

Mani's Dying

Bhalchandra Nemade

From *The Cocoon*. *The Cocoon* is a novel about a young man who leaves his village to go to university and live in the city of Poona but who can find no way out of his chronic alienation and is finally forced to return to his village, more alienated by life than ever before.

One is not meant to die at the age of five. The point is, why was a child meant to die at five ever born at all?

I was overwhelmed with grief when my five-year-old sister died. If grandmother had died instantly, I'd have had time to get used to it; if Mani, my sister, had died later, I wouldn't have been so full of sorrow. But in the forty years after Grandfather's death, Mani was the first person to die in our family. In my twenty years of life, she was the only person to die in our family. My sorrow knew no bounds.

I wasn't staying at home then, but here in Poona, living in the college hostel. Being away from home made my sorrow worse. So much so that even my friends came to know of it. But I didn't tell anyone about Mani's dying. So my friends began to say, 'Listen, old chap, the rings of sorrow go on whirling and one day begin to whirl around you. With terrifying speed. There isn't always a reason for it.'

But there was a reason for my sorrow. A sorrow with a reason is not, of course, real. But it hurts all the same.

There'd been only daughters after me. Four of them.

Till I was quite grown-up, my parents didn't so much as buy me a new shirt. I used to thrash my arms and legs about and cry, 'I'm your only son and you don't look after me at all.' Then my father used to say, 'Don't think you've obliged us. We'll have more sons.'

But, till the other day, there were only daughters. I remained the only son.

In our family, my sisters were treated in true Hindu fashion. There were not to insist too much on having anything, the elder sisters had to comb the braids of the younger ones, had to clean their arses and so on. They had to do everything Mother asked them to.

Sprung from a common source, sisters had to look after their sisters, brothers had to pay for the education of their brothers, elder brothers were supposed to marry off younger sisters. This was diabolic. A lot of this diabolic business went on in our house too. So it followed that Sumi, after her marriage, wasn't to visit us any more. But that Manutai should die, this I didn't like.

She was a very quiet girl. Quiet in her work, in her daily conduct, in the way she sang, in the way she went to school.

Mother used to say, 'She's got no brains - that girl.' If somebody broke the glass chimney of the bathroom lantern while scrubbing it, Mother would say, 'Mani, just you wait, you little imp.' Then Mani would reply from quite another part of the house, 'It's not me, Mother. I'm sweeping the house.' If somebody upset the pot of milk, Mother would say, 'That must be Mani.'

Each time, there was a daughter. So, when Mani was born, Grandmother was completely fed up with deliveries and all that went with them. She had to manage the whole house, and, in addition, look after my mother. She used to scrub little Mani fiercely. Once, she forgot to add cold water to the hot bath. She had already placed Mani face downwards across her legs. When she found that the water was scalding hot, she said, 'Well, why should I go and put her back in the cradle now, then add cold water to this, fetch the brat again from inside and place her over my legs?' When Mani yelled, Mother came out of the room. She dipped her fingers into the water and with tears in her eyes said to my grandmother, 'Please get up, I'll bathe her.' So Grandmother banged Mani onto the floor and said, 'A mother of daughters oughtn't to be so proud.' Not that Mother was so very fond of Mani. When she was pregnant, Mani's time, Mother used to say, 'Like the first, the second; like the second, the third. The third one, too, must be a son.' But instead there was Mani. So Father too looked askance at Mani.

That year there was a great epidemic of smallpox. About fifty children in our village died of smallpox alone, including her.

When I heard about our farm-watchman's son, I was terrified. The boy was in a frightful state, but since there was nothing to do except sit by his bedside, his mother went away to work, leaving him in the care of her little daughter. At midday, the boy felt he was on fire. He staggered out of the house and jumped into the well. But Mani died in bed.

At that time, Grandmother was all set to leave for the winter pilgrimage. And Mani was gripped with a high fever.

Mother said to Grandmother, 'Must you go this year? The youngest one still feeds at the breast. The most terrible things are happening in the village. You could go later, at the time of the summer pilgrimage. Look after the girl now.'

Grandmother unpacked her things in a huff. To our neighbour she said, 'You go on alone. For the sake of her daughters, I'm ready to give up even my God and my religion. A little fever, and she feels I should hover around her daughters. What makes her think they're going to get smallpox?'

My mother wept. 'Go if you want to,' she said, 'but please don't mention smallpox.* I'll manage the little one and take care of the girl, too. But please keep a hold on your tongue.'

Grandmother did not go on pilgrimage. She had used the dreaded word and it really turned out to be smallpox. Mani was red all over. Our neighbours, both young and old, stopped visiting us. Only the two women remained in the house. Both harboured grievances, wouldn't speak to each other. If Mother asked, 'Have you heated the water?' Grandmother would refuse to answer. And if Grandmother said, 'Make the *bhakri*+ for the men in the fields,' Mother wouldn't do it.

Just then, Father got the idea of pulling down our filthy old house and putting up a new one in its place. Cotton unexpectedly fetched a good price that year and he'd made a lot of money. 'I shall build a house with three storeys,' said my father, 'with a terrace on top. There'll be nothing like it in the whole village.'

Mother said, 'I won't let you pull the house down till Mani gets well.' This irritated Father. 'Now I've gone and arranged for the workmen and you come out with this. Mani will be all right in a week or two. One or two other fellows in the village also mean to build new houses. We must keep the workmen tied down from now.'

'Get out of here!' Mother said.

So he was furious with Mother. Only in the evenings did he come to ask after Mani. He and Grandmother spoke to each other angrily. Sometimes he would go and fetch the doctor. That was all.

Here in Poona, I used to receive letters from Father : Our cotton

* Refers to the superstition that to mention a disease or misfortune is to cause it to happen.

+ Coarse flat bread made of rice, maize or millet, eaten all over Maharashtra, especially in the villages.

fetches a good price. The elections are over. The first floor has been pulled down. Soon the ground floor will go and then we shall begin work on the new house. You are our only son. The glory of the family rests with you. So-and-so's son left for Germany. Think only of your studies. Et cetera, et cetera.

And I really did study. Then all of a sudden there was this letter: Mani died of smallpox. Don't take it too much to heart.

Terrified, I asked, 'Why should anyone die in this way?'

Last vacation it was Mani who, smilingly, brought me the comb as I was leaving for Poona. This vacation, I wouldn't see her at all. What was it all about? Then I went absolutely numb.

Very soon after the first letter, I received another from Mother. With full details.

Towards the end of the letter she'd written, 'As I write this, I remember all that I have been through in the last fifteen days and tears flood my eyes. The edge of my sari is drenched. Do not grieve too much. You still have three sisters.'

The pocks on Mani's body grew as big as lemons. Scowling continually, Grandmother looked after her. For little Nali's sake, Mother did not go too close to Mani. She would watch from a distance. When she saw Mother, Mani used to raise both her arms to say, 'Lift me.' But Mother wouldn't.

When the pocks had swollen to bursting, Mother went and sat by Mani's bedside. She just sat. Nobody in the house was allowed to come near the bed. To stop her from scratching at the boils, Mani's arms were slipped into long thin sacks and the sacks were tied fast at the wrists. Even so, she scratched through the cloth and tore the boils open. So both her arms dripped with blood. Then, in a fit of rage, Grandmother strapped her arms to the sides of her bed as tight as she could.

Then she would say, 'Free my hands.'

Mother once asked her, 'Manutai, what is it you want? Water?'

Mani didn't reply. Mother said, 'Speak, Mani, speak. Tomorrow, you won't be able to speak. Speak to me today.'

But she didn't speak to Mother at all.

Grandmother said, 'Manutai, what shall I ask big brother to fetch you from Poona?'

So she said, 'A red sari.' A red sari.

When she said those words, what exactly could I have been doing here? Was I in the room or on the hill behind our hostel? Or was I laughing away in the company of my friends, or was I gazing

out of the window at the hill? She must have thought of me at that moment. A red sari.

Gradually, her voice went dead. The throat, too, must have been full of boils. The eyes were already full of them and the pupils had turned white. Mother said, 'Manutai, what is it you want?'

'Free my hands,' Mani said, 'I'm burning, Mother, I'm burning, burning.'

Then her mouth wouldn't open at all. What you poured in, didn't go down. She had already lost her sight.

From the other side of the bed, Mother would call out, 'Manu.'

And Mani, both her arms pinned down like Christ's, would strain her white eyes in Mother's direction.

Then Mother would call out from behind the head of the bed, 'Manutai!'

Then she would raise her head backwards to try and look.

The eyes were white like shells.

'She can still hear,' Grandmother said.

And two days later, without even bathing her, they buried her outside the village. And along with her, they buried everything that had touched her bed. Her school satchel, her bed sheet, everything.

Then, for two or three days, I was in rage. But I didn't know what to rage against? What against?

I'll murder Father, I said. I'll kill Grandmother. Then I'll set the whole house on fire. I'll burn all their corpses in the house. Mother I'll burn alive. To die in this way.

Mani is buried... buried... buried... My emotions continued to rage inside me. I'm not joking.

I bought a deep yellow sari, the kind that little girls wear. And I tore it to shreds. I set the pieces on fire. My fingers got burnt in the flames. Then I emptied the ink-pot on the floor and cooled my hands in the ink. I dipped my palms in the ink again and again, and printed them all over the place. On the pillow, on the bed, on the table, on the note-books, on the books, on the door, on the windows, on the walls.

Then I took all the milk in the pot and fed it to a stray pup.

I said, 'I'll avenge this. I'll spend a hundred rupees a month. I'll demand two hundred rupees a month.'

I went out alone to the hill behind our hostel. At times, I ran about like mad. At times, I just sat. During the nights, I walked countless roads in Poona. Once, when a policeman stopped me, I said, 'My sister died.'

I took this too much to heart. My aunt came to my room with her

son. 'Who is going to be spared?' she said. 'Come and stay with us for a week,' she said.

'Why a week?' I said. 'Why not ten years?'

Little children have died in every house in India. So one need not give too much thought to death. But you can't get rid of those thoughts either. The living are at least committed to think of death.

Still, my aunt forced me to go to her house.

I got fed up in a couple of days and went back to my room at the hostel. Because, at her house, they were always conscious of my grief and that I had to be treated with care. In my own room here, I could do what I wanted. Things happened without my willing them. I took no interest in anything. Wandering on the crowded roads in the evening, walking with Mehta, I used to think of death all the time. If someone on the road didn't make way for me, I'd be furious. I would stand on the balcony near my room. When the bustle of students died away, it was quiet all around. The strip of moonlight stretching across the rooms in front of me used to crawl down to the ground. Then the strip would crawl up to my feet. Then it would keep moving upwards and I'd be able to see the moon. Then the moon itself would go down behind the rooms in front of me. Then it would be dark all around. On many such nights, someone would appear and say, 'Don't stand there all night like a ghost.'

After this I began to like all my three sisters.

Sumi was married off soon, and that left only two of them. At Sumi's wedding, everyone bustled about with joy. Mother too. If, some time, I saw her laughing aloud in company, I wanted to ask her – And what about Mani's dying?

Yet, when Mani died, I didn't write home at all. I kept receiving letter after letter from Mother, so I wrote back: Stop writing to me.

In answer, Mother wrote me a very long letter.

Then the college people planned a trip to the caves at Ajanta.

I said, the caves might help me feel better. So I went to Ajanta.

*Copyright: Bhalchandra Nemade
Translated from the Marathi by Vilas Sarang
Courtesy: 'New Writing in India' edited by Adil Jussawalla
(Penguin Books, Harmondsworth)*