

ZAKIA MASHHADI

## Long Live the Ganges! (Har Har Gange)\*

AS SOON AS SHE HEARD THE RUMBLE of Vermaji's rickety Land Rover, Mrs. Verma quickly put her hand on her waist and got up. "O Ram Da'i! Your Sahib's back. Start grinding five kilos of spices," she said cheerfully, adjusting the huge *bindya* on her forehead.

Vermaji was returning after a whole week at the farm. A hunting maniac, he often brought back a deer or a few waterfowl. Today, however, the jeep held quite a few live animals besides the game: a boy about ten years old, three girls, a man clad in a dhoti, and a pregnant woman—all as black as coal, half-naked, emaciated, and with yellow eyes and white teeth stuck into their terribly dark faces. Where had Vermaji picked up all this trash?

Those strange-looking creatures promptly moved forward to touch Mrs. Verma's feet in obeisance. She spontaneously backed away a little.

"Babu Lal," Vermaji called the servant. "Take them to Badhia's hut. It's empty. Show it to them. Then see to it that the deer is taken off the jeep. I got him early today."

And these—when did you get these? she thought to ask about the five wild humans, but she'd made it a habit not to question her husband too much when he was ready to go out or had just come back.

Deer kebabs were prepared. They turned out to be quite delicious. Smacking his lips Vermaji said, "O Ram Da'i, take a few kebabs to the people in Badhia's hut." Then he told his wife, "Have a bit of *chura*<sup>1</sup> and a clump of raw sugar sent over as well. They must be hungry." Working his toothpick he explained, "They're very poor. I wonder if they've ever had enough food to fill their stomachs. And you've already seen how little they have to cover their bodies."

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\* "Har Har Gaṅgē," from *Āj* No. 46 (October 2004), 163–70.

<sup>1</sup>Flattened rice.

“So why have you dragged them here?” Mrs. Verma gave her husband a questioning look.

“Never mind, they won’t be any trouble. Your knees ache, don’t they? At least now you won’t have to worry about finding someone to massage and rub oil on them. And that Lakkhi, he knows gardening. In the past he worked some man’s fields.”

My knees ache? Mrs. Verma wondered. And what about Ram Da’i, isn’t she meant to serve me? But, yes, a gardener we do need. Badhia used to do that work. God knows what got into Vermaji that he found him a job with the railway. Now Badhia even has a brick house to live in so why would he bother to look in our direction? The plants are dying and the whole lawn has turned brown. She relented a bit, but then quickly came to her senses: Why all this excess baggage along with the gardener? Badhia was single. He worked for fifty rupees and meals. How can fifty rupees support a whole family? As if Vermaji had read her thoughts he said, “They’ll grow their own vegetables, no problem there. Just give them a little grain. They’ll manage.”

Why, of course! Only a few in the house and a whole slew of domestics to serve them! Mrs. Verma thought as she washed her hands. Too late to do anything now; my whole life I’ve always had to submit to your whims.

Next morning Lakkhi’s woman, her seven-month pregnant belly bulging, came to touch Mrs. Verma’s feet. “Now that we’ll be living under your protection, Mistress, how might I serve you?”

“You’re going to serve me?” Mrs. Verma said somewhat curtly.

“I’ve been sitting here idly since yesterday, Mistress. Back where we come from, we’d spend whole days planting paddies in knee-deep muddy water.”

“How much did you make?”

“If the whole family worked, rice enough for two meals. After the planting was done, only one. Sometimes not even that. Instead we fed the kids what little there was. That’s all Harihar the vegetable grower gave us.”

Mrs. Verma remembered something. A few boys and girls wearing Kolhapuri chappals used to visit her *bari babu* (elder daughter-in-law) with sacks hanging from their shoulders. Most of the time Mrs. Verma couldn’t make heads or tails of what they said. One time they were talking about a tribe in Little Nagpur that could only find grass and leaves to eat; its whole population was slowly dwindling as a consequence of contracting every conceivable disease by drinking polluted water from muddy ponds.

“Who knows what’s happening and in what corner of the world,” Mrs. Verma had said peeling water-soaked almonds for *navratan chatni*.<sup>2</sup> “The poor, we’ve seen them too, lots of them, so poor they survive on a single roasted green chilly, a little salt and plain rice. But never so poor that they slept on an empty stomach.”

The fair face of the girl who was talking about the tribe turned red and the rest looked visibly annoyed too. Mrs. Verma’s *babu* looked embarrassed, as if apologetic over her mother-in-law’s crass insensitivity and foolishness.

“Auntie, you’re our elder and we’re in your home. It doesn’t seem right to say anything to you, but you live in a fancy two-story house in this posh colony, how could you ever know how many people in our country go to bed without a morsel to eat, or how many are deprived of clean drinking water, or ...”

“Or how the rice silos of people like you get filled,” a boy butted in, his tone extremely bitter.

At the time, Mrs. Verma considered this entire speech a craving for leadership, pure sentimental garbage. Today, however, she had a woman sitting across from her saying that when the planting season ended her family ate one meal a day and sometimes went to bed without eating anything at all. Whatever her children had on their bodies didn’t amount to more than a scrap of loincloth. Her own body had nothing to speak of above her waist. She had covered her breasts with a threadbare old rag of a dhoti. But then that was life. All kinds of people live in this world. A person can’t go on feeling sad about everyone’s suffering, nor take care of everyone’s needs.

“Ram Da’i, bring me some rubbing oil.” She stretched out on an easy chair in the mild October sun. Meanwhile the woman had already started kneading Mrs. Verma’s calves with her emaciated fingers. She rubbed so energetically that soon all the pain vanished and Mrs. Verma began to feel drowsy.

Ram Dhani’s Ma’e (mother)—as she preferred to be called, although her firstborn was a girl and Ram Dhani came after—continued performing her service and, a couple of months later, gave birth to another girl, just as dark and emaciated as her mother. It must be said, though, that ever since arriving at the Vermas’ she and her children never had to go to bed hungry, and they got not just rice but also potato mash or a dish of squash. Compared to the shirking city lout Badhia, Ram Dhani’s father proved to be an absolutely first-rate gardener. Vermaji’s big garden was filled with

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<sup>2</sup>Chutney made from dried fruit.

flowers until the advent of winter, and the kitchen garden flourished as well. Both Vermaji and his wife were very fond of flowers and greenery so they were quite pleased with these people.

“How are you going to marry off not one, not two, but this slew of four girls, Ram Dhani’s Mother? A simple operation would take care of you. Why not have it?” God knows how many times Mrs. Verma had repeated this exhortation. Of course she had the best interests of Ram Dhani’s Mother at heart, but there was also the fear that if this family kept increasing at such a speed, the gardener would cost her dearly.

After a year, when no doubt remained that the new arrival to the family was deaf and mute, Ram Dhani’s mother consented to a hysterectomy. What if she ended up with more girls who were deaf and mute? The thought horrified her.

Back home, indifferent to the problems that had preoccupied his parents, Ram Dhani had spent his time swimming with the buffalos in the village pond. He had become quite an expert at holding his nose and plunging into the water. A few days after arriving in Patna he had made friends with the son of the orderly of Mrs. Verma’s neighbor. Babbu often used to jump into the Ganges early in the morning and retrieve the coins thrown into the water by the relatives of those brought to the cremation ground. If he got lucky and retrieved a few rupees, he would spend the money on chaat and *barf-mala’i*<sup>3</sup> from the vendor and heartily enjoy eating the delicious treats. It was Babbu who had introduced Ram Dhani to these two heavenly bounties and Mother Ganges.

The first time Ram Dhani saw the Ganges he was completely stunned. Used to the little pond outside his home village, he had never seen so much water, and so blue and clear to boot, rising in waves, creating whirlpools. “Good grief!” His eyes bulged out just as they had when he’d seen the winnowing-basket full of *chura* and the clump of crop-fresh raw sugar in front of him, and deer-meat kebabs on top of that—never before in his life had he seen so much food at once, and no one in seven generations of his family had ever eaten kebabs. Oh Patna, what a wonderful city you are! He would never set foot in his home village ever again.

Gradually Ram Dhani got used to Mother Ganges, just as he had to eating a bellyful of food, to a thatched roof overhead that didn’t leak during the rains, to electric lights, and to a nice, clean place. He gingerly started getting into the water, but only holding on to Babbu’s hand. Later, he started jumping in without the least bit of fear. The terror Mother Ganges had at first struck in his heart totally disappeared, and the stench

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<sup>3</sup>Savories and ice cream.

of burning flesh from the cremations no longer bothered him. The village pond where he used to swim undaunted all day long was far filthier and more nauseating.

Ram Dhani loved his “Ma’e” immensely and she also loved him more than her four girls. She was always ready to fight with anyone on his account. Whereas the girls toiled alongside of her, Ram Dhani spent all of his time playing *gulli-danda*. Back in the village, however hard the times may have been, she always saved something for him to eat, never allowing him to go without food twice in a row. That’s why, whenever he retrieved some coins from the Ganges, he didn’t spend all of them on chaat as Babbu did. He saved some and gave them to his mother. With this money she had bought herself a braided hairpiece from the huckster and plastic bangles for the girls. And she no longer went half naked; Mrs. Verma had given her some blouses along with her old saris. Once her belly was full and her body covered, she got it into her head to pretty herself. Now and then she even bought herself a paan from the peddler at the corner.

It was the third rainy season since Ram Dhani had started coming here. The Ganga had swelled, but not dangerously. A few other boys were also swimming in it. They had swum slowly all the way under the bridge. A bus full of tourists was passing overhead. Some of the sightseers shouted “Long Live the Ganges!” and tossed a few coins into the water. Ram Dhani immediately dove under the water ... and dropped to the bottom like a stone. He never surfaced again. Choking with fear, Babbu swam to the bank and started crying at the top of his lungs. An hour later he returned home to tell.

Some four kilometers beyond the city, when Karo, the *dom*,<sup>4</sup> emerged from one of the huts along the bank of the Ganges, he saw a dead body floating by. His eyes were quite familiar with corpses of all stripes and colors—fresh or decomposed, pecked at by vultures, half-burned or intact, a child’s or a grown man’s. Before it came close, his experienced eyes had already figured out that the corpse was quite fresh and intact. He jumped up. Such immense good luck hadn’t visited him in a long time. He splashed into the water without a second thought. He had dealings with some people in the city who traded in human bones. He often supplied them. He might rake in three, perhaps even four hundred for this clean, fresh body. The price of everything had gone up lately, and such perfect bodies were only found once in a great while. Even if the poor did throw their dead into the river without burning them, they tied

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<sup>4</sup>Sweeper.

an earthen pot to the neck, or at least a few wooden logs. If the bones are damaged, they don't fetch a good price. True, some people did sneak into Muslim graveyards to steal bodies, but Karo feared complications and was satisfied with the bodies that came floating to him of their own accord. He dragged Ram Dhani from the water and covered him with a pile of hay.

Vermaji and his Assamese Muslim tenants searched far and wide along the bank of the Ganges for several hours and even sought help from quite a few boatmen. Finally, in despair, they decided to return home. Just as they were leaving, one boatman told them about some *doms* living further down the river who were always looking for corpses. They might know something. Why not talk to them? Mother Ganges hadn't yet come into full tide so it's unlikely she would cause a body to disappear in just a few hours. It's quite possible one of the *doms* fished it out and stowed it away.

The boatman's speculation turned out to be right, but Karo gave them a real run-around. At first he wouldn't even admit it, later he started to wrangle about money. "Go on, call the cops," he dared. "They'll take the corpse with them, cut it up, and only after that will you get it back. We poor people risk our lives plunging into the Ganges just to make a few paisas. That's why we fished it out of the water. Otherwise you wouldn't even find a trace of it. Just watch, one of these days we'll end up drowned ourselves doing this dangerous business."

They got the body back, but only after counting out a full hundred-and-fifty rupees.

Ram Dhani's mother stood as still as a stone, staring at her feet. "Next time you save a little money, buy some *aaltaa* (red color) to dye your feet," Ram Dhani had told her. Now, even if she ever did save some money, she would never have the heart to dye her feet. If she did, she would only see her Ram Dhani's blood splattered there. Where has that son, whom she had lovingly fed even if it meant starving herself, floated away to? That emaciated, half-naked woman who worked in the village fields all day long up to her knees in muddy water, and returned home in the evening with a fistful of rice which she boiled only to give the first mouthful to her son! That son who had lit up her womb, where had he disappeared after smearing it with mud dredged from the bottom of the Great Ganges? When she saw the corpse such a painful cry shot out from her chest and she cried so hysterically that it might have shaken the universe, but perhaps it was not enough to move the one who obliterates even images of his own making with a flick of the finger, like an afterthought. That dreadful, ominous crying spread everywhere in the wilderness like the hoot of an owl. Quite a few people from the neighborhood gathered around her. A poor village mother was writhing

on the ground, pounding her chest, all the while repeating the name of her only son. Four little girls stood by in a state of shock and fear, as if unable to understand what had happened. A simple, innocent-looking man stood silently, continuously wiping his eyes with his shoulder cloth. No one to console, no one to call one's own! It was such a moving scene that even the breeze stood still. Mothers quickly drew their children close to them, others spontaneously thanked the Lord that their children were nearby and safe.

"Ram Dhani's Ma'e," Mrs. Verma began, pressing her knees with her hands in an effort to get up, "what was fated has come to pass. Now start making arrangements for the cremation. The corpse has been in the water since morning." She quietly put some money in her hands. Her Assamese tenants gave some too, and more came from the people who had gathered. It added up to seven hundred rupees.

"Seven hundred ..." Lakkhi and his wife looked at each other. These people had rarely seen seven rupees all at once. And even since their arrival in Patna they didn't have a steady income to speak of, although Vermaji was tending to the needs of their entire family, which was quite a bit. In the pitch darkness, the seven hundred rupees began to glow like seven hundred fireflies. Ram Dhani was gone. The fire of grief was not likely to ever be quenched. It made absolutely no sense to waste the money that had come their way on account of him on a bunch of cremation logs. As it was, the price of firewood was skyrocketing. Back in the village one couldn't even buy it for cooking food. And then there were those other expenses, like oil and the priest's fee for chanting sacred texts.

Sometimes decisions are made silently in the eyes. Lakkhi handed the money to his wife. In the evening darkness, he wrapped the body of his son in his own tattered dhoti, the same one he was wearing when he first set foot in this house. Babbu's father was still hanging around out of compassion. The two of them lifted Ram Dhani's body and set out.

The turbid waters were churning in a rage. The lights of the city were shimmering far in the distance. The city curved sharply along the river. Somewhere close by, a band of pilgrims headed for Dev Ghar raised the cry "*Har Har Gange! Har Har Gange!*"

"*Har Har Gange!*" Lakkhi repeated the words under his breath. He caressed the boy's head, kissed him on the cheek, bowed reverentially before Mother Ganges and committed the body gently to the waves. □