

HASAN MANZAR

Kanha Devi and her Family

ONE OF THE HOUSES in Memon Para belongs to Kanha Devi. The residents of the neighboring houses are also Hindu. This Hindu enclave, created by the intersecting geometry of lanes and bylanes, looks like a tiny island surrounded by a sea of Muslim dwellings. These people, the majority of them at any rate, have been living here for as long as anyone can remember. Once in a while, though, a relative from Bharat washes up on the tiny island like a wave, and then recedes. Life resumes its old rhythms, both inside Kanha Devi's household and out.

In the narrow bazaar, shy of daylight, wooden handicrafts are skillfully carved and sold. They also do some brasswork here, and the bazaar is always well stocked with homespun cloth from Sindhi villages. When people jostle about in the crowded bazaar, rubbing shoulders, it is impossible to tell their communal identity. Just about everyone here uses *salaam*, the Muslim greeting, and the Hindu custom of touching the feet of one older than oneself is so widespread among the locals that one never knows which of the two—the one touching the feet or the one affectionately placing his hand on the other's head—might be Hindu and which might be Muslim. Both may be Hindu; then again, they may just as well both be Muslim.

Certain items, though, are never sold here: miniature idols used in worship, copies of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and those big, colored pictures, exquisitely printed on fine art paper, that the Hindu inhabitants of the neighborhood use to decorate their homes. Some of these, in heavy gilt frames, hang on the walls of Kanha Devi's sitting room, and some, smaller in size, on the walls of the small prayer room directly behind the

“Kanhā Dēvī kā G̃harāna,” from his collection *Rihā'ī* (Hyderabad: Āgahī Publications, 1981), pp. 41–57.

sitting room. A statue of Shiva and a brass oil lamp adorn a niche in one of the walls of the prayer room.

One step into these two rooms and you feel transported into quite another world—of long ago, inhabited by Krishna Gopal, the sly butter thief; Ganesh, with his elephant trunk; Shiva and Parvati; and Duhshasana trying to disrobe Draupadi—but an unseen blue hand helping her, spinning Draupadi around, feeding out length after length of sari, like the hand of a kite-flyer in the heat of the contest, letting the string spin freely off the spool, causing his seemingly victorious opponent to give up the match in sheer exasperation ... exactly what happened with Draupadi. “Unless a woman is simply bent on a loose life—flitting around like a kite with a cut string—she always remains safe behind the folds of her sari, until such eager hands as those of Duhshasana are ready to admit defeat.”

And as she recounts all this, Kanha Devi herself becomes chastity incarnate.

And this picture here, it shows Bharata removing the wooden sandals from Ramchandrajī’s feet, so that he may install the sandals on the throne and rule by proxy until such time as Ramchandrajī has returned. One cannot even imagine such a thing today. Why would the proxy relinquish the throne once he’s got it? Better yet, why would anyone give up the throne and go into voluntary exile in some forest in the first place? And leaving his sandals behind with his brother, at that!

Kanha Devi’s sister fasts every Monday in honor of Lord Shiva. And Kanha Devi’s brother-in-law—Persumal, who is well only half the year and is seized the other half by terrible fits during which he rants and raves, shouts and screams—is in the habit of getting up before dawn and feeding the birds. At this time, the birds come in flocks and alight on the low wall around the roof of the house. Persumal feeds them and recites from the *Bhagavad Gita* somebody had brought for him from Bharat some eight or ten years ago.

This usually means that he is well these days, and the whole family can breathe a little. Which is not the case when he is in the throes of a fit, for then he begins to curse his *wanyas*—that is, his own caste people—up one side and down the other. It would seem that he recites the *Bhagavad Gita* when he is healthy; but it also seems that it is only during the bouts of anger and insanity that the sacred text actually begins to unravel its meaning to him.

Persumal calls his father and older brothers *wanyas*. These people lend money at terribly high rates, unabashedly eat meat, liberally consume

alcohol, and smoke marijuana—in other words, they do just about everything the *Bhagavad Gita* considers reprehensible.

When Persumal is giving them a tongue lashing, Chandumal, Mirchumal, Dhumi, Sita, Ashok, even Kanha Devi herself—everyone feels terribly embarrassed. They touch the tips of their noses and then pinch their earlobes in repentance and say, “Ishwar has given him so much knowledge, if only He had also put a brake on his brains!”

“By giving Persumal so much knowledge Allah has really made our life miserable.”

Now, who would say these are Kanha Devi’s words? But they are.

Just as these people freely use the word *salaam* in their conversation, so they also use such other Muslim expressions as *Allah* and *insha’llah*. And nobody stops them. By having a different faith one doesn’t also come to have a different creator!

Usually on such occasions, when Persumal is in a temper, the Muslim neighbors take him over to their homes and do everything to calm him down. One takes out a *ta’wiz*, a charm, and puts it on him, another wraps a black string around his thumbs and wrists, and some woman brings holy water from the sanctuary of one of the local saints and tries, by earnest entreaty, to make Persumal drink it. Persumal, otherwise a strict Vaishnava in dietary matters, finally drinks from her glass, and does not insist, “No, I shall not drink from your glass because you people are meat-eaters.” Thus in madness, he manages to tell only what is truly blameworthy in man, never that which man has fabricated in order to put some above some others.

Their Bharati relatives, who visit them from time to time, have remained in the last thirty-odd years since Independence exactly where Manu had left them centuries ago: bound by caste differences and distinctions. The children of many such relatives now read and write only Hindi. During visits when these children play with their Pakistani relatives’ Muslim neighbors, in Kanha Devi’s inner courtyard no less, the older women from Bharat, unbending in religious matters, just gawk at this outrage with unbelieving eyes, though Kanha Devi herself finds nothing wrong with it. Children aside, even the adults in Kanha Devi’s neighborhood seem to have in one fell swoop scaled the restraining walls of untouchability and caste differences, and stepped into a refreshing open space where the son of the Brahmin Sri Ram is about to marry the daughter of the *wanya* Dhumi. Nobody loses any sleep over this glaring infraction of caste rules.

And not just that. Even the Shudras of this place freely participate in

the Ram Lila festival. Every one of the last six or seven years, Okha's son has been playing the rôle of Raja Ramchandra in the Ram Lila play. Stranger still, at college, this fellow and the Brahmin and Muslim boys often drink unreservedly from the same glass, no different from the children playing in Kanha Devi's courtyard. In spite of her deference to Hindu customs, the thought never crosses Kanha Devi's mind to reserve separate glasses for the Muslim children, nor to serve her orthodox Hindu relatives in separate dishes.

So when Kanha Devi got her son married to a Bharati woman and brought the bride over to Pakistan, a strange tension swept across her home, although she remained unaware of it for quite some time. She had spent all her life rolling out *papars*, a daily staple in her family fare, doled out to the neighbors and served up as handy snacks to guests. Likewise, she would spend the whole year preparing *achar*, and on festival days make pancakes and other sweet dishes. Preparing two kinds of dishes was her responsibility: one a sort of poultry, seafood, and red meat combination, the other strictly vegetarian. In preparing the latter, she would be careful not to use the same ladle with which she had earlier stirred the meat gravy. It seems these chores had been her charge from as far back as one cared to remember, from when she lived at her father's, just as later at her husband's.

Persu's wife was none other than Kanha Devi's own younger sister. Living with a crazy husband, she had become half-mad herself. Burn incense sticks or fast in honor of Lord Shiva, that's about all she knew. But nothing worked: she remained childless.

In that crazy environment, where the males in the family indulged in gambling throughout the rainy season and waited eagerly for the festivals of Holi and Divali to get drunk, Kanha Devi alone knew what it took to run the house.

Kanha Devi had succumbed to the fatigue of old age by the time that Damayanti, her daughter-in-law, had arrived. She had it all neatly figured out: "The minute Damayanti sets foot in the house, I'll leave everything in her care and retire. All day I'll sit in my swing-seat and chat with the neighborhood women, chew a *pan* maybe, or smoke a cigarette, and without so much as ever even lifting a finger be grandly served by her at meal times."

Damayanti took over all right, but what she did not do is tell the old lady: "Okay, I'll do the work, all of it, but you must promise to guide me. You must tell me exactly how many *papars* to roll, how much to spend and when, and what dishes to cook on what day."

Only much later did Kanha Devi realize that Damayanti had already been stewing in her own juices for two, maybe three months. It had begun to annoy her that the neighborhood children freely cavorted around in the courtyard. And yet if you sounded her out, you would know that Damayanti didn't really dislike children, though she did take umbrage with their barging in and out of the kitchen whenever they felt like it.

On the other hand, Damayanti didn't dislike visitors from Bharat. She would receive them with open arms, never mind the fact that they were driven to this country not because of any great love for their relatives, but by the desire to visit the sanctuary of their patron saint and offer up their votive dues, exactly as Kanha Devi herself had once gone to Ajmer in Bharat.

And visitors from Bharat brought gifts: colorful *bindis* and saris (which Damayanti was so accustomed to wearing herself, but which the other girls at her in-laws' did not wear), film magazines, and lots of gossip from over there.

That of course was understandable. But Kanha Devi had no idea that Damayanti should find the old acquaintances of the family so exasperating. Damayanti just couldn't bring herself to drink tea from the same cup used earlier by a Muslim guest, or, for that matter, a Hindu guest ignorant of the importance of caste differences. Then again, names such as Ramu, Shyamu, and Gopi were too fuzzy to indicate one's true caste origin. Worse still, just about anybody walked in uninvited, expecting hospitality.

Now not only did Kanha Devi herself visit her Muslim friends in their homes but also dragged an unwilling Damayanti along.

It seemed that true *dharmā*—or at least as much of it as Damayanti could understand by her own lights—had all but vanished among the local Hindus, and the pictures of Sarasvati, Lakshmi, Krishna and the Gopis had been hung on the wall merely to invoke their blessing and protection. Absence of hatred for those outside the fold was as good a sign as any, Damayanti thought, that the local Hindu had gone slack in his faith.

Then again, she could lick any one of them hands down when it came to true religious knowledge. Didn't she know the *Bhagavata* by heart? And the correct meanings of Hindu names? It would seem that the myriad communal riots and clashes of high-caste Hindus with the Harijans, the untouchables, in her native Bharat, had quickened that religious nerve in her that feeds on hatred.

How many local Hindus had gone to Bharat on pious visits and pilgrimages? How many?

One night she asked Kishan Chand, her husband, “Are we going to rot here forever?”

Damayanti’s question exploded like a bomb. Kishan Chand, who had just dozed off, was startled, and he asked, “Forever—what do you mean?”

“You *like* it here?”

“You don’t?”

But Damayanti remained silent. Kishan Chand, sensing the palpable tension around him, tried to clear the air with a light-hearted joke. “Don’t you like me? Ah, I get it, you’ve got somebody over there.”

“I’m not talking about you. I’m talking about *here*.”

“Here is ... here,” Kishan said. “I’m from here. If I don’t like it here, who will?”

Damayanti was sitting with her head tucked between her knees. She was uttering every word with the greatest circumspection, hesitantly, just as every girl does when she talks with her husband about some worldly matter for the first time, a matter which invariably ends up being the opinion of her in-laws.

“The fact is, the customs here are a little strange,” she said.

“And yours were different there?” Kishan asked.

“Yes. There we mixed only with our own kind, our equals. And nobody dared barge into the kitchen with their shoes on, as they do here. Nor did we cook meat.”

“But whenever I visited your folks, I always got to eat meat,” Kishan said.

“Not in our house. Maybe in other people’s houses.”

“So where do the men in your family go to eat meat?”

“In restaurants,” Damayanti laughed.

“I get it. You’d rather we ate meat out in restaurants here too, is that it?”

Time and again Damayanti tried to get on with the subject, but it seemed as though she and Kishan were talking on two different wavelengths.

Finally, Kishan Chand said, “You know what I think? If you had been born here, then you too would be like mother: you’d obey your religion and not hate others for obeying theirs. Anyway, why would I want to abandon this country? This is a land of *opportunity!*”

“What’s that?” Damayanti asked naïvely.

“Let’s just say that I’m in no mood to emigrate to Bharat. I’m happy

here. I've grown up among these people and consider them my own. Your misfortune is that you grew up in an environment full of instigators, people who keep themselves in business by stirring up members of one faith against members of another, and send one caste against the throat of another. Lucky for the politicians! Even in this day and age, they can find enough ignorant people to shore up communal unrest."

Many times thereafter, when alone with the younger members of the household or with her husband, Damayanti would take exception to their use of the phrase *insha'allah*. She even set her cup apart. When forced to accompany Kanha Devi to a Muslim friend's house where they would be offered tea sent for from the neighborhood restaurant, Damayanti would find some pretext or other to leave without drinking any.

One morning Kanha Devi's husband, a cotton merchant and moneylender, returned home unexpectedly early. When asked about it, he said that communal riots had erupted in some industrial town in Bharat.

Kanha Devi, as was her wont, said disinterestedly, "Well, then, shall I start packing?"

In the kitchen Damayanti's hands suddenly stopped what they were doing. She didn't catch the note of sarcasm in Kanha Devi's voice.

And it had gone on this way in this household for the past thirty-odd years. For although Chandarmal did do business here, he always looked like a bird poised to take wing any minute. He thought it unwise to tie up his money. But the other *wanyas* carried on their business undisturbed: one ran a bakery, another a restaurant, another made movies, and yet another worked as a contractor. Chandarmal alone looked jittery, always in a big rush, as though he would miss the train. Whenever news arrived of a fresh communal riot in Bharat, he would right away hop on his swing-seat and start pulling nervously at the hair on his chin. People say that he too had in him a streak of the same illness which afflicted Persumal.

The same nervous tension gripped him that day. When he arrived at the bazaar, he found the others busy at their work. Alone Lala Ram, the photographer, asked him in a hushed voice, "Did you hear the BBC this morning?"

"No, why?" Chandarmal asked, all keyed up. "Did you?"

"Communal riots ... on a large scale."

"Where?" Chandarmal asked, although he knew the answer.

"Bharat, *chacha*. Where else?"

Each looked into the other's eyes.

A little later Chandarmal's ears began to buzz with the noise of the paper boy shouting the headlines: THREE HUNDRED MUSLIMS SLAUGHTERED IN HINDU-MUSLIM RIOTS! POLICE OPEN FIRE ON MUSLIMS!

Hidden behind these words were the sowers of dissension and chaos, those who turned communal riots into a roaring business. Hawkers were happy that they would be done early today. Chandarmal alone had no idea quite what to do. He walked to one end of the bazaar and then back to the other, hoping to gauge the people's mood. But people were preoccupied with their own worries: one had to take his polio-stricken child to the hospital, another had a court hearing to attend. Somehow the Hindu shopkeepers appeared more preoccupied with their work today than usual, deftly avoiding the eyes of others.

Deepak, the tailor master, was marking the material spread out before him with a piece of blue chalk, his head hung low, while his son busily took the measurements of a Baluchi youth.

Damayanti felt the night growing oppressively long. Kishan made no mention of the communal riots. He had gone to a movie with some friends, and when he got back, he went straight to bed.

In Kanha Devi's small two-story house, crammed with some fifteen people, Damayanti was feeling herself perilously alone, expecting something terrible to happen any minute. Every whistle of the night watchman startled her.

At dawn when the sound of *azan* arose from the neighborhood mosque, Damayanti felt that fate had brought her into a cul de sac from which she couldn't possibly hope to escape. She was the animal tied to a stake and beaten to death. How different was her present from her past, when she still lived back in her own country! Over there she wouldn't have given two hoots about the communal riots, she wouldn't have lost any sleep at all over them.

All minorities, like an orphaned child, fear the worst, even in their dreams.

When Kishan stirred in his sleep and said, "What, up already?", Damayanti quickly answered, "I never really slept."

Kishan, still in bed, threw his arms around a swollen-faced groggy-eyed Damayanti, who was sitting up in bed beside him, and asked, "What's the matter? Don't tell me somebody drank from your glass again."

"That happens every day. How much can one avoid ..."

"Then *don't!*" Kishan said, lifting a lock of her hair, and then added, "Join the others. Mix with them."

Damayanti freed her neck from his coiling arms and said, “Come to Bharat with me. I will never be able to sleep peacefully in this country.”

“Why? Do beds have thorns here?”

“This isn’t even your country. It’s *theirs*.”

“Theirs—who?”

“Those who surround us. Who created this country in the name of religion.”

For the next few minutes Kishan strained as though trying to read some invisible writing on Damayanti’s face. He said, “Look at it this way: if a woman can be wife to one and mother to another at the same time, then why can’t the same piece of land be held dear by some, because it was gotten in the name of religion, and be respected as a motherland by others? Tell me, when you become the mother of our child, will you stop being my wife? Or must we have two Damayantis?... Only then would it make sense to think of one as mother and the other as wife.”

Damayanti laughed. But her worried heart kept pounding in her chest. Never before had she heard the sound of *azan* come from so nearby.

Early in the morning when her chores brought Damayanti to the rooftop, she found Persumal feeding the birds as usual. This was something he never failed to do, not even when sick.

Everybody is nuts in this family, Damayanti thought, whether it was her mother-in-law, her husband, or his uncle Persumal. Why else would anyone worry about feeding the birds at this outrageous hour?

Instead of finishing her work and returning downstairs, Damayanti decided to stay a while and watch Persumal, who had meanwhile joined his hands to pay respects to the rising sun and was mumbling some pious words.

When Persumal was done praying, he asked her affectionately, “You want to ask me something?”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Damayanti said. “Yesterday there was a riot between Hindus and Muslims ...”

“Where?” Persumal asked without much enthusiasm.

“In India.”

“So, what else is new?” Persumal uttered these words as though the occurrence was about as important and frequent as a common cold.

“Don’t you ever think of moving over to India?” Damayanti asked.

“Your father-in-law—my brother—does. I don’t.”

“Doesn’t it scare you? What if somebody provoked these people? We’re surrounded by them, you know. I’m so scared I stay awake the

whole night long.”

Persu lifted his hand and pointed at something in the sky, and asked, “What is that?”

Damayanti looked into the space and replied, “Why, a minaret, of course.”

Persu shook his head and gestured toward the pigeons pecking at the grains in front of him. “You know something?” he said. “These pigeons roost in that minaret at night.... More than this I shall not say; in fact, I’m not permitted to say.”

Damayanti wanted to ask who had prevented him, but decided to keep quiet as Persu had already become joyfully absorbed in his worship.

Downstairs Damayanti told Kanha Devi about it, who, instead of laughing at the matter, said with a feeling of profound respect, “Let people call him what they will. But Persu is no crazy. I say you can go through the whole city, let alone this neighborhood, and never find a soul more enlightened than he.”

—*Translated by Muhammad Umar Memon*