

# A POUND OF FLESH

Words and thoughts that originate in the backdrop of the Dadri lynching are strung together by four writers

I have been waiting for this day for the last fifteen days. My board exams got over at 12.30 pm today, and I am very happy about it. This afternoon my friends and I had a lot of fun. We went to Sweetie ice-cream shop, and four of us had three ice-creams each. I felt a little guilty for spending money on not one but three ice creams, but that's okay. We went to celebrate, after all. Abba has promised to buy mutton this evening so that I can make *gosht ka salan*. Mutton is my favourite, its Abba's favourite too, but we can't afford to eat it every day the way others in the village do. Depending on how much Abba buys, we can have some tomorrow and the day after tomorrow too.

These board exams were tough. I am not sure if I will pass in English and Geography. I will start praying more from tomorrow, I am sure that will help. But even if I pass the exams, what next? Abba won't let me go to college. I heard him speak to someone about my *nikah*. "If I get a good groom for Rooh, I will get her married off right away."

I don't want to get married yet. Maybe if I pass, Abba might change his mind and let me go to college. That will be fun. I will ask him for new material so that I can get fancy suits stitched. I can go to Kumarchacha's shop to stitch a suit just like Fatema's. Kumar chacha has a new boy, Saem, working with him. He keeps looking at me. He was also at the ice-cream shop this afternoon, and my friends thought he liked me.

But for now, it is the *gosht ka salan*. The masala is already ready; I took Shardachachi's help to make the masala. I wasn't sure if I had to add dahi. She suggested I make the *salan* in a pressure cooker, but I don't think I will. I will stick to the method I know. I hope Abba comes home soon, because it will be good if the *gosht* is kept marinated for an hour at least. If Abba gets extra mutton, then I can make more *salan*, and give some to Kumar Chacha. I am sure he will share it with Saem.

But for now I will just dream away, because I need to get to work after Abba returns from work anyway.

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"*Kahaan khogaye*, Kabir? Do you want the lift or should I leave?"

Finally, Shaam Babu is done with his work. "Yes, yes. I was waiting for you only," I smile and try to be as polite as possible. He has made me wait for one full hour.

I will buy myself a cycle next year. Shaam babu, the cashier at the farm, is very kind to give me a lift every day; but I don't like being so dependent on him. I waited for an hour in the morning and now this.

"Don't be so worried. You didn't get your weekly wage, because of Saturday's bank holiday. You will get it tomorrow," he consoles as we mount on his Kinetic Luna.

"I will get used to this. Every second Saturday from this October is going to be a bank holiday. So start saving up a little."

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I smile and nod. What does he mean by start saving up? Every rupee earned is saved up and deposited in the bank. All for Rooh. She turned eighteen last month. Soon I will have to find her a well-settled groom. She though wants to do her graduation and only then get married. She hasn't told me yet, but I heard her speak to her Ammi. I am not sure.

It was only last week that Ramesh kaka, the paan-wala at the corner of our house had commented, "The more she studies, the tougher it will be to find a groom. He will obviously have to be more educated than her. And if he is so qualified, then Kabir bhaai, you better have very deep pockets to match up to his dowry demands". He has no business in deciding what's good for my daughter.

"Kabir, your house is here!" "Shukriya," I mumble and get off.

If she insists on studying further, I will let her. Or maybe I will find her a well-educated boy from Delhi, who'll let her study after marriage. That will be perfect. I hope her board exams went well.

Oh God! Today was her last paper! I had promised to bring home her favourite mutton today. I had let her down on her birthday too.

"Shaam Babu!" I shout and run after him.

His Luna is already racing away.

"Shaam Babu!" I shout again.

This time he stops. "Shaam Babu, can you please lend me Rs 400?" He doesn't ask why. He just hands me the money. How can he always be so kind? Even I buy that cycle, I will continue taking a lift from him. He's getting old and needs some company.

Fortunately, there isn't much of a rush at the mutton shop.

"Give me half a kg of mutton, please Kareem miyaa." I don't know why I borrowed Rs 400 instead of Rs 200 from him.

Let me give her a surprise. "Do one thing. Make it



ILLUSTRATION BY OJOSWI SUIR

one kg."

Rooh is going to be very happy.

Why is this Chottu still sitting here smoking *beedi* by the stream? When will he understand that he needs to start putting his time to good use? I will have to speak to his father again.

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I notice my trembling fingers only when they fail to insert the key into the lock three times in a row. I frown and force myself to concentrate on the act of locking up.

I've been the temple priest for twenty years. I worked and studied hard to change from a junior priest to one of the most revered and respected holy men in this village. I know all my scriptures and the villagers know that I can solve any problem they come to me with. I can solve problems that the panchayat themselves can't solve. So it is worrisome that I cannot solve this one. I can imagine the senior priests and the villagers talking behind my

back.

I climb down the stairs muttering a prayer under my breath, hoping the Lord Krishna would have mercy on my soul. Is this a test to check my faith or has my Lord given up on me? If I do not find an answer, then I will be thrown out of the temple. Who knows, maybe I will be thrown out of the village, as well.

Everyone will blame me for the missing calf. It was my duty to check the shed, make sure all the cows had been accounted for. I very seldom do. Who would steal a cow or a calf from a holy place? No sane person would dare anger the goddess. It was only this morning that I realised it was the wrong thing to do. Maybe if I had noticed the missing calf first, then I wouldn't be under so much pressure. It would have been someone else and I would have been free and at peace. Now, it

Beginning this week, Bangalore Mirror brings you short stories written by young writers mentored by internationally renowned writer Anita Nair at her Anita's Attic Creative Writing Mentorship programme, which is aimed at identifying, nurturing and empowering literary talent across multiple genres of writing

feels like the whole world will be judging me. All morning two people searched the village. Nobody found anything.

I bow down before the temple, saying another prayer. My knees shake when I get up. I've been having more problems with my health nowadays. As I leave the temple I can see someone sitting under the giant banyan tree outside. The light is dimming and my eyes are not good anymore. I get closer and realise it's that use-

less boy Chottu. I've never seen him do anything useful in his life.

I cannot think of a solution. Tomorrow I have to give the sarpanch an answer. I mutter another prayer under my breath, hoping that someone will deliver me from this torture.

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What a *ghatiya* end to a great day. A fun day of loitering around had to end with baba shouting at me, thanks to that bastard Kabir. So I didn't feel like working today. Big deal. What if he had to take on my share of work for a day? Why did that son of a bitch go tell baba about it? I don't like how baba forces me to work at the fields every day. And now, thanks to Kabir, I'll think I sneak away from work all the time. He needs to be taught a lesson, and soon. It won't do to let him get away with this. Not a leaf stirs in this village without me, Chottu noticing.

It's fun to sit here under the banyan tree at sunset. Nobody walking past escapes my gaze. I'll catch the girls bringing back water from the stream. I like to see them squirm under my gaze, swaying hips and all. Like everybody here knows, there's no getting away from Chottu. I should have come here earlier, instead of lazing by the stream. Kabir wouldn't have seen me there if I had. I saw him eyeing me as he walked past. Now I know why he looked so smug, the *chottiya*. I'm sure he's celebrating something at home – he was carrying meat wrapped up in those big saagaun leaves from kasai Karim's shop. So he gets to celebrate happily at home while I go without dinner, thanks to him. I can't bear the thought of it.

It was a day well spent though - so much gossip to catch up on. Everybody seems worried about the rains not being on time. But Panditji has been saying it'll start to rain soon, and then hopefully we will be off the fields for a week.

I don't think he has been focusing on his poojas since the temple calf has gone missing though. The old man spends all his time worrying about the calf, telling everybody how it's an inauspicious omen. How silly! I wonder if someone stole the calf. Couldn't be someone from around here - everybody knows the temple calf by sight. The whole village is desperate for an answer though. Maybe...

This is why I am who I am. Chottu is going to give Panditji his answer. There he is now, locking up the temple. He'll soon walk past me, muttering to himself as usual. A word of concern about the missing calf is what he'll expect from me. Of course, he'll get that. What he doesn't know yet is that he's also about to find out that his precious calf is no more. How can it be, now that it's been cooked and probably eaten too?

Enjoy the meat Kabir, it might be the last meal you'll have.

## RELATIVE VALUE Raghu Rai (73) and Avani Rai (23)

# There's never enough film

Filming for his daughter's documentary, the veteran photographer attempts to strike a balance between an indulgent father and the subject

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Three years ago, when Avani Rai first expressed her desire to film a documentary on veteran photographer Raghu Rai's life and work, pat came a warning from the septuagenarian, "When we are working together, I am not your father."

"I, of course, was taken aback slightly," says Avani, who's in the process of filming *Raghu Rai: An Unframed Portrait*. "But I brushed off the thought soon enough. *Theekh hain, papa hi toh hain...*"

Avani, or as Raghu fondly calls her "baby bro" — "that's the language kids speak these days," he chuckles — makes herself comfortable next to her

father on a sofa at the author's lounge, at the Times Lit Fest. An hour later, Raghu is scheduled to speak about his many iconic photographs — Mother Teresa in prayer, Indira Gandhi against the Himalayas in 1972 and Bal Thackeray smoking a cigar — and Avani, armed with a camera, is ready to shoot him as he takes centre stage.

The 23-year-old was struck with the idea of making a documentary on Raghu, while perusing through pictures and footage of their family videos. "Few years ago, I came to Mumbai to study. It was the first time I left home," says the Sophia Polytechnic graduate. "I started looking at the footage and that would make me feel happy. It was the purest feeling." Avani shared the idea with filmmaker Anurag Kashyap, an old friend, who offered to support her if she was "serious about it."

Taking liberty that he is "papa only", an unabashed Avani simply walked into Raghu's space one day, unannounced, and started filming him. "When he asked why, I told him I want to make a documentary on your life," she smiles.

And the father, of course, is "the easiest prey," he says. "Now, can you ever say no to your child?"

The protégé of Henri Cartier-Bresson, famed for his moving images of the Bhopal gas tragedy and the classical musicians of India, however, insists he has been the toughest on Avani. Like any other parent, "I can be nice to my child and appreciate her always. But the world is not going to do that. It is, therefore, important that when people are trying to become individuals, their journey must be exploratory."

Decades ago when his older son Nitin started out as a photographer,

"this one person suggested why I don't take him under my wings. I responded, 'I take him under my wings so that he can't grow his own'. I don't believe in this nonsense that just because they are my kids, I am supposed to do everything in my capacity for them," he says.

Avani would know. It isn't easy to shoot Raghu. "Each time I try to shoot him, he either corrects my angle or my frame."

With five decades of serious artistic practice behind him, Raghu tries to reason with her, by explaining, "This documentary is about me personally, and maybe I want to look at myself in a particular way, and at times, there have been disagreements."

Inevitably, over the last few years, there have been several occasions during shoots when the two haven't been able to "handle each other." "At times, both explode and I end up crying and sulking in the other room."

Some astrologer who saw her

hand said she's your ancestor. The way she

spoke, I used to call her 'didi'

During those times, my mother

plays the mediator," says Avani.

Not too long ago, temperatures flared up in Kashmir, where Raghu was shooting for a Chinese company which requested him to take images with their 24-megapixel phone. "I was shooting and she was shooting me. I was on my job and she was on hers," says Raghu. "There was this one time in Gulmarg or Sonmarg, we had a long lunch, after which I took a half-an-hour nap. She and her friend climbed up to a higher spot and went off to sleep, and returned after two and a half hours." A furious Raghu walked away from the shoot, leaving Avani equally fuming. "Be it my son, daughters or neighbour, the same rule applies to everyone that there has to be discipline," he asserts. "But she fights

with me solid. Kids these days don't give up."

Growing up with Raghu, Avani recalls how he always carried a camera wherever he went. Chasing clouds and trees, which culminated in coffee table books, were a norm for the family. "So when it came to the camera, there was no holiday," she says. "It was never that 'Raghu Rai' was around me, it was always the camera that was around me. Sometimes, I didn't understand why he was shooting a centipede climbing a tree. But because my father was doing it I thought it was really cool, and I should totally respect it."

The doting dad concedes, on his part, that he always saw a spark in Avani. "Some astrologer who saw her hand said she's your ancestor. The way she looked and spoke, I used to call her 'didi'," he smiles.

To Raghu, Avani has always been the "sensitive" child. He recalls the time he bought a farmland in the outskirts of Delhi. For nearly 10 months, Raghu put a brake on all his projects and did nothing, but landscaping. A four-year-old Avani would tail behind him to lend a hand. One April, in the middle of Delhi's unforgiving summer, the two were on the job and had to walk long distances navigating the six acres of land. "Avani was tired and insisted I carry her," he remembers. "I told her no one picks anyone up in a gaon and she has to walk. After dragging herself for hours, she almost broke down. She was carrying a little flower and said, 'even I am picking someone up and walking, so why can't you'. I was moved. That to me was sheer poetry."

The veteran hopes this poesy translates in her documentary. "I am very keen to watch the documentary, but she's not allowing me to take a look at it. But now that so many mentors are supporting her, I am sure there must be something good about the documentary," he says, patting her thigh.

