

White ants

The Hindu religion is a
big tree.
Brahmins are the roots,
Kshatriyas the trunk,
Vaishya, Sudras and the rest
branches and twigs.

Not related to the tree,
but still obliged to stay here
are the white ants,
the untouchables.

If I were a tree

If I were a tree
the bird wouldn't ask me
before it built its nest
what caste I am.

When sunlight embraced me
my shadow wouldn't feel defiled.
My friendship with the cool breeze and the leaves
Would be sweet.

Raindrops wouldn't turn back
taking me for a dog-eater.
When I branch out further from my roots
Mother Earth wouldn't flee shouting for a bath.

The sacred cow would scrape her body on my bark,
scratching wherever it itched
and the three hundred thousand gods sheltering inside her
would touch me.

Who knows,
at the end,
hacked into pieces of dry wood,
burning in the holy fire,
I might be made pure,
or becoming the bier for a sinless body
be borne on the shoulders of four good men.

Untouchables

With a dead weight of inferiorities inside their heads and out,
fearing a slip, hiding their pride,
their bodies shrinking from offensive looks,
they drag their legs as they walk.

Plants can't sprout, birds can't fly -
a pall always masks feelings;
inspiration dead, spirit withered,
they sit silent, keeping still.
Their nature is to be frightened.

This is not detachment,
it's not equanimity.
Their faces are long,
they have worries:

Our progress is like the caterpillar's,
crawling, blind to daylight life;
when people who call themselves superior
come within reach of our shadows
we have to curl up on the ground.
Touch for us is torment,
we were born with the disease
of the touch-me-not plant.

Our coming and going
is like the red ants' scuttling;
to these staring people, we
are mother earth's bastards.

Our learning comes as a concession,
our talent is second rate,
in the midst of the taunts and the one-sided satire
we walk round, not accepting defeat,
exceptions to civilization.

The educated boys of the south side

Outside, holding the aluminium cup
kept apart in the roof thatch,
setting with folded legs, cringing as he asks
"give me a little coffee, boss" -
seeing my father like this, I get troubled
and heated, time and again.

Smearing the whole house with cow-dung,
scouring and rinsing all the plates and tumblers,
lighting the ghee lamps, made to pay a forfeit
for any mistakes, saying "your feet, my Mother"
as she runs past the temple, debarred
from entering- when I see my mother's plight
my stomach churns and I hawk and spit.

It's easy for Brahmins to enter heaven's gate,
for outcastes it's difficult to enter a hotel.
Awareness of all this produced ideas;
we educated boys grew up and then
an incident occurred: the Mahadeshvara Coffee Club
in an upper-caste street was invaded,
idlis and dosas were swallowed,
There was fighting in the village, the police intervened, etc.

And after all that, why is the south side of the village
an outcaste slum? There's still no answer.

Before it rains again

The house belonged to grandfather time,
the thatch laid round the centre pole,
ragged under the rain,
is old time's umbrella.

There aren't enough tins and plates
for the leaks around the edges,
hollows form in the dung floor
for pieces in a children's game.

Outside, frogs croak on the rubbish dump,
inside, father sits silent
with no more than
a gunny sack for blanket.

The children in their corner
have covers of torn up rags,
not enough to protect them
from the trickling rain.

Against the jaw-clenching cold
tattered wraps are not enough,
only half sleep
comes to a mind damp deep inside.

In the dream of summer to come
cracked tiles are replaced with new,
a fresh thatch is laid -
as long as fire doesn't fall
in the straw pile.

When the rains come to all the poor
people of my village,
feeding the sticks of their dreams
to their chests' hearth, one by one,
warming their minds,
sitting huddled in a heap,
they think how they can depend
on this season's rains.

Before morning comes
water is pouring over the threshold;
a cup with a hole in it
is inadequate for bailing it out.

These daily workers for small change
are tormented by all this

torrential rain - why won't it stop?
They seethe inside.

The bellows of father's mouth
forces out his words:
son, rearrange the tiles
before it rains again,
or otherwise carry away
my dead body.

Cow-dust

When the blaze has burnt to embers,
filtering ash the light fades slowly
and the sun's eye vanishes.

Wilting like leaves the workers
make their way to the village,
among them like a cow remembering her calf,
she, the mother
her arms like feathers, her sari end the tail,
cranes her neck, eagerly skipping.

The small child catches
the smell of loose earth
- time for mother to come home -
and cries loudly. Then
in my village it's cow-dust time.

He's walked the length of the street
pouring out words in his rounds
of the caste quarter, the little chief,
with a key tied to his waist-string,
running before nanny goats, sheep, billy goats and ox carts.
He's weak with hunger but persevering.

Catching sight of her in the distance, he's happy,
chatters like a bird, come this way, come that way,
come softly, beckoning her with words.
Before her hands can reach him, the mother grabs him,
before she can lift him up, the child hugs her.
Oh, my baby, she says,
her eyes lingering on him
with a starved look.

Below his nostrils are twin marks,
beaten tracks of oozing snot,
his unoiled hair is splitting,
his body dirty from playing with mud,
his one shirt is torn and open.
His mother lovingly calls him a monkey.

She carries him home on her waist,
his little arms hold her neck,
she sits on the step to appease
first her son's hunger,
then will come the rest of the chores.

Do tear drops brimming from her eyes
wash his whole body?

Does the warm breath forced from her nostrils by despair
anoint him with sandal?
She lifts his face in her cupped hands,
caresses his body, smiles once.

His eyes are greedy for her milk,
her blouse rustles as she lifts it,
she squeezes her breast for the milk that won't come.

For the pain of the child of her body
she weeps from deep inside.

It's dark, get up, light the lamp, says
the old woman sitting in the corner.

Life's like that

To the ka ka
sound of cawing
crows
father gets up, says
"mother the white
dawn has come."

Picking up his sleeping rag,
he puts it on, thinks
the calf might stray, and runs
to his master's house.

My mother his wife
follows behind him,
mucks out the byre,
spreads fresh dung on the floors,
cleans her teeth and cringes
outside,
filling a fold in her sari,
with the house's leftovers.

Under the noonday sun
father ploughs and sows
and draws water from the well;
he pours drops of blood
turned to sweat, and all
to fill someone else's corn bin.

Milking buffaloes, grazing
cows, fattening sheep,
taking them to water and bathing them,
herself without shelter,
my mother stands -
and not even a cup of milk
for her own child.
The lambs are sold for necklaces
for someone else's throat.

In her own house
there's no calf to prance around,
now cows to swing their horns,
no veranda to decorate
with rangoli.

But what devotion
to things that don't belong to her!

The bodies so battered

by master's bad temper
and mistress's selfishness
cling together and enter their hut.
As they fall asleep
an owl
says "guk".

To a rag-and-bone boy

In someone's shed
in someone else's arms
the boy has slept;
he gets up at dawn, kicks the laggard beside him,
hangs a bag over his shoulder,
and out he goes into lanes and filthy alleys.

He comes to a corporation dump,
stands with clasped hands as if discovering a treasure,
turns on himself and wades in;
his hands sift
as if removing a tiny piece of severed intestine
with a doctor's eye.

Among the broken glass there,
the plastic bottles,
the torn rubber condoms,
the old papers he lifts
where some housewife has wrapped a sickening red tampon -
below all that, something brings a smile:
a torn and patched two-rupee note.

Here and there, once pretty broken dolls
may kindle a light in his mind,
finding marbles can push him
into playfulness.

Like this broken eggshells may cut his feet,
he may thrust his hand into the pocket of old shorts
and touch a blunt blade
and the gush of spurting blood
will further squeeze his sapless frame.

Without parents, he has company,
though an orphan he is well satisfied!
What remains in cans emptied by rich men's children
or bottles thrown away by their fathers becomes holy water.
Leftovers sticking to leaf plates become prasad.
Opening his mouth for a bidi stub,
he leaves for the next lane.

Standing where he should not stand,
sitting where he should not sit,
scratching his sores
when flies and insects swarm round him,
shuffling and searching his precious collection

piece by piece again and again,
surrendering it for a few coins to the broker,
at last he throws himself down in someone else's shed,
someone else's child.

Filthy state

1

On this beautiful spring morning,
as I brush by smiling flowers,
pass among sprouting, swaying buds
in the clean, breezy dawn air -

carrying shit as usual,
today something bothers me.
Who has sprayed scent in my rotten sweaty armpits?
For sure there are fleshy growths
in my nose.
The stench ebbs and rises again.
Where have the flies gone that were buzzing round my head?
Have they been drawn away by wreaths of grown lotuses
nourished by the night soil?

This dry shit of summer is a little lighter -
not that coiling burden of wet mess
slipping on my head, dripping foul mud in my ears.
I do not want, sir, that rainy season mire.

For me the morning is not so simple, brother -
it's a morning dim with my degrading work -
a clean morning for you if I remove your shit.
Only when I've been and gone the plants in your yard smile and shine.

'Sarasvati at the base of the hand, Lakshmi in the middle,
Gauri at the fingertips', is their morning greeting to the gods.
If I open my eyes, I see the slippers and backsides
of Lakshmi-Sarasvati-Gauri of my street.

2

Except for husbands, wives and doctors, shit-bearers only
are allowed to see the bastard-brown secret organs
- the unwritten shastras say so -
and after all they also know
my eyes are piles crushed and oozing blood.

I have one prayer -
to be in the next life a crippled beggar at the front door.
I've had enough of this shit-bearer's back-door role.
Aren't leftovers better than shit?

Lately I'm disturbed by social reformers
who sympathize with me.
Why don't they understand
if I alone am pure
whole villages are defiled?
They babble that one must eat one's own food,
or some such thing...

The clean ozone air of spreading dawn
doesn't penetrate what covers my head,
the shit basket aura.
If I drink clean water won't it loosen my bowels?
Wouldn't pure air give me lung disease?
Why such bad thoughts now. Let it alone.

From sunrise to afternoon I do this hauling work
from backyard door to door along the drain toward my house.
When here or there my nose catches the smell of clean oil
cooking pappadams and the like, I feel sick -
and get over it only when I find in the front yards of my own street
rangoli drawn in shit by the children.

In the middle of my house my youngest child has shat.
My wife's immune to careless dirt - it's only child shit -
and sits beside it eating. Flies hover over the dry meat
and wounds are stuck to skin.

3

After the meal I make a pillow for a while of my dirty hand,
lean my neck on it.
Ah! Now I must get ready for the evening round.
I blink my bleary eyes.
Is there no end
to this filthy state?

The Roman slave and the bonded labourer of Hangara Halli

Skin blanched by cane strokes,
tunic tattered and torn,
shaven head, bent back, and worse
bound in chains,
body twisted by fire's heat,
eyelashes rusty with smoke,
covered in quarry dust -

an old black and white Hollywood movie
depicts the slave
of the ancient Roman Empire:
he was a man like this.

In the long journey of time
through all that has happened since,
such as machines, mathematics, speed,
satellites and computer software,

and with all those who have come and gone,
Mahavira, Buddha, Jesus, Mohamed,
Marx, Gandhi, Basava, Ambedkar,
has mind been cleansed?

Today's democratic Republic
is the same.
Come to Hangara Halli and see
a picture just like the above.

Untouchability is yet another stigma
branded on top of the old wounds,
not being allowed to use underwear
is salt poured again on the wounds.

If they make any murmur
as they lie in their chains,
sugar water is poured
on the suppurating wounds on their legs
and the ants are left to their work.

