

Three Stories by

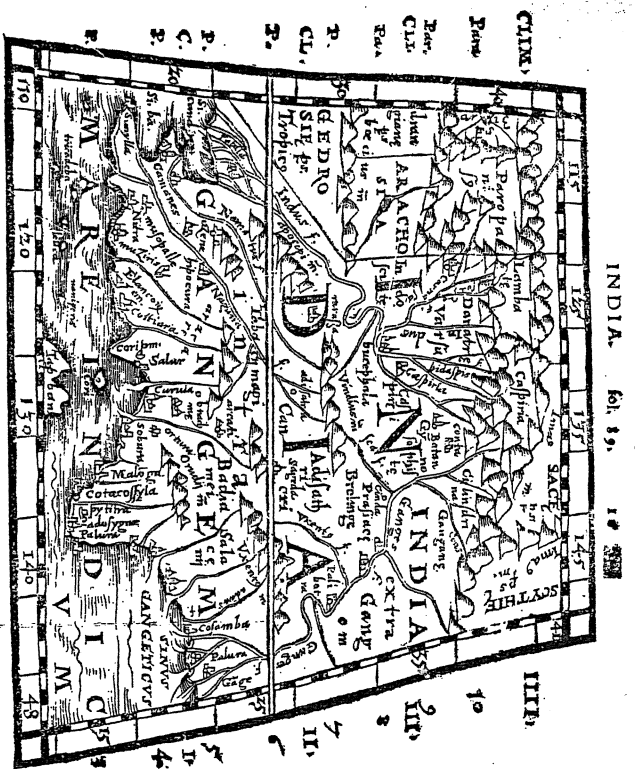
IMAGINARY MAPS

Mahasweta Devi

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Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha

I

Puran Sahay was sitting at the Block Development office when he heard the account of this unearthly terror.

His grandfather had named him Prarthana Puran—Prayer Fulfillment—for Puran's mother was producing one girl after another, and Puran's father had just left the Congress volunteers and become a Commis [Communist] and was most unwilling to marry a second time for a son—in those days one could have called it a revolt.

Even Puran's mother had told her husband, "Get another wife. Our line will die without a son." The Father, "As a Commis I cannot marry again."

— But a daughter will not carry the name.

— Son and daughter are the same to me. I'll send the girls to school, they'll be full human beings. I'm proud to be a father of daughters.

A disobedient son, but one must have a male child to preserve the line. So Grandfather went to the four great sacred places of India and offered his prayer. After all this the grandson was born. That is why he was given the name of Prarthana Puran. Among his father's friends there were journalists and poets who also came to the house. The grand name might owe something to their high-toned conversations as well. Long after Grandfather's demise, when he was himself a journalist, ex-social worker, and independent, he changed his name.

Which half to cut. Which to keep. A great problem. "Prarthana" becomes a woman's name, his wife's name was Archana. So he kept the name "Puran." His wife was very lively. She would say, "If we have a girl we'll call her Prarthana." But Prarthana didn't come into Archana's lap. It was Arjun who came. But just after Arjun arrived Archana died of *eclampsia*. Puran didn't marry again. Arjun spent some time with his mother's brother and then returned to Puran's mother. To him "Mother" means the faded photograph of a smiling Archana on the wall. At fifteen, neither adolescent nor young man, Arjun is a good student at the "Udyog" School. Puran's mother manages the house with a firm hand even at seventy-five. She is protecting the money left by husband and father-in-law and the house at Kadankuan. She has no confidence about Puran. She will make a marriage for Arjun as soon as he's twenty. Puran is as obstinate as his father. He hasn't married since Archana died. Although, in middle age, he tastes loneliness.

Puran's elder sister lives in the neighborhood, so Puran's mother is not altogether helpless. Puran can thus circulate at will as a reporter for the group of daily, weekly, and monthly papers *Patna Dibasyoti* (formerly *Patna Daylight*). Now he feels like marrying his sister's unmarried teacher sister-in-law Saraswati. It would have worked out if he had married her a bit before this. Now Arjun is growing up, a certain barrier of diffidence has come between Saraswati and Puran. Puran doesn't know what Arjun will say. Arjun, with his English-medium schooling, his attraction

for karate, his hockey-playing, has remained a stranger to him. He has become even less tractable after his wits have sharpened in science and mathematics quizzes.

Puran understands that if he goes here and there no spot is left empty at home, for he has long since not been there when he's there. Mother's household is sufficiently replete with Arjun, with the *Gita*, with her two daughters in Patna. Arjun's personal universe is most important to him. The elder sisters inhabit a distant world. They find it hard to understand that Puran, a male of the species, does not make his masculinity felt in harsh words, in manifestations of heat and light. Saraswati herself understands that no real relationship has grown between herself and Puran. Saraswati considers herself squandered. As if her life has floated away like the fruit-offering at the Chhat festival, unaccepted by the sun. The river doesn't eat it, it is not for human or animal consumption, it only floats, and rots floating.

Saraswati's glance says: it's your failure that there was no room for a fleshly, hungry, thirsty, human relationship to grow. Puran accepts that and considers himself half-human at forty-five. And this moral question arises: how will a person merely floating in the everyday world, who has not attempted to build a human relationship with mother-son-Saraswati, be able to do justice to a subject as a journalist?

Yet as a journalist his reporting of the massacre of the harijans at Arwal has received praise, and he too, like others, has fallen into disfavor with the Government in Patna. He wrote about the killing in Banjhi with a razor-sharp edge: "Red Blood or Spark of Fire in Black Tribal Skin?" And then water scarcity in Nalipura. Enteric fever epidemic in Hataori. The blinding of prisoners in Bhagalpur—the owner of the *Dibasyoti* group is a Punjabi industrialist. He is untroubled by the maelstrom of political moves in Bihar or the pre-historic warfare of casteism. He gives money to all political parties. He has support everywhere. The newspaper is a business to him. If reporting caste war keeps his paper going, so be it. Nothing will touch him. Industrial set-up in Ranchi, clout in New Delhi and Bihar, newspaper in Patna. The illustrated magazine called *Kamini*, devoted to women and the film world, brings in most money. Right beside a balance-sheet on suicides are recipes on the "For the Home" page. Right beside the world travels of an international Guru the statement of a sex-bomb star: "Motherhood is woman's greatest wealth." This sort of a mixed chow mein dish.

Even in this life Puran felt restless. He sensed that he was getting altogether too professional. First investigative journalism, but then no problem writing "Bihar, A Tourist's Paradise." His father had faith in communist ideals. His life was not adrift. But Puran cannot be happy in himself. He has done as he pleased. Yet where is the sense of achievement fulfilled?

These are his reasons for coming to Pirtha. Before he left, Saraswati startled him by saying, "I'll no longer wait for nothing."

— What will you do?

— I'll go to an ashram with a school.

— Not right away?

— And why not?

Saraswati spoke with a gentle smile. For a long time now, she has worn only white. In her white sari, white blouse, and with her long braid and tired dark eyes she looked like Nutan in the tragic film *Saraswati Chandra* (they'd seen it together). The theme song "O driftwood face, O unquiet mind" played in his mind.

— Saraswati, why an ashram?

— I'm thirty-two, after all.

— Let me come back.

— Your life won't be empty without me.

— Give me a bit more time.

— I've been waiting for you, fighting the family, since I was eighteen. My younger sisters are all married off. Now at last I'm weary too.

— Only this once, Saraswati.

— She wears only white, as if already a widow.

— This once.

— I can't give my word.

Puran has come to Pirtha with the worry that Saraswati might leave some day. The district is in Madhya Pradesh, the Block is Pirtha. He must go to the distant villages where the eighty thousand tribals among the one million, one hundred and seven thousand, three hundred and eighty-one people of the district live. For a long time people have been dying in Pirtha. Well, the Chief Minister of the state, who built himself a luxurious residence at the Bhopal Union Carbide disaster, is certainly not about to declare Pirtha a "famine area." But Puran's old friend Harsharan, now *Block Development Officer*, wrote, Come, take a look, the State Government says "No story," but here's Surajpratap's report, come to follow it up.

He came for this purpose, and sensed already in Madhopura that a good deal of hostility was afoot against journalists not only in Pirtha Block but in the entire district.

The SDO [Sub-Divisional Officer] said, "Why are you going to Pirtha? There's nothing there. There's nothing more to be seen in the tribal areas. You'll make a noise in the newspaper if you say anything, and more journalists will come. There will be a furor."

— It doesn't matter to you folks after all.

— You don't understand. Nothing matters to anyone these days. Nothing happens to anyone. Look, look at this.

The survey map of Pirtha Block is like some extinct animal of Gondwanaland. The beast has fallen on its face. The new era in the history of the world began when, at the end of the Mesozoic era, India broke off from the main mass of Gondwanaland. It is as if some prehistoric creature had fallen on its face then. Such are the survey lines of Pirtha Block.

— Come and see. What, looks like an animal, not?

— Yes. But these creatures are extinct.

— Who knows?

— The youthful SDO pulls the hair on his head.

— Our honor was destroyed by the Bhopal gas incident.

— How?

— There was talk about Bhopal. And in the middle of the gas affair in Bhopal, the state government did not permit a Health Center in Pirtha, and they were bringing the enteric patients from the tribal areas into town. The SDPO [Sub-Divisional Police Officer] fired in the dark, three people died. The enteric fever started from the polluted water supply. We sent water, it's coming, it's coming; the water tank didn't get there. Both the truck and the tank had disappeared. I myself had posted guards at the polluted wells. The tribals then beat up the guard, drank the water, and then: Epidemic.

— What did you do?

— Sent police to stop the violence.

— And the police?

— Hey Journalist! Pirtha is not agricultural land, and there is no struggle here. So what do the police do in such a tribal area?

— Where did the enteric fever come from?

— The SDO laughs with a vicious joy.

— When it rains, the water flows down the hillside. How do I know if something poisonous came with the water?

- It does rain then?
- From time to time. Otherwise how are they alive?
- Doesn't the state government give any aid?
- What aid? What resource? Look at this map. Near the foot of the animal there is a church but no *missionaries*. We are forty kilometers to the south of this church. And a *canal* would have gone from the animal's tail to its head by the Madhopura Irrigation Scheme. The scheme is in the register. That *canal* would have joined the Pirtha River as well. And look here.
- I'm looking.
- The tribals are in the animal's jaws. Near the throat water gushes down into Pirtha at great speed in the rainy season. If there were small dams three miles down the river, and then another mile down, the tribal area of Pirtha would be green.
- This didn't happen?
- No. Eleven years ago there was great pomp and circumstance on Independence Day. We sent food. There was a camp, the minister came, there was an inauguration ceremony, and many reporters came.
- I didn't come.
- It began where it ended.
- It didn't go any further?
- No no, it would have advanced if it had begun. Three SDOs have tried in turn, but these files get lost halfway between Madhopura and Bhopal. They always get lost. If the files get lost ...
- It isn't yet done?
- No. It'll never be done. Now we hear, There's lots of water in Pirtha.
- Who says?

The SDO is probably getting transferred.

- Imagine someone going to see Pirtha in Shaon or Bhadro—the fourth or fifth months—at the height of the rainy season, and then such a view he would have. No way to guess there's a water problem ... Journalist! Why come in the rainy season to inspect a drought area? You can spend a few hours most agreeably there if you take a picnic basket. Not everybody understands the seasonal nature of the stream. The Government brought a team of experts. They came in the rainy season. So OK, they said there's lot of water in Pirtha. Nothing can be done.

- But you people have been building roads and bungalows with tribal welfare money for some years now.
- How many copies do you print?
- Fifty-sixty-seventy thousand. A hundred thousand on Dewali Festival day. There's no fixed number.
- Then don't ask anymore. What will you write? How many will read? How much pressure on my state government? Have some tea.
- I don't want any more tea.
- Journalists and writers and poets drink a lot of tea, a lot of liquor, get very drunk.
- So everyone the same? All SDOs are not the same. All journalists are not the same. You and Surajpratap are not the same after all.
- How can that be?
- Puran turns his head away. The office garden of the ruler of the subdivision was blazing with bougainvillea. This is also the soil for bougainvillea. Rough and dry. There is so much bougainvillea in India that one could have given it a proper Indian name. A big monkey sat on a laburnum with his tail hanging down.
- Looking at this Puran says, "Has Surajpratap written of an unearthly terror?"
- Will Harisharanji send a jeep from the Block Office?
- What did Surajpratap write?
- Nothing but a story.
- That was nothing but a story?
- How do I explain? Starvation for years. Fewer children are being born to them, and the Administration still doesn't attach any importance to Pirtha. They have taken it for granted for some time that the government has given them up. Now how will they explain to themselves the reason for this misfortune? Whatever the case, they need an explanation if only for their peace of mind. So they are spreading stories.
- So tell me a story.
- You've come to Madhya Bharat [lit. Middle India], why don't you see Gwalior, Indore, Jabbalpur, Dhara-Mandu, Bhopal? Do you know that there's still a festival at Shivapuri, a statue-festival? The descendants of the servants of the old kings serve and worship the kings' statues. "The Middle Ages in Middle India" will be a fine piece. Go to Bastar, see the tribals.

— Come on, tell me what's up. You too have believed that some terrifying event has taken place.

— Look at this painting.

— A cave-painting?

— A boy painted this on the stone wall of his room. The picture was taken by Surajpratap, but no, this photo is not for a newspaper, *not for publicity*.

— He did not print a photo.

— No, we took away the negative. He cannot print this, he doesn't have a copy.

What is it? Bird? Webbed wings like a bat and a body like a giant iguana. And four legs? A toothless gaping horrible mouth.

— But this is . . .

— Don't say it. I won't hear it.

— How did he paint this?

— I don't know. The boy's shut up.

— Where? Where is the picture he painted?

— In Pirtha.

Now the SDO begins to speak in bursts. As if a badly wounded person is making a last-ditch effort to make a deposition to hospital or police, to the killers or to friends.

Like that man from Chitowra. Where Puran had been present. The Pasi harjans claimed a long-disputed piece of land, and no way would the Brahmarsi Sena (a fundamentalist Hindu gangster group mobilized by the landowners) militia let them have it. Of course the land is now with the Pasis, this very minute, but the ownership can change hands again. In Puran's state of Bihar, land changes caste often. Puran and a group of reporters went to the hospital. The man spoke in bursts, in front was Ramnagna, and Lakhan, and Nathnram and many people . . . five guns . . . Ramnagna opened fire . . . I was running to call the police . . . to call the police . . . The reporters would cluster there because it was only a Block Health Center—nothing bigger—and things were easier because Aditya Naolaksha of an all-India newspaper was there.

The SDO is talking like that man. He is moving his hands, trying to explain, as if there's a tremendous communication gap between him and Puran, a tremendous (mental and linguistic) suspension of contact. Are the two placed on two islands and is one not understanding the most urgent message of the other, speaking with vivid gestures on the seashore? This asymptote is a contemporary contagion. A man in Mahandi had split open the

head of a guy who had poisoned his water buffalo and had received a life sentence. How valuable is a buffalo that you are going to jail for twenty years? Asked this, the man, collar-bone shaking and foaming at the mouth, had made an effort to explain to Puran what a buffalo meant in the life of a villager. A water-buffalo is a priceless good to a well-to-do farmer.

Puran had not grasped the desperation behind his urgent and troubled message. Although he did turn the man's words into a most compassionate small news item, "For the Sake of a Buffalo."

The SDO continues to report.

— It was the waxing fortnight of the moon. It was a moonlit night. I don't know, the moon might have been full. The Sarpanch, head of a group of five villages, had come up to Madhopura. With him were a few people from Pirtha. Shankar was there as well. You will find Shankar. He is the only literate man in the village. It is he who comes to town from time to time at Census time. Your friend sometimes employs him to get people for road construction work. Harisharanji is most dear to them! Sufficient contempt is not demonstrated when the two words "most dear" are pronounced.

— Then did they see the creature?

— No.

The SDO's tone shifts. It reproaches the light frivolity of Puran's voice.

— Some of them were returning. There was a lot of drumming in the village. They beat drums with five sticks if they want to spread special news. The sound was like that. Then something had happened, they said, and started walking faster. The night was full of moonlight. You can count the leaves on the trees there on moonlit nights. They were walking along the sand and rocks where the Pirtha is a bit wider. At that time they saw a monstrous shadow fly by. Not too big, not too small, a bird.

— They said "bird"?

— That's what they said the first day. They'll think bird if they see something fly. What else can they think?

— Some sort of large bat?

— There's no such thing there. It was gliding rather than flying. It would flow like a wave, go down a bit swinging, rising a bit again. They raised their faces, saw it, and were afraid. Very afraid . . . the shadow moved with them.

— For how long?

— I don't know. Why don't you ask the owner of your newspaper to buy them all HMT watches? With illuminated dials. And train them. So that they can check the time whenever they see something strange.

— Forgive me.

— It's not a question of asking for or receiving forgiveness. This is beyond reckoning . . . The shadow moved on and vanished into the hillside. When they reached the village they saw that all the people of Pirtha were outdoors. And the headman was beating the drum. When they arrived the headman said, "An evil shadow has moved across us, some danger is ahead."

— This is the unearthly terror? This is an embodied creature, that can spread its wings and fly.

— Go to Pirtha. Explain this to them. I cannot make you understand. You are not understanding how it is in Pirtha. It isn't called a famine area. Pirtha is a place of perennial starvation. They have no resource, and they will never. A few thousand people have now accepted despair. They don't know how to ask, don't ask, but they take if given. How will I make you understand that it is not possible for those tribals to think reasonably, to offer explanations? You will understand them with your urban mentality? You will fathom the Indian Ocean with a foot-ruler?

— But you are a sympathetic officer.

— Please do not write this. A transfer as soon as the word "sympathetic" appears. And that word is false.

The SDO smiles weakly, becomes absent-minded, or drowns in the depths of his own mind.

— I'd have done something if I had been compassionate. You don't have to be "compassionate." I want to get a well dug, there are obstacles. I want to extend the road . . . the contractors and politicians are much more powerful than I . . . but I will certainly establish a primary health center. And four wells in the area, and where the Pirtha comes down from the hills, a dam . . . don't write all this. In fact it will be useful if you write that the officer is inefficient and ruthless. If a question is raised in the State Legislative Assembly, if there is a warning—"Why aren't you getting the work done"—then perhaps . . . But the shadow was seen in Pirtha for quite a few days.

— You can't be serious?

— The more it was seen, the more the terror spread . . . Such a variety of stories! But I took away the roll of film when I saw Surajpratap's photos.

— You could have allowed them to be printed.
— No . . . impossible. Then you have to accept what the creature is. How is that possible?

— Have you been there even once?

— I went a few times. No, no shadows are seen anymore. And it is not necessary either. The shadow has left a firm imprint on their minds. It's done its work and gone.

— What did you hear?

— Go hear for yourself. Why should you accept what I heard? Let me tell you what I saw.

— What did you see?

— I traveled around and saw everything: jungle, hill, cave. I got nothing. I saw the picture painted by the boy.

— Is it still there?

— It's there. Now that picture can't be erased. Engraved in stone. It's being worshipped. No, your jeep is not coming today, you'll have to stay overnight after all. Is the bungalow free . . . I don't know what Department's.

— No hotels?

— You won't be comfortable in those kinds of hotels. If you don't mind, stay with me in my bungalow. Our truck will go to the Block tomorrow, go with them.

— I don't have any problems with that.

— I know. Journalists can do everything.

— Why did Harisharan behave this way? He knew I was coming.

— Perhaps he's on tour . . . Your friend? He looks younger than you.

— Classmate. He was a good student. His father was transferred from Patna to Jabbalpur, he worked with the railways, they moved. We've kept in touch because he'd come to Patna occasionally. I never thought he'd enter the Madhya Pradesh State Civil Service.

— Why? What did you expect?

— He used to say he'd go into college teaching.

— I had thought to be a geologist. My brother wanted to be a doctor, now he sells "Have-A-Drink" soft drinks. Come . . . the news of the terror in Pirtha had spread so far that even in Madhopura worship services are going on to get rid of bad luck. The Block is Pirtha, but its office is in Rajaura. There too people are seeing many things! Making offerings at temples.

Madhopura had only recently been established as a district.

The district town is not so big either. New roads. New houses.

— A small town... there's a temple... this is a new hospital... that's the *District Magistrate's* house... here is my house. You'll have to suffer a bit. My wife has gone to Delhi... I myself didn't have the courage. The first child, just a little before birth, the fault of the doctors here... this time I sent her to her father's house... her father's a doctor... I'd wanted her to go that time as well, she said, No way. A new hospital, there are doctors, every other convenience... I shouldn't have listened. The daughter... would have lived if they'd done a *caesarean*... one does make mistakes.

Everywhere signs of the absence of the mistress of the house. A house itself tells you if there is a woman in it.

— Sleep in this room. There's an attached bathroom. Go to Pirtha, see the cave if you can. Some paintings have been discovered on the cave walls.

— Painted by cave people?

The SDO sighs.

— There's the problem. I believe one of them paints. I didn't see these pictures five years ago. I hadn't gone looking for pictures then anyway. And pictures of drunkenness, of communal dancing with drums, painted by cave people... that's awful hard, Purnaji. Can one measure the distance from the sun by releasing a kite? Even the birds don't know it.

— How much can birds know?

— See *The Birds*. Look at the group suicide of birds in Jatinga in the state of Assam. How can we tell what birds know or don't know? We have no communication with birds. We cannot know everything of nature's ways.

There are many books in the SDO's room. Mostly geology. Some novels in English and Hindi. Some Verrier Elwin. But the largest number is on chess, a man of many interests.

— Do you play chess?

— No.

— Here I don't get anyone.

After their bath they sit down to eat. They have to open stainless steel containers to get their food.

— They leave the food prepared. Have some pickles. Lie down after you finish. The *truck* will not come before dawn.

— *Passenger truck*?

— No.

The SDO gives a half-smile.

— Hansharanji's *truck*. He has let me know that they need food, milk powder, a doctor, medicine, matches, some clothes. I am sending rice, popcorn, dry molasses, a little milk powder and the doctors gave some sample medicine after a lot of begging. Hansharanji knows that they will spread the large sized birth control posters on the floor, and they will mend the holes in the walls with *koonch* sap.

— Aren't you going?

— There's no famine there after all. But I'll go at some point. I'll say over the mike how to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Independence. Brothers and sisters! Independence Day is a sacred day. Fighting against the British... everyone raise the flag at home, have fun, celebrate, light lamps in every room, and certainly go to the meeting in Rajaura. Mye-lay [MLA—Member of the Legislative Assembly], BDO, the Area Police and the heads of the rural administrative units will speak. They will also bring groups of Adivasi [aboriginal or tribal] dancers and singers.

That too?

— It's a district, even a *Block*, with an Adivasi majority, how can there not be Adivasi dancing and singing?

— Who will dance?

— The government can do anything if it wants to. Well!

They get up. Then they wash their hands and fall into bed.

Now Purnaji will fall asleep.

In his sleep the men and women of the cave paintings dance. In his sleep a shadow flies floating. No, this incident is not of the type where I come, I see, I take some notes for writing a report, I record some voices on tape. How about staying on a bit? I must write to Saraswati if I can. Thirty-two is not old. Yet in his dream the men and women of the cave paintings keep dancing and Purnaji asks Saraswati, Will you dance?

It's at this point that someone shoves him awake.

— Get up, get up, the *truck's* here.

— Eh! I am late.

— Breakfast's ready.

He packs at speed. He has been packing and carrying his bag on his shoulder for so long, that the moves have become mechanical. A sarong, a towel, jeans and kurta top (this is becoming national dress, in the jeans and kurta "there is no sexual discrimination"), "Monkey" brand toothpowder (he can't bear a toothbrush), soap, shaving gear, comb, camera, a small tape recorder, a

notebook, three ballpoints. The bag is sturdy. He'd had it made to order in Patna.

Tea, slices of bread, honey, bananas.

— Eat up. Tour ahead.

— Didn't you photograph the cave paintings?

— Yes. You will too.

— A picture of that creature?

— No. That I won't believe. I have to live with today's reality. So good-bye. Let me know your experience on your way back. I will read the Tale of Pirtha.

— I will certainly report back.

— Good day.

Puran climbs up on the truck. A thin wiry-looking man says to the driver, "Don't stop the truck."

The robust driver talks non-stop to the villages, trees, and human beings flying by at speed, "What's the use giving rice to the tribals? When have they eaten rice? Such good quality molasses, popcorn! The government lives for the Adivasis."

The thin man is silent.

— Be it jobs, or other kinds of aid, everywhere it's tribals and untouchables!

Puran says, "They need nothing?"

— No one can fulfill their needs, sir. They sell everything they get, they have standing clients in Rajaura you know. They won't live in government housing, so why should the government build for them?

Puran takes out a book from his bag, then puts it back. He has done his homework after all. Now he is looking at the villages on both sides.

The economy of Madhya Pradesh is mainly agricultural. Almost eighty percent of the population live in villages. Of course these are not villages like Pirtha Block. By 1981 figures there are eleven million, nine hundred and eighty-seven thousand and thirty-one scheduled tribals in Madhya Pradesh. 22.97 percent of the entire population. There are forty-six different tribes, and their sub-groups are one hundred and forty-seven in number.

Total area is four hundred and forty-three thousand four hundred and forty-six square kilometers. Of this 43.5 percent is arable.

Who has engraved the cave drawings? Are these pictures of contemporary human beings? They are without negotiable commercial value for TV if they are not prehistoric. Fourteen point

four percent of the land in Madhya Pradesh receives irrigation. Who controls the fertile black soil for producing cotton in the Malwa area? So-called main crops are jawar, wheat, and rice. Who eats this? So-called "lesser food grains" such as kodo, kutki, and soma are also grown. This state's agri-products for trade are oilseed, cotton and sugar-cane. The other day a Bhil tribal and the six members of his family killed themselves for reasons of poverty, although, in the unwritten Adivasi lexicon, suicide is a dreadful sin. Central India will soon make news in soybean cultivation. Is it the soybean revolution after the green revolution? Who will consume this soybean powder, nutrients, oil, the whole seed?

The soil of Madhya Pradesh is rich in iron, manganese, coal, limestone, and tin ore. Large scale, medium range, tertiary range, and small industries are developing fast. Agri-business is also developing apace, every day. Why did the boy draw that picture? What novel about the ancient settlements of Vidisha and Ujjaini—like *The Bride of Vidisha*—whose novel did he read the other day? In Abujhmar there is a huge depression in the rock like a well, or like a monster's bowl. The sunlight never reaches its belly fully. The Adivasis live in the land of that primordial dusk. In some remote day they were invaded and they crawled into the earth's womb for safety, never to emerge. They raise and sell goats.

You have to descend along the rock to reach there. Their eyes have grown accustomed to the near-darkness. They come up along the rock with their goats, graze them, and then go down along the rock again. Are they Baiga tribals? Their link with the world above is to go to market, to sell goats and the strong-smelling yogurt and clarified butter made of goat's milk, to buy food grain, oil, salt, clothing. Whenever they come up they see the broad arrogant roads. These roads have been built with the money sanctioned for tribal welfare so that the owners of bonded labor, the moneylender, the touts and pimps, the abductors, and the bestial alcoholic young men lusting after tribal women can enter directly into the tribal habitations.

The person who gave Puran this account had finally come to Bihar after he and his group had made a film about the Bhopal poison gas disaster, opened a health center for the afflicted, and demonstrated against the oppressive tactics of the state government of Madhya Pradesh.

The Bihar state government was not particularly pleased

about the documentary on the blinding of prisoners in Bhagalpur Jail either.

He had said, "When the Adivasis walk along that road to market, they walk on the graves of their education system, their irrigation system, their supply of drinking water, their health centers."

Except they don't know this.

What is theirs by right? The constitutional rights of 7.76 percent of the population of India, of fifty-nine million, six hundred and twenty-eight thousand, six hundred and thirty-eight persons. They have not yet been informed of this. Although Delhi and the states print many different topics on millions of tons of paper. Radio doesn't inform them, television doesn't inform them, newsprint doesn't inform them, the aspiring MLAs and MPs do not inform them, the rural administrative units or their heads do not inform them, the state governments don't inform them, the tribal welfare ministries do not inform them.

What an immense deal of labor and money is spent to keep up this directive of non-information. How many subtle heads work hard. How many political knots are tied.

What was theirs by right. The Adivasis will enter the twenty-first century, ignorant of this in their shadowy habitation.

Puran has heard that once Jawaharlal Nehru, and once Indira Gandhi, had tried to descend into those depths of Abujhmar, but had given up.

No one else had even tried.

The way to reach them is so inaccessible.

They come to Rajaura.

A very small place. The Block Development Office. Police station, school, health center (closed).

There are almost no brick buildings besides the bank and the post office. There is a market and shops, and a sawmill. Two video halls, and a signboard declaring this is an "Animal Clinic," but behind it a roofless room, whose doors and windows have either disappeared, or were never there.

The living quarters are attached to the Block Office. Harisharan comes out and says with great glee, "You bastard. Wait, let me check the goods. I am fighting with the uncrowned king of Rajaura since yesterday."

— Why?

— He buys all the coarse kodo and kurki grain, so-called "lesser" food grain, all the cooking koonch oil cheap and sells it to

them at a profit. Now he says, Give me the rice, I'll give popcorn in exchange, and take some money as well, you understand?

— Are you sure he won't get you in trouble?

— Of course he will.

Harisharan laughs uproariously.

— He transports labor everywhere from this district. A big labor contractor. Do you realize how powerful he is?

— He won't have you cut down by his thugs?

— No, he won't go that far. And now there's terror even here.

There is a strong rumor that the curse is coming in this direction from Pirtha. A lot of religious activity everywhere.

— What do the people of Pirtha say?

— They themselves will tell you. There are folk from Pirtha here. Shankarl Come this way.

A dark, slender, young man of middle height. Dry reddish curly hair, heavily hooded eyes, a short dhoti around his middle.

— This is my friend, the journalist.

Shankar looks at him steadily.

— He will go to Pirtha, perhaps stay a couple of days.

— Now!

— Yes.

At this Shankar clasps his hands together and starts muttering, and Puran suddenly understands that his eyes are the mirror of his soul. He doesn't want Puran to go there. Shankar's lips move for a while, then become still.

A black string around his neck, and a little copper medal hanging from it.

Harisharan says, "It's all right Shankar. He's my man."

— Why will he go?

— As I said, my man.

Shankar is quiet and slowly gets in the truck. He sits on the sacks, and lights up a *bidli* in a vague distracted way.

Harisharan says, "Will you sit inside? Or shall we go?"

— I haven't yet met your wife.

— Do you think the lady lives here? She is herself an MPCPS [Madhya Pradesh Civil Service]. She works in Indore. The two girls go to school there. We sometimes get together here or in Indore, or perhaps in Jabbalpur. Mother lives there.

— Isn't it inconvenient for you?

Harisharan says, "Oh no, she knew no housework at all. I taught her. And she's educated. She has a job, how can I say 'no'?

And you know what, she's very ambitious. Give the girls education, not dowries. Retire in Jabbalpur, run a school there. I have no ambitions. Don't worry, stay here a couple of days after your return. Will you stay in Pirtha, or come back?"

- I'll stay a few days.
- Good. I'm giving you a parcel. Might be of use later.
- What, books?
- See when you get there. Wait, you'll need a lantern, kerosene, a mosquito-net...
- Mosquitoes there?
- No, snakes.
- But they live there.
- They live there because there's no other way they can live. You're not in that class.

— Did Surajpratap take all this?

— No. He is a different sort of fellow.

— Where is he?

— He alone knows. He lost his job after he wrote the Pirtha report. The MLA's wife's brother's paper after all! And ... he had something like a breakdown after he got back from Pirtha. As soon as he was released from hospital he vanished.

— Where did he go?

— If I know him he'll be here again. Suraj comes around every few years.

— He had great promise.

— Had, has. But he hasn't learnt what's needed, to move with the stream. If you don't keep at it ... Use the *system* to unmask it. He starts from the premise that, since the Independence is fake, everything in post-Independence Indian democracy is fake—now such a line of thought is undoubtedly to be respected, but it makes it difficult for him to last anywhere.

— Yes ... He doesn't fall in with the pattern of deals.

— In terms of Pirtha he wants to return to the history of the human race in the India of some five to seven thousand years ago. My need is to make a big noise in whatever way and put Pirtha on the map of Madhya Pradesh and therefore of India. I don't want heaven. Only what can be done within the administrative framework, what we otherwise can't do, either for want of sympathy, or under pressure of politics and administration. I need help to get that much done. Who will explain that to him? Rather does he explain the root cause to me. Change the whole system.

— A rare type.

— Yes. But it's not right to deny reality ... I think he'll turn up again.

— What does he eat? Where does he live?

— There's the problem. His wife ... Sheila is working away at a center in Maharashtra to bring the consciousness that "leprosy is a social disease." A brave woman. An obstinate hardworking woman. Suraj can go there too, often does.

— I didn't even know he was married.

— Come on! He has a grown son, fifteen years old. Suraj and Sheila met in the Dalit ["downtrodden": radical name for the Untouchables] movement. They were married right away. Suraj is from the Dalit community; at one point, he caused a great stir with his book *You Are Untouchable, Not I*.

— But that book ...

— Written by Shyam Dusad, his real name.

— From Bihar?

— At some point, he doesn't talk about everything.

— He wrote nothing else?

— No. Surajpratap never repeats anything. Sheila is a wonderful person, I've seen her twice. Bringing up their son, working herself, and waiting for Suraj. What's up with you? Still doubts, still no courage? When will Indian women change? Is Saraswati still waiting for a good-for-nothing like you?

— I'll come to a decision this time. Whether it's doubt or cowardice, I don't know myself.

— It's not good not to know so much, Puran. Life is short and it's not right to see the end of the century knowing nothing. How long do people live? At most a hundred years, or a bit more. Look at Rajaura Hill. That itself ...

— Harisharan?

Puran manages a smile and says, "Don't tell me the age of a stone, my friend. I am not yet ready to look at the dawn of creation."

— Yes ... true ...

Now he talks in a different tone: "Shankar is a good fellow. They needed an explanation on the subject of that creature or shadow. They will not get food, water, roads. There will be no hunting. Singing and dancing will become extinct. At the same time they will not be allowed to explain the incredible shadow. This is intolerable."

— What are they saying?
 — They will tell you themselves.
 Pirtha approaches. The truck climbs. This is a pass in the hills. Once upon a time the enemy couldn't advance if the pass was blocked.

— This is full of hills.

— We'll climb, we'll go down, the truck will stop, we will stop, we'll climb down. We'll unload. From the Sarpanch's village goods will travel to Pirtha and Dholki by oxcart. Now the Khajra thorn bushes begin. Listen, you are completely free. Only request, don't go crazy to "print at all cost" like Suraj. If you suddenly saw a temple of pure gold somewhere, or a speaking tree, would you print that news and put modern man, the media, and foreigners on the trail?

— First off I won't see such a thing. Secondly, I won't tell if I do.

— That's what we want. We are entering on the tail of the animal traced by the survey map of Pirtha. Ahead is Gabahi, the Sarpanch's village.

The truck stops.

Some sort of instrument of the drum family is heard in the distance—dub-dub-dub-dub-dub.

Harisharan says, The drumming goes on, will go on.

— Emergency drum?

— Yes. This is an emergency.

II

The characteristics of the Indian *Austriac* are medium height, black (sometimes very black) skin, longish heads, slightly flat noses, but otherwise sharp features. Perhaps the skin color and the flat nose are a result of intermingling with older *Negroid* peoples. Were the *Austriacs* of a yet earlier time sharp-nosed and light-skinned? The *Austriac* aborigines spread all over India, and went East to Burma, Malaysia and the islands of southeast Asia (were they then going farther and farther east in search of the sun?), kept moving, moving, moving on, establishing settlements. The *Gazetteer of India* says, "*The Austriacs form the bedrock of the people.*" To strike a stretched-skin instrument five times means to inform of an emergency. The news is coming and spreading. The Sarpanch shakes and shakes his head. "What to say, revered

Sir?" If a terrible, inevitable something repeatedly casts a shadow ... in the Mushal chapter of the *Machbharata* the great constellation of Time himself shadowed the earth again and again ... Krishna was dark, so was Rama. If you are very dark then you are black, if slightly dark, dusky. The *Austriacs* laid the foundations of Indian civilization. They cultivated rice, raised vegetables, and made sugar from sugar-cane. One of the branches of their language is Mon-Khmer, and is alive in Khasi and Nicobar tribal tongues. Again the Munda branch has many divisions, and into these language groups fall sixteen aboriginal tribes. These *Nagesia* tribals are also among them. When did they cultivate rice, grow vegetables, make sugar from sugar-cane? Why are the descendants of the "*bedrock of the people,*" whose forebears laid the foundations of the civilization of India, why are they sounding their signal in such desperation? Puran has seen in his own state of Bihar, in Palamu district, that the Parhaiyas were designated as a "criminal tribe" by the British. And they are all bond slaves. The *Nagesias* live on hillsides, some collective memory haunts them, they'll see the enemy approach, and fly. But now all around are modern India and medieval Palamu, the enemy doesn't come with war drums, they have nowhere to run.

There are some caste-Hindus in Gabahi. Bhan Singh Shah the Sarpanch [head of the village council or Panchayat] has a turban on his head and a singlet on his back. He introduced himself as the descendant of the Gond king Shankar Singh Shah, whom the British had blown from the mouth of a cannon at the time of the Mutiny. If Puran doesn't believe this he can visit his home and see the well printed family tree. It is a great injustice that the government of independent India has not given him any recognition as the descendant of a tribal hero of the first Battle of Indian Independence.

— This injustice is because I am a tribal.

Harisharan and Puran look at each other.

Relatively speaking, the Sarpanch is well off. In his fortlike house with high earth walls you can see a separate enclosure for water-buffalo, a granary for corn. Cots in the courtyard. One of his sons is a messenger in the Electricity Office and another has passed an exam to become a clerk in the Post and Telegraph Department.

Harisharan said, "I read the proofs when you had your family tree printed."

— Sure. But his name is in history books. This is what Bhalerao from Gwallior told me.

Puran cleared his throat.

— This is very true. I will discuss it with you later. We'll have a long talk.

— Will you stay in Gabahi?

— In Pirtha.

The Sarpanch looks at Shankar. Shankar keeps his head turned away. An inscrutable, passionless black face against the backdrop of the sky. That face will never give a reply. He's listening with care, in deep, deep thought.

— Dhomra-drum.

Five times ... five times ...

— That's how tribals ... we ... spread the news.

Although the Sarpanch changed class long ago (when the tribal gets a little education, gains a little safety and moves from his class, does he go up or down? Does the lower middle class or the middle class accept him as a member? If even one percent of the tribals gets a house, a motorcycle, a job, some land, do they enter the well-to-do middle class or the rural kulak class? No, the main point is that he is not of the destitute tribal community, and not of the class which is his in the adjacent community. Is that why he has to empathize with his poor tribal community in troubled times? Why did the Sarpanch first say "tribals" and then "we"? A many-leveled problem. It is improper to pass quick judgment from a safe distance.)

— Don't come to a slambang decision, Puran, you know what I mean.

— Mr. Sarpanch! What message are they sending?

The eyes of the Sarpanch are now vague and distant.

— Well, you have come with the BDO and you will stay here.

The Sarpanch licks his dry lips. Then he straightens his slightly bent body (Puran learned later that before his fortunes changed he used to gather the fruit of the Ritha tree in the extinct forest and a falling tree branch had hurt his spine; at the time peacocks danced on the banks of the Pirtha ditch) and spoke as if in deposition, in a still small voice.

— Now in the whole area we are unclean, in mourning for the dead.

— Why in mourning for the dead?

— What is it that we have seen? Tell us, Mr. BDO! You are an educated man, you are the first government officer ever to

come to a tribal area. We had thought that the independent government of India was a fairy tale for our lot. We have seen you, now tell us, what have we seen?

— I don't know.

— You accept that we have seen?

— Yes, everyone can't be mistaken. But what it is, what kind of bird, that I don't know.

— Have you ever seen the picture drawn by Shankar's nephew Bikhia?

— You won't know what he saw.

— You say, our visitor wants to know.

— How shall I explain?

Harisharan says softly, "Mr. Sarpanch! My friend has been to many tribal areas. He is from Bihar. There are many tribals like you there as well, Baiga, Bithath, Gond, Khariya, Khond, Kol, Munda, Nagesia, Oraon, Asur—they are there too."

— How can that be?

— There are, there are.

— We are there as well?

— You are, you are.

— He has seen?

— He has seen them and lived there.

— Is he a moneylender?

— No, a journalist. He comes running when he hears of bad times for the tribals, he writes in the papers.

— Then why has he come now?

— Shouldn't he write about the famine?

— What famine? You tell them, the SDO tells them, and you are the government, still the government doesn't listen. This happens every year, no one knows, no one takes notice. The government doesn't even know that there are human beings in Pirtha.

Harisharan makes his voice even more respectful.

— I know. That is why I keep on trying, so that everyone knows about Pirtha, it comes up in the State Assembly, and the state helps you in some way.

Puran says softly, "So much money is earmarked for tribals, don't you get any aid?"

— How shall I explain to you?

At this point Shankar turns around, clenches his fists, and says in piercing anguish, "We are late by many many moons. Now no one can show us any help."

Moons? Many moons? When the sun is merciless in the sky?

When the swordlike heavy leaves of the Khajra trees are still, and when one leaf on the bare pipal tree shakes out of control? How late are Hansharan and Puran?

Shankar goes on talking with his eyes closed. Alas! He speaks Hindi; Puran and Hansharan also speak Hindi, but how can one touch the other? Shankar says his say in Hindi, but the experience is a million moons old, when they did not speak Hindi. Puran thinks he doesn't know what language Shankar's people spoke, what they speak. There are no words in their language to explain the daily experience of the tribal in today's India. Pashupati Jonko, of the Ho tribe of Singhbhum, a native Ho-speaker, had said with humble amazement at the time of translating Birsu Munda's life into the Ho language, "There are no words for "exploitation" or "deprivation" in the Ho language. There was an explosion in Puran's head that day.

That was during the Sagwana (teak) movement: "Away with teak, save the Sal." Forest Singhbhum was washed over with turbulence. There was firing at Gua. The Ho language has no synonym for "exploitation." There were many bullet charges after that. The Sal is sajom in the languages of Ho, Mundayi, Saontali, but in the site of the unfinished Sagwana struggle the word "exploitation" cannot be explained. Then in Ilyagarh, in the resistance against the damming of the Kharkai, the fearless Kol tribal Gangaram Kalundia died. In Gua, Bidar Nag is ruthlessly beaten to death, and Pashupati Jonko says, Brother! The word "exploitation" is not in the Ho language. Puran thinks, Do the tribals, whose life is nothing but exploitation, nothing but deprivation, have a synonym for "exploitation" in any of their languages? But the theorist Kamal, who sticks to the tribal area, even he can't jump over the glass wall of book-learn't theory in his head and says, when he descends to the plains from time to time, "My friend! There is class difference among them and, although small, a class is growing up among them that is exploiting and deceiving their own kind." Saraswati got very angry.

— Oh yes, in our society one person can swindle others and make millions in black money, keep it abroad, that you can accept. And we have taken away everything that is their own, we are imposing our rotten value-system upon them, and then if one of them makes a bit of money, or becomes like us, we abuse them from a safe distance. We say, Look, look! How that man's nature has changed, he is no longer a tribal.

The whole thing is very complicated. To say something too quickly is wrong. What is Shankar Nagesia saying? A warning bell goes off in Puran's mind. He must understand Shankar's words, otherwise no justice can be done to himself or Saraswati in the Saraswati affair. Saraswati had amazed him that day. Shankar speaks.

As if he is singing a saga. They have captured their history by observing the rules of birth-marriage-death-social justice. There is no alphabet, they have caught the past in their songs.

— Once there was forest, hill, river, and us. We had villages, homes, land, ourselves. In our fields we grew rice, kodo, kukri, soma, we lived. Then there was game to hunt. It rained, peacocks danced, we lived. People grew, the community grew, some of us moved to a distance. We asked the earth's permission, we are setting down stakes to build a roof, settling land to grow crops. The Chief of our society told us where we should settle land fit for living. There we built homes, made villages, settled land, each for himself. We worshipped the tree that was the spirit of our village. Then we lived, only us.

Shankar ran in a circle and pointed in all directions.

— We buried our dead. We lowered the body at the crossroads. We scattered the seed of the kodo and rice. Then at the time of burial we gave oil, cloth, rice, fruit. We laid the body down with the ancestors. After the funeral we laid a rock on the grave. There are many, many burial grounds like this. The souls of the ancestors were at peace. Blessed us. We lived. And now?

— Ah misfortune! As ants come before a flood, as white ants fly in teeming swarms before the rains, so did our news reach strangers. Did we make a mistake in our worshipping? Did someone tear a leaf from a tree before it was consecrated, before the new fruit, new leaf, new flower came in the springtime, in the month of Phalgun? Did one of us kill a pregnant doe in the hunt? Did someone insult the elders? The community's rule is to protect orphans, was that rule broken somewhere? I don't know where we became guilty.

— Why did the foreigners come? We were kings. Became subjects. Were subjects, became slaves. Owed nothing, they made us debtors. Alas, they enslaved and bound us. They named us, as bond slaves, Haroahi, Mahidar, they named us Hall, named us Kamiya, in many tongues. Our land vanished like dust before a storm, our fields, our homes, all disappeared. The ones who came

were not human beings. Oh, we climb hills and build homes, the road comes chasing us. The forest disappears, they make the four corners unclean. Oh, we had our ancestors' graves! They were ground underfoot to build roads, houses, schools, hospitals. We wanted none of this, and anyway they didn't do it for us.

— Alas! In pain we are stone, mute. We failed to give peace to the ancestors. We are coming to an end, rubbed off the soil. And so the unquiet soul casts its shadow and hovers. We didn't know how it would look. This is surely the ancestors' spirit! This is surely the curse of the ravaged land, village, field, home, forest! Now no one can save us. Now we are all unclean, in mourning. Oh Sir! BDO Sir!

— Here, I am here.

— I can't see you. But I say to you in great humility, you can't do anything for us. We became unclean as soon as you entered our lives. No more roads, no more relief—what will you give to a people in exchange for the vanished land, home, field, burial-ground?

Shankar comes up close and says, "Can you move far away? Very far? Very, very far?"

Shankar sways, he faints.

Some carry him under a tree.

— What happened?

— He fainted?

— Now what?

— They will splash water on his face, and he will come out of it.

Harisharan says, "Let's sit down."

They sit on a string cot. Harisharan says, "I have heard these words three times from three people. In three places, Pirtha, Gabahi, Dholki. I heard the same thing from the three. Some mysterious thing is taking place. Each time the man talks and talks, as if in a trance. When he talks, no one touches him, no one speaks. Then the speaker faints."

— What will you do now?

— Listen, *man*, I can't turn the clock back by five hundred years. Even if some magician can restore them to that archaic freedom, they will again lose it in the hands of newcomers. For they know or knew communism, harmony, co-existence. Is it possible to fight aggression, plunder, exploitation, using of the tribals—with their uncontaminated value-system? This is reality, this is history.

— But if they don't accept relief?

— And you too have to understand that a civil servant from today's Madhya Pradesh Civil Service cannot give back to an ancient nation the flowing Pirtha, the spreading forest, fields of grain where the only invaders are deer, peacock, and other birds, festival dances not watched and photographed by trippers, burial-grounds where others' shovels and spades won't strike. They want recognition of their violated ethno-national identity, their stolen dignity, freedom from slavery to the names Haroahi-Mahidar-Hall-Kamiya—my power is limited, dear friend. I can fight mightily with various government departments and bring them a little rice, medicine, powdered milk. And why do I run once to you, and again to Suraj? So that people know that the name "Pirtha" exists, so that the Pirtha canal is dug, if it doesn't happen while this SDO lasts . . . In a quite different voice Harisharan says, "Sarpanch! I'd like a drink of water."

The water comes with corn-and-molasses sweets. They drink the water and return the sweets.

— Sarpanch, strike camp fast.

— Let's go to Pirtha.

Now the scene changes. Shankar sits up, dusts himself off, drinks water. The Sarpanch starts to abuse a dozen men who have turned up from nowhere.

— The BDO hasn't come here to sit and wait. This is public work, a government undertaking. Where are the others, what about carts? The name of Gabahi village will be mud. You after all are getting enough to eat, you're not in famine!

Some more people arrive. Men pull forward water-buffalo carts. Buffaloes might die pulling weight uphill. Shankar says, "Shall I go first?"

— No, come with us.

Now the trucks are unloaded and the carts loaded double quick. Some stuff is stacked in the Sarpanch's house. There are tribals in Gabahi as well. They are not coming forward now.

— Why?

— You'll understand when you get to Pirtha.

— Will the Sarpanch distribute the relief material in Gabahi?

— "Yes, he will. Now everyone is on good behavior because of the terror. If only the Sarpanch had reported earlier"—the health worker said, "We too received news that people were dying constantly, in ones and twos, in Pirtha. I came up. The state govern-

ment will not declare famine even if people die. It seems that one can only declare famine if a certain percentage dies. How many people live here, that millions can die? They are deprivation's prey. Go take a look at the ones on the plains—happily farming.”

— What's the reason for the famine this time?

— Man-made. It's always that way here. There's no water that they'd farm kodo-kutki crops. A bit of rain in the middle of the drought was disastrous.

— Rainfall was disastrous?

— I wasn't here. I'd gone to Indore. Suddenly word came down: "This week is Farm Aid week." Characters came down from the Block Office and saw there was no agriculture at all, and they sprayed insecticide all over the dusty fields. Think of it. You can see the fields are burnt out . . .

— Why did they do it?

— To teach me a lesson. After all, fertilizers and insecticides come to my Block Office as well. The people with land get it. Elsewhere the Block Office gives to the tribals only in name, they don't deliver the goods, offer a nominal sum of money and say we bought it.

— Yeah, the banks cheat them on the loans, and they are beaten into the ground with the so-called "pesticide-fertilizer *mirikits*" as well.

— Here the quota for the tribals was just being sold to traders. I caught the graft, suspended the guys. In return they shafted me.

— What happened exactly?

— One day it rained.

Harisharan knits his brows and looks up in search of clouds. No clouds. The water-carrying sky-ranging clouds had left for Malava, Ujjaini, Vidarbha, as the bard sang.

— But rain is needed.

— The rain fell on the fields and fallow lands on the hillside and the poisonous water flowed into the wells they had dug. I had myself placed cement rings around them. Just a bit of water in two unpaved wells. They always ration their drinking water.

— Ration their drinking water?

— Always. They get enough drinking water during the rains, but at the time when both nature and the administrative authorities turn against them, the need for survival forces them to make those arrangements. What else can they do?

— So they died of drinking that water?

— They died of drinking that very water. The fleshy tuber of the Khajira is their chief hope. The roots sucked up that water. They died eating the fleshy tuber of the Khajira. And then each month a few kept dying. But even if they die, you don't know it until the patient gets to the health center. Only Bhajpura has a health center between Rajaura and Pirtha. There's a lovely ⁵gem-
ple. Like Khajuraho, smaller.

— How far?

— How do you find this climb?

— The hillside is getting gradually steeper.

— It's a hard way.

— Four kilometers like this, then five more. Still Shankar sent word, health workers came. Adults were taken to hospital in rough palanquins, children in double baskets slung on shoulder poles. But doctors there will not say the cause of death is starvation or lack of food.

— How do you know this?

— The health worker told me. I came and spoke very harshly to the Sarpanch. He said, "In or out of hospital they are dying, so I didn't send news."

— He did nothing?

— Sent offerings to the gods.

— What kind of person is that?

— What does he know? How much does he know? Even doctors can't come to grips with all the diseases here. The tribal understands somewhat, they have their own healers as well. There are non-tribal rural doctors too. But cases of enteric infection, cancer, coronaries, thrombosis, are either not understood by the doctors at the health center or they can't do anything about them. We have not brought scientific health care to the tribals. If something happens beyond the limits of their knowledge they think of mysterious reasons, divine rage, the witch's glance, and so on.

— You came then?

— I came. At that point the truck had come twice. They'd taken five girls, young women, and children on the truck. They bought them for a few sacks of the grain of the kodo.

— What did you do when you came?

— I had drinking water brought from Gabahi. I had already brought some parched grains of the kodo. I sealed off those two wells. I fight with tooth and claw to bring some relief every time.

The Minister of State has warned the MLA, Relief is always famine relief. You are forcing the government to say "famine." This cannot be.

Famine! In some district there is tremendous and extreme lack of food, a thing like water is terribly scarce, the price of food increasing because of lack, widespread hunger, starvation.

But in the perspective of the tribal areas of India you have to say, O dictionaries, throttle your chatter, O liars! How can I accept your word, listen to your utterance?

For there was no food scarcity in Madhopura district. In the big shops of the grain dealers in Madhopura township, there are as many flies as there are cooked sweets. A young bride was feeding cooked sweets to a bull sitting in the courtyard of a Shiva temple and all the milk that was being poured on the Shiva phallus was collecting in a stinking pool of sour milk, and the devotees were taking that milk and drinking.

Obviously there's no extreme food scarcity in the district. There is no drought. In the houses of the Magistrate and the SDO water is pumped up and up in pipes and is sprinkled, how strong the grass how green the trees. And there are many irrigated green fields of grain. On the way to Bhalpura, the fields on both sides were green, arrogant with grain.

The price of food has not gone up because of scarcity. Now the big landowners have to raise the price of tractor cultivation, shallow tubewells, artificial fertilizer on each bale of parched grain. The green revolution means revolutionary prices as well.

There is no widespread hunger and starvation in Madhopura. Agricultural land is in the hands of the upper castes. Hilly Madhopura is tribal, the people with arable land are not hungry, not desperate with starvation. All the trouble is around agriculture. If a tribal owns land in the plain he often cannot set foot there. "Non-tribals are not permitted to buy tribal land. If such sale has taken place in the last twelve years (in West Bengal, after the Land Reforms Act Amendment, in the last thirty years), even in apparently legal ways through deeds of sale or gift, land bought by non-tribals can be claimed back by tribals upon presentation of proper proof. In such cases, the Courts will help the tribal to reclaim his land. If such cases go to court the *officers* and *special officers* of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Welfare Divisions are particularly charged to look out for the tribal inter-

est. In this category, they are empowered with the authority of *special officers* in the Land Revenue Department."

But *legal-aid cells* are a hoax. And today there is no cell for tribal land anywhere in India, from West to East, from North to South. The non-tribal buys land in a fake tribal name, by force of political clout. The owner of the land gets no money, it's an inside arrangement. The *officers* of the Land Revenue Department are transferred if they are honest and when they see the political party is all-powerful, and the administration emasculated, they say "yes" to everything. Some take cuts, not everyone does. On this labeled sea-girt peninsula, the non-Aryans, the Titans, the demons, the monkeys (how many names for him from the Vedas through the epics, to the later Hindu scriptures) have forever seen land tax being paid in his name, seen influential thugs taking irrigation, fertilizer, and seeds by claiming "tribal land," and yet he had no right to that crop. To protest is to die. He can be a day-laborer on that land if he pleads with the thugs. Now these thugs don't have to tote guns on horseback. A thug who can sit in the village and keep the poor terrorized through political influence, a thug who can play catch with the heads of political opponents, does not need to ride a horse or tote a gun. He sits in the field like everyone, he oils his body when he washes, and looks at the photo of some holy man in the evening to see if some holy ash will fall from it.

In India, famine is being bought and sold by "to whom it may concern." Man-made famine is always kept going in Kalahandi or Madhopura or any intractable hill or forest area.

All the problem is in the tilling field, in taking bank loans to become self-reliant. Borrowing and lending is complicated, very complicated, it makes men violent. Otherwise why would a harijan-outcaste in Bilaspur district take a killer crowd and pull out the eyes of two harijan-outcastes who had been unable to repay their debts?

This is the way, everywhere, everywhere. Why is this bloody slaughterhouse, this stage of the executioners' fete, this valley of death—Puran's birthplace?

The aboveground bit of the Khajra tree is short, its tuber root is supposedly three feet long. The leaves are deep green, edged with spines. Are these the mythic sword-leaf plants lining the road to hell? Now the Khajra is growing more densely.

Harisharan says, "For the poor, it's the Kalpataru, the fabled tree of gifts. Split the leaf to weave mats and cut the tuber, leave the very end. Another plant will come up. And if you don't pick it, the bottom of the tuber will spread, many plants will come up."

— Can the leaf-fiber be used for rope making?

— No, the leaf-fiber is not of that type.

— They're growing it in Palamu.

— For rope?

— Yes.

— That's aloe, my friend. That fiber gives rope as strong as manila. They eat the root in Kerala. This family is a bit different. Rope indeed! I still cherish the hope of making a women's cooperative for weaving these mats, the women to be the owners. Rope-making! Look at our state of affairs. The government is bent on banishing poverty. *Man*, how can I show you all the new projects? The tribal doesn't get help to stay alive and the government will not help us to implement all the great schemes and all the hundreds of thousands of rupees supposedly there to keep them alive.

— Not easy.

— The money will even go back... it's like that in Madhupura. Madhya Pradesh was Madhya Bharat—Central India—in the Raj, a land of small and big feudal princes. Even now women sometimes make arrangements to burn themselves on their husband's pyres to be sati. But Khajra plants.

— That's not it. In India, in the matter of forests...

Surajpratap, yes Surajpratap had written. In India, there were various kinds of forests in the past. There were traditional uses of trees and forest products. In any other country they would have extended the forest and put trees to new uses for human beings. In our country natural forests were destroyed. People dependent on the forest were not taught any new uses. A lot of shellac was produced in Palamu from the flamboyant; the flamboyant is a village god there—the flamboyant has been cleaned out. And this production of aloe on barren soil is a kind of game. *Man*, the sacks are made of polythene, not jute. Rope made of synthetic fiber is much stronger than rope made of the fiber of the aloe.

The way doesn't end. Shankar sits with a stony face. Harisharan says, In 1983-84 there was a green revolution in the State of Madhya Pradesh as well.

Why does the computer in the brain store so much information, why does it turn the head into a bomb? The first green revo-

lution in India was confined to Haryana, Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh. The second green revolution takes place in West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh as well. Why then do the plowing fields of Bihar burn repeatedly in protest, journalists run to Kalahandi, Bhil families kill themselves in Madhya Pradesh, and contractors incessantly take bonded labor from these states? Why are the starving tribals, the starving poor of these states, the special constituency of the *Migrant Labor Act*, why are they constantly becoming slave laborers non-stop? Why are there slave-labor cases from Haryana and Faridabad pending in *Supreme Court*?

"The Indian agricultural sector has made remarkable progress. Through scientific methods of cultivation India has not only been able to solve the problems of flood and drought. She is sending food to the Asian and African countries less fortunate than India."

In 1985-86 India has raised between 146 and 148.5 million tons of food grains and 32.6 million tons of oilseed and 175 million tons of sugar-cane; 8.5 million bales of cotton and 11.4 million of jute; and India exports 25 percent of the spices on the international market.

Why is this not reflected from Himachal Pradesh to Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Rajasthan to Eastern India?

Millions of tons of food grains, green revolutions in Central India, in Orissa, Bihar, West Bengal. Why this poverty then, and why do hundreds of thousands of people leave home mesmerized by labor contractors?

— Now you are in the jaws and teeth of the beast in the map, Puran. Take off your shoes.

Yes, they have entered. In front and on the sides a few huts disappearing into the hillside.

— What are these chalk marks on the hut walls?

— People have died there.

— What is that crowd in front?

— You'll see. Don't talk now.

Some people are sitting in a circle at a distance from a hut. The hut is on high ground. An emaciated boy sits on the stoop of the hut. His hair is tawny, eyes very bright. This hut, like all the huts, has foundations and parts of the walls of stone. The rest is mud. The roof is some sort of rush thatch.

The picture is engraved on the hut's base. The being whose

wings are webbed like a bat's, body like a gigantic iguana, four clawed feet, no teeth in the yawning terrible mouth.

Around the boy's neck is a plaited string necklace.

- Bikhia. He is the artist.
- He has engraved it!
- Bikhia first outlined it with chalk, that was photographed.

Then he engraved it.

- He himself?
- They all can. You'll get engraved pictures like that in every hut.
- What do they draw?
- Trees, flowers, monkeys, elephants, birds.
- Bikhia is mute after setting down the unquiet soul of the ancestors. He can speak. He won't. Shankar, bring the ingredients for the ritual.

Harisharan arranges an egg, some flowers and leaves, in a clay bowl some rice, vermilion, and oil. Then he puts his palms together and says, "Now worship. We will make our offerings, ask for your ancestors' blessings, and then start work."

Many pairs of mute, dim eyes. As if they're looking from far away.

- Give us your permission.

Again the dhombra starts playing softly. It is as if there is a chorus of sound because many dhombas are playing together. The priest comes up. He sacrifices the eggs with his bony meager hand, offers the rice. All the men seem to be in mourning. The infants rest their faces like ticks on the chests of the skeleton mothers.

The Sarpanch sighs, wipes sweat, looks at Harisharan. Harisharan says, "Where are you striking camp?"

Shankar says, "Raise it here. We can give from here. No one will sleep in that room."

- Where does Bikhia sleep?
- On the stoop.
- Where will my friend stay?
- Behind this room. Dahi is dead, his son too. His wife has gone to Dholki.

The priest closes the service and says, "No one can do us any good now. Still since this government sir has come, we cannot turn him back. Tell us officer, what we must do?"

- See what I do. If you can help us, some of you.

Puran watches and watches. Stoves are put together with

rocks. Pots and ladles have been brought. Milk powder is mixed thinly with hot water. Shankar brings containers from every hut.

- Take the milk to the mothers for their children. Let the mothers take and drink, and then give again, give to the kids.

The Sarpanch helps. Today's relief is powdered, parched maize and dried molasses powder.

- They'll give rice tomorrow. If it's given today they'll eat it raw.

- Sir! This is today and tomorrow. Then?

— Get it going at least. Day after tomorrow Kausalji, from Mahavir People's Welfare, will give rice, kodo, maize. But they will run the kitchen and give cooked food. Let's see if their lot sends a doctor. Your job is to have wells dug. Get wells dug, Sarpanch, with or without cement rings.

Puran and Harisharan now give out parched grain powder, dried molasses powder. The Sarpanch's men bring water in jars, slung on shoulders. Shankar explains to the people, "Thin it with water, otherwise you won't be able to keep it down. No, it's all right, we have made the sacrifice."

It was Shankar who said a lot then.

Harisharan says, "Shankar travels all the time, earlier he had referred to their ancient history, and having seen it fresh he was speaking from the forecourt of the present. This body lives here naturally, and the mind is free to travel. Normally he is one of my mainstays. It is by his hand that I have given the tribals seven rupees as daily wages for digging wells, paving well-rings, cutting steps on the rock face for climbing down to the source of the Pirtha ditch. They used to get two rupees. He kept all the accounts."

- What is to be done?

— Shankar, we have to take some people to the hospital. I can take them in the truck.

- No use, they'll die on the way.

- Says who?

- The shadow has been around the whole way.

— Shankar! Live. If you live, the unquiet soul will be at peace.

- You don't understand. The government doesn't want that we live. That's why they don't give us any help. The forefathers have been insulted, we could not protect their dignity. Now our life and death are not in our hands. And, don't you see how few people have come from the area?

— Perhaps they haven't enough strength in their bodies.

— The ones who are strong enough haven't come either.

Harisharan says to himself, "I cannot accept that an entire area will die of a death-wish. The Mahavir People's Welfare will come once, and then? God, in the warehouses of the *Food Corporation* in Madhopura, rice and wheat are rotting away. What on earth should I do?"

— Your tribal MLA?

Harisharan's mouth speaks as his hands work.

— The tribal MLA, MP, Minister never open their mouths. Their own kind mentally push them away as soon as they are elected. After all, they are elected through the support of some party or other! This party stuff also brings a distance into their minds, for the rank and file of the party as well. Then in the Assembly, in Parliament, in the Ministry, they feel tremendously isolated among the mainstream people. Why speak of MLAs, MPs, Ministers! Even a Sarpanch or a Panchayat. If you raise the standard of your unit they call you selfish. *Very funny*. In West Bengal we heard of a tribal Panchayat representative or MLA who gave money to his party but did not get any work done in his area.

— This is true all over. And in some places where the MLA is just like the *mainstream*, he is as much a bastard as we are.

— Look at the neighboring Sarpanch of Bhalpura. The Sarpanch there works hard, and also steals. This tribal unit has more money, more *schemes*, but he is afraid to ask.

— Do these people love him?

— Yes... at least they could trust... now that his sons have been educated and got jobs, a certain distance has been created. But since in spite of famine he can't do anything, quite incapable, this might have created solidarity, it's hard to say. All our contacts with them are through Shankar. It is normally difficult to get Shankar to talk, and now...

Bikhia has not come forward and taken something to eat. He is looking at Puran with the same inscrutable eyes.

— Half of them have TB... hey!

An old woman was looking at them from time to time, and drinking from her bowl. Suddenly the bowl drops from her fingers and she slips, slips down.

Puran puts his arms around her. A strange mixed smell attacks him: of dying of starvation bit by bit, of an unwashed

body, of a rotting mouth. Puran lifts her up carefully and lays her down under a tree.

— I'll take a look. I'm a healer as well.

Sarpanch checks the old woman's pulse, turns up her eyes. Then he drips water down her throat from the end of his dhoti-cloth and gives Puran information. Dahi's mother-in-law:

— Come from Dholki?

— No sir, she lives here. If a little relief gets here, everyone will slowly come here. The shadow has gone around over Pirtha again and again, hasn't it? Hey, oldie!

The old woman opens her eyes.

Sarpanch says in a gentle voice, "Drink, I'll feed you."

The old woman keeps feeding in little bits from the mixture of powdered-parched grain and molasses, first from the dhoti end and then from the bowl.

Harisharan says, sighing, "From tomorrow we have to cook them rice gruel, rice over-boiled in salty water. No lentils, their bellies won't stand it."

— Send health workers.

— Yes, at least mentioning enteric... but if the government behaves this way... if I go to Madhopura tomorrow... let the *Magistrate* come, let the SDO come... let the Chief Medical Officer come... if no one comes, let them give us something from the Food Corporation of India warehouse...

Puran says softly, "You go to Madhopura."

— And here?

— I'll put my hands to it, it'll get done.

— Oh. Rain... if it rains now?

— Another rain?

— We want rain. Then the *Khajra* plants will live. The wells will fill Pirtha tank to the brim...

The truck beeps.

— The truck belongs to Mahesh Road Transport, the SDO got it. How can one get work done... with the help of merchants and traders... now the last resort, Mahavir People's Welfare...

— You say they'll come.

— What can I say? A so-called social welfare organization. A massive affair. They get plenty of money from the state, from the center [federal government]. Kausali's party is the Congress, the Welfare people are Bharatya Janata Party... don't ask me what it means... he keeps all the parties in his pocket. Only if they help

a bit ... they bring all this money by claiming to help these people after all. It's not that they don't do anything at all, but here ... they told me, you're a good man, you're asking, we'll go. But the government doesn't agree that this is a famine, they might take it amiss.

— What did you say?

— I said, the government now acknowledges the role of voluntary organizations in the eradication of poverty. Do some work, I'll help you from the Block Office, and ... I told them as lies ... but why not? If the government does nothing in the ITDP [Indian Tribal Development Project] area, I said, I'll ask you from the Block Office to set up schemes.

— And what can they achieve?

— Well, they can't do big items like Rural Labor Employment Generating Projects (RLEGP) or National Rural Employment Projects (NREP) but there are countless schemes, and endless funds ... some things can surely get done.

— There is a blueprint for this.

— How?

— If their registered organization starts a scheme with "We'll get this done here," it'll be good publicity.

— They must know this, otherwise why did they say "Yes"? I'm not telling them, let me activate the Sarpanch and see if their huts through RLEGP ... affairs of the government! Someone sold the idea of solar ovens, and the MLA says, Why not some solar ovens in my area. And even biogas we can do. I had to say that the problem in my Block was what to cook, not what kind of oven to cook in. There is no cattle that there'll be bio from dung. And Sir MLA! You can get biogas from human stool as well. In your constituency people eat little, they starve, the quantity of stool they produce is minute. You can't make biogas from it. This is my opinion, of course you can do what you like.

— What did he say?

— Nothing. As if he understood! If his brother had been the MLA I could have explained. He's very sharp. Not this one.

Sarpanch brings a large portable paraffin lantern.

— Shankar! Let me show Puranji the room. Come Puran! Now the work will go on.

Past this hut there is another room on the hillside. It's not small, and its thatch is relatively fresh. Harisharan says, "Dahi and his son belong to the first batch of the people who died of the

water. Like I said ... they did some work ... got some wages ... they moved the thatch ... see how they build! See the rocks?"

— It is of course they who cut through the rock?

— Yes ... behind that narrow tunnel-like passageway is probably the shrine room to the gods of the household. Never go in there.

— No.

— Will this room do?

— Perfectly.

When the eye gets used to the dark one sees there's nothing in the room. Just the room.

— They've broken the oven as well. The door ... the rush-framed cover, they've uncoupled as well.

— Why?

— No one will live here anymore. If anyone from Dahi's family ever comes, they'll put up new door covers, a new roof. This is where they put the water-jar, the stone is dented here.

— They don't make windows?

— There they are, the small holes in the wall.

— An excellent room.

— The door is not toward the village on the west side, where there's nothing but the steep hillside. Do you understand why?

— Why?

— Some people invaded the Nagesias in some distant day and they still build huts facing due hillside.

— The same in Palamu.

In the houses of the Nagesias of Palamu Puran had seen no date-leaf mats, not even grass mats, even in that notorious Palamu winter. What to do, my lord? The bosses dragged everything away. Even building their houses like hawks, out of sight of intruding enemies, the Palamu Nagesias have still not been able to avoid becoming bond-slaves, or kamiya, seokia, haroaha, charoaha, they have not been able to escape, anywhere.

They have nowhere to escape, not even in Palamu.

Young Gidhari Nagesia, with nothing but a loincloth on him, had said he would buy a *petrol lighter* some day, matches cost too much. Not for smoking, to light the oven and warm his limbs in winter.

— See for yourself Puran, go from hut to hut. As you climb higher, if one hut faces east, the other will face west.

Puran says softly, "So that the enemy can or could be spotted

from every direction. They played the dhokra, in Bihar they played the nagara. This word they carry in their blood. So they still build in this way."

— You know this?

Puran smiles.

— No one told me. This room is telling me, or I am grasping this as I've entered this room... this is sensed in the blood, it flows in the blood from generation to generation.

— Purani don't romanticize it.

Sensed in the blood! Why do migratory birds fly in winter to the same distant place, from the same place, over thousands of years?

— When were they invaded?

— I don't know. These tribals can be found in the Palamu district of Bihar, although their name is not to be found in the tribal register of Bihar. Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, West Bengal...

A small group, why did they scatter in this way? They lived in one place, built another village when their numbers increased, it is natural that they should live together, close together. They scattered, they went so far they were attacked.

— Now a different invasion! Invasion from all quarters, east-west-north-south.

— Yes, so Shankar said.

— You will need a water jar.

— I've got a water bottle.

— A filled-up lantern... mosquito-net... but what will you sleep on? Something from the Sarpanch's house...

— I'll ask.

— You'll stay... how many days?

Shankar comes and stands in the doorway.

— What do you say?

— What shall I say?

— The picture that he's drawn...

— Yes, that picture.

Harisharan looks at him.

Shankar says, "Three people should go to hospital... but they don't want to."

— The shadow was seen in Bhalpura as well.

Shankar is silent.

— Why don't they come?

— What is the use, sir?
Harisharan breaks down with the day's fatigue, labor, worry. He shouts his plea.

— Shankar! I didn't cut down the forest, take your land, keep you in bonded labor... I'm only charged with your Block Improvement... I can't do anything at all, let me do what little I can, let me take them.

Shankar looks in melancholy amazement.

Then he says, "Take them, sir. They will live in the hospital, then come home and die. You healed Dahi with the needle last year... this time..."

Harisharan rubs his face.

— Now as much as I can do... Yes Shankar, from the Sarpanch's house a rope mat, a pillow...

— A rush mat will do. I don't use a pillow.

Shankar says in a lifeless voice, "A rope mat, a mattress, sheets, pillow, nothing?"

— Just a rush mat, so I can tuck in the mosquito net.

— That journalist sir also... you live like them when you stay in a tribal hut... why? Then why a mosquito net, there are no mosquitoes.

— I'm afraid of snakes.

— Where are the snakes, sir? The snakes don't come, where did they go?

Shankar asks himself.

Puran realizes that he is not succeeding in earning Shankar's trust. He silently takes out his *tape recorder* and his *camera* and gives them to Shankar.

— Why are you giving these to me?

— Keep them in the Sarpanch's room.

Curtains come down over Shankar's eyes.

— I won't take pictures. I'll *tape* nothing.

Harisharan says, "You fool!"

— No, Harisharan.

Shankar returns the things to Puran.

— You keep your things... that journalist also took pictures...

Harisharan says in a dry voice, "We did not let it be publicized.

If he had, there would have been a mad rush of people to Pirtha."

Shankar says, "Come, sir. Let me walk with you. Then I'll bring him a rush mat, water."

- Where shall I wash myself?
 - It's getting dark ... why not come to the Sarpanch's place? You'll eat there too.
 - I'll have a wash-up.
 - You'll eat there too. Sir! You people understand nothing. Will our hunger lessen if you don't eat?
- Harisharan says, "Come come, the Sarpanch can tell you what this place was like forty years ago."
- He says in English in a low voice, "If someone dies at night you'll have to leave tomorrow, people are dying regularly. But from now on, whatever happens, if there is any *tragedy*, they will take your coming ..."
- They won't beat me up?
 - No, never. You are their guest, an imposed guest, but still a guest.

They keep on walking. The skeleton men-women-boys-girls have now lain down in a circle, keeping the picture at a distance, and the petrol lamp is burning.

The Sarpanch says, "I'll have the pot scoured tomorrow. I've unloaded all the stuff. Come, sir, you too are tired."

- And you're not?

— I'm the Sarpanch ... this is my job ... how can I be tired? I can get something done because this *Block Officer* is here, otherwise ...

Harisharan says, "You can't go on saying that, Sarpanch. Now I want a full list of the poor and tribal homeless in your area."

- Yes sir.
 - Can't you go to the *Block Office*? Can't you raise a noise? How many times have I said that I can't work if you don't go forward. When I go to Madhopura, for the last three years I hear you keep talking, but does the Sarpanch let you know anything? How many times will you slap my face?
 - Don't say that, sir.
 - Show work, show work, you're not worthy of being a Sarpanch of an ITDP area.
 - It'll be done this time.
 - After everyone dies?
- Sarpanch says, "There are rocks in the way, watch your step."
- Harisharan says, "Puran! If we could once make the administration sweat, *man!* Your report appears, the way I could draw you in with Suraj's report, perhaps with your report some big

paper in Delhi ... All due to Sarpanch ... Other panchayats come to me all the time but to this man I have to come myself, he doesn't come."

- I'd have gone this time.
- You were keeping the gods pleased. So, keep 'em pleased. But show some effort as well.
- Master, I am also the village doctor.
- The problem is great, Sarpanch. It won't be cured by you and me, although we must try.
- Don't worry so much, Harisharan.
- Sir, you too haven't dined.
- That's fine.

Shankar says, "Shall I come with you?"

— No. Who'll take care of all this then?

Shankar says, "Clouds come and go. They come and go. Even the clouds know we've sinned."

Then he says in a spiritless voice, "We are unclean because we are in mourning. Even so the journalist sir came to visit us."

He says to himself, "How stop it? We have never been able to do it. Everyone comes to see us, to see us, and we get dirty. Our women ..."

Harisharan said, "And a few were sold, shouldn't you have let me know?"

— That's the Sarpanch's job.

— But you come to my office.

— This is not the first time that people have been sold out of Pirtha. As long as we are here, buyers will come.

— Puran, how do I put Pirtha on the map?

— Tomorrow, tomorrow. Go home, clean yourself, rest, eat something.

Harisharan, hairy and large, now looks like a lost and bewildered bear.

— Puran. I have fought for this situation in Pirtha, but the picture drawn by Bikhia?

— Get in the truck. You are taking patients.

— Pirtha will eat me up.

Harisharan leaves.

Shankar looks, shakes his head.

Sarpanch says, "Well well Shankar, will you have a bite?"

— No Sarpanchji. How will this sir go?

— I will send Ganesh with him.

— OK, sir Journalist! Don't walk out after dark. You'll lose your bearing even if you have *batteries* [flashlight]. Rocks everywhere! You won't understand which rock is good, which bad. You might fall.

The Sarpanch says, "Yes, yes, in the old days the rocks moved about on the Pirtha Hill. Everything was alive. And the Lord Sun told them, you are alive, but I'm now sending humans to the world. They will make settlements. You will give them shelter. Now stay still. How will the river come down if you're not still? How can grass and Khajra grow in your cracks, and the forest grow on your slopes, at your feet?"

— Who told you this?

— Grandfather, great-grandfather, then great-great-grandfather. Is it written in books, sir? The book-writers don't want to know anything from us, and what they write . . .

Shankar says, "I'm off sir, Sarpanchji."

Shankar leaves.

"That sir," the Sarpanch says, "also feeds Shankar . . . a lot and stands over him." He says, "If your health goes too, who will come to let people know about Pirtha? Come, wash up, let me serve you food, you'll have to rough it."

— No Sarpanchji!

— You can't get anything here.

— I don't want anything.

There was a drought on, a drought. Tell me if there was a drought in 1980 and 1981, up to 1982, how could the green revolution come in 1983-1984? Who reaped those harvests? Puran wraps a local-weave gamcha-towel around his waist and bathes by the well. No, one can't come to Pirtha and return posthaste to look for good food in some government bungalow, it's immoral.

The wife or daughter-in-law sets down a flat wood seat with little legs and brings a laden plate.

Flat bread, rice, lentil, pickle, pappadum, yogurt.

Something pushes up in Puran's chest. There are posters all around saying "only one child, no more," and showing a happy couple. This poster has failed in a country where a child is born every second and a half.

— Sarpanchji, I can't eat so much.

Puran hadn't known that a laden plate could give such a shock.

— Ask for another plate.

The woman brings another plate.

— It's hard to eat just vegetables, nothing but greens!

— No, I don't feel good.

— If you take a little powdered-chickpea drink at noon . . . I are a ball of dried maize and molasses . . . you didn't eat anything, your belly is full of bile. Eat whatever you like.

A little rice, a little yogurt, a bit of molasses.

— That's all? Nothing more?

— No, I can't.

— Eat with us tomorrow then.

— No, I won't come for food. Have some maize-powder, salt, molasses, and rice brought for me. And a cooking pot.

— You cook yourself?

— Yes, I'm used to it.

— Does Sir have a family?

— Mother, my mother, and my son.

— And the housewife?

— Dead.

— You didn't marry again. And your son . . . ?

— He has his grandmother. And he's a big boy.

Puran tries to smile, "As in the poster, I have only one son."

— Yes . . . they cover cracks if you put them up on the wall, they stop the cold if you spread them on the floor, I distribute them a lot. But no more than one child! Here you are unjust. If you people have even four children, they get enough to eat, they get learning. Does that happen with the poor? The more children the better.

— But you won't be able to feed them.

The Sarpanch smiles at Puran's ignorance.

— He manages his kodo-grain himself. One goes to fetch wood, one pastures the goats of the village neighbors or of distant householders, one minds the younger kids, and even cooks. The parents can go to Bhalpura to look for work. One brings water, one goes to market to sell firewood. And all of them weave Khajra-leaf mats, to sell at the market.

Irrefutable argument.

— You can't do that family planning in a poor area. A poor household needs many children.

And they have no childhood, they remain illiterate. A child is born every second and a half in India. Where the parents have a halt after one or two children, there the children have childhoods

of a surplus of food and toys. Then from the nursery on as much higher education as possible. Population is increasing and will increase in the poorer social strata. India will only take their head count in 1991. And will not give them anything, education, a chance to live, some way of becoming fully human. On that stratum sexual intercourse with women is the only male pleasure, the way to be free of the pain of an accumulated sense of uselessness and failure, and as long as the parents are far below the poverty line, even if there are schools in every village, every year children will become child labor, ways of raising income. In Palamu Puran has seen children of eight and ten working in the landlord's fields with their parents.

Puran gets up.

— O Ganeshi!

— Sir!

— Give the sir a mattress, sheets, a rope mat ...

— Give me just a grass mat.

— Take a bundle of posters, you can spread them. There seems to be a touch of condescension in the Sarpanch's eyes. Puran realizes that he might be acting foolishly. He had always thought he was altogether self-reliant since he set out with nothing but a sarong and toothbrush in his shoulder bag.

Now he sees that's not enough. He feels inadequate. It's true that he can't reach Shankar's people by eating little or sleeping on grass mats. There is a great gulf fixed between Puran's kind and Shankar's kind. But he does want to get close.

Saraswati says, "Some day you'll see that what you know is not enough. Then perhaps your pride will fall, and you'll act natural."

— Am I full of pride?

— Isn't there a pride of "no pride"? It's there one way in you, one way in me, how can we avoid the touch of our times?

Now Puran realizes that he's never been in such a situation before. Where the ancestral soul casts a roving shadow, Bikhia draws, the settlement remains unclean and in mourning, and Shankar says, from a millennial other space, "We were!" Upon the backdrop of this experience there is the man-made famine. The same person, at the same time, banishes poverty in Constitution and Proclamation, creates poverty, protests in art-films.

They serve the upper echelons of society in glossy magazines, a lot of muddle like this.

What is Puran to do?

This burden is heavier on the return trip. The Sarpanch loads him up with maize-powder, molasses and salt, some rice. Ganesha takes a cooking pot. The Sarpanch says, "Don't pay me now."

— My paper has given me money.

— You can settle tomorrow.

On the way back the road from Gabahi to Pirtha is much longer.

It takes time to get there.

Pirtha is deadened. Bikhia is sleeping in front of the engraving.

He enters, lights the lantern, and lets Ganesha go. Puran was overwhelmed with sleep that night as soon as he had unrolled the mat, hung out the mosquito net and, lying down, had tucked it in. The rains came riding on cold winds that night.

And, when the rain symphony was at its peak, then into Puran's room came the soul of the ancestor of Shankar's people, half claw scratching, half floating.

It had crossed the passageway and entered the dead Dahi's house shrine, the inner shrine to the god of the house. Down the narrow passage with its wings furled, rubbing its claws on the floor. Did it make any noise then?

This Puran cannot say.

Puran turns to stone, he freezes.

It rains and rains and rains.

Did the sound of breathing come from the shine? Should he turn on his flashlight? No, that can't be. Puran slowly mobilizes his numb still body. He gets up.

He leaves his bed and stands on the floor. Then he slowly walks toward the passage. There is another room at the end of the passage. Part of the thatch of the room's roof has blown away. The room is not very large. Lightning flashes in the rain. The eye gets accustomed to it. Filling the floor a dark form sits.

From the other side of millions of years the soul of the ancestors of Shankar's people looks at Puran, and the glance is so prehistoric that Puran's brain cells, spreading a hundred antennae, understand nothing of that glance. If tonight he'd seen a stone flying with its wings spread, would he have been able to speak to it?

The creature is breathing, its body is trembling. Puran backs off with measured steps.

He comes outside. The rain wets him. Puran raises his face to

the sky and opens his mouth. He has never drunk the rain. Now water streams from his eyes, Puran sits down on stone. He leans his head on the wall.

No, nothing must be said. It wants refuge with Puran. Puran cannot betray this, for any reason at all. But what capacity does Puran have to protect the supplicant?

Why should Shankar's ancestors give Puran strength? From antiquity to today, the long marches of the Aryan and the non-Aryan, of the living and the dead are on parallel ways.

Puran has never been particularly curious about his (not personally his) ancestors; and Saraswati's comment that day (One of her friends's sisters having been burnt to death by her husband over a dowry problem), to the effect that look! Ramchandra is the ideal of caste-Hindu men in Bihar. What did he not do? Political treachery, murdering the powerful by trickery, subjugating the powerless for political profit, burning his wife, deserting her when she is pregnant, killing the Shudra sage Shambuk—I don't think the high-caste men of Bihar will ever be able to shake off Rama's influence.

This comment has thrown Puran into greater doubt. No, he doesn't want to know about ancestors.

Who will give him strength now? Puran sees that the sky is clearing and perhaps dawn is breaking.

Was he in that state that's called a trance in English? But now there's very little time. Some arrangement has to be made, but what exactly? If a naked beggar is asked to hide the koh-i-noor, where does he conceal the jewel?

Not the koh-i-noor, but a much more valuable, rarer, earth-shaking piece of news.

Newspapers and scientists from the world over are pouring into Pirtha, extinguishing the tribals altogether. Why Madhopura, Pirtha is on the map of the world. Internationally known foundations determine the "why and how." If the world finally comes to the decision that "only tribal areas inhabited by starving, living human elements can discover the impossible, that these areas can help us determine the earth's real age and prove that, in some parts of India, a piece of the original earth still remains undiscovered"?

Bikhia on international television?

Puran shakes his head. Goes behind the room. Keeps looking, keeps circling.

Someone holds his hand.
Bikhia.

A most imperial laughter in Bikhia's eyes. His lips don't move, don't speak.

Puran tears off a bunch of long grass and spreads his arms to show this much is needed. He knows Bikhia can hear him. He has only stopped speaking after he drew the picture.

— Grass needed, a lot.

Bikhia remains standing.

— And, water in a container like this!

Bikhia lets go of his hand and grabs his feet, puts his head on Puran's feet.

Puran pulls him up.

— Did you go to the room?

Bikhia inclines his head.

Surprising Puran he puts his hand on his own lips and on Puran's.

— Let no one know! No one will know.

Bikhia brought in bundles of grass. Before heaping grass at the mouth of the shrine-room Puran had seen flowers, rice, grains of kodo.

Had seen a bowl of water. An earthen bowl. Bikhia had gone forward with his eyes closed, with the bowl of water, which he had set down and retreated.

Their ancestor was looking at them with half-open ancient eyes and then Puran sees that his body was quivering non-stop. No, not too large. And what is it in his faded eyes, a question? Longing? What can it be?

Bikhia takes the load of grass into the next room, sets it down in a corner. There is a peculiar urgency now in his arms and legs.

Then he puts his palms together, lowers his head, and takes one turn. He expresses respect by lying prone. Looks up, the roof has blown away in the storm, there is a gap up there.

He covers the opening to the passageway with grass. Did he have all this dried grass stacked up in his room? That clay bowl, is it a household object, belonging to a home that its people have left, holding death's hand?

Puran keeps looking at him. At least he's not alone now, Bikhia shares the intolerable burden of his explosive discovery. Puran would have gone mad if he had had to carry this experience in his brain cells.

Bikhia has received his ancestral soul. That is why his face is now so full of a quiet wisdom.

What has Puran received?
Bikhia holds Puran's hand with utmost care. Puran weeps silently.

Bikhia keeps pulling him outside and points ahead.

Water is running down a crack in the rock.

Is Bikhia asking him to listen to the music of the waters?

Bikhia looks at him in deep expectancy but Puran understands nothing.

Puran understood later, a bit later, when Shankar came to take him down below.

— Where?

Shankar didn't answer. He went near Pirtha ditch and said, "You have brought this rain, the people of Pirtha are now in your debt."

The water is echoing and bounding into the source-pool, flowing away. Puran watches and says softly, "Cooperate with the Block Officer, Shankar. He is a very good man."

— I don't know if the curse will break.

— Perhaps it will.

Shankar sighs and says, "The gods gave water at a time when we don't have the strength to go down to the fields. There's water in the wells and the Khajra plants will live."

They were watching the water. The stream of the Pirtha comes out of the cave, down the stones. There are many caves on Pirtha Hill, small and large.

Caves, cave paintings, Bikhia's picture.

Puran now realizes that the rainfall on the night of his arrival might give rise to another legend.

He shakes his head repeatedly. He says to Shankar, "I have a heavy head. I got wet for a whim."
Shankar sighs.

— Come to Gabahi, take some tea.

Puran does not say no.

III

Harisharan says, "Man, they keep on waiting for a *miracle*. The modern age has given them nothing, if a *miracle* can bring some good luck into this intolerable existence! A small *miracle*, something big! The ancestors' shadow had brought a kind of news to them, as a result of which whole villages were awash with

death-wish. Malnutrition and starvation have a permanent settlement here, but in these three years I've never seen this type of despair, this type of exhausted despair. Night before last I couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, what a night of bad dreams!"

— Yes, you were very worried.

— *Tension* for me... it was my father's high blood pressure... My wife has brought me Benjamin's *Everybody's Nature Cure*. She writes all the time, Are you keeping to the blood pressure routine? And I write a million lies.

— What does *Nature Cure* say?

It is crucial for Puran now to find out what Nature says, what news she gives. He is caressing the leaves of the Khajra, the grass, the stones. From that dark rainy night on, he has been desperate to know if communication can be established, if the ancient mysteries of Nature can be known in any way. But it's breaking your head against an invisible glass wall.

Only when Bikhia comes at night...

— Come on, is it possible for me? I still write I am eating fruit, fasting from time to time, of course I really don't smoke or drink. I write that I am not eating spicy food, no sweets, almost no tea or coffee. But it's all lies, friend. Can one follow rules all the time?

— No, is it possible?

— Oh, I'm deeply in your debt. You don't know, but you've brought a small *miracle*. There it was, you came, and it started raining... there was some rain yesterday... there might be today...

Puran says in deep sorrow, "How can I bring rain? Can anyone?"

— *Man!* People who have nothing need *miracles*. For now it's through you... now a story will be put together from voice to voice, the story will become song... and the song will enter the history that they hold in their oral tradition.

Puran smiles palely. Can that be?

Will they ever wait in silence on the hilltop for the second coming of Puran? Shankar says those are not stones, the men who went on the ancient wars (Shankar doesn't know what wars, with whom, when) against the enemies, did not all return. The mothers, wives, and sisters of those who did not return turned to stone looking for their way back. At that time the enemy couldn't come across the Bhaipura, and the Pirtha was a bigger river. Those

ancestors of Shankar's people would go up near Bhalpura and fight, they didn't let the enemy enter tribal settlements. But now there's a bridge there, the map is changed. Their ancestors' soul has therefore wandered looking for familiar spots and been pained.

How naturally Shankar can say these things! If the town had moved as far as Pirtha, if tribals and non-tribals had lived together for two or three generations, then perhaps the memories of earlier times, the ancient glory-sagas, would have gradually become blurred in the mind.

That hasn't happened in Pirtha. These people are fully in exile. They have not received anything from modern India. This metal road has come to them to serve the interests of those very moneylenders from Bhalpura and Rajaura who will snatch their harvests to recover their loans, those patient customers who wait like vultures for the moment when starving parents will sell their children in the extremity of despair, and fall to feeding on carrion, the advance men of those labor contractors who will make the aboriginals their bond slaves with the seduction of "ten rupees a day and a full stomach."

Modern India only gives them posters for family planning. The birth of children increases rather than decreases as a result of starvation, until the bodies of the man and the woman go on strike permanently.

Only Shankar is literate in the surrounding villages. He too cultivates the stony ground, lives on the hillside, eats mainly the root of the Khajra. How can he abandon the past? They don't know if that past is legend or history, and no researcher comes to separate the two. And who is going to tell us what is legend and what history from the perspective of these totally rejected tribals? Where is the boundary between history and story? If we can get so much history out of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, what is the problem with Shankar's nostalgia?

How thoroughly rejected and forgotten these people are! They haven't seen a moving picture, they don't wear trousers, they don't drink tea, but only wait for a large or small *miracle*. When Puran leaves, will they be waiting in the merciless heat for the man who brought rain? And, if Puran doesn't come, will they say in self-consolation that he has gone somewhere else with his rain, where the drought is maybe just as bad? Is Puran so fortunate that they will mingle him in their history, saying, "Once upon a time he came with rain clouds at a sad burnt-out time when we were in mourning?"

— What are you thinking, Puran?

— No... so many things... did your Kausalji respond? Now he alone is our hope.

— Yes, today there will be a health camp in Gabahi. They are beautifully organized. Kausalji has been abroad many times. Don't you see how big the crowd is?

— But Hansharani! This is not the solution for Pirtha. For them to receive long-lasting help...

— My friend! Things will happen as long as this SDO is there. He too will come today. Well, what did the Sarpanch say? I hear you're not eating at his place?

— No... living in Pirtha... going to his house to eat... that's not possible.

— What do you eat?

— I have bought rice, salt, powdered dry corn, and molasses from him. I am cooking myself.

— Well...

— Come, let's get to work.

— Taking notes?

— Yes, in longhand. I am realizing how barbaric it is to photograph skeletal men and women.

— Please avoid that realization. Make an uproar about Pirtha. Otherwise for me to do anything will be very...

— I'll do everything, my friend. Don't you worry. After the massacre at Arwal, the Civil Liberties organizations are conducting investigations, many reporters from Delhi and from the big Calcutta newspapers. I will inform the Patna press. Also Delhi. Journalists are writing about Kalahandi in Orissa, why not about Pirtha? They will go to Bhopal and ask questions, about Bhopal as well.

— Bhopal! There's the Union Carbide disaster, yet there's also Bharat-Bhavan, a huge cultural center, and the minister builds a palace. The state government couldn't be mobilized around such an immense poison-gas disaster, can it be moved about Pirtha?

— Let's see. Only one request...

— What?

— Don't let them see Bikhi's drawing. Don't let them hear all that stuff about the ancestors' soul. Let them be concerned only about this permanent famine. Otherwise their enthusiasm will veer the other way. Bikhia will become the center of their discussion, surely you don't want that?

- No. I don't want that.
- These conditions are enough. This they'll find hard to digest. There will be an atomic explosion of news.
- I know. How will the drawing be explained?
- Bikhia is a natural. He saw such a picture somewhere and copied it. We think the cave-paintings are also his.
- That is no explanation. Let's leave it there for now.
- We want a stable solution here. As a *Block Officer*, don't you have any projects?
- The problem is most complicated, Puran. Look at it this way! I can help them in agriculture. I mean, I have the capacity. I will say this in Shankar's presence today. You will get an answer. Come, let's stop talking, let's go. Let's see what they're up to.
- Even the relief camp, this temporary relief camp has moved away from Pirtha. Gabahi is at least flat, and trucks can come there. All day yesterday, rice was cooked in Pirtha, powdered milk was mixed with hot water. The stone ovens are still filled with ash and burnt-wood. A skinny dog is hovering there.
- I don't see Bikhia.
- Must be around.
- I see marks of worship today as well.
- Bikhia has engraved the picture on stone with some kind of small hammer and chisel, like the ones used to prepare the spice grinding stone, and the lines show how gentle the hammer strokes must have been there.
- First he drew with a piece of chalk?
- Yes, that's what Suraj photographed.
- But you confiscated his film ...
- That he can't say. And this drawing is the only proof, if it's covered up ... let's see.
- Where did he get hammer and chisel?
- Listen, friend, they engrave pictures in that way inside their homes. They know all that. They carved the surface of the stone steps they built quite in the same way, so that they don't slip and fall. This work they know.
- Astonishing. Can't we turn this into something productive with enough encouragement?
- So I'd thought. You can't feed the government this project. How many will work? Where is the market? Still I kept it in mind. Yes, we should think about it, that they know how to use the chisel this way, if some cottage industry can be made out of this

... I think, I think.

There are lots of acacia trees between Pirtha and Gabahi. Harisharan said, "My Social Forestry Project is with acacia trees. On both sides of the Pirtha. They are themselves planting, as they hadn't before. Now they understand about planting. They can get firewood from the acacia. Goats can eat the new leaves. Although you still won't see goat or chicken in any of the villages. And they eat the seeds of the long hanging pods that are the fruit of the acacia. The acacia is the mythic tree of wish-fulfillment. Here, and in the State of Rajasthan, the acacia is the wishing-tree."

The Sarpanch says in Gabahi, "Come, sir! You are now a god to us. You came, the rains came."

— If the rains hadn't come, I would have been a demon, no?

— Don't they look for a witch when there's a drought or deaths from enteric fever? This is why witches are killed.

— Your *homework* is incorrect. Witches are indeed killed for such reasons. But these days most cases are land-related. They kill for the sake of land, or for the reward.

— These people don't believe in witches?

— The belief exists, but if things are this bad year after year—they know now that their lives won't be helped if witches are killed. But don't forget the matter of the *miracle*. They have assumed that nothing is owed to them, not even rain.

— To be a *miracle man* is a grave responsibility, Harisharan. Today *maggiman*, tomorrow fraud.

— Don't be difficult, Puran. Don't make me mad. Shankar! Hey Shankar!

Shankar does not come forward. He is leaning against the wall and watching. A little ahead you can see Kausalji's relief camp. The work is going forward with highly expert skill and speed. Now a thin gruel of rice, lentils, and vegetables is being distributed. The health camp is right beside it. Their doctors and health workers are examining men and women.

Kausalji is a heavyset man in dhoti and top. He says, "Reporterji. Be sure to take photos!"

— Sure.

— We are taking pictures too. Write that we have come to Pirtha before this as well and they are in such poor shape because of the government's lack of concern. There are plenty of projects at the *Block Office*. You can remove their poverty like a shot.

Harisharan says, "You make the effort. The Government will listen to you more than to me."

— Yes, we need a unit here.

— There is a *Block Office*, there are projects. Shankari!

— Yes, sir.

— Come this way. Take notes. Puran. These people are saying that there are many projects in the *Block Office*, we are not showing you support. I have talked to you before, but these people haven't heard. The government assigns projects by rote. I wanted to give you cattle per family, did you accept?

— How, sir? What would we have fed the cattle?

— We did give goats.

Shankar looks upward. Says in a detached voice, "What a state Pirtha was in that year! Nothing but acacia leaves. The goat is a tribal, sir. It knows how to live on minimum food. But even that bit wasn't there. People came from Bhalpura. They gave us five or seven kilos of kodo grain. We gave up the goats. Was there anything for it to feed on?"

— We gave poultry as well.

— Sir, if people don't have anything to eat, tell me what they'll feed goats and poultry?

Harisharan speaks, "We gave no ducks. That would have been a dreadful mockery. Where is the water? Agricultural aid..."
Shankar says, "If we had some land down below we could at least farm."

— Kausalji! The land these people owned disappeared long ago.

— Tribal land! Recover it for them.

— How? Did the land vanish yesterday? They farm on the slopes of this hillside, on barren land. Can one give agricultural aid to this soil? This is just for some kodo, some kulki... and even then in trivial quantities.

— I will get the land back from the government, let them come down from the hills, they will farm there, plant trees there, there's plenty of water. I'll build a housing development for them.

— Oh, that land?

— Let's see. I'll teach the women to weave cloth on a cooperative basis and there will of course be schools.

— See what you can do!

Now Shankar says, "Where is this?"

— To the west of Bhalpura.

— No hills.

Now Kausalji starts to speak fast and in English. "If they want to live on hills then we have to bring the roads up and give them land down below. Ask them to forget such unrealistic matters. Ask them to cooperate. Won't the condition of the tribals improve if they cooperate? Go and see in our Jijagar Ashram."

— There's a Shiva temple there, Puran, worth seeing?

— In our Jijagar Tribal Welfare Ashram two hundred tribal families...

Puran says, "I've seen on TV."

— You can't do it, Harisharanji. You didn't even build them homes, yet RLEGP [Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Program] says. Give the homeless tribals homes. This is not right.

— The government money for building homes cannot be used for constructing stone dwellings on the hillside. I will get some more wells dug.

Kausalji says in English, "Go slow, friend, go slow. If you help that much they will get entrenched here. But the place has been condemned. If you can move them, and plant some more trees, this spot with the river, the hills, and the trees will make an excellent picnic area. In Madhopura my brother-in-law is the Managing Director of State Tourism, and as you know, in Bhopal my..."

A rickety house is condemned. And the living areas of tribals. Unfit for the residence of the forest dwellers but fit for picnics. But Shankar was saying yesterday, "there used to be forest all around, now there is nothing. Still the graves of our forefathers are in Pirtha. We give to Pirtha's waters the bones of our dead at the end of the mourning time. Now we can't bury them anymore, we burn them. Then we put the ashes in a new bowl and bury them, put up a stone."

Will they put the past behind them, tear up their roots and leave this place to go to a housing development? Tribals in a tribal colony. In the India of the future, will they be preserved as endangered species or mingle in the *mainstream*? Or will the tribals change their character and become different? Even animals preserved behind wire netting are not safe. Somewhere the zookeepers themselves caught and ate the captive deer.

Harisharan tells Kausalji, "Yes, yes, of course. In fact he gives nodding assent to everything. Then he wipes the sweat from his

face and tells Puran, Now you see what these people are doing. I will give you all their published *literature*, Kausalji. Let me walk with him a few steps."

- What, isn't he going to lunch with us?
- No. He's just moving around, looking, taking notes.
- That's what we want. We will take video pictures from tomorrow. We always keep video pictures.
- You think of everything!
- The SDO will be here, why don't you stay?
- I'll be back in a minute.

Harisharan goes forward and says, "God, what a man!"

- He'll build a housing development?
- Listen! The land is his. He'll form another organization. It will be registered and to it he will donate this land for the welfare of the tribals. Then he'll get money from somewhere. He gets all kinds of funds. Foreign money too. Tell me, what can I do? These volunteer organizations can get in, even get some work done, precisely because the government has failed in its work. All that will take a long time, and I don't think they'll leave.

— Yes, this for them is the place where they have been from the immemorial past.

- But how will they survive here if they don't leave! Well. Now I'll be grateful if they run the camp for ten days. It's wet now, I'll sow kodo seed, sir. And if I give *agro-training* to a few of them then they can raise crops that don't need irrigating, like peanuts. We'll see! I fight on many fronts. With Shankar's kind, with the government, with politicians, and Kausalji has a lot of influence upstairs!

Harisharan says good-bye.

- Shall I bring anything for you tomorrow?
- A bit of fish.
- Cooked?
- No, no. I can do everything.
- Fish!
- Don't if you can't.

— It's very hard, my friend! If I can't, I'll feed you fish on your way back. It's rained, maybe there will be small fish even in Pirtha spring. But whole settlements are dying, who'll fish?

- I'll eat fish on my return trip then.
- That's better.

Harisharan leaves. As a student he had hoped to be an agri-

cultural economist, Puran used to think he'd become a professor. Life's wheel turns strangely. These days educated and affluent parents provide their children with education that will prepare them for a *career*.

Shankar's parents, Bikhia's parents, the parents of Dimag, dazed with the sale of his child (he'd wept aloud the first day, setting down the bowl of dried powdered corn and molasses. You did bring relief in the end, Master! I'd not have sold Māgni if I'd known!) never did *career-planning*, just as they never did *family-planning*. They knew they would not have a *career* more brilliant than farming for kodo with their spades in stony ground, if possible pasturing goats.

Yesterday the Sarpanch arrived and distributed bundles of posters, "End separatism, keep communal harmony intact, and renounce the path of violence." Dimag's wife was saying, This paper is not good, too thin. She is now pregnant, and forever holds the hand of a three-year-old girl, as if someone will snatch the child away. She talks as well.

- O Shankar! When will we all die together?
- Shankar! Why did relief come this time?
- Shankar! Why did it rain?

They are not entitled to rain, they are not entitled to relief, the ancestors' soul has come and gone casting its shadow, therefore unremitting death was their only lot.

Puran gets down toward Pirtha spring. A lungi—an ankle-length cloth—around his waist, a gamchha—a scarf-sized local washcloth—around his shoulders, torso bare. Now he takes off his sandals and walks down the steps cut in the stone. You can make lamps, candleholders, small urns, vases, et cetera if it's that kind of stone. Of course, the supplier will come to buy wholesale only if thousands are made. And if on stone tiles they carved the fish, elephant, people, bow and arrow, bird that they have in their dwellings, the government art emporiums, rich export boutiques of tribal art will be interested. What will the people of Pirtha get? Each question reaches a great no-reply.

The spring water is quite cool and under his feet is stone. He doesn't get fish, but gathers some stone-caught moss in his gamchha. There is a tremendous problem facing him.

He finds Bikhia waiting when he gets back.

Puran gives him the moss.

Their ancestors' soul looks with half-closed eyes. Rice, kodo,

some dead gnats. Small fish, some mud (so Bikhia caught fish) lie on the ground. Bikhia has refilled the water vessel.

Those eyes have a message for Puran.

Puran does not know those eyes' language.

Puran is a newcomer in the history of earth's evolution. The human being is only a few million years old.

This one came long before Puran.

Puran and Bikhia come out. The shrine room is full of an animal smell, a smell of flesh. This is an unknown carnal smell.

Now Bikhia looks at him. Then he suddenly stands up and spreads his arms as if in mime. The gestures are hand movements miming a floating flight round and round the room. He beats one hand on the wall as he turns and turns. Now that hand moves slightly. Bikhia sharpens his glance and still turns. Then squats with arms spread, drags himself on his hands toward the shrine room, and then is still.

— Yes Bikhia, all right. One wing is broken, so it dragged as it walked. Bring a bird if you can. If you can.

After Bikhia's departure Puran sighs and opens Harisharan's packet. And says in the direction of the shrine, Forgive me, forgive me.

IV

"Reptiles: in sea, in air.

"Pterodactyl—a flying reptile of the pterosauria class from the Mesozoic era, extinct species. Their limbs and organs were suitable for flying—their bones hollow and air-filled (when did marrow come to fill bones?)—the fourth digit of the front feet (they are quadruped) were unnaturally long holding up a flying membrane covering the entire body and thighs, Pterodactyls probably ate fish. Their earlier editions, e.g. the rhamphynchus, still had the long tail of a reptile and innumerable teeth.

"[This creature has no teeth. It does not have a long tail, Puran is certain, for he has taken a good look in the half-light.] The pterodactylus of the earth's Jurassic age was as big as a sparrow, with a very small tail, and teeth in the front part of the mouth. [This one is larger in size.] The pteranodon from the Cretaceous age was much larger, with a 25-foot wingspread, and a huge crest [of skin?] in the back of the head and a long toothless beak.

"[Pterodactylus, pteranodon, pterodactyl!] Now most experts suspect that the pterodactyl could not fly by flapping their wings.

"Their sternum was not strong enough to support the large muscles needed for flight. Our knowledge of the physiology of modern animals suggests that, with such heavy bodies and wings, they glided like waves, going up and down, some such thing!

"... One group of these creatures, the pterosaur, had bat-like leathery wings. [The pterodactyl, the pteranodon, and pterodactylus were all part of the pterosaur group.] From reptiles they became winged reptiles, creatures of the sky. They probably hunted on the wing, feeding on shallow-water fish. They did not get wet themselves. It was not these but flying reptiles from other groups that evolved into birds. The first known bird is the archaeopteryx. This crow-sized bird was in existence about one hundred and forty-seven million years ago."

Puran closes the book. He gets moving. The moon was in the waning phase, the sky covered with light clouds. How liquid the dark, as if melting bit by bit. Now the sacred room is covered by a grass-frame door. Bikhia is now worshipping as well as eating the relief food sitting in the same place, his eye is dusky and calm after establishing the pact of secrecy with Puran—he concludes this pact with Puran while remaining mute, making Puran think, by habit we speak, needlessly, one can do with many fewer words—even after doing all this he gets the time to make up the door frame by shaving the thin branches of the acacia and binding it up with grass.

No, you are not as small as a sparrow, yet your wingspread is not twenty-five feet, something in between the two—I won't go near, I won't touch you, I will not take your picture with the flash bulb of my camera. I think you rested somewhere as you flew floating, Bikhia saw you then and, on the run, quickly managed to draw your picture with chalk.

Did your eyes give Bikhia a sharply urgent wordsoundless message? The reason why your form was xeroxed on his brain and he could come running and draw that picture with chalk? Did he think then that chalk rubs off too easily, and did he therefore pick up hammer and chisel? Why is Bikhia not speaking? Why is he remaining mute? Was some communication established between your prehistoric eyes and his eyes, so that he (illiterate, never having read a book, with no knowledge of the history of the evolution of the planet) grasps that to keep your affair secret is

tremendously urgent. The world of today cannot be informed about you. "Today" does not know the "past," the "ancient." "Today," "the present times," "civilization," becomes most barbaric by the demands of getting ahead. Yet he doesn't know that "today" desecrates the ancient peoples' burial-grounds by building roads and bridges, cutting down forests. They won't let you go if they know of your existence, this is why he is protecting your visit like the sacred ashes of a funeral pyre or the bones of the dead. He has found some contact. He is a tribal, an aboriginal, you are much more ancient, more originary than his experience, both your existences are greatly endangered.

But oh the first and last living messenger from the prehistoric world! This too is the implacable and cruel truth that time will advance, that the wheels of time will destroy much as they advance. You cannot turn the eighteenth to the seventeenth, however hard you try. Only the creators of science fiction can do that. The boys and girls who are of the "cute" and "oh, baby" and "oh boy!" brand and who are constant escapists in the mind get an unadulterated joy when they read those stories. But in India, or in the world, what is "tidy," just fine, smooth? Such things exist for the few. For the many, time means a struggle red in tooth and claw and the struggle does not mean the same thing all the time. Time, complex time, how can a computer possibly process this time and give birth to a *data-sheet*?

The roof of the shrine room has blown away. The sky of the waning moon is covered in fragile clouds, the clouds are ambulant, there is water somewhere after all, for in the moon glow there is a large luminous circle around the moon. How transparent the dark, how liquid, melting bit by bit. Everything can be seen in such darkness. No, I don't want even to touch you. You are moveless with your wings folded, I do not wish to touch you, you are outside my wisdom, reason, and feelings, who can place his hand on the axial moment of the end of the third phase of the Mesozoic and the beginnings of the Cenozoic geological ages? That is a story of seventy-five million years. The Mesozoic ended in a tremendous turbulence, with the inception of the ancestors of the human being, and the Cenozoic, which is still going on, got its start. That is when the continents drifted again and took their current shape. You were supposed to have become extinct then. Space separating, seasons and climate changing. Did your world have such dusks? What ocean, what weed, what fish did you see?

And were you extinct? Have you left the pages of some picture book, taken shape so that you can give some urgent news to today's humans, have you come here because Pirtha is also endangered, its existence under attack for other kinds of reasons?

No, I have not the right to touch you. Apparently one can still see prehistoric fish in the sea. But there was, there was a pterodactyl somewhere, the world didn't know, I am silent, I am defeated. I won't go near to see if there are feathers, if the toes and nails of the front feet are truly long.

Puran's eyes put a question.

— What will you eat?

What do its eyes want to tell Puran?

This body made of the grey dusk or this liquid darkness is quite still. Only an unfamiliar smell, sometimes sharp sometimes mild. When Puran or Bikhia stands, the smell becomes mild and faint. Is this the instinctive feeling for self-protection against unknown animals?

There is no communication between eyes.

Only a dusky waiting, without end.

What does it want to tell? We are extinct by the inevitable natural geological evolution. You too are endangered. You too will become extinct in nuclear explosions, or in war, or in the aggressive advance of the strong as it obliterates the weak, which finally turns you naked, barbaric, primitive, think if you are going forward or back. Forests are extinct, and animal life is obliterated outside of zoos and protected forest sanctuaries. What will you finally grow in the soil, having murdered nature in the application of man-imposed substitutes? "Deadly DDT greens, / charnel-house vegetables, / uprooted astonished onions, radioactive potatoes / explosive bean-pods, monstrous and misshapen / spastic gourds, eggplants with mobile tails / bloodthirsty octopus creepers, animal blood-filled / tomatoes?"

The collective being of the ancient nations is crushed. Like nature, like the sustaining earth, their sustaining ancient cultures received no honor, they remained unknown, they were only destroyed, they are being destroyed, is this what you are telling us?

The dusky lidless eyes remain unresponsive.

Have you come up from the past to warn us, are you telling us that this man-made poverty and famine is a crime, this widespread thirst is a crime, it is a crime to take away the forest and make the forest-dwelling peoples naked and endangered? Are you

telling us that it is a crime to grasp in a stranglehold the voice of protest, and the arm of combat?

The eye says nothing.

How grey. What amazing eyes. It wants to say something, to give some news, Puran does not understand. *No point of communication.* Nothing can be said or written.

Is there a message in the smell of its body? Why do its eyes remain open? In the inner shrine room (the worshipped and the worshippers are gone) of the family god of a poor tribal (who is dead), you are sitting unmoving, oh ancient one, what do you want us to know?

The grey eye does not respond.

You have come to me for shelter, and I don't know how to save you, is that why I'll see your death? I don't know, if I knew I could have saved you, I don't know, if I knew I could have saved you, you would have left again on your flight, you would have searched out water, food, a resting place. I don't know, if I knew ... In this shrine room of stone and earth in the last years of this century an urgent message like this arrived and the news could not be given because human beings do not know or understand its language.

The grey eye wants to tell Puran something.

Puran shakes and shakes his head.

The water-pot remains as it was. Bikhia's offerings—a heap of moss, a handful of fish, insects and flying insects, Khajira tubers, kodo seeds, and rice—remain on the floor.

Puran backs out, closes the grass door.

Carefully puts away the books lent by Hanisharan. He knows more because he has read the information in the book, and the subject of the discussion is physically present in front of him. Yet he can know nothing from life.

How little he understood when he traveled in Ranchi district from one Munda village to another till he finally learned about them from S. C. Roy's book. Saraswati says, "Perhaps you have not been able to know me after so many years spent close together, because there is no book about me."—No I have not, Saraswati. Homihidi—homihidi—homo sapiens—maplens—the human being, modern man is afraid to know life by entering life. It is much safer to know life by reading books, reading theory.

But if the pterodactyl flies and casts its shadow in Pirtha Block in the distressed days of famine, if the aboriginals of Pirtha

think that their ancestors' soul has returned grieving because their ancestors' burial ground has been desecrated in their now extinct settlement, and if Bikhia, an illiterate tribal youth, draws the pterodactyl on the wall, and seeing it, photographing it, if there is an explosion in journalist Surajpratap's head, and if the SDO hides the photos by the following reasoning: "No, no indulgence for the fantastic. For if we acknowledge the pterodactyl, where will homo-sapiens-maplens be? Their two worlds are different, after all", and when Pirtha settlement is unclear in mourning, if journalist Puran enters the stage on Hanisharan's SOS (expressed appeal, Put Pirtha on the national map, and unexpressed appeal: "what about the most mysterious mystery of the century?") and if on a cloudy rainy night of the rainy season, through the doorless opening of Puran's room enters a pterodactyl, and goes to the godless shrine (how straight it went, was it living there before?) and seeing it there is an explosion in Puran's head (this fact must be kept secret, this discovery), and at the break of dawn comes Bikhia, from speechlessness moves to a lowered head, and before daybreak when Puran is quite adrift by the force of his amazing, inexplicable discovery, if then he finds out that those who considered him an outsider and an enemy yesterday are themselves today seeing him with different eyes, saying "He came and in his steps came rain, water for the thirst of the soil, of ourselves, of the rivers and the wells," then what is to be done by Puran, no book has been written about this.

If written by a third person Puran would have got a perspective on the whole thing.

There is no one to write.

And Puran has known in his blood-cells and his brain these three days that even after this deeply investigative analysis he knows nothing, has known nothing. Without taking his first lesson from humanity he has reached the final phase of the century. Yet he has seen human beings in the most excruciating distress, protesting oppression and debauchery and the blood-festival of the oppressor's protesting the protest, he has seen the battle between the government-enforced teak and the traditional Sal, the protest against industrialists by workers infected by poisonous asbestos down in asbestos mines, he has seen the self-congratulatory jubilation of the police after blinding prisoners.

How much he has seen like this, seen and written and come back to his safe room where Saraswati arranges and dusts his

books and sits waiting for the day when Puran will say, "Come into my room and come into my life," but even that Puran has not said.

He has known nothing, for he has wanted to know nothing. And it is to such a half-man, a rootless weed, that the messenger from old earth comes to impart some intolerable warning message. What will Puran do?

Today, at the crack of dawn, Bikhia comes with a jubilant face like an ancient hunter, with a freshly killed snake at the end of his stick. He looks at Puran and goes straight through pushing the grass barrier.

Puran waits standing.

Bikhia comes out after a long time. His mime is on stones of the hillside washed by the morning light, against the backdrop of the sky.

Now both his arms are wings, his body folds in two and crumples, he rolls his head, his two arms come down, immobile. He looks at Puran with questioning eyes.

Puran shakes his head.

— I don't know, Bikhia, what he'll eat, how live, what he wants.

Bikhia sighs and lowers his head, his body folds and crumples and trembles violently.

— Don't cry, Bikhia. Keep looking after him. And listen, I don't know where there are caves in these hills, you will lead me today. A most secret cave, where no one will ever go.

Puran strokes his body and head. Is anything communicated? Puran will have to leave Pirtha with so many things unknown.

He says in a deeply tender, soft voice, "Where is the time, Bikhia? We'll have to get a place nobody knows but you and I."

Bikhia gets up, leans his head in assent. Then he starts moving, as if he too is suddenly millions of years old. He can't carry on, he is weary, full of fatigue. So he drags his feet as he walks.

Puran goes into the room and lies down, closes his eyes.

Strange, they are no longer beating the drums.

What have they come to know, what news?

Puran writes the famine report in his mind.

In the morning Puran had seen a lot of acacia flowers, a lot of acacia leaves in front of the engraved stone, the stone almost invisible with flower and fruit. There was also a handful of rice, some earth in a clay pot, a torn piece of cloth and the place for

the offerings marked off with a line. Bikhia stood leaning against the wall. Whoever came, touched the stone and put their hands to the forehead. Each left some acacia flowers, leaves, a handful of soil. The soul of the ancestors came driven by distress and now Bikhia must go in search of a cave, for the guest's hour of departure is approaching, he cannot stay anywhere here any more—everything has been invaded and devastated by the present—now he will return against the current of time. There will again be an impenetrable, profound and unrelieved darkness—and so Bikhia puts everything into the offering. Take leaves and flowers, there is no forest. Take rice, there is no beast or fowl for sacrifice, take a handful of soil, we hold no ground anymore. Take a bit of torn cloth, there is no coarse cloth loomed at home—I have marked off that little space, because around our existence an invisible line is coming ever closer, we are terrified, there is no escape.

There is no escape, we were torn apart so long ago, in fragments in atoms, we are scattered everywhere. Does Bikhia tell this in his offering?

Nothing can be known or grasped. Puran says softly, "Now we must go, I'll be back in a minute."

Bikhia looks with pained eyes. His eyes are quite impenetrable now. A precious, incredible mystery (for Bikhia the ancestral soul is a fact, the scientific definition of the pterodactyl is without value for him), that was only his at first, must now be taken in equal share with this outsider, this has hurt him. But this too is now an immutable directive from past generations, that on the last flight of the ancestors' soul the outsider is the last resort. So he can't ignore Puran's words.

Puran waits a minute. Soon the Pirtha chapter will in the strict sense be over for him. The rest of his life will have to be spent evaluated from the perspective of Pirtha. In fact Pirtha has kicked this much sense into him, that water, bread, rice, are actually extremely precious in India, more precious than the koh-i-noor, and no one has the right to waste them or destroy them at will. As precious is a roof overhead, a cloth on one's body, a-b-c-d, medicine in time of disease. One person eats well by keeping five hundred starving, one person graduates college while six hundred remain illiterate, and one person buys an apartment keeping how many hundred homeless, such complicated ratios. No ratio has ever been calculated from the position of people-like Bikhia. The position from which *computer*, information ministry, and *media*

see the situation depends on the will of the current social and state systems. And it is by the will of this system that the educated person is unwilling to think. This system considers original thought an "exterminable threat." This system forcibly occupies the thinking cells of the brain and makes a body brush his teeth with Forhan's toothpaste. Sometimes makes him or her say that India is proudly on the way to becoming the biggest power in the Third World. Again sometimes it makes one crazy with the idea that the first duty is to change the name of the state. The system wants, and people "dance like wooden dolls." But the first obligation is to calculate the ratio from the position of people like Bikhia. Without that effort Independence has grown to be forty years old.

Bikhia, you don't want anyone to know of our dreadful discovery, for to you he is your ancestors' soul. The purity of the situation will be polluted if anyone knows.

Bikhia. I don't want anyone to know of our dreadful discovery, because if we let them know there will be an invasion of the media of the inquisitive world. You will be shown on television, and the soul's warning message, the terrifying news of the tribal being of Pirtha, will all lose their perspective, by many analyses the rodent and the rhododendron will be proven the same. And who can tell, all the countries of the world will conduct investigations out of Pirtha everywhere, into the last forest, the last cave, to see where the prehistoric time and creature are still hidden. That invasion will be inevitable.

You are endangered, and so am I. Like that song,

Alasl! Alasl! Dust storm has come

Alasl! Alasl! The land is going

Alasl! Alasl! Our country is going

Alasl! Alasl! Land-country-people is going to dust, to dust!

Alasl! Alasl! How shall we catch dust-notes from the air and

make a plowing-field?

To build the lost land?

We are distressed in that way.

But finally Puran says nothing. They are bilingual and speak Hindi.

Puran too speaks Hindi.

But Puran's Hindi and theirs come from two different worlds. Not just here, but from district to district of Bihar Puran has had

the same experience. After the shooting at Gua a political leader gave a spirited speech in fiery language.

Having heard it all Roto Sumrai said, "Explain what he said, in Hindi."

A class-divided society goes on parallel lines. There is no meeting-point. Language too is class-divided. Whether exploiter, or a fake party man with an "I am for the poor" type slogan, or yet a true lover of the poor or a believer in the change needed in this rotten social system yet "no party man," their Hindi-Bengali-Gujarati and other languages move on parallel lines with their tongues. The problem is so big and permanent that the peasant Ramabatar from Nalandanda would say, "Such is the situation. What to do, Maharaj?" Ramabatar called everyone "Maharaj [O King!]" including his goat.

Puran sighs.

— I'll be back, Bikhia.

V

Harisharan is most melancholy, and at the same time excited and reckless. The SDO remains as before, calm, harsh with repressed bitter mockery in the knowledge that all goodwill will finally be beaten. Puran realizes that an honest officer with a conscience has come to know that he will be defeated if he gives battle, but has decided to enter the battlefield within administrative confines. He is younger than Harisharan, yet he is old in wisdom. Harisharan is older, but he can still get reckless. As a student he had once said, "Let's do it on foot," and walked to Bodhgaya without climbing on a railway train. He is a bit older now, but he's still pig-headed.

— Pirtha is now a battle of honor.

— Hush, we don't want Kausalji's men to know anything.

— Kausalji has power, let him get work done if he can.

— ITDP [Indian Tribal Development Program] area. Government will say why should a non-government organization work when the government is there?

— But government is doing nothing.

— You and I are doing nothing.

— Will this state of affairs continue in Pirtha Block, in this Panch?

— Let him try, and let us try our best.

— How? There is no land, what land there is is full of stones. Who will give better than government quota land to a tribal? And where is land like that here?

— They will not go elsewhere.

— No.

— And they are all in debt at compound interest.

— Yes. The moneylenders are in Bhalpura, in Rajaura.

— Think about it calmly, please.

— About what?

— The current food problem.

— The magistrate will not say this is a *chronic famine area*. We must give battle on this issue.

— *Fight the famine on war footing?*

— Such is the case.

— *Fight the famine on war footing.*

The primary gross truth, nobody will allow you to say that an atom of the green revolutionary area of the State of Madhya Pradesh is in the "perpetual famine" zone of extreme backward tribals. War! War in sky-soil-water. Food will rot because of insufficient storage facilities at the Food Corporation, but it will still never reach, never does reach Pirtha, Kalahandi or Koraput. Food goes to Africa, to Sri Lanka, promises of building collective crop farms are given at SAARC conferences, let them be given, give everyone everything since you overproduce greatly in food crop production, but why not, at the same time, give to the district of Kalahandi and to the micro-region of Pirtha, why count the heads of the villages, of the forest-settlements of North Bengal for the census, to identify "Scheduled Tribe constituencies" and why not bring them within the panchayat system or the purview of the ITDP and when it comes to the responsibility for drinking water to roads for movement, education, health, employment, why wash your hands of them and say "They are under the Forest Department," when the Forest Department keeps them as slave labor, exploits them as "permanent casuals," gives them nothing, ever. By the same policy you keep the tribals of the North Bengal Dooars as outcastes, who are counted (the figure is needed to demarcate a constituency), and for them also you do not fulfill the minimum human claims from a to z, you say, "The tea-garden owners will look after them," and the garden-owner passes eighty-three paise per head for the garden's coolies in 1987, when "the century's sun is in the Western sky and its shadow is long,"—and

the garden-owner can show this impudence because no government upsets the owners, let the owner of the tea-garden be a multi-millionaire, let the coolies be in the debit column; when the only tribal-directed tea garden cooperative is swallowed up by anonymous fake owners and the wily government takes the safe and profitable role of the spectator. When the names of the Nagesia tribals from Ranchi and Palamu are not included in the list of tribals census after census, and in the Assam Dboars and the plains, the Santal-Oraon-Mundas brought a hundred and fifty years ago are not listed as "tribals" but as "castes." (These facts would have remained unknown if Puran had not read books.)

This is reality, these are facts. Who will save them by fighting on a war footing in the case of the tribals dead, half-dead, dying bit by bit, of sheer starvation?

SDO says, "Do everything."

Raising his face to the sky he wipes his throat and says, "Give wells, trees, goats, hens, give a check dam at the mouth of the Pirtha, put them to *Block* work and give them *minimum wage*. Make an attempt. I have written, there are famine conditions in Pirtha, not drought. I don't know what will happen after that. But you'll have to keep at it."

Later Shankar told Puran, "The SDO sir, the *Block* sir, will all be transferred. If they do nothing, then they will stay put and if they dig one well they'll be transferred. Better not to do anything."

— Why, Shankar, why?

— They will not be able to change things for the better.

And these words later came true when the Irrigation Department, without actually opposing the building of a dam at Pirtha, simply said, "This is a department matter" and made the proposed double dam useless by tying a gordian knot around it with red tape.

First the SDO and then Harisharan were quickly transferred on the charge of "inventing famine where there is no famine."

All that happened later, much later.

Later even Kausalji gave up hope, because Shankar and his people did not get down into the distant plains, did not live in colonies, because "there were no hills there." All this distress is because of living in the hills, yet they did not leave the hills to descend, they did not abandon Pirtha, and when Harisharan gave Shankar a thorough scolding about "getting food, remaining alive, getting education," Shankar consoled him, saying, "Don't be so

concerned, sir. We are dying, our numbers are decreasing. There are enough Khajra trees for so few, and it is you who have taught us to eat seeds of the acacia fruit, and look also! Not so many are being born, and even when they are born they are sold. Don't think so much for Pirtha, you are a good man. You feel pain. What can you do? There is no good soil in the plains below!"

Harisharan wept at this.

It was Harisharan who later wrote this to Puran from Indore. At least a year and nine months later.

Now Harisharan says, "Kausajji's master-plan is not going to take effect today."

— Do your own stuff without thinking of that. Oh hello Mr Journalist! You stay here. Pirtha needs rain. Of course the rains bring administrative problems as well. The people upstairs have only one verdict, "It's not famine, it's drought." Now that you've brought rain, the verdict might become "It has rained, so it's not even drought." See what a problem it is for us.

— I didn't bring rain.

— I hear that's what the tribals are saying.

— What else are they saying?

— I hear they're saying that the rainmaker must not leave.

— There would have been rain anyway.

Harisharan says, "*Mam, let them have their miracle.* They want a miracle, I have nothing in my bag. Only yesterday someone said in Rajaura, A sage is ready to do a fire service in Rajaura and is *guaranteeing* rain as a consequence but the Block government will have to pay expenses, ten kilos of clarified butter et cetera."

The SDO says, "So bring him."

— Sir, I said that my friend brought rain without expense. So the holy man's tout said, "The real religious people are beaten because of these crooks. If someone brings rain without a religious service, no one will have a service performed."

SDO says, "What's up with Bikhia?"

Harisharan says, "He's kept his mouth shut, but I hear he's very friendly with Puran."

— Are you in mourning too, reporter?

— Mourning, why?

— Unshaven face, dried out hair, bare feet, and wearing a lungi-sarong are dangerous. If you leave after this it will be an act of treachery. Hang on here.

— I stay showing false passion, and then to leave because I

couldn't bear to eat Khajra tubers and live with the drought and distress would be even greater treachery.

— The reporter is smart, Harisharanji! He knows one mustn't raise hopes in the tribal's mind, for it is hard to keep a promise in the end.

— Not hard if you admit to it beforehand.

— How?

— I was young then. A friend of my father's, an "uncle" with an M.A. in Anthropology, got a job in Dandakaranya. Very honest, most hard-working, interested in education, and with experience in other tribal areas. But he had worked mostly in the Himalayas where people cover their body.

— Why is dress important?

— There is a reason, believe me. Then he went to Dandakaranya. He came from a conservative family, and was himself a devout and practicing brahman. Since he couldn't keep to every restriction when he was on tour, he would do penance when he returned home. Now he went to an area this time, you understand, where women did not cover their chests, only down from the waist. Since he read a lot, he had known that women of that particular tribal community dressed in that manner. But once he saw it himself, he could not take it. He left after three months, resigned his job. He wrote the Department, "They are simple and innocent. But I am greatly inconvenienced at the sight of their women. I realize that the 'nakedness' is a pure and innocent thing, but I also realize that I am myself not so civilized, simple, pure, or innocent that I will accept this 'nakedness' as my bread and butter. Otherwise why should my mind react this way?"

What's the matter Kausajji?

— Come, they are going to take a video picture.

— No no, you are enough.

SDO says, "What is this?"

Suddenly there is a slight disturbance there. Dimag's wife is saying something, Shankar goes forward.

— Let's go and listen.

— Don't take a fillim sir.

— Look here, if we don't inform people about you, how will they know?

— Don't take, sir.

— How strange! Harisharanji! This way ...

The SDO says, "Go. This is your affair."

Harisharan goes forward.

— What's up, Motia's Ma?

Dimag's wife flares up, "Why are you calling me Motia's Ma? Where is Motia? Take a fillim again, people will come again, they'll know famine is going on, again *tur-rucks* will come. They'll take all the children away."

Kausalji is angry, he's angry, and it is now evident that he can raise camp from here at any point in time. OK, let the government decide if there is a famine or not. He has come and is doing work to save the deprived. But famine or drought, or the matter of administrative failure or negligence and Kausalji's role and human suffering, all this should be captured in a documentary. Public opinion will be shaped, and relief help will come, in fact there are people and organizations in other countries of the world who think of the hungry humans of the Third World. A lot of pictures are taken to form international public opinion about Nicaragua. This is true that the tale of Pirtha does not come into the map of Kalahandi even, forget Nicaragua (a little regret resonates in Kausalji's voice, practiced in giving speeches at home and abroad), but this must be documented. And it is here that he wants to inform those who misunderstand his goodwill that, if his wishes come true, then he will take the distressed of Pirtha from stony hill to the green of the plains, there they will have rooms fit to live in, drinking and irrigation water, agricultural aid and land, his training for women, school for children and adults, health care, they'll live like humans. They need this video image as they need food for their aid. No child-buyer will see this, but only those who need to see it. Government people have become very selfish, and people in the West have become self-indulgent.

The SDO says softly, "Here is the power of money—rupee, West Germany's mark, kroner-dollar-franc-pound. What do you say, Harisharanji?"

Shankar looks at the Sarpanch. Will the Sarpanch say something? But the Sarpanch is confused and silent.

Shankar looks at Harisharan. Sir! Sarkar! It's you brought these people, now will you too remain at a safe distance? Or will you make me say that we are surrendering? His eyes say to Harisharan in experienced wisdom, I know, Sarkar. Everything finally becomes a deal, even giving food to the hungry. At this moment we're eating his food, in exchange he wants to capture us *in film*. His dictionary cannot include the self-respect of the hungry.

He raises his hand. Says dryly, "Motia's mother could not make you understand. We are now in mourning. Our ancestors' soul is displeased with us. Our faith is hurt if you take pictures of us in this state."

— It's not a question of faith.

— I know. Take pictures. Motia's mother! Don't obstruct anymore, there is nothing we can do. If the government looked after the tribals, then how today . . .

Now the pictures are taken. The women cover their faces with the torn ends of their cloth. The men turn their faces away. The scene of an old woman holding a skeleton baby in arms taking lentil-rice in her bowl, is captured very well and when the tape recorder is held close you can catch the rattle in the old woman's throat and her mumble as well as the child's chirping wail.

— The next show in Geneva.

Harisharan murmurs.

SDO shakes his head.

— Come back to the initial argument. The government has failed in eradicating poverty. It's giving a lot of money to voluntary organizations, and it's a fact that behind most active, successful organizations there is foreign money coexisting with domestic money. In fact, because this dirty wash would have been brought out again . . . reporter?

— I'll tell you later.

What's there to say about this. Foreign money infiltrating by way of voluntary organizations in the name of welfare, is that unknown to the central government or at the state level? They have to accept this, because in spite of their hundreds of thousands of projects and tens of millions of rupees and a few hundred thousand government employees and Panchayats nothing reaches the real recipient. This ocean of money that flows for the removal of poverty among the tribals and the other deprived groups does not show up in the tribal and non-tribal demograph of destitute India. So many job quotas are another hoax, for how many tribal PR officers, computer scientists, oceanographers, and particle physicists have been produced in forty years? Who gets the jobs of that type that are set aside for them? They go a few in a million into higher education, it's enough if there should be a handful of lawyers or doctors, or they go into the humanities stream, not science or business, and even that a few in a million. All the states and the Center are pushing away poverty, and yet

poverty is and will be on the rise. They don't even get called according to the work that they can do. Teaching jobs in commerce, the sciences, geography, political science, and economics are reserved for tribals; and Bengali, English, History kept open for everyone, so everyone gets those jobs. "Because there are no qualified tribal applicants." When this is the entire *film serial*, then the voluntary organizations have to be acknowledged and if a *pathological* analysis of the sample is made foreign money comes out. Apart from the organizations nourished by foreign money there are too few voluntary organizations that can do anything for the poor. The Center and the state governments have accepted reality. Since these are the facts, the SDO's purism is unrealistic. All the power is in the hands of the government, and a huge amount of money spent is not reflected at all in the demograph of destitute India. The amount of milk reflects the cow's intake, a richer harvest reflects the fact that more advanced methods are being applied in agriculture, but the money that the Center gives the state and the state sends for the tribal Block in Pirtha, is not reflected at all in this area condemned to a life sentence of starvation. In the government documentaries, who acts the healthy, happy, smiling tribal peasant couple? Who says, We are building a happy family because we have only one child?

Puran says, "I'm off."

SDO asks, "Won't you write about Bikhia's picture?"

— No. That's their own affair.

— You're a journalist, weren't you intrigued?

— It's the soul of their ancestors, not mine.

— And this famine?

— Possibly the first culprit is the fundamental failure or heartlessness of the tribal welfare department from state to district to subdivision.

— That's all?

— They are themselves guilty as well. With all these arrangements for extinction they are not extinct, don't they have to pay for it? How much more relieved you'd have been if they weren't here.

Harisharan says, "Don't lose this bite in your report."

— It'll be there. On the survey map too Pirtha is between two jaws. How can there be no bite?

— You too are mad at Kausalji's film.

— Don't be daft. What right have I? It's he who's taking the film. So much relief, so much preparation, and no bite!

— *Man!* Don't you look at Shankar's eyes, all their eyes? They are again curling up inside. This is the real problem. We are living together, we talk, but they never trust us.

— This is a subject to be debated, discussed.

— They are angry.

— Harisharan! Don't be childish. We already have this situation, and then do you notice Kausalji's words? From the way he speaks, it's quite clear that he is blaming the failure of the government, explaining that his Kausal-method is much more effective, and that the tribals know nothing, everything about them is backward, most barbaric, and if they leave all this they can start new lives in his projected colony, this too he explains. Their starvation is real, the relief camp has held their inevitable death at bay for a bit, this too is real. But hence they must be grateful, they must enjoy things, by this you're expecting too much.

— You're back where you began, friend. But it's as if you have really understood them?

— I'm living in a dead woman's house, I too am in mourning.

SDO asks, "Are you eating all right?"

Harisharan says, "This is not Surajpratap, but the reverse case. Listen man, don't go crazy in a different way. Everyone will say, Pirtha is the place where reporters go mad."

Puran smiles a bit at the words of both and says, "I'll be on my way. I must make some notes to write my report, mustn't I?"

SDO says, "Write this too in your notes, that Kausalji wants to make a picnic spot out of the spring-fed pool and hillside of Pirtha."

Harisharan shakes his head repeatedly.

Puran says, "I also need to know your views on why no projects have been blueprinted or implemented in this ITDP area. The matter is most complex. I suppose?"

— Do come by. I'll tell you everything.

Puran looks around, and says, "In the Pirtha package, you get a sample of tribal India. Incredible."

Puran leaves.

SDO says, "Do you think he'll hang on?"

Harisharan says, "Oh no."

Now the Sarpanch comes forward. Excited.

— What's the matter?

— Sarkar, we must pitch camp in Derha, Sangatoli, Madhola, Pungah as well. Please give the order. Won't there be encampments there? There's famine in those areas as well.

SDO says, "Sure thing. Definitely. From the *Block Office*. What's Madhola *Block* doing?"

— The BDO has not been there for three years, Sarkar-sir! And the Sarpanch is in hospital.

— Even so.

Harisharan says, "Why don't you go on tour with the SDO from the *South*? Take some material with you when you go. There too—"

— Yes, Kausalji's organization is there as well.

— It's admirable that his organization works in many places in the district.

The SDO sighs.

— Why shouldn't there be, sir? The entire state of Madhya Pradesh was under kings and nawabs of various degrees of power. His family owned land all over the district. Madhola was in his taluka-fief. Wherever he had talukas, he has ...

— I don't know all this.

— Wherever there were kings and chiefs ... Yes, Sarpanch, something will be done.

— My daughter lives in Madhola. My son-in-law has sent her back here. The Janayuba [People's Youth] Group boys are here. They say, We'll take kodo seeds and maize from those who have some, and will give it out to everyone.

— Where is their leader Madhu Singh?

— In Bhopal. There'll be trouble with all this, Sarkar-sir.

— No, what's the trouble? They don't plunder, they are non-violent, they do purification-penance, and they distribute *leaflets*.

Harisharan says, "No, let's come to a decision."

— Harisharanji! The more it's known the more problems we'll face. Think upon it. Do whatever you can within these conditions. Kausalji says, "Wherever the suffering people are, there we are too. Try to understand that. Cooperate with us."

— Isn't your organization working there?

— Other work, but they'll do relief work as well. But that's not the solution of the problem. We need a permanent solution. Give me the chance, I'll show you work. My workers are different. They have not come for a job like the government employees. The government and the contractors are eating the money that is the tribals' right.

Kausalji looks at them as he says this. It's his brother's contracting firm that gets the government contracts in Madhopura.

His anger is due to the fact that Harisharan and the SDO kept him in check. But now everything will be passed. He holds much more power than they do.

— We'll bring clothes tomorrow.

After he leaves, Harisharan says, "We will start well digging, and some goats and hens ..."

— Whatever you do, double quick.

— What do we tell Puran?

— Tell him the truth. Journalist people understand. They will want the truth.

— Puran too has changed so in these few days.

— It happens, suddenly this sort of thing happens. Bye.

He turns around as he goes and says, "I too must make *notes* to defend my end. It can't be that I came to know after a journalist from Bihar informed me."

— Yes sir. But Madhola—

— Yes. Let him go! They are not in mourning there.

The Sarpanch says in troubled surprise, "Why do you think so, Sarkar? Everybody near here, tribal areas, tribal settlements know about this and are in mourning."

— But they saw nothing.

— So what? How do I explain ...

Shankar comes forward, "Stop explaining, Sarpanchji! Leave us now. Mahi and Diman and Lurhi are calling. You have not put their names on the list yet. Greetings, Sarkar!"

Shankar does not stop walking.

SDO looks at Harisharan.

— You have to take it all.

— Yes, sir.

Shankar stops in a bit. Steps down and off the track. Harisharan knows what there is. On the slope of the hillside, between and below two hills (the hills are low here, they can be called cliffs). Their land is on the gravelly flats. Divided by cactus fences. There's land here, land by the Pirtha ditch, land in little lots, perhaps no one has a full acre.

— What do you see, Shankar?

— Sarkar?

— What are you looking at?

Shankar says, "Land."

— Let's see what happens if it gets irrigation. It's never been irrigated after all. If there are field-wells in the land itself ...

— "Yes, Sarkar."

Shankar shakes his head. Goes forward. You can see from his eyes that he has entered some cave again. The video filming has shaken him.

Harisharan moves toward the camp. He must be in constant attendance at this time. For Kausali. Although his worry for Puran nags at him and he is pained that Shankar has again become the elusive quarry of fable for him. The *magistrate* often says, "Trihals are ungrateful and do not realize how much the government does for them."

Harisharan had brought for the Sarpanch today posters proclaiming that "Leprosy can be cured if caught in time. Go to the nearest Leprosy Hospital." The paper is good, the posters large-sized. The crowd has opined that it is a help that the government is giving such paper. Pasted on grass frames such paper will keep out the wind. The women say they can lay their babies down on it. You can sift the relief food grains on it. It is useful in many ways. Government proclamations serve the poor in this way alone.

Harisharan thinks, Who will do family-planning? These people are keeping the peace and quiet of the country unbroken in the process of becoming extinct, how much responsibility can a person who had nothing to eat today take to stop separatism and communalism all over India, and when Shankar and his other tribals had surrounded Rajaura Block office (by sheer luck not in his time!) chanting "Sarkar! Give us seeds, seeds, to eat," they had threatened law and order in the Block? And Leprosy Hospital! There are no hospitals near here. The Sarpanch or a village doctor or healer is the resort in sickness. They do know how to use these posters.

— O Sarpanch! Give the reporter some posters.

Puran is lying on the ground on a mat, eating maize powder, unbelievable! He used to wash his gamcha, vest, and sarong with soap every day.

Puran and Bikhia went looking for a cave in the same distressed urgency. A flashlight in Puran's hand, a staff in Bikhia's.

The water of Pirtha pool was shadowed by its banks, by the acacia trees all around. The water was green in places, in places transparent with sun. Stones slipping with moss in the bottom, the water comes up to your waist. Crossing the pool, walking upstream along the ditch gives you the sense that Pirtha hill is not

narrow and confined. It has spread its domain over a good area. The roots of the tall grass in the cracks of the stone are tough.

Puran has seen just such grass in the Western Ghats. Though after the rains there were sweet and bitter-sweet fruit trees on the slopes and peaks of the Western Ghats, food for the local poor, and there were countless waterfalls.

Here the hill looks primeval, the spread of the land is different, hard and harsh. There are no wild fruit trees; no trees of unscented white flowers as in the Western Ghats. After walking a bit Bikhia grasps at the hanging grass and enters a cave mouth and signals to Puran, Come up the same way.

Puran ties his gamcha around his waist and climbs up. Drums seem to beat in his chest, his heart lashes so in excitement.

He flashes his light, moves up watchfully with Bikhia and suddenly gets some sun as he enters a well-proportioned cave. The sun comes in at one side through the crevice above.

Puran shines his flashlight where Bikhia points. Drums beat from the smooth stone, one hears the clamor of the dance.

With great care and over time, who has engraved dancing men and women, drum, flute, the khoksar to keep the bear? Peacock, elephant, deer, bird, snake, naked child, tree, Khajra tree, bow and arrow, spear.

The human beings are larger than life, the animals and birds small, the trees large again. Who carved these pictures, filling the cave wall for how long?

Do these pictures date from the time when Bikhia's people were free, and the animal kingdom was their dominion, beasts of prey? When the forest was mother and nurse?

— You drew too?

Bikhia doesn't answer. The men wear earrings. The women are ornamented, apparently they used to wear ornaments of cat-chou wood at one time. To what period do these pictures belong?

Or is it that Bikhia and his people carve pictures to capture that past life?

No, Puran will take no photographs. He will not defile anything sacred, he feels no such urge.

Bikhia presses his hand, his eyes say, Let's go.

Now go down through a roofless tunnel, down, down, go down, turn, enter a dark cave again. The sound of water above them and its floor is slippery, walk carefully shining your flashlight. Bikhia strikes the floor with his staff as he walks. The Pirtha

is flowing along the upper cave. The thundering sound of its fall up ahead fills the cave.

Then a narrow path. They are descending further. Then Bikhia stops him.

The sun falls through a crevice above. In front a cavern. The flashlight does not hit bottom, the lowered stick strikes no floor.

Bikhia and Puran wait. Yes, a dark cavern in front. Perhaps it goes down to the hill base. As if the dark waits with its skirts forever spread. Give me, give me what you must keep secret, I will guard it with care. Now I have no mysterious secret of my own. Whatever is mine has been invaded. Where will the wild animal run when it's surrounded by a net fence? The present, encroaching from all sides, will eat the past whole. Yet there may be a priceless truth worthy of being guarded in secret, that you cannot let anyone know, give it to me, I am that ageless, timeless darkness of time, when the earth was under water, there was no light anywhere, darkness was everywhere and the creator was in thought, how to create the earth and the living world. I am waiting since then, I keep everything in my lap, nothing is lost.

Bikhia drops down a little stone.

The sound of the fall reaches them in a few seconds. Bikhia, this is good. No one will know.

— No one will know.

Bikhia lowers his head.

— The picture you carved . . . plant Khajra trees all around it . . . surround it with stones . . . it will slowly be covered, yet it will remain. How many pictures have survived in this cave. No one has seen them, they have remained.

Now they turn back. This hill was perhaps a fortress for them once. There are other caves. Did they think of houses on the hill as safe in the face of some invasion? Did they already understand, seeing the worship rituals and rites of other nations infiltrated into their forest dwellings, that an invasion of their ethnic being, their ritual, their faith and folkways was being ushered in? Is that why they spoil their rituals? Fled into the forest? Will Raghupati Raghava—King Rama of Gandhi's famous song—come again and again to determine their punishment? We never found out what the narrative tradition captured in their folk memory has to say. But from what an old Santal spoke of the ancestors a hundred and sixteen years ago (Roman script, Santali language), we know that the ancestors said that at the

time of King Rama all the aboriginals went with him to Lanka and fought to defeat King Ravana.

Too little can be known, we have destroyed a continent that we kept unknown and undiscovered. The tribal wants human recognition, respect, because he or she is the child of an ancient civilization. In what a death farce we are enthralled as we turn them into beggars, who are nowhere implicated in Indian education, development, science, industry, agriculture, technology. They remain spectators. India marches toward the twenty-first century.

They go back the way they came. And as he drops down holding on to the tufts of grass Puran realizes what an impossible (for him) thing he has done. Now they walk along Pirtha's breast and bathe in the pool. Black clouds pass overhead and the water suddenly looks black. Perhaps it'll rain again. But even if it rains, Puran hasn't brought that water. And, he has in fact read somewhere that if the desert in Rajasthan is made green the rains will slowly decrease and Madhya Pradesh will suffer the consequences first.

They come up after their bathe. Puran says without looking at Bikhia, "Sleep during the day. Come in the night." Bikhia leaves without response.

Today Shankar comes to his room.

— What Sarkar, eating parched maize-powder?

— I am Sarkar too?

— No, just "Babu"—gentleman.

He is silent for a while and then says, You have traveled a lot.

Is there no forest or hill that no one knows about?

— I haven't seen anywhere. And . . . Shankar . . . will your

people live if they cling to their mountain?

— Where should we go to stay alive?

Puran shakes his head.

— Your Sarkars are saying . . .

— Yes, they're saying . . .

— If there's a solution to the water trouble . . .

Shankar gives a little smile.

— Then all would have been well, Babu.

— Have you eaten anything?

— *Relief.* Take *relief*, let 'em make *fillims*. We are hungry, naked poor. That will be known on the *fillims*. But the *fillim* won't say who made us hungry, naked, and poor. We don't beg, don't want to beg, will people understand this from those pictures?

Everybody took pictures, what did you take?

— Of the camp's tents. Kausalji's. Tell me, you'd get water if you dug a well in the direction of the river, wouldn't you?

— If we dig wells . . .

— Won't your mourning end?

— Bikhia knows.

Shankar says in immaculate conviction, "Now Bikhia is above everyone. He will give everyone oil, then we'll oil our body and bathe. We will shave our heads and faces, cut our nails, and come out of mourning. It was he who saw . . . he knows what there is to know, and we know when we saw him."

— What'll happen to him now?

— He is bound now, Babu, he'll keep the stone unsullied, perform the ritual, he will not be free in this life. And that stone! How can there be a move away from Pirtha, tell me that?

They would on no account have left the shelter of Pirtha hill and river, now the stone tablet has become another reason for their not leaving. Perhaps Pirtha was their last shelter, or their domain, their past. And now it is precisely there that one finds the tablet. A myth to bind the past to the present. Perhaps this explanation is necessary for their nearly extinct sense of ethnic being. How can one rob a people of the supernatural, of myth, what is in their understanding an unwritten history, when the present time has given them nothing? No one holds that right.

— Babul

— Yes, Shankarl

— Tell this to the Block Sarkar.

— You can say it too.

— No, Babul He's a good man, he won't understand, he'll be hurt. I don't know if you will understand my words. He won't for sure.

— Who is in your family, Shankarl?

— Me? Everyone. Wife and daughter and mother. One by one they became stones. We bury the ash and raise a stone. I've heard that we buried the bodies in the old days.

— And now?

— No Babul There is always famine. My son is with my sister. In Bhalpura.

Shankar says in surprise, "How? I'm in debt for thirty rupees. He grazes the moneylender's cow, cleans the cowshed, makes cow dung cakes for fuel. It's been years, the moneylender does not

keep accounts. If he did the Sarkar would get the boy out. Sarkar says that "Hali" bonded labor is illegal now. That if the boy comes away the boss can do nothing. That would be wrong of me, Babu. I had taken money after all. He returns home at evening."

— Does your brother-in-law work?

— Both of them . . . whatever they can get.

— You?

— Whatever I can get. I'll get the boy out.

— Won't you send him to school?

Shankar says with profound affection, "I'll bring him home. Where will he read? And also, why should he read? I read up to Class Six, and the Tribal Officer and the Sarpanch had said I'd get a job. I'm off, Babu. You came and only suffered, come in the wintertime."

— There'll be no famine then?

— Then we get work on the boss's land. We bring paddy and marwa from the field that dropped out of the bales at the gathering of the harvest. Birds come to the Babla forest. For a month, month and a half. Otherwise the famine goes on. Good-bye Babu. He says with a sigh, Will the Big Sarkar [the central government] listen if you write about famine? If you write everything?

— I will of course try.

— You too will leave.

— Yes, I must go.

— But the old folks used to say that the person who brings water shouldn't leave. Someone brought water then too. And he stayed on here. I've heard he died of old age.

Shankar gets up.

— As long as there's Kausalji. And then?

VI

Puran and Bikhia sat at the shrine-mouth. There are clouds today, clouds are piling up. Let it rain again, let the earth wells fill, as well as the Sarpanch's big brick and cement well. It is the Sarpanch who gives water in times of drought. In Gabahi the Panchayat's big well is right in front of his house. There was much talk at the time of the digging of the well, that he's taking advantage. But the well was dug because the water level was somewhat accessible precisely there. The Sarpanch gives water from that very well, although he also bathes his water buffaloes. Let that

well fill also, Pirtha, Gabahi, Dholki, all the villages are thirsty. Moreover, the water of the wells for the tribals of Dertha, Sangatoli, Madhola, and Purgarb is bitter, foul-tasting. That water has some taste in the rainy season. Let the rains fall.

Bikhia's eyes are unblinking in his face pinched with lack of food and with mourning. Puran no longer wants to know where Bikhia saw it to draw it. Pirtha has taught him that, even if you are a reporter, you must not ask all the questions all the time.

Bikhia is witnessing that their ancestors' soul embodied itself and flew in one day, and now it's leaving its form and returning. If it were truly that? Would it have told all the tribals of the burial-grounds in the extinct settlement, lying underneath the *bridges* and paths, the new settlements and fields of grain, that our descendants are disappearing? Their existence is freshly endangered. To survive they must mingle in the mainstream, where their social position will be on the ground floor and their sense of ethnic being will no longer be distinct. Yet there is no liberation for them if they hang on with their teeth to the hillside of Pirtha, their land and their soil have turned to dust and blown away in the wind. Who can catch dust-motes from the wind and compose village, forest, field? Bikhia's eyes are like the still flame of a lamp, he wants to see his fill of the noble death of this noble myth.

Puran is witnessing his own futility. Having seen history from beyond pre-history, continental drift, seasonal changes after much geological turbulence, the advent of the human race, primordial history, the history of the ancient lands, the Middle Ages, the present age, two World Wars, Hiroshima-Nagasaki, holding under its wing this entire history and the current planetary arms race and the terror of nuclear holocaust, it came to give some sharply urgent news. Puran, a modern man, could not read the message in its eyes. Nothing could be known, can be known. One has to leave finally without knowing many things one should definitely have known. Seeing that Puran had understood nothing its eyes were closed since yesterday. The body seemed slowly to sink down, a body crumbling on its four feet, the head on the floor, in front of their eyes the body suddenly begins to tremble steadily. It trembles and trembles, and suddenly the wings open, and they go back in repose, this pain is intolerable to the eye. Bikhia goes on saying something in a soundless mumble, moving his lips. He sways, he mumbles, sways forward and back.

About an hour later Puran says, "Gone."

Bikhia is still.

Bikhia is still, unmoving, immobile.

They sit, the two of them sit.

An eternity passes. Bikhia has possibly gone to his ancestors, then, taking an eternity he traverses five thousand years and gradually returns. As if he had gone to sea in a boat and has returned after crossing the ocean, he is on his way back, his body moves, he had left Puran waiting. Puran is merely a spectator, he watched the boat set afloat, he saw the return in the boat, a spectator watches from a distance after all, he doesn't have news of the water.

Then Bikhia lies prone to pay his respects. He gestures to Puran to leave.

Puran goes outside and sits down.

Bikhia had brought a lot of stuff today, already before evening. He comes and takes a big basket woven of grass.

Much later he comes out with the basket covered in acacia leaves and grass.

Now he keeps looking at the eastern sky. The sky slowly pales in the east.

Bikhia keeps walking. Puran walks with staff and flashlight. Now Pirtha pool after descending the hill. Then past the pool upstream along the riverbed, turning again, in a strange devotion Bikhia holds on to the tufts of grass with one hand, clinging to the stones, holding on to the basket. Puran says softly, "Let me climb and show the light."

Bikhia stopped once before the cave drawings. After that the way was more complicated. Some reptile moves away, some night bird calls outside.

Much later they reached the edge of that expectant darkness. Then the darkness opened its mouth.

They bathed at the crack of dawn.

Then Bikhia brought water and washed out the shrine room, and an effaced, impersonal, yawning nothingness came and filled the room. Then it starts raining. Bikhia raises his face to the sky and drinks. Counts on his fingers, looks at Puran.

Now his voice is as fresh and clean as the rain.

— Oil bath in five days.

— Bikhia!

Bikhia is like an ancient chief of the community, venerated by all.

— Then you leave.

- I could go today too.
 Bikhia shakes his head.
 — You will stay in that room for five days.
 — You?
 — Me too.

Now Bikhia's eyes explain that this strange situation had made them one but they were never really one. As if in a strange situation of war two people from separate worlds and lives, who do not understand one another's language, were obliged to cross some icy ravine, or to pass an unknown and violent desert, and then complete mutual help became necessary. A time of danger has brought them together. Although their hands were clasped at the end of the episode of danger they realized that they belong to two different worlds. This is not just two classes going back to their separate habitations. Two classes, and then a poor tribal and a non-tribal, their stream of life is different from the mainstream, like the Ganga and Pirtha ditch. Life has not been linked to life, now Bikhia's eyes are bound to be distant. After all is said and done it is true that this outsider had to be let into what was intimately their own, in fact their own dead ancestors' soul, but to survive it took shelter with that very outsider, and then can the entire experience not be summarized as follows? That you are now invaded even in the extinct burial-grounds of the vanished settlements, even in the after-world, the only resource is to take shelter in the mainstream and therefore it came to Puran, not to Bikhia. It was informing Puran of some even greater message, which Puran did not understand. Bikhia's eyes spoke it. Because you are involved in this incident, therefore you'll have to stay to the end. That does not mean that you will get from me the comradeship of the last few days. You remain you, and I remain me, and after this heavy phase is over each will return to the orbit of his life.

There is rain on Bikhia's body and on his matted tawny hair. He leans on his staff and looks at the sky again.

- I am not your enemy, Bikhia.
 — I will tie the grass frame to the door.
 — I have not broken your trust.
 — Now you won't even be able to cook in that room.
 — Aren't you understanding my words?
 — What need, Babu?

Bikhia smiles, and moves off with his staff over his shoulder. No, there is no meeting-point with them. The ways are parallel

from the distant past. Puran knows everything, he came to Pirtha having read many books and done a lot of homework. It was not so much to know them (before coming) as for Harisharan's sake. Harisharan had written, *Man*, this much I pray you to do.

Here, Bikhia's engraved picture, the "death-wish" of the entire area, then Pirtha's unbearable suffering, then the rains, then their dead ancestors' soul enters his very room, in this connection Bikhia came to him. From the next day the settlement accepted Puran, he has brought rain, and his communication with Bikhia was then at an unusual peak. Did he put head on Puran's feet, did he bring offerings of insects and flies and grain and moss and snake and leaves and appoint Puran the doorkeeper? Did he take Puran to that astonishing cave where the hunt goes on on the walls of stone, the drum plays, the dance takes place, and the forest bears witness? Take him to the edge of that cavern which is in frontier of the earth, in whose belly primordial darkness lies in wait? Then, even at daybreak today the two of them were together.

Now, as soon as Bikhia broke the fence of his self-imposed silence, immediately Puran became superfluous. When he was silent and mute, then his mime, his eyes, and his fingers said so much. When he opened his mouth, it became evident, that even that intimacy had been in fact a myth. What a pity! this myth is and will be alive. He too will have to accept it and stay.

He strokes his own face. Oil bath in five days. Was it S. C. Roy or someone else who wrote that that is the day for the end of mourning and a small funeral service?

Puran keeps climbing down.

Today Bikhia is beating the drum without a break, endlessly.

Shankar looks at him.

What is in front of the stone tablet today?

Puran does not look that way.

Shankar says to him, "Come, have some tea at the Sarpanch's."

— Let it be.

— Why?

— Let me remain in my room and write.

— All right, I'll walk with you.

— Come.

No terrible secret news waits now in the shrine room. Now all can come.

Shankar does not even look at the shrine room.

— The roof must be mended.

- Then?
- Shankar says in deep compassion, "Whatever Bikhia says. If anyone from Dahi's family comes, we'll raise a roof."
- Then? What will you do?
- What we used to. We've got water, we'll work the field. One thing is true, we must plant the Khajra that keeps us alive. If Baola keeps us alive, we must plant Baola. Otherwise everything will be desert, and we will have to leave.
- Harisharan comes to his room today as well.
- *Man!* I've sanctioned six wells. You don't get continuous rain here, so we'll have to dig in batches.
- Contractor?
- No, they'll dig themselves. Shankar will bring people, Sarpanch will give everyone ten rupees in cash and kodo maize. Shankar says they can do it themselves. And I know they can.
- Perhaps so. If starvation is your regular diet, you can get to work on a few days' food.
- Kausajji is leaving in a week.
- He'd said he'd stay longer?
- Doesn't look like it.
- Actually his *grand scheme* . . .
- Forget it. And by the way! I hear they're going out of mourning. Oil bath in five days, and Bikhia is even speaking again.
- I've heard.
- *Report*, or his words?
- Both.
- Bikhia now possesses secret powers. He knows when the mourning began, and when it will be over.
- At least it's been proven that we don't know this.
- Anyway, the wells are not *mythic*.
- What's on the other side of the river?
- Forest Department land.
- Plant more trees there. Taking up the entire land and if you keep up cultivation of something or the other all year round, *as long as the land is under cultivation*, the Forest Department will not be able to evict them.
- *Man*, I'll do everything. You just do . . .
- In five days.
- What's that! You too? This is a mistake, Puran. Even if you do the oil bath here you may be sure that they won't think of you as their own.

Puran's smile is tarnished with pain.

- I know it better than anyone else. Still, I came at mourning time, stayed with them these few days . . . Think of it as a whim.
- No proper food.
- Powdered gram seed, molasses, pickles, what else do I need?
- Shall I send *lunch*?
- Feed me in Rajaura.
- *Man!* Go back. Get married. Return to normal life.
- I'll do that.

Harisharan points his finger and says, "This not marrying, not keeping to any rules, you can defend yourself about this with a lot of theory in the English language, but it is actually fear, an escapist outlook. You need courage to accept the responsibilities of everyday life. I cannot believe that you are still grieving Archana's loss." Harisharan moves off like a busy bear. He married for love and they are both very happy.

Puran returns to his room. *Notebook, ballpoint pen, writing pad.* Is the pen mightier than the sword? You had to "amplify this idea" in school. Let Puran believe that, even today, in the present social system, if the journalist's pen declares holy war then public opinion is formed and in some cases the government does some work. In Gua, by government report, eleven people had been killed, and by private report many more and after that even the unbending Singhbhum government, arrogant with caste and race pride, was obliged to move. Puran went to the impenetrable forest of Serengsighati, the memorable site of the old Kol revolt, where the Ho tribe stores paddy and spends the night, for fear of elephants, on wood platforms on top of high trees, and there, after bathing in the trickling stream that had once been red with the blood of the insurgents and putting a stone in his pocket (how grave and noble those hills, those immense trees, how talkative that stream), Puran saw a World Bank *Mark 2* tubewell on the hill, Laru Jonko (a militant young woman from the Ho tribe) told him that the government had put that in after Gua. No, let Puran be able to keep his faith in the pen. He is not a tribal. His naming ceremony is not called "naptia," his marriage ceremony is not called "kirincho bouhu bapla," his surname is not "chonre," his clan-totem is not the lizard, at his cremation women will not play the main role, his ancestors' soul does not become unquiet, he is not the prey of man-made famines every year.

How can he have faith in their faith? Puran must keep unshaken his faith in paper, pen, and the printing machine. Puran has nothing else. If there is no pen there is no Puran. Puran is not the bond slave Crook Nagesia of Kalabhoi village in Palamu, whom his owner forced to pull a cart full of paddy to save his expensive oxen from the June heat and whose shoulder blades broke under the yoke and who was thus newly named Crook Nagesia (Crook! There ain't no Nagesias in Bihar—the official decision, you don't exist), who had pointed at the vanishing forest and said, "The forest went, and we went too."

The forest is not Puran's nurse.

For him the pen.

For people like Crook nothing but ancient tales held in memory.

But the old stories are also getting lost, they are losing their way, like moles in the face of a dust storm, ancient tales, history, songs, sagas, folklore, folkways. How will fifty-nine million six hundred and twenty-eight thousand, six hundred and thirty-nine people capture and put together their history and their culture from the storm winds of areas ruled by twenty-five states and the central government? Will they too finally seek shelter from mainstream writers? If Nagesia has to learn from the writings of some anthropologist, he has to get that much education in order to read that material. If he wrote his own story!

Even educated tribals don't do that.

Puran picks up his pen.

VII

Dateline Pirtha.

I think the problems of Pirtha-Dholki-Gabahi-Derha-Sangaiti-Madhola-Pungath and the other villages of the Block are the same. I have heard that the Sarpanch is not sufficiently active here. But the Sarpanch has said that he goes to the Block every year and informs them. After Harisharanji became *Prakhanda Ayukta* or *Block Development Officer* they first received an earth well in Pirtha and then two elsewhere, seed for sowing (which comes a lot after sowing time and which they eat. It comes to the Block by this rule), fertilizer, which the Bhalpura moneylenders take away for repayment of overdue debts, and pesticide. All this did not help much, for the problem lay deeper. The state govern-

ment has no doubt granted monies through the district administrations in the ITDP areas for the backward people among these tribals, and that money is no doubt showing up when the balance sheets are audited. The state government is not prepared to think any further. But the awful truth is that the government officers, contractors, and businessmen are eating that money. At least ten motor-roads have been built with the tribal development money in a few years, two *bridges*, and the low-priced food shops are being controlled by the pet dealers of the Food Corporation. The contractors (who carry political clout) control everything. I traveled and observed for four days that most tribals are landless. The "Act Prohibiting the Transfer of Tribal Land" is a total failure. For shrewd exploiters have either bought land in the name of nonexistent tribals or forced the landowner to sell. Or the landowner knew nothing at all. This is happening with the cooperation of the Revenue Department and the courts of law. This Act is a failure. In Madhola I saw that people were not even going through the motions of buying. The land is in the name of a tribal, the taxes are reckoned in his name, and the tribal has no right to enter that land. This sample-survey asks: by the strength of what support is the poor tribal to live in the water and fight the crocodile? We can thus form an idea of the land owning situation of the tribal in the entire country.

I have seen only two tribal villages in Rawagathi, the Block adjacent to Pirtha, the Sarpanch gave me a bicycle. The picture is similar there. The central and state governments have kept at least thirty-five projects and subprojects in the ITDP sector in various names, and for each there is an enormous amount of money. I have toured some tribal areas of Bihar, Orissa, and West Bengal, mostly in Bihar. Such projects exist in this state as well. There are projects, money is being spent, yet there is no reflection in actual fact.

Let me speak of the Pirtha area.

Their land (even when given by the government) is stony and infertile. Yet they are dependent upon that land. The land might have grown kodo if there had been irrigation, but there isn't. There isn't enough drinking water. If there had been a double dam on the Pirtha River they might have been able to cultivate the Forest Department land on the two shores, but it hasn't been built. No school, no hospital, no good tracks. No self-supporting small industry project. All the neighboring good land has been

distributed in the name of fake tribals. Madhoria, Singh, and Deokia, three families from Bhalpura, Sougandha, and Rajaura, are the actual owners of a few hundred acres here under false names. It is they who take water, irrigation, fertilizer, and pesticide in the name of the tribals. They are also the tribals' creditors. Most of the tribals from at least ten villages work in their fields in season at wages of two to two-and-a-half rupees. They are also rich contractors, working for the government, they are the money-lenders, and because of their understanding with the Forest Department their unlicensed sawmills are growing every day.

This is the main reason of the persistent famine here. Whatever comes in their name, the government can show that it is spent in the tribal areas. And in fact others are plundering everything. But impartial investigation followed by confiscation and redistribution of land? That too is impossible. When in the records the owner is a tribal? And undoubtedly many different government departments on the district and state levels are involved in this plunder and robbery in ITDP sectors, and I also saw that as a result the budget in this sector is on the rise. These bosses are buying buses and trucks.

The state government obviously does not want such news to be published. Therefore there is so much objection to the word "famine." This is just "drought."

Every year at this time, in villages like Pirtha, Madhola, Derha, Dholki, people die of starvation, of eating rotten scavenged material, of dehydration. Touts gather, the tribals sell their infants and girl children. Touts take them for coolie labor at this time as well. Two Gond families from Dholki went to work in Bombay and came back two years later as destitute skeletons.

The SDO and BDO at headquarters knew that, in this so-called ITDP area, (a) some families are taking everything that's coming for tribals by holding false tribal names and by means of influence with government people and political clout. (b) This graft is in enormous amounts. For example, in the NCDC [National Cooperative Development Corporation—currently working with World Bank assistance] project from 80,000 to 100,000 rupees will be given for developing small businesses through LAMPS [Large Multipurpose Cooperative Societies] according to the cooperative method. To take over this project some living tribals must be shown. Since Block and Subdivision offices raised objections to such a trumped up case, secret power battles are

still going on. (c) This must be exposed. (d) It is necessary to make it known that the true tribals in Pirtha are dying of man-made starvation and to explain why this will not be called "famine"; and (e) to bring relief quickly to Pirtha.

The little relief that has happened is thanks to a voluntary organization. The state government will not allow us to say "famine," because then it will be revealed that:

In the ITDP sector of Pirtha the fruits of what comes in ITDP and related channels are enjoyed by others, but in forged tribal names.

Many officers, politicians, and contractors are implicated in this.

This is why it is so hard to get food by government channels and help had to be accepted from a non-government organization. The ones who accepted this will suffer the double bind of severe administrative reprimands.

Money in this account increases annually. And the government of course has the rule that ministries such as Food-Education-Irrigation must spend one-fourth of the budget in tribal areas.

There is no reflection in the tribal areas of the money spent on these projects and balanced in the accounts of the ITDP sector. There is, elsewhere.

There one can see everything that the government wants for the tribals: for example, advanced mechanized agriculture, income augmentation, general development, improvement in education.

I have already mentioned that the land bears gold.

Also mentioned transport, sawmills, lumber smuggling, et cetera.

Health—Bhalpura has a hospital, nursing-home, maternity home, you name it.

Education? In Bhalpura and Rajaura together there is a co-ed college, a commercial college, two higher secondary schools with boarding facilities and eight schools run by various organizations.

Who will change this completely? Why should the State Government bother to say that famine continues on a *mini-scale* in the ITDP sector of Madhopura district?

What will happen to the people of Pirtha?

Let us now see if there is any way of helping them.

They will not leave the hills. Whether they eat or starve, it is the symbol of their near-extinct ethnic being. Yet the productivity of that soil is extremely low. With irrigation, fertilizer, and timely

seeds, the soil can produce at the most four months' food.

The first necessity is to free them from slavery and indebtedness by applying the law ruthlessly on the basis of the illegality of the handover of land and the cancellation of the Agricultural Loans Act.

At the same time we must give help for survival. Otherwise, like the bond slaves of Palamu whom I've seen myself, liberated bond laborers will become slaves again in order to survive, because of the administrative failure (or deliberate cruelty? This system wants the feudal landowner to keep land, to have bond-slaves slave for him) to implement the emancipation. Bond-slaves receive some food, some food grain, which is a huge help in their lives.

At the same time we must help their survival by creating forests, giving them poultry and goats and giving them work and food during the starvation months. Before planting the forests they can themselves say what plants they want, what will help them live. Goats are hardy, they will live on grass and weeds. I had heard of "war footing." We cannot save them if we do not continue to fight.

At this time it is also necessary to encourage them to build hassocks and baskets with that strong and supple grass, to weave mats with Khajra leaves, and to arrange to sell them.

Cementing the sides of the Pirtha pool, putting up at least two double dams on the Pirtha river, will help them cultivate the Forest Department land. Then it is necessary to build in Gabahi a school, a center for basket-weaving, handloom, and animal husbandry—in order to make the women self-supporting—a primary health care center, and a *modified ration shop*.

I have used the name "Pirtha." The need is in every village. (Harisharan, this extended report is for you. Give a xerox copy to the SDO. I am writing another report for the *Daylight*. I will try to interest other papers, I give you my word. —Puran.)

P.S. Let's keep the art of engraving for the *Daylight*. I will be able to give many "human angle stories" for the papers, following my notes.

Motia's mother sold her children before this.

Shankar's own son is a bond-slave in the family of Tehsildar Singh in Bhalpura.

In Madhola, Ragho and Dashi, and Madho (female) in Pungarh did not eat poisonous tubers to commit suicide. They ate

the root because they could get no more Khajra. Listen, give great importance to the planting of Khajra. I ate it today, Shankar gave me some. It's edible.

The brother of the man who's been buying infants and girls from Pirtha and Dholki has a bicycle repair shop in Madhopura town. He too is implicated in this ring. The shops returns cannot subsidize a house in Madhopura and the rental of a passenger truck. It's been bought by Dalpat Chhagan and the truck-owner lives in Bhalai.

A certain Doctor Rao in Bhalpura Hospital told the Sarpanch, The government has not built the hospital to treat famine-starved people of this kind. He always mistreats people.

Dahi died of starvation this year. Year before last Dahi's elder brother committed suicide of starvation with his wife and children. Doga's mother in Pungarh said that the government gives us no help, only takes our vote. What do they do with our vote? And does the government live in Britain that they don't have news of Pungarh?

The clearest truth was told by the tribals of Rawagarhi. Their communal chief spat and sat silent. An elder said, "Go away. A reporter came two months ago as well. You'll take our pictures? You'll write about us? What's going to happen with that? Will the government give water, land, or food? Look at the girl."

A young woman sat looking at the sky. She would have grown comely in a month if she had enough to eat.

— She sold one of her twins, and the other died. Want to take her picture?

I took a picture of the fortress-like house of a boss of Rawagarhi and the pile of leaf-dishes used and thrown away, lying before it. They are having thanks-giving rites for ten days, the wife has given birth to a son.

In the name of these villages, millions of rupees have been spent in the last few years. I have taken pictures of the effects of the great tribal welfare project.

"Building Houses for the Tribals"—the picture of a few broken shacks with nothing more than wooden posts.

"Help with animal husbandry"—Sona Gond on her way to sell her last goat.

"Integrated Mother and Child Care Project"—three female skeletons sitting with four skeleton children with swollen bellies.

"Forest project for tribals"—a billboard saying "This Land

Belongs to the Forest Department" surrounded by unbroken fields enclosed in barbed wire.

"Drinking Water for the Tribal"—in the first picture an uprooted tubewell lies prone on the ground. Second picture, a Panchayat well, women standing at a distance with pitchers, and a certain non-tribal Gabbar Singh washing a fat water-buffalo. Third picture, women gleaming water from the sandy bed of the Pirtha.

"Revolution in the tribal mode of cultivation"—parched and barren earth on the hillside slope, a bemused infant stopped short, looking questioningly into the eye of the camera.

"Fair price food for the tribal"—an old woman holds up a Khajra tuber she has picked.

"No Famine Here"—skeletal men walking by the wayside, with mat-covered bundles on their head, holding the hands of women and children. Look at the arrow-sign on the *milestone*—Bhalpura ten kilometers.

Harisharan, these pictures will reveal some truths and some lies.

The truths and the lies are the same.

The truth, the tribal receiver gets nothing.

The lie, the government's proclamations are only on paper, they do nothing when it comes to the reality.
Look at the last picture.

Three houses framed one in the next. "Houses of the real beneficiaries of tribal development." I have mentioned his name earlier, but look again. Of course, I'll write, "It is alleged that the owners of such houses cultivate land recorded in the name of fake tribals in advanced and scientific ways."

Then you cope.

Again, Puran.

The "oil bath" takes place quietly.

Bikhia, the only discoverer of the embodied ancestral soul, gives everyone oil from a small bowl at the point of a twig in a ceremonial way.

Why does this boy observe the same rule in the matter of the form of the ancestral soul as is appropriate to the funeral rites of the formerly living? No one asks this question.

Did he see its death?

No questions asked.

Did he cremate or bury it?

No questions asked.

But the flow of excitement travels like a current of electricity. Did the soul of the ancestors come in this way? Or didn't it? Pirtha knows, it knows.

Did they fall into mourning at a dreadful news? Pirtha knows, it knows.

There are many rites after the oil bath, Pirtha will perform them as needed.

Puran realizes that the crisis of the menaced existence of the tribals, of the extinction of their ethnic being, pushed and pushed them toward the dark.

Looking at Bikhia's tawny matted hair, freshly shaven face, he understood that they were being defeated as they were searching in this world for a reason for the ruthless unconcern of government and administration. It was then that the shadow of that bird with its wings spread came back as at once *myth* and analysis.

This is a new *myth*. For the soul of those long dead will return hundreds of years later in the form of an unknown tired bird. Such a thing is probably not there even in their *oral tradition*.

But from now on they will wait in their suffering and in evil times for that shadow, otherwise this deception cannot be humanly explained.

Having drawn that stone tablet Bikhia is the guardian of the new *myth*. He will protect it.

And this mourning, this "oil bath" has given them an assurance. Now something has happened that is their very own, a thing beyond the reach of the understanding and grasp and invasion and plunder of the outsider.

Is this collective shaving and bath really purifying them? Everybody's face and eyes are very different, beyond Puran's reach, did Puran ever reach this?

Puran shaves and bathes and then descends with his bag on his shoulder. How self-absorbed, how calm, how distant Bikhia is now, Puran's breast trembles.

— Good-bye, Bikhia.

— Yes, Babu.

He doesn't say "come again," no one does. Shankar smiles wanly and says, "Come at the drought."

— If only I can catch the rain clouds!

Shankar says, "How will you go?"

— Let me walk down. I'll get a truck.

— Sarpanchji?

- You tell him.
 — The *Block Officer* won't come today?
 — No.
 — And *relief* will stop too.
 — I heard.
- Shankar says softly, "I don't know what the *Block Officer* is thinking. But we will not leave Pirtha."
- He looks around and says, "Why should we leave? Isn't this our place? Now no tribal will leave. The ancestors' soul let us know that all the places it visited are ours. Can anyone leave anymore, or will they leave?"
- Is that what it let you know? Who told you this?
 — Bikhia.
- Shankar says triumphantly.
- Puran shakes and shakes his head. They will not leave, they will not go anywhere leaving those stones, hills, caves, and river. To the fertile fields, to the plains, where there is plenty of water, and many supports for survival.
- If they want to give us aid, let them give it to us here. Spreading his arms, he says, "All this land was ours, the kings took it from us. They were supposed to return it to us, to whom did they give it back? No, we won't go anywhere. Let them give us our dues here."
- OK.
 — If not let them forget, let them forget us. At most we'll die, nothing worse can happen.
 Some rare deaths become *myths* and ascend from the dark caverns. But Puran does not say this.
- Good-bye, Shankar.
 — Yes, Babu.
- To reach from the back to the tail of the animal in the survey map, to get down in Gabahi, wiping his damp eyes, finally stopping on the road and looking out for a *truck*, how much time passes?
 Seventy-five million years?
 Five thousand years?
 There is no need to look back at Pirtha hill. Puran is carrying Pirtha village in his heart.
 Today he must leave Rajaura as well.
 No need to go to Madhopura.

- Pirtha is everything, all other places now seem trivial.
 What will he tell Harisharan?
 What will Harisharan tell him?
 — Harisharan, do you know the final experience of the story of Pirtha?
 — What? What? What?
 — We have lost somewhere, to Bikhia's people, to Pirtha. By comparison with the ancient civilizations modern progress is much more barbaric at heart. We are defeated.
- And?
 — Do you know the final word? There is no communication-point between us and the pterodactyl. We belong to two worlds and there is *no communication point*. There was a message in the pterodactyl, whether it was a fact or not, and we couldn't grasp it. We missed it. We suffered a great loss, yet we couldn't know it. The pterodactyl was *myth* and message from the start. We trembled with the terror of discovering a real pterodactyl.
- And Pirtha?
 — We built no communication point to establish contact with the tribals. Leaving it undiscovered, we have slowly destroyed a continent in the name of civilization.
- There isn't anything at all?
 — Nothing at all.
 — Is it impossible to build it?
 — To build it you must love beyond reason for a long time. For a few thousand years we haven't loved them, respected them. Where is the time now, at the last gasp of the century? Parallel ways, their world and our world are different, we have never had a real exchange with them, it could have enriched us.
- And . . . the engraving of the pterodactyl?
 — Bikhia knows.
 Puran repeats the dialogue a number of times in his mind, speaking for both. Yes, this is indeed the truth.
 We have lost.
 Bikhia has probably understood what the pterodactyl, seeking shelter, had come to say.
Puran has not.
 Harisharan, Harisharan! We have not understood, because we didn't want to and now it is evident that Bikhia's people are finally much more civilized, holder of the ancient civilization, and

so finally they did not learn our barbarism, there is possibly no synonym for "exploitation" in their language. Our responsibility was to protect them. That's what their eyes spoke.

Only love, a tremendous, excruciating, explosive love can still dedicate us to this work when the century's sun is in the western sky, otherwise this aggressive civilization will have to pay a terrible price, look at history, the aggressive civilization has destroyed itself in the name of progress, each time.

Love, excruciating love, let that be the first step. Now Puran's amazed heart discovers what love for Pirtha there is in his heart, perhaps he cannot remain a distant spectator anywhere in life.

Pterodactyl's eyes.
Bikhia's eyes.

Oh ancient civilization, the foundation and ground of the civilization of India, oh first sustaining civilization, we are in truth defeated. A continent! We destroyed it undiscovered, as we are destroying the primordial forest, water, living beings, the human. A truck comes by.

Puran raises his hand, steps up.

[In this piece no name—such as Madhya Pradesh or Nagesia—has been used literally. Madhya Pradesh is here India, Nagesia village the entire tribal society. I have deliberately conflated the ways, rules, and customs of different Austric tribes and groups, and the idea of the ancestral soul is also my own. I have merely tried to express my estimation, born of experience, of Indian tribal society, through the myth of the pterodactyl. —Mahasweta Devi.]

Afterword

"If read carefully," Mahasweta says in conversation, "Pterodactyl' will communicate the agony of the tribals." And in December 1992, Gopiballabh Singh Deo lovingly complained, again in conversation, "Didi [Mahasweta] leaves too much unsaid. Not everyone can understand her point of view." Ranajit Guha has commented on the Sanskritized translation of "culture" innovated by Bankimchandra Chatterjee, the celebrated nineteenth-century Bengali nationalist writer and intellectual: *amushilan*.¹ Here as elsewhere, the colloquial language takes away the project of an intellectual. In colloquial Bengali today, *amushilan* is attention, concentration. What Mahasweta asks for is *amushilan*, on our part, of the First Nation, the *Adim Jalti*.

I am learning to write on Mahasweta as if an attentive reading of her texts permits us to imagine an impossible undivided world; without which no literature should be possible. This is a learning because such a permission can be earned only by way of attention to the specificity of these writings. Since the general tendency in reading and teaching so-called "Third World" literature is toward an uninstructed cultural relativism, I have always written companion essays with each of my translations, attempting to intervene and transform this tendency. I have, perhaps foolishly, attempted to open the structure of an impossible social justice glimpsed through remote and secret encounters with singular figures; to bear witness to the specificity of language, theme, and history as well as to supplement hegemonic notions of a hybrid global culture with this experience of an impossible global justice.²

I believe that the same habit of mind—a vision of impossible justice through attention to specificity—may draw a reader to Marx, to Mahasweta, and to Derrida, in different ways. My earlier companion essays perhaps showed this too enthusiastically. And the general uneasiness about (or unexamined celebration of) Derrida's critique of humanism compromised their reception. My own sense of their inadequacy is related to an insufficient preparation in the specific political situation of the Indian tribal. I have

