uncle has never done anything for us except to dole out generous portions of pompous advice! What you need is political pull.'

'If you had some pull, as you call it, we wouldn't be in this state,' cried his wife. 'What is the point of being in the Collector's Office if you can't get the Collector to help you out in such a situation? Or, if you had earned money like other people, it would be different. But here I am, left holding the responsibility!'

Savitri's bitterness was understandable. As a young wife she had always held herself ready to carry out her husband's slightest wish. Gradually, she realized that she had married a man without initiative or courage in a world where none of his qualities, such as honesty, had much value. She now considered herself a martyr. That her husband would not take any money for the favours he was always called upon to render, was a great disappointment to her. The stories she heard from other women about how their husbands had been clever enough to earn money to pay for the dowries of their daughters or for various other purposes was a constant reminder to her of Seshadri Iyer's fault, especially as she was never able to decide whether he refused to be corrupt because he was honest or because he feared the consequences. Gradually it became her sole responsibility to manage the family budget on inadequate finances, and to take all the important decisions. Her only hope had been that one day Balan would become a doctor and improve the family finances and status. Those hopes were now shattered.

The only other time she had felt as bitter was when she had discovered that her daughter was born with a limp. This had not been immediately apparent and was discovered only when the child began to walk. 'What sins have I committed in my former lives that I should be cursed with a child like this?' she had wailed. The doctor had assured her that the limp was slight, that people wouldn't notice it very much and that it wouldn't inconvenience the child in any way. But Savitri knew better. She knew it was a cruel world in which she lived and even the sympathy of her well-meaning friends and relatives was hurtful. Lakshmi was a beautiful child, always calm and composed, with a bewitching smile that occasionally made her face light up. But when she began to walk, she became awkward and ungainly. Savitri dressed her in long skirts that touched the floor, in a futile attempt to hide her deformity. Lakshmi could sense when she was being talked about, even if the conversation was being whispered, and on these occasions she became more clumsy and her limp, more pronounced.

When Lakshmi started to go to school, the other children would taunt her and she would come home crying. Savitri grieved for her. What was the use of being fair-skinned, smooth complexioned, with a lovely face and beautiful long hair when you limped? There was some talk of taking her to Madras to see a specialist who could correct the limp, but the operation would cost a lot of money. Ultimately, everything hinged on one factor, money. So the idea was reluctantly abandoned. The mother and father consoled themselves by saying that even if they could have afforded it, the treatment may have not been successful. Sometimes, the foot caused pain to Lakshmi, particularly when she had to walk long distances. The doctor suggested she use a crutch or at least a walking stick so as not to put any weight on the foot. But this Lakshmi adamantly refused to do and after that, however much the foot hurt, she did not complain. When the idea of Balan going to study medicine first came up, he told his sister he would learn how to correct her limp. The family felt proud of him, though secretly they shed tears.

Later, when prospective 'bridegrooms'—all too few - came to 'see' Lakshmi, she would always be seated. But she would have to stand up and greet the visitors in order to show respect and this she did in a somewhat clumsy manner. In any case the visitors would usually have heard about her defect from 'well-meaning' friends. One of the ladies accompanying the boy would always say, 'Lakshmi, please come and sit by my side.' Then Lakshmi would have to walk; her serene face would collapse and self-consciously she would cross the floor to the lady. Her limp was much more pronounced at such times. Her mother would scold her afterwards. 'You can walk properly if you try. Why do you always limp more when there are important visitors?' Finally, mother and daughter would embrace and shed tears. They generally never heard from the prospective 'bridegrooms' after the first meeting; or if they did they were told, 'If the boy is to marry a deformed girl, he has to be suitably compensated. After all, he has to live with a cripple for life!' Lakshmi remained unmarried. Savitri had put up with all these humiliations in the hope that Balan—her brilliant Balan - would be the saviour of the family and that she would be able to hold her head high again. Now these hopes too were dashed!

'What crime have I committed, father, that I should be denied the opportunity of helping the sick and the suffering?' wailed Balan.

'It is all the politicians' doing!' said his father. 'They are responsible for all the corruption in the world today and they have brought this anti-Brahmin feeling into everything.'

'Then why was I born an accursed Brahmin?' Balan shouted in anger.

It was a thoughtless remark, uttered in the heat of the moment. But it planted a seed in Balan's heart that was to grow unseen for the next five years. He had criticized Brahminism and its attitude to other communities at an intellectual level earlier, but now he suddenly realized that his being a Brahmin was a matter that affected him personally as well.

'That I should hear a son of mine utter such words!' cried Savitri. 'A Brahmin is not accursed! It is as a result of good deeds done in a number of previous births that you are privileged to be born a Brahmin. We are special; we are chosen, twice-born. Don't you ever forget it! And don't you talk like a godless atheist!'

'If we are so special and had done so many good deeds in our past lives, why did I not get into the medical college?' Balan shouted back. 'And why was Lakshmi born with a limp?'

'I can understand your disappointment, Balan, even your anger, 'Seshadri Iyer spoke calmly. 'But I cannot understand your anger at us. If it is destined, it shall happen whether you are a Brahmin or an untouchable. It is our duty to accept it.'

'I will tell you why I did not get admission, father,' Balan said. 'It is because of our pride and our arrogance. That is the cause of our downfall today. For three thousand years, our community has been the repository of all knowledge and wisdom. What did we do with it? Converted it into a whole lot of meaningless ceremonies and superstitions. Instead of raising people to the highest levels of knowledge they were capable of, we kept them in ignorance and superstition. How can we blame them if they want to get their own back, now that they are in power?'

Balan went to the Arts College and completed his B.A. degree easily. But he was no longer a happy and enquiring boy, interested in everything, eternally asking questions of his elders, making jokes with his family, arguing with friends and full of optimism. He became an uncommunicative, moody young man, who largely kept to himself. He had fewer and fewer friends and most of the time he was at home there was an uneasy silence. His mother and sister looked at him with pity if not understanding. Savitri tended to shout at him on occasion, more to get rid of her own frustration than because he had done anything wrong. Afterwards, she would be sorry, shower endearments on him and blame her husband for everything. But Lakshmi—her brother's tragedy mingling with her own - was unfailingly kind and affectionate, for she knew the struggle that was going on inside him. One day, in a moment of tenderness, she asked him, 'Bala, I am cursed with a limp and have to pay the penalty. But why should things turn out bad for you?'

'Don't you know Lakshmi?' he asked his heart full of emotion. 'I too have a limp, a spiritual limp. In fact our entire community suffers from limps of one sort or another.'

Then, the search for a job began. The people in the employment exchange wanted money before they would register his name; and some more if they sent him for an interview. He replied to a hundred advertisements, his father organized some letters of recommendation and his former teachers encouraged him. In the offices he went to they wanted to know if he knew short-hand and typing or accountancy. 'If I did have those skills, would I get a job,' he wondered. But he did not want to spend any more of his parents' hard-earned money in acquiring these skills. With the help of his teachers, he got a few temporary jobs, coaching the sons of the rich for various examinations. And then, nothing.

In the evenings, he came home to the gloomy silence of his father, the eternal grumbling of his mother and the reproachful looks of his sister who was now twenty-eight and still unmarried. Seshadri Iyer was going to retire soon, which meant that life would be more difficult, for they would have to live on his pension alone. He intended to use his accumulated provident fund as dowry for his daughter, provided Balan got a job and eased the domestic financial burden. If he did get a job, Balan would also be eligible for a reasonable dowry—if not a generous one—and all might still be manageable. If, if..... these were facts known to all of them, but they were never openly discussed. There was really nothing to discuss; these were the inevitable consequences of a society, a tradition. The

only discussion that took place was about the price of vegetables, about everything going up not knowing where it was all going to end.

One day Balan had a bright idea. With the few rupees he had, he put out an advertisement in the paper:

Bride wanted for unemployed Brahmin graduate, willing to marry without any dowry, if father-in-law will provide a decent, permanent job.

Needless to say, there was no response.

Sometimes, Seshadri Iyer would ask, 'Did you find anything today?'

'No, father.'

If a letter came for Balan, his mother and sister would wait expectantly as he opened it and silently turn away as he crumpled it up and threw it on the floor. Without telling anyone, he had even applied for such jobs as bus-conductor, office-boy, even porter in a warehouse. He was told he did not have the personality for a conductor. 'After all, you have to deal with all sorts of people and situations in a bus and be able to handle them all without unpleasantness,' the interviewer told him. Slowly, a feeling of total rejection by everybody overwhelmed Balan and affected his sensitive temperament. He was bitter against a society that not only would not let him become a doctor, but would not even permit him to make an honest living. Most of all, he was bitter against himself.

And the hypocrisy. He was never refused a job because he was a Brahmin; oh, no! After all that would be discrimination and everyone knew that was against the constitution. Either he was too tall or not hefty enough, or did not have the required personality, or he was over-qualified and would not fit in. These days, they had socio-psychological explanations for everything, which made those in authority feel that they were being humane and considerate, besides being efficient. Occasionally, he was told by a sympathetic interviewer that he would find it very difficult to get a job without a 'suitable' recommendation. That was as far as they would go. But no one - not even the sympathetic interviewers - told him he was being refused because he was a Brahmin.

IV

One day, when Seshadri Iyer was at the office and Savitri had gone out, Lakshmi came to Balan.

'Bala, I want to tell you something; will you help me?' she asked.

Balan put down the newspaper he was glancing at. 'What is it, Lakshmi?' he asked solicitously.

'It is about my boss. I find it difficult to work there any longer.'

'I asked you before if he was trying to molest you and you said, "no". So what is it now?'

'It is so complicated.' She seemed embarrassed to speak. 'He is really a very nice man and he hasn't tried to misbehave or anything like that. But you see,' she hesitated, and then went on, 'he wants to marry me.'

'Good lord!' Balan exclaimed. 'I thought you told me he was an old man!'

'He is not so old really; he is only about fifty and has been a widower for some years. He doesn't want a dowry and, what is even more important, he doesn't mind my limp.'

'But do you like him?'

'Well... he has been very kind to me, and helpful and supportive when things were difficult at home...'

That means you like him.'

'What is there to like or dislike, for someone like me! The cinema kind of romance is not for me. What I need is security, affection, kindness, a little peace of mind. I can't be a burden on our parents any longer. Every time I took at the forlorn expression on their faces, I feel like jumping into a well. At least this way I can help them in their old age'.

'Which is more than I am doing.'

'Don't blame yourself, Bala; it's not your fault.'

"Then why don't you marry him?" But Balan already knew the reason.

'You know he belongs to a low caste. It will break mother's heart.' There were tears in her eyes.

'Poor girl!' Balan was full of sympathy and understanding. He came to her side and patted her affectionately. 'But Lakshmi, your happiness is more important than their pride. In time they will get used to it in the same way they have got used to my being without the thread.'

Lakshmi looked at him reproachfully. 'But Bala, don't you understand? Caste and community mean a lot to us. We live in a society that is caste-ridden, as you would call it. And don't forget, if I marry a low caste merchant, any chance of your marrying a decent Brahmin girl is lost.'

'Marriage is the last thing bothering me now.'

'In any case, one rebel in the family is enough, don't you think?' Lakshmi said with bitterness which she tried to hide. 'We can't both let our parents down.'

'What you mean is that if I hadn't thrown away the holy thread and conformed to our parents' wishes, you might have married this man.'

Lakshmi was silent.

'All right, if I wear the thread again and try seriously to get a job and conform to our parents' wishes, will you marry him?'

'You mean you will do it?' Lakshmi asked surprised.

'For you, yes,' he was definite. 'It would be worthwhile to secure your happiness instead of my futile gestures that impress no one.'

'Will you do it for me Bala?' she cried eagerly, clutching his arm. 'Will you really do it? Give up your ideals for my happiness?'

'What is there for me to give up, Lakshmi? There is nothing I can sacrifice on your behalf, for I don't have anything to give up; no happiness, no wealth, no status. But I will try to get you away from a miserable existence if I can.'

'It's just that I don't want to leave our parents without any emotional or financial support. If I thought you would stay and look after them, it would give me some peace of mind. After some time, maybe after they have got used to my marriage and accept my future husband, then you can do what you like.'

They were silent for a while, both absorbed in their own thoughts. Balan closed his eyes as if trying to concentrate. Finally, he said, 'You know Lakshmi, if I were you; I would not worry about anything. Just walk out and marry him before anyone finds out. The problems can be sorted out afterwards.'

'Oh, I couldn't do that,' replied Lakshmi. 'I couldn't leave them without a word; I couldn't get married without their permission and blessings, however long it might take.'

'Believe me, in that case you will never get married'.

'Bala, don't say that!'

'Don't say what? asked Savitri as she came in. 'I have to do everything in this house, from fetching water from the tap to getting vegetables from the market. My feet hurt me so, but who cares!' She dumped the bag of vegetables on the floor and slumped onto a chair, breathing heavily.

'But you won't let us do anything, mother!' protested Lakshmi, drying her eyes.

'Have you cleaned the kitchen? Have you washed the dishes after lunch? Have you tidied the bedroom? How do you expect to find a husband if you don't learn to do even these household chores?'

'Every time I try to do something, you stop me', cried Lakshmi.

'Yes, because every time you do something, I have to do it all over again.'

Savitri was obviously in a very bad mood and her daughter tried to pacify her. 'Never mind, you sit and rest; I'll make you some coffee,' she said, and went into the kitchen.

'Don't be harsh on Lakshmi, mother, just because you are tired and frustrated,' Balan spoke quietly. 'Shout at me if you like, for I have brought you nothing but misery.'

'Yes, a threadless Brahmin, what can I do with you?'

'A jobless Brahmin is more to the point'.

But Balan was not the object of Savitri's concern today. 'How long can I bear it Bala? Every time I go out, I feel insulted, humiliated. The seemingly innocent remarks about Lakshmi are really barbs of malice; pure poison. That aunt of yours - your father's cousin - was just telling me, "Our Saraswati is only seventeen, yet bridegrooms are queuing up already with their horoscopes. I can afford to pick and choose. But in your position and with a deformity..." And she went on to talk about the money they had saved up for the dowry, "And as a pleasant surprise my husband has also decided to buy a scooter for the bridegroom." That was how she boasted to me'.

'Don't let such talk upset you mother; it only shows how inconsiderate they are. Next time she speaks to you, tell her to be careful whom she selects, because there are a lot of bride-burners these days.'

'Yes, I will tell her that! Perhaps that will make her shut up.'

Lakshmi brought the coffee. Savitri drank it, wiping the perspiration from her forehead with the end of her sari, and indulged in a fresh burst of grumbling. 'Why does God punish me like this? Why am I cursed with a daughter who is twenty-eight and still unmarried? Every time I see your face, I feel I could kill myself!'

At this outburst, Lakshmi began to cry. Balan went to her. 'Please don't cry Lakshmi; Please don't!' Turning to his mother he said, 'If Lakshmi isn't married, it is not her fault. It was you who gave birth to her with a limp and it is your husband who can't earn enough money to satisfy those grasping idiots who call themselves prospective bridegrooms!'

'Did I blame her? Did I blame her?' Savitri said remorse-stricken, and going up to her daughter, embraced her. They both wept. Savitri said: 'My darling girl, I did not blame you; I was merely cursing fate and regretting my own past sins. How can I ever blame you for anything, you who are my angel!'

'It's all right, mother,' Lakshmi said. 'None of us can escape our destiny.'

'Oh, well, your father will be home soon,' said Savitri. 'I had better prepare something for him.'

'I will come and help you, mother,' offered Lakshmi.

'No, you sit and talk to Bala, I can manage,' replied Savitri as she went into the kitchen. Years of habit, the desire to look after your husband even when you were deeply disappointed with him, was deeply ingrained in Savitri's mind. Also, she liked to work alone in the kitchen, despite the fact that she was getting old and fat and tired easily.

'How long am I to put up with this sort of thing? Misery, recriminations, tears! Where is all this going to end?' complied Lakshmi, but in a quiet voice so her mother would not hear.

'In the long run, we will all be dead,' said Balan bitterly. 'It is the short run that is bothering me. You must carry out your decision, but don't reveal it beforehand; just go ahead and do it.'

'No Bala, I don't want to cause them more misery and humiliation. I'll talk to father this evening.'

'Getting married outside the caste may cause them sorrow, even appear to be a tragedy from their point of view, but it is a sorrow that can be overcome. As it is, you're dying a little each day; it's never-ending.'

Seshadri Iyer came in, with a bundle of files. He left his chappals outside the door, placed the files on the table, and having washed himself at the tap in the backyard, relaxed on the only comfortable chair in the front room.

'What did you do today, Bala?' he asked his son.

'The same as usual, and with the same result.'

'Don't give up hope, my boy; something will turn up soon.'

'How was your day, father?' Lakshmi asked him.

'After twenty-eight years of service, it still amazes me how crooked some people are. In fact things are getting much worse. Not a single request comes to me that is not illegal in

some way. I am unpopular because I refuse to bend the law to suit some people's interests. But at least my conscience is clear.'

'It is very worrying, I suppose,' Lakshmi prompted him.

'If it weren't for the financial angle, I would have requested premature retirement. But this morning, the Collector called me in and asked me if I would an extension, because of my "good work" as he called it and because I was keeping good health. I agreed.'

'I am glad, father,' said Lakshmi. 'If you can continue for one more year, our situation might have improved by then'.

After supper, the family sat in the front room-Seshadri Iyer in his usual chair, Savitri leaning against some pillows on the floor, and the children on two other chairs. Seshadri Iyer was turning the pages of the newspaper and commenting on the sad state of the world, Savitri was almost dozing, too tired to go to bed. Then Lakshmi dropped her bombshell.

'Father,' she started. It was an innocuous enough opening but the seriousness of her tone made even Savitri sits up.

'You know my employer, Mr Kandaswamy? He has made me a proposal of marriage.'

'What? What?' Savitri rose angrily to her feet, her eyes full of tears. 'A proposal of marriage? What have you been doing in that office of his? Oh, that my daughter should come to this! As if we haven't got enough troubles! I shall never live this down. I shall throw myself in the river!' She pulled her sari around herself and began walking out of the room.

'Keep quiet, mother, and let Lakshmi finish what she wants to say! Don't jump to any conclusions!' shouted Balan in an authoritative voice. But his mother would not be stopped.

What more is there to say?' Her words flowed in competition with her tears. 'What have I to live for, a threadless son and an immoral daughter? Is that what you want me to live for? A girl from a respectable Brahmin family, with a great tradition of piety and holiness, wanting to marry a low caste merchant! I suppose for you it's a matter for congratulations? Maybe she's even pregnant by that fat old man and that's why she wants to - has to - marry him!'

'Mother, don't say things you will be sorry for afterwards!' Balan was vehement. 'Don't you trust your own daughter? Have you no faith in her chastity and good sense? Do you think she will demean herself in such a manner? You are a fool to think such things about your own child'.

Seshadri Iyer, enraged by Savitri's cruel words, got up and slapped her hard, for the first and only time in his life. There was a moment of stunned silence. Savitri rubbed her chin, staring at her husband disbelievingly and sank whimpering into a corner.

Approaching Lakshmi, her father put his arm around her fondly. 'Tell me what happened, my dear,' he said gently.

But Lakshmi could not speak. Her mother's words had numbed her into silence, even tears would not flow. With considerable effort she whispered, 'It doesn't matter, father.'

'But it does matter,' her father pleaded. 'As one vitally concerned about your future, I would like to know what happened. Forget what your mother said; you know she always speaks without thinking. Please tell us.' His concern comforted her and she began, hesitantly, to speak.

'As you know, Mr. Kandaswamy has been a widower for some time. His daughters are married and he is on his own now. He has always been kind to me and he suggested that if you were to agree, he would like to marry me. After all, I'm twenty-eight and my chances of getting a bridegroom are slender. I told him I would discuss it with you and let him know. That's all that happened, father.'

'Kandaswamy is a decent man, but he is not from our community. Don't you realize that?' asked Sheshadri Iyer.

'I do realize it, father, but what is the alternative? How long am I to live like this? What is to happen to me in my old age? Besides, how am I to support you and mother in your old age?'

'How can you do all this by marrying Kandaswamy?' her father asked.

'He has promised to make a financial settlement so that if anything were to happen to him, I would have half his property and the rest would go to his daughters. Even during his lifetime, he has promised to make me a generous allowance.'

'So, you have settled everything, have you?'

'And Bala will have the holy thread back and will get a job and be with you and mother, won't you, Bala?'

'Yes,' said Balan quietly.

'You keep out of this!' The father shouted at his son. 'You who are a disgrace to the family and to the community, you must have put her up to this!'

'No father, please,' Lakshmi pleaded. 'Bala has nothing to do with all this; in fact he didn't know anything until I told him this afternoon. For my sake, he agreed to stay and look after you if I went away. That is all.'

Seshadri Iyer became thoughtful. Savitri who had been silent during this conversation spoke up. 'Are you going to let her do it? Are you going to allow your children to bring disgrace to the family?'

'Keep quiet!' Seshadri Iyer shouted at his wife. Then, turning to his daughter he spoke more gently. 'You have always been a good girl, Lakshmi. You have always complied with our wishes and have given us a lot of happiness, in spite of various problems. I know your decision must have been made with the best of intentions, perhaps it even springs from desperation, but you must realize that it's absolutely impossible. We cannot break away from what we consider our sacred duty despite economic hardship, even poverty. And we are a long way from that yet. We are not rebels, like some other people', he said, looking pointedly at his son. 'We believe in living in tune with the world, with our tradition, with our community. We don't want to be the laughing stock of society, to be pointed out as people who sold their daughter to a wealthy Sudra in order to better themselves.'

'If you can buy a bridegroom by paying a dowry, what is the harm in selling your daughter, as you call it?' asked Balan vehemently. 'The price of a bridegroom depends on whether he is a doctor or an engineer, or an I.A.S officer. But father, don't you realize that Lakshmi is not selling herself? Doesn't it strike you that she may be fond of that man, and it's cruel to stop her from getting some happiness out of life?'

'You have no right to speak on this subject; you are not fit socially, spiritually or even economically to do so.' Then, he turned to Lakshmi again. 'Lakshmi, I am going to convert my pension to a lump-sum payment. That, with my accrued provident fund, will enable me to find you a decent husband. Please don't worry about your future. Also, now that things have got this far, it's not nice for you to work for that man any more. From tomorrow onwards, look for another job or stay at home and help your mother. I will tell Kandaswamy on my way to the office, that you will not be going there any more.'

'Father....' Balan made a feeble attempt to prolong the discussion.

'That's enough. The matter need not be discussed ever again'. Seshadri said with an air of finality as he went into his room. He took off his shirt, hung it on a hook, and lay down, pensively.

He had never been so decisive in his life, and the family was numbed into an uneasy silence that reigned over the house for the next few days.

Lakshmi stayed home, weeping as she went about trying to help her mother with the household chores. 'Why don't you wash your face, comb your hair and go to the temple for evening puja?' her mother would ask in a moment of tenderness.

'I don't particularly want to go out? Mother,' Lakshmi would reply.

After the housework was over, mother and daughter relaxed through the hot afternoons. Savitri would ask her daughter to read the paper and tell her what was in the news. It was her way of making up for the cruel words she had uttered, but Lakshmi was usually gloomy and unresponsive. Balan was out most of the time; he didn't even come in for meals very regularly. No questions were asked and no answers given. Seshadri Iyer maintained a stony silence and hardly spoke to anyone.

Three days after Lakshmi's revelations about wanting to get married, Balan called on Mr. Kandaswamy, whom he knew a little because Lakshmi had been working there for some years. The merchant received him coldly and asked if he wanted anything. 'The few things your sister had left in her desk have already been handed over to your father', he said.

'I don't know what my father told you Mr. Kandaswamy, but my sister is heartbroken.' Balan said.

'Your father came here and insulted me,' said Kandaswamy. 'He may be the head clerk in the Collector's Office, but I can afford to buy half-a-dozen head clerks like him and not miss any money. I kept quiet only because I didn't want a scandal which would ruin your sister's name. That's why I didn't say anything.'

'Why don't you marry her all the same? Balan suggested. 'She is over twenty-one and does not need anyone's consent. You must have thought it over fairly thoroughly before making up your minds. Why then do you bother about my parents?'

'Look Mr. Balasubramaniam, I am a respectable businessman in this town. I have a status and a reputation to maintain. I don't want to be associated with scandal. I may not be educated like you people, but I have my pride. I don't want a runaway marriage with all the attendant repercussions. I offered honourable marriage and it was spurned. The matter is over as far as I am concerned.'

'The matter is not over!' Balan almost shouted. 'If you are both fond of each other, why do you care for caste or community? By getting married and giving it publicity, you will be reforming society...'

'Please don't shout so much; if people get to hear about it, it will only harm your sister's reputation. I also want to tell you that while I don't believe in all this caste business, I am not a social reformer. I want to live in tune with society and not rebel against it. I know you have thrown away your holy thread, but what have you gained except the antagonism of other Brahmins? Now, please go away.'

Balan had a friend called Ganesan, the exact antithesis of him: short, fat, with thick glasses, where Balan was tall and slim. He was the only classmate with whom Balan maintained any contact. At one time, Ganesan had hero-worshipped Balan as a genius, listened intently to his words and played the eager acolyte. But now he was employed as a reporter for the local paper and had also got married. Though marriage as well as his job had given him greater self-confidence and he no longer idolized Balan, he still listened to him, advised him and helped him whenever he could. Ganesan was busy during the day and liked to spend the evenings with his wife, but he and Balan often met in the twilight hour and walked along the river-bank with Balan airing his theories and views and Ganesan making appropriate comments. Ganesan—also a Brahmin—could sympathize with Balan's essential predicament. He was himself an agnostic, but followed the customs of the family and the community without attaching any importance to them. He was not cast in the mould of a saint or a rebel and he always told Balan so.

'Look Bala, what is your objective in life?' he asked. 'Is it to reform society or is to make a decent living, have a family and die a venerable old man surrounded by children and grand-children? If you want to reform society, I can tell you it does not want to be reformed. People are afraid of anything new, anything unusual, and will fight you tooth and nail.'

'I don't want to reform society and I don't want to be a saint,' Balan said. 'I just want to atone for the feeling of guilt I have on behalf of all Brahmins.'

'Maybe you believe in the saying that the sins of the fathers shall visit the sons, but I don't. We are not responsible for what our fathers did'.

'You would be right if we ceased to follow them, but if we persist, then they shall visit us. They have visited me already.'

'What do you mean?' Ganesan enquired.

'My not being able to get into the medical college,' replied Balan. 'Don't you think that's a good example?'

'I still don't understand,' Ganesan persisted.

Don't you remember, in the Mahabharata, Ekalavya, who belonged to a low caste became a great master in the art of archery in spite of the fact that Drona - who incidentally was a Brahmin—did not give him any lessons. He learnt the art merely by watching Drona teach Arjuna. But when Arjuna complained about it, Drona asked Ekalavya to cut off his thumb as his "fees" and thus made his skill and knowledge useless. If I am refused admission to the medical college today, don't you think it is the direct result of Drona's action?'

'Well, fortunately they don't ask Brahmin surgeons to cut off their fingers as fees. To that extent we have progressed, I suppose!'

'So, you see, the sins of the fathers do visit the sons,' Balan persisted. 'The philosophy of Dronaism, the idea that knowledge is the monopoly of a fortunate few has been the undoing of our country in general, and Brahmins in particular.'

'But don't you see, Bala, it is not we alone who are the perpetrators of the caste system and all its evils. Every caste has its own privileges and limitations. It's like a jigsaw puzzle, each piece fitting into a particular space. It is far too deep-rooted for us to do anything about it.'

'But I don't want to do anything about it,' cried Balan. 'I merely want to give up being a Brahmin. As a matter of fact, I have already thrown away the holy thread.'

'So, you have taken the first step,' Ganesan mused, 'I don't know where it's going to lead you, but I admire you. You have courage; a sort of foolhardy bravery which enables you to act even though you know you are going to fail.'

'It is only a symbolic protest.'

'It must have been a big blow to your parents; and won't your sister find it even more difficult to get a husband now? I wish you'd waited, at least until she got married, before deciding to become a saint.'

'Please Ganesh, don't dub me a saint; I don't in the least feel like one.'

'You are highly critical of us Brahmins; but you will find that throughout history, we have been in the forefront of most progressive activities. You are only following that tradition.'

'I am doing it because I wish to have a clear conscience, to be able to live with myself. I am beginning to realize that the greatest hell, the worst of prisons, is not one imposed by others, but of one's own making. I am a reformer if I want to make others free. But how is one to break away from the shackles and the hell that one imposes in oneself?'

'If I didn't know you well, I would say you're mad.'

'Yes, perhaps, it is a kind of madness that drives me.'

Yes, perhaps, it was madness. It certainly was a transformation. The seed of frustration planted in his heart when he failed to get into medical college, fostered by the disappointment of not getting a job, was now almost fully grown, especially after he had watched his father quash his sister's slim hope of escaping her tragic future. He blamed all

his woes on his Brahminness; soon his anguish blurred the difference between night and day, between hunger and eating, between the heat and the cold. His life took on a dream-like quality. Even the half-hearted attempts at getting a job were abandoned. Conversation within the family, even the discussions with Ganesh, began to lose meaning until they ceased altogether. His only concern - if anything - was his guilt, the overwhelming burden on his conscience. He wondered if faith would hold sway over the minds of men for ever. Could it withstand the onslaught of rationalism, the scepticism of science, the influence of materialism? Was it possible to predict the future of faith? Faith seemed indestructible. In moments of weakness, in times of sickness, in periods of helplessness, even men who had denied god turned to faith for comfort and solace, like a child turns to its mother's bosom in moments of danger. Yes, faith was perhaps indestructible, eternal, so long as man was subject to human weaknesses. But if faith was to serve its purpose, it had to be dynamic—like truth—and progress with growing knowledge. That was perhaps why a prophet—an avatar—was necessary in every age to bring faith up-to-date. He wondered if he was a prophet.... So far he had been logical, conscious in his thinking, but slowly, logic was giving way to fanciful ideas and delusions.

When the conscious mind fails to cope with problems of the conscience and guilt, the subconscious takes over. If manifested externally, it appears a kind of madness. But if it remains internal—as in Balan's case—the person is merely considered a bit weird. Balan's external behaviour was not strange; only his mind was subject to severe stress and strain.

There was a fire burning in his heart, driving him in quest of what he did not know. But he dared not disturb its leaping flames which darted through his mind in the form of dreams. Only fragments of the dream were revealed to him. Sometimes, he dreamed that he walked through enchanted lands of gold where virgin buds exuded magical fragrance, where the moon's silvery beams danced over the stillness of the lakes. Along rising paths and dusty plains he walked to reach distant hills that always seemed too far. He dreamed of things far, far away, of things great and unattainable, of things undefinable.

Love had never played a major part in his life. But now, lonely in a world indifferent to his dreams, he craved for the touch of unseen hands, for a bosom in which he could bury his tired soul, shed tears of love and longing. He yearned for the love of one who would share the turmoil within his heart. Alone, he walked; alone amidst throngs of men with empty faces, dull grey masks that hid their thoughts and visions from the world and from themselves. To them, he listened; to them, he talked. But what did he know of them? Or they of him? His conflicts, his yearnings, his dreams—to whom could he reveal these? And how? How could he reveal the secrets that he dared not admit even to himself?

He walked now in a place where men seemed to sit by silent streams under protective trees of faith. They admired the skies with their eyes closed; listened to the music of voiceless birds and breathed an air of blissful complacency. 'Probe not too closely into the mysteries of the Universe,' they said, 'lest thou offend thy Maker.' But his mind had

traversed the desert-like tracks of knowledge, endless paths that merged perhaps only with the horizon. In the path he had chosen, there was no shade, no gentle breeze, no cool stream; only hot air, hot skies, and an expanse of hot sand burning with new ideas and scorching every step that his mind took. Graves of faded yesterdays, cold and dead, lined his path. Memories of them clung fondly, but their ghosts obstructed the path. Yes, it was impossible to completely escape one's past. At one level he knew it all, yet he grew more and more restive.

The paths he took grew wild. They were no longer well preserved or marked by iron arguments. Groping for reality and craving for truth, he walked into the wilderness, to be confronted by nothingness. Only the eternal question stared him in the face—the why and the wherefore of things. In this land of nothingness, in silence and isolation he faced his self. The colourful robes, the holy thread, had been left by the riverside. The last shreds that had kept him covered were lost. Now, he tore off the final mask and beheld his soul. Physical nakedness, one could bear. But nakedness of the soul was unbearable.

Its face was different; its voice was strange. Its words were meaningless, yet vital. That was what had driven him onward, the glowing fire in the soul that consumed everything. Here were the two fires—the fire within that drove him on and the fire without that consumed him.

Roused by every wind that fanned the fire, moved by every passionate wish, yet unmoved within, taking part in every folly, yet strangely apart, he waited for his journey's end. He waited for the heat to subside, for the evening breeze, longed for the red sun to set, for the sudden darkness to spread and shut for ever, the tired eyelids of the mind.

When he came out of these reveries into the world of stark reality, it was to find that nothing had changed. He knew that nothing would change. His one desire was to get away from it all, to escape.

He knew now that his symbolic gesture of throwing away the holy thread was worse than useless. He had to break away completely. It was a compelling psychological and spiritual need. He had heard people talk glibly about the abolition of the caste system, about equality, about the creation of a classless society—but only in theory. The burden of tradition, the compulsion of habit, the line of least resistance, was all in favour of the status quo. When it came to the touchstone of action, everyone was a Kandaswamy.

Yes, he had to get away; the question was how? He had to be reborn, but as who? He had to obliterate his identity as a Brahmin, but what would his new identity be? If he applied for a job, they wanted to see his certificates even if they had no intention of selecting him. If he wanted to marry, they wanted his horoscope. If he wished to write to people, he had to have an address. In modern society, an identity, a background, an

environment, was essential features for survival. Even if he committed suicide, his body would have to be identified by his parents and cremated at the Brahmin cremation ground. He could be identified by a hundred-and-one thing, by his photograph, by his ration card, by the dhobi mark on his clothes. It might be difficult to get a job, but it was impossible to lose one's identity.

To be a true Brahmin, to be twice-born, was not enough, he told himself. He had to be thrice-born in a new birth where the pride and arrogance of long years would be washed away through sacrifice and purification. If that were to be, he had to be born among the lowliest and the meanest, to do the most degrading of all jobs. But how was he to ensure that he would be born among them in his next birth? He did not wish to leave it to chance or fate.

It is difficult to follow the thought processes by which an exceptional man arrives at a particular decision. The spiritual conflicts, the emotional and psychological struggles are difficult to analyze rationally. The role of aspiration, the desire for sacrifice, the pursuit of an ideal, the frustration of one's purpose, even economic circumstances—are all laid in the crucible of the subconscious before it emerges as a course of action. And that determines whether the man is to be considered a fool or a saint.

Sometimes, Balan wondered why he had been chosen to suffer for the sins of a whole community. Was he special? Was it by divine will, in which he seemed to have less and less faith? Of course, he knew that other people were suffering too from injustice, from corruption. But then they were not doing anything about it; they were merely asserting their rights, forming Brahmin Associations, starting separate educational institutions to circumvent discrimination. Fighting one evil with another was no solution. If social distinctions are unjust, they should be abolished instead of perpetuating them, as most people were doing. In any case, he was concerned with the problems of his conscience, rather than with those of society.

But still, there was no answer to the question why he felt compelled to sacrifice himself, for the sake of a society full of evil. An inner compulsion drove him forward and he seemed to have no alternative. He had to follow that compulsion relentlessly, wherever it led him, whatever his sufferings might be. Was he destined to be a saint, as Ganesan suggested? The strange thing was, he did not feel in the least inspired. He could not make grand or dramatic gestures that would attract attention and publicity. In fact, the last thing he wanted was to attract attention to himself. So, he moved slowly, groping in the dark, step by halting step... Giving up the holy thread was the first move in that direction.

And yet, when he thought of the dignity of the philosophy of the Upanishads, the grandeur of Kalidasa's poetry, he felt enthralled and fascinated. The simple maxims of the Tirukkural inspired him. But the greatness of philosophy was one thing, the reality of living quite another.

His thoughts wandered to his family. It was strange how hope for them had gradually given way to disappointment, to frustration and finally, to desperation; how love had turned to bitterness, even hatred. At the same time, he experienced moments of tenderness and sympathy and his heart went out to them living in their individual hells—particularly his sister, Lakshmi. There had been a time when he had felt a violent hatred towards them, towards his parents in particular, but gradually he realized that an icy silence was better than an open confrontation that led to a total break in relationships, or a false reconciliation that left one with nothing more than a feeling of guilt. He also realized that while duty was what one owed to others, moral justification was what one owed to oneself. Coming to this decision helped him to understand his parents better. Anger gave way to sadness, then to understanding, and finally to love. Oh, the pity of it all!

One evening, he went to his father. 'Father, I want to go away.'

'But where? Have you got a job?'

'No, I haven't got a job, but I hope to find one somewhere. Maybe it will be easier elsewhere. In any case, I don't want to be a burden on you any longer.'

'It takes the same amount of rice to cook for four as for three,' said his mother coming out of the kitchen, wiping her hands. Lakshmi, sitting in her usual corner, watched him.

'It's not a matter of rice alone, mother.'

'No, it is not a matter of rice, it's more your pride.'

'Strangely enough, it's not my pride either,' Balan answered quietly but with determination. 'I realize our paths have diverged and it is no longer possible for me to stay here.'

'Will you let us know where you are, how you are getting on? Will you write to us?' his father asked anxiously. Balan could see the glitter of tears in his dull eyes.

'I am not sure, father,' Balan tried to be honest. 'I hope you will hear about me some day. But I will not disgrace you.'

They all knew this was the end; there was no need for further words. Savitri, unable to control her sobs, went into the kitchen. Balan picked up the small bundle he had got ready and walked to the door.

Lakshmi fell at his feet. 'Oh, Bala, Bala take me with you!'

'No dear, you will not like it where I am going.' He gently pushed her aside, took one last look round the room and walked out of the door.

'I can't live without you, Bala!' were the last words that echoed in his ears.

TWO

I

The silent reminders of a dead past—his schoolboy initials on the tree trunk by the riverbank, the stone in the corner on which he used to sit and meditate, the wobbly pillar still supporting the choultry roof - were still imprinted on Balan's mind. His mother's alternating fits of anger and affection, the gloomy gentleness of his father and above all, the pleading, tearful eyes of Lakshmi came back to him again and again and gave him a dull ache. Was he still bound to his family through an invisible umbilical cord? Was throwing away the holy thread not adequate? Memory greeted him at every turn. He embraced it with all his heart and showered his love on it. It was his only friend and companion now, but it wasn't enough, for he had to contend with the problems of living. He was used to two good meals a day and partial to South Indian coffee and now he had nothing to combat hunger and thirst. During his imaginary wanderings, he often did not know when he ate or drank. But now, he was ashamed to realize that he was subject to all the weaknesses of the human body. At nights, he had to lie down somewhere to sleep. Continuous walking exhausted him and he had to rest.

He thought he had made careful preparations for his departure, but within a day or two, he realized how inadequate they were. He had an extra dhoti and a shirt in his bundle, a towel for drying himself after a bath and his razor. But he did not have a pillow for his head, or a blanket to keep out the cold, not even a tumbler or mug for water or coffee if it was offered to him. He did not realize that people wouldn't allow their tumblers to touch his lips (in case he was an untouchable) even if they decided to give him something to drink. Fortunately, he was able to sell his watch, fountain pen and a few other valuables and collect some money. He threw away his razor and replaced it with a tumbler.

He was determined not to beg for food or for anything else. He managed one or two free meals at temples and choultries and supplemented them by occasionally visiting a roadside food stall. Very soon, his clothes were dirty, his beard unkempt, his hair matted and his feet dusty. People mistook him for a tramp but not for an untouchable. The moment he started speaking they knew he was educated and probably a Brahmin because of his intonation and his choice of words and phrases.

'What is a fellow like you doing wandering in this garb?' people often asked him. 'Have you taken a vow to do so?' He usually muttered 'yes' in response and passed on. He did not want to converse with people who might try to discover his identity.

The strange thing was, he was now at peace with himself. The feeling of guilt had left him. Without any decisions to make and without any questions to answer he felt freed from all responsibilities. 'The earth is my bed; the sky is my blanket,' he told himself proudly. When he came across a river or a tank, he bathed, washed his hair and his clothes and tried

to tidy himself. The habit of cleanliness, ingrained in him from childhood, persisted and he could not give it up easily.

He knew he would soon have to do something to earn a living. His little store of money wouldn't last for ever and his ambition to do the lowliest of jobs remained unfulfilled. A few incidents that took place in the first few weeks of his nomadic life made him realize, however, that finding a job was going to be difficult.

Once, he had visited the affluent part of a small town and asked for work in bungalows that had gardens. The watchmen usually turned him away or the gardener would tell him to clear out. Only once did he come face to face with the owner of a house. 'What do you want to do?' the man asked him.

'I will do any work you give me, sir,' Balan replied, assuming an expression of humility.

'Show me your hands!' demanded the gentleman and Balan spread them out for inspection.

'You have never done a stroke of manual work in all your life,' claimed the man. 'Your hands are as soft as a baby's bottom. And you have an educated voice. What tricks are you up to?'

Balan thought quickly. 'I am doing it as vow, sir,' he replied. 'I have vowed to the god at Tirupathi that for three months, I will walk and earn my living through my own hands.'

'It is a peculiar vow,' the house owner said. 'Perhaps you are telling the truth. On the other hand, there is a gang of thieves going round the town. They go to houses, ask for work, inspect the house during the day, see if there are any dogs or watchmen, and burgle it during the night. How do I know you are not one of them?'

'God is my witness, sir, I have no other proof to offer.' For some reason, the reply impressed the man. 'I have no work for you; but you can have some money,' he said and offered him two rupees.

'No, sir, I have not come to beg,' Balan announced proudly.

'Evidently, your austerities haven't taught you humility,' said the gentleman. 'Don't you know that the first thing you must learn to fulfil such a vow is to be humble?'

'Thank you for your advice, sir,' he said. He accepted the money and left.

After this experience, he wondered if it was pride that prevented him from accepting money and decided that in the future, if money was offered, he would not refuse it. People expected nomads to beg for food and money or both, and to refuse it would naturally rouse

their suspicions. He also realized that if he expected to do manual work, his hands must be far more rugged than they were. But how could he make them rugged without doing any work?

As he went back to the choultry in the centre of the town, he saw a man crawling along on all fours. His limbs seemed to be in perfect condition, yet he crawled. The truth was revealed to him when the man came into the choultry.

‘I have made a vow to crawl on all fours to the temple at Srirangam,’ he said proudly. ‘I have done a hundred miles so far. Now it is not far to go.’

Balan decided to crawl, hoping that would toughen his muscles and coarsen his skin. It was surprising how many people he met who had made similar vows to mortify themselves as a means of emotional and spiritual fulfillment. Men who had needles pierced through their cheeks and tongues, men who carried kavadies on their shoulders, men who begged as a means of self-humiliation, men who kept vows of silence. The route that Balan took was a pilgrim route to the famous shrines of South India and he came across a large number of such people. From the conversation among these people at the end of the day in choultries, mutts, or under the shade of banyan trees, he realized there were thieves and crooks among them, waiting for an opportunity to rob innocent pilgrims of their meagre belongings. It was a new and different world where he could see human faith, human misery as well as human deceit in forms very different from those he was accustomed to. Those to whom nomadism, beggary and craftiness was a way of life recognized that Balan was not one of them and refused to have anything to do with him.

There was another group of wanderers, men and women who were performing acrobats or had trained monkeys or bears for purposes of exhibition and entertainment. They too roamed from village to village and from one town to another, entertaining people on the streets. Then there were the soothsayers, fortune-tellers and the bird astrologers. All these people considered themselves superior to the religious mendicants and the beggars and would not mix with them. Each of these categories stayed apart from the others, had their own codes of honour and ethics and considered the rest to be the scum of the earth. This came as a revelation to Balan, who had unconsciously assumed that there would be a kind of equality among the under-privileged.

At the end of the first day of crawling, his knees and palms were sore, the skin was beginning to peel off in places and he knew that if he continued, he would begin to bleed. The next day, he tied pieces of cloth round his knees to prevent direct contact with the earth. Despite the protection it wasn't easy to tie his small parcel to his back and crawl in the hot sun. The next day, there were blisters on his palms and he had to use his elbows to propel himself. This slowed down his pace considerably. At the end of a week, in spite of the pain and the sores on his arms and legs, he found that physical mortification gave him a

curious sense of peace and well-being. He now understood why it was so popular among a certain kind of people.

But he did not realize the physical toll all this was taking on him. The poor and irregular diet, the exposure to the hot sun in the day and the biting cold at night, the self-inflicted strain, all affected his health adversely. He persisted on the strength of his will-power but there came a time when he could no longer go on. One afternoon, shivering in spite of the hot sun, he collapsed in the shade of a tamarind tree.

When he came to, he found himself lying on the verandah of a small hut in squalid surroundings. There was a peculiar smell about that nauseated him. An elderly woman came out of the hut.

'You're awake, are you?' she asked.

'Where am I?' Balan asked by way of reply.

The woman did not answer but went into the house. When she returned she carried a brass tumbler of gruel, mixed with buttermilk. 'Drink this,' she said. 'It will make you feel better.'

He was suddenly aware he was famished and drank the concoction gratefully. Having done this he fell asleep. When he awoke the woman was by his side.

'It was a good thing I found you when I did,' she said. 'Otherwise, you may have been dead by now. For three days I've looked after you. But we have to move today because I have to get back to my husband. This is my daughter's house.'

'I still feel very weak', complained Balan.

'You have to move nevertheless; this isn't a hospital you know,' replied the woman. Then, her face broke into a smile. 'But don't you worry. I will look after you until you're better. I can take you to my village and keep you there till you're fit to go wherever it is you are bound.'

It was then that Balan realized that he was not bound anywhere that he had been wandering aimlessly, more or less going where his feet took him. He also realized he had lost his bundle and along with it, whatever money he had.

'I am not sure if I want to go anywhere in particular,' he said.

'A young man like you ought to have a job,' the woman chided him. 'What is the use of wasting your life just being a beggar? Anyway, we will decide when we get to my village Sirumudi.'

To avoid the heat of the day they set off after sundown. As night approached they stopped to rest under a tamarind tree. The woman had some buttermilk in her earthenware pot which she first offered to Balan; then, having gulped some herself, she turned in for the night.

Balan learnt that the woman's name was Pappa. 'It is very kind of you to have looked after me when I was ill'.

'I knew you were an educated man when I saw you,' she said. 'And I was right. No one in our caste bothers to make such pretty speeches. My husband will be thrilled with you.'

She was a low caste woman and lived in the untouchable part of Sirumudi. Balan was surprised and pleased at such kind-heartedness among the poor and lowly. He wondered if his mother would have taken pity on an unknown stranger and done what Pappa had done for him. No, she would have wanted to know the man's caste before lifting a finger, he thought.

Pappa's husband, Kuppan, was an elderly man, full of vitality and laughter. He took Balan's arrival with his wife as a matter of course and joked about it. 'Now that my woman has found a younger man, I expect she will throw me out,' he laughed, and Balan, not used to such conversation, was most embarrassed.

'What caste are you?' was the first question that Kuppan asked Balan.

'I am an untouchable,' Balan replied.

'That is not a caste', the old man said. 'There are Pallars, Paraiyars and Malas, just as there are Iyers and Iyengars among the Brahmins. No untouchable ever calls himself an untouchable; it is only others who do so. He usually mentions his caste. What are you?'

Balan could not avoid the deep and penetrating eyes of Kuppan. Also, he didn't know which among the castes he had mentioned, was the lowest. So he merely said, 'I am the lowest among them.'

'All right, that means you are a Mala,' the old man said with a twinkle in his eyes. 'Am I correct?'

'Yes,' said Balan. He did not relish this cross-examination.

'Very well, where do you come from?'

'I come from Kamalapur.'

'Don't interrogate him as if you were a blasted policeman,' shouted Pappa from inside the house.

'It is a good thing I am not a policeman,' laughed the husband. 'If I were, he would have been in jail by now, for I have already caught him in one lie and am on the verge of catching him in another.'

'Why, what has the poor boy done?' she asked, coming out of the house.

'If he is an untouchable, then I am the district collector,' said Kuppan. District collector was the highest personage he could think of at that moment. Then he spoke seriously. 'Look young man, my wife is a bit of a scatter-brain. She is good at inviting trouble and she has brought you here. I don't know what you have done. For all I know, you might have committed a murder and are hiding from the police. Maybe you are a naxalite. Perhaps you have run away from home. I don't know. But I am willing to bet everything I've got that you are not an untouchable. You must also realize that though I am an untouchable as you call us, I have a position and status to maintain in our community. I cannot afford to harbour a criminal. If you are to stay here and I am to look after you, you must tell me the truth. Otherwise, you had better be off before sunset.'

Balan was tired of wandering around. The last few weeks had been physically and spiritually exhausting. He had realized that loneliness is a terrible thing. He also remembered his original resolve to become an untouchable. Here was an easy way to become one. All he had to do was to stay with Pappa and Kuppan until he could absorb the untouchable way of life and then move on to a town where he could find himself a job. He decided to trust the elderly couple and tell them his story.

Once he decided to reveal his identity, he told them all. Not having had any human companionship for some time, he was eager to pour out his heart, to tell them of his frustrations and longings, his feelings of guilt, his relationship with his family, the problems of his sister Lakshmi, everything. They listened to him silently. When he finished, no one spoke for some time; there seemed nothing to say. At last Kuppan spoke.

'I am only an illiterate man. We people cannot afford the luxury of a conscience as you call it. But it seems to me that you are a little unhinged', and he touched his head meaningfully. 'The worst Brahmins are better off than the best untouchables in this village. And I can't help feeling sorry for your parents for having such an ungrateful son.'

Balan was silent. Pappa spoke up in his defence. 'Let the poor boy get it out of his system. After some time, he will return to his parents. They will tell everyone that he has been away on a pilgrimage, perform some purification ceremonies secretly and look for a bride with a fat dowry. But don't you criticize him. After all, he is not doing anything bad.'

'I wouldn't want to be a Brahmin, even if I could. We are born, each one of us, to a particular station in life and we have to accept it. So I can't understand why he wants to be an untouchable. He will only get into trouble,' persisted Kuppan. 'And I doubt if he can make it; for one thing, he is too educated.'

'I will do my best', pleaded Balan. 'I'll try to be a good Mala.'

'Not if you're going to stay with us, you won't' cried Kuppan. 'Malas are the lowest and we won't have anything to do with them. If you stay with us, you'll be a respectable Chakkiliyan, which is our caste.'

'I agree to whatever you say,' said Balan.

'I need a young man to work with me, so I can keep you', Kuppan continued. 'You have to do leather work and whatever else I tell you to do and you won't get any wages; I can't afford to pay another man. But you'll get the same food we eat you will be one of us. You will be like a son and subject to our discipline and caste rules. Do you understand?'

Balan was overjoyed. He had not thought he could become an untouchable so quickly or so easily. 'I shall obey you in every respect, just as a son obeys a father,' he assured the old man.

'Like they used to, you mean,' smiled Kuppan. 'These days, they're all like you, running away from home and not obeying their fathers. Another thing,' Kuppan warned Balan, 'You will not molest any of our young women. A lot of these high caste fellows think coming to the Cheri is a cheap and easy way of having some fun at our expense. The moment I catch you at it, you will be beaten up and thrown out of the Cheri.'

'I swear I will not indulge in any such activities,' Balan spoke seriously. 'I accept you as my guru and wish to learn how to be a good Chakkiliyan.'

'I will say one thing for you, young man; you know how to talk,' Kuppan said. 'The first lesson you have to learn is to forget that you ever went to school, and to learn to speak like us. No Chakkiliyan ever wears his dhoti down to the ankles like you do. The high caste people will think you are trying to ape them. You pick up the edges, take it between your legs and tuck it at the back. And always avert your eyes when you meet high caste people. They may think you are shifty, but they won't think you are proud.'

II

Kuppan consulted the other Chakkiliyans about Balan staying in his house. Though he was recognized as a sort of leader among them, he still consulted them on all matters affecting their caste. The elders of the community had a lot of questions to ask. Had Balan committed any crime, was he hiding from the police? Would his people come looking for him and get them into trouble for keeping a Brahmin boy in their midst and making him lose his caste? Would they have problems with the caste Hindus in their own village? Perhaps, he was a police informer and had come to see if they were distilling arrack in the Cheri. After

interviewing Balan, and having had a long discussion they allowed Kuppan to keep him in his house and teach him leatherwork.

Though the majority of the people living in the Cheri were Chakkiliyans, there were also a few Paraiyars and Malas who lived separately. Most of the houses had mud walls and thatched roofs, but Kuppan's boasted a tiled roof which kept the water out during the heavy rains. There were no proper streets in the Cheri and dirty water from the different huts stagnated in pools all over the place. A few people kept hens and almost every family reared pigs. The pigs were always rooting in the mud for something to eat, grunting as they moved about. There were also stray dogs that didn't belong to anyone and which competed with the pigs for anything edible in the garbage dumps. Chakkiliyan children played in the open space between the huts along with the pigs and the dogs. An atmosphere of informality reigned with no clear line of distinction between animals and humans. Balan ate in the kitchen along with the family and slept in the lean-to in the front at night.

Kuppan earned his living by making sandals out of local leather for the village folk who were mostly farmers. The sandals were made to a pattern that had been in existence from time immemorial and it never varied. But Kuppan was a skilled craftsman who not only introduced a few variations, but produced a quality product that could withstand rough usage in the fields. His sandals were in great demand. It was also Kuppan's job to repair the large leather buckets that were used to draw water from the wells for irrigation. However, with the advent of electricity for pumping water, that work was dwindling by the year. To supplement his income, Kuppan did jobs on the farm of one of the land-owners, Muthu Gounder. In addition to all these activities, Kuppan helped to make ropes for various purposes. Cactus of a particular variety was cut from the hedges and soaked in water for a long time until the pith dissolved. The remaining fibres were then removed, dried, cleaned and twisted into ropes of different thicknesses.

Balan helped Kuppan with all these tasks. He did not find the work either difficult or degrading. Often, he would make suggestions which Kuppan found intelligent and useful. 'That is what comes from your book learning, I suppose,' he commented once. But sometimes he would say, 'Book learning is no use for this sort of work, my boy, you had better forget it.' Kuppan was meticulous in his work, especially the crafting of leather.

'Your skill must start with taking the measurements of the feet correctly. Some are short but wide at the toes, some are thin and long and some have a peculiar bone structure,' he would instruct Balan. 'Did you know that a person's left foot and right feet aren't the same? I take measurements of both feet and make sandals of fit each. The difference is often negligible but it's important for comfort if you have to walk miles over rugged territory every day. Also, you must choose the right kind of leather for the sole and the uppers. The uppers have to be softer since they rub against the skin all the time. You will learn these things by and by'.

Initially, Balan just fetched and carried things for Kuppan. But soon, he graduated to stitching, folding and then, eventually, learned to cut the leather under Kuppan's strict supervision. 'If you cut wrongly, the leather is wasted or loses its value. Be careful,' he was instructed. 'In between the layers of the sole you can sometimes insert strips of poor quality leather and get away with it. But it is still bad workmanship. The soles of the sandals you buy in towns often have strips of cardboard sandwiched between thin strips of leather. I know, because people have brought them to me for repair sometimes just a couple of weeks after having bought them. But my sandals are made to last.'

The one thing that Balan found extremely difficult to get accustomed to was the smell of leather. For three thousand years, his ancestors had considered leather extremely unclean, as a result of which Balan had never been exposed to the material in its raw, uncured state. Here it was everywhere. Balan found it especially hard to eat food in that environment. Often he felt nauseated and controlled himself with great difficulty. To go and be sick outside in the yard (and leave the dogs to clean up the vomit) would have been impolite to his hosts, he thought. There was, of course, no sanitation facility where he could have been sick more privately. After a few days, however, his self-control deserted him and he had to go out and be sick.

When Kuppan asked him if he had indigestion, he shyly explained his difficulty. 'We Brahmins aren't used to the smell of leather, I'm afraid. That's what gives me nausea.'

'You must have very delicate nostrils; we never even notice it,' commented Kuppan, 'because we have grown up with this smell. But I know how you feel. When I go to a temple, I can't stand the smell of incense, camphor and stale oil. I come out as soon as I can, that is, assuming I am allowed in. But you'll probably get used to it in no time.'

Apart from the smell of leather, Pappa's cooking was not very good - everything was too spicy and made without much knowledge of preparing food. Balan, who had a delicate palate, often missed his mother's cooking.

Pappa went into Sirumudi village every day to work in Muthu Gounder's house. Her job was to sweep the front and back yards and to sprinkle water mixed with cow dung to keep the dust down. Sometimes, the family gave her some food to take home and this she would offer to Balan. 'This is from the big Gounder's house. It is perhaps closer to what you are used to and you may relish it better than my cooking.' Balan felt truly blessed at such kindness.

There were times when he had to walk past the ponds where the cactus leaves were soaked for making ropes. The smell of the soaking cactus was even worse than that of leather but fortunately Kuppan did not require him to help with the cleaning of the raw cactus. He only had to assist in making the rope after the fibre was extracted and by then, the smell was bearable.

He had often heard his mother say that she could recognize an untouchable ten yards away by the smell. Now he understood what she meant. But he was determined to get used to it. It would help, he thought, to look upon it as a sacred duty, an ordeal he had to undergo before he could purify himself.

There was another problem he found almost insurmountable. The Brahmin community attached great importance to cleanliness, but here it did not seem to bother anyone. He remembered with longing how every morning the space in front of his house would be swept clean and sprinkled with a mixture of cow dung and water. Then a kolam would be drawn and flowers would be planted in lumps of cow dung, as a sign of auspiciousness. A bath was compulsory every morning even if it meant only a dip in the murky waters of a tank or stream. Clothes had to be washed and changed every day. One became 'unclean' if one touched an untouchable – in fact, in certain cases, even if his shadow fell on one. One was not supposed to eat from a dish used by another even if it had been washed. Food was usually eaten off a banana leaf which was then thrown away. Or, each one ate off his own dish which was always kept separate. A tumbler was not supposed to touch one's lips while drinking water or coffee. A non-Brahmin's entry into a Brahmin puja room or kitchen could render it unclean. If a dog entered the house, a puja had to be performed to make it clean again. Everything had to be washed frequently, even if in dirty water.

Balan realized now that he had cherished these customs and attitudes even if only subconsciously. To see people go without a bath and wearing the same clothes day after day, not washing their hands properly before touching food, not distinguishing between cooking and eating utensils—all this revolted him. Having to eat off any metal dish that was handy, to dip one's dirty fingers into the pot that contained rice or curry, made him feel sick.

Then, there was the problem of meat. Balan had never even seen raw meat. On those rare occasions when he had to pass the meat market where the carcasses of goats or sheep hung, he would turn his head away and walk off as fast as possible. Fortunately, Pappa and Kuppan could not afford meat very often. But when meat was cooked it was a festive day in the house. Kuppan would buy a bottle of arrack from the local distiller to accompany the feast. He would offer the arrack and one or two tasty bits of meat to Balan, but he would refuse, turning his head away from the sight. Since there was no vegetarian curry on such days, Balan had to be content with buttermilk. One day, Pappa persuaded him to have just the gravy of the meat curry and Balan, out of sheer hunger, accepted it. He was sick soon after and the experiment was not repeated. His reaction upset Pappa. 'You have no guts,' she taunted. 'You will never make a decent Chakkiliyan.'

'The very idea of meat makes my stomach turn; I can't help it,' Balan cried. 'It's psychological. I'm really not against eating meat.'

'You people don't know how to enjoy yourselves,' was Pappa's verdict.

'You know, woman,' Kuppan intervened, 'Brahmins are very delicate. They can't do this and they can't do that and the other. They have so many prohibitions and dos and don'ts that they really get tied up in a knot. The higher you go up in the caste system, the less things you can do, that is, if you observe their rules.'

On the meat-and-arack days Kuppan would become philosophical and express views and opinions that he normally kept to himself. 'You know, Bala, this is what makes life worth living,' he said one day, tapping the bottle of arack. 'The other day, you asked me what were the most important things in my life. I thought it was a stupid question at that time, but I will give you the answer now. It is,' and his voice would fall to a whisper, 'a bottle of arack and a fat woman. Those are what make life worth living. But don't tell that to the old woman. She is skinny, but she can be a tigress if her temper is roused.' Soon after delivering this little speech, Kuppan's head dropped to his chest and he began to snore.

One day Kuppan brought home a very large piece of meat. In spite of his averted eyes, Balan could not help noticing it and he wondered if one could get such a large piece from a goat or sheep. Only then did it strike him that it must be from a much larger animal; the very thought horrified him.

'Where did the meat you just brought come from?' Balan enquired.

'One of my master's bullocks died this morning,' Kuppan replied. 'He asked us to take it away before the heat and the flies got at it and made it stink. Naturally, I got the biggest share since it belonged to my employer.' He called out to Pappa, 'Here, cook it straight away; it has already been dead for some hours.'

Balan walked away quietly. There was nothing he could say or do. Kuppan and Pappa were merely following their custom. When he had decided he was going to become an untouchable he had never realized it was going to be like this. To eat the flesh of dead animals was bad enough, but a bullock! He thought of all the injunctions against cow-slaughter in the holy books. He thought of Kamadhenu, the divine cow, the provider of prosperity for the universe. He thought of the many occasions in mythology when that divine being had come to the rescue of humans when they were short of food. According to the holy code, killing a cow was the worst of all sins, worse than killing a child.

But then had Kuppan really done anything wrong? He had not killed a cow. He was merely eating the flesh of a dead bullock. Why should Balan be so shocked? The fact that Kuppan would not have hesitated to kill a cow or a bullock if one was available was not the issue. Logically, he had no business to complain. After all, they had not forced him to eat even goat's meat, let alone beef. However, despite the soundness of the logic, his upper

caste upbringing would not be denied and he had to accept the fact that both his mind and body were revolted at the thought of returning to the house in the Cheri. He counselled himself to be patient. He did not want to go back on his decision to live the life of an untouchable. Equally, he did not wish to let Pappa and Kuppan see the revulsion he felt at their way of life and this was bound to happen if he returned. Whatever the decision he took, he realized they were not accountable. What, then, was he to do? He wandered around aimlessly, thinking and praying for a solution. He found it strange that he should have thought of praying, and then realized that while the decision to become an untouchable had been a logical and ethical one, things were not as clear anymore.

After wandering for many hours, he came to a decision. If his original desire to become an untouchable was right, then everything else followed in a logical sequence. He had neither the right to question nor the freedom to go back on his original decision. After all, he knew that untouchables ate beef and he had come to live in the Cheri with that knowledge. If his sentiments were hurt by it, he had to accept it as part of his suffering. Turning away from it was no solution.

When he returned late at night, the Cheri was dark and quiet. But Kuppan was sitting in front of the hut, waiting for him.

'Where have you been all this time?' he asked.

'I am sorry I went off like that, but I had to sort things out in my own mind.'

'Have you "sorted them out" now?'

'Yes.'

'And are you going to stay with us?'

'Yes'.

Pappa came out of the inner room. 'You must be hungry,' she said. 'Here, drink this. It isn't meat or anything.'

He gratefully drank the mixture of soup and rice.

'Bala, we are mere Chakkiliyans,' said Kuppan. Coming from the proud old man this was almost an apology. 'We cannot change our ways. Maybe they are wrong, but they have been our ways from time immemorial. We cannot alter them, nor can you. The gulf is too wide to be bridged in one or two generations. If you want to leave us, it is all right with us.'

'He has already told you he doesn't want to leave!' Pappa cried. 'He will get used to things after some time.'

‘Pappa is right,’ said Balan. ‘I will never be able to eat beef or even meat perhaps, but I will respect your ways and try not to show my feelings.’

‘It’s very late; let’s get some sleep,’ said Kuppan as he went into the house, and brought out Balan’s bedding for him. In the days that followed Balan realized that this incident had been the culmination of all the things that disgusted him about the life he had chosen for himself: the dirt, the pigs, and the stench. It was for this reason he had reacted as strongly as he had. Despite himself the conventional question that any Hindu would ask under such circumstances sprang to his lips. ‘What sins did I commit in my former life that I should be subjected to such suffering?’ And then, almost immediately, he corrected himself. It was not for his sins that he was suffering but for those of his ancestors. Moreover, he had not been forced to suffer; no one had imposed it on him. It was a voluntary penance that was willingly undertaken. If there was any compulsion, it was an inner one. There was no turning back and he had to follow his destiny wherever it led him. He had to remind himself of this again and again, but it was a mantra that strengthened his resolve every time he found something difficult to accept.

Another insight he found useful was his realization that the Chakkiliyans were now his people; did he have the right to feel disgust and horror at the customs of his own people? Was not his revulsion an indication that he was not a good Chakkiliyan? He found himself praying again. ‘Oh, God! Make me a good Chakkiliyan!’ He realized he had not prayed as ardently for anything before.

III

Balan found the Chakkiliyans a happy-go-lucky people compared to the Brahmins. Their aspirations were essentially short-term; they were not bothered about what was going to happen to them in old age, much less about what awaited them in the after life. Kuppan explained, ‘When you don’t know where your next meal is coming from, you are not worried about anything else. If I have money I spend it; if I don’t have it, I starve. So then?’

When they had money, they made a trip to the town, went to the cinema, or got drunk. The question of saving, or educating their children, did not bother them unduly. And if there were any among them who attempted to do these things, the others were quick to pour scorn on their endeavors. ‘You want to be like the higher caste people, imitating them and their ways. But if you want brides and bridegrooms for your children, don’t forget you have to come to us,’ they jeered.

Balan often talked to Kuppan about his community’s irresponsible attitude to life. ‘If you saved money and invested it, or if you educated your children so that they could get better jobs that pay well, you would be better off, wouldn’t you?’

‘No, we wouldn’t!’ Kuppan was emphatic. ‘I know a distant relative of mine who, after considerable effort, got a job in a factory that paid five times what he was earning before. He was the most miserable man alive after that. While at work it was not so bad, but the other workers did not want him to use their canteen; on the other hand, the factory could not provide a separate canteen for him and in any case, it was against the law to prevent him from entering the canteen. So, he sat in a corner all by himself eating his food and hating it. They wouldn’t let him use the canteen tumblers and kept one separately for him. But because of the money, he put on airs when he came to the Cheri, with his bicycle and wrist-watch - as a result of this the other people in the Cheri wouldn’t have anything to do with him. He was the loneliest man I ever knew. And you know how we Chakkiliyans love to be sociable! Yes, I would like to be a little better off than I am now; a little more money for things like meat and arrack, perhaps. But no, I don’t want to be so well off as to lose my position in our caste altogether. There is no other caste that I can enter or that can offer me happiness.’

The Chakkiliyan women worked hard, side by side with their menfolk, earned money and were far more independent than their more educated counterparts among the Brahmins. Sometimes, their men got drunk and beat them up for some cooked-up reason or sometimes for no reason at all, but they did not seem to mind it and often even boasted about it. ‘At least my husband has some gumption!’ they would exclaim. Quarrels were frequent and public and no one took any notice of them unless someone was hurt. ‘What will the neighbours say?’- a concern which determined behaviour patterns in the agraharam, was conspicuous by its absence in the Cheri. Nothing was confidential, nothing secret. Everyone knew everyone else’s affairs and commented on them without inhibition.

Unlike Brahmin women who were self-effacing in the presence of men, Chakkiliyan women mixed freely with the menfolk. If there was a stranger present, they would appraise him boldly, before turning away and giggling among themselves. Their manner was provocative and Balan was able to understand why men from other castes could mistake this for an indirect invitation. But Kuppan had warned him and he ignored the taunts and teasing of the younger women.

Though nominally all Chakkiliyans were supposed to be Hindus, he found that their customs, their festivals, their gods were very different from those he knew about. A fun-loving people, they celebrated all manner of festivals at every conceivable opportunity and sometimes without any cause whatsoever. Their gods and goddesses were all located in and around the Cheri, under trees or on mud platforms. The majestic architecture of temple towers was replaced by twisted tamarind or margosa trees; instead of artistic idols they had crudely painted stones or statues made of mud. Spears and tridents were planted round their idols as symbols of power and magic. The complicated structure of nadaswaram music

was replaced by the simple and vigorous beat of drums in unison. The solemnity of mantras gave place to songs and dances in which the entire community participated.

Kuppan explained his community's religious code to Balan the day before the Natrayan festival. 'There are evil spirits lurking in this world and they have to be propitiated. Otherwise, they bring ill-luck to you and the entire Cheri. Our gods are all strong, powerful and ruthless. They destroy their enemies without mercy and protect those who honour them. There is nothing that Natrayan likes more than goat's blood and plenty of arrack. But the government has made animal sacrifice illegal and drinking an offence. They say they're doing it for our welfare, but I don't see how our welfare can be ensured if Natrayan is offended. So, we have to do the distilling illegally and perform the sacrifice clandestinely. Eventually, we consume all the liquor ourselves. Even if we do get caught and one or two of us have to spend a few months in prison, it is a small price to pay for the safety and well-being of all Chakkiliyans.'

Other Chakkiliyan festivals included the festival in honour of the small-pox goddess and various other minor deities. Most of these festivals seemed to follow a certain routine. First there was the Puja during which one of the men—or occasionally, a woman—was 'possessed' by the deity. It seemed to Balan this personification of the deity was a form of hallucination where the individual thought that he—or she—had divine power; the others fell at the feet of the possessed individual and obeyed his commands. Some people were so overcome by religious frenzy that they would whip themselves. All this would take place to the steady beat of drums and dancing by young and old alike. As the consumption of arrack increased, the music became more insistent, the rhythm more emphatic and the dancing more abandoned. The celebration would go on all night, ending with a few fights over the sharing of the meat, over imaginary insults or over nothing at all. The entire Cheri would bear a ghost-like appearance the next day and very few people would turn up for work. Conversation would be desultory and Kuppan would be hard at work setting disputes of the previous night and effecting reconciliations.

Watching all this, Balan felt that the distance that separated the Cheri and the agraharam was far more than just physical distance. It was like the difference between heaven and hell, only he was not sure which was heaven and which was hell. These people enjoyed life with a recklessness that was impossible even in conception to a Brahmin—it was an earthy and vibrant living, in total contrast to the pale and insipid life the agraharam people led. Perhaps each way of life was heaven and hell in its own way.

In keeping with his enquiring bent of mind, Balan decided that the way to become a Chakkiliyan was to ask endless questions. Kuppan was a patient teacher and did his best to satisfy Balan's curiosity.

'They say all the time that they have done a lot for us, low caste people,' Kuppan explained. 'All that it means is that a few fellows in towns have got some concessions to get

to better jobs and boss over the higher caste Hindus. It is surprising how often a Chakkiliyan becomes a policeman in preference to jobs such as a school-teacher or a postman or a clerk in an office. Being a policeman gives him a sense of power. The higher caste people are afraid of policemen. But all these so-called facilities for us-like being allowed to enter temples or being able to eat in coffee clubs or travelling in buses - don't mean much when we have no money to go anywhere.'

'But surely there has been some progress even for you!'

'I suppose so,' conceded Kuppan. 'They dare not beat us now as they used to at one time. And they daren't molest our women. But otherwise, there isn't much "progress" as you call it. Supposing I wish to live among the landowners—in their street—I would be quickly chased out. I wondered if even the police would come to my rescue. Not that I would want to live there, mind you; I would feel most uncomfortable among that lot. I would have to raise my hands in salutation every time I met one of my neighbours on either side! Here, among my own people. I am free, sharing their joys and sorrows without hindrance from anyone.'

Balan wondered what the difference was between this kind of social division and that obtained in South Africa, where the whites and the blacks were forced to live in separate areas by formal legislation. The only difference seemed to be that if a Chakkiliyan wanted to live in the Gounder or the Naidu streets he could do so theoretically. But how was one to remove the barriers in the minds of men?

Kuppan seemed to sense his thoughts. 'I suppose these differences have always been there and will always be there', he mused. 'It is only madmen like you who take it upon themselves to disturb the existing order of things. Most of us are content to stay where we are, so long as we are not unfairly treated. And we are happy that way.'

They usually had these long conversations in the evening after they had finished their work. Pappa would often interrupt them with her comments. 'What a woman needs is a bit of finery, not your damned arrack and meat. Today in the Gounder's house I saw the gold bangles they had bought their daughter for her marriage. They were so beautiful. But you can't even get me the glass bangles I have been asking for, for years!'

'What do you want bangles for, woman?' Kuppan shouted. 'Men make eyes at you as it is. If you had bangles as well, some young fellow will run off with you. Then who will cook for me?'

'One of these days I will run off, with or without a young fellow, if you don't behave yourself!' Pappa shouted back.

Balan had never heard such good-natured banter between his father and mother. He marvelled that these people, in spite of all their backwardness, lowly status and poverty, still

had something very precious in life. From the point of view of the Cheri, how little wealth and status, education or philosophy, even the Ultimate Reality, mattered!

Kuppan changed the subject again and became Balan's teacher once more. 'The time to remember you are a Chakkiliyan is when you meet a higher caste person', he said. 'They would all expect you to raise your hands in salutation to them and in the old days, if you failed to do so, you would have been thrashed. But we still do it out of habit; it has become second nature to us. They can't beat us nowadays, but some of them glare at you if you don't raise your hands. The extent to which you raise them should depend strictly on what you expect from them. If it is before Deepavali or Pongal and you expect that they will give you some money, you raise your hands high - as you do for Natrayan or Mari Amman - bend down and shout "Swami!" But if they are the mean type who never part with anything, you merely make a sign of raising them. Inadequate respect is the worst insult a Chakkiliyan can offer to one of a higher caste under the present circumstances.'

'Don't you have any respect for any of them?' Balan enquired.

'Of course I have respect!' Kuppan almost shouted. 'Do you think I am an ungrateful wretch? I have respect for the big Gounder because he always treats me kindly, never shouts at me even when I do something wrong and gives me good advice when I need it. When my old woman was sick, he arranged for his bullock cart to take her to the hospital and gave a letter to the doctor whom he knew. To such people I am always grateful and salute them in all sincerity.'

'What else should I know as a Chakkiliyan?'

'You must stop speaking like a Brahmin. No fancy words and phrases, and no English words. On occasion, when the situation demands it, you must be prepared to prostrate yourself in the mud and the dirt and not worry if your clothes get dirty.'

'When would I have to do that?'

'Supposing your benefactor has a death in the family. We can't go inside the house and condole with them. So, we prostrate ourselves outside and express our grief as loudly as possible. Otherwise, they will think we are not sufficiently grateful and will not give us enough money in the future. They expect us Chakkiliyans to show our feelings on every occasion freely and not control them like the high caste Hindus, and we do so. We do not necessarily cry for the person who is dead. We shed tears thinking of our own past sorrows and future calamities. It is easy to bring tears to your eyes, if you can think of all the miseries you suffer. Then there are also weddings, when your master gives you and your family dhotis and saris. Again you prostrate yourself when you receive them. It makes the door feel good to have the whole family of Chakkiliyans down on the ground in front of all his relatives. It is a centuries-old tradition which we still practise both out of habit and because it is profitable.'

There was soon a demonstration of what Kuppan was talking about when there was a death in one of the Gounder houses. The Chakkiliyans were sent for and in the front yard of the house, they all prostrated themselves in front of the master of the house, Balan included. But Balan stood out among them because of his bearing and intelligent looks. Also, he was the only one who dusted himself down when he got up. The Chakkilian women stood in a corner of the yard and shed tears, and the men formed a circle and beat drums to an insistent and monotonous rhythm. They had chains of bells round their ankles which jingled in time to the music as they danced. Whenever a dignitary of the village arrived, they paused, raised their hands and shouted 'Swami!' The man usually parted with one or two low denomination notes before going into the house. Then the dancing would commence again. Kuppan was not among those who beat the drums. He stood in front of the groups and sang dirges about the glory of the departed soul, about the greatness of the visitors to the funeral, about the generosity of the family and so on. He seemed to improvise most of the time, though some of the verses were obviously composed to suit all such funerals. He had a powerful and sonorous voice, exaggerated gestures and mannerisms and an ability to improvise to suit the occasion, all of which greatly impressed Balan. Perhaps, a poet was lost to the world because Kuppan did not learn to read and write.

Balan found dancing difficult, both because he was inhibited and because he was not used to it. The others laughed at him, especially the little Chakkilian boys who, though equally untutored in dance, were having the time of their lives. Then he discovered that the older Chakkiliyans were drifting away and reappearing in small groups. Balan went with one group to see what was happening and he found that in a quiet corner of a side street, they were helping themselves to arrack before coming back to their drumming and dancing. 'Here, drink this', offered Kuppan who had followed him. 'You will feel better. You can't be a good Chakkilian unless you learn to drink arrack.' Without thinking, Balan took the glass in his hand and drank. The liquor went down his throat like a ball of fire, burning and making him choke. Kuppan gave him a tumbler of water to gulp down, after which he felt a little better.

When he returned to the dancing, he felt a curious relaxation of tension. It was as if the muscles in his legs had been loosened, his head and body were lighter than before and the music itself was more rhythmic. Mechanically, his feet moved in time to the beat of the drums, his arms swung in graceful movement and he found himself enjoying himself. The others noticed this and, winking at each other, they increased the tempo but Balan found himself keeping up with the best of them. He began to perspire, but the exhilaration kept fatigue at bay. As he danced on and on he felt a peculiar sense of peace and well-being that he had never experienced before.

One of the villagers who had been watching the Chakkiliyans dancing suddenly called out, 'Ay, you, come here.'

Balan went forward, raised his hands respectfully and said, 'Did you call me, sir?'

'Yes, you are new here, aren't you?'

'Yes, sir; I am staying with my uncle Kuppan, sir.'

When Balan had first come to the Cheri, it had been agreed that he should not visit the caste to the Hindu part of the village until he had learnt to behave like a Chakkiliyan. This was his first visit and Kuppan had thought that in a group of Chakkiliyans, he might pass unnoticed. Now he came forward, anxious that his ward might make a mistake and took over the conversation.

'You remember, sir, my sister who was married to a man from Kalladi,' Kuppan said. 'This is her son, sir. He has come to stay with me for some time because I have no sons and I needed some help with my leatherwork in the busy season. He will go back after some time.'

'I am looking for someone to work on my farm. This fellow seems young and healthy.' The man said and turned to Balan. 'What is your name?'

'Balan, sir.'

'That is not a Chakkiliyan's name, is it?'

'You know how it is, sir,' Kuppan intervened. 'Living in a town, they learn these new-fangled ways'.

'So I see,' the Gounder grumbled. 'He is the only one who has no bells on his ankles. He is also the only one who dusted himself after prostrating. 'These "townified" ways won't do in Sirumudi.'

'Oh, no sir,' Kuppan assured the Gounder. 'He is an obedient Chakkiliyan, sir. He knows his place; otherwise I would have chased him out by now.'

'Well, what do you say? Can you send him to work for me?'

'Well, you see, sir, it is like this,' Kuppan hesitated. 'Being born and brought up in the town, he knows nothing about farm work. He doesn't know the back of a bullock from its front. He won't be of much use to you, sir. Even about leather, I have had to teach him everything.'

'Nowadays, you fellows are getting too big for your own good', was the farmer's final remark.

Later, Kuppan asked his ward, 'Did you do or say anything to rouse his suspicions?'

'No, I was merely dancing with the others,' replied Balan.

'He is the big Gounder in the village. Even other land-owners have to show him respect. A bit dictatorial, but a good paymaster.'

They went on with their dancing and drinking. As the day advanced the arrack began to have its effect on the Chakkiliyans especially as they had nothing in their stomachs. Balan wisely did not drink any more and managed to stay on his feet when the funeral procession started, with the drummers leading it.

On the thirteenth day after the funeral, after the final obsequies were over, all the untouchables in the village were given a meal. There were about five hundred of them including women and children. Some had even invited their relatives from neighbouring villages in the hope of a good feast. As they began to gather, there was noise and confusion and those who were serving the food, all farm workers, had a tough time trying to get the people sorted out. First, the masons and the potters and the barbers objected to sitting with Chakkiliyans, saying that they had always been given separate places in the past. Then the Chakkiliyans said the Paraiyars and Malas should not sit with them as they belonged to a lower caste. There was a lot of talking and shouting and mutual accusations until the Gounder's servants threatened to chase them all out if they didn't behave themselves.

The castes having been sorted out satisfactorily, the serving of food was also conducted in hierarchical order, the masons and the potters first, the Chakkiliyans second and the Paraiyars and Malas, last. Each one was given a banana leaf and a mixture of curry and rice—two large bowls each—was served, followed by a sweet. Buttermilk was poured into the tumbler or jug that each person carried. The Gounder's son, a student in a college in Madurai, took photographs of the feeding and the serving. While the Paraiyars were being fed, it was discovered that some of the Chakkiliyans who had already taken their share had quietly come in for a second helping. There were protests and counter-protests and utter confusion reigned until someone went and shut the gates so that no one could get in.

Balan, sitting next to Kuppan and watching the proceedings, wondered at the humiliation of it all - that men and women could have so little self-respect that they not only came and waited for a free meal and put up with all the indignity involved, but even sneaked in for a second helping. His mother would die rather than ask anyone for anything. These people not only put up with all the humility, they even seemed to enjoy their rows and quarrels. The Chakkiliyans were gloating over the fact that they had scored over the Paraiyars and that a few of them had managed to get a second helping. Any sense of honour, self-respect or consideration for others was missing altogether and Balan wondered if he would ever be able to adjust himself to such behaviour. But then, he rationalized his feelings, if he was going to be a good Chakkiliyan, should he not free himself from these attitudes and enjoy himself with the rest of them? Did he not want to pass off as an untouchable—a Chakkiliyan—to feel and be one with them, indistinguishable and inseparable? How long was it going to take him? Oh god, how long?

IV

As time passed Balan got better at leatherwork. He was slowly getting used to the smell, even learning to ignore it. Kuppan allowed him to cut the leather for sandals, the most skilled of all the operations. Any mistake meant that the leather was wasted. It had to be done meticulously and under the watchful eye of his teacher. The leather was tough—being only crudely tanned—and the implements they used were not very sophisticated. Using scissors, Balan found, was a tremendous strain on the muscles of his fingers and thumb. He had never done manual work of any sort and he couldn't cut the leather for more than a few minutes at a time. But there was no sympathy from Kuppan. 'You will get used to it, but don't give up,' he advised. 'My old woman will massage the sores with some oil.'

So, Balan persisted, notwithstanding the pain and the blisters on his palm. 'You are not used to hard work of any sort, are you? Kuppan teased his apprentice. 'All these people who earn their living by book-learning are the same. They don't know how to use their hands.'

After a week of agony silently borne, Balan was able to overcome the pain and get used to trimming leather. Having seen fancy sandals in the shops, he suggested new designs for the uppers to Kuppan, which not only saved leather but were also more attractive. Kuppan, however, would not have any of this.

'Look, my grandfather made these sandals, my father after him and now, I am making them. We have always followed certain traditional designs which have been in the village for I don't know how long. The people in the village are used to these patterns. They are comfortable. And don't forget they are not going into one of your fancy offices to work. They trudge through the fields and farms and what very need is comfort. If you can forget that you are wearing sandals, that is what I call comfort. Just get on with the job.'

'But you can perhaps sell these for a higher price,' Balan suggested. 'Then you will have more money for your arrack.'

After much persuasion, Kuppan agreed to Balan making a few pairs according to his own designs. Balan agreed that the farmers might not like his designs, but some of the young men who worked in the town nearby and who often visited the village sporting their shining bicycles and flashy wristwatches might be potential customers.

'If you make them without knowing people's sizes, who will buy them and how are you going to sell them?' Kuppan wanted to know.

'I am what you might call an average size,' Balan explained. 'If I make them to fit me, I am sure they will fit a majority of the people. As far as selling them is concerned, on Sundays when the people from the town come to the village, I will sit under the tamarind tree on the

main road with the sandals displayed before me so that they can all see them. Perhaps, I'll be able to sell a few.'

'I've never done business like that before,' Kuppan grumbled. 'I don't make sandals for all and sundry. I make them for the important people of the village. I may be a Chakkiliyan, but I am not a tradesman; I am a craftsman. What will people say if I start peddling my wares? They will say that the poor man has no orders and has to resort to all sorts of tricks to make a living.'

'You can blame it all on me,' replied Balan. 'You can say it is this nephew of yours with new-fangled notions and you don't want to discourage him.'

'Why don't you let Bala do what he wants,' Pappa came to his support. 'You haven't become a millionaire for all your craftsmanship!'

Kuppan reluctantly agreed. 'As long as you tell them you have made them yourself and that I had nothing to do with it,' he warned.

The next Sunday, Balan sat under the tamarind tree on the main road at the entrance to the village with about six pairs of sandals in front of him. In terms of craftsmanship and comfort perhaps they were not as good as those made by Kuppan, but there was variety as well as novelty. The young men from the town came to look out of curiosity, tried them on and asked the price. When Balan quoted twelve rupees per pair, they looked at each other and started bargaining; finally, he was able to sell three pairs at ten rupees each.

When Balan came home and handed thirty rupees to Kuppan, the old man's eyes blinked in wonder. 'Do you mean to say you have really sold them?' he asked.

'Yes, I overheard the young men talking to each other in English and one said to the other that in the city, it would cost them nearly double, and the sandals would probably not be as good.'

'There is some merit in book-learning,' Kuppan grudgingly admitted. 'I suppose you will now set up shop in competition with me.'

'How can you say that? Balan protested. 'Everything useful that I have learnt, you have taught me. You are my guru. So long as you don't ask me to cut off my right thumb and give it to you as your "dakshina", I will always be beholden to you.'

'What are you talking about?' Kuppan who had no knowledge of the Mahabharata shouted, as he pocketed the money. 'Do you think I am a fool to cut your fingers off when I have taught you how to use them?'

'It is a pity that my ancestors were not as generous.'

‘Don’t flaunt your book-learning, my boy,’ Kuppan warned him. ‘It won’t make you a good Chakkiliyan.’ Then he changed the subject. ‘Now that you’ve started earning, I suppose you would want your share of the money.’

‘I don’t want anything for myself,’ Balan replied. ‘But I would like you to buy some bangles for Pappa out of my first earnings.’

‘You speak like a true son, Bala,’ Pappa had tears in her eyes. ‘A son I never had. The day I met you was a fortunate one.’

‘Wait till he gets a wife, woman,’ Kuppan said. ‘He will sing a different tune.’

When Kuppan went into the village after a few days, the people asked him about the new type of sandals his nephew was making. ‘The boy is playing around, sir,’ Kuppan replied somewhat casually. ‘Those fancy sandals won’t last like these.’

‘I think they look rather nice,’ one of the men said. ‘I wouldn’t mind a pair for myself.’

‘If you give me your measurements, I will get my nephew to make a pair for you, sir.’

Soon, a new market was established for the type of sandals Balan was making. While he still had a lot to learn from Kuppan in cutting, stitching and finishing, he was good at creating new designs and each time he introduced a slight variation. People compared their new sandals and each man felt he had got something better than the other. Gradually, Kuppan began to earn extra money for the same amount of work. His margin of profit on the leather became higher and he was pleased with himself. ‘You are not a bad fellow,’ he told Balan. ‘You will make a good Chakkiliyan yet.’ Coming from Kuppan, Balan knew it was a great compliment.

At night, the stars shed their dull light on the Cheri, as they did on the agraharam. The stinking pools of water magically reflected the starlight. The grunting of the pigs and the growling of the pariah dogs ceased as they too went to rest for the night. The huts created dark, romantic shadows against the skyline. Even the smell of leather no longer seemed as strong and oppressive. Pappa and Kuppan snored at different pitches inside the hut, while Balan lay in the lean-to unable to sleep-musing over his past, and wondering about his future. Over the months, this had become a habit with him.

His thoughts often drifted to his family. He wondered what they were doing, how they were getting on. Not that he wanted to go back, yet a sense of curiosity assailed him, as if he had witnessed the first half of a thriller and could not rest until he knew how it ended. In retrospect, the roused passions of the last few months at home, the disagreements and the recriminations, could all be viewed with a certain degree of objectivity. Even being denied admission into the medical college seemed like a faraway dream and did not affect him much, though that was what had triggered his whole new way of life. He wondered how Ganesh was getting on and realized how much he missed his conversations with him. He

was the only one who had had an inkling of what Balan was going to do. During the period of his hallucinations, he had confided in him and Ganesh had tried to talk him out of it. Would he try to trace his whereabouts, or leave him to his fate as he had promised?

Thoughts of Ganesh brought others in their train. For many months now, Balan hadn't read a newspaper or a book. He had not even listened to the radio. Though there was a radio in the village square in Sirumudi, where the farmers gathered every evening to listen to the news, very few of the Chakkiliyans went there and Kuppan advised Balan not to go. Having been a voracious reader, interested in ideas more than anything else, Balan found this the most difficult aspect of his adjustment to his new environment. Yet, this too was part of the penance he had undertaken. A man without a mind, that was what he had become, he told himself. But wasn't a man who didn't use his mind little better than an animal? What distinguished mankind from animals was an awareness of time, a sense of continuity and history, the consciousness of memory as well as feelings of hope and frustration... and, of course, love.

And he could feel no love... Whatever capacity he might have had for tenderness had been gradually eroded. To his surprise and dismay he felt unable to love Pappa or Kuppan. It was more a sense of obligation, gratitude, even affection perhaps, but not love. He felt somewhat ashamed about it, but he had to be honest with himself. He just couldn't care for them as he cared for his parents, and Lakshmi, or even Ganesh. A sense of loneliness enveloped him. Perhaps, he was destined to live a life without love, without a sense of belonging. He might make a tolerable, even a good, Chakkiliyan, but he would always remain on the fringe. Even while a part of him was actively involved in being a Chakkiliyan, another part would always be watching from a distance, critically assessing his performance. It was like play-acting rather than participating in real life. The tragedy was that apart from the acting, he had no other life, no other identity, left.

The realization came as a shock to him. Had he been wasting his time all these months and undergoing misery merely to discover this truth? But didn't the rishis of the past, the men who did penance, did they not go back to their original lives once their objective was achieved? Perhaps, he too could go back to being a Brahmin, an intellectual, once his quest was over. But when was this quest going to end? Could he set right in the short period of one life, the evils of a hundred generations? Even as he questioned himself, he knew that there was no going back for he would never achieve his objective. He might as well forget the agraharam, the Sanskrit verses, and the discussions on the river-bank...

In the wake of these, came other thoughts. Was there a god? Did he believe that the Ultimate Reality was the cause of everything? He found to his surprise that he did. He also believed that there was a divine spark in every human being, in himself as much as in the animal-sacrificing, beef-eating, arrack-drinking Chakkiliyans. There was a fundamental equality between a Brahmin and a Chakkiliyan: they were both human and both divine, irrespective of all else - equality before God, if not the world. This realization brought a deep

sense of peace. He felt a strange sense of detachment enveloping him: he would tread with the others, yet strangely apart, impatient of those who walked sluggishly along the paths he had trodden, yet sure that they would eventually follow. He had to wait, wait for the heat to subside, for the coolness of the evening breeze, for the scorching sun to set and for the darkness to spread, and shut for ever the tired eyelids of his mind...

Introspection at night was one thing, but the day was for hard work and did not permit such luxuries. Yet Balan was at peace as never before. Intellectual and ethical problems no longer bothered him much; he had no economic problems; and he was almost happy. Recalling his musings during the nights of silence and stillness, he wondered whether he was really two people within a single body. He realized that the Brahmin part of his self was sure to raise its head occasionally and it was for him to master it. But at the same time, he had to think of his future. Was he going to live for ever with Kuppan and Pappa, live and die in the Sirumudi Cheri? Now that he had become a passable Chakkiliyan, should he not move on and try to achieve his original objective of becoming a scavenger?

After he had been there for more than a year, Balan went to Kuppan one day and asked, 'Would you say that I am a good Chakkiliyan now?'

Kuppan looked at him for some moments before answering. 'Well, you can pass for a Chakkiliyan easily enough, except for one thing. Your speech is still a bit superior and English words come out of your mouth inadvertently. Otherwise, you are all right.'

'Do you think I could manage on my own, in a town, for example?'

'I suppose in a town you would pass unnoticed. Unlettered Chakkiliyans show off with wrist-watches there, though they do not know how to tell the time.' Then, looking at Balan, Kuppan asked 'Why are you asking these questions? Are you thinking of going into the town for something?'

'I have been with you for a year now', said Balan. 'You have been extremely kind and looked after me. Everything that I know about being a Chakkiliyan, you have taught me. Don't you think it's time I tried being a Chakkiliyan on my own?'

'Anywhere else, it would be different,' Kuppan replied. 'A non-drinking, vegetarian Chakkiliyan would be suspect from the start. You would soon give yourself away. But tell me, are you not happy here?'

'I am happy,' admitted Balan. 'But my ambition in life is to become a scavenger. So, I thought, if you agree, I would like to try for a job in town.'

Suddenly, Kuppan was a different man. 'You ungrateful dog!' he shouted at Balan. After all I have done for you! Looked after you like my own son. Taught you a trade too; and now you want to desert me! I will see that you are exposed as a treacherous Brahmin!

Hearing the noise, Pappa came out of the kitchen and immediately Kuppan started on her. 'This dog you took into your house, which you rescued from death and showered all your affection on, wants to leave us now. He won't last for a single day as a Chakkiliyan anywhere else! When he came here he did not know how to wash his backside! I taught him leatherwork, made a craftsman out of a Brahmin who knows nothing but how to intone mantras. Now he says he wants to become a scavenger. I bet he wants to set up as a sandal-maker in town and make money!'

Balan let him shout and rave. There was nothing he could do about it. But he knew that Kuppan had exploited him as an assistant without pay and was angry at the thought of losing him. It had not been his intention to leave immediately. He was merely considering it, but after Kuppan's outburst, he knew he could not stay there any longer.

And then, Pappa started. 'How can you do this to us?' she cried. 'You can't walk out just like that after eating out salt! Do you think Natrayan will let you go unpunished? He will see that you suffer tortures. What you have suffered so far will be nothing compared to the curses that Natrayan will bring on you! You wait and see. I will pray to Mari Amman and Makali Amman to bring their wrath on you. You will see that the tears of a good Chakkiliyan woman will not be wasted. Each drop will turn into a monster to torment you...' She was herself like an angry goddess, raving and ranting as if she was possessed.

When they had both finished, Balan spoke quietly. 'I am sorry you should take it like this. It was only an idea I wanted to discuss, but now I can't stay with you any longer. Even when I came, I told you that my objective was to become a scavenger. Unfortunately, there are no latrines and consequently no scavengers in the villages; so, I have to go and find a job in the town.' Turning to Kuppan he said, 'As for exposing me, what will you gain by doing so? Nothing, except that the caste Hindus in Sirumudi would be somewhat offended. You can't even write to my parents, since you don't know their address, and in any case, you can't write. I'm only sorry that I have to leave you in this manner. I had hoped we would continue to be friends.'

'Look Bala,' Kuppan tried to be ingratiating. 'You have safety and security here. The life may be poor, but it is not bad and I will look after you. The town, it's like a jungle; there's no friendship or loyalty. It is each man for himself and you will soon get into trouble there. Maybe, I should have looked after you better. What a young man like you needs is a wife. I know I warned you about women, but that was before I knew you. Now, you can pick one of the girls, and we can easily put up a hut next to this one. I know the girls like you, I have seen them eyeing you furtively. What do you say?'

The discussion went on, but Balan was adamant. Finally, he said, 'I came here with nothing; I am leaving with nothing. You can't stop me.'

Pappa and Kuppan exchanged glances. They knew they had lost the battle. 'Who says you are leaving with nothing? You have been like a son to us and we can't let you starve in the town as you no doubt will. If you wait for a few minutes, I will be back,' Kuppan said.

He came back after half-an-hour. 'Here is fifty rupees,' he handed it to Balan. 'You may need more but that was all I could manage to get out of the big Gounder. Take it.'

'I can't take any money from you,' said Balan. He had tears in his eyes. He could not understand these people who accused him of all sorts of crimes one minute and gave him money, the next.

'Take it, Bala,' pleaded Pappa.

'You have earned it,' Kuppan cried. 'You have worked for a year and during the last few months; you have brought in more money than I could have earned myself. This is yours.'

Balan took the money. 'I will come back and see you some time,' he said. 'That is, if you will have me.'

'Don't forget, this is your home.' Pappa wept.

He left. 'Ungrateful wretch that I am...' he told himself.

THREE

I

‘They treat us like dirt because we clean their dirt!’ the speaker shouted. He was standing on a rickety table outside the municipal office of Kallupatti town. About one hundred sweepers of the municipality—dressed in their uniforms, khaki shorts and shirts—stood listening to him. A few women on the fringes of the crowd giggled. The speaker went on, ‘I tell you comrades, we are not going to be treated like dirt. If we are, we shall refuse to clean their dirt. We can bring life in this town to a standstill, provided we are united. In unity lies our strength. Can you imagine what will happen if we stop work for a single day?’ The speaker paused, giving his audience time to reflect on such a contingency.

‘Rubbish will pile up in the streets. Lavatories will no longer be usable. Rats and bandicoots will roam the streets. Plague and cholera can easily break out.’ He waited for the picture to sink in before proceeding further. ‘But we are not irresponsible citizens. We realize our responsibility to society. Therefore, I am not calling for a strike at this stage. I have presented a charter of demands to the authorities and I want to give them time to consider it and give a suitable reply. But if no satisfactory answer is received within a fortnight from today, I want you to be ready to adopt drastic measures to defy the authorities. Meanwhile, you should all wear these black badges as a sign of our protest so that the public of this town will come to know of the unfair treatment that has been meted out to us.’

A young sweeper, short but well-built, who was standing near the speaker and who was obviously his assistant, started distributing the badges. The men eyed them suspiciously. ‘Will the authorities sack us if we wear them?’ one man asked.

‘Don’t be stupid!’ replied the man who was distributing the badges. ‘Wearing a badge is not illegal. Even the clerks do it when they want to bring anything to the notice of the authorities. Besides, the entire municipality is afraid of our president.’

Some pinned the badges on their chests, some thrust them into their pockets and some others just refused to take them. ‘Black legs!’ the man grumbled at those who refused.

Then he started distributing them among the women. A young woman, thrusting her chin forward aggressively, asked, ‘Why don’t you give us pink or green ribbons instead of these ugly black badges?’

‘Because black is a symbol of sorrow, of protest, it means we are dissatisfied,’ said the man.

‘But I am not sorry about anything,’ said the woman.

'Just wear it and don't be saucy!' shouted the man.

'Wear it yourself and don't bother me,' said the woman archly.

'Now I come to our charter of demands,' the speaker began again. 'It is a lengthy document and I don't want to bother you with the details, but I would like you to know some of the important points so that you can canvass support for them when you are on your rounds in the wards. First, I understand that the municipality has taken a decision to introduce underground sanitation for the whole town as well as automatic flushing arrangements in all public latrines. Implementation of these policies would mean that the job security of the sweepers would be greatly jeopardized and the potential for employment in the future would be considerably reduced. We are therefore totally opposed to these schemes and will fight to the last drop of our blood to stop them.'

A buzz of conversation started among the sweepers and the speaker was forced to pause and ask for silence while he explained the other demands.

'Second, we want an upward revision of wages for all, fixing of suitable higher grades for the skilled workers and workers who have direct contact with dirt.

'Third, we want the work-load of all workers to be reduced by an appropriate reallocation in the different wards.

'Fourth, we demand equal pay for equal work as between men and women.

'Fifth, we demand increased holidays with pay, leave travel concession, etc., in fact, all the facilities that are now available to Government of India employees.'

The speaker continued enumerating the demands, but the audience had lost interest. To them, the first one was what really mattered. They felt that the others had been added on merely from the point of view of bargaining power and to make the list of demands look impressive. They wanted to discuss the long term effects of the development among themselves. The speaker realized this and came back to the first point.

'Security is our first concern. The future employment of our children and their children in turn, is at stake. No sacrifice is too great, no suffering too severe, in such a cause. We are willing to shed blood if necessary in order to protest our rights. In this, we are one with all the other workers who have lost their jobs or are going to lose their jobs in the name of progress. The workers who have become unemployed in offices because of computerization, in factories because of automation, the rickshaw-pullers who have lost their livelihood as a result of the introduction of auto-rickshaws—all of them are here to support and sustain your struggle. Therefore, do not lose heart. Stand united, shoulder to shoulder and march forward to achieve your objectives....'

Balan stood at the fringe of the crowd and watched the proceedings with interest. He too was dressed in Khaki shorts and shirt with a dirty towel thrown carelessly over his shoulder. He could easily have been mistaken for one of the sweepers, except that he did not have the metal disc that every municipal sweeper carried and which indicated that he was a permanent worker of the municipality, entitled to all its privileges.

‘Who is the speaker?’ Balan asked his neighbour, a young man about his own age.

‘You are new here, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, I have come looking for a job.’

‘You won’t find one here,’ said the young man. ‘From what our president says, we will all be lucky to keep our jobs by this time next year.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ replied Balan. ‘These municipalities start out with a lot of these new-fangled ideas, but they rarely implement them.’

‘We have a new health officer who is very efficient and “modern”. He is supposed to have said that he wants to use machines for all cleaning operations in the municipality. Our president said so only yesterday.’

‘Who is your president?’

‘The man who is addressing us, Mr. Namasivayam.’

‘Is he a sweeper too?’ Balan asked.

‘Oh, no!’ said the young man. ‘He is a lawyer.’

‘Then how does he know what our problems are? Has he ever cleaned a latrine?’

‘I suppose not. But he is very sympathetic to all the downtrodden people in this town. He is the president of the Rickshaw Pullers’ Union, the Sweepers’ Union, the Market Porters’ Union, and so many others. Now, he wants to be the president of the Engineering workers’ Union, which is the biggest in Kalluppatti.’

‘Why don’t you have one of our own people as president?’

‘Because we can’t make speeches like he can; nor can we stand face to face with the municipal authorities and argue like he can.’ Then the young man started questioning Balan. ‘For a newcomer, you are asking a lot of questions. Why?’

‘Because I want to settle down here and find some work’.

‘Where are you from?’

'I am from the village of Sirumudi about a hundred miles from here,' Balan narrated the story he had rehearsed and perfected. 'My parents died early and I was brought up by my uncle. I don't get on very well with him and I wanted to try for a job in the city which is why I've come here'.

'What is your name?'

'Balan, and I am a Chakkiliyan.'

'Most of us are Chakkiliyans here; but we don't make any distinction between Chakkiliyans and Paraiyars. We are all sweepers doing the same work and getting the same wages'.

After exhorting the people to be united and strong, the speaker left, followed by a few of his supporters. The crowd was beginning to disperse, and people were talking among themselves. The young woman who had argued with the badge distributor, walked over to where Balan was standing and addressed his companion. 'Are you coming home, or are you going somewhere else?'

'I am coming', he said and turned to Balan but before he could speak Balan asked him, 'Can I find some place to stay while I am looking for work?'

The man was hesitant. The woman eyed Balan curiously. 'There is room in our house,' she said.

'You can stay with us if you like,' the man said. 'But you won't find getting work that easy.'

'I will try for a few weeks anyway. If I can't get anything, I'll have to move on.'

So Balan went with them to the sweepers' colony, with the somewhat grand title of 'Gandhi Nagar'. It was located in a triangular plot of land bound by a wide ditch on one side, a railway line on the other and a main road on the third. He learnt that the man's name was Chennan and the woman, his sister, was Lachi. They lived with their aged parents in a two-roomed hut.

The colony was similar to the Cheri in many respects, but there were certain notable differences. The huts here were more dilapidated than in the Cheri. The roofs were made of various materials such as rusted tin sheets, old tarpaulins or canvas, with deadwood planks and large stones placed on top to prevent them from blowing away in the wind. The land belonged to a private individual who charged rent by the square foot and consequently, it was a very congested area with very little space between the huts. It was made clear to Balan that he would have to pay his share of the rent while he stayed there. The openness and spaciousness of the Cheri were conspicuous by their absence in the colony. People literally lived on top of each other and the alleyways were narrow and full of dirty water.

Rubbish was strewn everywhere making the place an ideal hunting ground for rats and bandicoots. The colony also has its quota of pigs and stray dogs in addition to donkeys which strayed in occasionally. Chasing them with the help of the dogs was one of the standard amusements of the children. This often led to quarrels between the colony residents and the washerman who owned the donkeys and, occasionally, the police had to intervene to restore peace.

As they reached the hut through a maze of alleys, Chennan warned Balan, 'If my father says anything rude, just ignore it.'

The old man, Veeran, was sitting there with a torn blanket round his shoulders. 'Who is it?' he called out as they reached the hut. It was obvious he had poor eyesight.

'It is I, father,' Chennan replied.

'Who is the other one?' Veeran could sense the presence of a stranger.

Chennan explained who Balan was, how he came to be there, and everything else about him.

'Well, you know what happened the last time you brought one of your "friends" here. Don't you ever learn any sense?'

'It is all right, father. This man is from a village a hundred miles from here. He won't do us any harm,' Lachi interrupted. 'He looks a decent sort.'

'I hope so, I hope so,' the old man mumbled.

The mother, Kulla, who had been cooking behind the hut, came to see what was happening. 'This is the new one, is it?' she inspected Balan in the evening light. 'I suppose he can't do any more harm and he will help to pay the rent,' she said.

As the womenfolk busied themselves with the cooking in the small open space behind the hut, Balan asked, 'What happened with the previous man who stayed here?'

Chennan hesitated. 'You might as well know, I suppose. One evening, when my mother was out and Lachi was alone, he went into the hut and tried to rape her. But she had a knife handy and before anything serious happened, she stabbed him with it. Fortunately, the wound was not very deep and we managed to hush it up without it reaching the police. The man had to leave the colony, of course.'

Balan set out to get something to eat, but Kulla stopped him. 'Since this is your first evening, you can eat with us, but don't make it a habit.'

Balan partook of their simple meal. As the darkness grew, Lachi lit a small kerosene lamp inside the hut, but Chennan and Balan sat outside under the street light in the alley. A

few others joined them from the other huts and they started discussing the events of the day, particularly the information about underground sanitation for the whole town. It was what one might call a burning issue, since it would affect their future profoundly.

‘Look at it this way,’ Chennan said. ‘Are we going to be tied to the bucket and broom for ever? Is that our fate? Aren’t we ever going to do anything else?’

‘If you don’t wield the bucket and broom, you will starve,’ said Murugan, one of the others. ‘There is nothing else we can do; nothing for which we are fit; no other job in which people will employ us. If they introduce these new schemes, we’ll just be thrown out on the rubbish heap. Nothing else!’

‘I tell you, it won’t work!’ Pichu, the young man who had been distributing badges that afternoon, averred. ‘The shitting habits of our people are different.’ Balan flinched at the coarse language. But Pichu went on, unmindful. ‘They are used to the open air for such purposes. You see it around every public lavatory. They sit around the walls and do it. Or they do it behind hedges and trees.’

‘But that is because it stinks inside the lavatories. You can’t get rid of the smell. They give us phenyl, but it only means you exchange one stink for another,’ Chennan answered.

‘It is not the stink alone,’ Pichu continued with his argument. ‘It is the habit of generations in the villages from where they come. And they wipe themselves with stones or leaves before washing themselves. If there was an underground system, the stones and the leaves will block the whole thing in no time and we will have to be called in to set right the damage. Only, we may not be around when that happens.’

‘Whatever the system, we will have to go on cleaning other people’s dirt and living in it,’ Murugan philosophized.

Pichu, a strong supporter of the union and the ‘right-hand man’ of the president, Namasivayam, naturally knew more about it than anyone else. ‘And another thing, ‘he announced, this underground system needs three times the amount of water. As you know, this town doesn’t even have enough drinking water. So, where are they going to get the water for it? We should make that the basis of our attack.’

The conversation turned to the new health officer who had recently joined the municipality and who seemed to be behind all the changes. ‘The Sanitary Inspector tells me he is not all that bad,’ Pichu continued. ‘He wants to give us an assurance that no one is going to be sacked if the new system is introduced but the Commissioner does not want that. It seems, he says, “If we are going to spend fifty lakhs on such a scheme, it should be labour saving.” So, the matter has been referred to the Government.’

If you are so in with the Sanitary Inspector, at least you won’t be sacked,’ Chennan laughed.

'I hope this president of ours doesn't bungle things,' said Murugan. 'If he lands us in a strike, the town may get filthy, but we will certainly starve.'

'But the women won't go on strike,' said Pichu. 'And the municipal authorities know it. That's my worry.'

Balan listened silently to the conversation. He was introduced to Pichu and Murugan and they asked him where he came from, what he had been doing before. Balan told them he had been doing leatherwork. Immediately, Pichu asked, 'Then why do you want to come and clean filth? Compared to scavenging, making sandals is a superior occupation.'

'I just want to try it for some time,' replied Balan.

'You must have very peculiar notions about our work as well as our wages,' Pichu countered. 'You can earn thrice as much as any of us by repairing sandals. Besides, you don't have to put up with the stink.'

'You don't know how much leather can stink,' replied Balan.

'Don't try to teach me things,' Pichu became somewhat aggressive, 'I know what I am talking about.'

Balan let that pass and Chennan changed the subject. 'How about a game of cards?' he asked as he pulled out a pack from his pocket.

'How about you, Balan? Would you like to play?' Murugan invited him.

'I don't know how to play,' Balan confessed.

'He doesn't know anything,' Pichu cried. 'The country bumpkin thinks scavenging is superior to leatherwork. You don't expect him to play cards, do you?'

The three men started gambling and Balan walked back to the hut. The old man was lying down in the lean-to in the front. 'Toddy, that's what keeps you healthy, if you are a scavenger. It's the only way to keep the body healthy and the smell away. And this Government has banned the drinking of toddy! How these fellows manage their work on arrack, I can't imagine. The stuff ruins your stomach....'

He went on talking, sometimes loudly and sometimes in a mumble. As Balan stood wondering where he should sleep, Lachi came out. 'Here is a blanket and pillow for you; you can lie down in the lean-to along with father. Don't mind his talking. He talks to himself all the time. He misses his daily quota of toddy. Since prohibition, he has not been the same.'

'Don't you get arrack here?' asked Balan.

'He doesn't like it.'

Balan lay down to sleep.

II

Balan had changed considerably since the time he had left his parents and Kamalapur. Having worked hard for a year and learned a trade, he was now more confident of himself. He felt he had passed through a great ordeal and come out of it fairly successfully. The misery and the suffering he had undergone in the Cheri had been the penance he had contemplated for so long. The degradation of becoming a Chakkiliyan had been the subconscious answer to his past. He felt the sins of his fathers would not visit him again. Yet, he had reached the end of his journey. He set about planning his immediate future methodically. Once he had decided on Kalluppatti as his next destination (as it was far away from both Kamalapur and Sirumudi; was neither too big nor too small to make him feel either too lost or too conspicuous; and had enough scavengers) he had to make a number of other decisions.

For one, he soon realized the truth of Kuppan's remark that a vegetarian, non-drinking Chakkiliyan would be suspect from the start. So, he set about making up for these drawbacks. He vowed to eat only non-vegetarian food for a week and if he could not stomach it, he would rather starve than resort to vegetarian dishes. In spite of the feeling of sickness and nausea, he persisted. He had been through so many hells that one more would not make any difference, he told himself. His persistence was rewarded and by the end of the week, he was able to eat meat without feeling revolted though he never did learn to relish it. But getting arrack was more difficult. Though there was a lot of illicit distillation in many of the Cheris he visited on his way to Kalluppatti no one would offer it to a stranger lest he was a police informer.

He felt the need to supplement the money that Kuppan had given him for it would not last long. So, he spent a couple of weeks in another Cheri doing leatherwork and the people there offered him arrack after the first two days. He found it quickly went to his head, and the man for whom he worked suggested that he should eat something along with the arrack. He produced some fried meat and Balan found the combination of fried meat and arrack quite enjoyable.

The moment this happened, Balan began to question himself. If he was enjoying being a Chakkiliyan, then where was the penance and the sacrifice? Where was the payment for the 'sins of his fathers?' He found no answers; he didn't want to deflect from the path he had chosen. He had to follow it wherever it led him; the end was beyond his control. So long as his motives were pure, his conscience clear, and so long as he pursued his objective of becoming the lowest of the low, he would have peace of mind, he told himself.

During his stay in Sirumudi, he had been vaguely conscious of another change that was taking place within him. At nights, when he lay alone and pondered, he learnt the difference between prayer and meditation. Prayer was addressing god for a specific purpose, usually a selfish one. He had prayed in moments of suffering, pleading with god to make him a good Chakkiliyan. But meditation was different. It was undertaken for self-purification, for cleansing of the mind and the spirit. Balan found that prayer left him either dissatisfied because it was not granted or guilty because it was for a selfish purpose; meditation left him with a serene objectivity and a peace of mind that eventually enabled him to look upon his own life and its problems with detachment. He began to cultivate it as a habit.

If he meditated for long enough, he reached a stage of not being aware of his self. He reached what he called—for want of a better expression—the inner universe of human consciousness. It was like exploring a different level of the spirit. He realized that consciousness was what related the physical world to the spiritual world like an invisible bridge, but when he reached this new level, the physical world seemed to recede and become irrelevant and superficial. In such a state, space and time disappeared, pain and pleasure, love and hate, all human emotions ceased to exist, and all that remained was a complete void which seemed to be the final reality. It was not a static void, but something that was forceful and dynamic and completely free... it could only be described as a state of bliss.

It was difficult for Balan to verbalize, even to himself, these spiritual excursions into the world of his consciousness. It was like a spiritual orgasm that lasted a long time: it seemed to go on, wave after wave. He recognized it to be a state worth striving for and that its perfect attainment ought to be his goal. During the period of hallucinations in Kamalapur, he had experienced such a state, but failed to recognize it for what it was. In the Cheri, he had often reached it at nights, especially when he tried to meditate, attempting to concentrate on the Infinite. Occasionally, he had been disturbed in that state by Pappa or Kuppan and such occasions caused great mental strain.

On the occasions he was alone, with no one to disturb him; he attempted to reach that state through concentrated meditation. He found it helped him greatly. He felt much purer and better after it, as if cleansed by a spiritual bath. He also felt a certain psychological power grow within him on such occasions; people seemed to look at him differently, they listened attentively and carried out his wishes. The experience left him completely drained physically and spiritually.

Was this something special in him? he wondered. Or was it the result of his decision to become a scavenger? He did not know.

Thoughts about his family, about Kamalapur, intruded occasionally. He wondered, if he should go back, perhaps only for a few days, just to see how they were getting on. But meeting his family—Lakshmi in particular—would disturb him emotionally and probably

distract him from the path he had chosen. Still, he would have liked to know how they were. If only there was some way of knowing... He put aside such thoughts with effort. Perhaps, after some time, when he had established himself more firmly as a Chakkiliyan, he might go there clandestinely, but not now, not yet.

III

When he got up the next morning, both Lachi and Chennan had gone on their rounds. The old man was still lying down and Kulla was busy cleaning the hut. She made it clear she wasn't going to feed him again. 'The latrine and the wash place are just a few yards down this way,' she pointed. 'And beyond that is an eating place where you can get iddies and coffee. You had better start looking for a job right away if you are going to stay here and pay for your keep'.

Balan walked across to the latrine; it was a stinking hell-hole. Unable to stand the stink inside, the residents of the colony had freely used the outside. If that were so for men born as sweepers, who had been brought up and lived in that environment, it was impossible for Balan. He considered using the outside like the others, but it was already daylight and a natural sense of modesty prevented him from exposing himself to public view. He would have thought that the sweepers would keep at least their own latrines clean, if not that of others. He remembered what Pichu had said the previous night about the stink and mentally agreed with him that this was much worse than anything that mere leather could generate. As had become usual with him on such occasions, Balan stood still for a few minutes and meditated until his mind was blank, and then went in. He held his breath and willing himself away from the stench, performed his functions more or less mechanically. He used the tap a few yards away for cleaning his teeth and washing his face. If it was so difficult to even use the place, how was he going to clean it day after day? All his washing at that tap did not make him feel any cleaner, only wet. He wiped himself with a towel. The feeling he had had a few days ago, that his penance was perhaps over and that he was beginning to enjoy himself, disappeared. Perhaps his penance had just begun.

The eating stall was at one end of the colony, on the opposite side of the lavatories where the smell was not oppressive. A wide plank across a ditch led to the shop and men sat in the narrow open yard between the shop and the ditch to eat their breakfast. They ate off small banana leaves held in the left hand which were thrown into the ditch after they finished eating. Then they washed their hands from a bucket of water, drank coffee out of brass tumblers, and went off to do their jobs. The woman who owned the shop was versatile. She cooked iddies over an open fire, served the customers, chatted with them about the events of the previous day, asked after the welfare of the regular customers and collected the money. She did everything with a coarse cheerfulness that kept everyone amused.

As Balan began to eat his two iddlies, she accosted him, 'You are new here, aren't you?'

'Yes.' replied. Balan.

'Where are you staying?'

When Balan mentioned Chennan's name, she laughed. 'He is that girl Lachi's brother, isn't he? she asked.

When he replied affirmatively, she said, 'Well, don't do what their previous boarder did.'

'Why, what did he do?' Balan asked her to see if her version differed from Chennan's.

'That would be gossiping, wouldn't it? She gave him a big wink and a toothy smile as she went on to serve another customer.

Balan ate his iddlies in silence. The woman came back to him with a tumbler of coffee as he finished eating. 'That will be fifty paise,' she said.

As he paid her, she asked, 'Have you got a job yet?'

'No, I am looking for one. Do you know of anything I can do?'

'I don't run an employment exchange,' she guffawed. 'I only run an eating place and it takes all my time.'

'But if you hear of anything, do tell me'.

'Sure I will tell you. The Municipal commissioner will be coming round for his afternoon tea and I will mention it to him,' she said as he departed.

Balan went to the municipal office to see if he could get a job, though he had very little hope. After waiting around for a long time and talking to the gate-keeper and the clerks, he was finally able to meet the Sanitary Inspector in charge of one of the wards.

'There is no job for you in my ward,' said the inspector. 'You won't get one in any of the other wards either. They have decided not to recruit any more sweepers for the present.'

'But I hear the sweepers may decide to go on strike, sir,' said Balan. 'If that happens, don't you think you should have at least a few sweepers who will be loyal and carry out their duties?'

'Who told you they are going on strike?'

'I was here yesterday when there was a meeting of the sweepers,' Balan continued. 'I heard their president speaking and telling them to be ready to go on strike.'

'Oh, that windbag Namasivayam,' the Sanitary Inspector said. 'He is quite harmless. And most of the sweepers won't listen to him.'

'Sir, if you permit me, I would like to make another suggestion.'

'What is it?' the Sanitary Inspector was curious.

'Sir, there is a feeling among the sweepers that with the coming of the new underground drainage system; many of them might lose their jobs. Even if they don't trust Namasivayam, there is no doubt that they are agitated. If you recruit someone now, it will indirectly show them that no retrenchment is contemplated.'

The inspector eyed him sharply. 'You are a clever blighter. And I suppose you think you should be given a job in order to set them an example'.

'Well, sir, I would be greatly of course...'

After that, the Inspector wanted to know everything about him, where he came from, what he had been doing, why he wanted to be a sweeper, whether he could read and write, and so on. Balan admitted to the fact that he could read and write Tamil. He also pointed out that though he knew leatherwork, it was at best an insecure occupation and the sweepers in the municipality were paid well.

The Sanitary inspector was pleased with him and told him to keep in touch.

Balan had nothing to do after the interview but wait and hope for the best. He thought he might as well wander around the town and see the places where he might be called to work. He inspected one or two of the public latrines that he came across. They were slightly better than the one in Gandhi Nagar, probably because the Sanitary Inspectors visited them occasionally to see that they were kept clean. He was sure no Inspector ever visited the one in the colony. In street corners, in vacant lots, around dustbins, almost every hundred metres or so, dirt and filth were piled up in heaps. Animals and humans seemed to be competing with each other in leaving their refuse in the streets.

Balan had never thought about the civic problems of a town before. He had merely thought of the Hindus as a clean people on the whole and his ideas stopped at that. Now that he wanted to be a sweeper, the problem invaded his mind. Why did people defecate in the streets and behind bushes? In his college days, when one of the students did it, he usually justified it by saying that it was a fundamental right guaranteed under the Constitution of India and they would all laugh and then forget about it. Was it because there weren't enough lavatories and even when there were lavatories they were filthy? Was it an

act of defiance, hostility against the more law-abiding sections of society? Or was it an act of necessity?

He realized that tolerance of filth was a characteristic of Hindu society. Even where personal cleanliness was of a high order, Hindus did not seem to bother about their environment. Cleanliness—not so much physical as spiritual—had nothing to do with hygiene. That too had become a mere ritual, a symbol without meaning. After all if life on this earth was but a passing phase, a preparation for a better life in heaven, what did a little filth matter?

On the other hand, there were attempts being made at beautifying the town. Trees had been planted; little squares of lawn laid out in vacant spaces along the roads; there were even flower beds. But these were futile attempts, like applying cosmetics on a face full of sores.

Wandering around in this manner, Balan came across Pichu, sitting under the shade of a tamarind tree and reading a paper while his bullock cart—provided by the municipality for carting away the rubbish—waited patiently nearby. Balan went up to him. ‘This is your ward, I suppose?’ he said.

Pichu looked at him blankly for a moment, not able to place him. Then recognition dawned. ‘Ah, the new arrival at Chennan’s’ he exclaimed. ‘The leather expert!’

‘I’ve been looking for a job,’ said Balan, more to keep up the conversation than anything else.

‘If I could do leatherwork, I wouldn’t be doing this job for a minute,’ Pichu said. ‘Either you were boasting last night or you are completely mad.’

‘I might continue to do leatherwork in my leisure time,’ said Balan. ‘But it is erratic, uncertain work, and I need to have a steady job.’

‘Did you go to the municipal office?’

‘I did, but no luck.’

Just then, the Sanitary Inspector for that ward came round. He saw Pichu sitting under the tree and chatting, and shouted at him. ‘What are you doing, lazy blighter? Don’t you know that the Chief Minister is coming in a couple of days to inaugurate the beautification plan of the town? And you allow rubbish to pile up all over the place! He will be coming along this road on his way from the travellers’ bungalow to Mahatma Gandhi Park. Get moving and clear out the rubbish. If there is any of it left in the streets when I come round next time, I shall have to report you to the MHO.’

The Inspector walked on without to see Pichu’s reaction.

'Who is the MHO?' Balan asked him.

'The Municipal Health Officer,' Pichu replied. 'The Municipal Commissioner is MC, the Sanitary Inspector SI, and so on. The entire municipality is run on initials.'

'What are initials?' Balan asked innocently. He wanted his ignorance to be planted in the minds of the people in the colony.

'Where do you come from?' Pichu asked in wonder. 'Don't you know what initials are? Haven't you been to school?'

'I can read and write,' Balan said defensively. 'But I come from a village where such things are unknown.'

'No wonder you want to do scavenging when you can do leatherwork,' Pichu thought he understood Balan. 'Oh, well', he rose, 'I suppose I had better move some of that rubbish. Otherwise, that son of a prostitute will get after me with a vengeance.'

'Let me give you a hand,' Balan offered.

'So long as you don't expect me to return your favour by scavenging, you are welcome', said Pichu as he walked towards his bullock cart. Balan followed him.

Pichu patted the bullock which had been standing patiently and made some clucking sounds with his tongue. The bullock responded by moving forward and the two men walked by its side. When he got to the rubbish heap, Pichu made a different kind of noise and immediately, the bullock stopped.

'That is clever,' Balan admired. 'The bullock seems to understand you very well.'

'Yes, I've trained him well. He understands me better than some of the women do.'

'They have even allotted rubber tyres to the bullock carts to ease their load,' Pichu continued as he inspected the heap of rubbish. 'But they haven't given us anything better than this bamboo basket and spade to shift all the rubbish. Every day, the fodder for the cattle is measured and handed out by the Inspector. But who bothers to measure our food or ensure that we get enough to eat? Such is our fate I suppose.'

Pichu began to fill the basket with rubbish and Balan emptied it into the cart. They worked silently. After about half-an-hour of work the heap was almost cleared. 'That'll do for now,' announced Pichu. 'It wouldn't do to clear the whole lot. I must leave some for tomorrow.'

Just then, Lachi walked past with a basket in one hand and a hessian sack in the other. 'Ah, Lachi,' Pichu hailed her. 'You have been trying to avoid me'.

'I am not trying to avoid anybody,' Lachi answered, averting her eyes from the men, 'I am just doing my work.'

'Well, don't let it tire you too much,' Pichu winked at her as she walked past.

'I am going back to the colony,' said Lachi to Balan ignoring Pichu's remark. 'Are you coming that way?'

'Yes, I will come,' said Balan and followed her. She asked him what he had done about getting a job and he told her about his interview with the Sanitary Inspector.

'It is going to be difficult,' she said.

'Until I get a job, I will repair sandals and other such work,' Balan said. 'I don't want to go back to my uncle.'

All the time they were walking and talking, Lachi's eyes were alert, darting this way and that. Balan wondered what she was looking for. He soon found out.

When she came across some cowdung or house manure on the road, she stopped, collected it and put it in her basket while Balan waited. Next, she stopped at a garbage heap, and rooted through it with a stick. It was surprising what 'treasures' she discovered there. Torn magazines (she liked to look at the pictures of film stars), newspapers, cardboard pieces, plastic bags, an odd tin or a bottle-she sorted them all out neatly and put them into the sack. When she came across left-over food, she threw it to the stray dog that was hovering nearby. Having satisfied herself that there was nothing more to be salvaged, she picked up her basket and the sack and moved on. Balan noticed that the basket was nearly full of cowdung and house manure.

'Do you collect these things every day?' Balan asked her.

'Oh, yes,' she answered. The cowdung comes in useful for cooking. The newspapers and the cardboard and the bottles can be sold to a dealer when you have accumulated enough. Occasionally, you come across something valuable, but not often.'

As they walked, Balan observed her closely. She was neatly dressed. Her complexion was dark but her face and figure were alluring and she had what could be construed as a provocative walk. She smiled easily, her bright eyes often threw glances that were inviting, but she averted them at the slightest sign of familiarity from men. Balan, who had never bothered much about women or noticed them particularly, looked at her with appreciation. The only negative thing was that a faint odour of the latrine emanated from her when one got too close. Even the faded flowers in her hair did not hide the odour. Perhaps, she hadn't had a bath after work, Balan told himself.

Lachi chattered on. 'At one time, there used to be a lot of tins and bottles thrown away,' she was saying, 'but nowadays, people store them in their houses and sell them to

the men who come round. Also they are afraid to throw whiskey bottles if they don't have a permit to drink, because the prohibition people might get after them.'

Balan felt that Lachi had perfected the art of recycling waste before the economists and engineers had even thought about it.

'I do the houses from the corner of the post office to the end of Subash Bose Road,' Lachi went on. 'It is a good area to work in. Half the houses have the flush system. In one or two houses, they have it even for the servants. You know what? I use it myself. It is better than going into the stinking hole in the colony.....'

Balan admired her initiative.

'Wouldn't they take you to task if they found out?' he asked.

'But how can they?' she giggled. 'You don't suppose I leave the door open, do you? And in one house, they don't even wash themselves afterwards. They use paper instead! It is so soft and nice to the touch, you hardly feel it when you use it! And it just dissolves in water. I know because I have tried it.' She was obviously very proud of her brush with the affluent way of life.

'They always give you a few rupees every month if you are regular and talk politely to them. Occasionally, the ladies give me their old saris, so I don't have to buy any. The other sweeper women are all jealous of me.'

At the next rubbish dump, the procedure was repeated. After searching for a couple of minutes, Lachi began to giggle.

'What is it?' Balan asked curiously.

'Look!' she said between fits of giggles.

Balan saw something that looked like a white rubber ring. He did not know what it was, and was puzzled.

'It is what people use for not having babies,' she explained, without looking at him and hiding her face.

Wisdom dawned on Balan. He was confused and didn't know what to say.

After that incident, Lachi became silent and they walked to the colony without any further conversation.

It took Balan a few days to learn how the municipality organized the work of the sweepers. The majority of the cleaners of domestic latrines were women. They set off early in the

morning, each with her bucket and broom, and finished their rounds by about ten o'clock. Their daily collection was emptied into a cart which went round the streets. People recognized it easily because of the smell and gave it a wide berth. Then, there were the people who swept the streets and dumped the garbage in the dustbins which were usually spilling over anyway. The gutters on either side of the roads which collected the waste water from the houses were cleaned by another set of workers. The aristocracy among the sweeping community was the cart-drivers who were responsible for emptying the dustbins of all rubbish. They had the responsibility of looking after the bullocks, maintaining the carts and so on. The municipality had purchased a lorry some years ago for carting away the rubbish, but the sweepers didn't like it and threatened to go on strike. Then they couldn't find a driver to run it because no 'self-respecting' caste Hindu driver would drive a lorry that carried garbage. So the cart-drivers continued to enjoy the monopoly of clearing away the rubbish and it kept on accumulating in the streets.

After Balan had been there a few days, Chennan said to him, 'You said you know leatherwork, so why don't you start repairing sandals, while you are waiting for a job?'

'But where can I work?'

'Sit under that tamarind tree between the railway line and the main road,' Chennan suggested. 'All the people of the colony pass that way. You should be able to get some customers there easily.'

So Balan invested some money in getting the necessary implements, a few square feet of leather and a mat to sit on and started doing shoe repairs.

But within twenty-four hours, he was in trouble with the local Sanitary Inspector. 'Have you got a licence from the municipality?' the guardian of municipal law asked him.

Balan took a good look at the inspector's feet. 'Your shoes need heeling, sir,' he said. 'You have to walk a lot at your work and if you go on like this, you will get a pain in your left foot'.

'What are you saying?' the Inspector asked.

'Sir, for most of us one leg is slightly longer than the other,' Balan explained. 'That is why your right heel is more worn out than the left one. In the long run, this will mean that one of your feet will start hurting. You should have your shoes heeled right away'.

The Inspector thought for a minute. 'There is merit in what you say. Of late, I have been feeling a sort of pain in my right heel.'

'There you are, sir', Balan smiled. 'I can heel them for you in no time.'

Balan didn't get paid for heeling the Inspector's shoes, but there were no more questions about the licence.

Slowly, people came to him for heeling their chappals, or having the straps mended. Balan made a little money. But more than that, his identity as a Chakkiliyan was established. No one could doubt it now.

Repairing shoes and chappals did not occupy all his time. Besides, his ambition was still unfulfilled. So he decided to talk to Lachi about it.

After the incident at the rubbish heap, she had been rather shy and somewhat distant with him. 'I don't have enough work', he told her one day. 'Perhaps, I could come with you and help you on your rounds in the mornings.'

'I will see,' she said.

After a few days, Lachi came to him. 'In one of the big houses, they want a person to sweep the garden; they will pay you twenty-five rupees a month for an hour a day,' she said. 'Do you want to do it?'

'Why don't you do it yourself?' asked Balan. He thought that she was passing on the job to him out of sympathy.

'Well, it's really a gardener's job,' she said and then hesitated. 'You have to clean the dog dirt in the garden and help the gardener as well. Some of it is heavy work. That is why they want a man.'

The next morning, she took Balan with her. On the way she told him, 'I have told them you are my cousin and a man with a big family. You had better stick to that story'.

The owner of the house, Mr Sethuraman, came out to interview Balan. But before Balan could answer his questions, Lachi took over. 'My cousin is a good and honest worker, sir, not like these town sweepers,' she pleaded. 'He has just come from the village and has no work. He has to support a wife and three kids and it is hard on him. He will work full time if you like, but these days how can one live on twenty-five rupees and support a wife and children? You must be generous to us poor people, sir. Otherwise how can we live?'

'Look, I only want a man for an hour or so', Mr Sethuraman said. 'I don't want a full time man I will pay him only twenty-five rupees. Is that understood?'

Balan observed Lachi admiringly. She couldn't be more than twenty years old, but already she seemed to be an expert at bargaining and wheedling things out of people.

'But, sir,' Lachi pleaded. 'You know me; I have been coming here for five years now. I have to look after my cousin's family also, because he is unemployed. Could you not show some kindness to us poor sinners and make our life a little more comfortable? He hasn't had a haircut for six months, sir,' Lachi pointed to Balan's long and tousled hair. 'Because, even

for a Chakkiliyan, it costs five rupees to have a hair cut, sir! His children are starving and his wife sits crying in our hut. If only you could see....'

'All right, I will give you thirty rupees and nothing more; you had better clear out before my guests arrive.' Mr Sethuraman did not want to be seen bargaining with sweepers when his visitors came. This gave a further handle to Lachi.

'You are always so kind and generous, sir. But if you could also give instructions that some lunch or breakfast should be given to him when he comes to work, it will be so helpful, sir. After all, a man can't work on an empty stomach, sir.'

'All right, go!' shouted the master. 'No more talk!'

'He will start work from tomorrow, sir.'

'I told you to go!' shouted the enraged owner as he went into the house.

Lachi took Balan to the back of the house. Mr. Sethuraman's wife, Mrs. Subbulakshmi, came out.

'Amma, you didn't give me any saris for Deepavali,' Lachi started again. Now my cousin's wife has come from her village. She can't come out of the house Amma, because her only sari is torn and doesn't cover her properly. Now that my cousin is going to work here, why don't you give a sari, Amma? You are always so kind and generous.'

'I'll see if I can find a suitable sari; I'll send it with him tomorrow,' the lady of the house replied.

'Master has also said you will give him a meal when he comes to work here from tomorrow,' Lachi continued.

'That's all right.'

'You are so kind to us, Amma! I don't know what we poor people would do without your help,' said Lachi as they departed.

Mr. Sethuraman had two big dogs which were chained during the day and let out at night when the gates were closed, to keep burglars away. Balan's main job was to clean the garden of all the dog dirt. On the first day, Lachi instructed him on how to do it without getting his hands dirty. 'Throw some soil over it so that the moisture is absorbed. Then scoop it up with the spade along with the soil underneath it so that neither your hand nor the spade gets dirty. Then drop it into the bucket, like this,' and she showed him how.

In addition, he had to sweep the garden, collect the leaves and dump it into the dustbin located at the corner of the street.

Mrs. Subbulakshmi was a kind lady. She gave Balan some breakfast every morning, usually iddies, and occasionally rice mixed with some vegetables or buttermilk from the previous night. Balan was very obliging and did whatever jobs they wanted him to do apart from cleaning up after the dogs and carting away the rubbish. One morning, he found that someone had been sick in the middle of the driveway and the gardener told him, 'You had better clear that quickly before Amma sees it.'

When Balan got closer, there was the peculiarly nasty smell of stale arrack. 'What happened?' Balan asked.

'Obviously master had been drinking too much,' said the gardener. 'He does it sometimes without Amma knowing. If she finds out, he will be in trouble. That's why I asked you to clean it up quickly. The dog dirt can wait.'

Balan did as Lachi had taught him to. The mess was all over the place and it took considerable time as well as will power for Balan to get it all into the basket. The stink was overpowering and Balan wondered philosophically if this was the final degradation, or if there was more to come. As he was finishing, the lady of the house came out. She was almost in tears.

'Bala, you had better come into the bathroom and clean up there as well,' she said. 'Lachi hasn't turned up this morning.'

The bathroom was much worse since it was an enclosed space. The smell hung heavily in the air. Balan poured buckets of water and then swept it with a broom. Then he sprinkled phenyl to get rid of the smell.

'Don't talk about it to anybody,' Subbulakshmi requested. 'I feel so ashamed.'

'I won't talk about it, Amma, not even to Lachi,' he assured her.

He was given a particularly good breakfast that morning. And as he left, Subbulakshmi gave him one of her husband's old shirts to wear.

Balan was earning a good name for himself in the colony as one who was sober and did not make any trouble. The Sanitary Inspectors thought he was a good and loyal worker and found him to be pleasant and obliging. He kept in touch with the Sanitary Inspector who had first interviewed him as well as others who came to him to have their shoes repaired free of charge. Some of them even brought chappals of the other members of the family and Balan repaired them all with a smile. The only person with whom he did not get on well was Pichu, who had an aggressive nature and who felt that Balan was a potential rival in his conquest of Lachi. Whenever they talked to each other, Pichu tried to prove him wrong, particularly if Lachi was present.

'I hear you are scavenging dog's dirt', Pichu said when he heard about his job at Mr. Sethuraman's house. That's one step above any of us I suppose'.

'One has to keep body and soul together', Balan answered. 'There is no difference between different kinds of dirt'.

'Then why don't you clean the latrine in the colony?' Pichu taunted him.

'If the municipality gives me a permanent job and posts me there, I would certainly do it,' Balan retorted. 'There is no class distinction in dirt as there is among human beings.'

'I see we have a philosopher in our midst,' laughed Pichu.

'I don't know what you are talking about,' said Balan as he walked away.

'You should be careful of that Pichu,' Lachi warned Balan one day. 'He will get you into trouble if he can.'

'Why should he?' asked Balan. 'I've done nothing against him.'

Lachi averted her eyes. 'He doesn't like you staying in our house,' she said hesitantly. 'And he goes around telling other people he's going to marry me.'

'Is that true?' Balan asked innocently.

'Don't be silly!' she said and walked away.

His income from repairing shoes plus his monthly salary of thirty rupees from Mr. Sethuraman was hardly enough for Balan to live a comfortable life. He felt diffident asking people for things. Not so Lachi. She pleaded with Mr. Sethuraman on his behalf and got him a shirt as well as a pair of old trousers. Sometimes she let him help her and gave him food in return. But Balan knew she was doing it for his benefit rather than for her own convenience. So he went back again to the Sanitary Inspector who had asked him to keep in touch.

'I hear you are even willing to undertake the cleaning of the colony latrine if you are given a job,' the Inspector said.

Balan knew that Pichu must have been talking to the Inspector. 'I will do whatever work you give me, sir,' he replied.

'We will take you on a purely temporary basis,' the Inspector said. 'Let me see how you get on.'

'You are like a living god sir,' Balan repeated a phrase he had learnt from Kuppan. 'What would we poor devils do but for the kindness of men like you?'

'Come with me,' said the Inspector. He took him to the office and had him signed on as a temporary sweeper. He was allotted the colony and the surrounding areas. It was the dirtiest job in town, but Balan had achieved his objective.

The first few days were sheer hell. The place was filthy beyond imagination. But Balan had acquired great confidence and will-power since his Kamalapur days. Thanks to his experience in the Cheri in Sirumudi, he was also better prepared to tackle such tasks. Each morning, he meditated before going to work. He found that meditation gave him the strength to ignore the dirt and the stink. It was almost as if his mind was shut away from his environment. He was not conscious of his physical presence and his limbs moved like automatons carrying out the tasks to be done. The longer he meditated the better he was able to master his surroundings.

Earlier, not many people had noticed him meditating because it had been in the early hours of the morning, but after he started cleaning the colony latrines, it became more noticeable because he would be almost in a daze as he did his work. It became a topic of local gossip. Someone added the appellation 'Yogi' to his name and he became known as Bala Yogi. Lachi was not very happy about these developments though she was glad that he had got a job. She was sure that Pichu was responsible for all the talk about Balan's meditations and that he had invented the title. When she told Balan, his answer was, 'It does not matter, and after all, I do meditate.'

'But they have given you the worst job even for a scavenger, and they are now laughing at you,' Lachi protested. She was furious at the injustice of it all. 'Why don't you stop meditating, and get drunk like the others do and punch that Pichu on his dirty nose. Then people will have some respect for you.'

Even Chennan was worried about Balan and supported Lachi.

'I don't earn enough money to get drunk,' Balan replied. 'And I can't give up my meditation. If it is embarrassing for you, then I will find somewhere else to live.'

'You don't need to do that,' Lachi cried. 'We were only saying it for your good, for your standing in the colony. If anyone laughs at you, I'll show them!'

She spoke with determination and Balan knew that the men were afraid of her after what had happened to the man who had tried to assault her.

'After all, no one can object to prayer,' Chennan continued in his quiet manner. 'We ourselves worship various gods at festival times. It is just that you don't seem to worship anything. You just sit and gaze into the far distance, almost as if you were mad.'

'I am afraid it's a habit of mine,' said Balan. And the matter was left at that.

IV

Life in the colony was very different from what it had been in the Cheri. Kuppan had been right when he had described it as the life of the jungle. There was no cohesion here; no sense of unity or belonging, no unquestioned acceptance of leadership, for there was no one to lead them, only rivals who competed for power. Pichu, as the representative of the sweepers union, demanded allegiance from everyone. But he was not liked by most people who resented his bullying and his arrogant ways. Murugan, on the other hand, was very popular and friendly, but rather easy-going and not very reliable in an emergency. Each family—often each individual—went its own way.

There were also political rivalries, with flags of all the political parties flying outside the colony. At election time, the leaders came and harangued them, from a safe distance, keeping well away from the smells and the garbage dumps. Even the Sanitary Inspectors, who were supposed to visit every nook and corner of the town, did not come there often. When they did, they just visited the fringes, made some hasty comments and went away.

All the socializing in the colony was conducted under the street lights, for they could not afford bright lights in their own homes. Men congregated there to play cards or argue, and women to gossip about the events of the day. Drinking was done clandestinely just as in the Cheri, in the dark alleyways behind the huts. Arrack, supplied by a professional bootlegger, was quickly gulped down before the police could get wind of it. The leisurely drinking of the Cheri, the fun and the laughter were absent here. Because of the manner of drinking, some men got drunk easily and their womenfolk had to quickly take them home before quarrels broke out. Occasionally, the police came, raided a few huts, rounded up a few drunks who were fined or if they were unable to pay the fine, sent to jail for a week or two. Not drinking arrack in the colony was like not going to the temple in the agraharam; people made disparaging remarks about it. Not wanting to stand out in any way, Balan went with Chennan, drank a little and participated in the whispered conversation. He found it relaxing; it made him feel he had no cares in the world, so long as he did not imbibe too much.

On one such occasion, he inadvertently got into an argument with Pichu. They were discussing the coming of the underground drainage system and Pichu was explaining the union's point of view.

The president says we have to go on strike sooner or later,' he announced between gulps. 'Orders for pipes have been placed and work is due to start soon. We must register our protest and show our strength. Otherwise, they will treat us worse than dogs.'

'We will never be united enough to go on strike,' Chennan said. 'There are a lot of people who daren't challenge the authorities. You would be foolish if you called for a strike.'

'Like some people I know,' cried Pichu, 'who don't mind sucking up to the Sanitary Inspectors in order to get a job?'

Balan knew Pichu was referring to him, but decided to keep quiet.

'Coming from no one knows where and taking away jobs from our own people!' Pichu continued.

Pichu was itching for a fight. Better sense told Balan he should get up and walk away. But he too had had some arrack and his finer instincts were somewhat dormant. 'I am as good a Chakkiliyan as anyone present here,' he said somewhat belligerently.

'Yes, a Chakkiliyan who knows leatherwork and still prefers to clean dog dirt and untouchable dirt,' Pichu announced.

'Lay off him, Pichu,' warned Chennan. 'He hasn't done you any harm. Anyway, he's only a temporary worker.'

'He will suck up to the Sanitary Inspector's wife and then; he will be made permanent when all of us are retrenched'. Pichu was determined to provoke a fight.

'In any case,' said Balan, 'the underground drainage system is the only good thing that has happened in this town for many years. It is our only salvation and the only thing that will get us all out of this living hell. We are foolish to oppose it!'

'Who are you calling foolish, you filthy dog!' Pichu rose to his feet. 'You have been asking for a good thrashing ever since you came here.'

'And what would that prove?' Balan asked calmly. He was cold sober now. 'It would only prove that your muscles are perhaps stronger than mine. But it will not prove that you are right.'

The others laughed and said, 'That's a good one. We've never heard that before. Come on Pichu, he is right.'

'Bala, let's go home,' said Chennan who was afraid that at some point, his sister's name would come up, for he knew that Pichu wanted to marry her though she was not keen on him.

Balan had never quarrelled with anyone before or even exchanged harsh words. He did not know how to fight. But he also knew that if he were to retreat now, he would become the laughing stock of the colony. Better to face what was in store for him now when Pichu was drunk and the others on his side, rather than wait for another occasion.

'Cowards!' shouted Pichu. He now included Chennan also in his abusive remarks. 'You are no better than the dirt you clean!'

'If you are angry with me, don't drag Chennan into it', shouted Balan.

'I can fight you and Chennan and anyone else who dares cross me with one hand tied behind my back,' boasted Pichu.

'Calm down Pichu, you are provoking him unnecessarily,' said the others.

'You are nothing but a cowardly bully,' Balan shouted back.

Pichu hit him then. It would have been a powerful blow if he had not been drunk and if Balan had not been expecting it. As it was, it was a glancing blow against Balan's shoulder instead of one that landed squarely on his face. Balan staggered, but came back, grabbed his adversary round his waist and threw him down. It was not very difficult as Pichu was not very steady on his feet. Balan sat on his stomach and punched him in the face. By then, the others interfered and dragged them apart.

Pichu stood up, wiped his face and shouted. 'You son of a prostitute! You are hankering after another prostitute! You had better be careful, or she will get her knife into you before you get into her!'

The reference was to Lachi and everyone understood it. Chennan, who had been afraid of just this kind of remark, now came into the fray and felled Pichu with a strong blow to the face. But the others would not allow the fight to continue. They pacified Balan and Chennan and made them leave, saying 'We will discuss everything in the morning'.

As they walked away, they heard Pichu uttering dark threats. 'I am going to break every bone in their puny bodies when there is no one to intervene'.

The matter was never referred to between Balan and Chennan, but from then on Pichu was their sworn enemy. Balan had never thought of Lachi in that way before but the seed had been planted in his mind.

A few days later, Lachi questioned him about the fight. How do you know about it? Balan asked her.

'Everyone in the colony is talking about it,' she replied. 'I told you to be careful of him, didn't I? People say you were right and it has made him unpopular, but I am so ashamed.' There were tears in her eyes.

'I am sorry it had to end that way', said Balan.

Since he was getting a regular salary now, Balan gave up his shoe repair work, except when a Sanitary Inspector wanted to have his shoes repaired; or sometimes, to oblige a friend. This helpful attitude of his endeared him to everyone and made him very popular.

The colony latrines had never been as clean as they were now. Balan did his job meticulously and though a faint smell lingered in spite of his efforts, it was not overpowering and people no longer dirtied the outside. Balan even persuaded the children to go to the latrine in the morning instead of using the rubbish heaps round their huts. He suggested to Chennan that he should get the cartmen to remove the rubbish more often so that the entire colony had a fairly clean appearance. The Sanitary Inspector of the area was very pleased and brought the Health Officer of the municipality to the colony to see how clean it was. The Health Officer too was impressed. He questioned Balan about his antecedents, and received the stock answers.

'Cant you get some more people like you from your village?' the Health Officer asked him.

'All the young men have already left the place, sir,' said Balan.

Within a week, Balan was made a permanent worker of the municipality.

Now, Balan ate in Kulla's house most of the time. He paid them extra money for his food, which helped Kulla manage the household expenses a little better.

In the mornings, Chennan, Lachi and Balan set off early for their work. Balan would clean the colony latrines, go to the corner eating stall and have his iddlies. Then he would go off to Sethuraman's house and clean the garden. He often met Lachi on her rounds, but lately she was rather shy in his presence, preferring the company of other women. She seemed to have sobered down considerably after Balan's fight with Pichu. She was no longer saucy with the menfolk and didn't answer them back as she used to in the old days. If she came across Pichu during her work, she left the place as soon as she could. Balan noticed this change in her attitude and wondered how it had come about.

In the evenings, Balan would bring a newspaper and read out the news to the residents of the colony. As soon as he came he had told them he knew how to read and write Tamil, therefore, buying a paper and reading it was not considered unusual. Unlike at the Cheri, there were quite a few sweepers in the colony who could read write, though not many took the trouble of buying a newspaper. On most evenings, Chennan used to go off to play cards under the street lamp in the corner. But after the quarrel with Pichu, this became less frequent. Neither of them joined in when the other was present.

At night, Kulla and Lachi slept in the stuffy room which didn't even have a window. Chennan slept in the other room while Balan and the old man slept in the lean-to. Veeran talked to himself all the time. Sometimes, it was about arrack and toddy, sometimes it was about the days of British occupation, sometimes he bemoaned his fate at having to drag his body through a miserable life. Most often it was incoherent. Balan tried to answer him on occasion, but Chennan told him it was no use. The old man was best left to himself.

Lying there at nights, often unable to sleep, it was inevitable that Balan should reflect and reminisce. In the Cheri in Sirumudi, he would occasionally talk to Pappa and Kuppan about his early life, for they knew his background. Here, he could talk to no one. He was thankful he had succeeded in his objective of becoming a scavenger. He had faced the final degradation and emerged more or less unscathed. He realized how much meditation had helped him in his search for a guilt-free conscience. Sometimes, it seemed to take control of him and he lived in a dream world. But at the same time, he was also conscious of the physical world and knew what was happening around him. He tried to understand how all this had come about. What was the underlying cause of it all? The answer eluded him. It seemed to be a different level of consciousness, something finer, something rarer. Initially, the feeling used to come over him suddenly, like a wave, but gradually, he was able to control it, channelize it the way he wanted. Was he wrong to suppress it at times when he was involved with other thoughts? He did not know.

It wasn't that he had become a Yogi—or a saint as Ganesh would say. He had certainly not renounced the world. He had all the normal appetites of a human being. Particularly after his quarrel with Pichu, he had begun to eye Lachi with appreciation, even desire. The curves of her body, the archness of her face, the way she would smile at him in all innocence and joy and then shyly turn away—all these fascinated and tempted him. Was he right to allow this feeling to grow when he had taken upon himself the mission of a lifetime? How could he reconcile this with the feeling of godliness that came over him without warning? Was it wrong? He did not know.

V

He did not know. But the people of the colony had no doubts about it. Thanks to Pichu's remarks and his subsequent gossip, Lachi and Balan's names were linked together by everyone in the colony. Some people asked Chennan when the wedding was to be. Chennan was embarrassed, for he did not know either. He asked Lachi about it. She merely looked away and said nothing. But when Chennan persisted, and pointed out how everyone was talking about it, she said, 'You had better ask him.'

There was nowhere in the colony where they could talk in private. Even having a bath was more or less a public act. A tarpaulin was hung in the space between the hut and the ditch, and they went in one by one to have a bath. This happened only once a week or so and Balan had almost forgotten about his daily baths in the river. It seemed such a long time ago.

But they met more often on Lachi's rounds as if by tacit understanding. Balan would finish his work in the colony early and go to Mr. Sethuraman's house. Lachi would take her own time to clean their bathrooms. If there was no one present, she would help herself to some of the face powder in the hope that Balan would notice it. When he came, she would

wheedle Mrs. Subbulakshmi into giving them some food. 'Amma, we are so hungry, we had no rice in the house last night. That scoundrel of a brother spent all his money on arrack. We have both come to work on empty stomachs. The sun is getting hot and I have to do twenty more houses before I finish. Why don't you give us something to eat? I know you are generous. My cousin is also hungry, but he is embarrassed to ask you.'

Balan was somewhat outraged at the facile manner in which Lachi told lies in order to get what she wanted. But when Mrs. Subbulakshmi gave them food, they shared it with pleasure, laughing and chatting about the affairs of the colony. Then, while Balan cleared the dog dirt and swept the fallen leaves in the garden, Lachi finished her rounds and came back to help him cart the rubbish away to the dustbin in the street corner. He filled the bamboo basket and she took it from him and carried it to the garbage dump. As their fingers touched, Lachi became shy and averted her eyes. Balan did not know a blush could look so attractive on dark skin!

When they finished work they would walk back together to the colony. Lachi often tried to find out about his past, his family. She was eager for any bit of information about him. It was unthinkable for her that a man could be without a family, live without affection and has only acquaintances. He often wondered if he should tell her the truth, but ultimately decided against it, somewhat reluctantly. 'She tells lies to strangers about little things, but I have to tell lies to the one I love. How can I blame her for her harmless fibs?' he asked himself. He told her he knew nothing about his parents since they had died when he was young. He was rather vague about it and she did not press him further, thinking that, perhaps, it was a painful subject. But he told her about Pappa and Kuppan, how they had brought him up, how Kuppan had taught him to repair sandals, about the Natrayan festival, about the beating of the drums and about the caste Hindus in Sirumudi in sufficiently vivid detail for Lachi to accept it as the truth, which in a way it was.

On their way home they sometimes came across Pichu sitting under a tamarind tree reading the paper or gossiping with his friends. He would not talk directly to them but would make loud asides to himself or to the others present. 'Dog dirt and human dirt don't mix,' he would say. Or he would sing a love song from the latest film he had seen. Sometimes he would say, 'There goes our scavenger Yogi.' Balan and Lachi would ignore him.

Within the colony, they were more reserved. In the evening when the men ate, Lachi picked out all the tasty bits of meat or vegetables and put them on Balan's plate. Kulla and Chennan knew what was happening but said nothing. But the gossip in the colony continued and they knew they would soon have to put a stop to it.

Chennan came to Balan one day when he was working at Mr. Sethuraman's house in place of Lachi. 'Where is Lachi today?' Balan asked him.

'I came instead of her', said Chennan. 'I wanted to talk to you about Lachi.'

'What about?' Balan asked in all innocence.

Chennan was not very good with words and he hesitated. Then he said, 'You know, people have been talking, I mean, about you and Lachi. Mother feels it's wrong for you to stay in our house under such circumstances. We have always had a good reputation in the colony. After all...' He did not know how to complete the sentence.

This was the moment of decision for Balan, but still he stopped short of saying what he should. Instead he said: 'It's all that fellow Pichu's doing.'

'It was at first,' Chennan agreed. 'But lately, people have been seeing you and Lachi here almost every day. You know what I mean. That kind of thing is no good for a girl's reputation.'

'Yes, I see that,' Balan agreed. 'Now that I have been made permanent, I could take a wife, if you and your parents agree.'

'Yes, and you could give up this scavenging business and set up as a leatherworker. The family will help you of course.'

'We'll think about all that later,' said Balan. 'But first, we will get married. Is Lachi willing?'

Chennan was happy that he had been able to accomplish his mission with so little trouble. 'You should know that by now', he grinned.

From Balan's point of view also, things were very simple. There were no long-drawn-out negotiations, no bargaining about dowry, no reference to horoscopes or astrologers, and no discussions about the accomplishments of the respective parties. It was just a simple matter of love, he told himself.

With the atmosphere in the colony soured by Pichu's gossip, they did not want a wedding ceremony in the hut. Balan suggested they go to the Murugan temple in the town and get married there. Only a few people would be invited, some of Chennan's friends, for Balan had no friends as yet, and some girls whom Lachi wanted to invite. Later, Kulla would give them all a sumptuous meal. Without Balan's knowledge, Chennan had arranged for a few bottles of arrack as part of the celebrations.

Unlike most of the sweepers Balan was very thrifty. From the day he had become a permanent worker of the Kalluppatti municipality, he had started saving a few rupees every month and now it came in handy. He gave fifty rupees to Lachi. 'Buy yourself a new sari for the wedding', he said. 'I am sorry I can't afford more.'

'What about a new dhoti and shirt for you?' she asked. 'You can't get married in clothes in which you... do your work,' she said.

Yes, he did not want to go into the sacred precincts of the temple in clothes in which he had been cleaning dogs' dirt. 'I will get some too,' he replied.

Without her knowledge, he had bought a silver thali—he could not afford gold—to be tied round her neck at the time of the ceremony.

The ceremony at the temple was brief. Mantras were intoned for about five minutes, prasadam was offered, Balan tied the silver thali he had bought round Lachi's neck and they prostrated themselves on the floor and worshipped Lord Murugan, the chief deity of the temple. The few guests who were present also worshipped the deity and made a mark on their foreheads with the ashes the priest offered them. Chennan gave some money to the priest and they all left for the colony. All the way home, Lachi fingered the thali round her neck, as if it might disappear by magic. But she was very shy and would not look at Balan.

The middle room in the house had been vacated for the night for the couple. Chennan had quietly moved his bed to the lean to outside and gone off to celebrate his sister's wedding with his friends, armed with the arrack he had ordered. Kulla had locked herself in the other room. The small peep-hole of a window let in some of the light from the alley. There were no flowers, no silken bedspreads or rose petals on the pillows; no rose-water or sandalwood paste, not even face powder from Mr. Sethuraman's bathroom. Only the faint smells of the nearby ditch and the latrine that wafted in through the poky little opening. No music to speed their romance, only the rustle from the rubbish heap, made by the rooting of bandicoots and rats.

But the young people were oblivious of their environment. Balan embraced Lachi and whispered in her ear, 'Lachi! Lachi! We belong to each other now. No one can separate us. I love you!'

'Don't speak,' Lachi whispered back. 'Mother will hear us in the next room.'

For the first time since his quest, Balan felt he was now truly an untouchable. It was as if his vow had been fulfilled, as if his long, hard, journey was at an end.

FOUR

1

Balan and Lachi were perhaps the happiest couple in the sweepers' colony. They were friendly and popular with almost everyone. Under Lachi's influence, he started repairing sandals in his spare time to make a little extra money. Unlike the Chakkiliyans in the Cheri in Sirumudi who were satisfied with their lot, the sweepers—at least a majority of them—wanted to improve themselves. They sent their children to school, tried to earn extra money by doing odd jobs, went to the cinema and to restaurants and hoped that their children would get better jobs. Therefore, they appreciated Balan's thrifty habits. The men said it was surprising how a saucy and rebellious wench like Lachi had been tamed by a quiet and timid man like Balan. But the women were envious of Lachi and told her how lucky she was.

A difference of opinion was also developing among the sweepers about the merits of the underground drainage system. The situation had been complicated by the political parties. While the opposition parties blamed the municipality at first for not introducing the underground drainage system, as soon as a decision to introduce it was taken, they criticized the authorities for not planning it properly, for not having adequate water supply and for causing retrenchment. In view of the impending elections frequent meetings were held in the open space near the colony where speakers from different political parties thundered either for or against the municipal authorities and exhorted the sweepers to either go on strike or to support the underground drainage system. But thanks to Balan's quiet propaganda, there was a growing opinion among a section of the sweepers that it should be welcomed provided the municipality would give an undertaking not to retrench any sweepers. They saw it as a means of permanent salvation from the stink and the dirt and the degradation in which they seemed eternally imprisoned. Balan did not go out of his way to talk about it, but people asked him for his opinion very often, not only on this issue but on many of their personal problems as well. The people of the colony looked up to him; the municipal authorities were also pleased with him. This naturally became another bone of contention between him and Pichu, who was steadily getting resentful of Balan's popularity in the colony.

When people referred affectionately to Bala Yogi, Pichu would remark disparagingly, 'Oh, you mean the dog dirt Yogi!'

'You are jealous of him,' people would say.

'What, jealous of that puny little creature?' Pichu would ask. 'One of these days, I am going to break his neck.'

People laughed at him in response and this only annoyed him further. He watched Balan closely as he went about his tasks. But he did not do anything about executing his threat and Balan almost forgot about his quarrel with him.

Balan often wondered how his domestic life would affect his spiritual quest. It was generally believed that the life of a householder—however meritorious it might be—was not conducive to a spiritual state. He remembered the famous couplet from the Kural,

Aiding sages, the virtuous household gains,
Far greater good than all the sages' pains.

Would he still be able to experience spiritual ecstasy through his meditations, withdrawal of the self and the attainment of pure consciousness? Would his involvement with his family, his desire to earn a little more money, his sex life, affect his spiritual quest? This thought had worried him both before and soon after his marriage. But he had little cause for concern.

One night, a few weeks after he had been married, he was sitting in the lean-to. Lachi had gone to gossip with her friends, thinking that Balan and Chennan had gone out to play cards. She liked Balan to go out occasionally with the men and have some fun, though he did not seem to enjoy this very much. Chennan had gone off without him, not wanting to disturb the newly married couple. Balan sat alone in the dark and meditated. The usual grumbling of Veeran did not disturb him. Slowly, he slipped into a state of unconsciousness where his mind seemed to free itself from his body as if it had an independent existence. The bridge of consciousness between the body and the spirit was removed and he experienced a level of ecstasy that was as new as it was overwhelming. Chennan who came in to spread his mattress stumbled against the unconscious form of Balan. Thinking that he had fallen asleep, he tried to wake him, but couldn't.

'Lachi! Lachi!' he shouted, thinking there was something seriously wrong with his brother-in-law. 'Your husband seems to be in a coma. Where are you?'

Kulla came out of the inner room with the little kerosene lamp and seeing Balan's state, ran to fetch Lachi. Chennan sprinkled water on his face in order to revive him.

Balan regained consciousness slowly. He seemed to be completely oblivious of his environment and looked as if he was beyond time and space. He opened his eyes and still in a daze, asked, 'What is this?'

'Bala! Bala! Are you all right?' Chennan shouted in desperation.

Only then did Balan come round, he found he was completely exhausted and his body was covered with perspiration though it was a fairly cold night.

'It is all right, you can leave me now,' he said in a tired voice.

When Lachi came back with Kulla, Chennan explained what had happened and said that Balan should go to the hospital in the morning.

'I know,' said Lachi. She was close to tears. 'And this is not the first time either.'

'Then why didn't you tell us before?' asked Chennan.

'Because it is not an illness,' said Lachi. 'Or, if it is, it's not something that can be cured by doctors.'

'It is all right Chenna, don't blame Lachi,' Balan spoke slowly and deliberately. 'It is something that comes over me periodically. I seem to move into a different world.' Balan tried to explain the change that came over him to them. It was difficult enough to understand and articulate it to himself, but to explain it to these simple people in words that they understood was impossible and he struggled for the right words.

'I can explain it,' said Lachi. 'It is like being possessed by a powerful god, like Natrayan; except that his god does not have a name. But he is there all the time. I know because I have watched him. I have felt the presence of an invisible power. His body acquires a new status, a fresh glow, as if he has just had an oil bath. He is no longer himself then; he becomes that unknown god. It gives him power and we can refuse him nothing. Only he won't use that power.'

'How do you know all this Lachi?' Balan asked wonderingly.

'How do I know?' Lachi repeated the question. 'I am your wife, aren't I? Haven't I watched you for the past six months night after night or in the early hours of the morning before you go to clean the latrine? Haven't I seen you in your trance when you thought I was asleep? Haven't I been watching over you in case you said something, in case you needed something? That is how I know it and I am afraid of how it may all end!'

A wife's devotion! Her emotional commitment! She understood him better perhaps than he understood himself. Balan realized that Lachi's love for him was not just physical. It transcended mere sexuality. There was a deeper bond between this illiterate scavenger girl who smelt of filth and the Brahmin intellectual who had cast away his holy thread in order to become a scavenger himself. This realization brought on a great wave of affection and tenderness for his wife and his heart overflowed with love for her.

'What is it, Bala? Can't you explain it to us?' Chennan pleaded. 'Is it good or bad? Is it magic? Tell us'.

'I wish I could', replied Balan. 'Lachi seems to have got nearer the truth than I have. All I can say is that it is not evil and it is not going to harm me or any us for that matter. Maybe it is something divine in which I get lost and when I emerge I feel purer and fresher in mind and spirit. I suppose it is a form of yoga.'

'Have you seen god? Have you spoken to him? What does he look like?' Chennan wanted to know.

'It's nothing like that, Chenna. It is, I suppose, a feeling more than anything else; a dream, a state of mind', Balan struggled for words. 'I really can't explain it.'

'I wish all the same that you didn't have these dreams as you call them,' said Lachi.

'I wish the British were still here; they wouldn't have abolished toddy. They knew what was good for the scavengers', Veeran mumbled to himself.

I suppose we had better go to sleep,' said Kulla and they all retired.

In the darkness of their little room, Lachi pleaded with her husband. 'Please don't become a god,' she whispered. 'I would rather have you as a man, an arrack-drinking, wife-beating man, than as a god. Please don't leave me!'

I cannot help it, Lachi,' Balan whispered back. 'It comes over me and I have no power to stop it. But I will not leave you whatever happens. We are bound to each other for ever and ever.'

It was of course difficult to keep such an unusual thing a secret from the colony people. Rumours and gossip spread about Balan's unusual behaviour.

Then, one early morning, some men going to the latrine discovered Balan near the communal tap, in deep concentration. Chennan and Lachi were both out on their rounds, so the men summoned Kulla. She told the men to keep quiet and by sprinkling water on his face and talking to him gently, slowly brought him round. 'He shouldn't come out of his trance too quickly,' she explained. 'You see, the spirit has left the body and the body is dead for all practical purposes. The spirit can only enter it slowly. Any disturbance is dangerous.'

They too could feel there was something otherworldly, something divine about him as he came round.

'He is like a god at such times,' Kulla assured them. 'Look at his body now. Doesn't it have a new glow?'

'Yes, they sensed that they were in the presence of something holy. They knelt down and touched his feet.

People said he was 'possessed', that he had unusual powers, that he practiced magic, that he could cure the sick, and so on. But they could not reconcile all these with the smiling, friendly, helpful Balan who played with the children and cleaned the colony latrine better than any other scavenger. People looked at him with interest and curiosity, brought their children to him if they were sick, asked his advice about their problems. The name Bala Yogi became more firmly established. People asked Lachi about her husband's supernatural powers. The young women even asked her what he was like in bed but Lachi would not say much except that he had been blessed by an unknown god, that he might have divine powers but he certainly would not use them.

One day, Balan had finished cleaning the garden of Mr. Sethuraman's house, washed his hands with water provided by the gardener and come into the backyard for his breakfast, when he heard Lachi telling Mrs. Subbulakshmi, 'My cousin's wife ran away Amma, so now I am married to him.'

'But how can you marry him when he has not divorced his first wife?' Mrs. Subbulakshmi asked, surprised.

'What is marriage and divorce for us poor Chakkiliyans, Amma?' Lachi spoke full of emotion. 'It is a matter of convenience.' Then she brightened up. 'But this time it is permanent, Amma; we got married in the Murugan temple. It was all properly done. Here's my thali tied by my husband before Lord Murugan himself'. Proudly she exhibited her thali.

Mrs. Subbulakshmi examined it from a distance. 'I am glad you are properly married,' she said. 'Marriage and divorce seem to be very easy in your community'.

'But Amma,' Lachi pleaded. 'I am now pregnant and I have to save for the baby. It is so difficult these days...'

'Well, tell me nearer the time. I will see if I can find some baby clothes for you. Perhaps my daughter who has just had a baby will let you have some.'

'You are so generous, Amma!' Lachi cried. 'But I must keep well for the child, because I have to eat for two now'.

Mrs. Subbulakshmi was sympathetic though she did not believe Lachi's story about a previous wife. She got her some extra food and said, 'You should look after yourself.'

While they were sharing the food in the backyard, Balan commented, 'I don't know how you manage to tell so many lies at the same time and get away with it.'

'But they were not all lies,' Lachi protested. 'I couldn't have told her I was married to you without at the same time sending your "first wife" away, could I?'

'But what about your...?' Balan hesitated.

'That part is true,' she said shyly. 'I am going to have a baby. But it is not showing yet, is it?'

'I am so happy, Lachi,' said Balan. 'We will have a child of our own now.'

Yes, Balan was happy. Would it be boy or a girl, he wondered. A Chakkiliyan or a Brahmin? If a boy, would he be able to learn the Vedas, the Gayatri mantra? After all, Ravana did, though his mother was a Rakshasi. And Lachi was far from being one of those. His heart overflowed with tenderness for his wife.

II

One evening Balan and Chennan were chatting with Murugan and a couple of others under the street light in the alley. As usual, they were discussing municipal affairs and the possibility of a strike which was being postponed again and again because Pichu was not sure of the extent of support he was likely to get and because Namasivayam kept telling him that negotiations were still going on with the municipal authorities. They had been trying to teach Balan how to play cards, but in spite of their best efforts, he could not even remember the 'suits'.

'For a clever man like you, you are very dim where cards are concerned,' remarked Murugan.

'What makes you think I am clever?' asked Balan with a smile.

'Within just one-and-a-half years or so you have managed to become popular in the colony, and get a permanent job; the people of the colony-many of them—are eating out of your hand'.

'That is not cleverness', Balan assured him. 'It is just a matter of being nice to everyone you meet.'

'That's just the point', cried Murugan. 'None of us think of being nice to others. We are so full of our own miseries. But you're different from all of us, Bala.'

'By the way', one of them said, 'I believe there is something in the paper about a Brahmin who has become a scavenger'.

Balan's heart missed a beat, but he did not say anything.

'Really!' shouted both Chennan and Murugan. 'Fancy a Brahmin becoming a scavenger! Who would've thought of it? It shows that the times are all upside down.'

'Which paper was it?' Balan asked, without betraying his agitation.

'I don't know,' said the man who had brought up the matter. 'As you know, I am not much at reading. It was something like the Daily Star.'

'Nowadays, it's very difficult for Brahmins to get jobs', commented Murugan. 'Half the jobs are supposed to be reserved for people like us though we don't seem to do anything but scavenging. So, it will not be surprising if some poor Brahmin becomes a scavenger out of sheer necessity'.

'I saw in the paper the other day', Balan wanted to say something to divert their attention,' that the Government is going to train Chakkiliyans to become temple priests. If we can become temple priests, why can't the Brahmins become scavengers?'

'I don't suppose there will be a long queue of Brahmins to do our jobs,' ventured Chennan.

'Maybe it is someone doing it just for the publicity,' said Murugan. 'Like riding a cycle for a whole week or living with snakes inside a cage.'

'Or, maybe the newspaper didn't have anything sensational to print and they thought up something like this,' Balan remarked.

'If it is in the Daily Star, I will find it and read it', said Murugan getting up. 'Then, I'll pass it on to you to read', he told Balan as he left.

The next day, Murugan passed on a crumpled sheet of newsprint to Balan. 'I think it is some kind of a hoax,' he commented.

This was what the newspaper said:

A BRAHMIN SCAVENGER

We have heard of highly qualified men doing such jobs as bus conductors and postmen, but we have now come across an instance of a well-educated Brahmin youth who has chosen to become a scavenger anonymously. We can vouch for the truth of the story, though for obvious reasons, the names of people and places have been withheld. At the appropriate time, we hope to publish the details of this unusual human story in all its sublimity, as well as its tragedy and degradation. For the present, we are happy to publish the following letter written to the youth by his friend:

Dear friend,

I do not want to address you by your name though I long to do so. Even inadvertently, I don't want to reveal your identity in case you have not changed it. Since you wish to remain anonymous, I respect your wish.

It is now nearly three years since you left us. I know you discarded your holy thread, but have you also discarded your love for your family and friends along with it? Don't you want to know how your parents, your sister of whom you were so fond, are getting along? Even if you feel no love, are you not even curious? Has your penance made you so hard-hearted? Whether you want to or not, you are going to hear about them through this letter. I hope it reaches you.

I have been visiting your family often since you left. They love to talk to me about you, since I was your friend. Your mother died about a year ago. She was bedridden for some time and died thinking of you. She felt it was her fault that you had left home and she never really got over it. If this bit of news

causes you pain, I am sorry; but I know you would rather have the bitter truth than mere words that are false. At least you will be glad to hear that your sister married the man she wanted to and they are very happy. Your father has just retired and is living alone in the house. Though your sister often comes to see him, looks after him and would like him to go and live with them, he prefers to be independent. But he gets on well with his son-in-law. You are the only fly in the ointment....

No one knows where you are or what you are doing. But they often talk about you and wonder what has happened to you.

They still hope that one day, you will come back. I have, of course, not said anything; I have respected your confidence. I have hoped and waited in vain for some message, some letter, telling me what you are doing. I did not realize that your severance was going to be so complete.

I know you have taken it upon yourself to suffer for the selfish arrogance of the Brahmin community for the past three thousand years. Maybe you have been chosen to teach us all a lesson. But my dear, dear friend, don't you realize, even the severest of penances is time-bound. The greatest of sacrifices has to come to an end at some point of time. There is always an absolution for the most heinous of crimes. Purgatory is only temporary. When you take it upon yourself to suffer for the sins of your ancestors, you will come out of it purified and glorified, but will you come out of it? I earnestly hope you will.

Do you remember our college days? How enthusiastic we were about ideas, concepts, and philosophies? Your thirst for knowledge was unquenchable. Your ability to draw conclusions from ideas used to amaze even our teachers. Do you recall our discussions on the river bank? You are not destined to spend your life cleaning lavatories. You are intended for something better, nobler. Therefore, please, please, do not waste your life any more. There is a good job waiting for you whenever you want it. Please come out of your secret exile, or at least get in touch with me.

Yours ever,
G.

As Balan read the letter in the newspaper, he became more and more agitated. Fortunately, there was no one in the hut except Veeran who did not notice most things. Balan left the place so that Lachi or Chennan would not find out anything. Reading that letter from Ganesh brought back thoughts of his past, rekindled memories and emotions that had lain dormant for a long time, emotions which he thought he had buried. He shed

tears for his dead mother and blamed himself for not having been there when she passed away. He ought to have been there at least to light her funeral pyre. But he was glad that Lakshmi had had the courage to marry Kandaswamy. Once his mother had died, he knew his father would not have stood in her way.

How nice of Ganesh to write! How considerate of him to have respected his confidence and not revealed any names! Balan remembered their discussions nostalgically. His heart overflowed with affection for his friend. But what did he mean by a job waiting for him? Was he fit to do any other job now? It all seemed a different world, a different universe, with different rules and regulations, different conventions. Could he go back?

Was there an end to his penance as Ganesh suggested? The original objective of his decision—that of suffering for the sins of his ancestors—seemed so unimportant now. Yet, he had gone through hell, through purgatory as Ganesh had said, and come out unscathed, if not purified. And in that process, he had acquired something precious—Lachi. Then he thought of the news that Lachi had given him a few days ago. The child—his child—she carried in her womb, bound them together as nothing else would or could. Lachi in the sweepers' colony was one thing; but Lachi in the agraharam was a different matter altogether. Therefore, his penance—if penance it was—could have no end. His exile would have to be permanent. His discussions with Ganesh, seeing Lakshmi and his father, the job that was waiting for him—all these would have to be postponed, for ever.

Preoccupied with his thoughts, deeply moved by the emotions that the letter had triggered, Balan was not aware of where he was going until a voice hailed him. It was Chennan.

'Bala, Bala', he shouted. 'Where are you going?'

Balan was suddenly brought back to his immediate environment. He looked up. 'Nowhere in particular', he mumbled.

'You look as if you've seen a ghost.'

'It's nothing; I thought I would go and look for that newspaper with the article that Murugan was talking about.'

'But I thought Murugan was going to send you the paper.'

'It's not important,' Balan stammered. 'Let's go back to the colony.'

The newspaper article was cursorily discussed in the colony for a few days and then forgotten. But it had unsettled Balan. He tended to be absent-minded, thoughtful and not as attentive to his work and environment. Lachi noticed it immediately.

'Is anything wrong?' she asked her husband with concern.

'No, everything is all right,' he said.

But she noticed that he avoided looking at her. Lachi was perceptive about such things. 'Your meditation hasn't upset you in any way, has it?' she enquired.

'Not at all', he assured her, truthfully.

She let it go at that, but returned to the subject again after a few days. 'There's something bothering you', she announced. 'I can tell, because you don't smile as often as you used to. You are not as obliging as you used to be with people. When that woman Nachi brought her child to be blessed, you were quite abrupt with her'.

'I don't want people bothering me about such things, treating me as if I could work miracles, because I can't. I want to put a stop to it.'

'But you weren't like that before', Lachi persisted. 'You just used to smile and say, "Pray to God and he will cure you".'

'I am getting a bit tired of all this magic business, because that's what they think I am practicing.'

But he wasn't a bit convincing. 'You are my husband,' Lachi cried, 'We should not have any secrets from each other. If there's anything that is bothering you, tell me. Even if I don't understand it, I will try and help you.'

Balan realized she was crying. But how could he tell her? What could he tell her? He was surprised at her intuition and his heart wept for her, but he could not reveal the secret to anyone, not even his beloved Lachi.

'Lachi, I am sorry I have been a bit distracted lately. But from now on, I will be all right. You wait and see,' he smiled at her.

And he was as good as his word. The effect of the newspaper article was wearing off and slowly, he returned to normality. Lachi was happy. Neither of them was prepared for what followed.

About a month after the article had appeared in the newspaper and everyone had forgotten about it, Lachi came home crying one afternoon. Her hair was dishevelled and she had bruises on her arms. Chennan brought her home.

'What happened, Lachi?' Balan asked anxiously.

'That brute Pichu', she cried. 'He would have killed me if Chennan hadn't come along, quite by chance!'

'I will murder him!' hissed Balan.

'You had better listen to her story,' said Chennan. 'I have also asked Murugan to come, just in case.' But he did not explain any further.

'For god's sake, tell me what happened,' Balan shouted.

Lachi wiped her eyes and started on her story. 'I happened to be walking past Pichu and he shouted some obscenities. He called me a Brahmin's whore and not a decent Chakkiliyan girl. I got annoyed and threw some cow dung into his face. That was when he started to beat me. Fortunately, Chennan happened to come along'.

'Did you let him get away with it?' Balan asked his brother-in-law.

'I hit him on his nose, but he laughed and said, "You had better ask for an explanation from your so-called brother-in-law before you start blaming me. Ask your friend Murugan; I have told him the whole story." So, I've asked Murugan to come,' Chennan replied.

Suddenly, Balan understood what had happened. His entire world crumbled around him. His rebirth—he thought of it almost as a re-incarnation—so carefully planned and built, was now exposed as a sham. Now he would be considered nothing more than cheat. He was neither a Brahmin nor a Chakkiliyan, not fit to be the one and not accepted by the other. The brief period of bliss, all too brief, his penance and sacrifice, were all over. Whatever happened now, he had no hope for the future. Suffering seemed to be his destiny. He wondered how Pichu had got to the truth.

'That story about a Brahmin in the newspaper about a month ago, it was about you, wasn't it? Chennan asked.

'What newspaper story?' Lachi enquired.

'Ask him! Chennan pointed to Balan.

'Let Murugan come and tell the story,' Balan answered weakly. I have nothing to say.'

Murugan came and told his story. 'Pichu claims that he was suspicious of Balan from the very beginning. In the first place, no Chakkiliyan has ever been named Balan, particularly in a backward village like Sirumudi. Balan's manner of speech, his unconscious use of English words, made him seem more like one of the Sanitary Inspectors than a Chakkiliyan. Pichu says he had seen Balan attracted by English signboards, English advertisements and such like in the shops and in newspapers. No one bothers to look at them unless they can read and understand them. Balan's manner of dusting himself when there was dirt on his clothes, his reluctance to fight, the way he meditated, his desire to become a scavenger when he could do leatherwork—all these made him suspicious of Balan.'

'I too have noticed these', said Lachi. 'But I don't have a suspicious nature like that rogue'.

'Then when he read that letter in the newspaper addressed to a Brahmin,' Murugan continued, 'he thought it must be for Balan. You told us, Bala, that your aunt and uncle—Pappa and Kuppan—were from Sirumudi Cheri. Well, Pichu knew about it too, so he went to Sirumudi to check up. After that it was all easy. Kuppan told him everything about you and said that you were from Kamalapur agraharam.'

'I suppose he went to Kamalapur also,' Balan enquired.

'Oh, yes', replied Murugan. 'He went there and made enquiries and learnt that one Balasubramaniam, son of Seshadri Iyer, retired head clerk in the Collector's Office, had been missing for nearly three years. He says that all the dates and everything else tally and he can prove it in a court if necessary. He found out that you had been to the A.B.M. College, so he went and made enquires there and got a group photograph from a local photographer in which you are clearly visible. He even went to see your father and your sister'.

'I hope he didn't tell them where I was and what I was doing', Balan enquired anxiously.

The others started at him. Up till now, there had been a lingering doubt in their minds. But now, they had confirmation from his own lips that Balan was born a Brahmin which dispelled all doubt...

'No, he didn't tell them anything', replied Murugan. 'He told me all this because he says you cannot continue as a sweeper since you are not a born Chakkiliyan and he wants you to leave the colony for the same reason. "What do you think will happen if I went and lived in Kamalapur agraharam?" he says. You got your job under false pretences and the municipality should go to court against you for giving incorrect information in order to get a job. He wants me to see that you leave the colony immediately or there will be trouble. That is what he says.'

'And if I don't? queried Balan.

'Then, he says, he will call for a strike to make the municipality sack you,' said Murugan. 'He told me all this, Balan, because, as a well-wisher and friend of yours, he wanted me to advise you. But the decision is yours. Whatever you decide, I shall support you.'

Murugan stopped abruptly. He had nothing more to say. They waited in silence for Balan to say something. But he was trying to control his emotions; he was unable to speak.

'Why didn't you tell me?' Lachi was the first to speak. 'Couldn't you trust me? Have confidence in me? I knew there was something wrong. You have not been the same during the last month. I could feel it here', she touched her heart, inside me, but I had nothing to go by. You see,' she turned to the others, 'I did not know anything about the newspaper story.'

Suddenly, Chennan's anger burst forth. 'We trusted you!' he shouted at Balan emotionally. 'We took you into our home, gave you protection. You married my sister. All under false pretences! Is this what we get in return?'

'But Chenna,' Balan pleaded. 'I did all this to salve my guilty conscience! It was like a penance for the ill treatment that you have received for three thousand years. I did not do it to hurt you, or...' he looked at his wife, 'Lachi, I am no longer a Brahmin. I am a Chakkiliyan.'

'If you wanted to do penance, why didn't you go into the forest like your ancestors did?' Chennan cried. 'Why did you have to come here and disrupt our poor lives? I have half a mind to beat you up and throw you out myself'.

'And what will you do with me?' Lachi asked, her eyes blazing with anger and tears. 'Will you beat me up and throw me out too? Along with my unborn baby?'

Murugan and Chennan stared at her, speechless.

'A baby?' cried Chennan.

'Yes, a baby,' Lachi replied. 'Isn't it usual to have a baby when you get married? It doesn't show yet, but I am three months pregnant.'

'But Lachi!' cried Chennan. It was obvious that Lachi's bombshell had shocked him into a new frame of mind. 'If what Pichu says is true-and it is obvious it is—I don't see any alternative. The entire colony will want to throw him out. You will both have to leave. But if you stay here, I will naturally look after you-and the baby I suppose.'

'How little you men know!' she shouted. 'The colony will not throw my husband out! You men are all the same, trying to take the easy way out and avoid difficult or awkward situations! If you had had your way, you would have happily married me off to that scoundrel Pichu! So long as you get your arrack and a bit of gambling, that is all you care about!'

'But, Lachi!' Chennan interrupted.

'Don't you know who my husband is?' she shouted at her brother. 'Haven't I guarded him, looked after him night after night? When his body lay inert on the bedroom floor and when his spirit was elsewhere? Why do you think people call him Bala Yogi? He is not an ordinary person like you and me trying to make a living out of scavenging! That is not what he is here for! He is a god in human form come to save us from our miseries and tribulations! And all you are worried about is what will happen to your reputation! You people can do what you like, but I am going to see that he is not disturbed in any way.'

The men looked at her in wonder. 'Do you mean to say that he has magical powers?' Murugan asked.

‘What are magical powers?’ Lachi shouted. ‘Any drunken Chakkiliyan in front of Natrayan temple claims magical powers! He is much greater than all that! I don’t know how to explain it. All I can say is that he is a god in human form. He has come to save us poor sinners from our evil ways, from our misery, poverty and degradation. But all you can think of doing is to throw him out! You are no better than that rogue Pichu whose only intention is to destroy us because I would not marry him!’

‘You mean he is an avatar?’ Murugan asked again.

‘Something like that, I suppose’, said Lachi.

At last Balan spoke. ‘I am sorry I have caused you all this trouble,’ he said hesitantly. ‘All I can say is that my motives in becoming a Chakkiliyan were completely honest and sincere. It was my way of repaying the debt incurred by my ancestors. I have become a Chakkiliyan not by intoning mantras, performing ceremonies or going to the Natrayan temple, but by doing what you do, eating and drinking what you consume, and thinking your thoughts. It has not been easy and now I am a full-fledged Chakkiliyan and no one can take it away from me. Irrespective of what happens now, I will die a Chakkiliyan. But you people should do what you think is best for yourselves. If you think I should go away from the colony, then I shall. If Lachi will go with me, and he gazed at her earnestly, ‘I shall take her away with me. If not, I will go alone.’

‘If he leaves now, some terrible misfortune will descend on all of us,’ Lachi cried. ‘I will see that he doesn’t leave us. All the women will support me.’

Poor Chennan did not know what to do. He was a simple soul, honest and not very bright. ‘But Pichu says the municipality will go to court against him!’ he said.

‘I don’t think they will do that,’ said Murugan who had been listening to the family dispute. He felt great sympathy for Lachi and Balan. ‘The municipality will not go to court against an honest worker just because Pichu asks them to. I also feel this situation is going to be having wider implications than we think. Soon, other communities will get to hear about him. If Pichu does anything, it will receive a lot of publicity in all the papers. I am also sure Balan will receive a lot of sympathy. Also that man who wrote in the papers will get to know where Balan is and will come and take his side.’ He smiled for the first time. ‘So, we don’t need to take any decision in a hurry.’

Balan sensed that the tide was turning in his favour. ‘You know I have been to college,’ he said. ‘I know the legal position about my employment. It is the fundamental right of everyone to do the job he or she wants to do, irrespective of his caste, provided he is fit for it. As I told you the other day, low caste people are being trained as temple priests. Therefore, I cannot be prevented from being a scavenger. Everyone knows I am a good scavenger and I don’t want to be anything else. As for getting a job under false pretences, I have never told the municipality I was a Chakkiliyan. They merely presumed it, which was

their fault. So, it is a minor matter which, if taken to court, will only get me a lot of sympathy.'

'All right Bala, I am on your side,' said Murugan. Lachi looked towards him gratefully. 'I don't like that fellow Pichu; he has been mean and vengeful. Just tell us what we should do and we will do it. You are an educated man and you know how to handle things. You are our leader now.'

'There is no need for us to do anything now,' Balan told them. 'Tell everyone in the colony that though I was born a Brahmin, I am a converted Chakkiliyan and Pichu is merely trying to create trouble because he could not marry Lachi. If you do that with the men, I am sure Lachi can take care of the women. Tell them why I became a Chakkiliyan and why I do not want to give up my job. If Pichu does anything, we will counter it.'

Despite the brave front he put up before the others, in the silence of the night, Balan shed tears, tears of longing and bitterness, for the 'shame' he had brought on his family, for his unborn child, and most of all for Lachi. She did not understand the emotions he felt, yet she comforted him.

III

The news of Balan being a Brahmin spread in the colony like a forest fire in the dry season. It took various forms, shapes and sizes in its progress. Rumour, gossip, exaggeration and excitement gripped the colony and its inhabitants. But anger at Balan was not the predominant emotion. On the contrary, he became a saint overnight, come to raise the sweepers out of the depths of degradation into the realms of prosperity and a good life. He was an avatar come to destroy evil. Though some said he was a villain, who had robbed an unfortunate sweeper of his living by stealing his job, their number was small.

People came to Balan with renewed interest, with deeper devotion, with greater reverence, now that they knew he was a Brahmin. Now they understood his meditations. They brought their children to be blessed; their sick to be cured, their troubles to be set right, their quarrels to be patched up.

'He is god in human form!' they said, echoing the words of Lachi.

'Fancy an educated Brahmin cleaning our latrines!' they wondered. 'He should not be allowed to do so; it is a sin against god!'

'He should be revered and worshipped as a great Yogi!'

'His spirit leaves his body at night and roams the colony to see who is doing wrong!'

'He has magical powers!'

'He has usurped the job of another sweeper! That is what he has done!' asserted Pichu's followers.

'He is a phoney, a pretender, cashing in on the superstition of the poor sweepers!'

Balan was the topic of conversation everywhere. In the colony, in the streets where sweepers worked, in groups outside the municipal offices. The men talked about the economic and social aspects but the women were more interested in the religious and the mystic aspects. They wondered if Balan's family would come to claim him now that they might know where he was. Many had seen Balan meditate; a few had seen him in a trance. The latter talked with what they considered superior knowledge about his powers, about god appearing before him when he was in that state. 'What will happen next?' was on everyone's lips. 'Will Bala Yogi give up scavenging? Will Pichu make him resign and leave the colony? What will happen to Lachi? The last question was of special interest to the women who were all on Lachi's side. And more than all this, 'What will happen to the unborn baby?'

Chennan, Lachi and Murugan did their best to explain how Balan happened to become a Chakkiliyan and why. Murugan was irrepressible and told his friends. 'It is like being in the centre of an M.G.R. movie!'

The number of people coming to see Balan increased enormously. Curiosity, a sense of awe, a feeling of reverence inspired people to come to him. The majority of them were women. They asked questions, they wanted to know about Balan's past life, about his family and why he had chosen to become a Chakkiliyan and do the meanest of all jobs. In a society where nothing exciting ever happened, where apathy, monotony and poverty were the general rule, this was something that provided them with an emotional thrill as well as religious ecstasy. It was like going on a pilgrimage and to a cinema at the same time.

After the first wave of sorrow and frustration at being discovered, Balan recovered quickly, thanks to the support given by Lachi and Chennan and the popular feeling in his favour. After all, it was inevitable that he should have been exposed at some time or the other, he told himself. He went about his work as usual, calm and unperturbed, and answered people's questions truthfully. When men asked him why he had become a scavenger, he asked in return, 'when you commit a sin or when you are struck by a terrible misfortune, what do you do?'

'Oh, we go to the Murugan temple and have our hair shaved, or carry a kavadi, or take a vow, they said.

'Don't you put a needle in your tongue or through your cheeks as a penance?'

'Yes, some of us do,' they admitted.

'Well, I have done the same', said Balan. The Brahmins have ill-treated the other communities for many generations and I thought I would become a scavenger to atone for their sins.

It was an argument they could understand. But they asked, 'Why should you suffer for the sins of others?'

'I felt I was partly responsible for the actions of my ancestors'.

Sometimes they wanted to know, 'How long will your penance last?'

I don't know', he replied truthfully. 'I suppose until the differences between communities are totally abolished.'

'It will not happen in our time,' they assured him.

'In will not happen in our time,' they assured him.

'In that case, I suppose I will live and die a scavenger', replied Balan.

His truthful answers and obvious sincerity impressed them. Whatever their opinion, they respected him for his sacrifice, for they knew it could not be easy for a Brahmin to become a scavenger. 'You are truly a saint,' they said to him with respect.

Lachi was riding on the crest of a wave. Unlike Balan who put up with the publicity because it seemed inevitable, she positively enjoyed it. When people heard that Pichu had tried to beat her up at a time when she was pregnant she got a lot of sympathy.

'Of course I am proud!' she proclaimed to anyone who asked her. 'My husband is a great man. He gave up everything to become a scavenger. With his education, he could easily have become an officer or a teacher in a college. You don't give up such things and become a scavenger unless you are holy. And he chose me as his wife. Nothing can hurt him because of his divine powers which he has acquired through great penance and meditation. That rogue Pichu can't touch him!'

People liked Lachi. She was friendly and popular, always cheerful. When people came to Balan, it was she who made him offer his blessings to the children and the sick, and give advice to those who needed it. She regulated the crowd of people near their hut in the afternoons and evenings when they knew that Balan would be free.

But in the secret depths of her heart she was afraid. To be married to a man like Bala Yogi was a great privilege as well as a great responsibility and risk. Her life was leading her into strange and unfamiliar avenues where she could easily get lost. 'When and how is it going to end?' she wondered, in spite of all her confidence in public.

News of this nature could obviously not be confined to the sweepers' colony. The excitement it generated soon spread to the rest of Kalluppatti town. The municipal authorities learnt about it through Pichu, but ignored it without officially taking any notice. The sweepers discussed it in the different wards and soon it became general knowledge. Why Balan became a scavenger was also generally known. His meditations were also talked about among the sweepers and the residents of various localities. Balan became an object of curiosity and wonder. People wanted to see him, meet him, and talk to him. One usually did not associate saintliness and yogic powers with scavenging. It became a subject of discussion and debate in offices, shops and other public places. If Balan happened to walk past, he was immediately pointed out, stared at, and often questioned. He was neither offended nor elated at this interest and answered people's questions politely and respectfully, as a Chakkiliyan was expected to do.

Strangers, well-dressed upper class people working in factories and offices, stopped him in the streets and spoke to him.

'You are the Brahmin scavenger, aren't you?'

'Why do you do this mean and dirty job? Couldn't you find something better?'

'I can understand you doing this job because of necessity. But why did you marry a Chakkiliyan girl? You can never go back to your community now, can you?'

Once, he was offered a job by a sympathetic and influential Brahmin lawyer who felt that one of his own community should not be exposed to such publicity. But when Balan refused, the lawyer said, 'You know you are sitting on a gold mine, don't you? If you were to write your autobiography and are not averse to publicity, you can easily have it serialized in a magazine and earn a lot of money. It could be translated into different languages too. It could lead to other things. But the publicity will be bad for us Brahmins. That is why before the newspapers get hold of the story I am offering you a job—and your wife too if you like—so that you may be secure.'

But Balan refused. He was happy as a scavenger.

The Sanitary Inspector who had first given him the job came to Balan and asked him if the story that was going around was true.

'Yes, sir', replied Balan.

'I knew there was something special about you even on the first day you came to me for a job,' said the Inspector. 'I just couldn't put my finger on it. What are your plans for the future?'

'I have no plans, sir. I just want to continue in my present job.'

'You know there is a lot of discontent among the sweepers that a Brahmin has been appointed to one of their jobs, don't you? Pichu wants you to be sacked immediately'.

'It is only a handful of people who want to get rid of me.'

'What if we are forced to sack you?' asked the Inspector. 'Even some Brahmins are angry because you are working as a sweeper. They say it affects the dignity of their caste and offends their sentiments.'

'But I am not a Brahmin now, sir!' explained Balan. 'I am a Chakkiliyan and the only thing I want to do is to be a scavenger. I know I am within my rights. I don't mind going to the Supreme Court in order to establish that right.'

The Inspector smiled. 'Knowing you, I wouldn't be surprised if you did, and succeeded', he said. 'As far as the municipality is concerned you are a good worker and that is all that matters'.

Thank you, sir'.

But the Inspector was back again the next day. 'Look Bala,' he said ingratiatingly. 'Your presence as a sweeper is causing a lot of embarrassment to the municipality. I have been asked to enquire, whether we could quietly transfer you to a clerical post and avoid all the unpleasant publicity? We will put you in a job where you won't have to meet any of the other sweepers. And after some time everyone will forget about it and you will have a better job. This offer comes straight from the Commissioner himself.'

'Please thank the Commissioner for his kindness, sir. But I don't need a change of job at the moment.'

'You are an awkward devil, aren't you?'

'As you know, sir, I am doing it as a penance. My penance is not over yet.'

'Perhaps I used the wrong expression. You are not an awkward devil. You are an awkward god.'

'I am neither, sir; just a human being with human weaknesses.'

'And a hell of a lot obstinacy,' said the Inspector as he walked away.

When Mr. Sethuraman heard about Balan, he was most uneasy. 'It is not right that a Brahmin should be cleaning dog dirt in our garden,' he told his wife. 'It is against all canons of Hinduism. After all, we are Hindus and he is of a higher caste than us.'

'But you can't sack him now!' exclaimed his wife. 'That girl Lachi is going to have a baby and they need all the money they can get.'

'She is a clever little liar,' said the husband.

'I know she is a liar', replied Mrs. Subbulakshmi. 'She told me at first that Balan was her cousin with a wife and children and now it turns out that she has married him. But they are both good workers and we can't get any good sweepers nowadays.'

'But it bothers my conscience to employ a Brahmin—that too an educated one—as a scavenger'.

'But if you sack him now, what will people say?'

'Yes, whatever we do will receive a lot of publicity, and adverse publicity at that,' mused the husband.

The next day, Mr Sethuraman spoke to Balan and asked him about his family and his past.

'I feel bad about employing you here,' he said.

'I am grateful to you, sir, because you gave me a job when I had nothing', replied Balan. 'I am quite happy working here and Amma has also been very kind to Lachi. You needn't feel bad about anything, sir'.

'But a Brahmin working as a scavenger!' exclaimed Mr. Sethuraman. 'It offends our finer instincts. It makes us all feel guilty somehow'.

'You have no need to feel like that, sir.'

'Look, I don't know quite how to put this,' Mr Sethuraman hesitated. 'If I can find you a better job—I don't promise, but if I can—will you resign as a sweeper? Of course, having a Chakkiliyan wife makes it more complicated, but will you take it?'

'You are very kind, sir, but both Lachi and I are very happy as we are.'

'All right, I don't want to send you away if you really want to continue. But since your wife is going to have a baby, you will have extra expenses. So, from this month onwards, I will pay you fifty rupees a month. How's that?'

'Thank you, sir, you are most generous'.

That eased Mr. Sethuraman's conscience.

Journalists and newspaper correspondents began to visit the sweepers' colony to interview Balan. About ten of them turned up one afternoon with their shorthand pads and sharpened pencils, accompanied by a photographer. After making many enquiries, they picked their way through the maze of narrow alleys carefully trying to avoid stepping on the dirt and filth and arrived at the hut where Balan and Lachi lived. The scene they witnessed

amazed them. Women with babies in their arms, elderly men and women, were asking for Balan's blessings to cure their illnesses, telling him their problems, trying to touch his feet—there was utter confusion in the narrow space. Lachi was trying to create some sort of order, asking people to stand in a queue and come to the lean-to one by one. Before people realized what was happening, the photographer had taken half-a-dozen shots of the scene.

Balan felt that the coming of newspaper people meant that his whereabouts and his activities would soon be known in Kamalapur and to his family. But he also realized that it was unavoidable and had to be endured, perhaps, as a part of his penance. In a sense, he was glad that his mother was dead and would not have to face this.

'Gentlemen,' he said to the press in flawless English. 'This place is too congested and too dirty for you. Let us go to the open space under the tamarind tree where it is cooler and cleaner. But I have no chairs to offer you.'

He explained to Lachi what was happening and asked her to accompany him. The others heard and decided to follow them and together they formed a motley procession. Lachi was conscious of the importance of the occasion and brought along an old rug which she spread on the ground for the journalists to sit on. As they settled down rather uncomfortably, they all started asking questions. Balan silenced them, 'Gentlemen, I will make a statement, telling you about my family background and how and why I became a Chakkiliyan and a scavenger. Then, you may ask me questions.'

Balan told them his story, beginning with his holy thread ceremony at twelve years of age, his educational attainments, his failure to secure admission to the medical college, his soul searching and his decision to cast away the holy thread, to give up his Brahmin identity and take on that of a Chakkiliyan. He described his life in Sirumudi Cheri, Pappa and Kuppan's kindness, and also his present life in the sweepers' colony. The only things he did not talk about were his sister's marriage and his own meditations. He did not want to drag Lakshmi into it and did not wish to claim the yogic powers with which he had been credited. When he finished, they began to probe him.

'We have heard that you have developed certain special powers as a result of your penance and meditation. Is that true?'

'It is true that I meditate. It has helped me to adjust to my new environment. But it is not correct to say that I have any special powers.'

'Then why are all these people coming to you to be blessed?'

'They are poor, ignorant and miserable. They clutch at any straw that they think will save them.'

'We are told that when you meditate, you go into a sort of trance that your spirit leaves your body and you become unconscious.'

'That is true, gentlemen, but how or why it happens and what its significance is, I am unable to say.'

'Could you explain exactly what happens?' one of the journalists enquired.

'It is difficult, but I'll try,' said Balan. 'If you agree that the soul is capable of independent existence without the body, then the connecting link between the body and the spirit is the mind, our memory, our knowledge of the past, present and future, our awareness of our environment, our loves and hates; in short, what may be called our consciousness. This is the bridge between our body and soul. If the soul should leave the body permanently, we call it death. But if it leaves the body temporarily, then the sense of consciousness is partly broken, the spirit exists—temporarily—beyond time and space, in eternity, in what may be called pure bliss, or ecstasy of the spirit.'

The journalists seemed somewhat sceptical. But one of them pursued the subject, 'Are you conscious of what is happening around you at that time?'

'Though at the time I am not aware, I do seem to remember things afterwards.'

'Is it as a result of your yoga that you decided to become a scavenger?'

'No. The decision to become a scavenger was conscious and deliberate, while the practice of yoga came over me gradually and more or less unconsciously, without any effort on my part. The two are perhaps, parallel, but independent.'

'Mr. Balasubramaniam, how would you sum up your philosophy of life? What is your message to those who wish to follow you?'

'I do not know if I have a specific message,' Balan hesitated. 'As I explained to you earlier, I have taken to penance to purify myself rather than for a particular social purpose. But if people want to draw lessons from my life, they are welcome to do so. As far as my philosophy of life is concerned, it can be summed up in my staunch belief in the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of god'.

Then the questions took a different direction.

'Do the sweepers want you to leave now that they know you are a Brahmin?'

'Some might, I suppose, but most of them like me. And you see the evidence of it here,' said Balan pointing to the silent crowd around him.

They asked him about the problems of adjustment, about eating meat and beef, and finally about his marriage.

'I am happily married and my wife is going to have a baby. But if you want to know anything about her, you should ask her in Tamil.'

The talkative, vociferous Lachi, who was never at a loss for words was somewhat overawed by the occasion and she spoke in a stilted manner as if she was reading out of a book. But when they cross-examined her, she lost her shyness in her enthusiasm.

‘My husband is a god in human form,’ she told them.

‘I don’t know the word for it,’ she said.

‘An avatar!’ prompted one of the journalists.

‘That’s it? she exclaimed. ‘Who else would want to do scavenging work that is filthy and makes you stink all the time? He has come to save the sweepers from their miseries and the poor people follow him just as if he were god.’

‘After all this publicity, your husband may find it difficult to continue as a scavenger. He may have better job offers, invitations to give lectures or yoga demonstrations and so on. What will you do then? Will you remain a scavenger?’

‘I am married to my husband. We cannot be separated. I will follow him wherever he leads me. I will do whatever he wants me to do.’

Some more photographs were taken and the correspondents departed.

The newspapers-both English and Tamil—gave detailed and sympathetic coverage to Balan’s story. Other newspapers, even some national dailies, published shorter versions. The headings varied depending on the style of the newspaper.

‘Bala Yogi Comes Out Of His Shell’

‘A Broom is Mightier Than The Pen’

‘Brahmin Scavenger Tells His Story’

‘An Indictment Of Modern Society’

These were some of the more popular ones. An important, influential English daily published an editorial on the subject:

The tragic and poignant story of Bala Yogi which is reported elsewhere in this paper should make us all blush with shame... It is a strange irony of fate that a sick society such as ours seems to produce men of the saintliness and capacity for sacrifice of the stature of Bala Yogi.

Overnight, Balan became famous—a hero of sorts. He became a torch-bearer to the reformists, a saint to the truly religious, a publicity seeker to the sceptics. But even those who disagreed with him were forced to respect him for following his convictions against heavy odds. Lachi was excited to see her picture in the papers, but Balan went about his work unaffected by it all, quiet, polite and respectful.

And then the fan mail started. There were letters of congratulation, admiration, sympathy, and understanding. There were also a few written by orthodox Brahmins accusing him of letting down his caste and tradition by such inexcusable behaviour. There were offers of jobs, offers of money and help in various ways. One large company offered to set up a 'Bala Yogi Foundation' for the educational and moral training of youth, if Balan would head such an organization. A newspaper offered ten thousand rupees for the exclusive rights to his autobiography. A film studio wanted to make a film on his life if he would consent to act as well...

It was also inevitable that the various political parties should express their views on this unusual episode and relate it to their own political philosophy. Most of them criticized the government for its failure to provide adequate jobs to unemployed graduates which forced them to earn their living by doing menial work. The Atheist Society was the only one which was not excited about the situation. It issued a statement saying that there was nothing wrong in a man who was born a Brahmin doing scavenging work and it did not understand what all the fuss was about. The Brahmin Association, while deploring Balan's behaviour as being against all Hindu tradition and theology, condemned government policies with regard to college admissions and job reservations as a result of which Brahmin youths had to resort to such desperate means.

Everyone seemed to want to exploit the situation, exploit Balan's name and the publicity he had received overnight. It was obviously not possible to reply to all the letters that he received; therefore, with the help of a journalist, he had the following notice inserted in all papers:

Balan, also referred to as Bala Yogi, thanks all those who have written to him with offers to help in various ways. He wishes to state that he is in no need of such assistance. All he wants is to be left alone to practice the profession of his choice in peace and in privacy.

This statement only increased the public sympathy and Balan's fan mail. But the offers of assistance went down markedly. Balan treasured two of the letters that he received. One was from his sister Lakshmi.

My dearest Bala,

What can I say to you? You are only a hundred miles away. But we might as well be a million miles apart, for I am still bound to this world and its convention—in spite of my marriage—and you are beyond everything, beyond my reach. When I read about your life in the Cheri and in the sweepers' colony, I could only shed tears of longing and bitterness for all your sufferings. But I earnestly hope that at least now, you have found the tranquility and peace for which you have struggled and suffered so much. I also hope you are happy with your wife.

Maybe, some day, we will meet.

Yes, Lakshmi was right; they were a million miles apart. Lachi had never before seen him so moved. 'Who is it from?' she asked.

'My sister.'

'Is she coming to see us?'

'No.'

'Why doesn't she come? You are not just an ordinary Chakkiliyan. You are famous and have had your picture in the papers. She can now be proud of you instead of being ashamed.'

There was no point in explaining things to Lachi. She would not understand and Balan did not try. 'She may come sometime,' he said.

The second letter was from Ganesh.

My dear Bala,

I am sorry that my letter to you through the newspapers inadvertently caused your exposure; or should I say, re-discovery? But I think it is all for the greater good. You have, single-handed, succeeded in shaking the foundations of our society and have made all of us—particularly higher caste people—feel guilty. You have achieved sainthood which I predicted you would. A thousand years from now, people will build temples to you, expound your philosophy, take their doctorates from universities; if such things exist then... They will worship you as a god as people worship the Buddha today.

I have to go to Delhi on some urgent work and will visit you as soon as I return.

The letter was from Madras and the letterhead indicated that Ganesh had done well for himself in the journalistic world. Balan was happy for his friend. But if they should meet what could they discuss? The old doctrinaire philosophy that they used to talk about on the river-bank seemed so pointless when set against this existence.

The developments of the past few weeks came as a total surprise to Pichu. He had assumed that the moment Balan's identity was exposed, he would run away from the colony or the other sweepers would chase him away. Instead, his enemy had become more popular within the colony and a well-known figure outside. Public sympathy was running very much in Balan's favour and he wondered whether the sweepers would support him if he called for a strike at this stage. At the moment, he was motivated not so much by the desire to improve the lot of the sweepers as to get his own back on his rival. He was beset by jealousy and frustration. 'I wish I had given him a good thrashing and chased him away from the

colony when he first came here,' he thought. Six months in jail would not have done him any harm! But now it was too late for that and he had to think of other alternatives. He went to Mr. Namasivayam for advice.

'Sir, how can we permit a Brahmin to usurp our job? he pleaded with his union president.

'Public feeling is very much in his favour, Pichu,' the president who was a pragmatic trade unionist told him. 'Don't do anything foolish or precipitate matters. Our union is not strong enough to withstand a strike and it won't be successful.'

'But we can't have a Brahmin taking away the rightful job of a Chakkiliyan or a Paraiyan,' Pichu grumbled. 'We should protest.'

'Unfortunately, the law is not on our side.'

'But couldn't we hold a meeting and protest? We haven't had a meeting for a long time and the members are all wondering whether we are doing anything about the underground sewage system or not. You could explain things to them and at the same time say that no one other than a Chakkiliyan or Paraiyan should be allowed to do sweeper's work.'

The president thought for some time. It was true that no meetings had been held recently and if he refused point blank, his position might be in jeopardy. Yet he knew nothing would come of it.

'All right, let's have a meeting,' he agreed.

A meeting of the sweepers' union was called.

When they heard about the meeting, Balan, Chennan and Murugan had a discussion about it.

'The meeting is officially to protest against the delay by the municipal authorities in responding to our demands,' said Murugan.

'We have been waiting for an answer since I came to Kalluppatti,' said Balan. 'Why was something not done in the last two years?'

'The real reason is to protest against your employment,' Murugan, who had one or two friends in the opposite camp, informed them. 'If they announce it beforehand, people may not attend the meeting. Therefore, they will bring it up as a side issue, in relation to the employment of sweepers.'

'Then let us tell the truth about it to everyone,' Chennan said. 'Then nobody will go to the meeting. Let us boycott it'.

'No, they will say that we were all black-legs and anti-union,' said Balan. 'Let us attend the meeting and if my name comes up, then I will ask to be allowed to speak.'

'That might lead to trouble,' warned Murugan. 'If the president doesn't want you to speak and there is a scuffle or anything like that, we will be playing into Pichu's hands, and will be held responsible for the disruption.'

'We must avoid creating any trouble,' Balan agreed. 'If they don't allow me to speak, we will walk out quietly in protest and hold a separate meeting where I will explain my point of view.'

'Bala, we are not educated like you,' Murugan cried. 'We don't know how to discuss things with people whose views are different from ours. Why, even in the municipal council, sometimes the councillors use their fists instead of arguments. I am myself not above a little violence if I am crossed. Put a little arrack inside a Chakkiliyan and he is ready to fight. You of all people should be careful, because Pichu might make use of the occasion to give you a thrashing as he has been threatening to do for some time.'

'Yes, do be careful,' Lachi pleaded.

'Don't worry, nothing will happen,' Balan assured her.

Balan vividly remembered the day of his arrival in Kalluppatti when he had attended the sweepers' meeting. That had been nearly two years ago. But it seemed as if nothing had changed. Mr. Namasivayam stood on the same rickety table and Pichu stood by his side, aggressive and unbending. A couple of policemen were hovering in the background, just to keep an eye on things rather than to prevent any violence that might break out. Some Sanitary Inspectors and clerks from the municipal office stood watching the proceedings from a distance. Evidently they too had heard rumours. The crowd of sweepers squatted on the floor or stood about the wall, chatting. A group of women in a corner crowded round Lachi. She was evidently conducting a whisper-campaign among them, about her husband's point of view.

A group of men surrounded Balan, patted him on the back and laughed and joked with him. Mr. Namasivayam made a note of this and realized that Balan was far more popular than Pichu had led him to believe. He decided to tone down his remarks accordingly. The speaker called for attention and the meeting began.

Comrades!

It is nearly two years since we placed our charter of demands before the town authorities and we have so far received no satisfactory reply. I have met the Commissioner and the Health Officer many times in order to impress upon them the urgency of the situation, but their replies have been evasive. They do not seem to have any intention of conceding our

demands or even negotiating seriously about the various points raised in our memorandum. It is obvious that they don't attach any importance to our demands. Our patience has obviously been misunderstood as weakness. As I have said in the past, they treat us like dirt...

This was followed by high-flown oratory about being united, about fighting till the last drop of one's blood, about bringing life in the town to a standstill and taking a solemn vow.

'All right, tell us when we are going on strike,' one of the militants interjected.

'I shall come to that in a minute,' Mr. Namasivayam continued. 'But in the meanwhile another serious problem concerning our employment in this municipality had arisen. While we are faced with unemployment and starvation, recruitment of new sweepers is going on. Even people who do not belong to any of the sweepers' castes are being recruited in an attempt to browbeat us.'

'He is now coming to the main purpose of the meeting,' Murugan whispered to his friends.

'Let him continue,' Balan whispered back.

'Mr. Balasubramaniam of Kamalapur has been taken on as a sweeper though he has no right to claim that job.'

He paused to gauge the effect of his statement on the audience, but the sweepers had not heard of a Mr. Balasubramaniam of Kamalapur and did not immediately catch on. The speaker continued.

Comrades, I am told he is a very religious man, very popular and makes an excellent scavenger. I have no quarrel with him. But friends, keeping the town clean have always been the prerogative of the Chakkiliyans and the Paraiyars from time immemorial. If we permit one man to take away one job from us, then there will be no end to it. Tomorrow, you will have a queue of Brahmin graduates, all standing in line to become scavengers. Then, where is our job security? This is the question I ask of you and Mr. Balasubramaniam.

It was a mere rhetorical flourish. Mr. Namasivayam did not expect that a reply would be forthcoming to the question he had posed. But Balan immediately went forward and shouted, 'All right Mr. President, I will answer your question if you give me an opportunity.'

'Yes, let Balan speak!' Murugan and a few others moved forward along with Balan towards the speaker's table.

Meanwhile, the crowd had realized the import of Mr. Namasivayam's remarks and started shouting.

'Leave Bala Yogi out of it!'

'He is one of us!'

'Let Balan speak!'

'Long live Bala Yogi!'

Pichu rushed forward and pushed back Murugan who was ahead of Balan.

'Don't touch any of us or we shall kill you!' hissed Murugan. Pichu was taken aback.

Even as Pichu's followers shouted, 'Throw the Brahmin out', the others continued to shout, 'Let Balan speak!'

There was confusion for a couple of minutes while the speaker called in vain for silence and order. Balan's friends pressed steadily forward and raised him on to the table where Mr. Namasivayam was standing. Pichu and his followers who had been taken unawares tried to pull Balan down. The situation became tense but Mr. Namasivayam, who was a seasoned trade unionist, and good at gauging the feelings of the crowd, told Pichu to restrain himself.

'Comrades!' the president said. 'We are a democratic organization and we pride ourselves on having freedom of speech in our union. If it is the wish of the majority that Bala Yogi should address you, then I will hand over the mike to him.'

A tremendous cheer went up from the audience while Pichu and his friends sulked in a corner. Pichu cursed the day he had wanted Namasivayam to be the president.

Balan started on a low key. His voice was soft; his words, simple and clear. His experience in the debating society of A.B.M. College came in handy now.

'Friends', he began. 'We are told that if I am not sent out of scavenging immediately, you will have a queue of Brahmin graduates applying for jobs as scavengers. If that happens and if some of you become priests in temples that will be the day of salvation for this country. But friends, I want to give you a solemn assurance that as far as job security for all of you is concerned, the day another Brahmin wants to be a scavenger, I shall certainly give up my job and walk out. It is a promise.'

'No! No! You must stay!' shouted the audience.

'We are also told that I cannot be a scavenger', Balan continued, 'because I was born a Brahmin. Yes, it is true I was born a Brahmin, invested with a holy thread when I was twelve years of age. Where is that holy thread now?' And he bared his chest for all to see. 'It is at the bottom of the ocean, thrown away by me many years ago'.

'I know some of you or your friends have been converted to Christianity. Have you ceased to be sweepers on that account? Similarly, I got converted and became a Chakkiliyan.' Balan raised his voice. 'And I did not get converted by the sprinkling of holy

water, or by a priest chanting mantras or by going to the Natrayan temple. I got converted here, my friends,' and he touched his heart. 'Here, inside my heart.'

The audience was now thoroughly roused. They leaned forward, came nearer and craned necks to be able to see better.

'I got converted by being a true Chakkiliyan at heart,' he shouted. His voice rose to a higher pitch. Even Pichu's followers were listening now. 'I got converted by eating your food and drinking your drink—now our food and our drink—by worshipping our gods, by doing our work. I have been a good leatherworker, a good scavenger, the best as everyone who has used the colony latrine will vouch. Therefore, I claim to be a Chakkiliyan by right. Our misery is my misery; our salvation, my salvation.' He paused for it to sink in and dropped his voice a little. There was a hush among his listeners. 'And if you should kill me and take my heart out of my body, you will find one word written on it.' He paused again. 'And that word is Lachi!'

A great cheer went up from the crowd as they heard the word 'Lachi' and the men rushed towards the table. Balan had intended to say something about the coming of the underground drainage system, about the delay by the municipality being equal to the delay by the union—but he was not allowed to complete his speech. He wanted to say that it was going to be their salvation, their permanent release from being tied to the bucket and broom. He was going to demand from the municipality an assurance of job security, for the retraining of sweepers for other jobs, for the setting up of a cooperative leather factory where they could work, oh, so many things! But it was not to be. There were shouts and cheers as men shouted 'Bala Yogi!' 'Bala Yogi, Long Live Bala Yogi!'

The feeble attempts by Mr. Namasivayam to say a few words at the end by way of concluding the meeting were ignored by the crowd as they carried Balan off in a triumphal procession, shouting, rejoicing and singing.

Among the women, Lachi blushed that her husband should have revealed his love for her in public. She modestly hid her face with the end of her sari. Nevertheless, it was the proudest moment of her life. The other women surrounded her, giggling and laughing and followed the procession.

Pichu was overcome with anger and humiliation. He felt that Mr. Namasivayam had let him down. When the president wanted to speak to him and explain things, he shouted, 'You go to your ruin; I will go to mine!' He was gripped by an unconquerable hatred and a violent passion for revenge. There was only one way in which it could be satisfied now.

V

Murugan and Chennan were elated. The success of the meeting had been beyond their wildest expectations. 'Bala, you are so clever. How have you managed to keep all this hidden from us for so long?' they asked.

'You are any day a better speaker than that Namasivayam', they said. 'You should be the president of the union and lead us!'

In fact, the whole colony was delighted. They had never liked Pichu very much and had tolerated his leadership only because he had been instrumental in forming the union and getting Mr. Namasivayam to be the president.

'Pichu is finished now', they said. 'And with him, the union too, one should imagine.'

'I shouldn't allow the union to go down,' Balan told them.

'You know what, Bala,' Murugan patted his friend on the back, 'Mr. Namasivayam is a wily old bird. He realized which way the wind was blowing when he asked you to speak. I wouldn't be surprised if he sends for you and asks you to be the secretary in Pichu's place.'

'Yes, Bala, why don't you do it? Chennan seconded the idea. 'Maybe in time, we will be able to do without Mr. Namasivayam altogether.'

'I will think about it,' said Balan.

Murugan set about organizing a celebration. He got a few bottles of arrack and fried meat which he knew Balan liked - and asked a few select friends to join in.

'Let us not have it in the usual place,' Balan suggested. 'In case Pichu is around, it will upset him. Let us not add insult to injury.'

'He didn't think of that when he wanted to chase you out of the colony, did he?' retorted Chennan. 'I would like to go and celebrate in front of his hut.'

'No, that would not be right,' replied Balan. 'In victory, we can afford to be generous. Let's not forget that he too has a following.'

'You are too good for us, Bala,' commented Murugan. 'Here is a fellow who tried his best to deprive you of your livelihood and you don't even want to offend him. I suppose that's why you are what you are. But we believe in revenge.'

'And what if Pichu wants his revenge too?' asked Balan. 'He might go and tell the police that we are drinking arrack.'

'Yes, Balan is right,' said Chennan. 'That's just the sort of thing Pichu would do. We should choose a more discreet place.'

‘Pichu won’t come out tonight,’ said Murugan with his usual optimism. ‘He would be too ashamed to show his face anywhere.’

‘I know you won’t agree,’ Balan said. ‘But I would like to go and find Pichu, tell him that the past is forgotten and invite him to join us. That will make him feel better and there won’t be division among the sweepers.’

‘That’s too much for us, Bala,’ they told him.

They had their celebration some distance away from their houses and even further away from the main road, in a dark alley where there was no street light. Murugan produced a hurricane lantern and they ate and drank in its dim light. There was fun and laughter, ribald jokes, allusions to Lachi’s pregnancy.

‘You are a good Chakkiliyan, Bala,’ exclaimed Murugan with his mouth full. ‘Perhaps the best that ever was. What’s more, you are the only one who has admitted to being fond of his wife, in public.’

‘I liked what you said about conversion,’ commented Chennan. ‘Can I be converted in the same manner as a Brahmin and marry a Brahmin girl? They are so much fairer than our girls.’

‘Lachi written on his heart!’ laughed one of the others. ‘Fancy thinking of something like that!’ I know what you will find if you take out my heart. The word written there would be “arrack”!’ And he guffawed. ‘Except that I cannot read or write!’

Everyone laughed.

Suddenly Balan felt tired of it all. He felt physically and spiritually exhausted.

‘Chenna, I am feeling tired and sleepy,’ he said. ‘And you know I can’t take much arrack. I’ll go home. You carry on.’

‘Yes, Lachi is waiting,’ said Murugan and gave a wink.

Balan got up. ‘I will come with you,’ Chennan offered.

‘I don’t want to break up the party; I’ll be all right on my own.’

Balan walked slowly back through the dark alleys. He was thoughtful. In a way, he cursed himself for the way things had turned out and the cheap oratory he had resorted to in order to justify himself. He also realized that the physical and mental strain of the last few months had sapped his energy. His frequent inroads into the world of the spirit had left him increasingly exhausted each time. How long could he go on like this, he wondered. An iron will and an unflinching determination had carried him through hell-fire and he had come out

of it unhurt. The moment of victory, the fulfilment of his cherished objective, was also the moment of his greatest doubt. Something had snapped inside him. Above all, he realized he was a human being, with human weaknesses, in spite of the conferring of sainthood on him in the popular imagination. For a moment he wondered: To what end is all this?’

What had he achieved in concrete terms—except Lachi’s pregnancy? True, he had set off on his journey to get rid of his overwhelming feelings of guilt and he had succeeded in that aim. But was it adequate recompense for all the trials and tribulations he had undergone? A sudden thought flashed through his mind. Perhaps, the greatest tragedy in life was to realize that one’s cherished ambition, a life-long objective, was not so important after all... He supposed even saints had their moments of conflict and soul-searching. Perhaps, tomorrow, he would feel differently about it all. But where did he go from here?

The answer came all too soon. As he turned the dark corner of a narrow passage, three men were waiting for him. The first struck Balan’s head with a stout stick. As he fell to the ground someone else bent down and stabbed him. As the knife plunged into him a second time, Balan knew who it was.

‘Pichu, may God forgive you for what you are doing,’ he said.

On hearing the word ‘Pichu’ the men scuttled away.

The colony was quiet. The faint smell from the latrine hung in the air and there was a rustling nearby—rats and bandicoots rooting in the rubbish heap.

EPILOGUE

Balan died in hospital three days later. Throughout the days he lay dying, large crowds of sweepers milled around in the hospital compound while Chennan and Murugan waited in the corridors, making anxious enquires of any member of the hospital staff who happened to pass that way.

When Balan was brought in by Chennan and Murugan, the doctors who examined him said that his only chance of survival depended on an emergency operation; and even that was only a chance. Chennan—as next of kin—agreed immediately and the operation was performed in the early hours of the morning. Balan was still unconscious. The doctors were not saying much except that they were doing their best.

Lachi broke down completely on hearing the news, but she rallied round when she heard that there was a chance of saving him. She stayed by his bedside without a wink of sleep, drinking only the cups of coffee that Chennan periodically forced on her. She prayed to all the gods she knew as well as to Balan's unknown god. She made vows and offered sacrifices in order to preserve her husband's life. Her mother stayed with her part of the time, more to keep her daughter company than for any other reason.

Pichu and his henchmen were in hiding and the police were looking for them. 'I will tear him to bits, hack him to pieces, if I lay my hands on him!' Murugan whispered aggressively to his friends.

Balan came back to consciousness twenty-four hours after the operation. The first face he saw was Lachi's smiling at him through her tears.

'I have been a nuisance to you all,' he said weakly.

'Please get better soon,' was all Lachi could say.

Ganesh arrived the next morning. He had just returned from Delhi when he read about the attack on Balan in the papers. He drove all the way from Madras. He radiated charm and authority in spite of his grief. He spoke to the doctors to find out how serious the situation was. They explained to him that the blow on the head was not very serious, but there were two deep stab wounds, one of which had damaged the liver; the other had perforated the intestines. Also, Balan had lost a lot of blood since a few hours had elapsed between the attack and his receiving medical attention. Besides, he had been weak physically, to start with. They were giving him blood, but it was touch and go, they said.

Ganesh had his friend moved to a private ward where he would be more comfortable and explained the nature of the injuries to Lachi, Chennan and their friends. As soon as

Balan became conscious, he spoke to him. 'I am glad you made it, Ganesh,' Balan's face lit up with a bright smile. 'At least you will be here for the funeral.'

'No, Bala, the doctors are hopeful.'

'You are wrong, my friend; the work I came to do is finished. My penance is over. I am ready to go. My living any longer will be a permanent embarrassment to all of you. Poor Pichu has done all of us a service.'

They were talking in English. Lachi became suspicious. 'What are you saying to each other?' she asked anxiously.

'We are talking about what Balan should do when he gets out of here,' Ganesh lied. After that, they spoke only in Tamil.

'If anything happens to me, will you look after Lachi?' Balan asked his friend. 'You know she is going to have a baby.'

'I didn't know,' replied Ganesh. He looked at Lachi with new interest. 'I will look after her as if she were my sister,' he promised.

'And the baby.'

'Of course!'

'You are in safe hands, Lachi; you don't need to worry about your future.'

At this, Lachi broke down and started to weep, but Ganesh consoled her. 'I am glad to know you, Lachi. I am the cause of his exposure by writing that letter to the newspapers, but I shall certainly look after you. You don't need to worry at all. But that won't be necessary; Balan will be all right soon.' Lachi began to have confidence in Ganesh.

Ganesh telephoned Lakshmi and informed her of the developments. She arrived with her father and husband the same afternoon.

When the three of them walked into the room, Lachi backed into a corner. She felt diffident and hostile; she did not wish to share her grief with these strangers. These high caste people might take her husband away from her, even if death spared him.

Lakshmi did not speak; she merely stood by the bed and held Balan's hand. Seshadri lyer stood by his daughter's side. His eyes were misty. Kandaswamy, not wanting to intrude, waited a little apart.

'Forgive me for all the trouble I have caused you, father,' Balan cried. 'But I am glad you came'.

'There is nothing to forgive my boy,' said the old man. 'I realize you cannot be judged by ordinary standards. It is a privilege to have you as a son in spite of all the ... anxiety.'

'I am glad you married my sister, Mr. Kandaswamy,' said Balan. 'I know you will make her happy.'

Kandaswamy looked up. 'Yes, get well soon,' he replied.

The conversation was tiring Balan and the men went out to wait in the corridor.

The two women looked at each other, Lakshmi with great compassion if not love, Lachi suspicious and ready to take offence. Lakshmi, the older and the more educated, went up to her sister-in-law. Lachi noticed her limp.

'It must be terrible to have a limp like that,' said Lachi out of the simplicity of her heart. 'My husband never told me.'

'One gets used to it,' Lakshmi replied. 'I understand you are going to have a baby.'

'Yes'.

'Our names are the same I think,' Lakshmi continued. 'Lachi is really a modified form of Lakshmi, don't you think?'

'In our caste, it is always Lachi,' Lachi answered proudly.

Conversation was difficult, but the ice was broken. They stood on either side of the bed—strangers bound by love and affection for the same man—and comforted Balan. But they also knew that they were unlikely to meet each other again.

After two days of vigil, Balan passed away. Lachi was uncontrollable in her grief and had to be taken away from the hospital. It was Ganesh who made arrangements for the funeral after consulting Lachi and Chennan. They wanted Balan to be buried in the colony, in the open space near the tamarind tree where he had first started repairing sandals. Even in death, Lachi did not want to be parted from him. On the other hand, Seshadri Iyer wanted cremation, not burial. So Ganesh arranged for a cremation at the spot specified by Lachi. As the procession of sweepers and their families wended its way towards the colony, followed by Balan's family, Ganesh outlined his plans to Lakshmi and Kandaswamy. 'I want to establish a Bala Yogi Foundation to promote Balan's philosophy through action and demonstration. I want young men to follow him, do menial jobs, preach his ideas to the people by setting an example themselves. Balan put it in a nutshell when he told the journalists that his philosophy was "The Brotherhood of Man and the Fatherhood of God." That is going to be the motto of the foundation...'

'You can count on me,' said Kandaswamy. 'He was a great man, only we didn't realize it at the time.'

But Lakshmi was not listening. She asked, 'Tell me, Ganesh, why did Balan have to die?'

Ganesh thought for a while before replying. 'Well,' he said, 'when a Brahmin becomes a scavenger voluntarily, the next step, obviously, has to be divinity. There is no room for him in this world.'

'When will his dream be fulfilled?'

'When we start following our saints instead of merely worshipping them, maybe we have some hope of converting his dream into a reality.'

Very soon, the flames consumed the mortal remains of Bala Yogi.

In the open space near the colony, there is now a platform with a statue of Bala Yogi on it. Every morning, the sweepers on their way to work, come to pay their respects. Occasionally, one sees people of other communities also. They say Bala Yogi symbolizes the unity of the Brahmin and the untouchable.

Thanks to Ganesh's generosity, Lachi has given up her job and now looks after the Bala Yogi temple. Ganesh had suggested that she come and live in Madras so that her son could be educated in a good school, but she had said, 'No, my place is here with my husband. You can spread my husband's message among the educated; I will spread it among the sweepers.'

Ganesh comes to see her and her son every month to make sure that they are well. Lachi stands by the platform and tells the people who come of her life with the saint, of the little boy, and of Bala Yogi's ideas, in her own inimitable way.

The words 'The Brotherhood of Man and Fatherhood of God' are engraved in stone on the four sides of the platform.

Will the cult of Bala Yogi spread? Only time will tell.
